

PITFALLS OF NATIONALISM IN ERITREA

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Tekle M. Woldemikael

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Introduction

Every year on 24 May, Eritreans celebrate Independence Day with great fanfare and revelry.¹ This is a celebration of the day the nation became a reality, a thirty years of armed conflict with Ethiopia (1961–1991). On that day a nationalist guerrilla movement, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), took power, making Eritrea an independent country from Ethiopia. In 1994, EPLF's third congress was conducted in the town of Nakfa, wherein the guerrilla movement transformed itself into the only party in the country, renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and assumed absolute control of the state. Ever since then, nationalist leaders and the state-controlled single party have propagated a form of nationalism that is increasingly aimed at controlling the culturally plural Eritrean society, bringing it under the party's firm hegemonic control so that society can be reconstructed in ways the party leadership considers desirable.

This form of nationalism can be characterized as an integral nationalism (Alter 1994) with the aim of producing an integral state (Young 1994). It also has historical roots in the celebrated EPLF, which acted as a total institution (Goffman 1961) by controlling every aspect of the guerrilla fighters' lives during the nationalist war. The EPLF, and now the PFDJ, have aimed to make the public succumb to its unbridled hegemony and identify with the state totally. One of the mechanisms the state uses to accomplish social control has been through sponsoring, planning, directing, and orchestrating the 24 May Independence Day celebration.

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However, the joy participants feel in participating in nationalist holidays is a small reward in return for the enormous demands the Eritrean nationalist movement makes on the people. This article examines how the state manipulates the public to participate in 24 May Independence Day as a national holiday, and how and why the public participates in the state-organized celebrations. I argue that the 24 May celebration serves multiple ideological functions for the state and society. These include providing the state with a sense of broad popular support for its rule, thus allowing the government to believe in the ideological illusion that state and society live in seamless harmony, while at the same time providing the people (the *hafash*, or “masses”) with psychological release from the dire economic and political plight that characterizes contemporary life in Eritrea. This project of the state, however, will be “ultimately undermined and defeated by what Achille Mbembe aptly terms the ‘the historical capacity for indiscipline of society’” (Young 1994: 248). In the case of Eritrea, the unruliness of the “masses” has taken different forms, from internal self-criticism within the ruling party, to open disapproval of, and resistance to, the regime by Eritreans both at home and in the diaspora.

The Independence Day Celebration: 24 May 2005

In May 2005, the official and unofficial celebration of Independence Day had a carnival-like atmosphere. The celebration lasted for

over ten days, with each day devoted to special activities. Among these were speeches by the president, parades by uniformed men and women, singing by renowned performers, musical theater, students' dramatic plays, acrobatic performances, circuses, and cultural shows by representatives of all recognized ethnic groups in Eritrea. There was also continuous dancing and jubilation by the spectators. Sponsored by a government organization, the National Holidays Coordinating Committee (NHCC), these activities are set up to promote the celebrations and galvanize public participation in the festivities in order to reproduce indefinitely the experience of liberation in 1991.

One of the ten days of celebration, 23 May, was designated as that of the Independence Day Carnival Parade. During this day, the main avenues of Asmara were filled with people from different age groups, religions, and ethnicities, all dressed in different outfits, parading in the streets of the city, clapping and dancing and performing to music. Here is a description of event by Meron Abraha, a journalist for the government website, www.shaebia.org:

The parade open[ed with] a long procession with a marching band up at front [that] made its way through the Independence and Martyrs Avenues and reached Bahti Meskerem Square. ... Taking part in the parade were small children from the various kindergartens in the city, elementary as well as secondary school students, Sunday school students of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, members of the clergy in their unique attire, the followers of the Islamic faith, and representatives of all the district administrations of Asmara. ... There were also some cultural groups dressed in the clothes of the different ethnic groups, who portrayed the culture and traditions of their respective nationalities. There were also youngsters, dressed in the colors of the national flag, performing different acrobatic, aerobic and circus performances in the parade. The public expressed admiration: men clapping their hands and women ululating and sometimes dancing to the tune of the music around.

The carnivalesque atmosphere in Eritrea can be linked to what Achille Mbembe called the banality of power in postcolonial Africa. Mbembe wrote, "Ceremonies and festivities constitute the pre-eminent means by which the *commandement* speak and the way in which it dramatizes its magnificence and prodigality" (Mbembe 1992: 9). According to Mbembe, the banality of power includes the predictable, everyday routines in which power is exercised as well as the obscene, vulgar, and the grotesque aspects of life that are intrinsic to all forms of domination and power, and are the mechanisms of confirmation or deconstruction of the power structure (Mbembe 1992: 1–2). Mbembe was inspired by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on Medieval Carnival and focused especially on Bakhtin's analysis of laughter, comic composition, profanity, and parody. Mbembe centered his analysis of public spectacle on what he called the grotesque aspects of the body such as the mouth, the genitals, anus, and things related to the belly such as eating, drinking, and belching, and took them to express the banality of power in Africa. In the case of Eritrea, the banality of power takes the form of carnival as described by Bakhtin: there is a concentration of bodies of both leaders and followers into the public arena where they rub one another's shoulders in close proximity, where they enter into "a free and familiar contact," and where a new interrelationships between them may possibly be worked out (Bakhtin 1984: 123). Peter Biles, a BBC journalist who covered the 24 May 2003 celebration, described how different bodies, including the president of the country, were involved in a public display of the banality of power in Eritrea:

In carnival mood, tens of thousands of Eritreans partied into the early hours of Saturday to mark their country's 10th anniversary of independence. ... In the capital, Asmara, they thronged Liberation Avenue, the main street characterized by its palm trees and Italian-style cafes. ... As popular Eritrean songs blared from loudspeakers, Asmara's well-heeled young set danced and war veterans in wheelchairs were pushed by their relatives or friends. ... Shortly after midnight, Eritrea's president, Isaias Afewerki, appeared beneath an arch of flashing party lights. ... Although he was flanked by bodyguards, police and soldiers, the atmosphere was surprisingly relaxed. ... President Isaias, dressed in a blue safari suit and black sandals, set off to walk the entire length of Liberation Avenue.

He waved, often with both hands held aloft, while the crowds cleared the road to make way for him. ... People cheered loudly and whistled, and the police beat back groups of excited young men who tried to close in on the rear of the presidential procession. ... Few heads of state would have felt confident enough to have embarked upon such a public walk-about at night, but Eritrea has always been different. (2003)

However, behind the festivities and celebrations, we have to look at how the ruling party operates using different technologies of power (Foucault 1978). The government's celebrations are planned to manipulate the public to participate in the ceremonies and experience the madness and temporary euphoria that the festivities induce. Even more important is how these festivities are produced through technologies of power or biopower (1978: 140). By technology of power or biopower, Foucault meant the "numerous and diverse techniques of achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (1978: 140). The Eritrean state, through the various micropolitics of the state, uses technologies of power in an attempt to produce nationals who will obey, follow its programs, and respect its authority and disciplinary power. The Independence Day celebration is one of the mechanisms used by the party in its attempt to produce docile bodies, subjects who fit into the ruling party's image of nationhood.

The National Holidays Coordinating Committee (NHCC) planned the weeklong celebrations within Eritrea and around the world through its branches within the various Eritrean diaspora communities. A description of the plan

published in the government's shaebia.org website reads:

According to the National Holidays Coordinating Committee (NHCC), the week-long celebrations will include various programs highlighting the historic event: cultural shows at the Bahti Meskerem Square, cultural and musical performances in the main streets of Asmara, marching bands, dramas, photograph exhibitions, Independence Day carnival, community get-togethers and fireworks. Different sports activities including mass sport and Independence Day Marathon will also be carried out. So far, soccer matches, cycling as well as car and motorcycling competitions have already been conducted in connection with the Independence Day Celebrations. ...

The streets of Asmara have also been decorated with lights and flags, thereby creating a festive mood. Private businesses have also decorated their restaurants, shops, boutiques and the like. ... Similarly, Eritreans around the globe are making extensive preparations to celebrate the joyous occasion. Thus, Eritreans residing in different European and American cities will conduct various activities, including children's sport festival, cultural and artistic shows among different age groups from 21 to 28 May 2005. ... The activities that will take place in Washington and its environs would also feature similar progress. Walta Cultural Troupe, consisting of 11 popular singers, has already arrived in the US to give the event added splendor.

In 1991, the celebration of Liberation Day was a spontaneous act. Since then, it has become ritualized through the active sponsorship of the state. There have been 24 May celebrations every year since 1991, but after that year the government has sought to capitalize on the holidays and celebrations. The celebration of Eritrean independence might have remained a purely spontaneous and popular affair, one carried on without the intervention of the government, but we will never know this for certain. Taking advantage of popular responses in the early days of liberation, the celebration of 24 May has become a top down practice. Thus, although each annual celebration has had its unique aspects, the celebrations have become more formal and ritualized with the passage of time. For example, the independence celebrations of 1992 were more ritualized than those of 1991. The state organized the festivals, which consisted of marches, speeches, art shows, visits from foreign leaders, prayers in churches and mosques for the martyrs of the nationalist war, and dances and musical performances. Even more formal were the 24 May 1993 festivities. Although the referendum was conducted between 23 and 25 April of that year and Eritrea was officially declared a sovereign nation on 27 April, the government delayed declaring Eritrea formally independent for a month because it wanted to announce it on 24 May. Thus, it made the festivities of Independence Day coincide with the declaration of Eritrean independence. Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans in different towns and regions of the country, and Eritreans in exile, celebrated that day.

For the government of Eritrea this is a show of solidarity and support from the public. According to Eritrean traditions, support is shown when people attend one another's weddings, funerals, and other events; showing up to celebrate Independence Day also indicates to the government that the people are behind them, that they have not lost touch with their supporters. This sentiment was aptly expressed in the Independence Day Carnival of 21 May 2005 by Meron Abraha, when he stated, "Stressing the importance of conducting such a carnival, the organizers note that since 'freedom was attained by the people for the people,' the people were naturally involved in the carnival" (Meron Abraha 2005).

Thus, the public is manipulated into legitimizing the system in a highly planned and orchestrated manner. This involves declaring that day a national holiday, shutting down all the shops and workplaces, and sponsoring nationally famous singers and dancers who perform for the public for free. Everything comes to a standstill. In every town, village, and neighborhood, there are the PFDJ-run organizations that seek out talented individuals who might perform for the holiday. Once selected, they practice with others and prepare for the event. The leaders of neighborhood organizations are expected to encourage or pressure their communities to come out for the day. There are veiled threats of reprisals if a person refuses to participate. The only show in town is the government-sponsored celebration. During festival days, there is nothing to do except go to the celebrations, ceremonies, and parades. Performances are open to the public and they are done quite professionally. People are encouraged to join in and dance and participate. Celebratory speeches are given by the president. People who participate in the revelry are clearly in throes of joy, waving Eritrean flags; many are interviewed and their statements broadcast on the radio and television repeatedly. Overall, the experience seems to lead to some form of amnesia and forgiveness among the public. As Peter Biles (2003) wrote about the 23 May Parade, in which President Issayas walked among people publicly,

President Isaias' appearance was all the more unusual because his government has attracted strong criticism in the last two years and his opponents say he now heads a repressive regime that lacks any genuine popular support. ... However, there was no sign of that discontent as the residents of Asmara came out to celebrate the anniversary. ... In fact, they seemed eager to thank the man who for many years led the fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in their armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia. ... In a young nation such as Eritrea, the strong sense of nationalism, forged from 30 years of conflict, cannot be over-emphasised.²

The manipulation of diaspora Eritreans is more subtle. The hegemonic intent of the government and the party is hidden from the public. The best musicians and dancers are sent to entertain them. The public comes voluntarily to meet, socialize, relax, and

celebrate with other compatriots. They are often socially isolated and alienated from their host societies. In addition, they lack the independent organization necessary to pursue their communal concerns outside of the control of the Eritrean government. In the government-organized celebrations of independence, the diaspora public comes, dances to the music and songs, has a good time, and momentarily forgets it lives in diaspora.

But at the same time, through this participation, the dancing and revelry can serve to relieve the public's inner tensions and disappointment (Fanon 1963). Mbembe refers to such interactions as relations of "promiscuity" or "convivial" tension between the *commandement* and the target population, resulting in mutual "zombification," i.e., robbing each other of their vitality and leaving them weak (Mbembe 1992: 4–5; Richman 1992: 116). After the festivities, Eritrean people are left with the sense of solidarity with the ruling group, while the ruling group feels it has found a way of gaining back people's trust in its effectiveness and power. Of course, all this is illusory. Instead of zombification implying that people become something like the walking dead, the celebrants in Eritrea—rulers and ruled alike—are seized by temporary euphoria in which they forget all the failures, frustrations, and disappointments of life for that moment. It is also true that the local people are not alienated ethnically or culturally from the ruling class. The ruling class maintains kinship, friendship, or personal connections to the people, especially the most vocal and politically significant group in Eritrea, the Tigrinya speakers.

But it should be pointed out that these events themselves construct consent and to some extent forgiveness and forgetfulness. This is supported by Bakhtin's analysis of carnival: "Carnival is the place for working out a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*. ... People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free and familiar contact on the carnival square" (Bakhtin 1984: 123). It is also similar to the collective consciousness created by "ritual activity" and "mythological thought" that Durkheim wrote about in 1912 (1998). Durkheim wrote, "Collective consciousness ... has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and images which, once born, obey laws all their own" (1998: 91). The Eritrean public at home and abroad feels good when they attend and participate in these celebrations. There is plenty of food and revelry; one feels as on a drug, or possessed by some type of temporary insanity or madness. This is the moment the public lets its hair down; some of its inner tension and trauma is relieved and released. As Fanon pointed out in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), public dancing with such energy and emotion serves a therapeutic purpose. In Fanon's own terms, the people's release

takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed, and conjured away. The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits. ... Men and women come together at a given place ... fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic, in which by various means— shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing of the whole body backward—may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. (1963: 57)

When the participants are in the dance hall, moving their shoulders and heads and arms and legs to the rhythm of the drums and music and dance of the other, they enter into a trance-like state. Every worry and disappointment they have is temporarily forgotten and forgiven. Such amnesia leads to a "feel good" attitude, to a perhaps more forgiving outlook and a reduction in the despair and disappointment they feel towards the Eritrean leaders and government. Under such conditions, the public does not want to hear negative things about the government precisely because it cannot afford to do so. It wants something that will be soothing and comforting. The party and the government know that very well and provide the medium for it. So at the end of the day, the issues of human rights and other problems are pushed down to the subconscious level and the consciousness of the public seems positive towards the nation, the leaders, and the flag, and they feel hate and disdain for the detractors and those who are perceived as enemies of the nation. Such gross manipulation of sentiment functions to maintain the system, and allows the state to avoid answering critical questions about its policy and actions over the last few years.

Pitfalls of Nationalism

The May 2005 spectacle in Eritrea disguised the dire political and economic straits in which the nation found itself. All the celebrations took place while the human and civil rights of the local population were violated on a daily basis. The most surprising aspect of the May 2005 celebration was that it came amidst Eritrea's deepening economic and political crisis. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported in 2005,

Eritrea remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita GDP of about \$130 and a Human Development Index ranking of 156 out of 177 countries. More than half of the population lives on less than US\$1 per day and about one third lives in extreme poverty (i.e., less than 2,000 calories per day) (IMF 2005).

In 2005, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that Eritrea was in a critical economic situation and in need of external economic help due to four consecutive drought cycles and high level of malnutrition. "All six regions of Eritrea had malnutrition rates higher than 10 percent, and three of them, the rates were above 15 percent" (IRIN 2005). In addition, the Ethio-Eritrea border war of 1998–2000 had not been fully resolved; tensions and the possibility of another border war flaring up loomed large in the horizon. The war and the continuing tensions, endemic drought, and inadequate rainfall had put Eritreans on the verge of a major famine and grave danger. As though to defy the abject poverty and the looming famine, the government paraded its 250 imported new tractors that it hoped would enhance agricultural productivity and tackle famine in the future. Under the title "New Tractors to Boost Agricultural Production," the government website shaebia.org reported, "The Government of Eritrea has imported 250 new tractors in an effort to enhance agricultural production. The tractors were shown to the public on Thursday in a parade along the main avenues of Asmara and through the Bahti Meskerem Square, where a huge crowd gathered to watch a cultural show" (www.shaebia.org, 21 May 2005).

However, the Eritrean economy was then at its weakest point after fourteen years of independence. The government suffered a terrible shortage of foreign currency. According to the IMF, "Foreign reserves declined in 2003 to equivalent of about 2 weeks of imports" (IMF 2005). Every year, Eritrea's imports greatly exceed its exports. For example, in 2005, the estimated value of imports was \$676.5 million f.o.b. and of exports was \$33.58 million f.o.b. (i.e., a ratio of 20 to 1) (CIA World Fact Book 2006). In 2006, the estimated value of imports went up to \$701.8 million while the estimated value of exports went down \$17.65 million. The ratio of imports to exports was almost double of the year before, rising from 20 to 1 to a shocking high of about 40 to 1 (CIA World Fact Book 2007). Thus, the economic deficit of the country has been staggering. To mitigate the situation, the government has passed a policy regulating foreign currency, much of which comes into the country as remittances. According to economist Tekie Fessehatzion, "In no other African country are remittances as important to the national economy as in Eritrea, where remittances comprise slightly less than one-third (30 percent) of the GDP" (2005: 168). In addition remittances consisted of more than 26 percent of the per capita income of Eritreans in Eritrea in 2002. "As percentage of GDP, remittance flows exceeded net official development assistance to Eritrea for all years since 1993, with the exception of 1995 and 2002, which were years of extreme drought and food shortage. When combined with Official Development Assistance (ODA), remittances provide two third of Eritrea's GDP for the years 1995–2002" (Tekie Fessehatzion 2005: 169). It is alarming that the government of Eritrea relies so heavily on the Eritrean communities abroad. Because of the economic crisis, the government has passed regulations to control the flow of foreign currency, including cracking down on merchants and private investors who it claimed were responsible for the economic difficulties. With the single-party government, the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), taking full charge over all economic activities, the private sector has been practically stifled. Then, in a hasty attempt to weaken the merchants, the PFDJ opened fifty shops to sell groceries and food items in 2005 (Agence France-Presse 2005). In effect, the party has been acting as a private enterprise, monopolizing all investment.

Other forms of repression and control in the public sphere have also worsened. Severe religious repression has resulted in the targeting of evangelical and Pentecostal groups, especially in the past several years. Even the majority Orthodox Christian Church has not been spared. All private newspapers were banned in 2001 and numerous journalists have been arrested since then. Eleven senior government officials were arrested in 2001 and remain in prison without charge or due process. Young people have been required to serve in the military with no or little compensation. Most of them have been serving beyond the required time period, some of them for over ten years. Today, there are 200,000 soldiers in a nation of 4 million, i.e., one of every twenty Eritreans is a soldier.

The politics of self-reliance is another mechanism the state uses to control society. Various religious and other NGOs have been kept out of Eritrea, and the state used this method to consolidate its power and prevent outsiders from observing conditions in the country. NGOs have been weakened and largely serve the interest of the state, and are therefore unable to create a base outside governmental control. Religion has been a big factor in Eritrean politics, and the state has co-opted the old and existing religions in its zealous persecution of the new religions that threatened the established religions of Islam and Orthodoxy. With the established religions now under its control, the new regime denied any civic organizations that might emerge outside of its purview. The first victims of this were religious minorities, especially Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses.³ The conservative sides of the Orthodox, protestant, and Catholic churches, as well as Islam, have since submitted themselves to the control of the state.

What we are witnessing currently in Eritrea is the pitfalls of excessive nationalism of the kind that Frantz Fanon described. Fanon warned that once independence was achieved in the formerly colonized countries of the Third World, the national bourgeoisie that came to power would become the instrument of global capital, using its position to enrich itself and serve as a intermediary between capital and the ex-colony. Instead of being a champion for the liberty and freedom of the people, the bourgeois class identifies itself as the guardian of the nation's interests, and whatever

benefits it is also assumed to benefit the people. Fanon attributes this failure to the inability of the national bourgeois leaders to move beyond nationalism. He argued that the national bourgeoisie is incompetent, with limited capacity and ability, mired in class interest and self-interest, seeking only to perpetuate itself and to benefit from its position of power and its linkages with international powers and capital (Fanon 1963: 148–205). Using Fanon's insight as a point of departure, we can see that the Eritrean nationalist aspiration for greater liberty and freedom has been betrayed in the years since Eritrean independence. The nationalism that was to liberate the people has turned into a vehicle for their manipulation and domination.

Towards an Integral Nation-State

The new Eritrean state aims to establish absolute state power by bringing the whole society under the hegemony of the party, in order to transform and reshape that society in accordance with its own vision. The PFDJ has been trying to discipline the Eritrean population and create a mode of citizenship characterized by submission of individuality, culture, traditions, political aims, and human rights to the state's demands without resistance. It aims to produce civilians who are docile bodies, who can be transformed into malleable and more efficient agents of the state's nationalist dreams; in the words of Foucault, "[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (1979: 136). Under such a scheme, the whole society would be a huge organization working in harmony within a single administrative structure. The party aims to become a large-scale solidarity group, encompassing the entire population. The human and material cost of maintaining this enterprise would be confounding.

I suggest that the state's desired end product is an integral nation-state (Alters 1989; Young 1994), wherein the state and society are gelled into a seamless unity and where distinctions between state and society and nation would be erased. The state has not been completely successful and has not achieved its goal, partly because the party lacks the capacity to accomplish its vision, and because culturally pluralist societies often are not easily manipulated and controlled by totalizing nationalist efforts (Young 1994).

This hegemonic practice of the PFDJ has historical roots in its predecessor, the celebrated EPLF, which acted as a total institution controlling every aspect of social life. One can think of the guerrilla movement as a prison or cage—a cage of the Goffmanesque type, one that forms a "total institution." Erving Goffman stated that the total institution "may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (1961: xiii). It is an institution where all the aspects of the life of individuals under the institution are controlled and regulated by the authorities of the organization. The concept of total institution has been applied to prisons, mental hospitals, boarding schools, concentration camps, and boot camps (Goffman 1961) and may also be applied to the EPLF, a guerrilla movement. Initially the soldiers of the nationalist fronts were volunteers. The innovation of President Issayas Afeworki as a guerrilla leader and his group was the creation of a movement, the EPLF, from which members could not escape or leave. If you were a member of the EPLF, you were highly controlled in ways that led scholars like David Pool (2001) to view the front as a rational organization. However, EPLF's organization was always based on absolute domination over the individual members, who had no time for privacy and free movement (Pool 2001). These nationalist excesses were important in creating a nation called Eritrea.

After independence, the EPLF evolved into a dominant single party, the PFDJ, and sought to continue its policy of acting as a total institution, and to impose its definition of what the nation should be. In its 1994 National Charter, the PFDJ asks itself the following question: "If we are to succeed in achieving our objectives, what kind of organizational structure and organizational principles should the Front have?" It answers its own question in the following way:

The detailed answer to this question should be left to the constitution, but the basic ideas are as follows: ... Given the Front's extensive objectives and the structure of our society, ... given the absence of any positive experience of a multi-party system in the country, the Front, as during the liberation struggle period, should as much as possible be broad-based, embracing all patriotic Eritreans who have at heart the welfare of Eritrea and its people. ... At the same time, organizationally and procedurally, the Front must strive to attract and actively recruit all citizens who are interested in the unity, peace and prosperity of Eritrea, and want to become active in politics. Basically, the Front should be a reflection of the unity of the people of Eritrea, and the guarantor and promoter of such unity. The Front must be the center of political gravity in Eritrea guaranteeing peace and stability, promoting and strengthening nation-building, healthy democracy and political progress (PFDJ 1994).

As can be seen above, the PFDJ sees itself a movement/party/government, a trinity, one in three and three in one. It desires the public to succumb to its unbridled hegemony and identify with it totally. Thus, in the case of Eritrea, nationalism is not subtle and banal, manifesting itself in how the institution operates (Billig 1995). It is a "hot nationalism" (Billig 1995; Hutchinson 2005); it is "grotesque," à la Achille Mbembe. It requires centrally controlled public declarations of national loyalty and celebration. This

large-scale solidarity (Calhoun 1998) does not tolerate criticism or diversity of views. Even within the party, there has been a gradual purging of members who have dissented or questioned policies of the leader and the party.

Celebrations, holidays, and other activities are used to remind the public that there is a nation and its leader is to be identified with the nation.

The nation is objectified in the person of the nationalist leader, Issayas Afewerki, and in the army, the party, and the various government agencies. In public, the leader's ideas and policies are to be defended and considered as the statement of the nation, the views of the party are always correct, and the party represents the people. If a person of Eritrean origin is found to be in a conflict with Ethiopians or other nations, he or she is to be supported because he or she is Eritrean, regardless of the merit of the reason for the conflict. The state, the leader, the party are all representations of popular will (Gramsci 1971). Any critical statements against the policies, actions, and statements of government, the leader, and the officials are deemed as anti-Eritrean, and therefore, opposed to the nation. The body of the president is the human representation of the nation, the speech of the leader is the speech of the people, and the feelings of the president are the feelings of the nation, for he is devoted to the people, to the nation. He has the national interest at heart with no trace of personal interest. Even when he makes a mistake, he does so in the interest of the nation, for he is the nation and the nation is him. The same goes to the nationalist party that replaced the EPLF.

Recently, Issayas Afewerki has himself systematically replaced any person or individual who can challenge his power or authority with individuals who have little social base within the front or whose loyalty to him is unconditional. The patterns of consolidation and centralization of power in the person of Issayas is similar to many postindependence African and Third World countries. Dan Connell has referred to this as the move from collective leadership to individual dictatorship (2004). Instead of seeing it as a process of consolidation of power, Connell sees this as betrayal of the revolution, an interpretation with which I disagree. It has always been this way, except that now it is happening on a national scale in which Eritrea is an actor in the international stage, unlike the EPLF, which was an isolated and obscure nationalist movement.

The party, as a total institution, aims to construct an integral state. Crawford Young defines an integral state as "a design of perfected hegemony, whereby the state seeks to achieve unrestricted domination over civil society. Thus unfettered, the state is free to engage in rational pursuit of its design for the future and to amply reward the ruling class for its governance service" (Young 1994: 249). The mechanism for producing an integral state is integral nationalism. Integral nationalism is radical, extreme, militant, aggressive, and excessive. According to Alters, "integral nationalism casts off all ethical power, obligating and totally subordinating the individuals to one value alone, the nation" (Alters 1989: 20). The end product would be an integral state, where the state and society are gelled into seamless unity and distinctions between state and society and nation would be nonexistent. In Eritrea, the nation under the control of single party attempts to control the entire population and bring it under its tight control, reshaping them to be firm supporters and reorganizing society and culture in the vision of the party and the state.

Stuart Hall wrote about ethnicity as a cover story, as something different than its content, to show the variability and flexibility of the meaning of ethnicity (1989: 15). Craig Calhoun's (1998) insight that nationalism is a rhetorical or a discursive formation is similar: the terms *nation*, *race*, or *ethnicity* are used as cover stories for varied activities and practices of disparate groups, and in much the same way, nationalism is a cover story that can have different contents and programs within it. It can be an instrument for resistance against intolerable conditions, or it can be a cover for abusive and oppressive actions or programs. We can only judge nationalism by its practice (Brubaker 1996: 7). In Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice*, he writes that the structures as well the process of structuring are in reflexive interaction, giving structure and agency an interactive role in producing and reproducing social structures and practices, habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Nationalism can be both a structure and a structuring force (Brubaker 1996).

By embracing nationalism, nationalists succumb to the limitations of its structure and its structuring logic, habitus. So the logic of nationalism becomes the prison that does not allow people who used it as a vehicle to gain power to become its prisoners. Thus, national identity, like all forms of identity, becomes the cover story (Hall 1989) or the vehicle (Brubaker 1996) with logic of its own. Nationalism can also be used to claim arbitrary and undemocratic actions of the national bourgeoisie. Without realizing it, the nation as represented by the PFDJ is creating an integral state, a state that is potentially destructive to the autonomous and culturally plural life of Eritreans.

Conclusion

Nationalism is a double-edged sword. It can be a tool for bringing about a greater future or it can be a destructive force, one that is unable to produce new heights of human liberty and dignity. The Eritrean state and the ruling party, and many Eritreans at home and abroad, have wrapped themselves in a shawl of nationalism to such an extent that they are blind to the dire situation their country is in. They see the current excesses of nationalism in Eritrea as an end in itself. These excesses were important in creating a nation called Eritrea. But they are also detrimental to the

evolution of civil society that respects the human rights of the people. The fact is that nationalism is a powerful force that needs to be tamed and used in specific moments to prevent others from annihilating and destroying human life. But unbridled solidarity based on religion, land, language, or common history or memory can lead to human misery and suffering (Malkki 1995a).

In a situation where the oppression is total and people have no other mechanism of organizing the populace, nationalism becomes an effective method of protest because nationalism creates wide-scale solidarity. This sense of solidarity can be mobilized and deployed in confrontation against totalitarian systems. But often nationalist movements tend to mistake the nationalist struggle as an end in itself and stop their pursuit for greater human equality and dignity and liberty. Instead, they worship the nation, creating myths of national uniqueness and superiority. The national forms become an imperative that dictates their actions. They seek national glories and worship themselves as unique, forgetting that the embrace of nationalism was a tactical and not a long-term strategy or an end in itself. The nation becomes the basis for self-promotion and worship, in the manner of idolaters who create idols to stand for gods. But idols are not to be worshiped and considered as real. Marx wrote of fetishism of commodities in capitalism; here we have fetishism of nationhood. The Eritrean case illustrates this social reality.

A historical perspective can be useful to explain this sad situation. Eritreans had very limited freedom to protest under Ethiopian rule (1961– 1991). This was especially true under the Derg, the party that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie and established a Marxist-Leninist state in Ethiopia in 1974. As was true in many parts of the world during colonial and postcolonial rule, joining the armed nationalist movement in Eritrea was an effective method of protesting Ethiopian rule. Eritrean nationalism created wide-scale solidarity. This sense of solidarity was mobilized and deployed to confront the totalitarian regime of Mengistu Hailemariam of Ethiopia, leading to the defeat of the Ethiopian army in 1991. Class struggle may have been an effective way of getting rid of the totalitarian regime in Ethiopia and the inequalities in society, but nationalism in Eritrea, by blurring the differences between classes, created a huge imagined community ready to act in unison (Anderson 1991). That was the value of Eritrean nationalism.

After independence, the nationalist movement in Eritrea wanted to continue its policy of acting as a nationalist movement that controls every aspect of the society under its control. Its experience as a guerrilla movement became resource for creating a mythical and ideal past of harmonious, faultless, and integrated relationship between the movement and society. This is not uncommon in nationalism. In *The Break-Up of Britain*, Tom Nairn expressed the view that a society needs a strong national identity and that

it is through nationalism that societies try to propel themselves forward to a certain kind of goal (industrialization, prosperity, equality with other people, etc.) *by a certain sort of regression*—by looking inwards, drawing more deeply upon their indigenous resources, resurrecting past folk-heroes and myths about themselves and so on (1997: 348).

But he also observed that substance of nationalism is ambiguous. The ambivalent nature of nationalism is

like the old Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face look forward and one backwards. Thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of ‘development’ (Nairn 1977: 18).

After independence, the PFDJ sought to impose its definition of what the nation-state should be by using the recent past of glorious success “against all odds” (Connell 1997) and mythologizing that experience and drawing lessons from it. In the process it mistook the nationalist struggle to be an end in itself and suspended its pursuit for greater human equality, dignity, and liberty. Instead, there is veneration of the nation in Eritrea through a myth of national uniqueness and superiority (Tekle Woldemikael 2005b). The national form has become an imperative that dictates the actions of the nationalist leaders. The nation has become the basis for self-promotion and delusion of grandeur for the president and the ruling party. In doing so, it aspires to create what is known as an integral state (Alter 1989; Young 1994).

Notes

1. The title “Pitfalls of Nationalism” is derived from Frantz Fanon’s chapter title “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon: 1963).
2. BBC News (2003/05/24 www.new.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/2935752.stm)
3. It is to be noted that the guerrilla movement, the EPLF, was against these groups from a very early point, because they were seen as having the potential to undermine national sentiment. It even listed them as antiprogressive religions in its National Democratic Program in 1977 and National Charter of 1994.
- 4.

