
Opposition, Exile and Identity: The Eritrean Case

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This paper suggests that investigation of refugee experience can be informed by consideration of the literature of ethnic identity. The development and maintenance of a distinct Eritrean identity among refugees and immigrants to Canada is examined. Numerous pressures, both internal and external to the group, exist which threaten the persistence of such an identity. However, the work of several community organizations strengthen this identity and provide a means of expressing it. These voluntary organizations are seen as a primary means of maintaining a distinct Eritrean identity in the experience of exile.

Introduction

Refugee studies can be informed by consideration of ethnic identity, as such identities are frequently central to the experience of migrant groups and can influence processes of resettlement and adaptation in a host country. Various explanations are offered regarding the emergence or persistence of ethnic identity. Following Barth's (1969) seminal volume on ethnic boundaries, scholars have emphasized the subjective and mutually-defining aspects of ethnic identities. While Isajiw (1980) notes objective difference, he joins De Vos and Romanucci-Ross (1975), Chrisman (1981), Dashefsky (1976) and Glazer and Moynihan (1963) in regarding ethnicity as a subjective concept. There is a consensus that ethnicity is a product of interaction, not isolation. Cohen (1974) finds the condition of forming part of a larger population and interacting with people of other collectivities crucial to ethnicity. Banks (1978), Berreman (1975) and Isajiw (1979) emphasize the double boundary of ethnic identity: self-definition and role ascription by others. Cohen (1969), Hale (1971) and Wallman (1979) indicate the situational and perceptual character of ethnic identity.

Much of this work has developed in the context of fairly stable relations between groups and assumes a relative coincidence or agreement on ethnic boundaries of the groups. However, other studies consider situations in which relations are less symmetrical (Buchignani 1980; Mandel 1989). Building on this literature, I propose to discuss the development of Eritrean identity, both in the Horn of Africa and in the context of the refugee experience in Canada. The

Eritrean case is a very interesting example in which the double boundary of ethnic identity is not maintained and a group's self-identification is actively rejected by others. The case of Eritrea is particularly interesting because it affords an opportunity to examine the emergence, transformation and persistence of an ethnic identity in light of attempts over an extended period to eliminate it by violent suppression and to negate it through various types of discourse. My remarks are based on a study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada during 1989-1990, which involved discussions and extensive interviews with selected informants, both Eritreans and Ethiopians, including participants and non-participants in various community organizations. Informants who took an interest in the project spent many hours discussing the issue while other interviews were more brief. Over one hundred individuals were contacted. The study is also informed by fieldwork in Eritrea during 1986 and participant observation in Eritrean communities in several Canadian cities over the last decade, including membership in one of the Eritrean voluntary associations over the last eight years.

The Eritrean Case

Eritrea is a former Italian colony on the Red Sea coast. Colonialism fundamentally transformed Eritrean society (Araia 1986, 1987; Jordan 1983, 1989; Leonard 1984; Markakis 1987). After 1941, Eritrea came under British administration for a decade (Trevaskis 1960). Unlike most European colonies, Eritrea did not obtain independence but was federated with its neighbour, Ethiopia, by a United Nations resolution in 1950. In 1962, Ethiopia abrogated the federation and annexed Eritrea (Bereket 1983, 1989; Semere 1987; Serapiao 1987). Since then, Eritreans have fought for independence from Ethiopia, which was armed first by the United States and later by the Soviet Union (Petras and Morley 1984).

Ethiopian discourse constructs Eritrea as part of a state rooted in antiquity. Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia, claimed to be the descendant of Solomon and Sheba, ruling over a 3,000 year old empire which included Eritrea. Desiring access to the Red Sea through Eritrean ports, Ethiopia presented its goal as a reunification of what Italian colonialism had divided. The Ethiopian government claimed that complete linguistic and cultural identity existed between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In September 1945 the Ethiopian Government presented its case to a Foreign Ministers Council in London, stating:

Ethiopians and Eritreans are incontestably one and the same people . . . The history of Eritrea has been one with that of Ethiopia . . . The race is the same, the language except for dialectical differences, is the same. The culture and habits are identical . . . (quoted in Healy 1983:98).

Although the Emperor was deposed by military coup in 1974, Ethiopian policy on Eritrea is unchanged and Eritrean nationalism is portrayed as secessionism,

Arab encroachment or banditry. This discursive construction is rejected by Eritreans, who accept neither the antiquity nor the integrity of the Ethiopian state, and reject ascribed identification as Ethiopians. They see the case as an unresolved colonial issue, a liberation struggle to achieve independence.

An Ethnic Conflict?

Some analysts view the Eritrean case as an ethnic conflict. Gamst (1986), Horowitz (1985) and Nagel (1980) treat it as ethnic separatism, comparable to Quebecois in Canada, Basques in Spain, Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, Ibo in Nigeria, and so on. Canadian government officials also see the conflict in such terms; for example, David MacDonald, former Ambassador to Ethiopia and now a Member of Parliament, has on two occasions described the Eritrean case to me as an instance of ethnic conflict similar to that in Biafra. But the Eritrean case is not precisely comparable to these situations and such analogies distort understanding of the conflict, which is best seen in terms of a non-ethnic nationalism (see Lewis (1983) for relevant essays on nationalism in the Horn of Africa).

Eritrea is inhabited by a number of different ethnic groups. The basic division is an ecological one between highland agriculturalists and lowland agropastoralists. The population is almost equally divided into Christians and Muslims. On the basis of language, the main nationalist movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, identifies nine different nationalities within Eritrea: Afar, Bilen, Hadareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre and Tigrinya. The Ethiopian government acknowledges eight different groups in Eritrea, arguing that this variety invalidates any claim of Eritrean identity (Healy 1983:103). One cannot speak of a traditional Eritrean ethnic identity in terms of tribalism, as is sometimes done in the African context, and comparison with Biafra reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of regional history (Wallerstein 1965; Nzongola-Ntalaja 1987); nevertheless, a strong sense of Eritrean identity does exist and must be seen in its historical context.

After World War II, Eritrean politics were extremely complex, incorporating religious, linguistic and regional divisions as well as class interests and the objectives of external powers (Ellingson 1977). Originally, the independence movement was largely, although not exclusively, based among Muslim groups but not all of these took the same position. Most support for unification with Ethiopia came from the highlands where people felt some solidarity with Ethiopia's Tigrinya-speaking Christians. The extent of that support is subject to debate (Bereket 1983; Erlich 1983; Markakis 1987; Tekeste 1986, 1987). Although ethnic differences were significant in Eritrean politics, political divisions were not divided exclusively on ethnic grounds. Prominent Tigrinya leaders were involved in the independence movement from its inception. As Ethiopian attacks against Eritrean civilians increased, more Tigrinyans joined the armed Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was mainly composed of fighters of Muslim background, but was divided by region, language, ideology, clan rivalries and personal ambition. Internal

tensions led to civil war and the eventual emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF identified itself as Marxist in the 1970s but has played down this ideological character in the 1980s, although its Secretary-General, Issayas Afeworki, told me in 1986 it is 'certainly socialist'. The EPLF has sought to create a pan-ethnic nationalist movement by down-playing internal differences.

A distinct national Eritrean identity has developed as a product of historical interaction and opposition. As noted, Eritreans cannot be regarded as a single ethnic group as the population consists of a number of different peoples, speaking mutually unintelligible languages, adhering to various religious beliefs, practising different forms of production and exhibiting different physical traits. While claiming complete cultural unity with Eritrea, Ethiopian discourse emphasizes differences within Eritrea as a means of invalidating the idea of an Eritrean identity. Eritrean nationalist discourse rarely suggests the idea of an Eritrean people culturally unified throughout history but instead refers to an identity shaped by shared experience of domination. There is a shared historical experience of Italian colonialism and decades of war with Ethiopia as well as the EPLF's conscious effort to shape an Eritrean identity which encompasses all ethnic groups. The EPLF officials whom I interviewed in Eritrea stressed that Italian colonialism is the basis of a distinct and unified Eritrean identity which exists in differentiation to that of neighbouring peoples. In contrast to Ethiopian versions of history based on claims of unbroken continuity of the present state with the ancient empire of Axum, which included part of Eritrea, there is no attempt to project backwards into antiquity a unified and distinct Eritrean territory although many informants note that parts of Eritrea were free from Ethiopian rule at various periods in history. Eritrean nationalism emphasized its roots in Italian colonialism and shared experience of struggle against Ethiopia. It is this shared experience which constitutes Eritrean identity rather than any one common cultural trait.

In this sense, political ideology may 'over-ride' ethnic affiliation (Mitchell 1974:31). Clearly, the Eritrean case is not an ethnic conflict as such but rather the emergence of a multi-ethnic nation unified by shared historical experience. Emergence of a nation involves at least partial transformation of constituent groups from ethnic identification to identification as a single, corporate group (Gellner 1983; Hechter 1976). The EPLF discourages existing cultural distinctions as a basis for social, political or economic action and seeks to substitute new symbols, and a new national focus, for identification.

Similar cases of a shared sense of identity against external forces are found elsewhere (Leach 1954). However, as noted, the EPLF actively promotes pan-Eritrean consciousness. This involves the conscious and methodical transformation of membership and boundaries of the group through symbolic means.

Ethnic communalism and nationalism are types of identity formation . . . defined as the process of intensifying the subjective meanings of a multiplicity of symbols and of striving to achieve multisymbol congruence among a group of people defined initially by one or more central symbols or ethnic attributes (Brass 1976).

Although intensified by the EPLF, this process is rooted in the immediate post-colonial period. For example, Woldeab Wolde Mariam, a key founder of the nationalist movement, recounts how he and other Christians symbolically sealed the formation of the independence party by sharing meals with Muslims; traditionally, Christians and Muslims were prohibited from eating together. Today, in the EPLF-controlled zones of Eritrea, a camouflaged art gallery exhibits paintings depicting nationalist themes and displays handicrafts of the various ethnic groups. The EPLF broadcasts radio messages in all Eritrean languages and prints books in those which have scripts. A principal tactic of constructing Eritrean identity is through cultural shows. Songs and dances performed by the EPLF cultural troupe are intended to promote a new, inclusive national identity by incorporating ethnic traditions of all Eritrean peoples. Mesfin (1990:92) suggests that because Eritrean 'cultural displays have a strikingly contemporary emphasis' a national identity is absent but this is a misreading of Eritrean discourse, which is explicit about the origins of such a national identity, placing them in the context of the European 'Scramble for Africa' which gave rise to the current borders of Africa.

Just as ethnic identification is determined both by self- and other-ascriptio, so the creation of Eritrean national identity from disparate ethnic groups has been shaped both by aspirations of Eritrean nationalists and by the response of others, most significantly by Ethiopia and its allies. The brutality of this response and the war's duration are primary factors in the creation of a national Eritrean identity. Possibly, had Ethiopia observed the terms of the UN Federation, Eritrean nationalism would not have been as strong, particularly among groups which share linguistic and religious traits with Ethiopian peoples. Such speculation, however, is of little relevance to the present situation. Although a renewed federation has been proposed as a compromise it is doubtful that the Eritreans would now accept such an arrangement when independence appears to be within their grasp. Thus, one may say that Eritrean identity has been strengthened to the precise extent that it has been forcibly denied and repressed.

Ethnic Identity and the Experience of Exile

War in the Horn of Africa has created one of the world's largest refugee populations. Canadian government statistics do not distinguish Eritreans from Ethiopians so it is difficult to determine the number of Eritreans who have come to Canada. Overall, the number of African immigrants to Canada is very small. Through the 1970s, 'Ethiopian' immigration grew steadily but never reached a rate of more than 100 per year. As military conflict and repression continued in the 1980s, numbers of 'Ethiopian' immigrants grew sharply and by 1987 over 1,000 per year were arriving in Canada. Most were single men, aged fifteen to forty-four, with secondary-school education. About a fifth of the total number of 'Ethiopian' immigrants to Canada in the 1980s had university education or a professional diploma. Occupationally, over half were

classified as new or non-workers with the second largest category being that of clerical-related workers. Approximately half have settled in Ontario; Alberta has the second-largest population of these immigrants while few went to the Maritime provinces. According to the estimate of one of the Eritrean associations, there are over 5,000 Eritreans in Canada, most living in Toronto.

Many Eritreans came to Canada as refugees and even those not so classified may view themselves as refugees who were forced to leave their country. None of my informants identified themselves as Ethiopian; all saw themselves in terms of an Eritrean identity asserted by opposition to Ethiopia. Thus, while the conflict itself is not simply based on ethnic differences, Eritreans view themselves as a distinct ethnic group in Canada. However, this self-definition and internal boundary maintenance is often not accepted by others. As noted, Eritreans are officially categorized and institutionally-administered as Ethiopians by the Canadian government, which does not acknowledge a separate Eritrean identity. Folk-classifications made by other Canadians may include them as Ethiopians or in broader categories of Africans or Blacks:

At work people know me as Ethiopian. I've told them many times that I'm not Ethiopian, I'm Eritrean but it just goes over their heads. It's like they don't even hear what I say to them. But they don't know anything about Ethiopia either, just what they see on television. One day we all went out for lunch and there was too much food. One guy was joking and he said 'Well, let's send it to the Ethiopians!' Everybody just stopped and looked at me and then he looked at me and started apologizing. He was very embarrassed, more embarrassed than I was. Well, why should I be embarrassed? I'm not Ethiopian . . .

All of my informants expressed a belief that Canadians have no knowledge about Eritrea and most suggested that Canadians were ignorant of Africa in general. Some expressed surprise at the extent of this ignorance:

People here don't know anything about the world. When we were in school we learned about all the countries of the world. We learned about Canada and all the provinces but Canadians don't know anything about Africa.

The ascribed social identity of Eritreans is shaped by racist stereotypes; awareness of racism also shapes Eritrean perceptions of their role in Canadian society. As one informant noted:

Because you're Black, people always treat you in a certain way. They think you can't do something. Even when they try to hide it you can tell what they're thinking.

Another individual stated:

I didn't know I was Black until I came to Canada. People in Eritrea don't think about such things. Here there are some foolish people who call you names but I don't care about them. It's not their fault. It's all political. Those who have power use these things to create divisions between people and distract them.

Taxi-drivers, in constant contact with a variety of Canadians, are particularly subject to unsolicited classifications:

One man sat in my car and asked me 'Where are you from?' just because he sees me and thinks because I'm Black I must be from someplace else. So I asked him 'Where are you from?' and he got very angry.

Another driver said:

Many people think because we're Black we must be Jamaicans and they ask us where to buy drugs.

While Canadians are generally ignorant of Africa and are expected to be unfamiliar with Eritrean identity, other African immigrants to Canada who are aware of the Eritrean case may explicitly reject the self-definition of Eritreans, as I will discuss below. Under these circumstances, where the double-boundary of identification is not observed and Eritrean identity is rejected through official negation, general ignorance and political hostility, to what extent is a corporate Eritrean identity maintained among the refugee and immigrant population?

Migration has different effects on various groups and individuals. While some degree of acculturation in the host society is certain, the process varies from complete assimilation to integration in which cultural identity is maintained or it may take the form of separation or marginalization; such variation depends upon the cultural characteristics of both the acculturating group and the host society as well as psychological characteristics of acculturating individuals (Berry, Trimble and Olmedo 1986; Berry and Kim 1988). Some attempt to begin anew whereas others want to maintain or refashion the society left behind (Morton 1981). Bolaria and Li (1985), Herberg (1989) and Kallen (1982) suggest that parallel ethnic institutions may develop less from ethnic solidarity than from racist ideologies, policies or laws which create exclusion of minorities. Porter (1965) also sees persistence of ethnic identity as a consequence of economic discrimination, suggesting that ethnic groups are not always primarily concerned with maintaining identity but instead may be more concerned with preventing discrimination. New patterns of organization may develop which are not part of the original culture of the immigrant generation (Francis 1976). Among Eritrean expatriates in Canada, a number of new voluntary associations have been organized, partially because many trained immigrants cannot pursue their trade and must take employment in menial jobs. There is widespread underemployment within the Eritrean community, creating frustration and a sense of exclusion. Education is highly-valued in Eritrean culture and Canadian immigration authorities also filter out the unskilled; as a result, many Eritreans in Canada are from the professional class. Yet many cannot find work in their field and must take jobs as taxi drivers. This has encouraged the development of an Eritrean engineers' association, a workers' association and a youth association which encourages education and professional training. A number of employment-related workshops have been organized by the associations for the community. An association of Eritrean physicians also exists but its objectives mainly concern provision of humanitarian aid to Eritrea.

Conflicting Narratives of Identity and History

Barth (1969) says boundaries are more psychological than territorial; they are defined by ascriptive mechanisms from within the group and from external sources. Folk diacritica of ethnicity classify Eritreans as Blacks but this is based on superficial similarities and those included in this category may have little in common. Although the category is widely used (for example, Herberg 1989), the validity of classifying 'Blacks' as an ethnic group is questionable, as it overlooks a variety of differences among those so categorized; the tendency to see adaptive strategies as a result of shared culture may invert the actual situation (Staiano 1980).

Uchendu (1975) suggests four sometimes conflicting alternative identities for Africans: continental identity, Black 'racial' identity, new national identities and local ethnic identities. For Eritrean refugees, there is a fifth alternative, identification with the new host country. With the exception of young children, expatriates in Canada are of the original immigrant generation and most identify themselves as Eritreans. However, approximately one-eighth of 'Ethiopian' immigrants to Canada in the 1980s were younger than fourteen and new children are being born. Younger people and those who have lived here for several years speak of an attachment to Canada and identify themselves as Eritrean-Canadians. The most commonly-expressed concern of my informants was the loss of Eritrean cultural identity, particularly in terms of language, among the young. Tigrinya-language schools operate in Toronto and Winnipeg but attendance in Toronto has been poor, a problem the organizers are attempting to remedy by encouraging more active support from parents.

Uchendu finds that identity shifts according to the frame of reference; that identity is situational and impermanent. Thus, the 'Canadian' or 'Eritrean' element of self-identification may be stressed according to particular circumstances and audiences. As one informant expressed it:

That will be a hard question for people to answer. They will want to tell you they are Eritrean. Everyone feels that they are Eritrean. But they don't want to make you feel bad, so they may tell you they are Canadian.

Mazrui (1967) sees African identity as essentially oppositional, suggesting Africans have a common identity to the extent that they are unlike anyone else (cf. Gorer's (1975) findings that English identity is basically internal and little dependent on otherness). Uchendu (1975) suggests that Nigerians abroad typically identify themselves as African rather than as Nigerian. This is not the case for Eritreans, however. In contrast, individuals usually identify themselves as Eritrean and then go through the rather complicated process of explaining where and what Eritrea is. For some, this may have become such a conditioned reaction to Canadian ignorance that they do it automatically. Thus, some individuals proceed to relate details of Eritrean history at some length even to those familiar with the circumstances. These recitations are not necessarily restricted to those who are active in the political organizations.

Such explanations are important keys to the construction of Eritrean identity. Essentially, they are a packaging of history into a key set of symbols. A number of informants stressed that Eritrean history has been 'stolen' or distorted by Ethiopian hegemony. In contrast to the Ethiopian version of history, which typically asserts the antiquity of the empire and Eritrea's place within it, Eritrean constructions of history usually begin with Italian colonialism. Rather than viewing federation with Ethiopia as reunification, Eritreans dismiss the action of the United Nations as legitimizing the imposition of foreign domination. There is a tendency to project such unity as now exists into the past and to overlook the internal divisions which existed historically and minimize those which remain. Thus, one informant asserted that 'all Eritreans opposed federation', when in fact political opinion was divided.

While the Ethiopian version of history insists on the 'artificial' and foreign character of Eritrean nationalism, an Arab-inspired attempt to divide an ancient African state and turn the Red Sea into an 'Arab Lake', Eritreans insist that theirs is a genuinely African independence movement. Both narratives are based on appeals to an independent African identity but each stands the other on its head. While Ethiopia insists that foreign agents are attempting to divide the unity of an ancient African civilization, Eritreans compare Ethiopian domination to that of European colonialism. Nevertheless, the complex political background of the Eritrean case undermines ascribed similarities which construct an African or Black identity for Eritreans. Only briefly colonized, Ethiopia is a potent symbol of African civilization and many Ethiopians, even those opposed to the military regime and who have fled to Canada, resent an Eritrean independence movement which threatens this idealized Ethiopian unity. Similarly, activists in the Black community (including those born in Canada as well as immigrants) who subscribe to a pan-Africanist ideology also reject the Eritrean movement as a secessionist one. The political experience of some immigrants may affect their views of Eritrean nationalism. For example, Nigerian expatriates, recalling events in Biafra, may reject the Eritrean case, although the circumstances are quite different. Canadian awareness of African political issues tends to be restricted to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, with the African National Congress (ANC) having the highest profile. The ANC, which receives Ethiopian backing, does not acknowledge the Eritrean liberation struggle as a legitimate one (although prominent ANC activists such as Ruth First have supported self-determination for Eritrea) and this has served to exclude the Eritrean case from the agenda of activists concerned with African issues. Supporters of other South African groups such as the Black Consciousness Movement and the Pan Africanist Congress do acknowledge the validity of Eritrean self-determination. The situation is further complicated by the involvement of Sudan and Somalia, both superpowers, various Arab states and Israel. Thus, the external boundary of Eritrean identity is shaped by a wide variety of complex political relationships.

Ethiopian expatriates hold various opinions about Eritrea. Some recognize a distinct Eritrean identity and the legitimacy of Eritrean self-determination; others reject this and resent Eritreans as troublemakers. Several Ethiopian informants suggested that once the military government is replaced the Eritrean issue can be resolved within existing boundaries. Acceptance of a distinct Eritrean identity had been forced upon some expatriate Ethiopians by military events in the Horn of Africa. At one meeting held in 1989, a speaker representing a coalition of armed Ethiopian movements opposed to the government informed a mixed audience of refugees and immigrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea that they had to accept Eritrean self-determination whether they liked it or not because the EPLF essentially had defeated the Ethiopian government. This statement seemed to be accepted by many, except for several participants identified as Amharas. There is a tendency to equate Amhara identity with opposition to self-determination, but opinion among Amharas also varies; one informant stated:

I don't want to see Ethiopia broken up but it is for the Eritreans to decide themselves. The war has to be stopped, anyway. Everyone has suffered enough. If it means Eritrea has to go, then it should go. Things cannot continue like this.

Other groups of people who are included in the same category (i.e., Blacks) may have differences with Eritreans which prevent common identification. For example, Rastafarians regard Haile Selassie as a sacred figure and find the origins of the Eritrean independence movement incomprehensible, just as Eritreans are perplexed by deification of the autocratic Emperor. In addition to cultural differences, class also internally divides this category. Among Eritreans, there is both amusement and resentment concerning racial classifications by Canadians; several informants reported shock at their experience of racism in Canada and by Canadian inability to distinguish among Black people.

There are suggestions that racism also exists in Ethiopia. Levine (1965) states that Ethiopians do not consider themselves Black, and both Spencer (1984) and Perham (1969) note racism among Ethiopians towards those with darker skin. Belcher (1989), studying Eritrean refugees in Edmonton, uncritically assumes that Eritreans share these attitudes but I have seen no evidence of this. When questioned, some informants suggested that Eritreans are a 'mixed race'. One person elaborated on some physical differences:

Ethiopians are different from Eritreans. Eritreans are mixed between Yemeni, Zagwe, people from the north. The real, original Eritreans are the people around Barentu and then these other people came from the north and from Yemen and mixed with them. Our faces are lighter than the Ethiopians. The Eritreans have smaller bones. The Ethiopians come from the south, they come from Kenya, they're more like Africans. They're bigger and they have darker skin.

While Eritreans resent racist assumptions, none object to being classified as Black and informants stressed their identity as Africans in positive terms. With

a few exceptions, there is little interaction with other Black groups in Toronto but this appears to be determined by political and cultural factors rather than a belief on the part of Eritreans that they are not Black.

The Form of Eritrean Identity

De Vos (1975) posits three forms of self-identity. Present-oriented identity is conferred by a sense of membership in a state or an occupational group. Future-oriented identities derive from participation in religious or political organizations. Past-oriented identities are based on a sense of ethnic origin or ancestry. Isajiw (1978) views ethnicity as past-oriented, offering symbolic belonging to a simpler world, an opportunity to maintain an autonomous identity in a post-industrial realm.

Development of Eritrean identity, however, incorporates a mixture of these. Eritrean identity encompasses three temporal orientations based on the effort to recover or reinvent a lost, repressed history, a need to assert continued existence as a distinct collectivity as well as to support those who face war and famine in Eritrea, and the struggle to create an independent state in the future. Recovery of the past does not necessarily mean conservatism or a return to traditional beliefs; indeed, the stated aim of the EPLF is not just to attain independence but to build a new society. This is to be achieved through programmes in agricultural rehabilitation, health care and education which are supported by the voluntary associations abroad. In some cases, the EPLF explicitly seeks to eradicate cultural traditions. A striking example is genital mutilation. Clitoridectomy and infibulation are widespread in the region and represent not only subordination of women but pose extremely serious health problems. The EPLF discourages these practices, through education rather than imposing an outright ban which it considers would be counter-productive. Some success has been made and women's roles have changed during the war, although this may be challenged after independence. In Canada, virtually all Eritrean men publicly endorse the emancipation of women. Some men actually support this in practice although others offer more conservative statements in private. Nevertheless, the expression of Eritrean identity is not premised upon a resuscitation of these repressive traditions but, rather, endorses efforts to eradicate or transform them.

Although there are political differences within the expatriate community, most Eritreans identify with the aim of liberating and modernizing Eritrea. The process of developing a new Eritrean identity is also part of refugee experience. During such a process an ethnic group can develop new features which are not those of traditional society or of the new host society in which the group exists (Herberg 1989). For example, Eritrean couples in Canada may combine aspects of a traditional marriage ceremony, including cultural dress, music, food and dancing, with a civil ceremony, a church ceremony and an EPLF ceremony. As with such events among other groups, this may not necessarily reflect the priorities of the couple so much as their obligations to

family and community. Incorporation of the various aspects thus 'covers all the bases' of Eritrean identity.

Identification with the physical territory is a central component of Eritrean identity. Independence is supported by many who were born outside Eritrea and who have not visited there or who have only spent brief periods in the capital city, Asmara. Yet many of these people hang large photographs of Asmara or wall-maps of Eritrea in their homes, as a reminder of what they actually may never have known. Maintaining this sense of Eritrean identity presents problems of priority. Refugees must adjust to Canada, yet for many 'real life' is in Eritrea. Dahya (1974:83) writes of a 'myth of return' whereby immigrants consider themselves transients rather than settlers. Such belief does not necessarily mean that they will in fact return but it helps them to endure hardships in Canada.

The idea of possible return pervades the exile community. The fact that Eritreans have struggled for three decades not just against Ethiopia, with its huge army, but also against both superpowers, and the belief that eventually Eritrea will win its independence gives many a sense of confidence that no matter how bad things may get in Canada, there is always the possibility of return at some point in the future. While this identification with Eritrea is reassuring, it prevents some, such as those who are fully involved in the voluntary associations, from pursuing academic and career goals in Canadian society.

External Constraints on Eritrean Identity

While several voluntary associations maintain and promote Eritrean identity, other factors, both external and internal, threaten it. In particular, a distinct Eritrean identity is not recognized by Canadian institutions. Eritreans are frustrated by Canada's reluctance to provide emergency food relief to Eritrea except through the Ethiopian government and its refusal to protest Ethiopian violations of international law. The failure to recognize a distinct Eritrean identity also has an impact upon provision of services in Canada. As have other ethnic communities, Eritrean voluntary associations have sought official support for some of the services they provide. When one of the organizations requested funding for its settlement and adaptation programmes, Canadian government officials rejected the application, stating that Eritreans should use services intended for all Africans. Such a response reveals a lack of sensitivity to the experience of Eritrean refugees. Eritreans are forced to use existing organizations for African immigrants but many are reluctant to do so because some staff are Ethiopian and they feel they will not be treated fairly:

You think I am going to use that place? I am an Eritrean and the Ethiopians working there will not help me.

One informant expressed anger at having to speak Amharic, perceived as the language of domination, to one such worker.

Why should I have to speak Amharic? It's not my language. That's why I left my home, so I wouldn't have to speak their language. They don't even speak English,

I speak better English than they do and I don't want to talk to them in Amharic. People who tell you to do this don't understand that it's like giving up your whole identity.

Even where informants did not express concerns about having to deal with Ethiopian staff about extremely sensitive matters such as sponsorship of relatives, many protested against their inclusion within a general category of Africans:

Why is there just one agency for all Africans? Is that realistic? We are not all the same.

Virtually all informants stated a preference for having services provided through an Eritrean organization. Some believe that there is no chance of government support for the programmes of the voluntary associations:

The government doesn't want to help us. We will have to do these things for ourselves.

Due to political differences, other Africans may deny the validity of Eritrea's independence while folk ascriptions and lack of knowledge among the general Canadian population make it difficult to retain Eritrean identity. To assert this identity, then, requires conscious determination and willingness to explain or defend Eritrean uniqueness. While self-ascription as Eritreans remains strong, it requires considerable effort to maintain this identity outside the group. Thus, there is considerable pressure for Eritreans to become 'Africans', 'Blacks' or 'Ethiopians'.

Internal Constraints on Eritrean Identity

Factors internal to the Eritrean community may also affect identity maintenance. The degree to which a distinct Eritrean identity is stressed may be determined in varying extent by age, past personal experiences and the circumstances in which individuals left their homes. For those who have been personally involved in the military conflict or who have been persecuted or tortured because of being Eritreans, this identity will likely remain extremely significant. Those who have left in less desperate circumstances may have a different sense of that identity. Social mobility may mean that some members of the group do not remain associated with others, although this does not seem to have occurred among the first generation. Children may refuse to learn or speak Eritrean languages and identify with the broader society, although the phenomenon of ethnic rediscovery in successive generations has been noted in other cases and may be expected among Eritreans as well.

Some other factors, such as regional and religious affiliation, which might be expected to act against the maintenance of a unified Eritrean identity exist but do not seem to be of primary significance. Although regional affiliations contributed to violent oppositions in the past, there are conscious attempts among Eritrean refugees to minimize these differences, just as in Eritrea itself

the EPLF has made a concerted effort to overcome such divisions and to create a new corporate Eritrean identity. For example, individuals meeting for the first time generally avoid direct mention of regional origins and even after a period of years, the topic may not have been openly discussed. Two individuals who have been close friends for several years told me that they had never asked one another about their origins. This does not mean that those origins would not have been made apparent in more subtle ways. In general, people avoid such discussions; as one person said:

It is a taboo to discuss such things, not really a taboo but people don't like it. They will feel uncomfortable if you want to talk about that. They will talk to you because they know you but they don't like it.

EPLF cultural shows typically attempt to give equal prominence to all ethnic groups, but some individuals have expressed a fear of Tigrinya predominance. Others state their ambivalence in different terms, drawing distinctions based not only on regional differences but on different visions of independent Eritrea:

All these people are from Asmara, we call them 'Asmarenos'. They have an idea of what Eritrea will be, they want it to be just like this with big roads, big buildings. That's not what I want to see in Eritrea. They aren't in touch with the people in the country. They think they're better just because their grandfather, maybe their father, went to the city. They don't know the real Eritrea. They don't know the people. That kind of development isn't needed in Eritrea. How are they going to pay for those things? Are people fighting just so the educated ones can have an easy life?

Both Isajiw (1979) and Herberg (1989) stress that religion is as important in defining ethnicity as is national origin. As with regional origins, a person's religious background will generally be apparent to other Eritreans. In some cases, this is seen as a fundamental part of identity. One Christian informant suggested that, because of its long history in the region, his religion shapes Eritrean identity and that Christian values characterize even the non-religious or Muslims. This apparent paradox was explained by an assertion that these individuals have Christian ancestors who were forced to convert to Islam some generations ago but retained their Christian identity. Just as the reluctance to discuss regional origins may reveal continuing ambivalence about past conflicts, so such assertions may indicate the existence of sectarian chauvinism; it would be incorrect to assume that all past divisions have been overcome. However, such assertions seem rare and, as with regional origin, the overt expression of religious affiliation usually is not stressed in defining Eritrean identity. Whatever personal beliefs may exist, there is little open exhibition of religious behaviour beyond the display of symbols in the home. There is a definite, conscious determination to ignore regional and religious differences and to construct a pan-ethnic Eritrean identity. Individuals associated with all political factions have expressed a desire that Eritreans should be united.

Structural Constraints and Ethnic Identity

In Canada, Eritrean refugees are a marginal group within a minority. Historically, Blacks have been few in Canada, less than one per cent of the population before 1960, and only formed a sizeable population since 1980 (Herberg 1989:74-79). Numerous studies point out the continued existence of structural racism in Canadian society. The experience of Eritrean refugees in Canada is affected by such conditions, but in a unique way. Categorized as Black, there are significant cultural and political differences which act to maintain a separate Eritrean identity which is not subsumed in a more general category.

As noted, however, there are both external and internal constraints on the persistence of a distinct Eritrean identity in the Canadian context. Viewed from the perspective of some scholars, this identity would appear to be quite fragile. Herberg (1989:93) lists seven factors influencing ethnic group cohesion and identity: size of membership, territorial concentration, language retention, residential concentration, religious monopoly, endogamy, and institutional completeness. In terms of these criteria, potential for continuation of a separate Eritrean identity appears low. The community numbers several thousand, small in comparison to other ethnic groups in Canada. There are some residential 'pockets' but no Eritrean neighbourhoods. Language retention is a concern of several informants. The Tigrinya-language school is not well-attended. Similarly, a considerable part of the community does not use the existing church. The community is quite new but endogamy will probably continue as one of its features for some time. Despite the fact that there were few Eritrean women here until recently, hardly any of the men married women of other ethnic backgrounds. Women, too, infrequently marry out of the Eritrean community. Institutions are so far limited to the voluntary associations, church and restaurants. However, the possibility of maintaining a distinct Eritrean identity in the context of exile should not be dismissed. Particularly for individuals of the first generation, this sense of identity remains strong. The activity of voluntary associations which play the most consciously active role in terms of conserving, promoting and elaborating Eritrean identity may be crucial for survival of Eritrean identity in terms of group behaviour. Although Herberg acknowledges the important role played by voluntary organizations in promoting a strong sense of identity, his criteria overlook the political dimensions of ethnic identity. In the case of Eritrean refugees, this sense of identity will be profoundly influenced by political and military events in the Horn of Africa.

Ethnicity and class can overlap (Hannerz 1974). To an extent, Eritrean identity in Canada is a phenomenon shaped by urban intellectuals who take active roles in the voluntary associations. 'Assimilationist' theorists suggest that education and occupational differentiation will lead to the decreased salience of ethnicity (Schuti and Seleshi 1981). However, an urban educated class may strongly promote ethnic identity (Hale 1971). Among Eritrean refugees, there is a concerted, institutionalized effort by intellectuals to reconstruct Eritrean

history and maintain a sense of distinct identity. Although numerous tensions still exist within the community, the organizers of the voluntary organizations in particular have made concerted efforts to heal the wounds of past divisions. Despite factors which act against its persistence, this sense of Eritrean identity is a strong motivating factor among the community in general, and the voluntary organizations may be the chief means of propagating it.

Eritrean Voluntary Associations

Vallee, Schwartz and Darknell (1957) discuss processes of assimilation and differentiation, which they suggest may occur simultaneously as ethnic groups become more like a dominant group or more different from one another. Kallen (1982) suggests three spheres of assimilation. Structural integration refers to participation in basic formal organizations and institutions of the larger society, such as education and economy. Cultural integration refers to participation in general culture, and personal integration refers to participation in the activities of other groups, for example, intermarriage. As with other immigrant groups, most assimilation of Eritreans occurs at the structural level, in the workplace, educational institutions and so on. Personal integration is more limited.

Ethnic identification is most likely among older individuals and those associated with voluntary associations (Hoyt and Babchuk 1981). Participation in such associations can create increased self-esteem, political involvement and less alienation. Voluntary associations generally command more personal commitment than do those in which activities are done for pay, and involvement in voluntary associations contributes to individual happiness, satisfaction and mental health, counteracting feelings of isolation (Smith 1972). Voluntary associations play such a role in the Eritrean community and are widespread among Eritrean exiles. In Toronto, there are at least ten Eritrean voluntary groups, distinguished by membership and function. Some groups reflect a broad political division based on past events in Eritrea, but there is a conscious effort to repair the rift and to unify the expatriate community. Voluntary associations in Toronto have links with similar groups in other Canadian cities and are part of a network of Eritrean associations in North America, Europe and the Middle East. As one informant stated: 'If you get two Eritreans together they'll form an organization'.

There are degrees of commitment, as in other communities. The core of the organization is formed by the altruistic volunteer, the individual most willing to subordinate personal material benefits to the service ideal (Smith 1972). A few individuals virtually dedicate their lives to the organizations. At one Toronto office shared by several associations, about twenty individuals come in after their regular jobs on a daily basis to do work related to the activities of the groups. Most participants are less dedicated and mix altruism with concern for their personal lives and careers. Nevertheless, almost every evening the office is crowded with people who come to learn the latest news, to watch

videos from Eritrea or to socialize and listen to Eritrean music. Thus, space shared by the organizations also serves as a social centre for the community.

Eritrean voluntary associations have been formed in Canada to meet several needs. Most critical is provision of humanitarian aid to Eritrea. The Eritrean Relief Association in Canada (ERAC) was established in Toronto in 1979 by Eritrean expatriates in order to provide such assistance. ERAC is engaged in lobbying the Canadian government, promoting development education among the general public and seeking support for projects in emergency relief, agricultural rehabilitation, health care and education. ERAC works with other Canadian non-governmental organizations, such as OXFAM and Development and Peace, and belongs to the Canadian Council for International Co-operation and Partnership Africa Canada. Projects are implemented by ERAC's counterpart in Eritrea, which has played a 'central role . . . crucial for the effective delivery of aid' (Brodhead 1986:876). By 1990 ERAC had established eleven branch offices across Canada, each of which is responsible for its own operating costs and is expected to support relief efforts to Eritrea. Until 1989, most activity was centred in Toronto but with the departure of the Co-ordinator to establish a national office in Ottawa, other branches have become more active. ERAC was the first Eritrean association to be established in Canada and assisted the growth of the other associations by providing them with office space. Unlike the other voluntary organizations, ERAC is not staffed solely by Eritrean expatriates but includes Canadians. Thus it is not a purely 'ethnic' organization.

ERAC shares its office with several other voluntary associations. This includes the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn). NUEWmn meets biweekly and holds periodic fund-raising events but the office does not serve as a daily meeting place for women as it does for men. A few women participate in the other organizations but the office and the voluntary organizations are staffed by men. Both cultural and economic factors have ensured that an Eritrean identity among women has evolved in a different social space. Indeed, the matter of 'an Eritrean identity' is particularly complex for women, as traditionally this has relegated them to a subservient status. The nationalist movement promotes the emancipation of women but many women still find themselves facing criticism for not fulfilling traditional expectations. Women's participation in the voluntary organizations is also constrained by the fact that many who are mothers must also work outside the home so that time for such activities is extremely limited.

Another significant organization is the Research and Information Centre on Eritrea (RICE). RICE is part of an international network formerly based in Rome and now established in the liberated zones of Eritrea, where it carries out primary research. RICE sponsors conferences and produces a large number of publications in various languages, and the Toronto office acts as a distribution centre for these. RICE also maintains a library and encourages research on a variety of topics. There has been little opportunity for Eritreans in Toronto to do such research, but some Tigrinya poetry written by refugees

has been published by RICE. Internationally, RICE has been very active in the production of a counter-discourse to that of Greater Ethiopia. A number of Eritrean academics have devoted themselves to the recovery of an Eritrean history which they feel has been obscured and distorted by scholarship which has accepted Ethiopian versions of the past.

Other groups sharing space include the professional associations, youth group and cultural troupe. The voluntary associations solicit funds and support for famine victims from among Eritreans in Canada as well as from official funding sources. The voluntary associations also play a less dramatic function by arranging social events for the community, 'Eritrean Nights', at which traditional music is played and food is served. Humanitarian and social aspects combine when 'Eritrean Night' serves as a fund-raiser. The events are well-attended and are held on a regular basis, at least monthly and sometimes weekly. The level of organization and support for the voluntary organizations is impressive, a fact recognized even by those who reject a distinct Eritrean identity. For example, one Amhara informant who expressed his hope for a 'united Ethiopia' (i.e., one including Eritrea) stated:

The Eritreans are more organized than anyone. You don't have to agree with them but they may win because they are good in their organization. It's the same here. They are more organized than any other group. Whenever they have a meeting or a party everyone goes. They are very effective. Everyone should learn from them.

Voluntary Associations and Identity

The voluntary associations play a central role in drawing the community together and maintaining the sense of a distinct Eritrean identity in Toronto. Similar findings are noted in Chrisman's (1981) study of voluntary associations among Danish-Americans in San Francisco and Kwong's (1984) discussion of voluntary associations among Chinese-Canadians in Winnipeg.

Eritrean voluntary associations not only unify the community in Toronto but link Eritreans across Canada and internationally. The voluntary associations are a principal mechanism of maintaining group identity through constant contact centred on relief work, annual meetings of branch offices, visits by the national co-ordinator to branches and so on. The voluntary associations encourage Eritreans living across Canada to support those affected by war and famine. They also organize group visits to other communities, cultural troupes travel to other cities for guest performances, soccer teams go to the US for tournaments and so on. There is a large annual meeting of Eritreans from across North America in Washington DC, as well as a cultural festival in Bologna every two years. Cultural shows, literary contests, sports and special foods stimulate and attract participants and serve as ethnic markers. Generally, there may be more emphasis on aesthetic/cultural patterns during ethnic resurgence (De Vos 1975:15). Most refugees are from urban centres but decorate their homes with traditional handicrafts from the rural areas. In exile, many Eritrean refugees express appreciation and preference for

traditional music. However, as one informant said, 'most of these people wouldn't have listened to cultural music at home'. Thus, in the experience of exile, some individuals reclaim a traditional Eritrean identity. For others, particularly the urban elite and those born outside Eritrea, however, this 'traditional' identity is one which they had not actually experienced in Eritrea. Some of the songs they listen to at cultural events are performed in languages they do not speak and may be quite foreign to them. For example, two informants may identify a particular song as being from different ethnic groups. Obviously, this does not imply that the Eritrean identity of these individuals is therefore 'false'; instead, it points to the conscious decision to assume and to participate in a created national identity. This is an individual decision which is facilitated by the activities of the voluntary organizations.

The voluntary associations offer both affective and instrumental benefits. Participation offers positive reinforcement because it offers an opportunity to contribute towards alleviation of the tragic situation in Eritrea and dispels feelings of having abandoned those in desperate circumstances. Involvement in the associations also allows people to maintain bonds of personal friendship and provides a setting for predictable social relationships and positive interaction due to shared values, beliefs and interests; these relationships offer both a sense of familiarity and more permanence than other ties formed in the urban context (Chrisman 1981:267).

Instrumental benefits are also important, particularly for recent arrivals in Canada. The voluntary associations provide a variety of services on an informal basis. These include orientation, assistance with accommodation, employment, translation and interpretation, transportation and counselling for personal problems. Recently, one of the voluntary associations began to assist individuals in sponsoring immigrants. Considering the turbulent situation underlying the Eritrean refugee experience, the voluntary associations in Toronto also play an important role in acting as a sort of psychological safety-net, providing a supportive environment for newcomers.

Not only the voluntary associations but ethnic institutions and businesses also provide a basis for maintaining ethnic identity. Breton (1964) considers institutional completeness as fundamental to continued ethnic identity. Participation in ethnic institutions and patronage of ethnic businesses and services can create 'relative encapsulation and reduce the potentialities for interpersonal relations across the ethnic boundaries' (Dahya 1974:94). There is often a perceived obligation to support such ethnic institutions as an expression of loyalty and this support reminds participants of their 'shared past, their cultural characteristics, their motives for migration, their low social status in the wider host society and their separate identity' (ibid.) Thus, ethnic institutions are shaped by the double boundary of internal and external imperatives.

Although the Eritrean community in Toronto is not large enough to support a full array of parallel institutions, some essential services are provided through the voluntary associations. A Tigrinya-language school opened in 1988 and in 1989 an Eritrean church was established. Eritrean restaurants

operate in Toronto and Ottawa and provide opportunities for social interaction in a distinctly ethnic setting.

Conclusions

The Eritrean case is an interesting example of the development and persistence of an ethnic identity against prolonged and violent opposition. Despite the existence of a number of internal and external constraints on the maintenance of a distinct Eritrean identity, Eritrean refugees in Canada do promote a sense of such an identity in the face of both ignorance and hostility and resist efforts to dissolve this identity in a number of broader classifications. The maintenance of such an identity has profound implications for the experience of refugees in a host country. While the decision to maintain or reassume Eritrean identity is a personal one and some individuals will choose to reject this and select other available identities, the voluntary associations serve as means of publicly expressing this identity and of channelling this expression into actions. Thus, the voluntary organizations act as the most significant force for maintaining identity. While considerable energy goes into such efforts, benefits result for the community in terms of the provision of services and a sense of psychological security. Because of the complex historical background to the Eritrean case, many Eritrean refugees are reluctant to use existing services designed for Africans in general. Therefore, the voluntary associations will likely continue for some time as the primary channel of such services and be the main force in shaping the community.

Because the Eritrean community is new in Canada, at this point only tentative remarks are appropriate about its future and the maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity in this context. The fact that the Eritrean community is new in Canada also presents a unique opportunity for studies which seek to examine the course of settlement and adaptation of refugees and immigrants over time and generations. Some degree of acculturation for Eritreans will definitely occur and it will be most interesting to see what future studies reveal about the development of Eritrean identity in exile.

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