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Pride, Prejudice, and the Ethnicization of the Eritrean Nation

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa has long been known as a region of staggering ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic, and topographical complexity. In recent years, Ethiopia has attracted renewed scholarly interest for its "experiment" with ethnic federalism under a government led by the former Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), a guerrilla movement that originated in the mid-1970s in the northern highland, Tigrinya-speaking region of the country. The new state of Eritrea has also earned a place in the international arena after a thirty-year war for independence from Ethiopia, during which it forged a socio-political and cultural landscape distinct from its neighbor despite some enduring linguistic and cultural continuities. After the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF fought together to oust the Stalinist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, eight years of relative peace, prosperity and cooperation ensued within and between the two countries. In May of 1998, however, renewed conflict broke out over an undemarcated border separating the Ethiopian province of Tigray from Eritrea, and rapidly escalated into highly mechanized, full-scale war.

Ethiopia's post-1991 "ethnic federalism," while ostensibly devised to facilitate a more equitable distribution of power and resources among Ethiopia's numerous and often historically aggrieved regional populations, has been heavily interrogated for its dubious democratic character (see, for example, Asafa 1998; Joseph 1998; Markakis 1998; Ottaway 1998; Poluha 1998; Tegegne 1998). Eritrea has emerged as an apparently highly-unified society with a fervent nationalist identity and a strong collective consciousness about the history of its struggle for survival and independence. Within the context of post-1991 Ethiopian and Eritrean nation-building projects and the relationship between the two states, highly politicized ethnic identities in Ethiopia have begun colliding with competing nationalisms within the state itself and across the border with Eritrea. The Ethio-Eritrean border war provides a tragic moment in which to observe and analyze the complex interaction and flexible deployment of ethnic and national identities in the region.

I suggest that the most recent Ethio-Eritrean war is less about a political border separating two states as it is about the boundaries and claims to power that demarcate populations, histories, and traumatically transformed identities. While the war broadly involves two multi-ethnic states, it is nonetheless being waged on the newly-formed geopolitical border that

separates historically fluid populations in particular: highland Tigrayan
Ethiopians and Tigrinya Eritreans.[1] Ethiopia's ongoing deportation and
repatriation of over 70,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin has
revealed and affirmed the acute ambivalence of Eritrean otherness, and has
provided a fertile new ground for Eritreans to consolidate national cohesiveness
by claiming a naturalized, *ethnic* identity for the nation. I argue that the
ethnicization of the Eritrean nation exposes the complex process of negotiating
Ethiopian and Eritrean identities simultaneously ruptured and recreated by
the socio-political struggles that have plagued the two countries for decades.
Moreover, the forcible winnowing out of Eritreans from Ethiopians — and
from Tigrayans in particular — speaks to the political-economic position
many Eritreans have occupied in Ethiopian society, stereotypes of who
"Eritreans" are, and the emotive sense of betrayal felt by many Ethiopians at
both Eritrea's recent independence and Eritrean nationalist claims of a historic
distinctiveness from the rest of Ethiopia. Finally, I situate the process of the
ethnicization of the Eritrean nation within the larger ethnic-federalist
experiment in Ethiopia and the reification and politicization of ethnicity it
has set in motion.

Terminology, Methodology, and Analytical Considerations

Social scientists overwhelmingly agree upon the historically and socially
constructed nature of ethnicity. Popular consciousness and the media,
however, have too often fallen back upon the concept to *explain* the origins of
conflicts or enduring hostilities between groups, particularly in post-colonial
Africa. Invoking ethnicity as an explanation for conflict obscures the
historically changing relationships between groups by failing to account for
how identities are differentially and dialectically deployed within specific
contexts and time periods. Maintaining an outdated "primordialist" notion of
ethnic or national identities is therefore problematic and potentially explosive
because it naturalizes difference and conflict rather than deconstructs them,
while simultaneously disavowing responsibility for the actors involved.

        While my use of terms like ethnicity and nationalism are consistent
with their broader social scientific definitions, I have tailored them to reflect
their significance and usage in the Ethiopian and Eritrean contexts. I do this in
part as a response to the malleability that often obtains between national,
ethnic, and racial designations. As Fox (1990:3) writes, "the important
'fuzziness' [between nationalisms, ethnicity, and racial identities] comes not
from scholarship but from social life: from how people conceive of themselves
or are conceived of by others, and how people live out and live with these
conceptions." In fact, it seems scholarship *has* contributed to the confusion
and conflation of these terms through their generalization and reification
across important local distinctions. In an attempt to avoid this pitfall, I
define my terms to reflect their meaning and use within Ethiopian and Eritrean
socio-political, historical, and cultural parameters. So while I privilege the

meanings and usages assigned to "ethnicity" and "nation" by Ethiopians and Eritreans themselves, I also analyze their implications within broader anthropological terms.

First, I make an important distinction between nations and states within the Ethio-Eritrean context. In what follows I will use "nation" to mean those groups who subscribe to a unique historical identity grounded in a particular region, who are either identified with the regime in power, or who compete for power vis-à-vis the regime and its central governing apparatus. The state is therefore the central governing apparatus that oversees the production and distribution of resources, national development and defense, and exercises coercive power over its citizens. Definitions of the nation and claims to power are complicated by the introduction of ethnicity, which seems to have only become salient in claims to political power and identity in the past decade. Groups formerly defined only as "nationalities" are now also referred to as "ethnicities" depending upon the context. While I will explore this in greater depth below, it seems that the term ethnicity has become particularly significant since the replacement of the traditional Amharized ruling nationality by that of the minority Tigrayans, under whom an alliance of political parties based on national (sometimes called ethno-regional) identities has been marshaled within the state structure. In this sense, fluid ethnicities have become reified in state-sponsored projects to serve different national/ist purposes vis-à-vis state power.

Data for this paper comes from a melange of sources. I draw upon recent literature on ethnicity, nationalism, and the state in the Horn of Africa, and social scientific work on the meanings, uses, and interrelationships of these categories. Material about the current border war comes predominantly from a few scholarly accounts and popular media, including newspaper articles, editorials, government propaganda, and transcriptions of radio broadcasts. Eritreans and Ethiopians, particularly those living in exile in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, are highly engaged generators and commentators on news and events emerging from their home states. I am particularly interested in their own portrayals and constructions of ethnicity and nationalism, and the tensions therein.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that the issues and arguments presented in the following pages are somewhat sensitive and controversial. Ethiopia and Eritrea are again at war. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and countless hundreds of thousands more displaced. My analysis of the tensions present in immediate Ethio-Eritrean relations is tentative and meant to provoke critical reflection on some of the deeper identity dynamics that I believe are important in the current border conflict. In the Horn of Africa, observers continue to underplay the importance of identity while focusing attention on political and economic dynamics, significant issues that do not necessarily act in isolation from identity formation. I agree with Kjetil Tronvoll (1999:1038), who argues that the current border war "cannot be reduced to the issue of negotiating national identity alone . . . one must view

the border conflicts both as an expression, or manifestation, of an array of deeper factors, and as a means of demarcating Eritrean identity." Yet, Eritreans are not singularly responsible for infusing symbolism into the border as a means of solidifying and enacting the "in-group" identity, as Tronvoll clearly implies. Rather, Ethiopia's vigorous "othering" of Eritrea remains central, and is linked to the ethnic differentiation pervading the Ethiopian state as a whole.

Nations, Ethnicities, and the Politics of Power

The relationship of nations and ethnicities to power and the state continues to be complex in Ethiopia and Eritrea, perhaps most visibly since 1991. While numerous smaller populations exist within Ethiopian borders, only three of the largest ethno-regional groups appear to have significant and externally-recognized claims to power: Amharas, Tigrayans, and Oromos.[2] Other groups which may have somewhat or even markedly distinct linguistic or socio-cultural identities often flow into one another or become absorbed as parts of the larger groups that dominate the political field (see Markakis 1987, 1998; Tegegne 1998). Prior to Tigrayans attaining leadership in 1991, power remained concentrated among those of Shoan and/or Amhara background. Tegegne (1998) argues that because of the traditional association of the Amhara with the state, the Amhara are the only nationality within Ethiopia that does not see itself in exclusionary, particular terms, but rather identifies first as "Ethiopian." Moreover, he suggests that the category of "Amhara" has historically been quite fluid, and members of other nationalities who adopted the Amharic language and other cultural trappings were readily absorbed into Amhara identity and are therefore able to share in the state power structure. Others argue that undergoing "Amharization" was necessary for non-Amharas to participate in national culture or gain political voice.

Other nationalities such as the Tigrayans and Oromos, however, seem to have been more politicized in the last century by their broader exclusion from the central state apparatus and its power and resources.[3] Tigrayan and Oromo nationalist discourses often emphasize the way in which their regions and populations were "conquered" by Amhara expansionism and their resources and labor exploited under a imperial system that bears some superficial resemblances to European feudalism (see Asafa 1998; Adhana 1998; Markakis 1987; Sorenson 1995). Since the decline of Shoan centralism, which loosely coincided with the militant rise of Eritrean, Tigrayan, and Oromo nationalist movements, these groups have made competing demands and waged armed struggles on the state for power, recognition, and even self-determination. The most successful of these dissident movements has been the Eritrean, which succeeded in achieving independence from Ethiopia in 1991.

Concomitant with Eritrean independence was the ascension to state power of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front

(EPRDF), an alliance of political parties and opposition groups identified by nationality-based constituencies, and led by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). Working in tandem and coordinating guerrilla strategies, the TPLF and EPLF (in Eritrea) assisted one another to oust Mengistu from power, secure Eritrean independence, and place the Ethiopian state under the control of the TPLF via the EPRDF. Beginning in 1991, ethnicity in Ethiopia became charged with overtly political meaning. As Tegegne (1998:116) writes, "Politicized ethnicity has become the ideology of the state and the guiding principle of the government . . . anything that has to do with government, politics and administration in Ethiopia is now governed by the politics of ethnicity or politicized ethnicity."

Due to the long-standing hostilities that had endured between regional populations in Ethiopia under successive, Amhara-dominated regimes the EPRDF coalition was intended to explicitly recognize other nationalities and allow them adequate representation in government. But as Joseph (1998) and Ottaway (1998) note, the TPLF seems to have created this alliance in part owing to its weakness, which stems from Tigrayan ethnic minority status (Tigrayans comprise less than 10 percent of the Ethiopian population). Both authors charge that the TPLF has manipulated the EPRDF alliance such that the ethnic federalist arrangement, which was to focus on increasing decentralization and democratization, has actually decreased political participation among other "ethnic" parties, and has resulted in the concentration of power and resources in Tigrayan hands and territory. Some nationalist intellectuals, such as Asafa Jalata (1998:14, 16) of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), charge that Tigrayans are "mainly interested in taking power from the Amhara rulers and keeping the Ethiopian empire under their control by introducing some cosmetic changes," and that Oromo nationalists have been actively harassed for their continued opposition to the regime.

The Amhara, who supposedly "do not possess what people usually refer to as objective ethnic markers: common ancestry, territory, religion and shared experience" (Tegegne 1998:120), have also emerged as hostile towards the TPLF-led regime. Disgruntled by a loss of power and the outright hostility directed towards them as the previous "oppressors," some Amhara appear to be particularly chafed by Eritrean independence and the former close alliance that obtained between the Tigrayan and Eritrean movements. Lamenting ethnic fragmentation and the state's loss of a pan-Ethiopian identity with which the Amhara had equated themselves, Amhara intellectuals harshly criticize the nationalist discourses and historical interpretations of populations such as the Oromos, Tigrayans, and especially the Eritreans.[4] Other groups participate in this kind of cross-criticism and chastisement of each other as well. For example Oromo and Tigrayan intellectuals often criticize Eritrean nationalism and the projects of the new state, while Eritreans, since the eruption of the border war, regard with fury Tigrayan nationalist ambitions.[5]

Within Eritrea, regional and "ethnic" distinctions are far more difficult

to detect, and perhaps consciously submerged, within the structure of the current state. That the early nationalist movement in Eritrea was plagued by sectarianisms of religion, region, and ethnicity (divisions cultivated by the Ethiopian state) remains a source of concern for the government and a target for nationalist homogenization (see Markakis 1987, 1994; Tronvoll 1999). Compared to most post-colonial African countries, relatively little information is available concerning "ethnicity" in both the Eritrean past and present. And while the struggle for independence may have consolidated a national identity across ethnic lines, ethnic conflict and tension remains a taboo topic. Several state policies are specifically aimed towards fostering multi-ethnic bonds beneath a unified Eritrean national identity, such as military training for young people (Tronvoll 1999) and other kinds of work projects, such as the *keremtawi maetot*, or student summer campaign. Potential hot spots of dissidence and Islamic fundamentalism like the western Eritrean-Sudanese border are heavily policed by the state (see Tronvoll 1999), and expressions of ethnic identity are circumscribed within the larger nationalist framework. "Official" nationalist discourse (see Anderson 1983) therefore emphasizes the multi-ethnic character of the Eritrean state, whose national identity has unified, surpassed and rendered obsolete those identities that have long been blamed for conflict throughout the African continent.

While the picture has been simplified here, it is nonetheless within this context of local definitions and usages of nation and ethnicity that any discussion of identities in Ethiopia and Eritrea must take place. Nationalisms may have competed for a longer period in the region's history, but it is only recently that "ethnicity" has been deployed and heavily politicized. Any account addressing the implications of the border war in terms of identity formation must situate the analysis within state and nation-building efforts and the politics of power in both countries.

War: what is it good for?

Since June of 1998, Ethiopia has identified and deported tens of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin (United Nations 1999; Asmarom 1998). A distinct irony pervades this fact, as a common argument delegitimating a separate Eritrean identity emphasizes Eritrean belonging and continuity with the rest of Ethiopia, and Tigray in particular. Arguing that Italian colonialism was insufficient to establish a strong incipient state or national identity in Eritrea, those opposed to Eritrean independence are fond of pointing out the multitude of ways that Eritreans have always participated in or benefited from the Ethiopian nation-state. Since the outbreak of the border war, however, Ethiopia has effectively enforced a separate Eritrean identity by identifying those of Eritrean heritage, seizing their property, deporting them to Eritrea, or interning them in detention camps.

An additional layer of contradiction is that the war and deportations are occurring under a Tigrayan-led Ethiopian government. Hailed as Eritrea's

closest allies and often talked about as "the same people" or "brothers-in-arms," Tigrayans and highland Tigrinya Eritreans have long shared especially fluid boundaries geographically, culturally, and linguistically. With the introduction of a national boundary, emblematic of the extended nationalist revolution that simultaneously transformed Eritrean identity and society, a material and symbolic rupture has occurred within this former fluidity. Questions of erstwhile political and ideological tensions between the TPLF and EPLF (see Abbink 1998; Alemseged 1998; Young 1997), stereotypical characterizations of "Eritreans" and "Tigrayans," and the exaggeration of Eritrean "power" vested in the Ethiopian citizens or residents who (willingly or not) trace their ancestry to that territory, have repeatedly surfaced in discourses of profound ambivalence, betrayal, and anger.

Despite its overwhelming characterization throughout the past year by both foreign and "native" observers as a war over political-economic tensions and competing despotic regimes, arguments involving identity have begun to appear in local Eritrean and Ethiopian news sources and propaganda. An update from the Eritrean News Agency (ERINA) reported with great indignance that senior TPLF politburo member, Sebhat Nega, attributed the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia to the "supreme race mentality" of Eritreans: "Speaking in an interview on *al-Jazeera* TV last week, Sebhat said of Eritreans 'they call themselves the 'Jews of Africa' and the 'Black Israelis' . . . They say Tigrayans are inferior and that they are a super race . . . that is the cause of this conflict. They say they are a super race and believe it. Our enemy is the attitude of the Eritrean people'" (*ERINA Update*, March 23, 1999). President Isayas Afwerki of Eritrea reiterated this issue of national stereotyping in a radio broadcast with *Voice of America*. Acutely aware of historic Tigrayan-Eritrean connections and tensions, he commented, "This type of warfare is an expression of this desperate desire to punish, to humiliate, to tame, to teach someone you feel has always been sort of superior or very proud and arrogant. They [Tigrayans] have always blamed us." In the same interview, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia pointed out that Eritreans should actually feel *inferior* because they had been colonized by Italy: "If colonization is a dehumanizing experience, we in Ethiopia — Tigray or otherwise — have been spared that . . . Our cousins across the border in Eritrea, unfortunately, have not been spared this experience" (*Voice of America*, April 21, 1999). Competing nationalist historical interpretations are clearly at work in these characterizations, as Ethiopians and Eritreans continue to debate, albeit circuitously, the impact of colonialism in Eritrea, the lack thereof in Ethiopia, and what it all means for current identity formation, nationalist ambition, nation-building projects, and the relationship between the two countries.

Longtime journalist and Horn of Africa observer Dan Connell has pointed out this deep ambivalence between "close" neighbors like Tigrayans and Tigrinya Eritreans as it has emerged in the border war. Unapologetically sympathetic to Eritrea, Connell nonetheless notes the "complicated

nationalisms" at work in the conflict: "the very closeness of the two peoples and their political leaders is itself a key to understanding the intensity of this crisis — that is, in effect, a family feud, with all the ferocity and heightened emotionalism that commonly attends domestic disputes." He continues, addressing the stereotypes Eritreans and Tigrayans invoke of one another:

> many Tigrayans harbor deep personal bitterness toward the Eritreans — independent of the political movements now leading them — for being looked down upon by their neighbors to the north as cultural and political inferiors. Migrant workers from Tigray commonly held the most menial jobs in Eritrea, and many say they have been frequently insulted by Eritreans, whom they characterize as 'arrogant.' Others say they resent being treated like the 'little brother' in the political alliance that evolved between EPLF and TPLF (unpublished).

Similarly, in an interview between a major Ethiopian newspaper and respected historian Dr. Bahru Zewde, the paper inquired, "Nowadays, Shabia [members or supporters of the EPLF] intellectuals . . . try to portray Eritreans as more civilized and modernized than Ethiopians who they claim to be still hidebound and fettered by ancient modes of thought and behavior. What do you think is the origins of such chauvinism and arrogance?" Dr. Bahru's response clearly points to the colonial experience, which as I have noted, is usually *underemphasized* as a legitimate factor in Eritrean identity formation: "Eritrean chauvinism appears to be associated with the fact that the Eritreans were colonized by the Italians. The existence of certain infrastructures, the use of Italian utensils and appliances, eating with knives and forks and eating pasta instead of injera [traditional food], et cetera, might have inculcated in the Eritreans a false sense of modernity" (*Addis Tribune*, January 4, 1999). Even Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs Seyoum Mesfin, speaking at the 53rd General Assembly of the United Nations, described Eritreans as "intransigent," "belligerent," and "aggressive," and cast Ethiopia as a victim of "flagrant violation of international law by a small nation which is totally blinded with arrogance" (*United Nations*, October 1, 1998).

The patterns of "othering" that have emerged among Eritreans and Tigrayans in particular since the escalation of the border war indicate an intense ambivalence underpinning shared histories, former political alliances, and the yet-unhealed geopolitical and symbolic wound caused by Eritrean independence. While one basic assumption at work here — the idea that Eritreans and Tigrayans were at some historical juncture virtually the "same" people — must be more carefully scrutinized and perhaps revised, the Tigrayan-Eritrean tension between sameness and difference is more generally mirrored in larger Ethiopian discourse. Perhaps no single dimension of the war has revealed the affective depth of such ruptures in territory and identity as the deportations.

In July of 1998, roughly two months after the emergence of all-out war, Eritrean anthropologist Asmarom Legesse of Citizens for Peace in Eritrea

(CPE) conducted a survey of "ethnic Eritrean deportees from Ethiopia." The title of the pamphlet was particularly curious, as it was the first time (to my knowledge) the term "ethnic" had been applied to Eritreans. Drawing upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the pamphlet aimed to explain some of Ethiopia's ostensible rationale for the deportations, the violation of various articles of the UDHR, and demographic and ethnographic profiles of some of the deportees. Identifying a common pattern among all the deportees they had contact with, Dr. Asmarom and the CPE reported that

> most of the deportees were born in Ethiopia or spent a major part of their lives in that country. A survey of the first group of deportees who arrived at the Asmara reception center reveals that the majority (59%) of them lived in Ethiopia for 25 to 60 years. Nearly all of them hold Ethiopian passports or identification cards bearing the words 'Citizenship: Ethiopian.' Some were very young, others old and frail. Some were extremely old people picked up in the early morning service in church. Many were retirees from public or private sector jobs who lived on their pensions. Some were veterans of the Ethiopian army who lost their limbs in battle. Some were blind and others had chronic illnesses . . . even Catholic nuns and Orthodox priests picked up in monasteries and churches. They were all said to be 'security risks' to the Ethiopian government, spies or saboteurs or supporters of the Eritrean regime who were raising funds for the 'invasion' of Ethiopia (Asmarom 1998:12).

The demographic survey of these first 783 deportees showed that men heavily outnumbered women (73% male, 19% female); that most (59%) were between the ages of 41 and 60; and 60% had lived in Ethiopia for 16-35 years. In terms of employment, 30% were government employees; 19% private employees; 40% enterprise owners, and 11% other. Figures for assets ranged from 36% with 0-50,000 birr, 26% with 100,000-500,000 birr, and 10% with 1,000,000-5,000,000 birr (Asmarom 1998:21).

While most of the deportees do not appear to be extremely wealthy, the CPE reported that all deportees, and businessmen in particular, were told to designate someone with the power of attorney to sell their properties. The CPE also documented incidences of "de facto confiscation of property." The most extreme case of property loss documented was that of a successful owner of a construction company, responsible among other things for the waterworks of Addis Ababa, whose net worth totaled 34 million birr, or $5-6 million US (Asmarom 1998:17). Adding to this report, the author rightfully noted that one "potentially dangerous impact that may result from the war is the animosity that it could generate between two peoples who have had age-old historical and cultural links" (1998:23).[6]

The deportations have also received minor attention in the international media. Many of these articles also use the terms "ethnic Eritreans" to describe the deportees, or "ethnic cleansing" to describe the

process of purging Eritreans from Ethiopia. One paper reported the story of a top bowling champion who was deported from Ethiopia when "Ethiopia decided he wasn't Ethiopian anymore...[but] like 150,000 other Eritreans, he had chosen to stay Ethiopian when his *ethnic homeland* seceded in 1993" [my italics]. The article continues, "Many [deportees] come from poor backgrounds, but among those expelled were members of Ethiopia's elite: doctors, students, judges, wealthy businessmen and sports champions." It addresses Tigrayans as "ethnic cousins" of the Eritreans who supported the TPLF and were seen "by virtue of [their] commitment to the new [Ethiopian] regime as privileged" (*The Independent*, February 21, 1999). Another news article contains a section heading "Expelled Because of Ethnicity," and reports that "Ethiopia says it has expelled only Eritreans with links to the government but dozens of deportees told Reuters stories of how they were expelled just because of Eritrean ethnicity." The article goes on to quote several of the deportees, who claim variously that "I am Ethiopian. No one in Eritrea would take me seriously," "I can't speak Tigrinya . . . I had never once in my life set foot in Eritrea until they kicked me out," and "I have heard from friends in Addis [Ababa] that a strange family has moved into my house. My business is being run by someone I don't know" (*Reuters*, March 2, 1999). Finally, an editorial produced by an Eritrean summarized the increasing sentiment of his countryfolk and government that the border war is not quite about a border at all:

> What is surprising is all the heinous steps that were taken by the Ethiopian government have nothing to do with the war at the border. It appears that the predominantly middle-class Eritreans living in Ethiopia must have been the envy of the Tigrayan underclass for quite sometime. For decades, the Tigrayans have been marginalized from Ethiopian mainstream socio-economic life . . . . It looks like the border conflict has created a very good pretext for the Tigrayans to disenfranchise Eritreans and enrich themselves from the spoils. The fact of the matter is that the Ethio-Eritrean conflict has sparked a lot
> of subdued Tigrayan anger and inferiority complex [sic] (*Afrifocus*, February 22, 1999).

Even government officials and more scholarly accounts have picked up the term "ethnic" to describe the deportations. Eritrean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Haile Woldetensae, reported to the United Nations General Assembly that "The [Ethiopian] propaganda campaign accents *ethnic hatred*, vituperation against, and hatred of, the Eritrean people and members of the Eritrean government" (*United Nations*, October 1, 1998 [my italics]). Sociologist Craig Calhoun calls the deportations "a peaceful and mild version of ethnic cleansing," and argues that "new economic grievances reinforce old ethnic resentments and boundary disputes," (Calhoun 1999); the conceptual and word choice is odd for a social scientist apparently familiar with the Horn of Africa and known for his work on nationalism (see Calhoun 1997).

Similarly, Bahru Zewde wrote in a scathing response to an Eritrean colleague,
"the question that still remains unresolved is when is it that an Ethiopian of
Eritrean origin ceases to be Ethiopian and becomes Eritrean?" (*Addis Tribune*,
February 5, 1999). One possible reply could point to the deportations
themselves.

Competing Nationalisms, Reified Ethnicities

The fact that the latest and perhaps most violent dispute in the Horn of
Africa involves a boundary or border seems virtually pregnant with symbolic
weight. Consider, for example, Featherstone's (1996:54) assertion that
"conflicts heighten the sense of boundary between the 'in-group' and the
'out-group' . . . [a] sense of the particularity of the local place will tend to
become sharpened and more well-defined when the locality becomes locked
into power struggles and elimination contests with its neighbors." Clearly,
the existence of a geopolitical boundary that divides Eritrea from Tigray
province, Ethiopia, has created a situation in which sameness and difference
must now be brutally clarified and populations clearly separated. The
complicated emotional aspect of such socio-cultural processes, as Rosaldo
reminds us (1989), must not be overlooked. The wider Ethiopian sense of
betrayal at Eritreans breaking away and denying many of their historical
connections to Ethiopia, and the Eritrean fury and sadness at their Tigrayan
brothers "stabbing them in the back" writhes tumultuously beneath the surface
of the border war. But clearly there are competitions for power and resources
at work as well, as thousands of deported Eritreans lose their jobs, property,
and assets to the Ethiopian state. Once again, Featherstone (1996:55): "It is
the shifts in interdependencies and power balances which increase the local
people's consciousness of the symbolic boundary between themselves and
others which is aided by the mobilization and reconstitution of symbolic
repertoires with which the community can think and formulate a unified
image of its difference from the opposite party."

Leaving aside the complex political-economy of the border war, I
wish to focus here on what I call the "ethnicization" of the Eritrean nation.
Drawing upon both Featherstone's quote above and the information already
presented about the deportees and the process of stereotyping or reifying
identities, I argue that the notion of Eritrean ethnicity has been externally
produced by Ethiopia and then seized upon by Eritreans, each for separate
purposes. The impulse to label, characterize, and expel Eritreans has served
a particular end in Ethiopia: while the undercurrent of "betrayed" identities
and histories can clearly be identified, a more immediate political-economic
function has also been served in the seizing of employment, property, and
assets. Through the deportations of Eritreans, many of whom were only
tangentially identifiable with the region (that is, they carried no overt markers
of language, citizenship, or political affiliation), a separate Eritrean identity
has been externally reinforced by Ethiopians. Moreover, the seeming

arbitrariness with which Eritreans have been identified for expulsion, coupled
with proliferating discourses of who Eritreans "are," have provided nationalist
ideologues with a powerful unifying stimulant for the diverse Eritrean nation:
that of *ethnicity*.

Eritrean nationalist identity was predominantly formed, articulated,
and solidified during the thirty-year revolution and war of liberation (1961-
1991). During that time, the small size and population of the incipient state,
coupled with the massive suffering and decimation of people, landscapes,
and infrastructure, forged a cohesive identity that was reflected and recorded
in broken bodies and families, dispersed populations, destroyed towns and
villages, and desiccated, cratered land. Elsewhere I have argued that the power
of Eritrean nationalist identity has been thoroughly grounded in metonymic
blood linkages between land/territory as place, the bones and blood of Eritrean
ancestors and "martyrs" that are literally contained within the land, and the
affective kin relations that obtain between Eritreans as members of a single
"family" who have suffered, lost, and gained in semi-isolation from the rest
of the world. [7]

While Eritrean nationalist identity undoubtedly presents a more
unified image of itself to the outside world than what may obtain within the
nation-state (see Anderson 1983; Featherstone 1996; Medina 1997), the
current border war has presented a powerful opportunity to resolidify
nationalist identity through the remobilization of a society forged through
militarization and warfare, and the forced identification and winnowing out
of Eritreans from Ethiopians (see Tronvoll 1999). As Medina (1997:760)
writes, "In linking territory with a sense of peoplehood, nationalist projects
homogenize difference by defining shared characteristics which mark the
persons who inhabit the territory as the same 'kind' of people." In her
analysis of competing nationalisms in Belize, in which sameness and difference
stand in tension with one another and are complicated by co-existing ethnic
and racial identities, Medina demonstrates the fluidity of identities like nation,
race, and ethnicity and their alternative deployment for different homogenizing
projects (see also Williams 1989). Indeed, as Banks (1996) has also pointed
out, social scientific approaches to identity in general, and ethnicity in
particular, have emphasized or revealed the same kind of fluidity despite the
reification or seemingly static nature of identity within both concrete social
life and academic analyses. Such fluidity has allowed for the complicated
appropriation, conflation, or co-optation of one kind of identity by or for
another. As in Fox's view (1990:3), social scientists "preserve a false rigidity
to our conception of culture and artificially fortify our belief that cultural
productions can be classified as either racial, or ethnic, or nationalist. The
reality, however, is that they are at any moment quite rubbery and that, over
time, they can assimilate one another."

The Eritrean nationalist project of homogenization[8] has been served
by the introduction and external Ethiopian enforcement of a more rigidly
defined Eritrean identity than one simply based on history and territory.

Claiming an Eritrean ethnicity, and seeing its reflection and reification in the popular press and scholarly articles, affords Eritrean nationalism a "deeper" legitimacy. More specifically, the "blood" connections that underpin Eritrean nationalism have been further substantiated in the Ethiopian project of identifying Eritreans and removing them from the country. If Ethiopian citizens who have been identified as Eritrean exhibit no markers of Eritrean national origin other than that of parentage, an identity based on blood or biology may easily be imagined and claimed. Moreover, this ethnic identity appears deeper and more natural as opposed to that of regional or nation-state distinctions. Eritrean ethnicization both solidifies nationalist projects and responds to the historic delegitimation of Eritrean distinctiveness through the seizing of a seemingly natural difference. Moreover, Ethiopians themselves have pointed out and enforced this difference.

Yet the reification of a ethnic Eritrean identity only makes sense when seen in the context of wider ethnic politics and power claims within and between the two countries. Earlier, I offered a brief overview of the recent developments regarding ethnicity in Ethiopia, and the politicization and institutionalization of ethnic claims to power within the state structure itself. While Eritrea has, since independence, attempted to embark upon its own political-economic path that denies any necessary dependence upon Ethiopian markets or cooperation, its small size and underexplored resources imply that it will most likely have to rely upon Ethiopia and other regional neighbors for economic sustenance in its future. Moreover, the participation of many Eritreans in the Ethiopian political economy (prior to the recent deportations) also indicate that Eritreans have been implicated in the state projects now underway in Ethiopia.

As the closest of neighbors with intricately and problematically entwined histories, Eritrea and Ethiopia are products of one another as much as of their own struggles. The ethnicization of the Eritrean nation, therefore, appears to be directly related to the process of politicizing ethnicity in Ethiopia under the current regime. If ethnic designations have been reified and imbued with new power claims as part of the ethnic-federalist experience, why should Eritrean communities within Ethiopia be exempt from the process, particularly when their identity has been an epicenter of calamity in the Horn? Furthermore, if Eritreans are seen as virtually the "same" as Tigrayans, and if the Tigrayan-led government faced criticism from Amharas, Oromos, and others for its magnanimity in dealing with independent Eritrea based on "ethnic solidarity," it would be in the interest of the larger Ethiopian state to emphasize that Eritreans are, in fact, *not* the same as Tigrayans. For Ethiopia, casting Eritreans in Ethiopia as "different" naturally entails ethnicizing them, as the current state has earnestly deployed ethnicity as its central organizing concept. For Eritreans, readily adopting this ethnic label allows them an unequivocal claim to the distinctiveness on which their nationalist identity has been constructed. Finally, the fact that Ethiopia has induced this process and has brutally recognized an Eritrean identity by removing tens of thousands

of people, now offers Eritrea the perfect moment to establish agreement with
Ethiopia on an old point of contention. In a rather perverse and bloody way,
Eritreans have finally received from Ethiopia the recognition for their
distinctive identity for which they have so long struggled.

Conclusion

As Brackette Williams (1989:401) has written about ethnicity and its
deployment by both social scientists and social actors, "Leaders, seeking to
forge new political and economic ties to other national populations, and to
control the negative consequences of past and existing ties, have also found
the concept useful." Arguing that homogeneity is the organizing principle
informing the usage and fluidity of identity categories, she notes, "ethnicity
labels the visibility of that aspect of the identity formation process that is
produced by and subordinated to nationalist programs and plans — plans
intent on creating putative homogeneity out of heterogeneity through the
appropriative processes of a transformist hegemony" (1989:439). Within
Eritrea, ethnicity has recently become appropriated by the nationalist project
of the state to facilitate solidarity and cohesiveness within a diverse country
that may otherwise be subject to fragmentations and rivalries. How successful
the attachment of this new label may be remains to be seen. Yet, it has
occurred within the context of a border war with Ethiopia, and most
importantly, at the precarious edge that now separates and requires the
definition of Eritreans versus Tigrayan Ethiopians. The politics of power
and identity in Ethiopia itself, moreover, has created the conditions for the
intensification and transformation of Eritrean nationalist identity into Eritrean
ethnic identity.

　　　　As the war drags on, the tragic ironies and paradoxes of "defining
difference, forging unity" (Medina 1997) in Eritrea and Ethiopia emerge as
central, albeit subterranean, features in the ongoing hostilities. And while
those familiar with the Horn of Africa sadly look upon this current "war of
identity" as perhaps but a prelude to decades more suffering and tragedy, the
working out of tensions between definitions of sameness and difference,
Ethiopian and Eritrean, may also be the most important kind of score to
settle once and for all. For if Ethiopia and Eritrea can agree on nothing else
within this war, they have reached a twisted consensus about the existence of
a separate Eritrea. And when each country can accept the wound that has
riven them apart, the healing might at last begin again.

Notes

[1] Prior to Eritrean independence in 1991, Tigrinya-speaking highland Eritreans
were also referred to as "Tigrayan." Throughout the Eritrean independence

war (1961-1991), however, numerous historical, socio-cultural, and political-economic ties that had obtained with Ethiopia were altered or redefined as part of the Eritrean nationalist project. In maps produced by the Ministry of Culture post-1991, highland Eritreans had already been renamed by their linguistic designation, Tigrinya. This appears to have been done to mark the contemporary (and according to Eritrean nationalist historical interpretation, historically substantiated) "difference" between highland Eritreans and highland Ethiopians.

[2] See Donald Levine (1974) for a breakdown of "ethnic" and linguistic groups in Ethiopia.

[3] Clearly, not all Amharas were members of the "ruling class," and not all Tigrayans and Oromos were marginalized and disempowered. While generalizations can certainly be made about the plight of groups and relationships between them, it is important to recognize the varied inclusions and exclusions that stand in tension to one another (see Marcus 1991; Markakis 1994, 1998; Paulos 1998; Tegegne 1998).

[4] See "Ethiopia: A Perspective of the Ethio-Eritrean Border Conflict [interview with Professor Bahru Zewde, Addis Ababa University]," *Addis Tribune*, January 4, 1999; "In Response to the Response' by Dr. Amare Tekle," [editorial by Bahru Zewde], *Addis Tribune*, February 5, 1999.

[5] See Asafa Jalata, 1998; "Interview with Professor Merara Gudina," *Addis Tribune*, January 25, 1999; "Statement by H.E. Mr. Seyoum Mesfin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia at the Fifty-Third Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *United Nations*, October 1, 1998.

[6] Prior to the border war, approximately 550,000 Eritreans resided in Ethiopia.

[7] See Redeker Hepner, "Collective Memories and Embodied Events: Eritrean Nation-History,"*Journal of Imperial and Postcolonial Historical Studies* (1:1), and "Contested Terrain, Transnational Borders," presented at the African Studies Association annual meeting, Philadelphia, November 1999.

[8] Eritrean nationalism and nation-building projects are only now beginning to be analyzed by social scientists. The highly charged and biased nature of much scholarship has perhaps produced more examples of how identities are produced and reified than adequate analyses of the processes themselves. Sorenson (1995) pays much-needed attention to the formation and deployment of identity claims in the Horn, and Tronvoll (1998; 1999) has pioneered critical anthropological inquiry into post-independence Eritrea and nationalist state projects

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