

# **'Imagining Eritrea': the creation of the nation**

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter addresses the creation of the Eritrean nation by the post-liberation government between 1991 and 2001. Subsequent events and outcomes are not discussed here<sup>1</sup>. Current anthropological debates and positions on nationalism, the creation of the nation and ethnicity are first discussed. The Eritrean government's appeals to nationalism and its fashioning of a national identity based on sometimes contentious or minority perceptions of ethnicity are examined. To provide historical context, a few of the ways in which identity has been formed and re-formed in the past century in what is now Eritrea are considered. The essentialising notions of the Eritrean government with regard to identity are contrasted with a number of relatively recent developments in anthropological theory, such as 'the open subject'. The influences of history and memory on national identity, especially as expressed through the metaphors of landscape – landscapes of loss and landscapes of renewal – are briefly addressed.

In sub-Saharan Africa forced migration is increasing year by year; repatriation invariably fails as a complete solution to displacement. Post-return negotiation of integration has been viewed in Eritrea as a contested process at local and national levels. Therefore, it is apposite that in this chapter closer consideration is focused on whether and/or how refugees and returnees inform the debate on national identity and belonging.

Gender aspects of nationalism and ethnicity are also considered. Research indicates female and male notions of nation and nationality can be somewhat different, and differently expressed.

## **2. Nationalism**

### *Anthropological approaches to nationalism*

Hylland Eriksen has written: 'Nationalism is a new topic for anthropologists'<sup>2</sup>. Foster notes: 'The very notion of a nation with a fixed, 'given' cultural identity is a sign of the success of a whole array of practices in naturalising that identity. It is also the sign of the success of a particular construction or version of national

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this paper represents a record of past actions and is historic, based on information and scholarship available in 2001. Coherence of national identity was a subject that in 2001 was increasingly coming to the fore in debate – closely managed by 'official' channels. Events inside Eritrea subsequent to 2001 have indicated the sensitivity surrounding creation of identity, and also the dangers inherent in individuals' and groups' attempts to conduct public debate on such matters. In the opinion of the author, such closing down of debate represents one aspect of the severely reduced public space for genuine democratic development and citizens' participation in governance, a state of affairs that remains unresolved in late 2009.

A shorter, preliminary version of this paper was presented at the ASA UK 2000 conference. It was entitled *Nation and Location: Eritrean Returnees' Voices*.

<sup>2</sup> 1993: p98

culture, for all definitions of the national essence selectively ignore competing definitions' <sup>3</sup>.

[The larger unit of the nation-state] 'has not been subject to a significant amount of anthropological research (exceptions include...Kapferer 1988), probably because it does not lend itself to the localised field work in smaller communities... By examining nations as places [that] are created within specific historical contexts, it is possible, however, to view them as cultural constructions on a par with other places. As such they become part of the anthropological project' <sup>4</sup>.

The means by which citizens or subjects (in itself a potentially significant distinction) participate, or do not do so, in the endeavour of the construction and legitimisation of the nation and abide (or otherwise) by the structural controls of the nation-state are discussed by Rorty. His definition of a meta-narrative is 'a narrative which describes or predicts the activities of... entities... These meta-narratives are stories, which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities'<sup>5</sup>. It is interesting in the context of Rorty's stance to consider Billig's provocative thesis of 'banal nationalism', the means whereby symbols as seemingly mundane as the Stars and Stripes on a garage forecourt reinforce and embellish the apparent roots and timelessness of nationalism<sup>6</sup>.

There are instances where a relationship of the subaltern group or groups with the mechanisms of the nation-state and hegemonic structures introduces the need for a similar acknowledgement of contingency, process and change. It is valid to consider the ways in which the creation of the nation may introduce and/or develop alternate perceptions, where the views of those who consider themselves as powerless within the polity may either challenge or feel removed from over-arching constructs of nation and national identity. Here attention to the 'engendered subject' represents a further necessary layer of scrutiny. Such varied foci assist an examination of the potentially disparate and conflicting means by which groups may either accede to the dominant perceptual framework, or contest it, on however limited and varied a scale<sup>7</sup>.

Consideration has been given increasingly to the possible and various links between the construction of the nation *per se* and the consolidation of the structures of the nation-state, the development/strengthening of a shared sense of community and communal purpose and 'the invention of tradition'. Thus 'Invented traditions... are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the nation, and... associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-

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<sup>3</sup> R. Foster, 1991: 237-238. 'Making National Cultures in the Global Ecumene' in *The Annual Review of Anthropology* (20)

<sup>4</sup> K. Hastrup & K. Fog Olwig XX: 11: 'Introduction' in *Siting Culture*.

<sup>5</sup> 1991: 199

<sup>6</sup> Billig 1995, especially chapter 7: 'Philosophy as a flag for the *Pax Americana*'.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Probyn 1993.

state, [and] national symbols' <sup>8</sup>. Smith notes that 'One of the major difficulties faced by the new states in Africa and Asia is precisely the lack of unifying memories and myths, symbols and values for the inhabitants of the territories created by the colonial empires' <sup>9</sup>. In his opinion the volume edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger '... suggests the enormous utility for modern states... of the ideals and symbols of the nation in counteracting divisive tendencies and creating cohesion' <sup>10</sup>. Appadurai has written of the central significance of the common enterprise in the creation and maintenance of the nation, and by so doing also stresses the necessity for a common understanding of, and identification with, certain collective projects if it is to endure <sup>11</sup>.

Renan described the 'community of fate', and it is relevant to address the sense of nation building that may arise from such perceptions. A nation, a community, a group, can be profoundly bound together by the memories of sacrifices made in the past. The challenge comes when there is a need to renew those bonds, when people's readiness or otherwise is put to the test. It is then imperative that a sufficiently strong and cohesive common weal has been shaped with a unifying ethos, so that the nation continues to cohere and to grow stronger in unity.

#### *Forced migration, return and the nation*

It is only relatively recently that consistent attention has been given within anthropology to the linking of refugees and returnees into the wider debate on issues of belonging, place and space and the very processes of nation building and nationalism<sup>12</sup>.

Discussion of the processes by which national entities may be created, reified and maintained has merit in terms of consideration of the post-return experiences of refugees. Brief consideration of refugee experience indicates a potential dissonance between such concretising tendencies, the perceptually transitory nature of exile, and the ways in which disparate histories and expectations are often expected either to be discarded or subsumed within the explicit project of nation-building with its often necessarily dominant singularity. Thus any number of separate identities, communities and histories may be written out of the discourse. Here discourse theory, with its thesis that people's social identities are complexes of meanings and networks of interpretation, and thereby contingent, is relevant. As Fraser has written, social identities are drawn from a fund of 'interpretive possibilities' available to actors in different societies, at different

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<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 13.

<sup>9</sup> 1988: 11

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: p5.

<sup>11</sup> 1993.

<sup>12</sup> There is an ever-growing body of literature on these general subjects. For the purposes of this chapter a number of texts have been consulted. These include Amselle 1998; Barth 2000; Basso 1996; Bender 1994; Brah 1996; Casey 1996; Clifford 1997; Cohen 2000; Fullerton Joireman 1996; Geertz 1996; Giddens 1991; Garcetti & Gruber 2000; Kapferer 1998; Küchler 1994; Lovell 1998; Mayer 2000; Parkin 1998; Shapiro 1997; Tronvoll 1998a & 1998b; Werbner 1998.

times – and at different stages of individuals' lives and experiences. Social identities are discursively constructed in historically specific times and places<sup>13</sup>.

One of the few studies that has hitherto considered the place and role/s of returnees in 'state formation' is Stepputat's work in Guatemala. He writes that 'The process of how repatriation links up with the (re-) formation of states has rarely been examined... The process of repatriation in Guatemala is demonstrated to have increased the presence of the 'state' in the former areas of conflict, but at the same time to have enhanced the possibility of new conflicts'. He also believes that it is fruitful to be imaginative in considering the state. 'The 'state' can also be conceived of as an idea – a claim to unity, coherence, structure and intentionality – with material effects. In this sense, the 'state' lives in and through its subjects... [Here] the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality' [enters]: the modern government is the particular way of thinking about the kinds of problems that should be addressed by social authorities, which emerged together with an ensemble of means to manage 'populations' during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe... These everyday forms of state formation... the embedding of ideas and practices of 'state' in the everyday life of the state's subjects, takes us into the 'local' level of analysis.'<sup>14</sup>.

### **3. The creation of identity**

#### *Contingent identities*

In recent years attention has also been given within anthropology to the occasionally contingent nature of seemingly inviolable constructs, identities and identifications. Post-return situations, where people (both returnees and residents) attempt to (re)create 'home' and 'belonging' and to (re) establish themselves within historical structures and as participants in the nation, benefit from such focus. Malkki stresses the virtue of 'a processual anthropology, an intellectual practice that would foreground dimensions of time and indeterminacy, the co-existence of both repetition and innovation... and processes and transformations whose outcomes are not as predictable as they sometimes seem to be'<sup>15</sup>. Many years ago Audrey Richards described 'the necessity for inconsistency' in the relationship with the anthropological subject, with that *other* whose perceptual structures may threaten the anthropologist's categorisation of the connection between knowledge and power.

Thus there has been considerable recent research within anthropology that has highlighted the often notably flexible and situation-specific ways in which people define themselves. It has been realised that many have become adept at

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<sup>13</sup> Foster 1991 (ibid)

<sup>14</sup> F. Stepputat 1999b 'Repatriation and Everyday Forms of State Formation in Guatemala' in R. Black & K. Koser (Eds.): *The End of the Refugee Cycle? Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

<sup>15</sup> Liisa Malkki, writing about Sally Falk Moore, in 'News and Culture: Transitory Phenomena and the Fieldwork Tradition' (p.87) in Gupta, A, and J. Ferguson (eds.) 1997 '*Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*'. Berkeley: University of California Press.

manipulating identity to fit certain circumstances, and to apply shifting and sliding scales. The notion of 'creolisation', where people adapt and merge identities in kaleidoscopic fashion, has increasing resonance in many societies<sup>16</sup>. While such matters have found discussion in the context of refugee groups, there has hitherto been little reflection on the potential worth of such a perspective in post-return situations<sup>17</sup>. Yet 'home' may necessitate just as much flexibility and malleability, in order to accommodate both shifting views among returnees themselves, and those among whom they settle.

### *Heterogeneity and identity*

One study that examines from an anthropological perspective the ways by which increasing heterogeneity at a community level shapes the construction of migrants' identity is by Refslund-Sørensen<sup>18</sup>. She describes her finding that such issues touch on the relationship between space, place, culture and identity. One focus of her attention is how settlers view displacement; many narratives stress not suffering but an experience that serves as a frame of reference for the (re) interpretation and the (re) organisation of history, society and identity<sup>19</sup>. The Sri Lankan settlers described by Refslund-Sørensen came from various locations and had different histories and backgrounds; many had suffered quite considerable upheaval. This allowed for, even at times required, a certain 'building forward': people shared little "common content" and had minimal joint foundations on which to rebuild.

There is resonance here with returnees, to Eritrea and elsewhere: their lives have been disconnected from their pasts to a certain extent; their individual and eventual shared concept of identity and locality may well differ from that of the homogenising tendency. Such concepts may of course also differ markedly among returnees themselves, whose histories and memories will not all be identical; the same has been seen to be true of some returnees' interpretations of belonging and national identity.

There is potential for exploration of such theses in post-return negotiations of identity and belonging, particularly as in Eritrea where there is very precise overarching discourse of the creation of a national identity. The contesting of space and place may have no 'official' remit, but it exists on the ground in the areas where returnees have settled. Their relationship, or the absence of such, with local residents, indicates that the attainment of a coherent 'collective ideology', as discussed below, may be fraught with a degree of tension and a need for negotiation. People's own narratives and history/histories may preclude or limit the emplacement of such a structure. The 'borderland' may remain even post-

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<sup>16</sup> Anthropologists who have considered such topics within the field of forced migration include Allen 1996 and Turton 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Among those who have addressed the subject include Schuthof & Boerenkamp 1990, Wilson with Nunes 1994, and Kuhlman 1994 on refugee strategies of integration.

<sup>18</sup> 1997.

<sup>19</sup> See Cohen 2000, p 146 *et seq.*: especially his discussion of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995).

return: 'home' can represent alienation and strangeness. Local (and indeed displaced/resituated) identities can be 'departicularised' when subsumed into the national project; people are expected to be, or become, homogenised. Thus dislocation and relocation should not be seen as finite processes, but as continuous discourse.

In this context further consideration has to be given to space and membership of/adherence to, that space: which space(s) do I belong to as an individual? Thus there can be citizenship of a nation-state, and membership of smaller entities. 'Citizenship ought to be theorised as one of the multiple subject positions occupied by people as members of diversely spatialised, partially overlapping or non-overlapping collectivities'<sup>20</sup>.

#### **4. The contested creation of the Eritrean nation**

##### *Perceptions of ethnicity and identity in the historical record*

A paper by Gewalt gives insight into the manipulation of peoples in the southwest lowlands of Eritrea by the British Military Administration (the BMA)<sup>21</sup>.

'The British divested a number of political structures of legitimacy, and invested others with state sanctioned legitimacy. Some pre-colonial forms of governance were cancelled, new forms were created, and some forms with alleged historical antecedents were accorded new legitimacy. In so doing the British Administration changed forever the manner in which society existed in the Western Province [present day Gash Barka Province: the south west lowlands]'<sup>22</sup>.

The BMA actively created new 'tribes': Public Record Office documents cited by Gewalt described how the British were uninterested in 'tribal units' of fewer than 2,000 people<sup>23</sup>. It was during this period that the Beni Amer people, discussed in detail by Nadel, begin to disappear from the official record, their place to be taken by those then defined by the Beni Amer as serfs, i.e. the Tigre<sup>24</sup>. The government describes the Tigre people as the second largest of the nine nationalities. Similar activities have been mentioned as happening during the BMA in the northwest highland areas of Eritrea, in the region around Nakfa. People self-identified as the Habab live there, but are absent from any contemporary consideration of Eritrean nationalities: they do not figure on the approved list of nine nationalities<sup>25</sup>.

Abbay has written that '[During the BMA] Eritreans 'imagined' their community in different ways. The Eritrea that *Metahit* [peoples of the lowlands] imagined was

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<sup>20</sup> Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 73.

<sup>21</sup> Jan-Bart Gewalt: 'Making Tribes: Social Engineering in the Western Province of British Administered Eritrea 1941-1952'. This paper was presented at the ASA UK Biennial Conference in September 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p2.

<sup>23</sup> Public Records Office: FO 1015/138, p.13.

<sup>24</sup> S.F. Nadel 1945: 'Notes on Beni Amer Society'. In *Sudan Notes and Records* XXVI (1).

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication from man identifying himself as Habab, Tessenai, Eritrea, 2000.

not the same Eritrea that *Kebessa* [peoples of the highlands] imagined’<sup>26</sup>. While there can be debate about Abbay’s at times simplistic division into highland and lowland factions, research increasingly shows that the BMA was a time of considerable re-definition of identity on many fronts and for many reasons.

Such shifting of boundaries and both internal and external definitions of groups and allegiance occurred at the time of the first Italian colonial expansion into present-day Eritrea, in the 1890s. As Gebre-Medhin and Erlich separately describe, many parts of the highlands and areas of the lowlands were virtually depopulated when the Italians arrived from the coast<sup>27</sup>. This was due to war and a desperate famine: many had died and many more had migrated, with large numbers going to Tigray across the Mereb river. The Italians alienated huge swathes of land they assumed to be empty. This became so-called *demaniale* or Crown Lands on which Eritreans were not allowed to settle, farm or graze animals. Many people were unable to return to their homes in the later 1890s; according to tradition, groups numbering many thousands were assimilated into larger groups whose lands had not been taken<sup>28</sup>.

As Abbay notes, Eritrea has had ‘a rough road to the invention of identity’<sup>29</sup>. It is apparent this process continues and continues also to be contentious.

The collection edited by Werbner has much to offer in terms of consideration of the shaping and refracting of memory in Eritrea<sup>30</sup>. Eritrea was a *de facto* colony of Ethiopia between 1952 and 1993 when independence (as separate from liberation in 1991) was achieved. Its prior existences as an Italian colony (1890-1941) and as subject to BMA control (1941-1952) also enable much discussion of what Werbner terms the “... historical approach to memory [that] takes it as problematic that intractable traces of the past are felt on people’s bodies, known in their landscapes ... and perceived as the tough moral fabric of their social relations”<sup>31</sup>. It is in the re-figuring or even sometimes usurpation of memory that contestation of identity comes to the fore. In Eritrea that debate has barely started in a public arena. If memory is to be part of the inscribing of national identity, then the voices of dissonant and/or minority histories must be heard. Among these voices will be those of returnees and women.

### *Current nationalist ideology in Eritrea – ‘the nine nationalities’*

Within Eritrea there is very much a government-directed discourse of collective ideology, one in which pre-existing divergence has to be subsumed in order to

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<sup>26</sup> Abbay, A. 1998. *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles*. Asmara & Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press.

<sup>27</sup> Jordan Gebre-Medhin, 1999. ‘Eritrea (Mereb-Melash) and Yohannes IV of Abyssinia’. *Eritrean Studies Review* Vol. 3 (2); Erlich, H. 1996. *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa. A Political Biography: Ethiopia and Eritrea 1875-1897*. Asmara & Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press.

<sup>28</sup> Personal communication from old Tigre men in the lowland town of Hagas who described their ancestors as having been Beni Amer, i.e. nobles, before the ‘catastrophe’.

<sup>29</sup> 1998: p115.

<sup>30</sup> *Memory and the Post-colony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*. London: Zed Press Books.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*: pp1-2.

create 'diversity in harmony' and an entity in which the 'nine nationalities' co-exist on equal terms. The very use of the term 'the nine nationalities' is replete with meanings. The decision that there are nine ethnic groups in Eritrea, while people themselves apply different criteria, suggests a more complex underlying web of membership and potentially shifting allegiances. 'Nationality' attempts to fix identity. It was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF: the eventually victorious liberation movement) that first fixed the boundaries of identity at nine ethnic groups/nationalities. The Eritrean government explicitly continues this proscriptive defining: e.g. the new currency, the Nakfa (a name itself redolent with EPLF memories, as the town was the EPLF forward base at the time of greatest danger), shows female representatives of the nine nationalities on the 1 Nakfa note.

Yet research increasingly indicates that ethnic groups have formed and reformed in Eritrea as elsewhere in Africa and that activities in colonial times continue to have importance today. Werbner makes a powerful argument for continued attention to be given to such matters also in the post-colonial era. 'There are four main reasons why, for the analysis of the cultural politics of identity and everyday life in Africa, postcolonial studies must foreground the state and state-created domains... [T]he 'retreat of the state' or its transformation; the importance of political violence and state genocide; the re-appropriation of the state, reciprocal assimilation, and political hybridity; and the change in identity degradation, stereotyping and the occult imaginary of the post-colony'<sup>32</sup>.

Ranger discusses how 'Inventing ethnicity *did* involve ascribing monolithic identities, and also involved tremendous upheaval and affront to the 'taken-for-granted' world. Many historians have described how under colonialism bounded ethnicities replaced previously much more fluid, multicultural, and multilingual networks of interaction and identity. But we have stressed perhaps too much the intellectual processes which underlay the production of ethnic units – the dialectic between colonial inventors and African imaginers – and not enough the great disruption involved in drastically narrowing down the African religious, social and economic world while at the same time enlarging the administrative and political'<sup>33</sup>.

It can be argued that the current Eritrean government, in line with EPLF policies during the liberation struggle, continues the 'production of ethnic units', in that its interpretation of the definitions of and boundaries between peoples in Eritrea is being imposed.

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<sup>32</sup> R. Werbner 1996: 7. 'Multiple identities, plural arenas'. In R. Werbner & T. Ranger (Eds.) *Post-colonial Identities in Africa*. London & New York: Zed Press Books.

<sup>33</sup> T. Ranger, 1996: 274. In 'Postscript: Colonial and Post-colonial Identities'. In R. Werbner & T. Ranger (Eds.).



### *Memory, landscape and the creation of an Eritrean national identity*

Eritrea has been shaped by war. For the past 35 years perceptual categories have been strongly bellicose; people's connections to the landscape and their own locality have been filtered through military activity. The terrain of Eritrea is overtly defined by the government as permeated by landscapes of heroism and loss, as epitomised by the trench systems that thread through much of the higher ground and the martyrs' cemeteries. Fighting for land and the defence of borders has literally shaped the dominant narrative of national identity. Such sacred topographies have particular meaning in Eritrea: these are asserted as informing much of what it means to be an Eritrean. And yet many Eritreans will have no or little share in these metaphors of identity: they will have been absent, unborn or are for any number of reasons unable or unwilling to participate in the creation of national identity based on such criteria.

Thus when the 'body national' is identified with the 'body politic' through the embodying of sacrifice in the martyrs' memorials, their stamp is placed upon the land and the landscape. Holy places and 'a land fit for heroes' exemplify the foundations of an Eritrean identity, inherently exclusive of many yet supposed to signify common ground<sup>34</sup>. There are many communities of memory and landscapes of loss. The same location can articulate different histories, memories and meanings: a question to be asked is whose then achieve pre-eminence, and why?

"Locality and belonging may be moulded and defined as much by actual territorial emplacement as by memories of belonging to particular landscapes whose physical reality is enacted only through acts of collective remembering"<sup>35</sup>.

When discussing Latvians' experiences of internal exile and internal dislocation, Skultans makes a plea for the inclusion of people's life histories and narratives to display and debate identity; such narratives as she heard showed identity as 'differently refracted according to time and place... Identity, landscape and time interact in a series of mutual refractions'. And to live in a community, local as well as national, where memory and remembrance are significant 'one must in a real sense also play a part in its creative reproduction and sustenance as a 'living' tradition'<sup>36</sup>.

### *Nationalism in post-liberation Eritrea*

The durability of traditional social structures in the context of the development of the post-conflict nation and the further consolidation of a cohesive national

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<sup>34</sup> Kapferer's 1988 discussions of the Anzac memorial and the surrounding ethos of Australian identity evoke many echoes in the Eritrean context. From another perspective Geertz's consideration of Negara (1980) foregrounds how personal ties of lordship and submission formed the central plank of identity and belonging rather than land: analogies might be drawn here with events in Eritrea.

<sup>35</sup> N. Lovell 1998: 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> V. Skultans 1997. 'Theorising Latvian Lives: the quest for modernity' *JRAI* 3 (4) and 1998: *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*. London: Routledge.

identity shaped by government is problematic. Many such customs, beliefs and practices are in contradistinction to the public ethos of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the party of government since 1993, and its stated perceptions of the independent Eritrean nation. These are presumably grounded in the policies and practices of the EPLF during the war of liberation. Hence there is a frequent dislocation between many of the deep-rooted precepts of traditional societies and the thrust of change envisaged by the Eritrean government. The influences of traditional beliefs and customary behaviour permeate all aspects of the construction of post-liberation Eritrea (since May 1991); these have enormous and varying influence on communities' responses to government initiatives.

Werbner describes the state 'colonising the imagination of its subjects': this has quite powerful resonance in the case of Eritrea. The Eritrean government has assumed control of the imagining of Eritrea, with little actual debate on how people themselves define being Eritrean. Old customs, or those powerfully perceived as old, indeed sometimes immemorial, are to be replaced with a government-created national code and ethos of nationality<sup>37</sup>. It is interesting here to consider the idea of 'building a nation from words' as defined by Hofmeyr<sup>38</sup>. It can be argued that while the written word shaped and guided much of the liberation struggle in combination with deeds, now deeds and actions are less explained in words.

Foucault's perception of 'governmentality', the importance for governments of the active negotiation or *arrangement* of subjectivity and sovereignty, has as yet found little response in official Eritrean discourse of the nation.

#### *Essentialist approaches to identity by the Eritrean government*

Consideration of 'the ethics of the open subject' as described by Battaglia is pertinent<sup>39</sup>. 'A central problematic – some would say 'the' central problematic – of any post-essentialist theory and practice concerns how subjects are positioned within culturally patterned and socially constructed differentials of power. This problematic asserts an unwavering value for acknowledging the social, historical and cultural locatedness of persons'. Battaglia's definition of the 'open subject' resists any notion of a 'core' self, immutable and authentic.

If the 'open subject' can be taken as refusing to limit identity/identities to the boundaries of the body politic, then it can be argued that the Eritrean government adheres vigorously to an essentialist, 'closed subject' definition. In the few short years between liberation and the onset of conflict (the 2<sup>nd</sup> war with Ethiopia) in

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<sup>37</sup> R. Werbner 1996: 10. 'Multiple identities, plural arenas' in R. Werbner & T. Ranger (Eds.): *Post-colonial Identities in Africa*.

<sup>38</sup> Hofmeyr, I. 1987. 'Building a nation from words' in S. Marks & S. Trapido (Eds.): *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*.

<sup>39</sup> D. Battaglia, 1999: 116. In 'Towards an Ethics of the Open Subject: Writing Culture in Good Conscience' in H. Moore (Ed.) *Anthropological Theory Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

May 1998, there were indications that the creation of what it means to be 'Eritrean' would not be straightforward; dissonant voices were emerging. One reason among many is that there is an absence of sufficient acknowledgement within Eritrea of the small-scale, the local, the discourses between different experiences and the ways in which belonging, memory and history may play their parts in forging the national identity. The Eritrean national project could benefit from greater flexibility in terms of recognising the potential 'provisionality' of national identity and how local identities may be at odds with the over-arching construct. Here issues of gender and nation/nationalism are very much to the fore; so too are those of returnees' place within the polity<sup>40</sup>.

A central tenet of the government project of nation-creation is that categories of identification that had previously been actually or potentially divisive should be subsumed within an over-arching national identity. Equality and equity for all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or gender is a cornerstone of policy, derived from the actions of the EPLF during the struggle.

The onus upon the government is to ensure that the loyalty of the general population is maintained and strengthened as time passes and the immediate influence of the liberation war grows less. This is especially important in the context of the second war within a decade. In order to do so it is important that there continue to be a development of transparency in governance and in the mechanisms of civil society, both for dissemination of information and opportunities for debate. While the current conflict with Ethiopia has re-emphasised the strength in depth of support for the government, the relevance of such sustained focus will remain.

### ***5. Gender issues of nationalism, ethnicity and identity***

Dissonant precepts have been found among a number of ex-fighter and returnee women with regard to identification with overarching conceptualisations of nation building. Individual and group stances on the creation of the nation and the consolidation of a collective identity occasionally reveal both confusion as to the ultimate shaping and context of the female role, and a degree of dissent with what is often perceived as male-defined national ideologies and structures of governance. Both female ex-fighters and returnee women adapt and make use of the discourse of 'the nationalities', with variants being posited as more encapsulating of actual experience post-war and post-return; the central tenet is an expression of inequality and hierarchical structures.

Refugees assisted in their return by the PROFERI programme<sup>41</sup> have been described as 'the third nationality' – the 'first nationality' comprises those who in

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Grosz-Ngaté & Kokole 1997; Gruber 1999b; Mayer 2000; and Yuval-Davis 1997.

<sup>41</sup> PROFERI stands for the Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea: this initiative was funded by the UN from 1992, and ca. 24,000 returnees from the Sudan were given financial and asset assistance. They were subsequently settled in places where spontaneously returned refugees, i.e. those who received no support, had also settled. See further Gruber 1999a.

their various ways more directly supported the liberation struggle, the 'second nationality' with those who repatriated spontaneously without assistance. A variant on this tripartite hierarchy is that the second nationality represents all male returnees; the 'third nationality', yet lower still in the hierarchy of 'true Eritrean-ness', is made up of female returnees.

A considerable amount of research now exists on the position of women in post-conflict Eritrea, while this piece of research represents the first to focus on the returnee community<sup>42</sup>. No consistent evidence or indications have been uncovered of noteworthy changes in gender relations and rôles. Findings are more complex and less entirely and uniformly positive. Eritrea is undergoing profound and difficult change: people's reactions will be many and various. The enormous strength of customary attitudes and behaviour cannot be minimised; neither indeed can the potentially path-breaking influence of war, exile and dislocation.

Vail's discussion of women and ethnicity provides a somewhat rare occasion of attention to the role of women in both the initial creation and any subsequent re-fashioning of such identity. While he considers southern Africa, his points have considerable resonance in present-day Eritrea. He writes: 'The place of women was also a central issue dealt with in ethnic ideologies. An emphasis on the need to control women and a stress on the integrity of the family came to be intrinsic to both ethnic ideologies and the actual institutional practices of indirect rule... Ethnicity's appeal was strongest for men, then, and the Tswana proverb to the effect that 'women have no tribe' had a real – if unintended – element of truth in it... It was for very real reasons of exercising at least a measure of control over land and women, bringing at least a measure of peace to their minds, that African men welcomed the new ethnic ideologies which involved augmenting powers of chiefs in a situation of rapid social decay'<sup>43</sup>.

#### *Gendered space and female identity*

Notions of 'gendered space' and locality linked to gender have a lengthy pedigree. Attention has expanded more recently into issues of gender, migration and nationalism. As Brah notes "Feminist politics have constituted an important site where issues of home, location, displacement and dislocation have long been a subject of contention and debate. Out of these debates emerges the notion of a 'politics of location' as *locationality in contradiction* ... a positionality of dispersal"<sup>44</sup>.

Women's spatial and social mapping of their locality and their world will often be contingent upon their relative absence of control over public space. Because

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<sup>42</sup> E.g. the ESCOR-supported research study (grant R6836), undertaken by the author of this paper. See Gruber J 1999a: *Post-return re-integration in Eritrea*.

<sup>43</sup> L. Vail 1989: 14-15. 'Introduction: The Creation of Ethnicity in Southern Africa' in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*. London: James Currey.

<sup>44</sup> 1996: p204; emphasis in the original.

access to and use of land may be problematic for many women, they will be excluded at least to an extent from the frequent virtually umbilical connection of men to land.

Perceptions of belonging, location, place and space and how these can be addressed in the light of increasing population movements and the supposedly unstoppable impetus towards globalisation continue to receive much, albeit often somewhat reserved, attention from anthropologists<sup>45</sup>. How such changes might be linked to, and have an impact on, women's perceptions of space, place and belonging and their own identities, would repay further consideration in the context of women in Eritrea, most specifically returnees, local residents and ex-fighter women living in the south western lowlands and the capital Asmara. The role of women in 'creating' Eritrea and its national identity is one that continues to be fiercely contested at local level.

It could be posited that due to separation from public space some women come closer to deterritorialisation within their own country than do men. Identity may become dependent on other criteria, or be informed by less rooted notions. There are indications of such perceptions among a number of returnee women in the lowlands of Eritrea, e.g. in the lowland town of Hagas. The creation by them of the 'second and third nationalities' descriptor to define categories of returnees in contrast to the 'first nationality' of those who fought for liberation suggests an awareness of additional factors to delimit and strengthen other routes to identity. These would include the role of landscape and memory and the use of history by national entities. It is interesting to think about how women have adopted the idea of the 'nationalities' and changed it in a manner both robust and challenging. Research with men in the lowlands, both returnees and locals, has not revealed any such challenge to orthodoxy.

Female perceptions of being the internal *Other* are described by Mayer: "[N]ationalism, gender and sexuality ... play an important role in constructing one another – by invoking and helping us to construct the 'us' versus 'them' distinction and exclusion of the Other. ... Despite its rhetoric of equality for all who partake in the 'national project', *nation* remains ... emphatically, historically and globally – the property of men"<sup>46</sup>.

## **6. Returnees and identity: returnee identities**

### *Post-return strategies*

Refugees have multifarious strategies for dealing with forced migration; their views will also vary on both the possibility and the reality of return. Similarly, strategies post-return will differ according to individual and households'

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<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Chatterjee 1993; Cohen 2000; Grosz-Ngaté & Kokole 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Kandiyoti 1991; Kapferer 1988; Lovell 1998; Mayer 2000; Radcliffe & Westwood 1996; Shapiro 1997; Werbner 1998.

<sup>46</sup> 2000: pp 1-2; emphasis in the original.

circumstances. It may well be that some returnees adhere most closely to their diasporic identity and filter their experiences of Eritrea and 'being Eritrean' through that prism.

### *Identity and movement*

Consideration is increasingly given within anthropology to the ways in which displacement and movement may in themselves constitute aspects of identity: narrow definitions of nation and location may be matched by wider, more expansive notions of how migration can be the defining event in shaping identity. Such issues are central to examination of returnees' understanding and analysis of movement vis-à-vis emplacement: how these two seemingly opposed conditions of life may in fact be elements on a continuum. Returnees in Hagas and elsewhere in the lowlands were not all at their journeys' end: many spoke of how the future might bring further migration. Identity would in certain such situations become malleable through necessity.

'The growing body of studies concerning deterritorialised cultures and identities has had certain methodological implications for anthropology... When studying migrants, exiles, refugees and diasporic communities... anthropologists must contemplate a variety of perspectives on culture and identity and examine not only how these interact with each other but also how they relate to the ethnographic representation. By applying a multi-perspective approach, the anthropologist discovers that the view from afar is taken by many different actors, making it difficult to define precisely what anthropological knowledge is...' <sup>47</sup>.

In his recent response to Kibreab's throwing down of the gauntlet regarding notions of 'deterritorialisation' and identity, Turton writes: "Mursi identity is both 'rooted' in a particular territory *and* a relatively recent product of a long-term process of migration ... the Mursi did not make a journey: 'a journey made them' "<sup>48</sup>. Cohen's consideration of "McCrone's remarkable observation that 'identities should be seen as a concern with 'routes' rather than 'roots', as maps for the future rather than trails from the past" has much merit for opening up the debate on returnees' perceptions of belonging <sup>49</sup>.

### *Hierarchies of identity*

Identity and the authentication of this can veer perilously close to exclusion if posited in an all too essentialist fashion. Authenticity *per se* if defined primarily through imposition rather than negotiation and inclusion is predominantly essentialist – nuances of difference can be viewed as subversive and counter to the nation-state marking of territorial integrity and identity as defined through the categorisation of alterity. In this context there are suggestions of a certain growth of hierarchical perceptions in areas of Eritrea affected by significant returnee

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<sup>47</sup> K. Pærregard 1997: p39. 'Imagining a Place in the Andes: In the Borderland of Lived, Invented and Analysed Culture' in K. Hastrup & K. Fog Olwig (Eds.) *Siting Culture*. London: Routledge.

<sup>48</sup> D. Turton 1999: emphasis in the original. *JRS* 12 (4). See Kibreab 1999a & b and also 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen 2000: p167, citing McCrone (1998: 34). See also Clifford (1997).

settlement: returnees on occasion appear to be apportioned the role of the internal *Other*; women returnees perhaps even more so. They are placed in a certain contrapuntal position compared to the roster of 'true' Eritrean-ness – especially as former refugees are unlikely to have participated in the liberation struggle.

With specific regard to returnees it can be suggested that there may in fact exist several internal 'collective ideologies', dependent on the groups involved, and that these may emerge in several variants both during exile and after repatriation. The opportunities for either preserving or reconstituting a sense of continuity of purpose and common goal may vary enormously between different groups. The essentialising tendencies in the approach of the government of Eritrea to the question of ethnicity appear on occasion to reify the intangible and limit the inclusion of potential alternate identifications. Continuity *per se* does not only mean stasis and an absence of change, but rather an ability to absorb change and act upon it in a culturally consonant fashion. Research has indicated that returnees perceive, interpret and make manifest the social construction of post-return life in a variety of ways. These perceptions are not always consistent with those of the wider community, whose own constructs might be otherwise.

### **7. Concluding comments**

This paper posits that notions of nationality and the meaning of such identification by the government should be seen in the light of the multitude of positions that influence post-return life and integration in Eritrea. Relations of relative power, issues of gender and ethnicity, access or otherwise to resources, histories and the creation and/or imposition of collective memory, are among potential key factors influencing the creation of the nation. This is also true with regard to post-return integration of refugees, a significant and heterogeneous group in Eritrea. Research by the author of this paper in the town of Hagas, elsewhere in the lowlands and the region around the capital Asmara (1997-2001) shows that the journey does not end when people return 'home': rather than then becoming clean slates they remain palimpsests of the entirety of their experiences. This complexity of reality and response requires greater space within the present hierarchy of identity creation within Eritrea.

Local levels of analysis are currently stifled in Eritrea. It can be posited that the consolidation of a national identity, incorporating returnees and other groups with disparate views and outlooks, is a process of constant negotiation where participation of all such groups should be a given. Thus while for instance the government is intent on the dilution of internal loyalties to territoriality through the establishment of regional structures and other moves, people are concerned to maintain, re-establish or create such links to locality and belonging. So on the ground, in communities, there is consideration of different identities and the voicing and living of these.

Balibar has written of 'fictive ethnicity'; the Eritrean national project could be described as encompassing not only that narrative but also a collective mythology that enables the development of the 'mythic nation'.

The ontological identification by the Eritrean State of national identity is constituted through the liberation struggle and the recently concluded conflict: these are the boundary markers that define difference. It is ironic and sad that while Eritrea is experiencing determined internal moves towards less bounded structures of territory and location, with the attendant emergence of alternate, subaltern, perceptions, its external impetus is towards the most clear-cut definition of *Otherness* based on boundaries and territoriality. The deterritorialisation of Eritrean land brought about by the Ethiopian invasion of May 2000 may well be countered in individual Eritreans' perceptions by yet further allegiance to locality as a conduit of self-identification and to their own self-defined ethnic and other groupings. The same connections cannot be observed at the State level of representation of identity.



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