Transnational governance and the centralization of state power in Eritrea and exile

Tricia M. Redeker Hepner

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Abstract

During the Eritrean war of independence from Ethiopia (1961–91) the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front developed institutionalized transnational strategies that linked dispersed refugees and exiles to the nationalist movement in the Horn of Africa. Upon independence, these institutions and strategies were maintained for purposes of nation-state building. This article shows how state-directed transnationalism and deterriorialized patterns of governance have contributed to the centralization of state power in Eritrea and the development of civil society outside the country. Ethnographic and historical analysis of state and civil society institutions highlights how transnationalism enables new forms of political and social action while facilitating state power and repression, including human rights abuses, warfare and militarism. Moreover, it is suggested that the Eritrean state seeks to control transnational institutions in order to retain sovereignty and reject foreign, neo-liberal interventions associated with globalization.

Keywords: Africa; transnationalism; governance; civil society; nationalism; human rights.

Introduction

Eritrean exiles in the Middle East, North America, Europe and other African countries have been important actors in the nationalist movement and post-independence project for over fifty years. Agitation in the 1940s and 1950s among students and exiled nationalist leaders, refugee flows into Sudan beginning in the 1960s and the ongoing migration of urbanized elites to cities abroad, all contributed to the transnationalization of the independence struggle. While the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) pioneered links between exiles and

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the nationalist movement in the 1960s, it was the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) that later dominated the transnational and national environments (Hepner 2003, 2005).

Throughout the 1970s, EPLF propagated itself as a socio-political institution among Eritreans abroad, absorbing exiles into chapters of the front and its mass organizations to channel and regulate their participation in the revolution (Hepner 2004, 2005). This transnational social field (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Glick Schiller 1999, 2005) was part of EPLF's evolution as a state-like entity in Eritrea, where the front established hegemony through extending nationalist ideology and administration, and waging a bloody civil war with the rival ELF. In 1991, EPLF freed Eritrea from Ethiopian rule, and today governs Eritrea as a single party regime, the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

While the transnational social field helped sustain Eritrea from revolution to statehood, it was also shaped by violent power struggles deeply rooted in history and nationalism. Outmigrations due to the war with Ethiopia (1961–91) and the ELF-EPLF civil war (1972–81) forced over half a million people to flee the region as refugees or prevented them from returning permanently. Migrations have continued into the present, and today the diaspora comprises approximately one-quarter to one-third of Eritrea's total estimated population.[1] This diaspora and its links to Eritrea are united by nationalism in general but divided by it in particular. While Eritrea and exile are bound by certain shared commitments, the state's intervention in all aspects of social and political life exacerbates conflict at home and abroad. Fifteen years after independence, the impacts of Eritrean nationalism on transnationalism, and vice versa, remain salient.

The state's centralized power at home and abroad has depended on its ability to replicate its institutional presence locally and transnationally. Although the aim of EPLF, and now PFDJ, has been to entrench its nationalist agenda and consolidate its power over the political, economic and cultural spheres, this has encouraged fragmentation within Eritrea and exile as pre-existing and emergent political and social institutions are eroded or destroyed (see Tronvoll 1998a; Connell 2005). In their place, the state materializes seemingly everywhere at once, appearing in the guise of development projects and national service policies, state-approved non-governmental organizations, handpicked religious leaders, holiday parties and fundraisers abroad, and party members who record the activities of compatriots. In controlling its citizens locally and transnationally, the state works to isolate Eritrea from external political, economic or cultural influences while at the same time exploiting its own global reach. Thus, Eritrea today appears a bundle of paradoxes: aggressively territorial, obsessed

with sovereignty, highly centralized and devoutly nationalistic, as well as deterritorialized, transnational, institutionally diverse and nationally fragmented.

But are these contrasts really paradoxical? Current anthropological thinking suggests that the diversification and spatial diffusion of state institutions and 'governmentalities' (Ong 1999) is common under contemporary globalization and transnationalism, and even centralized powers may inhere in multiple bodies and actors, blurring distinctions between public and private, state and society, national and international. This may produce considerable contradictions, but does not diminish the importance of states, sovereignty or national identity materially or symbolically (e.g. Ong 1999; Gledhill 2000; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Trouillot 2001; Greenhouse, Mertz and Warren 2002; Aretxaga 2003; Eckert, Dafinger and Behrends 2003; Louie 2003).[2] The Eritrean state is a highly centralized, nationalist, authoritarian project that has obliterated civil society and rebuffed foreign interventions, while also establishing itself as a transnational entity with a global institutional reach. Hence, it seems a relevant and challenging case study for the anthropology of transnationalism and the state. Two phenomena I will explore in this essay are especially noteworthy.

First, the Eritrean state has replicated its governance institutions transnationally since the days of the independence war not to democratize society or enhance political participation across borders but rather to consolidate and centralize powers in the party-state. In this way, the deterritorialized characteristics developed during the revolution enhance territorial nationalism and authoritarianism. Through specific policies and political and social institutions like embassies and consulates, PFDJ party chapters (formerly EPLF), associations of women and youth/students and *mahber koms* (community associations), the state exerts authority over dispersed citizens. Where the state encounters organizations or alliances it neither created nor endorsed, it defines them as 'anti-Eritrean' and seeks to co-opt or destroy them (Hepner 2005; Woldemikael 2005). Second, although Eritrean state institutions have facilitated some forms of exile participation in ways similar to other transnational nation-states (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Itzigsohn 2000; Levitt 2001; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003; Louie 2003), its particular transnational character is antithetical to internationalization and the development of local civil society.[3] The Eritrean state utilizes its transnational capacities not to expand sociopolitical participation and rights or to enable foreign/global economic interventions, but rather to limit, control and repress them (see al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a, 2001b; Hepner 2003; Conrad 2005; Hepner and Conrad 2005; Woldemikael 2005).[4]

The present article examines how the Eritrean state utilizes the transnational social field for centralization while impeding its efficacy as a source of power sharing, democratization and socio-economic change in Eritrean society itself. I explore how the Eritrean party-state, as a transnational administrative body that surveils, regulates and coerces its people living abroad, deploys patterns of governance that are at once deterritorialized and yet intensely focused on territorial goals. As authoritarian state institutions increasingly dominate local and exile society, and as human rights abuses become prevalent, exile organizations have begun mounting social and political resistance and help construct a transnational civil society or public sphere to challenge this arrangement (Hepner 2003, 2004; see also Guyer 1994; Fermé 1999; Kaldor 1999; Bernal 2004). Meanwhile, the party-state stifles these impulses, viewing them as threats to the definitions of sovereignty, national security, economic development and cultural authenticity on which its power partly rests. Definitions, it must be added, that reinforce the modernist state's claims to legitimacy *and* legitimize its use of violence at home and abroad. Through an analysis of the Eritrean case, I suggest that transnationalism is a multifaceted and contradictory phenomenon that enables new forms of political and social action while facilitating state power and repression, including human rights abuses, warfare and militarism (see al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a, 2001b; al-Ali and Koser 2002; Brysk 2002; Hepner 2004, 2005). Further, by controlling transnational flows, the Eritrean state protects its boundaries against 'imperialist' interventions associated with globalization and the neo-liberal order (see Glick Schiller 2005).

This analysis is based on qualitative historical and ethnographic research carried out in Eritrea and exile communities in the US from August 2000 to February 2002 as doctoral fieldwork. Earlier periods of exploratory fieldwork in 1998 and 1999 also contributed to the research design and findings. Data were derived and analysed from archival sources in English and Tigrinya, participant observation and approximately 100 structured interviews. Ongoing research and advocacy in the human rights arena, including structured interviews conducted face to face or via e-mail with Eritreans in the US, Europe and South Africa and participation in over seventy asylum cases, also informs the present analysis.

Nationalist ends by transnational means

Born of a 1993 national referendum in which 99.8 per cent of its population voted in favour of independence, Eritrea is Africa's newest nation-state and perhaps the only one to make the postcolonial transition during the era of 'the global turn' (Hedetoft 2003). But it

also boasts more dubious distinctions as party to one of Africa's longest and bloodiest wars and an especially high refugee-producing region, together with Ethiopia (see Kibreab 1985, 1987). Eritrea's nation- and state-building process was thus from the outset situated within at least two important contexts. First were the lasting legacies of war: the displacement or exile of approximately one-third of the population, widespread violence and political instability, and aggravated ecological conditions like famine and drought. Second was the manner in which international modernist and global impulses (see Donham 1999, 2001) shaped state, society and nationalist ideology throughout the independence war (Hepner 2003, 2004, 2005; see also Bernal 2004; Dorman 2005). As this article illustrates, the EPLF's modernist nationalism and revolutionary independence war exploited the realities of forced migration, geographic dispersal, intensifying travel and communications, and other markers of globalization in ways that culminated in a distinctively transnational nation-state.

That global and transnational processes have been instrumental in Eritrea's emergence and postcolonial trajectory for decades is significant when viewed in light of both anthropological debates and the defensive posture adopted by the Eritrean state today. First, in contrast to claims that globalization and transnationalism were eroding the nation-state and associated features like national identity and citizenship (Soysal 1994; Kearney 1995; Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Ong 1999), scholars now acknowledge that states and their constituent elements have adapted to, and even exploited, these realities for national(ist) purposes (for example, al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a, 2001b; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Hepner 2003; Levitt and De La Dehesa 2003; Bernal 2004; Louie 2003). In Eritrea's case, the EPLF's ability to reproduce its institutions transnationally helped midwife the birth of the modern, postcolonial nation-state by channelling the economic and political vitality of exiles to the warfront (see Hepner 2005). Rather than withering away, states have been either reconfigured or actively created in ways that permit unanticipated forms of power, governance and political, cultural and economic mobilization. Concomitantly, national identities and territories remain tenacious, perhaps *because* of their transnational dimensions. It is the latter observation which helps us understand how Eritrea could be both the product of transnational processes and also obsessed with controlling them.

Understanding this dynamic requires revisiting Eritrea's history of 'territorial transnationalism'. At one time the northernmost reach of the Ethiopian empire, Eritrea's borders and identity largely coincide with its colonization by Italy in 1890. Partitioned from Ethiopia to the south and Sudan to the north and west, Eritrea became the site of pre-World War II Italian social and economic policies, including fascist

and segregationist experiments in the latter colonial years (Negash and Gebre 1986; Negash 1987; Murtaza 1998; Barrera 2003). In 1941 Italy lost its colonies, and Eritrea was ceded to the British as a military protectorate until 1952, when the United Nations returned Eritrea to Ethiopia. Under this mandate, the northern Red Sea province was to remain an autonomous federated unit under the Ethiopian monarchy. However, the experiment failed within a decade (Iyob 1995; Negash 1997). Elite elements loyal to the crown manipulated fragile political relationships to the detriment of regional autonomy (Ellingson 1986; Marcus 1994; Negash 1997), while increasing nationalist sentiment and widespread discontent with Ethiopian policies wrought violence throughout the country (Ammar 1997; Killion 1997; Murtaza 1998). In 1960 the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) formed an armed rebel movement largely concentrated in the Muslim-dominated western lowlands, and in 1961 Emperor Haile Selassie I annexed Eritrea in an effort to reabsorb the region into Ethiopia. By the early 1960s refugee flows from western Eritrea were already entering Sudan, establishing what would later become a permanent, if changing, exile population (Kibreab 1985, 1987, 2005).

In 1970 a new force emerged in the struggle for independence, which later came to be known as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). Formed by breakaway factions of the ELF, the EPLF claimed to better reflect Eritrea's diversity and argued that Eritrea could ill-afford a nationalist movement marred by the clan, ethnic, religious, regional and gender divisions attributed to the ELF (Connell 1997; Pool 2001). Rather, these identities and loyalties should be synthesized within a common national identity. The EPLF propagated its nationalist orientation through widespread campaigns to mobilize, modernize and homogenize Eritrean society, largely through the mass organization of civilians where new socio-political ideas and roles were imparted. The EPLF also developed and disseminated a particular perspective on Eritrea's distant and colonial past, its domination by Ethiopia and the simultaneous interference and isolation by the rest of the world that was instrumental to the struggle and still shapes contemporary politics and social relations (see Dorman 2005; Reid 2005).

Coinciding with the growth of nationalism was the inception of exile communities as locations for mobilization. In the 1960s and early 1970s, students from the Christian-dominated highlands and urban areas began migrating to Europe and North America for higher education and employment, while many Muslims gravitated towards Cairo, the Middle East and Gulf States. From there they mobilized resources and fresh fighters for the ELF and EPLF. The EPLF in particular recognized the value of exiles to the liberation struggle, and soon fostered its institutions abroad nearly as carefully as in the parts

of Eritrea it periodically wrested from Ethiopian control (Hepner 2004). It is important to recognize that these were not independent from EPLF, but rather formed a dimension of the front itself.

By the mid-1970s, the EPLF had established an office in Rome where it posted cadres to coordinate the activities of Eritreans in North America and Europe. It was during this period that EPLF assumed both its state-like and transnational structure in Eritrea and abroad (Pool 2001; Hepner 2003, 2004, 2005). By 1980, EPLF was comprised not only of the central political body and its military apparatus, but also of coordinated mass associations of civilians who lived both in Eritrea and across the world. These groups supported and implemented the front's policies and ideology, submitted to its authority and channelled considerable financial and political support to the movement. The consistent reproduction of EPLF's homogenizing or synthesizing nationalism (Medina 1997), which subsumed and neutralized all sub-national identities based on region, religion, ethnicity and clan or kinship, was instrumental in defining the boundaries of national subjectivity and identifying the nation exclusively with EPLF (Hepner 2003, 2004; Dorman 2005). Concomitantly, Maoist democratic centralism formed the core of EPLF's political praxis, sharply curtailing any organized political dissent at home or abroad.[5] Reports of violence against dissidents (including execution) were not readily discussed, while the more subtle threat of exclusion from the nation and state exerted pressure. Accused of treachery and collaboration with Ethiopia, groups that did not submit to EPLF were discredited and isolated within the independence struggle (see Hepner 2003, 2004, 2005; Conrad 2005; Woldemikael 2005). This had special implications for exiles formerly affiliated with ELF and contributed to tenacious opposition within the nationalist struggle following ELF's 1981 expulsion from Eritrea.

By the time the EPLF liberated Eritrea from Ethiopian rule in May 1991, the transnational social field was acknowledged as a key part of the struggle's success and Eritrean society as a whole, which by definition entailed a deterritorialized sector. Assiduously managed citizens-in-exile were organized into EPLF institutions like the Association of Eritrean Students in North America, the Association of Eritrean Women in North America, Eritreans for Liberation in Europe, the Eritrean Relief Association, the Research and Information Center on Eritrea and chapters of EPLF. These 'civilian wings' raised awareness and funds for EPLF's war effort and helped reproduce nationalism abroad. By the time independence arrived, EPLF had exclusive control over exiles' activities, identities and finances, to the marginalization of ELF and others. Eritrea thus entered the world system of nation-states as a deterritorialized entity with strong territorial fixations, governed by a centralized body whose power

and nationalist hegemony was created and concentrated by the transnationalization of governance institutions.

Transnationalism and the paranoid state

While EPLF diffused its institutions transnationally during the independence struggle, this did not broaden spaces for political participation. Rather, the approach to governing both local and exile populations remained focused on consolidating and centralizing state power by confining all participatory spaces under party-state administration. After independence this pattern matured. The functions of global chapters of EPLF were reconfigured into the work of PFDJ party chapters, while more sophisticated matters of state management were taken up by embassies and consulates. The former mass organizations, functioning as government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs, sought to retain loyal subjects abroad by developing agendas and programmes aimed at re-integrating exiles on state-defined terms. A new division within the Consular Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, set up in 1999, linked Eritrean embassies and consulates abroad, local community associations in exile (ideally organized and managed by PFDJ chapters) and the state. And finally, the Citizenship Proclamation of 1992, one of the first policies enacted after liberation, defined any person born to one Eritrean parent anywhere in the world as a citizen of Eritrea, with the requisite rights and obligations.

At a glance, then, both pre- and post-independence Eritrea appear similar to other transnational nation-states and societies that have adopted formal and informal mechanisms to incorporate diaspora populations into the political, economic and cultural life of their countries of origin (for example, Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Fuglerud 1999; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999, 2001; Laguerre 1998; al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a, 2001b; Levitt 2001; al-Ali and Koser 2002; Louie 2003; Levitt and De La Dehesa 2003). Eritrea initially seemed an exciting example, as the nation-state was literally forged over three decades of transnational activity between guerrilla fighters, local people, exiles and refugees (Compton 1998; Hepner 2004). But, unlike cases where transnational policies and practices have expanded socio-political and economic participation, Eritrean transnationalism has forged a heavily circumscribed field in which one participates on the state's terms or risks retribution. State centralization via transnational strategies *requires* that Eritreans participate economically and politically if they wish to remain Eritrean at all: a phenomenon al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001a) describe as 'enforced transnationalism'.

Ideologically, the deliberate conflation between the PFDJ party, the nation, and the state – cultivated since the revolutionary days when EPLF identified itself with 'the people' – has made legitimate (and

safe) resistance all but impossible within Eritrea proper (see Pool 2001; Connell 2005; Conrad 2005; Dorman 2005). The 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia precipitated a national emergency of sufficient magnitude that the party-state's 2001 violent crackdown on students, journalists, government reformers, minority religious groups and all other 'dissidents', well-documented in humanitarian literature, could be justified as essential to national security.[6] The crisis also allowed the PFDJ to cancel elections indefinitely, close all independent presses, ban the formation of political parties, shut down non-approved religious bodies, forbid the gathering of groups larger than seven in public or private and arrest and detain without due process thousands of people who fit the broad profile of a dissident. These included eleven members of the PFDJ Central Committee who criticized the President in a controversial open letter, journalists, religious leaders and laypeople, conscientious objectors, military resisters, returned asylum seekers and others.

The PFDJ also intensified its economic protectionism, forcing out or rebuffing private investors, curtailing or expelling NGOs and other development agencies (including USAID), failing to provide sufficient policy or implementation information to lenders and donors and otherwise proceeding with the *etatification* of economic enterprise. This was justified by nationalist imperatives, including self-reliant ethics and the need to protect a fragile society from the exploitation and pollution of foreign or global influences, including neo-liberal economic agendas. While Eritrea's approach is interesting for its resistance to dominant external trends, the internal reality shows a paranoid leviathan state that bullies a fearful citizenry as it expands its power in the name of securing national sovereignty, rights and boundaries against Northern/Western imperialism, globalization and the Ethiopian Other.

Transnationalism has also complicated the state's efforts, however. While essential to the political-economic survival of the nation-state, exiles also represent the wolves of imperialism clad in sheep's clothing. While EPLF and now PFDJ dominate the transnational social field institutionally, there is also much unevenness and unpredictability. As the state becomes more centralized and as human rights violations escalate, increasing numbers grow disillusioned and restive. Exiles have spearheaded numerous political and civic organizations that oppose the state's institutional power and policies, especially since 2001. Former members of the PFDJ, including ex-officials who have fled abroad, have created opposition parties and coalitions that are working towards effecting regime change (Plaut 2002; Schroeder 2004). Organizations advocating human and civil rights (including religious freedom) have not only joined forces with one another across vast distances (facilitated, of course, by the Internet) and staged

coordinated actions like worldwide public demonstrations, but have begun building linkages with international organizations within and across countries of settlement and with local groups that provide rights-based legal assistance or advice. One needs only to visit popular Eritrean websites or attend an exile event to glimpse this network and its highly contested character.

Such new organizations are often founded by or partly comprised of refugees and asylum seekers who have left Eritrea since the recent deterioration of political, social and economic conditions. Many draw upon their own experiences of abuse and repression, oftentimes in compulsory military and National Service, to argue that the promise of independence has been broken by the centralizing party-state. Their concrete goals remain centred on a combination of political transition to a more democratic system, the growth of independent and autonomous forums for public and private action, the expansion of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to society by the unimplemented Constitution and lasting peace with Ethiopia, Sudan and other neighbours. These new movements exploit the same transnational social field established during the independence struggle under EPLF administration, drawing portions of their membership away from the organizations that are linked to the state's institutional power (such as mass associations, *mahber koms* and the PFDJ party). But they have also sought to open up new spaces within that field to create a public sphere (see Bernal 2004, 2005) or transnational civil society (Hepner 2003, 2004) that has heretofore been absent from Eritrean society and political culture. Opening up such spaces has required groups to start building linkages with non-Eritrean bodies and discourses, rendering them vulnerable to marginalization within official nationalist circles as the state and its loyal supporters charge them with representing the same foreign agendas that threaten Eritrean security and sovereignty. In this way, these new movements are redefining the transnational social field from that which circulates only among Eritreans, to that which connects Eritrea to the wider world.

Exiles and the competing social and political organizations they are developing may challenge the party-state's domination of the transnational social field, but thus far have not penetrated Eritrea effectively. The state's presence is even more totalizing in Eritrea, and its threats or use of violence, including imprisonment without trial, torture and extrajudicial execution, prevent these organizations from making local inroads.[7] Indeed, it would seem that the state's intensifying repressiveness and violence are linked to the proliferation of independent, autonomous institutions and discourses within the transnational social field over the past five to seven years. This repression, in turn, generates new support for anti-state movements in exile, as young urbanites in particular flee the country to join compatriots abroad (see

Kibreab 2005). Herein lies the generational dimension of transnational activity, albeit with a twist. Whereas scholars have begun examining the extent to which transnational linkages endure and change beyond first-generation migrants (Levitt and Waters 2002), the generational fault line in Eritrea is embedded in the timeline of the nationalist movement. It is along the fissure known as *Warsay-Yeka'alo,* or the EPLF-PFDJ guerrilla generation versus those coming of age post-independence, where transnational activity has begun to pivot. Fresh from the realities of independent Eritrea, a layer of new refugees are engaging with the transnational state and social field as they seek to redefine and reorient the national present and future, while foreign-raised children of earlier migrants largely disengage from a socio-political milieu to which they cannot relate (see Andall 2002; Conrad 2003, 2005). In the following section, I will evaluate two examples of recent transnational engagement that illustrate both these 'generational' shifts as well as the way in which the state utilizes its institutional capacities to combat socio-political autonomy or resistance transnationally. But first, it is useful to examine more closely the dark side of post-independence Eritrean transnationalism with special attention to the role of state institutions.

As noted earlier, the structure of the transnational Eritrean state and its modes of governance are underpinned by institutions that include local chapters of the PFDJ party; community associations, or *mahber koms*; chapters of the former mass associations of women and students/youth, now known as unions; and embassies and consulates. While the PFDJ chapters, embassies and consulates are clearly 'of the state', the unions and community associations have attempted to convince people of their autonomy. Overall, they have failed in doing so, and hence remain embattled, embittered spaces inhabited largely by loyalists or those who feign compliance to avoid trouble. These characteristics have firm roots in the history of the transnational independence struggle and are ethnographically documented elsewhere (see Hepner 2003, 2005; Conrad 2005; see also Woldemikael 2005).

Despite such conflict, these institutions nonetheless fulfil their primary functions as mechanisms for socio-political control, ideological reproduction and financial support for the state. During my fieldwork in 2000, many PFDJ party members campaigned within their exile communities to challenge or intimidate dissidents, re-educate or capture the minds of impressionable people and otherwise police the parameters of acceptable national identity, discourse and practice (including posting signs at a local haunt in Tigrinya charging newly formed ELF opposition chapters with links to Osama bin Laden). Additional evidence from Germany and South Africa indicates that party members also act as the eyes and ears of the regime, maintaining watchlists, photographing or videotaping dissidents at protests or in

opposition meetings and providing to the embassy or consulate their findings and evidence (see Mekonnen and Abraha 2004; Conrad 2005).

The embassies and consulates, for their part, maintain and convey to the central state apparatus whatever information PFDJ party members, or their own staff, can provide about local goings-on. They also carry out other typical and not-so-typical tasks like issuing passports, visas and the *menenet*, or identity card; expediting various official transactions; and facilitating communication between citizens-in-exile and the state. They also oversee the collection of taxes and other voluntary financial contributions. The Eritrean government levies a 2 per cent flat tax on the income of every adult Eritrean living abroad, and periodically calls for other donations, such as the 'dollar a day' campaign during the border war with Ethiopia. While tax collection is not enforced in any direct way, failure to pay one's taxes results in bureaucratic problems: passports or other documents are denied and certain rights associated with nationality are blocked, such as claiming land in an ancestral village, building or purchasing a home or engaging in official or business transactions in Eritrea. Similarly, while other financial contributions are considered voluntary, people are prevented from carrying out official business with the state if records reveal insufficient contributions. For example, a young woman resettled in the US as a refugee in the early 1980s told me in a state of tearful fury in 2000 that, although she paid her taxes annually, the government would not issue the paperwork allowing her to adopt her deceased sister's children because she had not donated enough during the border war. It is this kind of 'enforced transnationalism' (al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a) that lends an ominous ring to the following comment made in a 2001 interview I conducted with a Consular Affairs official in Asmara:

Our plan is to give [exiles] very efficient services in terms of facilitating the things they do here . . . . And abroad, we have a plan towards raising communities, you know, they have meetings and we go visit them, like we did before independence, and seek donations. And we have leaders, people who represent the communities and take care of consular affairs. If we have consular affairs representatives there, then there must be a community affairs representative here, to take care of all the communities. That's what we're planning now, especially in the US and European countries . . . to organize communities, help form communities abroad. For those [PFDJ members] already there [in the US or Europe], it would give them some projects to do, such as counting people, gathering data about who they are, monitoring the day to day conditions of our people.

We now turn to two specific examples to further illustrate how the state works to consolidate its power transnationally by manipulating institutions and strategies of governance against exiles' attempts to locate spaces of autonomy and resistance.

Case studies in coercion: religious minorities and rights-based initiatives

How does the state act at home and abroad to limit, repress or destroy interventions it deems threatening, while reasserting its centralized power through transnational institutions? How can we understand deteriorating conditions within Eritrea, including the alarming crisis of human and civil rights and new refugee flows, as linked to Eritrea's transnational – and nationalist – past and present? Two ethnographic examples help us begin answering these questions. They are the proliferation of new charismatic Christian churches in Eritrea and exile and the emergence of a movement launched by postgraduate students focused on popular rights-based initiatives and non-violent struggle as sources of political change. While there are many movements emerging among Eritrean exiles globally, including opposition parties and coalitions of civic and rights-based organizations, the one considered here is the Eritrean Movement for Democratic and Human Rights (EMDHR). EMDHR is a self-defined non-partisan civil society movement founded in 2003 by tertiary-level students sent by the Eritrean government to study in South Africa, and now includes other Eritreans living there.

The state's response to new churches and rights-based initiatives like EMDHR highlights several features of Eritrean transnationalism. These cases reveal that the transnational social field so carefully managed by EPLF and later PFDJ has diversified in relationship with changing conditions at home and especially the intensifying political repression and economic decline since the Ethio-Eritrean border war. As spaces for autonomous movements or dissenting views disappear or fail to materialize in Eritrea proper, exiles struggle to establish and maintain them elsewhere. Their appearance in the Eritrean transnational arena and the resources available abroad, including access to international movements and technology, enable them articulate agendas and resist the state in ways impossible at home. While earlier generations of exiles focus on political opposition and interpret many issues through the revolutionary-era lens of ELF vs. EPLF, the rights-based initiatives are influenced by new-wave exiles who have left Eritrea or refused to return due to post-independence repression. As in past attempts to establish transnational autonomy from EPLF (Hepner 2005), their engagements with the state reveal how the latter utilizes transnational institutions to intimidate its citizens and shore up power. Thus, while new efforts at autonomy, resistance and

intervention are significant, the enduring strength of Eritrean transnational governance points up genuine concerns about the efficacy of transnational civil society institutions *vis-à-vis* a transnational authoritarian state.

New religious groups began appearing in Eritrea well before independence in 1991–3. Among the first were Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, both of whom were criticized by EPLF and, in the case of the former, actively punished for their 'counter-revolutionary' beliefs and practices during the liberation war. After independence, these religions and other charismatic and non-denominational congregations began growing, making born-again Christianity a more notable feature on the Eritrean religious landscape. Their popularity among urbanized young people in particular captured the government's attention, which had since the days of the EPLF maintained a secularist position, especially among guerrilla fighters. At first responding to the 'disruptive' presence of proselytism and Bible study among military trainees, the authorities soon began intervening in the new churches in an attempt to stem their growth.[8]

Within exile communities new Christian congregations also emerged as alternatives to the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which is one of the four officially recognized religious bodies and largely viewed as the most 'authentic' religious expression aside from Islam. The relatively rapid growth of new Christian churches in Eritrea proper seems to have occurred at the same time or even earlier, and perhaps on a greater scale, than it did abroad. Moreover, while new Christian churches almost always defined themselves as independent, transnational links certainly obtained between specific exile congregations and others at home. And, perhaps more importantly, these new churches began forging links, largely informal and loose, with counterparts in the West and in other parts of the world, making them conduits for international influences. For example, a Pentecostal congregation I studied in Illinois maintained linkages with one of the largest new churches in Eritrea, which in turn cultivated relationships with similar congregations in Kenya, Canada and the US (a branch also exists in Ethiopia). During my visits to this large church in Asmara, guest preachers from non-Eritrean congregations led the worship, and interviews with one of its leading pastors (now languishing in prison) confirmed the church's independent yet transnational character.

I have explored elsewhere the salience of religion, and charismatic Christianity in particular, for shaping Eritrean national identity and challenging the transnational state (Hepner 2003). Drawing on data collected among new churches, their leaders and congregants in Eritrea, as well as in exile congregations, I argued that these new movements represent a genuine challenge to state power and nationalist hegemony. For many people I interviewed, religious identity and

practice provided them with a sphere of activity that was relatively autonomous from the state and volatile nationalist politics, and helped them cope with the collective suffering they had endured. Briefly, it seemed that Eritrea proper and its transnational social field were allowing for new freedoms and the expansion of a public sphere. This was partly the promise of independence under the EPLF's leadership, despite Eritrea's long record of violent and oppressive regimes.

In 2002, however, the PFDJ began forcibly closing these new churches in Eritrea and arresting their leaders and followers. The state claimed that new churches had failed to register with the government under 1995 regulatory provisions, although church leaders had reported to me in interviews in 2001 that they knew of the requirements, had attempted to comply and repeatedly encountered bureaucratic blocks. Part of the registration process entailed indicating the property and assets owned by the church, the names and addresses of its leaders and all foreign sources of funding. Such records were given to the state by most churches, including those that were rejected.

As reports of the church closures began appearing in the news and from international human rights organizations, I noted more and more names of people I knew appearing on lists of the detained. Within a few months, the state had shut down all religious entities that fell outside the officially recognized Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant Lutheran or Muslim establishments. From 2002 to 2006, authorities arrested over 1,700 people, including some Muslims and Orthodox who were suspected of connections with charismatic or fundamentalist movements within the established faiths. The state also banned religious study, worship or discussion among military trainees, and forbade even informal gatherings of believers in private homes.[9] I received numerous requests for help from attorneys representing Eritreans seeking asylum on the basis of religious persecution, which included beatings, torture and confinement inside metal shipping containers.

While churches in exile could not be treated like those at home, the closures and violence showed exiles that their religious identities and organizations were considered illegitimate by the state because of their 'foreign' origins and linkages. The closures and arrests in Eritrea shattered unsanctioned religious practice and whatever contribution it was making to incipient civil society. The repression also destroyed the new churches' capacity to diversify the transnational social field, establish autonomous spaces, and develop connections beyond the national polity. Exiles who continued worshiping in their new congregations were alerted by the violence at home that their religious identities, beliefs and organizations were forbidden. Thus, the measures the state took *vis-à-vis* new churches in Eritrea deliberately blocked emergent connections between transnational religious bodies

and identities and new religious groups at home. While the state did not utilize its own transnational institutions here, it did deploy its centralized power and use violence to stop the growth of an unwanted and threatening element within the wider transnational social field. This is significant in light of Glick Schiller's (2005) recent argument that the global spread of religious fundamentalism represents, among other things, a form of contemporary imperialism. Certainly, the state viewed new religions and their global or transnational character in precisely these terms.

The Eritrean Movement for Democratic and Human Rights (EMDHR) provides a different but equally interesting example. EMDHR was founded in South Africa and exploits the greater freedom and resources available there to develop its agenda. Unlike the churches, EMDHR could not live within present-day Eritrea, even briefly. However, it shares with the churches the broad goal of an autonomous public sphere across Eritrea and exile, and is similarly positioned within a transnational social field dominated by state power and institutions. It has therefore been subject to repeated attempts to debilitate and punish its members, particularly through the Eritrean embassy in South Africa. The objective of the state, here as in the past, is the obliteration of autonomous organizations and their potential to challenge state power and, ultimately, effect socio-political change in Eritrea. Here, the state actively deployed its deterritorialized institutional capacities to combat a movement based far beyond Eritrea's borders.

Headquartered in Pretoria, EMDHR was founded by postgraduate students sent to study in South African universities as part of the government-planned Eritrean Human Resources Development Programme, funded by the World Bank in the amount of US$53 million. Coordinated by the University of Asmara (itself an acknowledged government institution), the project sent more than 600 mostly young men to various South African universities for training in specialized fields. The objective of the programme was to train professionals to fill 'identified strategic gaps in Eritrea ... includ[ing] the positions of civil services, teacher training institutions, and teaching posts in the University of Asmara' (Mekonnen and Abraha 2004, p. 3; see also World Bank 1998). The students signed an agreement that upon the completion of their studies they would return, and departed for South Africa in 2000 and 2001.

At the time of their departure, the devastating human and economic impacts of the border war with Ethiopia were becoming apparent and the internal political situation in Eritrea had deteriorated. As conditions worsened and the students in South Africa witnessed from afar the closure of the private presses (with which some of the students had worked), the arrest of journalists, government officials

and other putative dissidents, they initiated sometimes contentious discussion among themselves via email (archived on EMDHR's website, www.emdhr.org). They were also concerned with the imprisonment and subsequent escape to Ethiopia and Sweden of Semere Kesete, the leader of an independent student union at the University of Asmara that was crushed by the government in the summer of 2001 following Semere's public criticism of compulsory labour for students. Shortly thereafter, the entire university student body was rounded up and sent to labour camps after many assembled in a peaceful and spontaneous gathering outside the courthouse where Semere was held.

The students in South Africa shared the conviction of their peers in Asmara that the government had violated the human and civil rights of citizens, and young people in particular, through 'never-ending campaign programmes under the guise of national service, student summer programmes and national sovereignty' (EMDHR n.d.) These programmes are part and parcel of the *Warsay-Yeka'alo* project through which the government is seeking, on the one hand, to reproduce the discipline and self-sacrifice of the guerrilla fighter era among the post-independence generation and on the other, to institute a centralized economic plan implemented exclusively by the state and reliant on the compulsory labour of youth in National Service and/or the military. EMDHR contends that such a programme relies on forceful conscription and has resulted in underpaid employment in fields unrelated to students' interests and skills, caused social unrest and economic hardship throughout Eritrea, and destroyed 'the nation's social, cultural, economic and religious values and institutions' (EMDHR n.d.). The students in South Africa further argued that as a result of state intervention and domination, Eritrean citizens were:

> entirely missing their civic structure and are turned into a mass of isolated individuals unable to work together to achieve freedom, to speak in confidence to each other, or even to do much of anything at their own initiative. Indeed, due to the excessive repressive campaign programmes, Eritrean youth are simply facing suffering without purpose and a future without hope. (EMDHR n.d.).

The students also suspected that the government had rushed into implementation of the South Africa-World Bank programme in order to 'get rid of young professionals who could potentially develop into strong resistance inside the country' (EMDHR n.d.)

Once in South Africa, however, the students began articulating these grievances in an organized way, especially following the 2001 crackdown in Eritrea. At first just posting letters or articles to the Internet, the students soon attracted the attention of the PFDJ, which monitors

online activity and maintains its own websites. Hurriedly posting an ambassador to South Africa, the PFDJ revoked management of the World Bank-funded scholarship programme from an NGO (run by an Eritrean exile) and placed it with the embassy. In an effort to silence the growing critique of state policies among the students, the embassy 'arbitrarily terminated the scholarships of the students who overtly demonstrated their discontent for the injustices in Eritrea' (EMDHR n.d.). The ambassador also sent letters to numerous students who had not yet completed their programmes stating that their stipends had been discontinued and they must return to Eritrea (Mekonnen and Abraha 2004, p. 8). Students who did return, including those who completed their studies, were reportedly not employed as expected but rather redeployed into underpaid National Service programmes or the military.

Meetings between the students and government officials in South Africa were subsequently convened at various times, similar to those convened throughout Eritrea and exile by EPLF and PFDJ officials to 'clarify' important issues. Students who voiced critical questions or comments in these venues were publicly intimidated by the officials and later had their stipends, health insurance and tuition pulled. In eight separate cases students had their passports revoked. The revocation of passports by the embassy was followed by the initiation of deportation proceedings by South African authorities, who were notified by the embassy that the students in question had violated their contractual obligations with the PFDJ and were now illegal residents of the country. In one meeting held in Durban in July 2002, attended by President Isayas Afwerki, a student whose father had been detained in Eritrea without due process asked when political prisoners would be released or charged in a court of law. The President responded, 'Whenever we feel like doing so.' He then drew on the US detention centre in Guantánamo Bay as an example of how governments can and should detain indefinitely prisoners whom they believe to be threats to national security (Mekonnen and Abraha 2004, p. 18). The President also added that, because of the new labour conditions associated with globalization, employment opportunities intended for the students could easily be filled with people imported from Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines and elsewhere (Mekonnen and Abraha 2004, p. 18).

A core of student leaders responded to these developments by intensifying their organization of a broader movement to challenge the government's actions concretely. They continued posting on-line and established connections with other Eritrean exile groups, international NGOs and local advocacy organizations. They constructed petitions detailing the embassy's actions, which they distributed to South African political officials and non-governmental organizations. Two

postgraduate students sent to South Africa, who had already served the Eritrean government respectively as a judge in the central regional court (Asmara area, *zoba ma'ekel*) and president of the coastal regional court (Massawa area, *zoba semenawi qeyih bahri*), conducted a legal analysis of the initial contract signed between the students and the government and determined it was 'defective and unconscionable' due to the lack of informed consent and the fact that exit visas were withheld until the contract was signed (Mekonnen and Abraha 2004). They also further analysed the embassy's behaviour and determined that the latter's pressure on the South African Department of Home Affairs to initiate deportation proceedings against some students violated several provisions in the South African Bill of Rights and other statutory rights guaranteed in South African law. Several other students filed for asylum in South Africa due to their experiences with the embassy after arriving there, arguing that they feared imprisonment and torture for their political opinions if they returned to Eritrea. Under the guidance of the two former judges, the students began identifying proper legal avenues in South Africa to address the state's injustices. Most importantly, they formed EMDHR in December 2003 as the avenue through which to address their experiences systematically and to challenge PFDJ through the mobilization of international human rights instruments and pluralistic legal regimes within the transnational social field. Consistent with past patterns of delegitimation and marginalization, the state responded to EMDHR's rights-based approach by calling them 'mercenaries of the Government of Ethiopia, ethnic regionalists, Christian extremists, and terrorists and criminals' (EMDHR n.d.).

EMDHR's Constitution was adopted in October 2004 and defines its mandate as a non-partisan, independent civic organization dedicated to the promotion and defence of human and democratic rights for all Eritrean citizens inside and outside Eritrea (EMDHR 2004, p. 5). In particular, the organization opposes the PFDJ's ruling of Eritrea without a constitution and its denial of basic rights and freedoms to its citizens. It also opposes compulsory National Service and the *Warsay-Yeka'alo* campaign, viewing them as 'a pretext for the mistreatment and abuse of youth, women, and the underage' (EMDHR 2004, p. 2).

While founded in exile, EMDHR is the outcome of mounting unrest among sectors of Eritrean society in recent years and represents a contrasting modernist vision to that of the revolutionary guerrilla generation. As the state has shut down or prevented autonomy, dissent and transnational linkages with non-Eritrean entities, these have emerged in places to which Eritreans have fled. While EMDHR is known to some Eritreans within the country, especially family members or friends of students in South Africa, urban youth and the minority of

people who access the Internet, there is very little possibility that under the current climate of repression any related movement might arise in Eritrea proper. The current stalemate between Eritrea and Ethiopia also guarantees the quashing of any rights-based initiatives as the national security issue remains paramount.

The ability of the Eritrean state to deploy repressive mechanisms of governance locally and transnationally, and to sever undesirable transnational linkages between Eritrea and exile, raises serious questions about the degree to which autonomous bodies formed abroad may effect concrete change within Eritrea. However, the growth and maturation of exile movements, especially those like EMDHR that exploit features of transnationalism and globalization to transcend narrow nationalist goals, likewise raises serious questions about the degree to which the state will continue dominating the transnational social field in the future.

Conclusions

In this article I have shown how the Eritrean state uses its transnational institutions of governance, first established during the war of independence and revolution, to control its citizenry and consolidate its centralized powers at home and abroad. Through surveillance, ideological manipulation, violence and intimidation, since the 1970s the party-state has drawn on the realities of exile and features of contemporary globalization to achieve its territorial, nationalist goals. Indeed, the question of nationalism and its associated obsessions like sovereignty and security cannot be underestimated for their role in the Eritrean dilemma. An exploration of how nationalist state ends and state repression work through transnational means helps us to understand how contemporary mechanisms of governance can be deterritorialized and yet centralized and territorially focused.

While nationalism remains key to this process, a richer comprehension of contemporary Eritrean state-society relations and patterns of power requires moving beyond 'methodological nationalism', defined as an approach which analytically equates society with the nation-state, and leads many social scientists to conflate national interests with the goals of research (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Glick Schiller 2005, p. 440). To date, nationalist assumptions have obscured our understanding of Eritrea as many researchers ignore the transnational dimensions of its historical experience and contemporary strategies of governance. They have also created obstacles for Eritreans struggling to effect change through transnational movements who internalize state-produced myths of isolation and self-reliance. Instead, scholars and actors alike may take cues from political anthropologists and approach nation, state, society, governance and power as

comprised of multiple and often deterritorialized institutions, actors, roles and discourses. In the case of Eritrea, it is helpful first to view the authoritarian state not as a reified monolith, but as comprised of entities operating within a transnational social field where power and territorial nationalism are consolidated and challenged from above and below. Scholars have recently made strides in theorizing how states and governance are changing as a result of globalization, and have directed our attention especially towards the tensions and contradictions that arise as a result. For Eritrea, this tension is visible in the way the state rebuffs many aspects of globalization while exploiting others, chiefly through its own transnational institutions and nationalist ideology. However, important regional and thematic variations in these tensions and contradictions remain under-explored. This is especially true for sub-Saharan Africa, rendered increasingly 'superfluous' to a global economy that has back-burnered 'developmentalist dreams' in favour of profitable and integrated (if not integrating) markets in Europe, Asia and the Americas (Trouillot 2001. p. 129). As African states have grown more irrelevant and hence more vulnerable in the global political-economy, many leaders have articulated and pursued their own 'developmentalist dreams' through the nightmare of totalizing control, xenophobic nationalisms and internal competition for increasingly scare and inequitably distributed resources. The global environment and its enabling of new kinds of political and economic relations have not led to an expansion of wealth or of freedom for most African nations; in fact, quite the opposite (Ferguson 2006). That environment thus becomes another backdrop against which powerful elites manoeuvre locally and transnationally, almost undetected, to achieve their often less-than-admirable ends. Moreover, in this global environment we must emphasize the role of the US's policies in the so-called War on Terror, which have supplied ample justification for brutality and rights abuses in many parts of the world under the guise of threats to national security.

Without arguing for exceptionalism, it is nonetheless vital to address African postcolonial specificities when analysing broader patterns of power and governance in the global era. In particular, this entails attention to the actual processes of state and citizen-subject formation in Africa (Mamdani 1996) and the importance of competing 'vernacular modernisms', like revolution, nationalism and the nation-state itself (see Donham 1999, 2001), which are themselves 'always already transnationally constructed' (Gledhill pers. comm.). For, however transnational the 'new state' or its governance institutions might be, the Eritrean case highlights how these are suspended within a hierarchy that is historically determined and resistant to the diffusion of power. Bound (and gagged) by a narrow but persistent nationalism deeply embedded in Eritrea's past, central to its collective

identity and foundational to state policies, globalization and transnationalism still remain captive to the modernism of centralized and violent state power. And, while examples of resistance can be found in the transnational social field, they may also reinforce state centralization through their fixation on the nation-state and sovereignty. Perhaps this may change as more linkages develop between Eritrean movements and global civil societies less beholden to national boundaries and imaginaries. For now, Eritrean nationalism reminds us that the state 'is first and foremost an exercise in legitimation' (Abrams 1988) and that transnational relations are intimately related to this legitimation (Glick Schiller 2005, p. 440). For activists, as for scholars, circumventing and challenging the state may thus require strategies that move beyond methodological nationalism to free transnational strategies – and theories – from its logic.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. No official census and different modes of migration make estimates difficult. Total population figures hover around 3.8 to 4 million, and estimates for the diaspora vary. The government claims 530,000 exiles worldwide (Fesshatzion 2005), based on the 1993 referendum. Including recent outmigrants and Eritreans born abroad would perhaps double that figure (see Conrad 2005, p. 215, citing Hadera 2004).

2. This builds on earlier anthropological thinking that identified the modern state as 'not just a set of institutions staffed by bureaucrats who serve the public interest. [But] also … cultural and political forms, representations, discourse, practices and activities, and specific technologies and organizations of power that, taken together, help to define public interest, establish meaning, and define and naturalize available social identities' (Nagengast 1994, p. 116; see also Abrams 1988; Herzfeld 1997; Scott 1998).

3. Field data from 2000–1 suggested that state efforts to incorporate exiles were more prevalent prior to the border war. These included recruitment of skilled personnel to ministries and development projects, programmes integrating local and exile youth and some opportunities for business ventures.

4.   The limiting of transnational intervention includes restrictions on NGOs, multilateral lending agencies and international rights groups (see Hayman 2003).

5.   EPLF nationalism has been explored by historians, social scientists and journalists (Markakis 1987, 1988; Cliffe and Davidson 1988; Wilson 1991; Pateman 1993; Sorenson 1993; Woldemikael 1993; Iyob 1995; Connell 1997, 2001; Tronvoll 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Pool 1998, 2001; Hepner 2003, 2004, 2005; Dorman 2005; Wrong 2005). Less attention has been paid to different constructions of nationalism across ELF and EPLF and the local and transnational impacts (Woldemikael 1993; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001; Pool 2001; Hepner 2003, 2004).

6.   For example, Amnesty International, AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005 'Eritrea: Religious Persecution'; AI Index: AFR 64/003/2004 'Eritrea: "You Have No Right to Ask" – Government resists scrutiny on human rights'; AI Index: AFR 64/008/2002 'Eritrea: Arbitrary detentions of government critics and journalists'; Connell (2005) for Freedom House.

7.   Evidence for abuses, including execution, is found in the testimonies of asylum seekers. Case material could not be included in this article under conditions stipulated by The Code of Federal Regulations, 8 C.F.R. Sec. 1208.6(a).

8.   Protestants represent about 2 per cent of all Eritreans. Half belong to the Lutheran church and half to more than thirty-six evangelical and Pentecostal churches (Amnesty International, 'Eritrea: Religious Persecution', p. 3).

9.   Documentation of church closures and persecution of leaders and laypeople can be found in Amnesty International reports since 2002, including 'Eritrea: Religious Persecution' (AFR 64/013/2005), and US State Department International Religious Freedom Reports since 2002.

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