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The Eritrean National Identity: A Case Study

Peggy A. Hoyle[†]

I. Introduction

Both the nation and the state of Eritrea are relatively recent constructs. Granted statehood in 1993 following a protracted war for independence from Ethiopia, the idea of the Eritrean entity dates back to 1869 when Italy established a colony to support its interests in the Red Sea region. The Ethiopian emperor and the Italian government, by agreement, delineated the present Eritrean borders that encompass both scorching coastal lowlands and the temperate highlands around Asmara.[1] The Italians officially bestowed the name, Eritrea, upon the territory.[2] After Italy's defeat in the Second World War, a British caretaker government assumed control of Eritrea while the Allied Powers contemplated its destiny.[3]

The United Nations ultimately decided the fate of Eritrea. Uncertain about outright independence but still intent upon distinguishing Eritrea from its neighbor Ethiopia, the U.N. General Assembly, in compromise fashion, resolved that "Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown."[4] Much of the uncertainty demonstrated by the General Assembly related to the view

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[1] *See* ROY PATEMAN, ERITREA: EVEN THE STONES ARE BURNING 10 (2d ed. 1998).

[2] *See* RANDALL FEGLEY, WORLD BIBLIOSERIES, ERITREA at xxxiii (1995). The name is from the Latin for Red Sea—*Mare Erythraeum*. *See id.*

[3] *See id.* at xxxvii.

[4] UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION, THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE INDEPENDENCE OF ERITREA 94 (1996).

propagated by Ethiopians and their sympathizers that Eritrea was not entitled to be a state since there was no "Eritrean nation."[5] Consequently, from 1950 to 1991, Eritrea existed as an unwilling adjunct of Ethiopia, extracting itself only at the expense of thousands of Eritrean lives.[6]

For its small size, Eritrea is an incredibly diverse state comprised of nine major ethno-linguistic groups.[7] Furthermore, the Eritreans are not only divided by language, but are also divided by religion. The country can be described as accommodating a population that is evenly split between Christians and Muslims.[8] The Christian population is largely associated with the highland areas and tends to be sedentary.[9] Conversely, the Muslim population has traditionally been associated with the lowlands.[10] Moreover, a dwindling, but still significant number of the lowlanders, moreover, are nomadic or semi-nomadic.[11]

Inescapable ethno-linguistic and religious differences among Eritreans, as well as the considerable similarities between populations of Eritreans and neighboring Ethiopians, gave pause to those contemplating Eritrea as a nation and as a potential state. Prior to Italian colonization, the territory known as Eritrea had been linked in varying degrees to the Ethiopian empire.[12] The Eritrean highlanders, the Tigrinyans, were culturally and linguistically related to the Tigray of Ethiopia,[13] and these peoples

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[5] PATEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 70-71.

[6] *See id.* at 235-38. During its war for independence, 60,000-75,000 fighters died, 100,000-150,000 civilians died, and thousands died due to the war-related famines in the 1980s. *See* DAVID POOL, ERITREA: TOWARDS UNITY IN DIVERSITY 11-13 (1997); Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *Eritrea Wins the Peace*, NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC, June 1996, at 82, 85.

[7] *See* Cobb, *supra* note 6, at 86. Eritrea consists of a 46,842 square mile strip along Africa's Red Sea coast. *See id.* at 87. Its population, estimated at 3.5 million, includes Tigrinyans, Tigre, Kunama, Nara, Bilen, Saho, Afar, Hedareb, and Rashaida. *See* Pateman, *supra* note 1, at 4-5.

[8] *See* UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION, *supra* note 4, at 7.

[9] *See* Cobb, *supra* note 6, at 100.

[10] *See id.*

[11] *See* PATEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 179.

[12] *See id.* at 29-41.

[13] *See* ALEMSEGED ABBAY, IDENTITY JILTED OR RE-IMAGINING IDENTITY? THE DIVERGENT PATHS OF THE ERITREAN AND TIGRAYAN NATIONALIST STRUGGLES 1 (1998).

even referred to each other by a common name, the Habesha.[14] The international community appreciated the Ethiopian community's concerns as to how such a closely related people could be considered a separate nation.[15] To complicate matters, the Afar, another smaller population within the colony of Eritrea, began an irredentist movement to unite Afars living in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti into their own independent state.[16]

The purpose of this article is to explore the concept of national identity as it relates to the Eritrean experience. To place the concept of national identity in proper context, Part II of the article commences with an examination of the significance of national status within the international community.[17] Part III proceeds to analyze the debates over the definition of nation and national identity.[18] Once the concepts of nation and national identity are defined, the focus of Part IV shifts to an overview of the genesis of the Eritrean nation[19] and a deconstruction of the Eritrean national identity.[20] Part V concludes with a few observations about the relationship between the ideal of national identity and the Eritrean national reality.[21]

II. The Significance of National Status

During the thirty-year Eritrean war for independence, or the struggle as Eritreans call it,[22] the issue of whether Eritrea met the definition of a nation was the subject of much academic speculation in political science and African studies circles.[23] The

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[14] *See* Interview with faculty and students, University of Asmara, Asmara, Eritrea (spring semester 1996).

[15] *See* PATEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 6, 67-71.

[16] *See id.* at 19.

[17] *See infra* notes 22-39 and accompanying text.

[18] *See infra* notes 40-101 and accompanying text.

[19] *See infra* notes 102-48 and accompanying text.

[20] *See infra* notes 149-261 and accompanying text.

[21] *See infra* notes 262-79 and accompanying text.

[22] *See* PATEMAN, *supra* note 1 (describing the conflict as "the struggle"); THE LONG STRUGGLE OF ERITREA FOR INDEPENDENCE AND CONSTRUCTIVE PEACE (Lionel Cliffe & Basil Davidson eds., 1988) (referring to the conflict as "the struggle").

[23] *See generally* PATEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 3-27 (discussing whether Eritrea meets

debates were significant because pursuant to the prevailing international legal regime, Eritrea would have to demonstrate its status as a nation before it could be granted its own state.[24]

The idea that nationhood was a precondition for statehood is derived from the concept of self-determination—a central precept of the U.N. charter.[25] Article 55 of the U.N. charter, building upon Article 1, states that "peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle . . . of self-determination" are to be developed.[26] The U.N. General Assembly, in Resolution 1514, "The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," maintained that "[*a*]*ll* peoples have the right to self-determination."[27] Notably, the Charter failed to define the term "nation"; the General Assembly likewise neglected to qualify the term "peoples." In so doing, a definitional vacuum regarding the "self" of self-determination was created.

Clear definitions of the terms "nation" and "peoples," which have been treated in practice as synonyms, have been sought from various sources. As discussed in detail in the following sections, political scientists, political geographers, and historians have focused substantial attention on drawing out the concept of nation.[28] In terms of actual recognition by the international community, the only peoples or nations that have been allowed to exercise self-determination are those that inhabit former colonial territories.[29] Indeed, the set of self-determination norms that has

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the definition of a nation); Alain Fenet, *The Right of the Eritrean People to Self-determination*, *in* THE LONG STRUGGLE OF ERITREA FOR INDEPENDENCE AND CONSTRUCTIVE PEACE, *supra* note 22, 33, 33-45 (discussing Eritrea's international law and legal claims to self-determination).

[24] *See generally* WILBUR ZELINSKY, NATION INTO STATE: THE SHIFTING SYMBOLIC FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN NATIONALISM 4-9 (1988) (explaining that a "nation" precedes a "state" but that a "nation" does not always become a "state").

[25] *See* U.N. CHARTER art. 1, para 2.

[26] *Id.* art. 55.

[27] G.A. Res. 1514, U.N. GAOR, 15th Sess., Supp. No. 16, at 67, U.N. Doc. A/4684 (1960) (emphasis added).

[28] *See infra* notes 40-76 and accompanying text.

[29] *See* Laurence S. Hanauer, *The Irrelevance of Self-Determination Law to Ethno-National Conflict: A New Look at the Western Sahara Case*, 9 EMORY INT'L L. REV. 133, 134 (1995).

achieved the status of customary international law in essence requires that prospective states must have once existed as colonies.[30] One consequence of this requirement is that some well-defined nations with a collective national consciousness, such as the Palestinians or the Kurds, have no legal rights to determine their political status while nations that "hardly exist as a collective group" can claim the right of self-determination.[31]

Laurence S. Hanauer offers the Sahrawis of Western Sahara as an example of a group with a marginal and exceedingly nascent sense of collective consciousness that was granted the right of self-determination by the United Nations and the International Court of Justice.[32] The Sahrawis are desert nomads who wander within the former European colony of Spanish Sahara, which lies south of the country of Morocco.[33] No supratribal authority or state structure existed in the territory until the 1970s, and there was certainly no concept of a Western Saharan national identity up to that time.[34] Yet, Western Sahara enjoys the blessings of the international community to exercise the right of self-determination.[35]

Clearly, the territorial prerequisite for statehood results from the competing aims of another foundational precept of the United Nations—territorial integrity.[36] For instance, Resolution 1514 also provides that "[a]ny attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of . . . the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations."[37] There is no doubt that permitting non-territorial or sub-state entities the right to self-determination could upset the entrenched

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[30] *See id.* at 133-34, 145.

[31] *Id.* at 134.

[32] *See* Western Sahara, 1975 I.C.J. 3, 68 (May 22).

[33] *See* Hanauer, *supra* note 29, at 157-59.

[34] *See id.* at 133.

[35] *See* Western Sahara, 1975 I.C.J. at 68. Despite the International Court of Justice's decision, no referendum on independence has been held in Western Sahara. *See He Tried, Hard*, ECONOMIST, Nov. 14, 1998, at 47. The delay in scheduling the referendum arises from an ongoing debate over which peoples are qualified to vote. *See id.*

[36] *See* G.A. Res. 1514, *supra* note 27, at 67.

[37] *Id.*

interests of pre-existing states. As one scholar, Gregory Fox, explains, "Granting the right [to self-determination] to any substate entity . . . begins the slippery slope toward legitimizing secession."[38]

To summarize, in accordance with prevailing international law norms, an entity seeking self-determination should be a former colony.[39] In addition, even though the Sahrawi case appears to set an easily surmountable benchmark, the prospective state must be able to present an argument that it exists as a nation.

III. The Debates Surrounding the Definitions of Nation and National Identity

A. Attempts to Define a Nation

With the end of the Cold War there has been a renewed interest in the study of nationalism and nations, but these concepts remain nebulous. Reminiscent of the U.S. Supreme Court's infamous definition of obscenity, "I know it when I see it,"[40] Hugh Seton-Watson probably offered the best summary of the literature on the term "nation" when he said: "No 'scientific definition' of nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists."[41] In other words, one will recognize a nation when one sees it.

This notion of the impossibility of defining "nation" is arguably the most predominantly recurring theme within the literature on nations. From Rupert Emerson's 1960 *From Empire to Nation*[42] to Benedict Anderson's 1991 *Imagined Communities*[43]

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[38] Gregory H. Fox, *Self Determination in the Post-Cold War Era: A New Internal Focus?*, 16 MICH. J. INT'L L. 733, 734 (1995) (reviewing YVES BEIGBEDER, INTERNATIONAL MONITORING OF PLEBISCITES, REFERENDA AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS: SELF-DETERMINATION AND TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY (1994)). Thomas Franck refers to the unleashing of secessionist activities as "post modern neo-tribalism." THOMAS M. FRANCK, FAIRNESS IN THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM 140-68 (1995).

[39] *See* Hanauer, *supra* note 29, at 133-34. In this context the term "colony" almost always refers to European colonies. *See id.*

[40] Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964) (Stewart, J., concurring).

[41] HUGH SETON-WATSON, NATIONS AND STATES 5 (1977).

[42] RUPERT EMERSON, FROM EMPIRE TO NATION: THE RISE TO SELF-ASSERTION OF

to John Hutchison and Anthony D. Smith's 1994 compilation *Nationalism*,[44] each proclaims that there is little if any agreement as to how a nation is defined.[45] One author, Clifford Geertz, went so far as to characterize the lack of scholarly consensus as a "stultifying aura of conceptual ambiguity."[46] Nonetheless, despite the scholarly protestations, there is, if not a cohesive body of literature, at least a lively and thoughtful discussion regarding the meaning of nation.[47]

Broadly speaking, attempts to understand the concept of nation have tended to focus either on a series of objective criteria (such as a common culture or political values) needed to form a nation,[48] or a very subjective interpretation based on the consciousness of the community.[49] A number of noteworthy definitions combine both subjective and objective elements.[50]

A good example of a truly objective definition of nation is that offered by sociologist Anthony Giddens. He concludes that a nation "exists when a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed."[51] A second example of an objective definition of nationhood is that proposed by Joseph Stalin who listed five characteristics that needed to be isolated before an entity could be called a nation.[52] He explained that "[a] nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory,

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ASIAN AND AFRICAN PEOPLES (1960).

[43] BENEDICT ANDERSON, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM (2d ed. 1991).

[44] NATIONALISM (John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith eds., 1994).

[45] *See* EMERSON, *supra* note 42, at 90-95; ANDERSON, *supra* note 43, at 5-6; NATIONALISM, *supra* note 44, at 3-4.

[46] Clifford Geertz, *The Integrative Revolution*, *in* OLD SOCIETIES AND NEW STATES: THE QUEST FOR MODERNITY IN ASIA AND AFRICA 105, 107 (Clifford Geertz ed., 1963).

[47] *See infra* notes 48-76 and accompanying text.

[48] *See infra* notes 51-54 and accompanying text.

[49] *See infra* notes 55-57 and accompanying text.

[50] *See infra* notes 58-65 and accompanying text.

[51] Anthony Giddens, *The Nation as Power-Container*, *in* NATIONALISM, *supra* note 44, at 34, 34.

[52] *See* Joseph Stalin, *The Nation*, *in* NATIONALISM, *supra* note 44, at 18, 19-20.

economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."[53] Quincy Wright also composed a kind of a checklist to determine whether the entity in question was truly a nation: A nation "is objectively [a perfect community,] one which manifests cultural uniformity, spiritual union, institutional unity, and material unification in the highest possible degree."[54] Therefore, even though something like "spiritual union"—or "psychological makeup" as in Stalin's definition—may seem hard to index, the nation is not considered a matter of interpretation but an entity that can be identified by a certain set of characteristics.

Subjective definitions of nation offer an alternative to the search for objective commonalties. For example, one of the earliest definitions of "nation," that of Ernest Renan in 1882, could be characterized as excessively subjective. In his essay *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*,[55] Renan described the nation as a "soul" or "spiritual principle" comprised of "a rich legacy of memories" and "present-day consent, the desire to live together."[56] Almost a hundred years later, Walker Connor formulated a similar definition using less spiritual terms. He maintained that the essence of a nation "is a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in the most vital way."[57]

In his well-received 1977 treatise, *Nations and States*, Hugh Seton-Watson initially defined nation in a rather material, checklist fashion.[58] A nation, he stated, is a "community of people, whose members are bound together by a sense of solidarity, a common culture, [and] a national consciousness."[59] However, dismayed that this definition did not accurately capture the essence of a nation, Seton-Watson further remarked, "all that I can . . . say

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[53] *Id.* at 20.

[54] 2 QUINCY WRIGHT, A STUDY OF WAR 992 (1942).

[55] Ernest Renan, *What is a nation?* (Martin Thom trans.), *in* NATION AND NARRATION 8, 19 (Homi K. Bhabha ed., 1990).

[56] *Id.*

[57] Walker Connor, *A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group . . .*, 1978 ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUD. 377, 379.

[58] *See* SETON-WATSON, *supra* note 41, at 1.

[59] *Id.*

is that a nation exists when a significant number of people . . . *consider themselves* to [have] form[ed] a nation or behave as if they [have] formed one."[60] In one of the more popular definitions of recent years, Benedict Anderson translated Seton-Watson's reference to "consider themselves" into "imagine themselves"[61] to define a nation as an "imagined political community."[62]

Explaining the connection between the subjective and the objective components of a nation, Ernst Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism*, argued that it is the group's recognition of its duties to each other, not the shared attributes of the group itself, that make the group a nation.[63] Thus, shared attributes bring individuals together as a group, but it is the appreciation of their mutual commitment that elevates the group to nationhood.[64]

Today, most definitions of the term "nation" recognize both objective and subjective components. For example, Martin Glassner's *Political Geography* defines "nation" as follows:

> A nation is . . . [a] group of people with a common culture, sharing one or more important culture traits such as religion, language, political institutions, values and historical experience. They tend to identify with one another, feel closer to one another than to outsiders and believe that they belong together . . . . Perhaps the critical factor is whether the group in question considers itself to be a nation.[65]

It is significant, particularly in the Eritrean case, that the foregoing definition of nation did not require that the "group of people" in question be members of a single ethnic group. With recent global trends toward both heightened national consciousness and a renewed interest in ethnic identity, many commentators equate these two phenomena, acknowledging that "while it is impossible to dissociate nationalism entirely from ethnicity, it is equally impossible to explain it simply as a

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[60] *Id.* at 5 (emphasis added).

[61] ANDERSON, *supra* note 43, at 6 n.9.

[62] *Id.* at 6.

[63] *See* ERNEST GELLNER, NATIONS AND NATIONALISM 7 (1983).

[64] *See id.*

[65] MARTIN GLASSNER, POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY 38 (1993).

continuation of ethnicity."[66] Similarly, Anthony D. Smith maintains that while shaped by premodern ethnic identities, modern nations are largely polycentric and dynamic.[67] In contrast, ethnic communities are xenophobic and, at least in premodern times, lacking in political consciousness.[68]

Scholars have tended to view the nation as a product of political and social construction and not "natural factors." For example, Peter Alter states in his book, *Nationalism*: "Nations are not creatures of God's hand, instead, they are synthetic—they have to be created in a complicated educational process."[69] Alter further argues that this complicated process had to be "engineered by intellectual minorities."[70] Similarly, Max Weber emphasizes the cultural aspects of the nation and argued that "intellectuals . . . [were] predestined to propagate the 'national idea,'" because the intellectuals were the only ones who had "special access to certain achievements considered to be 'cultural values.'"[71]

The idea that nations are artificially constructed reaches its apogee in the work of Ernst Gellner, which argues that nations have been engineered or actually "invented."[72] Such inventors, maintains Gellner, are nationalists who, at times, go so far as reviving dead languages or even fabricating traditions to manufacture their nation.[73] In contrast, Anthony D. Smith, while acknowledging the seminal role played by the ruling classes or intelligentsia in forging nations, nevertheless believes that these elites do not invent but rather reconfigure the pre-existing traditions of the core ethnic group that comprises the state.[74] Smith argues that it is impossible to build a nation using another

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[66] Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 19 ANN. REV. SOC. 211, 211 (1993).

[67] *See* Anthony D. Smith, *The Origins of Nations*, *in* NATIONALISM, *supra* note 44, at 147, 147-54.

[68] *See id.* at 151-54.

[69] PETER ALTER, NATIONALISM 14 (2d ed. 1994).

[70] *Id.*

[71] Max Weber, *The Nation*, *in* NATIONALISM, *supra* note 43, at 21, 25.

[72] GELLNER, *supra* note 63, at 53-62.

[73] *See id.* at 56.

[74] *See* Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?*, *in* REIMAGINING THE NATION 9, 15-16 (Marjorie Ringrose & Adam J. Lerner eds., 1993).

community's past or to create wholesale a body of traditions. Instead, the traditions espoused by the elites need some basis in that particular community.[75] As Paul Brass concludes, nationality is in large part "the study of the process by which elites . . . select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group."[76]

B. Defining National Identity

In 1994 the Commission of the European Communities (the Commission) filed an action in the Court of Justice of the European Communities charging that a Greek trade embargo imposed on Macedonia violated European Community commercial policy.[77] In defense of its embargo, Greece maintained that the existence of a state called "Macedonia" threatened its national identity.[78] Specifically, Greece was troubled by the use of the name "Macedonia" and the use of an ancient "Greek" symbol in the Macedonian flag.[79] In support of its arguments, Greece produced evidence that politicians and historians had constructed a "Macedonian" nation within the newly founded state of Yugoslavia, and that "Macedonia" was essentially part of Greece.[80]

As the Greek embargo illustrates, national governments guard national identity carefully. Comprising such a critical aspect of national survival, a country's national identity bears thorough analysis in the study of nations. The concept of national identity can be divided into two primary elements—continuity and differentiation.[81] Continuity refers to the idea that the nation is a

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[75] *See id.*

[76] Paul Brass, *Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity Among the Muslims of South Asia*, *in* POLITICAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA 35, 41 (David Taylor & Malcolm Yapp eds., 1979).

[77] *See* Keith Highet & George Kahale III, *International Decisions: European Community Law—Greek-Slavo-Macedonian Conflict—Embargoes*, 89 AM. J. INT'L L. 376, 376 (1995).

[78] *See id.*

[79] *See id.*

[80] *See id.* at 377.

[81] *See* MONTSERRAT GUIBERNAU, NATIONALISMS 73 (1996).

historically rooted entity that projects into the future.[82] Thus, continuity entails a set of common experiences that "only 'insiders' can grasp."[83] Differentiation, in turn, allows members to distinguish themselves from those labeled as "strangers," "the rest," and "the different."[84]

Having forwarded its basic components, it nevertheless must be admitted that, like nation, there is no precise way to define national identity. In *National Identity*, Anthony D. Smith explains national identity by setting forth five essential features: a historic territory or homeland, "common myths and historical memories," a "common, mass public culture," "common legal rights and duties for all members," and a "common economy with territorial mobility for members."[85] Regarding the requirement of an historic territory, geographers have long focused on the significance of territory in understanding the nation.[86] David B. Knight defines territory as "space to which identity is attached by a distinctive group who hold or covet . . . it."[87] Thus, territory is not simply land or space, but a "place" in the sense of its distinct attachments. Indeed, commentator David Hooson explains that the process of national identity occurred when "communities [came] to inhabit particular places and, over the centuries of occupation . . . gradually [came] to identify with their regional environments, perceived as archetypal, endowed with love and celebrated in song and poetry."[88] The map, a depiction of the national territory, serves as a key symbol of the national identity.[89] One scholar, Benedict Anderson, notes: "Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrate[s] deep into the

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[82] *See id.*

[83] *Id.*

[84] *Id.*

[85] ANTHONY D. SMITH, NATIONAL IDENTITY 14 (1991).

[86] *See, e.g.*, JEAN GOTTMAN, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TERRITORY (1973); David B. Knight, *Identity and Territory: Geographical Perspectives on Nationalism and Regionalism*, 72 ANNALS ASS'N AM. GEOGRAPHERS 514 (1982); ROY E.H. MELLOR, NATION, STATE, AND TERRITORY: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY (1989).

[87] Knight, *supra* note 86, at 526.

[88] DAVID HOOSON, GEOGRAPHY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY 1 (1994).

[89] *See* ANDERSON, *supra* note 43, at 174-75.

popular imagination."[90]

Accordingly, one could say that territory is linked to the nation through its history: "The nation's unique history is embodied in the nation's unique piece of territory—its 'homeland,' the primeval land of its ancestors, . . . the same land which saw its greatest moments . . . ."[91] This homeland or historic territory can further be described as the "repository of historic memories and associations, the place where 'our' sages, saints and heroes lived."[92] As discussed above, to qualify for the exercise of self-determination, as it is recognized by the international community, territory—specifically, territory within colonially defined borders—is essential.[93]

Coupled with territory, another requirement for national identity is the necessity of a distinct culture. Guibernau observed that "while other forms of ideology such as Marxism or liberalism require the indoctrination of their followers, nationalism emanates from the basic emotional attachment to one's land and culture."[94] The term "culture," as it is used here, includes both symbolic forms and historical memories.[95] Flags, anthems, uniforms, monuments, and currency exemplify the myths or iconography necessary for national identity.[96] National heroes also serve as symbols.[97] Linking symbols to the process of differentiation, Guibernau explains: "Symbols only have value for those who recognize them. Thus they provide a revealing device to distinguish between members and 'outsiders' and heighten people's awareness of, and sensitivity to, their community. The soldier who dies for his flag does so because he identifies the flag

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[90] *Id.* at 175.

[91] James Anderson, *Nationalist Ideology and Territory*, *in* NATIONALISM, SELF-DETERMINATION AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY 18, 24 (R.J. Johnston et al. eds., 1988).

[92] SMITH, *supra* note 85, at 9.

[93] *See supra* notes 85-92 and accompanying text.

[94] GUIBERNAU, *supra* note 81, at 76.

[95] *See id.*

[96] *See generally* ZELINSKY, *supra* note 24, at 22-27 (discussing how "countries symbolize their nationhood or statehood by means of a particular idealized human figure or totemic beast").

[97] *See id.* at 30-35.

with his country."[98]

Like symbols, historical memories, instances of "having suffered, enjoyed and hoped together," reinforce ties between members of the nation.[99] Rituals, moreover, are occasions to invoke symbols and historical memories:[100] "Individuals who share the same culture, feel attached to a concrete land, have the experience of a common past . . . need to create occasions in which all that unites them is emphasized."[101] Rituals, the "performance" component of national identity, can be as simple and personal as saluting the flag or reciting a pledge, or as involved as participating in presidential campaigns, taking part in parades, fairs, and festivals, or journeying to national shrines.

IV. The Eritrean National Identity

A. Can Eritrea be considered a nation?

As a preliminary note, many commentators may wonder whether an analysis of Eritrean nationhood is still relevant. As discussed above, during the thirty year war for independence, the question of whether Eritrea was a "nation" was paramount—it was the key to eventual Eritrean statehood.[102] The world community had denied Eritrean independence on the grounds that Eritrea was not a distinct nation but instead a compilation of tribes, half of which—the Christians—were part of the Ethiopian nation.[103] As a result of its military victory over Ethiopia, Eritrea is now recognized as an autonomous state by the U.N., so it no longer has to argue for statehood by claiming that it is a nation deprived of its independence.[104] Indeed, whether or not classified as a nation,

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[98] GUIBERNAU, *supra* note 81, at 81.

[99] *Id.* at 76.

[100] *See id.* at 83.

[101] *Id.*

[102] *See generally supra* notes 22-39 and accompanying text (discussing the significance of national status).

[103] *See generally supra* notes 7-16 and accompanying text (discussing diversity within the Eritrean state).

[104] *See generally supra* notes 1-6 and accompanying text (discussing Eritrea's protracted struggle and eventual victory for independence).

Eritrea has attained its long sought after status—that of a state.[105]

Nevertheless, the question of Eritrean nationhood, as a case study, offers useful insights into the body of nationhood scholarship. In the ensuing paragraphs, I argue that, although relatively new, Eritrea can be considered a nation—one whose existence was set in motion by accident and consolidated by design.[106]

When the Italians relinquished the colony of Eritrea in 1941,[107] the Ethiopians argued that Eritrea had rightfully been a part of the Ethiopian empire and should, therefore, be returned to them. Ethiopia's leaders, Emperor Haile Selassie, and dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam after him, promoted the idea that Ethiopia was the successor to biblical kingdoms and that its boundaries, which originally included Eritrea, dated back that far.[108] In addition, the Ethiopians fueled concern in the West that Eritrean secession would lead both to the balkanization of Africa and to the arabization of the Red Sea.[109] Both the United States and the Soviet Union backed the Ethiopians on the grounds that Eritrea was not a nation.[110]

Some scholars supported the American and Soviet position that Eritrea was not a nation. Christopher Clapham maintains that, far from a national independence initiative, the Thirty Year War amounted to nothing more than the by-product of a classic core-periphery problem.[111] According to Clapham, the northern part of

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[105] Eritrea attained independence in 1993. *See* TESFA G. GEBREMEDHIN, BEYOND SURVIVAL 6 (1996).

[106] *See generally* BEHIND THE WAR IN ERITREA (Basil Davidson et al. eds., 1980). Regarding the evolution of nations, Andrew Smith has maintained that "[t]he West acquired nations almost by accident; in other parts of the globe, nations were created by design." SMITH, *supra* note 85, at 100.

[107] *See* THE STATESMAN'S YEARBOOK: THE ESSENTIAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC GUIDE TO ALL COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD 512 (Barry Turner ed., 135th ed. 1998-99).

[108] *See* ROBERT PAPSTEIN, ERITREA: REVOLUTION AT DUSK 3-9 (1991).

[109] *See* Peggy Ann Hoyle, Eritrean National Identity: The Role of Education and the Constitution 49 (1997) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) (on file with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library).

[110] *See id.*

[111] *See* RUTH IYOB, THE ERITREAN STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE: DOMINATION, RESISTANCE AND NATIONALISM 1941-1993 12 (1995) (discussing CHRISTOPHER CLAPHAM,

Ethiopia, which included Eritrea, was historically the core of the Ethiopian empire, but lost its position of primacy as the core crept southward over time.[112] The movement of the core southward was evidenced by the relocation of the Ethiopian capital from Axum to Lalibela to its current location of Addis Ababa. Consequently, the south grew in stature while the Eritrean north became more dependent and isolated—peripheralized.[113]

Clapham further argued that the political incorporation of Eritrea within Ethiopia in 1962, poorly managed by Emperor Selassie, merely served to highlight Eritrea's peripheral position in the empire.[114] Clapham contended that Eritrea, displeased with its marginalization, ultimately chose to secede from Ethiopia.[115] Pursuant to Clapham's theory, Eritrea was but "an artificial colonial creation"[116] encompassing several nationalities that capitalized on support from nearby Muslim states to end its dependent position.[117]

Like Christopher Clapham, Haggai Erlich maintained that Eritreans were not a separate nation, but rather dissatisfied Ethiopians. In his book, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*,[118] Erlich argued that "Eritreanism . . . was essentially the negation of Ethiopianism rather than a historically rooted supratribal, supralinguistic, and suprareligious sense of Eritrean affiliation."[119] It was Erlich's position that any problems between the Eritrean highlands and Ethiopia dated from the federation period, 1952-

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TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY IN REVOLUTIONARY ETHIOPIA 205-06 (1988)). "Core" areas are the "foci of human activity that function as the leading regions of control and change." H.J. DE BLIJ & PETER O. MULLER, GEOGRAPHY: REALMS, REGIONS, AND CONCEPTS 30 (John Wiley & Sons eds., 8th ed. 1997). The "periphery" is the less developed countryside surrounding the core areas. *See id.*

[112] *See* CLAPHAM, *supra* note 111, at 205 (1988).

[113] *See id.*

[114] *See id.* at 206-07.

[115] *See id.* at 204-14.

[116] *Id.* at 211.

[117] *See id.* at 204-14.

[118] HAGGAI ERLICH, THE STRUGGLE OVER ERITREA, 1962-1978: WAR AND REVOLUTION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA (1983).

[119] *Id.* at 18-19.

1962.[120] During that period, the political pluralism in Eritrea that resulted from forty years of Italian rule clashed with the absolute emperorship of Ethiopia.[121] Agitation for separatism began within the Muslim community and later enveloped the younger generation of highlander Christians who associated Ethiopianism with deprivation.[122]

Proponents of Eritrean nationhood, conversely, have emphasized the weak historical ties between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Richard Greenfield, in his article, *Pre-Colonial and Colonial History* [of Eritrea],[123] argued that the Eritreans were never really a part of Ethiopia prior to its annexation of Eritrea in the early 1960s, and were only occasionally affected by the authority of that empire-state.[124] Eritreanists maintained that it was Emperor Selassie, eager to promote Ethiopia as a vast, ancient empire, who characterized Eritrea as a continuous part of the Ethiopian empire.[125] Not mentioned by Selassie was the fact that in the Treaties of Uccalli and Addis Ababa, signed after the Ethiopians had defeated the Italians, Ethiopia had unilaterally consented to the Italian claim on Eritrea. Notably, few Eritreans ever spoke the language of the Ethiopian empire, Amharic.

Most observers of Eritrea today acknowledge that while Eritrea is definitely diverse (few African countries, for that matter, are comprised of but a single ethnic group) and has had close ties at various times with Ethiopia, there is a unique sense of community among the Eritrean people. Bereket Habte Selassie, the father of Eritrea's Constitution,[126] identifies this feeling of community as nationalism arising from "the Eritrean people's sense of entrapment and isolation, as succeeding colonial powers either

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[120] *See id.* at 7-10.

[121] *See id.*

[122] *See id.* at 7-11.

[123] Richard Greenfield, *Pre-Colonial and Colonial History*, *in* BEHIND THE WAR IN ERITREA, *supra* note 106, at 16.

[124] *See id.* at 16-31.

[125] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 48.

[126] Dr. Selassie served as the chair of the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (1994-97).

encircled them or occupied their land."[127] Others such as John Sorenson agree that Eritrean nationalism is based in colonialism but would not look back to such 'succeeding' powers as the Abyssinians, Turks or Egyptians.[128] Instead, as Sorenson argues, "Eritrean nationalism does not typically appeal to a deeply-rooted historical identity, but begins with Italian colonialism and stresses the development, through several stages, of a new identity based on common experience."[129]

The Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki, has expressed a similar opinion:

> In a small area as diverse as this with nine languages, [and] two major religions, Eritrean nationalism developed largely as a result of foreign intervention. . . . After the Second World War the fact that Eritrea was officially denied the right to exercise self determination created a political sentiment of trying to assert one's self as a nation. . . . I trace [nationalism] . . . to Italian colonialism, the repression of the Haile Selassie years and now to the repression of the present regime . . . .[130]

Admitting that Eritrean nationalism was weak during the colonial period, eminent Africanist Basil Davidson pointed out that a fragile sense of nationalism was the norm in many parts of Africa.[131] Like Afwerki and Sorenson, Davidson contended that, in the Eritrean case, the foundation for the nation was laid during "the struggle."[132] In a departure from these earlier theories, Ruth Iyob emphasized the recency of the Eritrean nation when she described the different Eritrean communities as basically strangers to one another prior to the Italian period.[133] These strangers did not develop a set of symbols or ideology or shared defining experience necessary for developing a national identity, argued Iyob, until

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[127] Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 51.

[128] *See* John Sorenson, *Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity*, 29 J. MOD. AFR. STUD. 301, 309 (1991).

[129] *Id.* at 309.

[130] PAPSTEIN, *supra* note 108, at 39, 41.

[131] *See* Basil Davidson, *A Historical Note*, *in* BEHIND THE WAR IN ERITREA, *supra* note 106, at 11, 15.

[132] *Id.*

[133] *See* IYOB, *supra* note 111, at 4.

well into the thirty-year struggle, specifically the last ten years of it:

> The sense of nationhood achieved after three decades of struggle . . . transcends the legacy of fragmentation that characterized traditional Eritrean society. Those cleavages, religious and regional in character, had split the nationalists in the 1940s and persisted into the 1980s. It was only during the 1980s, when the single imperative of liberation from Ethiopian hegemonic control emerged to unite the Eritrean factions, that an all-encompassing nationalism was achieved.[134]

It should be noted that Iyob carefully drew a distinction between the battle for independence and Eritrean nationhood.[135] She cautioned that the experience shared by Eritreans in facing a common enemy should not be mistaken for a full-fledged national identity.[136]

Hence, there remains disagreement as to when the varied Eritrean groups came together as a nation.[137] Habte Selassie considers nationhood as developing gradually from years of colonialism.[138] Sorenson and others view nationhood as a product of the separate experience under Italian hegemony.[139] Iyob gives credit to the last years of the armed struggle against Ethiopia, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) took sole control of the liberation movement, as the beginning of the Eritrean nation.[140]

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[134] *Id.* at 3.

[135] *See id.* at 95-96.

[136] *See id.* at 96.

[137] *See supra* notes 123-36 and accompanying text.

[138] *See supra* note 127 and accompanying text.

[139] *See supra* notes 128-32 and accompanying text.

[140] During much of the thirty-year struggle, two armed movements for Eritrean liberation existed, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). *See* IYOB, *supra* note 111, at 108-09. Following a civil war, the EPLF emerged as the dominant movement which went on to defeat the Ethiopian army. *See id.* Today, the EPLF governs the state of Eritrea under the name People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). *See* UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION, *supra* note 4, at 31 (stating that "[t]he EPLF turned itself into a political party known as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice"); Cobb, *supra* note 6, at 99 (stating that until a secular democracy is created, "the EPLF will remain in power as

Iyob's argument is especially persuasive because, while acknowledging the centripetal role of colonialism, she does not ignore the lack of supratribal identity existing among Eritrea's hodgepodge of communities in 1940.[141] It is true that, due to its long and separate Italian colonization, the people in the territory known as Eritrea were permanently changed in two general ways. Whereas highlanders and lowlanders had enjoyed little in common, they now shared both a new identity, Eritreanism, and the bond of the Italian experience as a result of colonialism.[142] Eritreans, furthermore, could differentiate themselves from Ethiopia both by their new identity as Eritreans and also by the impact of Western colonization on their society.[143] Yet, prior to the 1980s, even though various movements advocating self-determination existed within Eritrea, there was no single overarching *Eritrean* movement for independence.[144]

Indeed, it was not until the EPLF defeated its main rival, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in the late 1970s that a single movement promoting a supratribal, supralinguistic, and suprareligious identity emerged.[145] The new national identity promoted by the EPLF was artfully designed to capitalize on the experiences shared by the peoples within Eritrea during the previous eighty years and to offer both tolerance and unity in place of ethnic, religious, and linguistic distinctions.[146] Motivated by their new identity, the Eritreans sustained a decade of fighting to achieve victory against overwhelming odds.

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the renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ").

[141] *See* IYOB, *supra* note 111, at 4.

[142] *See id.* at 4-5.

[143] *See id.* The impacts of Western colonization (not experienced by the Ethiopians) included capitalism, the establishment of modern industry, urbanization, the mass construction of roads and railways, and land alienation. *See* Mesfin Araya, *Colonialism and Natural Economy: The Eritrean Case*, 13 NORTHEAST AFR. STUD. 165 (1991); *see also* IYOB, *supra* note 111, at 61 (discussing Italy's establishment in Eritrea of a "harsh and effective central administration, which in later years had glorified fascism and established a quasi-apartheid society replete with laws governing racial separation").

[144] *See* IYOB, *supra* note 111, at 120-22 (emphasis added).

[145] *See id.* at 120-35.

[146] *See id.* at 123-35.

According to Peter Alter, "the only conclusion that can sensibly be drawn is that it is practically impossible to place an exact date on when a social group or people first conceives of itself as nation. Apart from a few exceptions, the nation is a goal rather than an actuality."[147] Despite Alter's advice against trying to pinpoint national inception, it may be argued that Eritrea, the nation, was not conceived by accident, but born by design. Italian colonialism arbitrarily lumped diverse peoples of highland and lowland, Christian and Muslim tradition into a single political unit, at the same time separating many of them from more appropriate political units. Yet, as a result of an EPLF-inspired movement designed to marginalize ethnic, religious, and other centrifugal distinctions in favor of a new identity, a nation emerged within the political unit.[148]

B. Deconstructing the Eritrean National Identity

Exploring an area as subjective as national identity is precarious to say the least, with any exploration further complicated by the attendant danger of drawing generalizations about selected populations. Nonetheless, there are some basic outlooks—ways of looking at the world, not necessarily belonging to every national, but valued by the community—that can be isolated as contributing to the national identity. These outlooks or identity components are what allow members of the nation to both appreciate their collective continuity and to differentiate their nation from others.

In this case, the national identity in question was the one promoted by the EPLF in motivating young Tigrinyans, Tigre, Saho, and others to exchange their lives for an Eritrean nation.[149] In analyzing the Eritrean national identity, several particular

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[147] ALTER, *supra* note 69, at 13.

[148] Some analogy can be drawn between the Eritrean experience and the aforementioned Sahrawi experience. *See supra* notes 32-35 and accompanying text. In the case of Western Sahara, the idea of a Western Saharan identity emerged under the aegis of the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi national liberation movement. *See* Hanauer, *supra* note 29, at 159-60.

[149] *See supra* notes 144-46.

component values[150] will be examined, namely: ethical behavior,[151] a belief in critical public speech,[152] perseverance or steadfastness,[153] an emphasis on the community over the individual,[154] and a commitment to self-reliance.[155] It cannot be overemphasized that these components may not necessarily be attached to individual Eritreans. Obviously, there are members of the Eritrean nation who are not steadfast or who will not speak critically in public. Rather, these are traits upheld by the national community—by Eritreanism.

Eritreans celebrate their nation as being exceptionally ethical and contend that dignity and fairness are what differentiates them from other societies, especially Ethiopia.[156] Whether Eritrean society is unusually ethical and fair has not been empirically proven (if that is possible). However, since national identity addresses how citizens perceive or desire their society to be rather than how it really is, this determination arguably does not matter. In her book, *Eritrea: Miracleland*, Illen Ghebrai, writing about her experiences during wartime Eritrea, focuses upon the ethical comportment about which Eritreans are so proud: "Our society is imbued with a deep sense of fairness, dignity, equality, integrity, honesty and an equally strong sense of ethical and moral propriety .... The humane treatment the Ethiopian Prisoners of War received at the hands and mercy of the Eritrean Liberation Forces is a glaring example."[157]

It is undisputed that while Eritreans were tortured in Ethiopian prisons, Eritrea maintained a strict policy of treating Ethiopian and

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[150] A research study on the Eritrean educational system and the constitutional process, conducted in 1996, identified these component values. *See generally* Hoyle, *supra* note 109. The study included extensive interviews with government officials and members of the University of Asmara faculty. *See id.* It also included a questionnaire survey of University of Asmara students. *See id.*

[151] *See infra* notes 156-68 and accompanying text.

[152] *See infra* notes 169-84 and accompanying text.

[153] *See infra* notes 185-90 and accompanying text.

[154] *See infra* notes 191-204 and accompanying text.

[155] *See infra* notes 205-16 and accompanying text.

[156] *See* Interview with faculty and students, *supra* note 14.

[157] ILLEN GHEBRAI, ERITREA: MIRACLELAND iv (1993).

other prisoners humanely.[158] During periods when food was scarce, the Eritreans would give their Ethiopian prisoners basically the same rations as their own fighters rather than allow them to suffer from malnutrition.[159] In many cases, the Eritrean captors went so far as to teach illiterate Ethiopian captives how to read.[160] Overall, Eritrean policies toward Ethiopian prisoners of war could be described as charitable, and Eritreans, proud of how they treated the Ethiopians during the struggle, revisit this subject when conversing about how Eritrean society is unique.[161]

Regarding the Eritrean government, it has an unusual reputation in Africa of being free from corruption.[162] In the words of Tekie Beyene, head of the Eritrean Central Bank, "if there is corruption in a society, everything is in ruins. There is no corruption in Eritrea now. If . . . corruption [is] kept out, we can achieve our goals."[163]

Many Western governments echo Beyene's assessment of the Eritrean government, maintaining that corruption in the Eritrean bureaucracy is virtually non-existent.[164] As the former U.S. Ambassador to Eritrea, Robert Houdek, has remarked in reference to Eritrea, "the incorruptibility . . . of these people is extraordinary."[165]

Of course, as in any society comprised of human beings, some corruption exists. A few years ago, when incidents of corruption were discovered among civil servants who were ex-fighters

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158 *See* PAPSTEIN, *supra* note 108, at 37-38.

159 *See id.*

160 *See id.*

161 As President Isaias Afwerki affirmed in an interview on Eritrean National Television, "[w]e will continue to show our goodwill to the people of Ethiopia living in Eritrea, especially to the people of Tigray." Interview with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, on Eritrean National Television (Sept. 17, 1998) (transcript of interview on file with author).

162 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 57.

163 Nicholas Kotch, *Eritrea Hopes Battlefield Austerity Will Win Peace*, THE REUTER ASIA-PACIFIC BUS. REP., July 17, 1995, *available in* LEXIS, News Library.

164 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 57.

165 Joshua Hammer, *Eritrea: Back from the Ruins*, NEWSWEEK, Feb. 26, 1996, at 40.

(*tegadelti*), the Eritrean President became personally involved.[166] He summoned all the tegadelti together in a special meeting (so large that it had to be held in the main movie theater in town) to express his shock and disappointment.[167] He then proceeded to name publicly those who had taken part in the illegal activities.[168] The fact that an incident of corruption would elicit such a response from the country's highest official arguably demonstrates how rare, and certainly how offensive, acts of corruption are in Eritrea.

The use of a public forum by the President to combat corruption exemplifies another value component of the Eritrean national identity, the tradition of critical public speech.[169] During the struggle, the EPLF employed public meetings to educate Eritreans about everything from the political efficacy of the struggle to proper hygiene and nutrition. The idea of the public forum was promoted by the EPLF, and public meetings today have become a capstone of the constitutional process.[170] Even the Diaspora hold regular meetings to discuss issues such as support for the martyrs or the border conflict with Ethiopia.

The current government has fostered the idea that the views of the 'common folk' are appreciated and incorporated into the day-to-day operation of the government.[171] The civics text employed in the Eritrean school system teaches students that criticism is a civic duty.[172] According to Illen Ghebrai, the encouragement of public speech is compatible with a long-standing local tradition of free expression.[173] For example, in explaining how Eritreans viewed union with Ethiopia, Ghebrai wrote: "All discussions [about union with Ethiopia] were conducted in a hushed manner. One really had to trust someone to venture into making any comment ad hoc.

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166 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 150, at 58.

167 *See id.*

168 *See id.*

169 *See id.*

170 *See* Richard A. Rosen, *Constitutional Process, Constitutionalism, and the Eritrean Experience*, 24 N.C. J. INT'L L. & COM. REG. 263, 286-87 (1999).

171 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 59.

172 *See id.* at 102.

173 *See* GHEBRAI, *supra* note 157, at 29.

This trait is alien to Eritreans, as we are known to be overly frank, and vocal about our views and feelings."[174]

In a questionnaire survey administered to University of Asmara students,[175] they were asked if an important part of being a good citizen was to be "critical in his or her approach to public issues."[176]. Some 90% of the respondent students replied that it was either "important" or "very important" to be critical in assessing public matters.[177] The questionnaire also asked how important it was for a good citizen to "always support government policies even though one may disagree with them."[178] Most respondents responded to this inquiry with a rating of "one," indicating that it was "not important" to always support government policies to be a good Eritrean citizen.[179] In sum, "good" Eritreans are perceived as those citizens who honestly question the government in furtherance of the national interest. The government deems this practice of questioning, "the culture of critical thinking."[180]

Yet, it would be misleading not to point out that in juxtaposition to the idea of the critical public forum, there is a strong tradition of deference within Eritrean society.[181] Persons such as village elders or teachers are generally not to be questioned, but to be followed and respected.[182] American and European instructors at the University of Asmara commented that their Eritrean students, when compared with their students back

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[174] *Id.* at 29.

[175] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 9. The national identity questionnaire survey, conducted in 1996, involved 148 University of Asmara students. *See id.* It may be argued that in a country where the majority of citizens are not literate, university students are hardly a representative population. *See id.* at 11. Yet, these educated elites do represent the next generation of leadership in the country—those that will inherit the task of fostering the national identity. *See id.*

[176] *Id.* at 59.

[177] *See id.*

[178] *Id.* at 60.

[179] *See id.*

[180] *See* CONSTITUTIONAL COMMISSION OF ERITREA, CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS FOR PUBLIC DEBATE 14 (1995).

[181] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 59.

[182] Interviews with faculty, University of Asmara, Asmara, Eritrea, (spring semester 1996).

home, were especially reluctant to speak out or to question them or their Eritrean colleagues.[183] Recently, the government imprisoned an Eritrean journalist for reporting that Eritrean troops assisted a guerrilla movement within Sudan.[184]

Steadfastness or perseverance is another virtue widely encouraged and valued as an aspect of the Eritrean identity.[185] Undoubtedly, the most obvious example of Eritrean steadfastness is "the struggle" itself. Despite discouraging odds, including the Soviet Army's entrance on the side of Ethiopia,[186] the Eritreans refused to give up their struggle for statehood.[187] Already part of the national folklore, the story of the struggle relates how the Eritrean people fought for self-determination and how nothing—famine, lack of arms, repeated defeats, or absence of international support—persuaded them to yield.[188] The new government regularly draws upon this tradition of steadfastness to inspire citizens to persevere in the arduous and frequently frustrating task of national reconstruction.[189] Indeed, the first line of Eritrea's new national anthem proclaims, "Eritrea . . . steadfast in its goal, symbolizing endurance."[190]

In inspiring the citizenry to continue the reconstruction process, the government also appeals to the strong sense of collective responsibility and duty that exists among the Eritrean people.[191] After their victory over Ethiopia, Eritreans acknowledged that, in order to rebuild their battered country, each

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[183] *See id.*

[184] *See* David Hirst, *Eritrea's Traits Make It Stand Alone in Africa; Self-reliant Nation Has Austere Rulers*, WASH. TIMES, Oct. 15, 1998, at A13. The initial imprisonment of the journalist, Ruth Simon, was rationalized by the government on national security grounds. *See id.* Yet, she was held under house arrest, without a trial, for over a year. *See id.*

[185] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 60.

[186] *See* Paul Harris, *Eritrea: A Small War in Africa*, COMBAT & SURVIVAL (Oct. 1998).

[187] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 60.

[188] *See id.*

[189] *See id.*

[190] *Id.* app. 2 (reproducing the Eritrean National Anthem).

[191] *See id.* at 60.

individual would have to sacrifice personal goals for the good of the nation (much as they had done during the war).[192] Hence, for months on end, government workers served without pay and often at jobs in which they were not particularly interested.[193] One professor at the University of Asmara School of Law who loved teaching resigned to join the Ministry of Justice because trained lawyers were desperately needed to assist in the drafting of laws.[194] He hated to give up his position at the University, but he did so because he was needed by his country.[195]

The professor who gave up his career for his country is but one story among thousands. Each year ordinary Eritreans put off their education or careers in order to participate in national service.[196] Herbert M'Cleod, representative of the United Nations Development Program, summarized the phenomena well: "There is a big difference here compared with the rest of Africa .... People are much more interested in their country than in themselves. They all made sacrifices."[197]

The research questionnaire administered to students at the University of Asmara provided evidence of the Eritrean community's focus away from individualism and toward the best interests of the whole.[198] In the questionnaire, students were asked who was the "greatest hero of Eritrea."[199] Expecting the answers to contain the name of an individual, the most popular response nonetheless was not the name of a person, but of a community of people. The students surveyed claimed that "all Eritreans," or "all fighters" or "all martyrs" were the greatest heroes of Eritrea.[200]

Collective responsibility further requires that those who sacrificed and were disadvantaged by the struggle must not be

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192 *See id.*

193 *See id.* at 61.

194 *See id.*

195 *See id.*

196 *See id.*

197 Kotch, *supra* note 163.

198 *See supra* note 175.

199 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 61.

200 *See id.*

forgotten by the community.[201] Consequently, Eritreans acknowledge that it is the collective responsibility of all Eritreans to care for war-orphans and the disabled, and anyone who has spent time in Eritrea cannot avoid witnessing the compassion and care bestowed on these people by the community.[202] For example, at the University of Asmara, students take turns leading the blind to their classes and reading to them.[203] Even though resources are scarce, the government fits disabled veterans with prostheses and retrains them so that they can continue to contribute to society.[204]

Eritreans concur that another characteristic that sets them apart as a people is their devotion to the concept of self-reliance.[205] After being subjected to decades of colonialization by different states, the lesson drawn by Eritreans was that the only people that they could rely on were themselves.[206] While the Ethiopians received supplies, intelligence, and manpower from the Soviet Union, the Eritreans lacked any "superpower" to assist them.[207] Still, as Eritreans enjoy recounting, they were not deterred or intimidated but created an underground nation to sustain themselves.[208] In the EPLF's northwestern stronghold of Nacfa, hospitals, schools, homes, and other institutions were built beneath the earth and maintained from scraps and spare parts.[209] Artillery and tanks were stolen from the Soviets and retooled for EPLF use.[210] According to Dr. Nerayo Teklemichael, head of the Eritrean Relief Agency, "[d]uring the war, we used to put American spare parts on Russian cars. We called them Vodka Cola . . . . Even in the darkest moments, we really believed we

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[201] *See id.* at 62.

[202] *See id.*

[203] *See id.*

[204] *See id.*

[205] *See id.*

[206] *See id.*

[207] *See id.*

[208] Interviews with Eritrean government officials, Asmara, Eritrea (Feb. 19, 1996; Mar. 12, 1996; Mar. 18, 1996; Mar. 27, 1996).

[209] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 62.

[210] *See id.*

had to be self-reliant."[211]

Enshrined in the constitution as a "national value," the notion of success through self-reliance serves as an inspiration to Eritreans during the slow process of reconstruction.[212] Though funds and resources remain scarce, the government accepts relatively little financial aid from the West on the grounds that it wants to retain its autonomy.[213] When foreign interests offered $400 million to rebuild the country's railroad system, the government replied in characteristic fashion that Eritreans could perform the reconstruction task themselves.[214] Men who had worked on the railroad back in the days of Italian colonialization, some in their seventies, came out of retirement and set out to repair the rails with the help of former soldiers.[215] For Eritreans, this railroad became a symbol of their self-reliance.[216] Today, in on-line chat groups among the Diaspora, many inquire about the progress of the railroad.

In conjunction with the aforementioned celebrated values, the Eritrean people's attachment to the territory of Eritrea serves as another integral component of the Eritrean national identity.[217] Territory, as it is used here, is not so much a reference to specific rivers, mountains or plains, although that aspect of territorial identity certainly exists.[218] In speaking of Eritrea and her eventual return to her home country, Illen Ghebrai declared:

> That land that I might not be able to fully recognise but which shall nevertheless recognise me. Even though I may have

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[211] Kathy Chenault, *Eritreans Dream of Self Reliance: Africa's Newest Nation Wary of Foreign Aid*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Aug. 4, 1995, at 43A.

[212] The Preamble to the Constitution instructs that the rebuilding of Eritrea may be accomplished through what are deemed "national values," among those being "self reliance and hard work." ERI. CONST. pmbl.

[213] *See* James C. McKinley, Jr., *Eritrea: African Success Story Being Written*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 30, 1996, at A1 [hereinafter *African Success Story*]; *see also* James C. McKinley, Jr., *Working On The Railroad, And On Eritrea's Revival*, N.Y. TIMES, May 19, 1996, § 1 at 3 [hereinafter *Working On The Railroad*].

[214] *See African Success Story*, *supra* note 213, at A1.

[215] *See Working On The Railroad*, *supra* note 213, § 1 at 3.

[216] *See id.*

[217] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 63.

[218] *See id.*

> changed throughout the years, there shall always be that particular way of walking or jumping that land of mine shall never fail to recognise. I am sure I shall be recognised and acknowledged by my land, by the mountains and by the trees. Because they are part of my natural and real environment and identity.[219]

Perhaps hoping for recognition from their land, it is not uncommon to see members of the Diaspora kissing the ground and raising their hands to the sky upon finally returning to Eritrea.[220]

The relation, however, between attachment to territory and the Eritrean national identity explored here assumes the form of a symbol, namely the map outlines of Eritrea.[221] Arguably, one of the most ubiquitous symbols in Eritrea is the outline of the Eritrean state.[222] No business in Asmara is complete without an outline of the Eritrean map to accompany the business name on the sign outside.[223] It makes no difference as to the nature of the business—grocery stores, restaurants, bars, apparel stores, and electronics shops—all display the map outline in equal numbers.[224] In some cases, the word "Eritrea" as in "Eritrea Shoe Shop" is fashioned into the shape of the map.[225] Map outlines too are available on products ranging from shirts to postcards and stamps.[226] During the fifth anniversary celebration of its statehood, scores of decorations put up to commemorate the event contained a drawing of the Eritrean map.[227]

The national connection to the map is understandable considering that the Eritrean people had fought for recognition of their national borders. The map, in a sense, is the visible, even tangible, product of their thirty year struggle. Some maintain that

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219 GHEBRAI, *supra* note 157, at 165.

220 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 64.

221 *See id.*

222 *See id.*

223 *See id.*

224 *See id.*

225 *See id.*

226 *See id.*

227 *See id.*

the preservation of their borders has occupied the current government to the point of obsession.[228] Since independence, the Eritrean government has engaged in territorial disputes with Djibouti, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen.[229] The dispute with Ethiopia over the regions of Badme and Zalambessa is ongoing and has resulted in significant loss of life and displacement of border populations.[230] The dispute with Yemen over a series of uninhabited islands in the Red Sea also involved military action.[231]

The Eritrean government is accused of provoking these territorial disputes to maintain national unity during the difficult post-struggle development period.[232] Nonetheless, international arbitration resolved the Yemeni dispute peacefully.[233] To Eritrea's credit, and the surprise of many of its critics, Eritrea has abided by the international tribunal's decision even though it adversely affected Eritrea's territorial interests.[234]

According to the University of Asmara students who participated in the questionnaire survey, the symbol most commonly associated with Eritrea was not the map, but instead the flag.[235] Sixty-two of the 133 students (forty-six percent) who

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[228] *See* Nuhad Jamal, *Eritrea's Bad Press*, MIDDLE E. INT'L, Aug. 21, 1998. The perception in the Arab world, where Eritrea is referred to as the "Israel of Africa" is that Eritrea is intent upon "picking fights" with bordering countries and other neighbors like Yemen. *See id.*

[229] *See* Michela Wrong, *Eritreans Are Defiant as They Await Fresh Storm*, FINANCIAL TIMES, June 9, 1998, at 6; Thomas Burmeister, *Ethiopians Gloat Over Defeat of Eritrea in Border War*, DEUTSCHE PRESSE-AGENTUR, Feb. 28, 1999.

[230] *See* Marie Colvin, *Horror and Beauty of Ethiopia's War*, SUNDAY TIMES, June 14, 1998; *Truce Urged in East Africa; Peace Broker Appeals to Eritrea, Ethiopia*, WASH. POST, Mar. 2, 1999, at A14. Interestingly, the dispute, as described by the Eritreans, results from the Ethiopian Tigray ruling party's cartographic view of its nation. *See* Wrong, *supra* note 229. The Tigray are, according to the Eritreans, attempting to realize their long held goal of a "Greater Tigray," which imposes upon the former Italian borders claimed by Eritrea. *See id.*

[231] *See* Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, *Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical-Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute*, 52 MIDDLE E. J. 367, 368-69 (1998).

[232] *See* Jamal, *supra* note 228.

[233] *See* Lefebvre, *supra* note 231, at 369; *Eritrean-Yemen Relations Picking Up Fast*, AFR. NEWS SERVICE, Oct. 15, 1998.

[234] *See Eritrea-Yemen Relations Picking Up Fast, supra* note 233.

[235] *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 69.

responded to the question, "When I see_____ (name symbol), I have a special feeling of love for my country" (hereinafter "the symbol question") filled in the blank with the word "flag."[236] Much like the map outline of Eritrea, the Eritrean flag of red, light blue, and green is visible outside a myriad of shops and stores all over the country.[237] At special family events such as weddings, the flag flies at the reception site.[238] During Eritrea's fifth anniversary celebration, flags hung from every light, pole, store, home, and even cars.[239]

Many students also responded to the symbol question with answers relating directly to the war. For instance, several students considered those who sacrificed either their lives or limbs in the war as special symbols.[240] They indicated that when they saw the "handicapped" or "fighters" or a "cemetery" or "martyr's cave" that they thought of their nation.[241] One respondent answered that when he looked at a picture of his brother who died in the war he became overcome with a special love for Eritrea.[242] Some of the responses relating to the war were actual battle sites such as "Nacfa,"[243] or "Sawa" for Massawa, or "the Former Front Line."[244] One respondent commented that he felt patriotic feelings about Eritrea when he saw "films of the struggle."[245]

Another group of responses to the symbol question included references to the present government. Students commented that when they saw "the president" or the name, "Issayas," that they felt a "special feeling of love" for Eritrea.[246] "Our government

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[236] *Id.*

[237] *See id.*

[238] *See id.*

[239] *See id.*

[240] *See id.*

[241] *Id.*

[242] *See id.*

[243] In recognition of this battle site, the new Eritrean currency is named the Nacfa. *See id.*

[244] *Id.*

[245] *Id.*

[246] *Id.*

officials who are not corrupt" served as a symbol for one respondent,[247] and another respondent maintained that when he saw "development" he felt patriotic.[248] Finally, one student responded to the symbol question with "the color blue."[249] During the 1993 referendum for independence, colored cards were used to indicate "yes" or "no" votes since most of the populace was not literate.[250] Blue-colored cards signified a positive response for Eritrean statehood.[251]

The final group of responses to the symbol question related to natural features of Eritrea. Several students viewed the Red Sea as a symbol for Eritrea.[252] Others (it was the second most popular response overall) responded that seeing a "camel," not necessarily a natural feature but a natural being, imbued them with a "special feeling of love" for their country.[253] The camel is enshrined on the official government seal of Eritrea. Some speculate that the government employs the camel symbol as a means of assimilating the lowland population since the camel is an important part of the lowland way of life.[254]

Students participating in the questionnaire survey were also asked, "What was the most important battle of the war?"[255] Since the war is, if not the focal point, an integral part of the Eritrean identity, the question was intended to determine whether Eritreans shared a consistent view of the struggle.[256] The most popular answers to this question were the battle of Massawa, with over forty responses, the Sixth Offensive or the Red Star Campaign, with thirty-five responses, and Afabet, with twenty-four

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247 *Id.* at 74.

248 *See id.*

249 *Id.*

250 *See id.*

251 *See id.*

252 *See id.*

253 *Id.*

254 *See id.*

255 *Id.*

256 *See id.*

responses.[257]

The answers provided to the question regarding the most important battle of the struggle could not be distinguished on gender or religious grounds.[258] Numerous students asserted that the "whole war" was the most important battle.[259] One of the Muslim respondents to the question, however, replied that the most important battle of the war was "the battle between Eritreans," explaining that the battle between Eritreans was a battle between indigenous ethnic and religious groups.[260] He further stated that the battle continued to be fought and could be seen in the "opposition to the Islamic movement" within Eritrea.[261]

V. Conclusion

It is hard to argue with Clapham's assessment of Eritrea as "an artificial colonial creation" encompassing several nationalities.[262] Eritrea was and is a compilation of numerous ethno-linguistic and religious groups in a territory as diverse as its inhabitants.[263] Eritrea's genesis was artificial, or accidental, resulting from arbitrary boundary-drawing on the part of the Italian colonial power.[264] Nonetheless, due to the diligent efforts of a national liberation movement, the EPLF, a single nation evolved inside the former colonial borders.[265] Building on common colonial experiences and traditional values, the EPLF fostered a supratribal, supralinguistic, suprareligious Eritrean identity.[266]

Consistent with the Alterian and Weberian theory of nation-building, a core group of military elites and intellectuals have been responsible for administering the national educational process in

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257 *See id.*

258 *See id.* at 75, 209-14 (app. I).

259 *Id.* at 75.

260 *Id.*

261 *Id.*

262 *Supra* note 117 and accompanying text.

263 *See supra* notes 7-11 and accompanying text.

264 *See supra* note 1 and accompanying text.

265 *See supra* notes 140, 145-48 and accompanying text.

266 *See supra* notes 145-46 and accompanying text.

Eritrea.[267] To be sure, these elites did not "invent" the nation as Gellner might argue,[268] but instead nourished pre-existing values and traditions enabling the territorial peoples to appreciate their continuity and to differentiate themselves from other national groups.[269] The commonalities fostered by the EPLF during the last decade of the struggle, necessary to justify the personal sacrifice required, are collectively known as Eritreanism or the Eritrean national identity.[270] Among the values and characteristics that motivate Eritreanism are commitment to a high ethical ideal,[271] belief in critical public speech,[272] uncommon perseverance,[273] emphasis on the interest of the community over the individual,[274] and self-reliance.[275]

Symbols, including the Eritrean flag, the ubiquitous map outline of Eritrea, and the ex-fighters themselves, are employed by the government to facilitate the continuity and differentiation process.[276] The camel, previously associated with the Muslim lowland population, has been placed on the official seal of the Eritrean government.[277] The national heroes are those who lost their lives in the struggle, "the martyrs," but this group also includes a few individuals—for example, Woldeab Woldemariam and Awate.[278]

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267 *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 87-96.

268 *See supra* notes 72-73 and accompanying text.

269 *See supra* note 146.

270 *See supra* notes 145-48 and accompanying text.

271 *See supra* notes 156-68 and accompanying text.

272 *See supra* notes 169-84 and accompanying text.

273 *See supra* notes 185-90 and accompanying text.

274 *See supra* notes 191-204 and accompanying text.

275 *See supra* notes 205-16 and accompanying text.

276 *See supra* notes 221-27, 235-42 and accompanying text.

277 *See supra* notes 253-54 and accompanying text.

278 Of the students who did name an individual, most answered "Awate," the man credited with having fired the first shot in the war. *See* Hoyle, *supra* note 109, at 75. The next most popular answer was "Woldeab." *See id.* Woldeab Woldemariam's "activities, maintained over four decades despite numerous assassination attempts, earned him acclaim by Eritrean nationalists as 'the man who has walked the longest.'" Sorenson, *supra* note 128, at 305.

While the values comprising the national identity are those idealized by the community, there is some disparity between the ideal and the reality. Certainly, the University of Asmara student who named "the battle between Eritreans" as the most significant battle of the war evokes a different vision of Eritrea. And the imprisonment of a journalist in a nation where critical speech is written into the textbooks as a civic duty represents another departure from the ideal.[279] In order to maintain national allegiance during the trying reconstruction period, the Eritrean government faces the daunting task of holding the departure between ideal and reality as closely in check as possible.

[279] *See supra* note 184 and accompanying text.