

'The Third Nationality': Female returnees to Eritrea

Issues of gender, return and the creation of the nation

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In this paper various hypotheses with regard to post-return life of refugees, gender issues and nation building are advanced, with specific reference to Eritrea. The first part provides a brief sketch of a number of developments within anthropology, which have led to an increase in focus on issues of identity, integration and nation building, and which have relevance in expanding the scope of consideration to post-return integration of refugees. Attention then moves to an examination of certain aspects of the Eritrean experience since liberation in May 1991, the ways in which the instrumentality of the state is shaping the creation of the Eritrean nation and the complexities of such a project.

Anthropological perspectives

Contingency and identity

In recent years attention has increasingly 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'¹. 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 manipulating identity to fit certain circumstances, and to

¹ 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.

apply shifting and sliding scales. The notion of 'creolisation', where people adapt and merge identities in kaleidoscopic fashion, has increasing resonance in many societies². 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 situations³. 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.

The creation of the nation

Anthropology has only latterly addressed the study of nations and nation building. Here too discussion of the processes by which such entities may be created, reified and maintained has merit in terms of consideration of the post-return experiences of refugees. 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 find resonance in Rorty's definition of a meta-narrative. This 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'⁴. 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 and epistemological enquiry and exegesis⁵. Such varied foci assist an examination of the potentially disparate and conflicting means by which groups either accede to the dominant perceptual framework, or contest it, on however limited and varied a scale.

There has been a great deal of debate about 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 its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols'⁶. 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'⁷. In his opinion the volume edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger '... suggests the enormous utility for modern states... of the ideals and symbols

² Anthropologists who have addressed such topics within the field of forced migration include Allen 1996, James 1996 and Turton 1993.

³ E.g. Schuthof & Boerenkamp 1990, Eastmond 1993, Wilson with Nunes 1994 and Kuhlman 1994 on refugee strategies of integration.

⁴ 1991: 199.

⁵ See e.g. Caplan 1992 and Probyn 1993.

⁶ Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 13

⁷ 1988: 11.

of the nation in counteracting divisive tendencies and creating cohesion'⁸. 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 endure⁹.

Yet 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 times – and at different stages of individuals' lives and experiences. Social identities are discursively constructed in historically specific times and places¹⁰.

Heterogeneity and the nation

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-Sørensen¹¹. She describes her finding that such issues touch on the relationship between space, place, culture and identity. There is potential for exploration of such theses in post-return negotiations of identity and belonging, particularly perhaps where there is very precise over-arching 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-return: 'home' can represent alienation and strangeness. Alonso has written of how local (and indeed displaced/resituated) identities can be 'departicularised' when subsumed into the national project; people are expected to be, or become, homogenised¹². 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? There can be citizenship of a nation-state, and membership of smaller entities. '[C]itizenship 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'¹³.

⁸ *ibid*: 5.

⁹ 1991 & 1993.

¹⁰ Fraser 1992.

¹¹ 1997.

¹² 1988.

¹³ Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 73.

Locality and belonging

It can be seen that there is much potential here to consider the notion of locality, of association/disassociation with a given place and the perceptual categories that derive from such connection or disjuncture. One to address this issue has been Parkin: 'A distinction might be drawn between peoples for whom one locality is all-inclusive of their remembered experiences, and those for whom many places mark their histories and whose sense of belonging is to that extent multilocal'¹⁴. There could profitably be focus on the concept/s of origin that a self-delineated group may have; refugees have been shown to re-create, re-define, their links and relationships, their varying sense of belonging, as part of the exigencies of flight and exile. So far little thought has been given to whether such new structures of identification are maintained post-return, whether these were entirely contingent and, therefore, easily discarded, or whether in fact there might exist tensions and several possible choices of identity – whether creolisation and contingency are perpetuated or continued.

One perception is that: 'Displacement and the experiential narratives that derive from such a condition are not intermediary statements. The lived experience of migration, exile or other forms of dislocation may uproot settled locality, but it is not in itself a condition in between, since meaning is derived *in situ* from dislocation itself'¹⁵. However, refugees' (and also returnees') view may be that they are in a liminal phase, that does not allow much acknowledgement of the reality of the here and now. Thus marking time between one reality and another may be their own definition. Another element in this situation is the power of memory and remembrance – and of forgetting – and whose memory/ies become paramount¹⁶.

The Eritrean experience: the discourse of nation-building

The theoretical strands briefly sketched above merit consideration in the specific context of Eritrea, where there is a defined process of the creation of the post-liberation nation. There is potential tension in the movement by government towards the structures of the new nation, whose cohesion is in certain instances predicated upon the disavowal or marginalisation of collectivities and relationships to people, location and land. There have been suggestions that such reconfiguration jars against older perceptual frameworks, especially when these are perceived by people as intrinsic to their self-identification.

Collective ideology

Within Eritrea there is very much a discourse of collective ideology, one in which pre-existing divergence has to be subsumed in order to create 'diversity in harmony' and an entity in which the 'nine nationalities' (the nine ethnic groups perceived as resident in Eritrea) co-exist on equal terms. The use of the term 'the nine nationalities' is replete with meanings. The very 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. With specific regard to returnees it can be suggested that there may in fact exist several

¹⁴ Parkin 1998: xiii

¹⁵ Lovell 1998: 5.

¹⁶ Work by e.g. Connerton 1989 and Fentress & Wickham 1992 is illuminating here.

'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. It has also to be noted that there are certain essentialising tendencies in the approach of the government of Eritrea to the question of ethnicity, which on occasion 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 for this paper 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.

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 Eritrean People's Liberation Front during the struggle. The early history of the EPLF, and the subsequent bitter fighting between it and the other liberation force, the Eritrean People's Front, have their roots partly in deep distrust of factions, based predominantly on fault lines perceived/depicted as age-old. The government is additionally acutely aware of the ways in which ethnicity was used as a fuse and a cause for continuation in recent appalling conflicts in Africa and elsewhere.

The government is in possession of considerable support from much of the resident population in terms of an expressed sense of national pride and commitment, and readiness to accept decrees and directives. The onus upon the government is to ensure that such loyalty is maintained and strengthened as time passes and the immediate influence of the liberation war grows less. 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. Renan wrote of 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 unity¹⁷.

Such commitment is especially pertinent given that the influence of traditional beliefs and customary behaviour permeates all aspects of the construction of post-liberation Eritrea; these have enormous and varying influence on communities' responses to government integration and rehabilitation initiatives. There is recognition by the government of the challenges presented by the durability of traditional social structures

¹⁷ See Garcetti & Gruber 1999 for further discussion of this topic.

in the context of the development of the post-conflict nation and the further consolidation of a cohesive national identity. Many such customs, beliefs and practices are in contradistinction to the ethos of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the current party of government, and its perceptions of the independent Eritrean nation. These are grounded in the policies and practices of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front 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 challenges are how best to bridge that divide, and how to ensure that all such initiatives are sustainable

Government policy and instruments

The Eritrean government is attempting to create through its policies and its focus on unity in diversity, a national community whose members are less concerned about origins, ancestral ties to locations, and more about a commonality of feeling and expression of unity. Thus territoriality is to be minimised and ultimately discarded. The government has embarked on a number of fundamental transformations of customary practices. It has been suggested that it might be more appropriate to use the strengths of these as foundations on which to build sustainable development initiatives and post-return programmes¹⁸. Indeed it can be posited that the consolidation of a national identity, which incorporates post-return integration and the development of gender equity, is a process of constant negotiation where participation of all groups is essential. In this situation it is illuminating to focus on certain initiatives that are seen to have especial potential to alter permanently people's relationship with locality and local identification. The underlying rationale may be described as a conscious effort to reshape and redefine such connections, so as to create a more national ethos. In this regard the Eritrean government's responses to repatriation and the question of gender equity are illuminating; so too are a number of government decrees, which have been noted by observers as potentially particularly instrumental in that reshaping of the national entity.

Integration of returnees

The focus of many repatriation initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere has been on 're-integration': research for this paper indicates there is a paramount need to recognise and acknowledge that the process in fact necessitates negotiation of what will often be fundamentally new social structures. This finding corroborates those from other post-conflict and post-return contexts. It is increasingly recognised that repatriation ushers in often entirely new socio-cultural challenges and developments.¹⁹ In Eritrea at government level there is a determination to consolidate the directions and perceptual frameworks created during the years of conflict into the creation of the new nation. However, it is surely necessary somehow to accommodate and work with the potentially many and widely disparate understandings and perceptions of people whose life histories, experiences and expectations will be extraordinarily varied and potentially capable of different forward momentum. It is unsustainable to presume that those communities and areas affected by repatriation will always and simply absorb returnees and continue as before. It would be as unrealistic to think that all returnees have identical views and wishes, and that there is not a jot of difference between any, in

¹⁸ Tadria 1997; von Braunmühl 1996; UNRISD 1996.

¹⁹ Allen & Turton (1996); Malkki (1992); Refslund-Sørensen (1997) address various aspects of this subject.

terms of their emotional and conceptual responses to the proposed structure of the Eritrean nation.

It is more appropriate and more inclusive of all those affected by repatriation, and their varying experiences, to focus on 'integration'. However, integration cannot presuppose a return to the *status quo ante*. The process must accommodate diverse and potentially divisive attitudes, behaviour and needs; it must also genuinely promote transparency and equity at the communal level. Negotiation of what may be profoundly altered ways of life and familial and communal structures should be recognised as intrinsic to any repatriation initiative.

It is not only those who went into exile but those who remained behind who will need to address what may be extremely complex issues striking at the core of deep-rooted socio-cultural mores. In a situation of post-conflict reconstruction and integration, where there are potentially opposed perceptions of society and general conduct, as well as gender relations, there may be opportunity for specific attention to alteration of traditional precepts. Such initiatives require considerable and pro-active definition and continuous support from national, regional and local administrations, line ministries and other involved bodies. As the lessons of PROFERI have suggested, where there is endemic gender inequity, pervasive food insecurity and economic and environmental fragility, it is preferable that all sectors of the population can see tangible benefits arising from any post-return programmes ²⁰.

Gender equity

Despite impressive initiatives both during the liberation struggle and post-war, Eritrea remains a profoundly patriarchal and hierarchical society. Traditional beliefs and patriarchal structures profoundly militate against gender equality. Girls in all the ethnic groups are socialised from earliest childhood to be submissive, meek and to see their future in terms of marriage and motherhood. They are also imbued with the perception that obedience, firstly to their fathers and male kin, and latterly to their husbands, is intrinsic to appropriate female behaviour. The reproductive role of women places enormous restrictions on individual girls' and women's opportunities for equal access and entitlement in all areas of life; customary and *Sharia* law and general religious precepts similarly operate from a central premise of different rights for women and men. It is these structures which carry most weight in people's everyday lives.

At present in Eritrea there is an acknowledged gender gap in terms of the divide between policy and practice, between the creation of legal instruments and implementation ²¹. Gender relations remain predicated upon unequal perceptions; this is as true for the great majority of returnees as for the general population. Such a situation has potentially wide-ranging implications and repercussions for the ways in which Eritrea develops as a nation.

²⁰ PROFERI stands for The Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea; this initiative was UN-funded, albeit to a far lesser extent than had been hoped for by the Eritrean government.

²¹ See e.g. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1995; Gruber 1998

De facto top-down government approaches prevail in the context of gender equity initiatives. There is a danger that the already extreme gender gap might be exacerbated. The government position is that changes in gender relations must derive from communal perceptions and wishes. While such an approach has merit, it presupposes not only general will in the absence of pro-active government initiatives, but also echoes the concept of women as 'change agents', now largely discredited²².

In effect there is a central discrepancy in Eritrean government policies and approaches to integration and to gender issues: while there is overall determination to retain possession of the shaping of the post-conflict nation, in specific relation to gender rôles and relations, there is a stepping back from active implementation. Research informing this paper indicates that in this instance there might be a case for a concerted, combined and genuinely participatory effort to implement both processes of integration and gender equity. Each demands often very considerable change in people's outlook and lives; neither can be fully sustained without the other. Neither is in fact feasible without the other. The difficult balance is somehow to combine clear indications of desired change, without imposing these from above, and to integrate such activities within the overall ethos of the creation of the nation.

Some commentators, while acknowledging the admirable policy approach of the government towards the attainment of gender equity, are of the opinion that specific and pro-active initiatives and implementing structures may become necessary. There is no dedicated chapter or section in the Draft Constitution on gender issues and initiatives to promote greater equity. A number of research documents have suggested that the current patriarchal structures and resultant acute gender inequality may require greater direction from government. '[C]ontrary to most other governments in the region, Eritrea has not put into place a national machinery to implement the gender policies of the government'²³. As present no organisation exists that would have the capacity and remit to advocate and then to monitor government gender policy and practice. Such measures might serve to hasten the evolution of sustainable change and also to monitor the extent of genuine progress. There are indications in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Report to the 4th UN Conference on Women that it is understood that this crucial issue of the gap between policy and practice, between governmental initiatives to increase and strengthen women's participation, and reality in the villages, must be addressed. A key route forward is seen as inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral collaboration. Communities must be mobilised so as to desire, initiate and ultimately sustain more gender equal practices.

Yet if communities are to be mobilised, there must be clear mechanisms to ensure that this occurs. These should ideally incorporate a core element of community-generated activities, in addition to any higher-level initiatives deemed necessary. One potential danger of allowing change to evolve 'naturally' is that this process may result in the all too lengthy survival of the gender gap. The very significant and admirable developments seen during the years of struggle may otherwise be dissipated or even lost. Many

²² von Braunmühl (1996), Tekle (1996) and Tادريا (1997) critically discuss various aspects of government gender policy.

²³ von Braunmühl 1996: 28.

fundamental, traditional mores and customary practices were challenged, indeed altered, in the liberated areas during the war. Thus attitudes towards child marriage, certain forms of female genital mutilation and access to child and adult education were radically addressed. However, research has indicated that many Eritreans have always been reluctant to change their behaviour. There is evidence of a peacetime 'backlash', where advances made in terms of equality, access and entitlement, for women and for other groups, have been set aside or repudiated. In addition there has been a reported resurgence of female genital mutilation and growing and sustained negative attitudes towards female (ex) fighters²⁴. If there is piecemeal and/or intermittent attention to the many ways in which these are interrelated, the outcome may well be that many Eritreans fail fully to acknowledge the reasons why change is necessary.

There is a possibility that unless there is clear direction entrenched positions will retain force and might indeed intensify. This is as true for equity writ large, within which integration is to be included, as it is for specific directed initiatives concerning gender issues. The over-arching goal of the attainment of a just civil society must encompass equity. Within Eritrea there are directions from government as to intent and instruments; the challenge is to convert theory into practice.

Gender inequity influences all aspects of life. This is true as much for the majority of returnees as for the general population. This study has not found evidence of sustained widespread change in returnee gender relations and rôles other than those brought about by absolute necessity. Exile has not resulted in a general radicalisation of refugees; in fact many have adopted the more restrictive practices prevalent in northern, Muslim, Sudan.

Forced migration and residence either in a camp or as a self-settled refugee can in certain circumstances actually act as a liberating experience for a small minority of women. There is evidence from the Sudan that some women derived a degree of benefit, both personal and for their children, from the presence in camps of health and educational facilities²⁵. The work by Oku Bright among Eritreans at Umm Gargur is particularly informative on the range of behaviour patterns adopted by women, either voluntarily or by weight of social and religious mores. Families can become dispersed during forced migration: several young women interviewed in Khartoum stated that they could not envisage ever returning to a 'traditional' way of life after having been introduced to a more personally free existence²⁶. It would be unwise to overstate this case: many women become wage labourers and heads of households and go against tradition *faute de mieux*. In other words, they have no other option. Nonetheless, returnee initiatives such as those from Malawi to Mozambique have shown that a few women are unwilling to return to the old ways, where their lives and behaviour are defined and confined by men.

This particular study has also found indications that many refugee women's gender rôles have undergone profound changes after flight, often as a result of dire necessity. Women who would previously never have worked outside the household had to do so in

²⁴ UNICEF 1995 & 1996; Issayas 1996; Araya 1997; Gruber 1998.

²⁵ Oku Bright 1985 & 1994; Kuhlman 1994.

²⁶ Kibreab 1995.

order to assist the survival of their families. Nonetheless, many interviewees described how they, and a significant number of other women, had either maintained their traditional gender rôles, or were actually made to confine themselves even more to the private domain, due to religious pressures within the Sudan.

Dissonant precepts have been found among a number of 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. Here too experiences at the level of the village have defined women's post-return expectations and the conclusions that they have drawn. Yet such seemingly limited terrain does not preclude sophisticated analysis. Considerable use is made of the discourse of 'the nationalities', with variants being posited as more encapsulating of actual experience post-return; the central tenet is an expression of inequality and hierarchical structures.

Thus those refugees assisted in their return by the PROFERI programme have been compared with those who repatriated spontaneously without initial assistance as 'the second and third nationalities' – the 'first nationality' comprises those who in their various ways more directly supported the liberation struggle. A variant on this tripartite hierarchy is that while the first nationality remains more or less the same, the second nationality represents male returnees; the third female returnees.

A considerable amount of research now exists on the position of women in post-conflict Eritrea, while research for this paper represents the first to focus on the returnee community. 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.

The Establishment of Regional Administrations

It has been argued that the Eritrean government intends that long-held concepts of kinship and identification through connection to land and locality will be permanently and radically altered through regional and sub-regional re-organisation, as defined in the Proclamation on the Establishment of Regional Administrations (86/1996)²⁷. The administrative structure of the country has been changed from ten regions to six, the new regions being: Central (Maakel); Northern Red Sea (Semenawi Keyih Bahri); Southern Red Sea (Debubawi Keyih Bahri); Anseba; Gash-Barka; and Southern (Debub). The new Central region or Zoba encompasses the old region of Asmara and all the villages of former Hamassien within a 25 km radius of the capital. Northern Red Sea includes parts of the former provinces of Sahel, Semhar, Hamassien and Akele Guzai; the region of Southern Red Sea comprises virtually all of Dankalia. The Anseba Zoba encompasses parts of the former provinces of Senhit, Sahel, Barka and Hamassien. Gash-Barka includes parts of the former Gash, Setit and Barka provinces, while major

²⁷ Tronvoll 1998.

parts of the former provinces of Akele Guzai and Seraye, and a small portion of Hamassien, form Dehub. Tronvoll has trenchant opinions on the impetus behind such policy instruments as Proclamations 86/1996: 'The strongly integrated rural society of Eritrea will, from a nationalist viewpoint, become an obstacle to the development of an all-embracing national identity'²⁸. While varying interpretations of his fieldwork findings might be posited, Tronvoll has a clear perception of the Eritrean government's intention to deconstruct kinship and ethnicity structures that might militate against the construction of the nation.

The Land Proclamation

In addition the Land Proclamation (GoE 58/1994) and the subsequent related Legal Notice #31/1997 and Proclamation #95/1997 have considerable potential to alter people's traditional relationship with the land, and hence with locality and belonging. As Tronvoll notes, such connections are frequently profound: in the highland village of Mai Weini the land tenure system is known as *meret shehena*, the 'land of brothers' or 'land in common'. While such change may be perceived as especially the case for settled farmers, many of whom thus link lineage and ancestry to land, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists could also be confronted by changes to land use and connections to locality. In theory people will be able to request land allocation wherever they wish: alienation for commercial use is another prospect.

The Proclamation sets the framework for the nationalisation of all land, and abolishes the various existing usufructory tenurial systems. In reality the situation at present is that the central ruling that all land has been nationalised is no longer likely to be widely implemented even in the medium term. The very process of informing people that 'their' land has now become subject to entirely new tenurial systems will take a long time indeed, and may well meet with extremely stiff resistance. It has been found that uncertainty over land rights and related land use has had considerable effect on many farmers, whose understanding of their longer term rights are confused²⁹. Such uncertainty is likely to have a knock-on effect on people's willingness both on a practical level to care for the land, and on attitudes towards settlement, migration and dispersal.

In the Land Proclamation there appears to be a movement towards limiting options for those who might wish to engage in either pastoralism or agro-pastoralism. This may be especially the case with respect to the focus on settled agriculture, eventual removal of land from traditional usufructory structures and support to commercial farming. Thus it has been claimed that the Eritrean government is potentially limiting livelihood options. The Proclamation, which has profound implications for the livelihoods of the majority of returnees and the resident population of the lowlands, has been perceived as incorporating Modernist perceptions of development. In this perceptual framework pastoral systems are considered inimical to sustainability and environmentally appropriate initiatives – the by now much discredited 'tragedy of the commons' thesis³⁰. The government expectation is that the great majority of returnees will engage in settled agriculture. However, research has revealed that a number at least would prefer to engage either in what they feel to be a more flexible combination of semi-settled

²⁸ Ibid: 281.

²⁹ Holm Andersen & Habteab 1998.

³⁰ Fullerton-Joireman 1996 & Kibreab 1996; see also Mengisteab 1998.

farming cum pastoralism, or to retain the widest possible range of risk aversion livelihood strategies. In addition the government view is that most will settle permanently in the Southwest lowlands, while there are indications that both internal and external migration (the latter back to the Sudan) will be a dominant aspect of life for the foreseeable future.

If land is alienated from an individual or kin group, the response may not be entirely cohesive – people may feel deracinated and supplanted. Again, if people are effectively prevented from pursuing their choice of livelihood strategy, but are encouraged into settled agriculture, there may be a similar perception of distance from the over-arching pursuit of that collective ideology. Once the often virtually inherent link between land and identity is either weakened or severed, people's connections with the greater polity may require re-negotiation. Refugees have been found to hold fast to a sense of continuing identification with land: in this situation also, post-return reality of the inaccessibility of land perceived to be one's own may have repercussions.

Gender Dimensions of the Land Proclamation

In Eritrea women's relationship with the land has invariably been mediated through male definition and/or control. Those ethnic groups where women might at first glance appear to have greater opportunity to control their own land use (Tigrinya and Kunama especially) are on closer examination pretty well as much (if differently) shaped by traditional structures which militate against genuine female equity of access and/or entitlement. Post-Proclamation responses and activities, on the part of both women and men, indicate considerable and deep-rooted resistance to change. It is fair to suggest that the gender ramifications and repercussions of the Proclamation have yet to be fully considered. There are signs that returnee and lowland women (and especially female-headed households (FHHs)) will continue to be at a disadvantage with regard to accession to land and its use, despite specific government intentions to the contrary, and that the Proclamation will exacerbate the situation³¹. Thus even if a woman were first to claim and second to have land restored, she would frequently have to rely on male labour, either from her own household or hired hands. She herself might very well not be allowed to have dealings with those who worked her land. Clearly such issues may become more acute when female claimants are part of FHHs.

The notion that adult women now have equal usufructory rights to men is unlikely to be met with universal approbation. Customary laws among many ethnic groups in Eritrea do not allow women either to inherit land or to undertake many agricultural tasks (e.g. it is common among the Tigrinya to prevent women from ploughing, for fear that they 'sour' the land). In one Tigrinya highland village, Amhur, the whole community, including its women, refused point blank to accept the Land Proclamation, although the report on this does not discuss whether female resistance to change was entirely independent of male pressure³².

When land reform with provisions similar to those enshrined in the Land Proclamation were instituted in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, it rapidly became apparent that women

³¹ Chapter submitted for inclusion in book proposal: Gruber 1999.

³² Tekle 1996.

continue to suffer disadvantages, especially those in female-headed households³³. Add to this list that Muslim women in many Eritrean ethnic groups have absolutely no right in customary law to own or use land, and that the provisions of *Sharia* law are known to be frequently flouted or manipulated. It becomes clear that the very idea of greater female entitlement would probably be stoutly resisted; the extreme complexity of the situation becomes evident.

The clauses in the Land Proclamation that deal with restitution of property also have potential gender dimensions. Many women are simply either not allowed to make representations in public, or would be mortified if called upon to do so. This remains the situation, whatever the provisions of the Constitution and the reshaping of the local government structure to allow women theoretically greater and more equal access to decision-making processes in the villages. In addition, certain ethnic groups do not allow women to play any part in agricultural activities: this is true not only of the Tigre and the Hedariib, whose homeland is in the lowlands and whose livelihoods traditionally revolved around agro-pastoralism, but also of the Bilen. This ethnic group has its traditional home in the highlands around the town of Keren: it is a point of honour that women and adolescent girls are not seen to work on the land.

Conclusions

The government of Eritrea has embarked upon a programme of social engineering to transform a multi-ethnic, war-torn society into a coherent national polity through the instrumentality of the state. Its achievements since liberation in 1991 are wide-ranging and laudable regarding both national affairs and infrastructure rehabilitation. Nonetheless, this paper indicates that certain past and current Eritrean government initiatives might benefit from further consideration of how best to attain effective, participatory and sustainable implementation and development. This is especially true when such initiatives are examined in tandem with the government's stance on the creation of the national polity. The emphasis on the consolidation of a national sense of identity and belonging has ramifications and potentially multi-faceted repercussions for post-return integration of refugees, gender equity and future development.

In a context where an over-arching construct of nationhood and national identity is being defined, it is plausible to imagine that there will be times when contest and negotiation over identification, definition and eventual reification of the process will come to the fore and need expression. There are many challenges inherent in the Eritrean national project; not the least of these is that those who are to manifest that national identity must feel they have been given full scope for debate. In addition, those structures and customary attitudes and behaviours that are deemed inappropriate to the construction of Eritrea must somehow be acknowledged before being consigned to history. Recent history in Eritrea is replete with enormously powerful meaning; opportunities for its use as a cohesive force will depend a great deal on the achievement of a coherent sense of the past. There should also be a future where minority and/or dissonant histories have been incorporated or at the very least given the dignity of expression and reflection.

³³ Hendrie 1996.

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