Nationalism is not reliant upon position or locality. Nationalism is fluid and dynamic, and it is a combination of give and take between the people and their state; resulting in fluctuations of intensity and public presence based on the situational circumstances of the time. So as their colonizers imposed upon their customary laws, one by one, we see a surge of nationalism from the Eritrean population in defense of their orally translated doctrines. Keeping the same logic, it
is clear that during times of relative peace and tranquility that nationalism becomes subsidiary to more localized and particular issues. In a sense, times of crisis and turmoil bring with them the opportunity for the people to triumph over a common enemy. Hopefully in doing so, I will show that nationalism has never been abandoned in Eritrea but instead that it is so deeply engrained within adherence to the customary laws that during times of domestic and particular calm it remains dormant-waiting, to pounce.

Eritrea’s historical context, in light of its current status, provides for a complicated and often times misleading interpretation of nationalism and identity. My initial assumptions about Eritrean nationalism were incorrectly formatted around a single obsession; the desertion and defection rates plaguing the country. My mistake was thinking that I could define or classify nationalism without first understanding the “cultural system” by which the nation operated. Without locating the significant elements of power with a given society, it is impossible to adequately represent something so diverse and encompassing as “nationalism” towards one’s country. As for its customary laws, which have not been well documented in the past, Eritrean identity and cultural systems have not strayed far from its initial dogmas even in the face of constant colonization and degradation. So to the outside world, myself included, it may be hard to see past the isolated nature of a nation so intent on liberating itself without the political, financial, and moral impositions of western society. However, in response to such critics I would like to offer the position of one of the leading figures in “interpretive Anthropology”, Clifford Geertz. In the opening section of *The Interpretive Culture*, entitled “Thick Description”, Geertz offers his opinion on the matter of observing or classifying cultural systems. He writes,

“Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore
not an experimental science in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical” (Geertz 5).

Keeping said logic, my aim is to provide both historical context and ethnographic observations in order to persuade you that despite external interventions, true analysis demonstrates adherence to the customary laws above all else.

**Introduction**

I spent the summers of 1998 and 2002 avoiding the drops of blood coming from the goat jerky basting in the sun; which was hanging from the laundry line that made space for dehydrated meats and boxer briefs alike. In the summer of 98’ my two sisters and I, along with our mother, went to Addis Ababa for about three months to visit my grandparents and aunts. As a seven year old, I was utterly disappointed with a vacation that didn't involve a beach hotel and cable television. When we arrived in Addis, I was so terrified of the unattended dogs-which might as well have been wolves- that I almost never left the house unless we were driving straight out of the compound. My grandparents were by no means the wealthiest people in Addis, but my grandfathers electrical store afforded them with a comfortable lifestyle compared to the majority of the population. However, I could have never anticipated how drastic things could change in a matter of days. I remember going to sleep after watching movies all night with uncle and two sisters, and I couldn’t have been asleep for more than half an hour when my mom woke us up and told us to start packing our bags. I was unfamiliar with the anxiety and worry in her voice, and I could tell something was wrong. I assumed the worst; one of my grandparents must have passed away or something along those line. But instead when we finished packing my mom calmly told us to put our stuff in the car, and that we would be going to the U.S. Embassy so that we could change our flights. Me and my two sisters, dazed and confused, didn't ask too many questions and just did as we were told to do. Although I knew something was going on, I could
tell that we weren’t in any immediate danger because my aunt was still making tea and breakfast when we were leaving. When we finally made it to the embassy I asked my mom what was going, and why my grandparents and other family weren't coming with us if something was wrong. She explained, as simply as she could, that because of skirmishes between Ethiopia and Eritrea; all Eritrean citizens were being ousted from Addis and being forced out of the country without their material possessions. It wasn’t until a week later, when I learned that my grandparents and aunt and uncle were in the process of being relocated, that I understood exactly what was happening and why. Because of our status as U.S. citizens, we were given accommodations in the city for one night and were expected to be on the next flight out of Addis. The vivid details of the atrocities committed by both Ethiopian and Eritrean parties alike, which I will touch on a bit later, were far beyond graspable as a six year old.

Fast forward four years into the future, I finally made it to the motherland. Accompanied by my father this time, who was unable to go to Ethiopia with us in 98’ due to fear of prosecution, my sisters and I spent the entire summer living in Asmara. By almost all accounts, relative peace existed between Eritrean and Ethiopia between its independence date late in 91’ and the resurgence of border scuffles in 98’. I was ten years old now, and I started to pick up more on the subtle differences between being Eritrean and being Eritrean in Eritrea. Not referring to the blatant presence of materialistic and technological disparities between Eritrean’s and those in the larger Diaspora, there was a sense of polarization between the values possessed by a native and that of a first or second-generation immigrant. Having been born and raised in the states, my initial reactions to our destination were a bit pessimistic in that I couldn’t fathom enjoying myself-at this age- in a third world country. After a week or two sulking in my own sorrows, I reluctantly began to open up a little and even made friends with the neighbors kids. At the end of the day,
to a ten year old, having fun is having fun; and I found myself enamored with the amount of freedom children had to move about the city. Everyday, with the equivalent of four dollars in my pocket, I was able to go in and out of the city as I pleased using either public transportation or hitching a ride from a neighborhood car. Despite numerous conflicts with international entities, the Eritrean population seemed to operate, and even thrive, under a self-governance stance on cultural and social etiquette. Yes, there are obvious physical and political barriers in place under the current democracy in Eritrea. It is not my intention to refute the arbitrary nature of said policies, and I would even go as far as condemning such regulations; on the grounds of the implementation and practice of said policies, not their original intent. The issues plaguing Eritrea stem primarily out of a contradiction between gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the world, and realizing that no matter what, customary laws have priority over contemporary legislation.

**Historical Context**

The formation of the infrastructure of the majority of the country was dominated by external forces whose strategic aim was to exploit Eritrea’s proximity to the Horn of Africa, using it as a launching pad for further excursions in areas such as Somalia or Ethiopia. Although Eritrea may not have been the ultimate prize for the Italians or the British, their lack of sustained interest in the country did not shield Eritrean culture and nationalism from the lasting influences left behind by their colonizers. I present an analysis of these eras as a way of exploring the constant duel that goes on between the mandates of the orally transmitted customary laws and those imposed by the occupying powers. In doing so, my hope is to convince my audience that Eritrean nationalism has not shifted towards transnationalism, but instead has survived in spite of its con-
tradicory nature. I would like to offer an excerpt from *The State and Democracy: An Anthology* as a way of organizing and signifying the root of the power and influence within the formation of nationalism.

“The crucial element is not the name the system goes by but how the system works. [...] The nominal system of a government is less significant than the nature of the society in which it operates. [...] To categorize accurately the political system of a given society, one must define the significant elements of power within it” (viv anthology)

In addition I hope that this lesson in history will illustrate why Eritrean nationalism cannot be approached from an isolated singular perspective.

With that being said, let us begin with the Italian influences on Eritrean cultural formation. Before going into further detail regarding the intricate influences of Christianity in Eritrea, I want to keep in mind my initial research agenda. I hope to utilize the formation of infrastructures such as scholastic and educational curriculums as a means of portraying the dissociative nature between cultural identity and location. More specifically, I will explore how they relate to what I believe to be a contemporary movement towards a deterritorialized notion of cultural identity. By looking at how Italian culture dominates pre-existing notions of identity, I will examine the agenda and motivations behind the European influenced school curriculum; an agenda which promoted and advocated for the adoption of Italian cultural and societal ideologies. *Eritrean Education-Retrospect and Prospect*, by Ravinda Rena, explores the utility of propaganda within education systems as a means to shaping the people. In regard to the initial and changing aim of the Italian founded schools, Rena writes,

“The purpose of Italian education in Eritrea was clear and narrow. It was to indoctrinate the Eritreans with devotion for Italy and a respect for Italian culture and civilization. These schools were opened for Eritreans to become worthy elements of the native troops, interpreters, clerks, telephone operators and typists” (Rena 4).
I found this excerpt to be contradictory in its very nature, as it depicted a dichotomy between the practicality of functionalism and its moral efficacy based on intention. We will continue to dissect this theory, better yet this assumption, even further in an attempt to portray the wide breadth of disciplines affected by religious affiliation. The goal of the Italian owned and operated schools or institutes was first and foremost to shove religious doctrine and ideology down the throat of people they viewed as unenlightened heathens operating outside of its original jurisdiction. One might argue that to make this type of an assertion, using such theatrical and implicating prose is to play into the clichéd discourse surrounding anthropology; more specifically as it relates to the formation of the identities of victims and aggressors.

The reason I present my claim using such emotionally charged words, is my own contorted attempt at portraying the allegorical nature of rationalizing the extent of religious penetration into almost every facet of daily life. Furthermore, my use of the term allegory is intended to represent the symbolism that encapsulated the educational system. The education system, which was introduced by Italian colonialism, based in religious doctrine and biblical application, stood for the conventions and ideas by which the Italians wanted their colonies to abide by. This thought process was difficult for me to grapple with at first. It was not until I attempted to analyze the motivations and means as inevitable misrepresentations of the population’s comprehensive beliefs, that I was able to see the inherent contradictions between the theory and actual practice. Regarding the formation and definition of essential humanistic notions of spatial identity and affiliation; I believe that motivation and intention are so paramount to cultural identity that they have the ability to render utility or functionality as futile measures of ‘moral sensibility’.

Although Italian colonialism had long lasting influences in the cultural and economic sectors, the Eritrean population actively resisted their interferences throughout the entirety of their
occupation. These surges of resistance and rebellion can be interpreted as a manifestation of the significance placed in the customary laws. As Roy Pateman put it, “Everyday forms of resistance rarely find their way into history. However, pattern of behavior can be discerned which have had significant influence on the development of a specific Eritrean consciousness” (47). From this, we can infer that this consciousness that he is referring to is the exposure or leaking of nationalism. It is also his belief that these acts of resistances, scattered both geographically and temporally, were responsible for slowing the rate of influence the Italians had on public policy. It was their initial goal to flood the Eritrean territory with the peasants from southern Italy, but a fear of rebellion quickly made it apparent that this was not the right time or setting for such implementations. According to Pateman, it was these acts of resistance that birthed the notion of a “distinct” Eritrean nationalism.

Eritrea as a nation under British trusteeship was the shortest lived, and this iteration of colonial government had the most fleeting and temporary influences on the formation of the Eritrean Nation State. The trusteeship was initially, in 1941, a temporary fixture in order to maintain control of the region after Italian forces fell during World War II. The Four Powers, according to Cliffe and Davidson allocated Eritrea to British trusteeship until further negotiations would provide a more permanent administrative structure. The British however, maintained an agenda of their own. Their plan was to separate the country based upon its religious affiliations, after which the nation state would be partitioned between Ethiopia and the British colony of Sudan. In this account, the Ethiopians would receive the majority of the coastline and the Sudan would gain the lower western regions dominated by Islamic doctrine. The plan was devised to weaken the unifying capabilities of a nation state that was inherently torn by its religious contradictions, so that there was no realistic possibility of revolting against their colonizers. The British were attempt-
ing to make the chasm between the two opposing religions so deep that it would be impossible to conceive notions of identity which operate across and through religious affiliation. To the Eritrean population however, religious fervor is simply one facet of a complex social structure that is not grounded in divisions of physical territory. Unlike the Italian colonization, the British trusteeship did not introduce any new notions of belief systems or religions. Instead they utilized preexisting prejudices to their economic advantage.

However, according to Cliffe, this plan backfired on the British, as it ultimately strengthened the bond between the two parties finding common ground in liberation ideology. In my opinion Eritrean identity, as an autonomous and liberated notion, became the driving force for what was to be a long road to independence. Cliffe and Davidson, use the words of famed political leader Woldeab Woldemariam to present the sentiment of a people who just escaped Italian occupancy, “When we set out to organize our party, the Liberal Progressive Party, our aim was to preserve the unity of Eritrea under the banner of “Eritrea for Eritreans” (Cliffe 72). By 1949, Eritrea had become primarily comprised of what was called the Independence Bloc; which referred to the collection of several revolutionary groups who all operated with the intention of freeing themselves from British association. Along with the Eritrean based opposition groups, with the support of the Coptic Church first Ethiopia suggested a marriage between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This party, also known as the Unionist party, was officially backed by the Ethiopian government, and due to another outbreak of civil wars based on religious dissidence they were able to gain a foothold in the potential outcome of Eritrea’s situation.

Who was to be making the decisions regarding the future state of Eritrean Nationalism? Would it be a collaborative group of both U.N. officials and local Eritrean assemblies? No, the issue of Eritrean statehood was discussed by the United Nations, absent of any representative
member of Eritrea or its political parties. This judgment imposed by the United Nations, whose result will be discussed further later, is a symbol for the more important issue at hand; Eritrea’s inability to legitimize their claim to independence to the rest of the world.

In a brief look forward here, I wanted to further explore this lack of legitimacy experienced by the liberation movements. I provide the following to supplement the idea that Eritrea is simply part of a world economy that puts notions of identity and culture on the back-burner as opposed to the economic and political agendas brought to the forefronts. In November of 1980 the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, more commonly known as the EPLF, requested a referendum in which the Eritrean people would have control over the fate of their nation state. However, before exploring the details and consequences of the referendum, it is of vital importance to unpack the complex nuances surrounding Eritrea’s inability to make a claim for legitimacy. Why was Eritrea in their struggle for autonomy from colonial and imperial oppressors, unable to gain recognition? According to Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, co-editors of *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, the root of their unrecognized cause or movement was based in a technicality of categorization.

The Eritrean struggle, based on its geographical location and historically unstable circumstances was deemed as a “regional matter”; a regional matter which therefore was unable to be reviewed or questioned by the United Nations or its affiliates (Cliffe 47). Because their claim was deemed a regional matter, their struggle must first have been recognized and presented by the OAU-the Organization of African Unity. However, to do so would ultimately be some sort of social suicide, as the text reads “no member state of the OAU fraternity of heads of state is ready to raise it formally since Eritrea is regarded as an “internal affair” of Ethiopia” (Cliffe 47). According to the bylaws of the OAU, which state that Eritrea is regarded as an internal affair of
Ethiopia, no member state has the jurisdiction or moral obligation to intervene in inter-state affairs. Furthermore at the OAU summit held in Tanzania in 1964, President Nyerere who was head of the Tanzanian delegation, called for a resolution in which the members of the organization would abide and formulate their territorial boundaries based on the division during colonial status.

Despite unequivocal disapproval from the Eritrean population, the U.N. granted the Ethiopian regime their claim to acquisition, clarifying that Eritrea has to be a federation of the Ethiopian Empire. Immediately problems arose with Eritrea’s new democratic notion of a political agenda in relation to the monarchy-like system that ruled Ethiopia. So once again Eritrea’s land and political claims were auctioned off to the highest bidder, in this case, the one who could promote the agenda of the super powers most effectively. This was the beginning of yet another transition period for the Eritrean population. The Ethiopian regime immediately began destroying the social and political infrastructure. They started by dismantling the numerous and diverse political parties in Eritrea, and continued by abolishing the Eritrean language-Tigrinya-from almost all public spheres of society. Instead, the Eritrean population was forced to adopt the Amharic language at school, work, and almost everywhere else. Cliffe and Davidson also seem to suggest that the Ethiopian regime deconstructed the domestic economy within Eritrea to bolster the weakened circumstances in Ethiopia. They give accounts of entire factories and industries being relocated from Eritrean cities to the capital city of Addis Ababa. It was this chain of events that began the turn in Eritrean political ideologies of freedom. It was in 1961 that the Eritrean people formulated their first unified liberation movement party; the Eritrean Liberation Front, or ELF. This was the first of many liberations movements to come, and it constantly faced opposition by those outside and within the state. This opposition was manifested by the emergence of
such political parties as the EPLF and the EPRP; which will be examined in the following section of the piece.

The existence of multiple factions within a supposed liberation movement was divisive enough, but the dissidence in the ruling party ensured the conflict between the two sides would be even more complex and morally ambiguous. To clarify the state of the different factions, I would first like to define each of the liberation groups relevance to the current discussion. The EPLF, or the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, played a key role in the formation of liberating or revolutionary ideology during the armed struggles between Eritrea and Ethiopia. However, they were not the first revolutionary faction within Eritrea; as they grew out of the nascent organization of the Eritrean Liberation Front. The ELF was seen as the begetter of the independence movement in Eritrea, as it came about in September of 1961. The ELF was initially comprised of prominent officials and authorities who either left or were exiled once Ethiopia had annexed Eritrea as the 14th province of the Ethiopian Empire. Their priority was maintaining connections and relationships within Eritrea, and they aimed to provide the launching pad for the armed struggle outside of the country. Cliffe and Davidson in their text *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, give their interpretation of the formation of the group:

“But the ELF, although created out of a need to preserve the national entity of Eritrea, was led by self-styled leaders, residing abroad, whose aim was to set-up a neo-colonial state in Eritrea through armed struggle. As such, the ELF lacked a clear ideological line, and a political program that could safeguard the interests of the oppressed majority of Eritreans.”

This, among other reasons, was why the ELF did not remain the dominant party during and after the armed struggles.

More importantly, the masses felt as if the party was allowing religious endeavors to shape the formation of policies and legislation that in effect were culturally and socially repres-
sive by nature. Religious agendas were given greater priority over issues regarding ethnicity, cultural boundaries, and the fluidity of identities based on spatial locality. In response to the shortcomings of their current liberation movement, the Eritrean people who disagreed with the ELF’s primary agenda formed the EPLF—the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front. Rising in response to the ELF’s abuse of their power over revolutionary troops, the EPLF, according to Cliffe and Davidson, made it clear within their manifesto that “they not only would fight the enemy and set up an independent Eritrean Government, but would go beyond this in order to bring about fundamental changes in the life of the Eritrean People” (Cliffe 76).

However, the ELF would not go down without a fight; as they made claims that it would be impossible for a divided front to gain its independence from its common enemy—Ethiopia. The ELF, according to the text, labeled the EPLF as “counter-revolutionary” and made an attempt—via congressional resolution—to liquidate all aspects and operations of the EPLF. This was the beginning of what I will call the ‘civil war within the civil war’. The civil war between the two factions was waged for a couple of years, and was greeted with delight by the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian regime took this opportunity of weakness among the opposing parties and deployed troops to pinch the new EPLF between their struggle with the ELF and the Ethiopian front line. Although the revolutionary state was inevitably affected negatively by the civil war, the plan hatched by the Ethiopian regime was unsuccessful and led to the intervention of the Eritrean people into their civil affairs. After a cease fire was agreed upon in 1974, the Ethiopian regime experienced drastic political changes whose effects would reverberate throughout Eritrea’s political and social economy. The Ethiopian population, unsatisfied with the current political and social agenda provided by Haile Selassie and his regime, took clear steps towards revolution themselves. Cliffe and Davidson detail the collective cooperation of the certain Ethiopian mili-
tary officers and the role they had in stripping the emperor of his power. By September of 1974, Haile Selassie “was officially deposed and a Provisional Military Government Proclaimed in Ethiopia” (Cliffe 77).

The third phase of oppressively historical circumstances was primarily dominated by the 1974 formation of the Dergue, or what became formally known as the Provisional Military Armed Council (PMAC). The Dergue’s standing became apparent when the Ethiopian imperial regime finally collapsed. The downfall of the imperial regime, spurred by the mutinous demands of veterans exercising their right of protest, saw a transfer of power towards the military forces. Pateman goes into further detail in his account, describing the chain reaction of rebellions and mutinies in the capital city of Asmara. By September of 1974, the PMAC had inevitably given birth to the PMG, or the Provisional Military Government. Pateman’s text goes on to question and raise issues with inherent contradictions between the theoretical desire for regional autonomy, and the lack of follow through regarding the execution of its liberties. The new Ethiopian regime, the Dergue, made very open and public offerings of peace with the illusion that the agenda was centered on the restoration of unity. In the wakes of the post-revolution era within the province, the Dergue made an attempt to allocate all the blame (surrounding the Eritrean struggle) to what Pateman referred to as the residue of the feudal system.

They pleaded with the Eritrean population that now, with the introduction of the socialist inspired party, their struggles and conflicts with inter and intra state groups would be over. There hope, in such a proclamation, was to persuade those who had defected or fled from the country as refugees that in their return they would be greeted with amnesty and social acceptance. The Dergue went as far as recommending that they have neutral discussions and dialogues with those in objection with the policies of the PMG. Here, it is important that we briefly depart from the
chronological narrative leading towards the forefront of the independence movement and further explore the details of authority figures within both the PMAC and the Eritrean liberation movement. General Aman Adnom, the first chairman of the PMAC, was in fact Eritrean. Through his high level position, he made an attempt to convey to both the Eritrean liberation movements and Dergue administration that “it was impossible to set up a stable administration in Eritrea through the sheer use of force” (Pateman 78). The authority that the Ethiopian Dergue administration had placed in Aman’s hands could be seen simply as a tactical political insertion in the usually hostile encounters.

The liberation movement groups within Eritrea, however, were willing to honor a “virtual” ceasefire for the latter part of 1974; during which they would negotiate terms of peace and conduct open air meetings. The Dergue, however, took advantage of Eritrean vulnerability by supplementing their forces with several thousand more men. After which, according to Pateman, “they then affirmed a clear policy that “the unity of Ethiopia and Eritrea is eternal and armed force will be used if Eritreans are not able to realize this” (Pateman 79). This act of trickery was simply yet another thread in the quilt that is Eritrea’s unfortunate relationship with their neighbor Ethiopia. It affirmed that although the Dergue administration talked a big game (not to suggest there were none in support of Eritrea’s independence, like Aman) when it came down to execution, the majority of the Dergue community was not in support of negotiated settlement. And indeed why would they, with their livelihood and culture at risk? Although the ELF and EPLF organization initially agreed to a ceasefire, it was clear by November of 1974 peaceful negotiations were no longer an option. After Aman Adnom, and a good portion of those within the Dergue supporting the peace cause, were killed by government forces, the ELF and EPLF responded with their own, rather unfortunate, means of revenge. Pateman recalls the EPLF and ELF guerril-
las engaging in retaliatory acts in the capital city of Asmara which led to many civilian casualties. After fourteen years of constant scuffle and bickering between Mengistu’s Dergue administration and the members of the Eritrean Liberation “consortium”, February of 1975 brought with it a “declaration that Eritrea was now in a state of emergency” according to Pateman.

Again, in the early stages of 1976, the Dergue administration formulated a systematic approach to regaining the trust and approval of those in support of secession by Eritrea or any other regional province for that matter. They agreed to release many of the prisoners they had rounded up during 1974 and in addition agreed to lift the declaration of a state of emergency over the territory. Along with their immediate efforts to appease the emotions of the liberation supporters, the Dergue also claimed that they would be willing to exchange ideas and theories on questions concerning nationality amongst varying cultural affinities. This time, however, Pateman offers surprising analysis in regards to the reaction of the revolutionary groups. The populations seemed to be in favor of the new aims of the Dergue administration, despite history suggesting otherwise, and the administration urged the Eritrean population to see their affiliation or cooperation within the system as a mode of empowerment, not weakness. The Dergue administration painted a picture that there should be no reason that the Ethiopian people and Eritrean people should maintain innate contradictions. Pateman recalls an instance where within the local *Ethiopian Herald* the authors belittled the notion that the EPLF was fighting an anti-colonialist war. Ironically resenting the categorization of the entire Dergue administration as a colonial power, the regime made an effort to downplay their dominance within the relationship; calling attention to Eritrea’s “higher stage of capitalist development” (Pateman 80). In a bit of witty banter with the reader, Pateman makes a sarcastic statement: “One might then wonder what advantage there would be for progressive Eritreans in a union with Ethiopia” (80).
I wanted to briefly bring attention to an unexplained acronym used earlier in my conversation about the diversity in political actors in the Eritrean Liberation movement. The EPRP, or the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party, was in Pateman’s mind the most imminent danger to the dictatorship of the Mengistu regime. This opposition group is further evidence that the sense of nationalism held by Eritreans, whether they are domestic or abroad, has always been rooted in liberation ideology and not territorial claims or acquisitions. The liberation movement was taken up by diversely located ethnic, cultural, and political groups; and together this ensemble of revolutionaries serves as a microcosm of what I believe to be Eritrean identity. It is paramount to see how much was done for the Eritrean liberation movement outside the actual confines of Eritrean regional territories. The EPRP was primarily constituted by Ethiopians, some of whom new to the cause, who came to the conclusion that military power had in fact, infringed upon the civil sphere. In an attempt to control the population further, the Dergue administration closed schools and universities (an issue that is ironically still prevalent in contemporary Eritrea). Therefore, the armed liberation factions collectively received a great number of recruits from both Ethiopia and Eritrea, who had found new grounds to secede from the Dergue administration. The existence of cultural, social, and political diversity among those who made up the supporters of the Eritrean liberation movement, is simply further evidence that the true nature of Eritrean identity is one that may be deterritorialized, but not desensitized.

This detailing of Eritrea’s long historical oppression in and of itself has its limits in regard to the exploration of my central research question. However, this historical presentation of events should serve, in conjunction with my ethnographic research to follow, as a means of identifying the roots of Eritrean identity. As we analyzed the physical and intangible influences of the long list of oppressors, my attempt was to portray why the Eritrean people were not tied to the territo-
ry of Eritrea defined by non-Eritreans. It was useful to my research in that it provided the evidence of the irrational injustices that would render the Eritrean citizen completely detached and dissociated from the spatially constrictive notion of identity as defined by its history. In addition to allowing the historical circumstances to rationalize the formation of identity, my goal is to use them to help make an assessment of the current political and cultural status of Eritrea; more specifically as to how they can be used as inferences regarding the sentiment of the people and their potential plan of action. I hope that this historical presentation of events provided the reader a succinct foreword to what I hope is the revelation of contemporary Eritrean notions of identity not based in geographical, political, or religious spheres of spatiality.

Ethnography/Methodology

Asmara is flat, extremely flat. The locals say that’s why Asmara is considered a biking city, and also why Eritreans make for great distance cyclists in world competitions and the Olympics, unlike their hill infested neighbors in Ethiopia. But a quick twenty minute drive on the one road leading out of the city unveils some of the most astonishing and prolific mountain ranges I have ever seen. The depths and shadows of the valleys are pronounced, and engraved into the mountain sides are bedrocks that form a sort of foothill that would have been clearly beneficial in their guerrilla warfare against Ethiopia. It was the first time I recognized how Eritrea’s landscape gave it a military or tactical advantage over the much larger and more equipped Ethiopian Army. There is a long running joke amongst the Eritrean population, or mantra if you will, that claims the Ethiopians must have been “smoking something” if they thought they could win a war in such a hostile environment. I wish my words offered a more vivid and dynamic portrayal of these magnificent land structures, just as I wish I could do justice to the image of the town tightly hugging the cliffs of the mountainside. I could spend the next twenty pages going into a
detailed analysis of the interesting landscapes of Eritrea, and it would still be somewhat useful in depicting the significance of land claims in Eritrean nationalism. However, it was such rationalization that misled my initial assumptions about where and how Eritreans signify elements of cultural and social power. Simply analyzing nationalism’s relationship to the land is to enter a vacuum in which one is blind to the multifaceted nature of Eritrean Nationalism; nationalism that legitimates land claims, religious dogma, kinship relations, and political climates based in the fundamental rights enumerated by their customary laws.

Keeping that in mind, this ethnography will focus on the most relevant and prevalent trends that manifested themselves in my interviews and observations regarding the definition of nationalism. It will not necessarily be chronological, but instead divided into three themes that each encompass the priority of the customary laws over all social and cultural etiquette. The first will address the issue that inspired my research, that is the “defection” rates and the many variables associated with classifying one as such. The second will be inspired by my interactions with the professors of the former Asmara University and their reactions to the decentralization, or localization, of the states University. Finally I hope to portray that although land tenure is evolving in Eritrea, there are still contradictions that portray the problem with implementing legislation when customary laws are preferred.

“Defection”

I arrived in Eritrea at three in the morning, after a grueling six hour layover in Cairo, exhausted and irritated with the inefficient process of customs clearance. It was a short cab ride to my great uncle’s house, and an even shorter ride into the center of Asmara. I was trying to catch my bearings, hoping I would remember a landmark or a street corner from ten years past, but the lack of sleep ultimately bested me and I woke to family members yanking me out of the car. I
was mentally ill-prepared to answer the incessant inquiries about my mom, my sister, or my third cousin in Toronto that I’ve never even heard of. I never doubted that everyone who had come to welcome my father and I did so out of compassion and respect, but it was as if they were impervious to my blatantly emphatic yawns and head nods. For every one glance at the clock there was a new story from my mother’s cousin, and a shot of Areka, disgusting licorice flavored liquor, from my uncle. Adequately inebriated, and having eaten enough for three, the family reunion concluded as the sun was rising.

I didn’t have a single moment to myself or for my thoughts until laying in bed that morning, at which point I started to think about my task at hand and more specifically the very short amount of time I had to do it. I could have spent an entire year in my attempt to debunk the subtle nuances and complexities that regulate and justify the intermingling between the people and the state of Eritrea, and I wouldn’t have even scratched the surface. To say that two weeks was not nearly enough time is an understatement, and I am sure that this ‘time crunch’, so to speak, will manifest itself in the later stages of my work. Taking that into consideration, one could see why I was so worried due to the deteriorating communication between myself and the embassy office. I questioned whether or not I would be able to reach out to individuals; more importantly individuals who could provide me with relevant information void of external pressures. Without word from the embassy, how was I going to arrange and conduct these interviews? When I woke up, fourteen hours later, I was just as anxious as I was before going to sleep and thought I would never shake the feeling. In planning my trip, I thought it would be a good idea to give myself a day to acclimate to both my new time zone and neighborhood. Had I known that a day of acclimation ultimately meant that I would be going from one relatives house to another, being shovelled meal after meal, I maybe would have postponed such acclamations for the end of my trip.
The first day did however bring with it the key to the rest of my field study. A family friend, who was also from Atlanta, invited my father and I to dinner at their house the very first day. Initially I was reluctant in going to this dinner, mostly because I had eaten enough food to feed a village as they say. When our gracious hosts came to pick us up, I tried to pay attention to the roads this time and get a feel for the layout of the city. We drove for about ten minutes and had already left the confines of the center city. When we arrived, I took a look at my surroundings and found it astonishingly similar to that of the western suburbia of my home. It was obvious these houses were newer models to arrive in Eritrea, and as I would later find out; primarily either the media elite or expats returning as citizens occupied these areas. The houses themselves were beautiful, resembling Italian style villas enclosed by large iron gates and a stucco fence. It was there that I was introduced to Fremnatos Stephanos, a former soldier in the liberation against Ethiopia, who currently worked in the ERI-TV offices as a photographer and junior producer for the news agency. After dinner, he suggested that I meet up with him the next day and said that he would try and introduce me to some of the more public figures of Asmara. The first on his list, was the well-known author Alemseged Tesfai. Alemseged was also a member of the EPLF army, and it wasn’t until after the war that he began to document the historical and cultural adaptations of the continents newest country. Looking back at all of my interviews and meetings, Tesfai was the most willing to speak his mind freely. He seemed to be unhindered by the same clandestine aura of the rest of the civil service employees. We first started talking about the Italian influence in its tangible forms around the city. He seemed very interested in talking about the styles and trends in the street, local business, and even the restaurants that were popular. In addition to pointing out the prevalence of small artisan shop keepers and local specialized shops, he tried to relay the influence that Italian rule had on the culture of work and labor forces in Eritrea. He kept
bringing up the notion of “technical knowhow”, which I inferred was the introduction or exposure to technology and therefore the technical skills in industries such as electronics, home repair, and even practical measures of hygiene. But I got the sense that beyond these practical improvements in technical skills and matters of hygiene, that there wasn’t much substance in the remnants of colonialism.

Italian education was extremely poor in content and form. But of course there was a lot of influence in that the Eritrean language had adopted many words straight out of the Italian language. In that sense, there was no discernible literature that was written during Italian occupation and therefore nothing of substance written in the native tongues. According to Tesfai, aside from Arabic because of its utility in other expansion efforts, all other native languages were subsidiary to Italian. Tigrinya speakers were completely isolated from being able to produce or interpret literature, not to mention they didn’t have the access or the means to relay their ideology without newspapers, pamphlets, etc. Italian colonialism was focused on training Eritreans in enough of the Italian language so that they could communicate with their colonizers. And whatever geography or history lessons that were taught under the Italian education system, had to do with the history and geography of Italy and Europe, not Eritrean or even African history. He shared a common theme that he picked up on in most of the texts dealing with Italian occupation and Eritrean resistance, and it was that the Italians had a three prong agenda for what they wanted and expected from their Eritrean constituents. 1. The indigenous people are to be taught their basic mathematic tables and functions, so as to enable them to be fruitful for themselves and for the Italian empire 2. That the indigenous people be taught enough hygiene to keep them safe; safe here referring to the safety of the Italians who would have to come in contact with the indigenous
That the indigenous population be knowledgeable and versed in the detailed history of the personalities that made the Italian empire so great.

That being said, I wouldn’t categorize the Eritrean population as being particularly good at math or hygiene to be honest; and as for their history lessons, I’m sure most Eritreans wouldn’t be able to tell you the difference between Mussolini and a Maserati. However, I couldn’t help notice the high concentration of bookstores in a nation who’s history is sparingly documented. Not only that, but aside from a select few of western classics like Dickens and Twain, almost every piece is either written by an Eritrean or about the Eritrean struggle and liberation movements. But when, if not under the Italian occupation, did the Eritrean population begin to document their deeply rooted ideologies and customary traditions? In talking to Alemseged, I came to the conclusion that it wasn’t until the British gained trusteeship over Eritrea that the nation saw its customs being transmitted in textual form. Unlike the Italians, the British allowed for the population to express itself freely through its own localized news organizations and agencies of exposure. Through the eyes of Tesfai, someone who experienced the shift in literacy rates first hand, the nation experienced an influx of books, literary critiques, and even history texts. A sense of nationalism that had been transmitted orally for the majority of its existence, was finally gaining recognition in the literary world. Although the struggle was not well documented by outsiders, at the time, it gave the Eritrean population the opportunity to express their comprehensive beliefs that were otherwise subdues by colonization.

To the surprise of many, much of the works produced very early on were impressive in light of the author’s minimal experience. Tesfai made it very clear that this phenomenon had one plausible explanation. The fact that the early writing produced in Eritrea finally represented the comprehensive beliefs of the population means that Tigrinya was never truly abolished at the
home or local level. According to the Italians, Tigrinya had been wiped from the entirety of the public sectors and therefore should have eventually faded out as a national language. Tesfai recalls that the only time that Tigrinya was acceptable to use was during church chants and hymns known as “geiz”. But again we see adherence to the customary traditions over external influence, as it is the belief of many that despite penal codes outlawing it, citizens continued to converse and write in the native language. The majority took place under clandestine gatherings of neighbors and families often referred to as “mahabers”. A “mahaber” is simply a collection of Eritrean’s who pull their resources, financial and emotional, to fund and support social programs for the kids, adults, and elderly who live in close proximity to each other.

By the second or third day, I realized that my research question had changed and I had been imposing certain stereotypes that did not actually exist amongst the population. I initially assumed that the actions taken by those leaving the country-‘defector’s- as clearly anti-nationalistic. I though if Eritrean nationalism had a voice it would say shame on those defectors, but this was not the case at all however. I was in Eritrea for just shy of two weeks and not one person I met was satisfied with my classification of those youth leaving the country as deserters. My cognitive process was in a sense imitating that of Levi Strauss and his fellow structural anthropologists, in that I took their to be one homogenous definition of such notions like defection or desertion, and using these misguided interpretations I formulated a convoluted representation of the relationship between the state and its citizens. I hate that I didn’t see my mistakes earlier, but I envisioned Eritrea to be a prison with the middle and lower class being the inmates, and the elite politicians and military advisors serving as the officers for the warden (Isaias). I was wrong, and I was wrong because I didn’t first determine the significant elements of power in Eritrean social norms. A quick check with the customary laws would have proven the inherent con-
tradiction present in the imposition of such terms like defection or desertion. There can be no single classificatory system when observing the migration patterns of the youth in Eritrea. Tesfai wasn’t the only one to reject such a term. Senait, a former graduate of Chapel Hill and professor at Asmara University, also shared the same sentiments about classifying said group. In addition both Dr. Rezzina and General Efrem both saw the negative effects of imposing such westernized ideologies on nationalism and loyalty.

Defection from what? That’s what Alemseged Tesfai asked in response to my question. We stared at each other awkwardly for I’d say twenty seconds before I finally mustered up the courage to ask him what he meant. Defection from what? He said it again. He pointed out a flaw in my question, and picked on the fact that not once did I ever address why there were high levels of “defection” amongst youth; but instead went straight to classifying them as a problem.

There are several types of people who leave the country for several diverse reasons, but Tesfai shared with me what he thought adequately represented the demographics of the fleeing population. First, and foremost, there are those who flee simply because of the dire economic situations plaguing the country. In his eyes, these type are those who can be legitimately classified as economic refugees seeking comfort elsewhere. The youth in Eritrea are largely unemployed and those who are employed commonly find themselves unsatisfied with the jobs they have. I saw first-hand what such frustrations can lead individuals to do in desperate attempts to create some financial stability in their lives. Haile, the man I was staying with, had a son that was twenty-one who took me out in the city a couple of nights to meet up with his friends. The first night we went out, he took me to a street corner and said this was usually where he could find his friends. Assuming that we would eventually go into a café or bar to hang out, I was shocked that the rendezvous consisted of posting on a corner and making small talk while his friend ran an
illegal valet service. For the most part I listened when I was with his friends, but when I got a minute alone with Musse I asked him what was going on. With a small grin on his face, he said “he’s just parking cars”. Apparently, the new thing to do is hang around the crowded restaurant scenes and ask the locals if they wanted their car parked and delivered to them when they were done. He said on average, aside from the occasional generous patron, a service like that would run someone about 50 nakfa, which is equivalent to about one dollar. And when we got back to the house, his dad asked what he had been up to. When Musse told him that we were hanging out with Abel, he immediately knew which corner we were at and what was going on. But there was no look of disapproval or even anxiety, because he personally knew his friend and son’s particular reasons for doing what he did.

So Tesfai, along with the majority of the population, do not place shame or blame in those who leave their country only in an effort to provide for themselves and their immediate and extended family. The current economic conditions in Eritrea manifest a contradiction between not fleeing and adhering to the customary laws. In accordance with customary law, children are expected to provide for their parents after a certain stage in their lives. They are responsible for providing monetary, physical, and emotional support to their parents who offered the same in the child rearing process. Therefore the dire conditions, in the lowlands and highlands alike, create an impossible arena for a young member of society to fulfill his or her obligations. So, what then? A large majority of the population must then decide between remaining loyal to the traditions passed on through customary law or assimilating into a universalistic interpretation of nationalism. The decision to leave, in the case of ‘legitimate’ economic refugees, has nothing to do with a negative attitude towards the country or its people. It is instead a simple response to a hu-
man instinct to better one’s living standards and also a necessary evil in the eyes of the purists who abide by the customary law above all else.

It is impossible to group the entirety of those who leave as defectors or deserters. More importantly, it is therefore also inadequate to assume that those who were leaving were leaving because they were losing their sense of nationalism or nationalism was on the decline. These individuals for the most part are not emigrating to Europe or the U.S. and forming opposition groups that hold anti-nationalistic norms. Some do go to the states and establish opposition groups whose aims are to revolutionize the current operating systems in Eritrea, but for the majority, leaving the country is simply a trickle down approach to improving the lives of loved ones. Those leaving may not benefit or cultivate good in the public sectors of Eritrea, but in the eyes of the population, those “defectors” are honoring the significance of customary traditions. In fact it is my understanding, through my observations, that the majority of the population who finds their way abroad often times form “Mahabers”.

This is not to say that everyone who leaves the country does so because they need to. There are those who live economically viable lives in Eritrea, the sons and daughters of the shopkeepers and government employees, who make up the second type of “defectors”. These are the type who leave, as to inquire whether or not the grass is really greener on the other side. Some make it to greener pastures, subjectively speaking of course; like my parents and the many others who have made comfortable settings for their families having left Eritrea. But Alem shared a story with me from his lecture series that took him to Kenya, and what he told was both revealing and disheartening. He went to gander at the neighborhoods and districts that were occupied by Eritrean “defectors” seeking asylum or economic refuge. And before I jump into what Tesfai witnessed in Kenya, let me be clear that the living conditions in Eritrea are far from ade-
quate. People do live in squalor and there are many panhandlers in the street. It is, as is the majority of its continent, a third world country. However, the structure and design of the cities located in Asmara and the highlands are that of an open city, a city that can breathe without being concentrated in high rise towers or condensed shantytowns. Eritrea is a country with a low population, but more importantly Eritrea is a country with low population density.

Alem met with the organized community leaders for the population that had made it to Nairobi. He couldn’t believe it when they took him around the shanty towns that many had called home for several months if not years. Kibera is not only the largest shantytown in Kenya, but also the largest urban slum on the continent. He tried to paint the picture as vivid and real as possible, but from the look on his face I could tell that he didn't think his words did justice to the reality of the injustice. Aluminum roofs that stood no more than six feet tall, dirt roadways which just lead straight into a living rooms and kitchens, and mothers trying to appease hungry children. Unfortunately this was the reality for many of the youth who decided to leave Eritrea. This is not to say that only those who left from curiosity experienced such hardships, as those seeking legitimate economic or political refuge were susceptible to the same conditions. His words after that will stick with me forever: “We are losing our young people by the hordes, and that is a serious problem that we have yet to address”.

Dr. Rezzina, formerly an associate professor of Psychology at Asmara University, provided me with some of the most conceptually interesting information regarding the high levels of desertion and defection. I wanted to press him on the issue of defection, an issue I might add, that was just unravelled for me by Tesfai. I didn't know what to expect when I asked him about defection. He was very hesitant in answering my follow up, and I could tell that he was struggling in preparing his words. When he finally broke his silence, he said something that has stuck
with me to this day. “A small dose of fear is healthy and, if approached correctly, can situational-ly serve as a motivational tool of action. However, a society plagued with social and cultural anxieties is one that is non-conducive in establishing a productive and motivated population.” More explicitly, he considered Eritrea to be the epitome of a group of people living with anxie-ties spurred by instability in the government, work places, and even status in the global economy. Keeping that in mind, I thought to myself, how am I expected to extrapolate useful information from individuals too anxious to answer truthfully. As the worries piled up in my head, he said something to me that changed the spectrum of my research, and for the better. He reminded me that because a large majority of the population is operating under such conditions, that the high level interviews that I had in place would lost likely produce no relevant information that I couldn’t get from a brochure at the airport. In talking to him I cam to the understanding that this anxiety plagued those in more authoritative positions more than those a bit farther removed from the regulators surrounding civil or political action.

Even after my talk with the professor, I didn’t have a full understanding of the whole anxiety ordeal. What exactly were the people anxious about, and why, if it was so prevalent, had nothing been done to address the issue?

He seemed to believe that the high levels of defection or desertion, words I introduced into the conversation, stemmed from two sources and that these two forces worked harmoniously to attract much of the youth. He divided the issue into a “push” and “pull” scenario, in which he correlates the pull factor with external entities and the push with domestic influences. The pull refers to the external forces, outside of the confines of Eritrea, that are responsible for attracting the young individuals who are curious in change and exploration. And when he was exploring the existence of such youth, who are curious enough to explore the outskirts of the continent or
even move to Europe, he wasn’t disappointed or even surprised. He kept on referring to their age as a means to rationalize their immaturity to him, that justified the conviction of certain individuals to travel outside of Eritrea. In his words, “The pull factor is out of our hands, but it is our job to limit the effects of the push; which is internally produced.”

It would be hard to convince the youth of Eritrea, or anyone for that matter, that the luxuries and amenities associated with life in western society aren’t worth the risk of defection. The unfortunate reality is that Eritrea cannot afford all of its citizens with adequate healthcare, three meals a day, or the opportunity to own a home. And Dr. Rezzina would argue that until the state realizes they can’t control the attraction to novelty, they will continue to waist their time implementing policies which feign influence over the affects of globalization. Focus instead should be placed on domestic affairs and policies whose aims are to influence public perception regarding the state of the union. There are many who share this sentiment, and during my time in Asmara I found that not everyone is drawn to the attraction of milk and honey. A large majority of the population is content with their living conditions and would consider moving to the west an inconvenience in their lives.

Dr. Rezzina who has three sons, and shared with me their stories, which represent what I believe to be a rather comprehensive belief held by the citizenry in regards to “defection”. Two of his sons have decided to continue their education in the United States, while his oldest son remained in the country willingly to fulfill his national service and make a living in Asmara. All three had the choice to leave, legally I should add, but not all were drawn by the brights lights of America. He explained that his eldest son never had aspirations of leaving his country, and in fact had recently gotten married and moved into his own home. His goal is to finish his military service and then start a family, and ultimately continue in his fathers steps and become a teacher.
The push factor refers to certain policies or traditions within Eritrea that have become widely unfavorable with the younger generation. Mandatory military conscription, the closing of the central university system, and the overall isolation of young people are some of the most well-known “push” factors. And Dr. Rezzina believed that the combination of restrictive policies and low economic standards created an environment in which people could not rationalize staying. In his humble opinion, and mine as well, mobility is the key for stability. Looking past the obvious oxymoronic nature of what I just said, the freedom to move in and out of the state as one sees fit manifests a society that is content and able to see the benefits of staying. The mobility or freedom to explore allows for the population to become “accustomed to their accommodations” which, Dr. Rezzina suggested is essential in preserving culture.

**University System**

The actions taken in regards to the university system in Asmara were and still are confusing to most who try to find the rationale for not having a central university system in the nations capital. As it stands now the University of Asmara is on an indefinite hiatus, and its future existence is uncertain. The new system of higher level education is focused on smaller localized colleges in more diverse regions of the country. There are currently nine colleges located in Eritrea, each one specializing in a different field or study, but no centralized university affiliation. The building that used to be Asmara University now serve as the the home of the Orota Medical School of Asmara. The other schools offered specialized degree programs in fields like agriculture, engineering, medicine, and even marine biology. That being said, it was almost unanimously agreed upon that the diversification of the colleges was a great idea, and it would ultimately serve to place certain individuals, those hindered by the rurality of their existence, in academic arenas that they would have never been exposed to. Not only that, but there were also other ob-
vious benefits to the specialization of each college. Instead of having a marine biology program in Asmara, hundreds of miles from any form of water, classes are offered at the ‘Massawa’ College of Marine Sciences which is nestled tight against the Red Sea. The College of Arts and Social Sciences is located in ‘Adi Keyh’, the College of Business and Economics in ‘Halhale’, and the Eritrea Institute of Technology in ‘Mai Nefhi’ are a few of the new colleges established in the different regions of Eritrea. Despite the positive results of geographical diversity, there was also unanimity in regards to the benefits of having a centralized university structure; one through which experiences, processes, and even funding could trickle down to each affiliated college in their respective geographies. That was not the only negative effect of the new university system. The new policies and locations of the schools inevitably created competition.

During my discussions with Dr. Rezzina, I got the feeling that the presence of the medical school in Asmara created a subtle ranking system between the colleges and their fields. He was very helpful in dissecting the path or journey that a student takes beginning his matriculation from secondary school. According to him all students, having completed their eighteen month tour of duty in the national service, have the opportunity to take the university entrance exams which will determine their available avenues to becoming a productive member of society. Those who get the best scores either go to the medical school located in Asmara, or they go to the college of engineering which is the closest in proximity to Asmara and more generally populous regions. Those students who receive lower scores are most likely to attend the colleges in the outskirts of the state like that of marine biology and farming techniques, which severely limit their potential career paths.

*Contemporary Legislation versus Customary Land Tenure*
The Eritrean customary laws are, in the opinion of many, tragically misrepresented in the form of written text and I found the sentiments to be true. I had not even heard of these so called customary laws until I was in Eritrea and I was having coffee with a good family friend who I had met in 2002. Shambel, formerly an Eritrean chief of police in what was then Ethiopia proper, is one of the most well read and situationally aware people I think I have ever met. His ability to recall, suggest, and even directly quote pertinent resources was truly astounding, but that is besides the point. The customary laws of Eritrea had been in existence for centuries and for the majority of their reign, they went undocumented and were therefore dependent on oral transmission. In fact; according to Friederike Kemink, author of the excerpt entitled *The Tegrenna Customary Laws*, it wasn’t until the later part of the nineteenth century that they were transmitted to paper.

It was his aim, within this piece, to prove that although there have been several instances of cultural, political, and economic interference in Eritrea’s national formation, “the influence of other legislating institutions has remained insignificant compared with that of Customary law” (Kemink 55). This is not to suggest that there are no theoretical or tangible traces of judicial or civil influences left by the Italians, the British, or even Ethiopian occupation. My stance here, is one that attempts to make a distinction between adherence to regulations and statutes made via statutory law or those developed by common law. It is undeniable that the Italians, the British, and the Ethiopian empire had long lasting influences in legislative and judicial procedures. However, going back to my central aim within this piece, I hope to prove that the population places importance in its customary code over that of its penal and civil regulations. It is here that I hope to reiterate that to adequately categorize or classify a political system’s sense of nationalism, one must first analyze and define the significant elements of power within a given society.
The day before I was leaving, I was filled with a small sense of regret. Regret that, although my interviews were beyond fruitful, I was unable to speak to someone in a position of authoritative power. Anyways whether it was through the will of the gods or sheer luck, one of the two of the ministry members I had initially sought out had heard, through the grapevine, that there was an American kid going around asking people what Eritrean nationalism meant. It just so happened that my mothers cousin, through his work with the governments agriculture and tourist departments, was familiar with one of the individuals and offered to take me to him for an interview. I quickly got my stuff together, knowing the unpredictability of appointment times in Eritrea, and rushed over to a part of town I had never been to before. We pulled up to what looked like a personal residence, a mansion none the less, and were swiftly greeted by security inquiring as to why we were there. My uncle told the security guard that we were American, and “that the kid is here to get his masters degree”. When I heard that I laughed, mostly because he was probably the twentieth person who assumed I was there completing my masters degree. I don’t know if they thought I looked a bit older or maybe I was just emitting the image of a more poised and mature individual, but either way I recognized the futility of trying to correct them and ultimately went along with the facade.

I was a bit shocked at the presence of such a security detail, even if I was meeting with minister of defense. It was the first time, aside from the embassy offices, that I saw a federal office space being so closely guarded. Once in the compound things seemed to return to normal behavior. Security ended up being a tall and lanky gentleman who was probably twenty years the elder of my father, and as we transitioned inside he morphed from security guard to barista, asking how many scoops of sugar in our tea. After ten minutes of waiting in the conference room, in walks General Eferem, the minister of defense. For some reason when I first heard I would be
interviewing a General, I assumed I would be meeting a broad shouldered military man decorated in full dress. However, I was greeted by a man in his early sixties wearing blue trousers and a blue blazer with no tie. For the first five minutes we made small talk while sipping our tea, apparently a fad in Eritrea, after which we got down to business. Him being a military man, I though it would be too obvious to begin with my inquiries regarding the purpose and agenda of the national service program. Instead I chose to press him on the issue of implementing new legislation regarding land claims. I wanted to know whether or not he believed that the new legislation would actually gain support from the public, or if this would become yet another issue between the people and the state. He started by explaining exactly what the new legislation entailed, and more importantly he transitioned into the motivation behind such policies. The policies themselves were simply allocating the state with final jurisdiction over land claims. The motivation however, was a bit more intricate. I inferred that the motivation behind such policies were politically charged, and were put in place to legitimize the authority of the Eritrean government. It was crucial, as one could guess, for the government to have claim over the land so that external forced could not make rational rights to claiming their land. My theory was supported by both Efrem and the text that he suggested I look into further.

Luca G. Castellani is the author of the working paper entitled *Recent Developments in Land Tenure Law in Eritrea, Horn of Africa*. He offers a historical analysis of the “evolution” of land tenure systems in Eritrea; more specifically he makes the generalization that contemporary legislation, while undeniably practical, cannot compete with the comprehensive adherence to customary law. Without going into too much detail in regards to regional divisions, the country cab be divided into four main segments. There are the eastern and western lowlands, the Danakil desert, and finally the highlands (Castellani 1). For the sake of efficiency, I will skip ahead to the
contemporary land laws that were established specifically to cater to the new independence of the population. The new reforms wanted to shift power away from the customary traditions, and move towards a policy system that gave control of the land to the state instead of a loose collection of regional traditions.

The village is a very important concept in the social fabric of Eritreans, and it finds legitimacy within the customary laws. According to customary tradition, not necessarily reality, “every Eritrean who has fulfilled his or her military duties is entitled to land in the home village. That right does not apply to urban areas, which still lack pertinent legislation” (Castellani 10). This is not only referring to some abstract notion of a village or community of like minded individuals, but also includes the physical bond and relationship with the land itself. Your village is the birthplace of your parents and their parents, and thus it is the burial grounds of your ancestors. All land and property claims, aside from in Asmara, had been honored based upon inheritance of ancestral land claims and will be the case for the discernible future. Why? Because according to my observations (and in conjunction with the theory offered by Luca) Eritrea has tried, and failed, to implement land tenure policies that manifest contradictions with customary code. The simple truth of the matter is,

“Given the limited capacity of African states to triumph in the clash with customary systems, this course of action is associated with economic inefficiency, social unrest, and environmental degradation, all of which contribute to fostering continued underdevelopment. To minimize such dangers, a more cooperative attitude toward existing social structures would be a preferable stance for the state.” (Castellani 14)
The Eritrean Constitution, in chapter 5 Article 37 “Property Rights”, provides: “Property rights and rights of a real nature, including those on State lands, established by custom or law and exercised in Eritrea by the tribes, the various population groups and by natural and legal persons, shall not be impaired by any law of a discriminatory nature” (F.F. Russell 100). This excerpt from the Eritrean constitution, which is still trying to gain legitimacy, is in my opinion, a perfect example as to why the current ruling party wishes to establish authority over land claims.

*Isolated Status*

*The State and Democracy: An Anthology,* offers an interesting critique of not only Eritrea’s particular historical context and cultural formation, but also that of the interactions between the horn of Africa and its countless colonizers. This text, first and foremost, was an analysis of the simplification or reduction that occurs when evaluating or observing a foreign parties cultural and political infrastructure. The goal of the anthology is to avoid over simplifications and stereotypes that clutter the truth or purpose of individual or collective power. So in order to derive and judge the root of political and civil power in a given territory, say Eritrea, one must debunk the complexities and intricacies of the polices instead of sweeping the details under the rug that is cultural ignorance.

It is my opinion, based upon my observations in the field and my exposure to the customary laws in their written form, that the simplification of complex nuances passed on through oral tradition causes a misinterpretation or a bad measure of nationalism. I want to make it clear that I myself was guilty of such generalizations when I first approached the development of my research question. Initially, without proper evidence to support my hypothesis, I came to the rash conclusion that Eritrean nationalism had shifted towards ‘transnationalism’. My logic was primarily based on my curiosity with the defection rates in Eritrea in conjunction with my personal
relationship with a small sample of students who left Eritrea and never returned. In addition to these poor assumptions, I also made the tragic mistake of classifying Eritrean nationalism as being physically and emotionally detached from any claim to tangible land.

However I will say this; although my theory on the affiliation to land was far off, I do believe I am still correct in the claim that the bond with the land is not the only-or even primary-means to defining Eritrean nationalism. I still maintain that Eritrean nationalism, in its most pure state, is based on the connections made between members of the state and those in the larger Diaspora. However, I would like to offer an amendment to such statute so as to divulge the diversity in the formation of Eritrean nationalism. Therefore, while I attest to the significance of personal relationships and transnational cooperation in creating a classification system for nationalism; I am unable to deny the role played by external dominating forces and in addition the historical presence of rights to land. Eritrean Nationalism, as I have come to understand presently, is a manifestation of the duality or polarization that stems from a cross-temporal analysis of historical precedence and the current status of mobility-or lack thereof.

“No culture, no society and no state has the final understanding, the ultimate answers. If any society-or its representatives leadership claims to have the final answers, it is a lie, it is a dangerous pretension. Western liberal society and its dominant establishments suffer from this dangerous malady, dangerous to itself as hubris and dangerous to others as justification to imperial domination” (Viv Anthology)

It was this principle theory that was neglected by those occupying Eritrea during its vast history as a collective or national affiliation. Going back to the days of colonialism, we can see the devastation and long lasting influences of oppression on the psyche of the Eritrean population.

It is also this neglect that has established precedence that can be found in some of the contemporary issues facing Eritrea-i.e. international embargoes and sanctions imposed by the U.N. In regards to such sanctions, it is the assumption of much of the Eritrean population that
these embargoes are at their root at the behest of the U.S. government. It is the popular belief that these sanctions are being imposed as a means of coercive domination.

The United Nations adopted resolution 1907, created by the security council, in which Eritrea was placed under a similar embargo that was drafted for their neighbors in Somali. Eritrea would, under resolution 1907, be under a dual natured arms embargo which criminalized both the import and export of arms in Eritrea. According to the unofficial manifesto of the UN sanctions on Eritrea, “All Member States shall take measures to prevent the sale or supply to Eritrea of arms and related materiel of all types as well as technical assistance, training, financial and other assistance related to military activities or to the provision, manufacture, maintenance or use of these items.” (UN)

Since the original resolution, there have been several amendments that have grown increasingly stringent on Eritrean policies and practices, and their actions seemed to get muddled together with the entire horn of Africa. By 2011, the UN security council renamed the task force to include both Somalia and Eritrea under the jurisdiction of the task force. What task force do I speak of? The unit that was basically delegated to monitor activity in and between Eritrea and Somali, with the expectation that one or the other was responsible for funding and harboring individuals considered to be terrorists according to universalized standards.

The sanctions imposed on Eritrea have not only influenced the political agenda of a nation who just recently gained its freedom, but subsequently it has manifested itself in the economic sectors of a nation that cannot afford to burn another one of their bridges. The sanctions laid out by the UN clearly mandated, “All Member States shall freeze without delay funds, other financial assets and economic resources owned or controlled, directly or indirectly, by individuals and entities designated by the Committee.” (UN)
According to the U.S. Department of State, Eritrea was initially among a list of African nations or members who wish to cooperate with counterterrorist measures and polices being implemented primarily by the West. In an effort to portray such willingness to not only cooperate but actively aid, the Eritrean government allowed for U.S. aircrafts and other details to occupy and maneuver within their airspace and ground territory. However, due to a “lack of transparency”—as worded by the State Department website—the U.S. saw the Eritrean government as a conducive environment for terrorist proclamation and preservation. The State Department’s “Country Reports on Terrorism” felt that the isolated nature of the Eritrean government was one incapable of adequately tracking and monitoring terroristic behavior within its own backyard. Their creed reads as followed, “The Eritrean government’s national doctrine of self-reliance and disinclination to accept international assistance prevented the United States from providing training, technology, or other counterterrorism assistance.” (State Department Website). Since when is the art of self-reliance something to be degraded or belittled; and of even more concern, when did such a trait become the justification or measure for international cooperation. In this instance the call for unified or international cooperation seems to be more rooted in assimilation rather than engaged debate and open communication. It may be true in many cases around the globe, but it is not fair to assume that a closed door insinuates malicious intent or shady behavior.

I saw first hand the consequences of such sanctions in my dealings with the airport and the airline industry. Notice I said airline industry and not “airlines”—plural. The sanctions imposed on Eritrea have created major setbacks in a diverse array of societal and political organization, but the effects they had on the airline industry may be the most detrimental to the progression of a young state. When I first went to Eritrea in 2002, I took a flight from Atlanta to Rome and from there I took a flight-via Lufthansa—straight to Asmara International Airport. Further-
more I had more than one option if I really wanted it; I would have also been able to also go from Rome to Yemen and from Yemen to Asmara, or even fly from Atlanta to Cairo or Istanbul and then straight to Asmara. Anyways, its pretty obvious that whether it was through Alitalia, Lufthansa, Turkish Air, Egypt Air, or even a domestic industry; I had many means of getting to and from Eritrea. This is far from the case today. When I went to Eritrea, I was forced to go from Atlanta to Rome, from Rome to Cairo, and then from Cairo to Asmara. You might be thinking, so what, you had one extra connection-no big deal. Wrong. The issue is that was my only choice. After the revised political and economic sanctions were imposed on Eritrea, the airline industries that frequently made trip there and back began to pull their planes and agencies out of the country. The only airline that is currently operating flights to and from Eritrea, aside from Yemen Air’s twice a month schedule, is Egypt Air. During the busiest of days there is a maximum of one aircraft leaving from Eritrea to only Cairo, and likewise a maximum one flight a day entering Eritrea from, you guessed it, Cairo. Thus, Egypt Air, essentially operates as a monopoly of the airline industry in Eritrea, and their full knowledge of the details and complications surrounding the embargo is exactly what allows for such occurrences. When my luggage was “lost” in Cairo, aka rifled through for valuable electronics, I was forced to come to the airport everyday to see whether or not my luggage had arrived. Everyday I went I was greeted by a different employee who was somehow unable to help me with my particular situation. They were unaware of how most of the complexities of the industry worked, and were more than happy relegating the authoritative or administrative positions to individuals not part of the citizenry.

When I finally made contact with the Egypt Air manager, at four in the morning, I stepped into what I assumed to be the biggest if not only office located on the premise. In a sense the Asmara International Airport, from a managerial or executive standpoint, was headed by an
Egyptian man whose job is the only reason keeping him in the country. The rest of the employees, surprisingly many for such a small operation, were responsible for things like cleaning, baggage handling, and even served as baristas at the accompanying café. Sure there’s nothing wrong with working in the service industry, in fact many of the population strives to enter such a position, but there is a problem when a customer or client is unable to get service because someone is on their tea break. It was my interactions with the airport staff and so called employees that solidified my theory that tea is at the center of Eritrean belief and communication systems. All jokes aside I was delayed another day in getting my luggage, even though I could see it through the clear glass window of the customs office, simply because the person in charge of the customs office was out on a tea break. I couldn't believe it. Not only was the customs officer, if you can even call him that, on break; but no one else was able to help me because apparently only one copy of the office key had been made and that key was also on a tea break.

I tried to express my frustration, by venting, however I didn't even seem to strike the slightest nerve of the lady I was talking to. I pleaded with her that she had to see the absurdity in the situation and the validity of my frustration, but she remained calm and almost bashful through the remainder of my lecture. After I had finished laying into her, to the best of my abilities using the native language, she simply replied “what am I supposed to do, I am just a worker?” And it was at that point I began to situate myself in their positions, as employees in a receding industry that could ultimately vanish at any point. There jobs have been relegated to babysitting a building that is in use roughly three hours a morning, while the remaining 6 hours of the shift are spent gathering around tea or sleeping in the currency exchange office as I frequently saw people doing. The recent sanction have even affected the postal service. In the past few months, postal service has stopped entirely and it is due to the fact that Lufthansa no longer flies
to Asmara. Nothing comes in or out of Eritrea via cargo planes anymore, and it has become a serious issue for those who depend on their medicine that is not produced or sold in Eritrea.

Conclusion

Eritrean nationalism is rooted in Eritrean independence. Eritrean nationalism supersedes physical and metaphysical notions of territories, borders, and ethnicity. It can not be defined without consideration for its particular historical context and must be evaluated autonomous of western precepts of civilization or sophistication. There is no individual ambassador, political party, or corporation that epitomizes Eritrean nationalism. It can not be interpreted by those who neglect cultural relativism, nor can it be classified using popular generalizations or stereotypes imposed upon the populace by external groups. Eritrean nationalism, despite many opportunities, was largely uninfluenced by the political, economic, and penal institutions established by the Italians, British, and Ethiopians.

Eritrean nationalism is, at its root, a defense of customary laws. Nationalism was a reaction; a reaction to the infringement upon traditional values passed down for centuries. It is the result of struggle and triumph, and is much more than a physical attachment to the land. The significance of nationalism, is that it portrays the particular struggles and subsequent triumphs experienced by a community. However important the issue of land claims may have been, it was only a portion of the liberating ideologies associated with the independence movement. In the words of Woldeselassie,

“The Eritrean independence was no gift from anybody or any force. It is the result of precious sacrifice. Tens of thousands of Eritrean Freedom Fighters and thousands of innocent people were sacrificed to gain Eritrean independence. Many decisive battles were fought such as: Afaabet, Adi-Keih, Adi-Gebru, Gindae, Eila Beread, Keren, Massawa, Nakfa and finally the battle of Dekemhare was victoriously fought to gain the enviable independence. It was here that Eritrean independence was gained amidst the bushes, hills, rocks and quarries. It was never a gift from the TPLF. Eritrean independence is the result of 30 years war, the longest war in the history of liberation movements so far. A war against all odds and
against assistance of many governments like the USSR, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, etc. etc. which were actively helping Ethiopia” (12).

So to say that my initial assumptions were wrong, would be an understatement. Eritrean nationalism does find some legitimacy in its affiliation to the land. However, I found the most significant aspect of nationalism to be the defense of its customary laws. And as for the ongoing problems that the state is faced with, things would go much smoother if contemporary legislation recognized the power and influence of customary land traditions.
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