

REVISITING THE “BLACK MAN’S BURDEN”:
ERITREA AND THE CURSE OF THE NATION-STATE

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the state apparatus has failed to provide Africans with a culturally compatible form of governance. The state is a product of colonial origin, and thus, has failed to resonate with Indigenous African spirituality, moral consciousness or political tradition. By grounding my argument in the Eritrean context, I make the case that the Eritrean state – not unlike other African states – is failing in three fundamental ways. First, it is oppressive towards Indigenous institutions of governance, particularly the village *baito* practiced in the rural highlands of Eritrea. Second, the state promotes a national identity that has been arbitrarily formed and colonially imposed in place of Indigenous ones, such as those formed around regional or linguistic groupings. Lastly, because the Eritrean state is a rather new phenomenon that suffers from a crisis of legitimacy, it inevitably falls back on processes of violence, coercion and control to assert its authority.

Dedication

For Africa's Indigenous nations, you are still the *Dimtsi Hafash*

Acknowledgement

It only seems fitting to begin by thanking my family. To my father Bairu, my mother Aster, and my sisters Sewit and Awet, thank you. I also owe thanks to my partner, Solome. All of whom have been patient and supportive collaborators along this turbulent journey.

Thank you to George Dei, a scholarly giant in the field of Indigenous Knowledges and antiracist theorizing. Your work has inspired me to ask new questions about the world. Thank you to my second reader John Portelli for providing timely support and advice on improving my work. And of course thank you to my supervisor, Njoki Nathani Wane, for providing a model for my development both in and outside of the classroom. You have influenced me in more ways than I am able to cite here. You are a patient teacher, wise elder and dear friend. I see you.

I humbly place myself at the continued service of Fanon, Makeba, Cabral, Awate and other revolutionary minds who gave their lives in pursuit of African liberation. They have taught me that the fight for Black/African liberation is an ongoing process, and although they had sacrificed greatly, there is still much more for present and future generations to sacrifice in its pursuit. I am especially indebted to the work of Basil Davidson. Davidson passed away while I was writing this thesis and I owe much of my conceptual foundation to his book, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992). Over the centuries many white missionaries, politicians, and scholars have exploited Africa for personal gain. Davidson was not one of them. He was an ally and friend to the continent and contributed to the theorizing of an Africa beyond the nation-state. I wish him well in his journey through the spirit world.

Lastly, I owe my existence and well being on this earth to the Great Ancestors who came before me. Thank you for feeding my spirit with the wealth of knowledge and tradition. I live to honour you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Nature of the “Burden”

In *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, Basil Davidson argues that Africa’s reliance on the state model is linked to the colonial notion that “nothing useful could develop without denying Africa’s past, without a ruthless severing from Africa’s roots and a slavish acceptance of models drawn from entirely different histories” (Davidson, 1992, 42). In his concluding chapter Davidson speculates that the young state of Eritrea, which had just completed a thirty year revolution at the time of his writing, would serve as a vanguard in a new wave of African governance. At the time of the book’s publishing, Eritrea was described by the author as a site of “reasoned hope” (Davidson, 1992, 319). Davidson believed that the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (renamed the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice following independence) would lead the young nation along a new course of accountable and transparent leadership based on Indigenous-styled self-reliance. The Front’s leader-turned-President, Isaias Afwerki, was thought of as belonging to Africa’s new generation of leadership. Unfortunately, it would not take long for Davidson to be proven wrong. Shortly after securing independence from the Ethiopian *Derg* led by Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Eritrean state would reproduce the same colonial relations of power it once fought against. Nineteen years later Eritrea has come to symbolize the final nail in the African state’s coffin. It has failed to break from the dominant narrative of state failure in Africa. In its 2003 World Report, Human Rights Watch described Eritrea as “a country under siege – from its own government” (Mengisteb & Yohannes, 2005, 131). The national university has been closed in an attempt to stifle intellectual criticism of government, and a program of indefinite military conscription has denied the country’s youth access to classroom education.

Tactics of indiscriminate torture, sexual violence, and economic restrictions are commonly used against people who refuse to serve the state’s wishes, and disproportionately include the disenfranchised and underclass (Sium, 2010). Journalistic freedoms have also been greatly curbed in efforts to keep such injustices national secrets. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has described Eritrea as “the world’s biggest prison for journalists” and ranked the nation last in its 2009 World Press Freedom Index, just below North Korea and Turkmenistan

(Reporters Without Borders, 2009, “World Press Freedom Index”). These are just few examples of the state’s repression of public criticism and participation. As for the historian who once believed Eritrea capable of breaking the cycle of state violence in Africa, Davidson passed away in July of 2010, never to see an African nation dare turn to its history for solutions to the crisis of governance. From Davidson’s obituary we can tell that his last days were marred by disillusionment and feeling as though Africa’s last site of “reasoned hope” had failed to break from the cycle of state repression.

The eventual turn towards repressive government taken by his friends in the Eritrean leadership, when other leaders to whom he had been close were imprisoned in Asmara, was a sad rerun of a similar political trajectory he had witnessed in post-independence Angola. He did not like talking over these matters, but he did not disguise his disappointment. Critics from the right were swift to condemn the early judgements that he had made about these revolutions. (Brittain, 2010, *The Guardian*)

Despite the problematic gendering of the term, which positions the Black *man* as the sole subject of study, Davidson was right to describe the state apparatus as the “Black Man’s burden”. As the state’s increasing failure is no doubt grounds for crisis, the question then becomes, are we speaking of a crisis of capability or a crisis of inheritance? The evidence overwhelmingly suggests the latter. It seems the contemporary African state – which is only few decades removed from its predecessor, the colonial state – still lacks popular support in both rural and urban segments of the nation. Since the end of direct colonial rule and the African takeover of government, instances of inter/intra-state conflict, corruption and other threats to political stability have only further weakened the African state. In this thesis I examine the reasons for such volatile political climates and locate blame in the fact that Africa has turned its back on the Indigenous governing practices used since its days of empire. I examine the state’s marginalization of such practices through the example of the village *baito*, an ancient and highly participatory political model used by the Tigrinya people of the Eritrean highlands (*Kebessa*). Although the *baito* has been used since time immemorial to mediate village conflicts, equitably distribute land and collectivize labour, the Eritrean state has tried to dismantle the institution instead of learning from it and applying its teachings at the state level. What becomes clear is that the state’s fear of alternative governing methods is reflective of its own insecurity.

In the present historical moment, one in which huge technological advancements have been made in the name of efficiency, the same could be said of colonialism. The present era

demands an evolved and more sophisticated brand of colonialism, one that uses centralized governing models to sever, rename, and reshape Indigenous communities; to make them fight each other for the few crumbs that fall from the colonial table. Just as colonizers replaced Indigenous spirits with whitewashed images of God, Indigenous identities and customs have been deemed illegitimate in the face of imposed colonial models. Just as colonizers once carried guns and brutalized Africans openly, they now hide their brutality behind eurocentric theories preaching state nationalism, development, and capitalist modernity. The great tragedy of the last thirty years is that these theories have and continue to fail. In the wake of Davidson's death, it is necessary to revisit his thesis. It is necessary to take seriously the concept that the state apparatus is an inherently flawed system of governance that African people have repeatedly rejected, but continues to impose itself through the elite and their Euro-American backers. I begin the conversation with a personal location, and discussion of how I came to the topic.

Personal Location and Rationale for the Study

I was once told by a professor of history that “those who love their country the most are the ones who have never been there”, but use their imagination to fill gaps in their knowledge of the homeland. I feel his words summarize my experience as a diasporic Eritrean situated in Canada. As someone born, raised and educated outside of his home nation, I was forced to use my imagination in connecting myself to the broader national body. As a child I spent copious amounts of time dreaming of the return to my native land, of walking the streets of my mother's village, and sitting at my grandparents' feet as I listened to stories of my ancestors. There was something romantic about my connection to the country. There was something mysterious about it. Since I had never been there and possessed limited knowledge of the nation's cultural and physical geography, I filled the knowledge gaps with my own mythology of what Eritrea looked like. Benedict Anderson (1983) would agree that my childhood interest in Eritrea came from a yearning to be connected to an “imagined community” of likeness. In other words, it was experiences of racist exclusion and cultural alienation in Canada that made me look to Eritrea in search of people I could identify with. That is, a people with the same cultural-historical location as myself.

In order to prepare me for my eventual return home my mother educated me on traditional Tigrinya practices, just as my grandmother educated her. From an early age I was

taught the importance of common good and communal decision making. I was taught to honour the spirit of *Wefera* (working together) as a fundamental principle of life, and to revere the divine wisdom and life-giving power of our ancestors. Above all it was important that I lived in tune with the ways of *Abotatna Kem Zemharuna* (“Like Our Fathers Teach Us”). Although I was embarrassed of these teachings at the time, a wholehearted respect and admiration for the Indigenous customs of my people has come to anchor my identity as a Tigrinya man today.

With the close of the Eritrean Revolution in 1993, through which Eritrea gained full territorial sovereignty and a release from Ethiopian occupation, I finally had my chance to return. At nine years old I boarded the plane with the rest of my family eager to measure my imagined homeland against the reality on the ground.

To my surprise, the first images I saw were not those of a bountiful landscape as my mother had described in her stories, but those of a nation ravaged by thirty years of anticolonial warfare. Instead of the ancient palaces and rock-hewn churches I dreamed of as a child, I saw rusted tanks abandoned on the roadside, beautiful mosques split in two by bomb blasts, and mothers in the streets still grieving the loss of their slain children. My grandparents had little time to entertain me with stories of our ancestors, as they too were grieving the loss of two sons. The half empty houses along my grandparents’ street were a chilling reminder of the lives lost to the struggle. Each household had shared the burden of independence.

On occasion I saw groups of street kids with spray cans graffiti-ing the sides of buildings with the names of fallen comrades. Of course these urban tombstones remained without a corpse, since many of their friends’ bodies were still scattered across the nation’s many battlefronts. There was something both sombre and celebratory about these images. They were celebratory in that independence was only few months removed and sombre because it came at the cost of countless young lives. To say the least, many of the images were also violent. They abruptly shook me from the dream of what I imagined Eritrea to be and woke me to the harsh reality of what it had become. With time I came to see the beauty in my country’s misfortunes. I developed a particular appreciation for the revolutionary struggle and the collective hope and perseverance with which it was fought.

Since my trip to Eritrea seventeen years ago, during which the country was characterised by boundless optimism, nation-building has taken a radically different course than expected. The country has relapsed into the same functions of repression and cultural control that its colonial

predecessors once used. The Indigenous ways of knowing and living that I was curious about as a child are now under attack from their own cultural bearers. In this time of crisis I believe it is the duty of the academic and activist alike to confront such instances of de-Indigenization; to speak for the power of Indigenous ways of governing and socially organizing.

My study of Eritrea has come to be a personal mission more than anything else. It is a way of reconciling the imagined Eritrea of my past with the real Eritrea of the present; a way of making up for the geography that separates me from my people; and a way of connecting me to the traditions of my ancestors. I hope to shed light on the often understudied Indigenous knowledges of the Tigrinya people, with a particular focus on how they can be useful in political and social reform. Let us begin by reviewing the methodological framework I will use in doing so.

Methodology

As both scholars and activists, we must be wary of how research becomes framed, mobilized, and acted upon in the world. After all, virtually all forms of oppression were at one time or another supported by research. There is no doubt that the most severe abuses of research have been suffered by Indigenous peoples, leading Linda Tuhiwai Smith to comment that ‘research’ “is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith, 2006).

I am cautious to treat my research as a delicate, living and interactive organism. I strive to paint the most truthful and complete picture of Tigrinya culture possible, while admitting to the limitations of my research along the way. The methodology I have chosen is above all self reflective. I have chosen a self reflective method because it validates lived experience and other non-‘conventional’ ways of producing knowledge. This thesis reflects my lived experience as a Tigrinya man and the informal conversations I have had with other Tigrinya people of various locations in regards to class, sex, gender, and Indigeneity. These conversations have worked to strengthen my understanding of the *baito* and Tigrinya identity. My knowledge of the *baito* is further informed by two generations of oral history passed on by my parents and grandparents.

It is true that all history is written with an eye towards the future. For this reason my methodology is also historical in that it takes into account history’s potential to transform the present as well as determine the future. I draw upon a distinctly African philosophy of history

that works to value Indigenous traditions, cultural knowledges and cosmological understandings of the world. I have chosen a historical methodology for the purpose of revisiting the dominant literature on Eritrea, which has its parameters set and regulated by the state.

The majority of scholarship on Eritrea developed alongside the Revolution, during which scholars were well trained to write in support the revolutionary Front-turned-state. Scholars expressed an unquestioned loyalty to the Front and focused their work on writing in favour of Eritrea's independence under an EPLF led state. Since independence the fetishisms and mythology surrounding *meda* (the revolutionary battleground) have grown into an organized body of statist scholarship. Even today, nearly twenty years after independence, intellectual criticisms of the state are often drowned by expressions of blind nationalism as scholars collectively remember (...and then re-remember) the Revolution. Of course the Eritrean state has encouraged such intellectual nostalgia in order to divert scholarly attention away from its present failures. The unfortunate reality is that many scholars on Eritrea have fell for this diversion.

Tronvoll (1998) agrees that

Much, indeed, of the writing on Eritrea has been at the level of the polemic or a product of the 'guerilla groupie.' A surprising number of eminent scholars and journalists have taken the leading Eritrean movement, the EPLF, at its own evaluation, and its historical claims as fact. The results have impoverished the literature on Eritrea, and have created a distorted national mythology. (Tronvoll, 1998, 8)

I have made great strides to avoid blind hero worship of the Front-turned-state and its "distorted national mythology", as Tronvoll puts it. The role of the scholar needs to be that of a critical intermediary who comments on the relationship between a people and their government. A historical methodology allows for the critical revisiting of how history is manipulated and re-written, and creates space for the reclamation of lost truths.

Lastly, my methodological framework is literature based. It included books, articles, novels, newspapers and online editorials. Few primary sources – by way of colonial documents and state constitutions – were also used. I chose a literature based methodology because, despite the limited research on Eritrea, much of the literature that does exist has not been fully appreciated or engaged with. For example, literature concerning Indigenous knowledges in the Eritrean context has been especially ignored by the majority of scholars. In the following chapters I place my own work in conversation with Davidson (1992), Tronvoll (1998), Abbay (1998) and few other authors who have contributed to research in this understudied area, and

strive to fill analytical gaps wherever they may exist.

Additional research has been cited from nongovernmental organizations including Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. I should mention that I use NGO research with discretion and believe it to suffer from certain knowledge biases. Too often NGOs become political attack dogs used by dominant states to demonize and condemn others. That being said, given the secrecy that the Eritrean state operates within, recent statistics regarding population, demographics and other categories of interest are limited. The NGOs I mention here provide some of the only statistics available in these areas. The following section outlines few additional limitations to the study.

Limitations of the Study

This study does not intend to cover the various Indigenous governing institutions in Eritrea. It is limited to examining the Tigrinya *baito* and the ways in which it has been violently engaged with by the state. The Tigrinya highlands are comprised of three main sub regions. Each region has its own distinct traditions and localized identities but come together under the overarching affiliation of *Dekki Kebessa* (“People of the highlands”). These regions include Hamasien, Seraye, and Akele-Guzai. Although the scope of my study includes the whole Kebessa it is particularly interested in my own region of Hamasien. Despite my limited focus it should be remembered that the colonial geography that is “Eritrea” is comprised of nine nations, eight of which are Indigenous to the region and carry with them distinct rituals, beliefs and ontological understandings that cannot be covered here (Afar, Bilen, Hadareb, Kunama & Nara, Saho, Tigre, Tigrinya). It is also important to note that the Indigenous nations are not defined by fixed geographical boundaries, but shared cultural and group identities. People tend to personally identify with one another through language, cultural practices or shared history. For example, a Tigrinya woman who resides in southern Eritrea may still identify with the Tigrinya nation even though she lives on Afar territory.

As a Tigrinya man living in the diaspora I am conscious of my limitations in representing Eritrea as a whole. In fact the purpose of my work is to move away from colonial geographies and identifications (such as “Eritrea”), while moving towards Indigenous ways of marking identity. As this will be demonstrated through the Tigrinya example, the same process of re-centering must take place within all of Eritrea’s Indigenous nations and Africa at large.

Due to the large number of Tigrinya people and the urban concentration of those numbers, we have received more scholarly attention than any other people in Eritrea (however little that may be in relation to the rest of Africa). As a student of Eritrean history I am also aware of the historical privilege awarded to Tigrinya (Christian) highlanders and our present domination of the Eritrean state. Similarly, I am aware of the mass targeting, marginalization and displacement of (Muslim) lowlanders who remain on the periphery of political discourse. I do not hide from the tragedy of these facts. Instead, I believe we must embrace Eritrean history in its entirety: the good, the bad and the ugly. It is important that we base our oppositional struggle on a version of history that makes room for the different ways we become privileged and punished based on region, religion, Indigeneity, class, gender, age etc. and work towards correcting these injustices. Our unity will not be realized through pretensions of being the same. It must come from an acknowledgement of our differences within the context of an overarching connection as African peoples.

The second limitation of my study is of a methodological nature. Much of Tigrinya practices are preserved and passed on orally. The traditional Tigrinya belief is that oral history is not to be written or recorded, since its power to educate resides in the memory and voice of the oral historian. I have, however, chosen to record various oral histories, myths, proverbs and principles as part of my research. In doing so I hope to convert the basic messaging of these teachings into written form without compromising the essence they espouse.

Organization of the Thesis

Since the dawn of flag independence few African scholars have written about the state's cultural incompatibility with Africa. Here I feel the need to point out few examples of the incompatibility I speak of. Where the state is predominantly associated with centralized and top-down relationships of power, Indigenous African societies prefer participatory and collectively shared relationships of power. Where the state is quick to employ violence or the use of force to enforce law and order, Indigenous African societies prefer preventative measures and non-violent means of enforcing social harmony.

Recent works have picked up where earlier scholars left off in exploring the nature of this incompatibility. Many have even theorized ways in which the state could be reformed, readjusted or reconsidered to suit African political values and ethics (Samatar & Samatar, 2002;

Mengsiteab, 2003; Yeshitela, 2006). What becomes clear from these writings is that we cannot disentangle the African state from its colonial birth, during which localized Indigenous systems were violently displaced in favour of European nation-statism. The contemporary state still serves to defend its colonial borders, and uses an ideology of territorial nationalism to separate “citizens” from national Others. All communities who express a group solidarity that cuts across these borders are deemed “anti-nationalist” elements, or worse, “anti-state”. In the remainder of this section I briefly outline the structure of my thesis and how I plan to engage the topic of state failure and de-Indigenization.

Chapter Two examines the literature concerning my topic. The literature review will familiarize the reader with basic perspectives concerning political historiography and state failure from both the Western and African perspective. Here I put the various literatures in conversation with one another, point out the gaps between them, and offer suggestions as to how they can be addressed through new analyses.

Chapter Three explores the discursive framework that will introduce the reader to my theoretical grounding, an explanation as to why I selected the theories I did, and how they can be applied in the Eritrean context. As someone who appreciates a discursive analysis that is inclusive of various theories and perspectives, this section will help the reader understand the mixture of ideas I draw from.

In Chapter Four, *From the Hamitic Myth to Heart of Darkness: Unlearning the Myth of an Africa Without History*, I address the importance of complete history. By “complete history” I mean a holistic account of the past that includes the strengths, weaknesses, successes and failures of a people; and one that reaches both before and beyond the colonial encounter to tell its story. This is important because it is only through complete history that a people develop a sense of historic location in relation to the past, present and future. Here I debunk the myth that Africa has no history and examine the effects of colonial myth-making on Africans themselves.

Chapter Five, *Indigenous Nations v.s. Colonial States: The Case of Tigrinya People in Eritrea*, is divided into three sections. Section one focuses on a central tension of the neo-colonial era, that between Indigenous and colonially imposed governing institutions. In many instances this tension characterizes itself as one between old versus new, “traditional” versus “modern”, or rural versus urban. Regardless of how it is characterized there remains a disconnect between those ancient governing structures used by local communities since time immemorial,

and the Eritrean state that was concretized through Italian imperialism in 1889. I examine the disconnect between one particular institution, the village *baito*, and the contemporary state. After providing an anatomy of the *baito*'s leadership, purpose and historical beginnings I proceed to describe its core principles and day-to-day function in the village. As examples of these I focus on two functions in particular, the traditional Tigrinya naming ceremony also known as the *Msigar* and the practice of conflict mediation during land disputes.

Section two of the chapter addresses questions of national consciousness and belonging. In order to naturalize its boundaries and force a sense of unity amongst its people, the Eritrean state downplays – if not makes illegal – transnational, regional and linguistic ways of identifying. In place of these outlawed identities the state promotes *Eritreanness*, an invented national identity complete with moral assumptions, personality traits and expectations of what it means to be Eritrean. The belief in a shared national character came about during colonial rule and has since been used to force a fictitious unity upon otherwise diverse peoples. Even though most of the Indigenous nations within Eritrea have transnational communities that cut across state lines, the state has refused to recognize the existence of such bonds. In this section I look at the example of the Tigrinya nation located in the Eritrean highlands as well as the Tigray province of Ethiopia, and how the nation has been caught in a diplomatic and military crossfire between the two states that claim ownership over it. Creating a situation in which those Eritreans who express Tigrinya nationalism are at risk of appearing as ethnic chauvinists who seek to undermine national unity, or worse, sympathizers with the regional rival of Ethiopia.

I close the section by making few suggestions for improving the present Eritrean condition. At which point few questions will be raised. Chief among them is, since the state was designed to silence sites of Indigenous leadership and authority, how can we integrate Indigenous structures of governance (and the identities attached to those structures) with the current state? Is it possible to integrate them at all? To be a critical scholar in the academy today is to understand that any attempt to centre Indigeneity means challenging the power structures in place. In light of this fact I settle on the opinion that an effective resistance will require the re-imagining of Indigenous communities and institutions beyond their state boundaries. Through the regionalization of governance I propose a new community of cultural partners, neighbours and nations that make room for the articulation of multiple identities at once.

Section three of this chapter examines the sociology of state violence. I begin by

exploring the effects that war have on the education system and economy within the country. Next I treat the social and economic conditions that lead to state repression, and argue that much of the violence stems from the African state's fragility. It is the state's fragility – in combination with its lack of popular support – that forces it to employ violence in upholding its authority. Here, I am particularly interested in the state's current project of de-Indigenization, and argue that de-Indigenization becomes a strategy to remove the ancient differences between the peoples of Eritrea, and replace them with a uniformity imposed by the state. De-Indigenization is of two general types. First, I explore structural de-Indigenization through the state's attempt to dismantle the *baito*. Second, I explore the state's attempt to purge the country of the Indigenous principles and moral codes.

By way of conclusion, Chapter Six provides some last words on moving beyond the problem at hand. Of particular concern is Africa's crisis of leadership at the state and continental level. I discuss the need to form a new crop of leaders that invest hope in the continent's ability to solve its own problems and design a future based on its history.

Definition of Terms, Names and Locations

Nation Nations are both a real and imagined communities of people bound by common origin myths, self identities, and mutual respect. If one considers the concept in terms of Indigeneity, than nations are usually rooted in shared historic pasts that have cultivated a sense of collective spiritual purpose and worship.

State In defining the state I turn to the basic definition put forth by Laremont (2005), who describes it as a political structure that operates based on **a**) a monopoly on law, order and the use of force, **b**) consolidated borders, and **c**) seeks to create a shared national consciousness amongst its citizenry. It is necessary to make a distinction between the ancient and contemporary state. Laremont's definition describes the contemporary state. The ancient state has its origins in ancient Kemet where the monarchy ruled the nation through a political structure that drew its legitimacy from common spirituality and ties to the metaphysical. Much like states today, the Kemetic state had separate branches of government, a claim to permanent boundaries, and state run institutions such as the national treasury (Warburton, 1997, 37). Thus, we can trace the concept of the state to the heartland of Africa even though the term only came into use in sixteenth century Europe. I raise this history to clarify that the state I am refuting in this thesis is

not the one used in Kemet, or any other Indigenous African styled state for that matter, but the one Europe imposed on the continent through colonial rule.

The state could be envisioned in two fundamental ways. It can be seen in abstract terms, as the idea of structural power that governs nations from above, or in material terms, as a group of political elites who systematically collect the knowledge and resources of the nation in support of their power. The interesting difference between nation and state is that only the nation can exist alone. This is an important historical fact that is developed further throughout the thesis. **Eritrea** is located in the Horn of Africa along the southern Red Sea coast. It has a population of roughly five and a half million. In antiquity the Eritrean highlands were known as *Midri BaHri* (the Land of the Sea), and before that it joined with the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia to form the Axumite Empire (Habte Selassie, 2007, 4). Highlanders take pride in their Axumite heritage, as Axum reigned from 100 B.C.E. to 700 C.E as one of the leading commercial and political powers of the day. Since the days of empire, a long list of imperialist powers washed ashore on the southern Red Sea coast, most of whom had desires to enslave or colonize the local population. On more than one occasion the local peoples were forced to pick up arms in protest. Let us take some time to familiarize ourselves with the region's colonial and anticolonial narrative.

Italy first carved the colonial geography now known as "Eritrea" from a plethora of pre-existing nations. Italian claims to the territory were entrenched in the Treaty of Wachale (1889) signed by King Vincenzo and Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia, the latter being the lone African representative at the Berlin Conference fifteen years earlier (Connell, 1997, 51). Before Italy there was a long list of imperialist regimes that sought to control the region. Beginning with Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century, to Egyptian (1848) settlement of the area, to the Italian (1889) and British (1941) takeovers, and ending with thirty nine years of Ethiopian (1952) occupation.

The Italians were especially harsh in their treatment of Eritreans, often locking them in decade long contracts as domestic labourers or soldiers in the colonial army. As a result of this vast reserve of exploitable labour Mussolini characterized Eritrea as "the heart of the new Roman empire" (Connell, 1997, 53). Minerals, precious metals and stones were being stolen from the colony by the boat load and sailed throughout the world with profits boosting the Italian economy. The colony was also being rapidly deforested to serve Italy's growing need for lumber.

In the 1920s 30% of Eritrea was covered with forestry, which dropped to a startling 1% at the time of independence (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, 70). Most of the usable land left was expropriated by white farmers. In Italy's first year of occupation alone, over one million acres were expropriated, fully one-fifth of cultivatable land (Connell, 2002, 19). The colony was also organized along a strict and unforgiving colour line. Indigenous taxes in combination with a policy of racial apartheid ensured that Eritreans were clearly demarcated from their white overseers. Renowned Eritrean novelist and theoretician, Bereket Habte Selassie, tells us that "under the system of racial segregation, no Eritrean was allowed to live or work in the Italian zone... Eritrea's indigenous populations, the *indigeni (natives)*, were only allowed education up to the fifth grade" (Habte Selassie, 2007, 25). As Habte Selassie goes on to explain, the denial of Eritreans' access to formal education was meant to create a society of "sub-clerical workers to serve the colonial purpose" (Habte Selassie, 2007, 25).

The colonial army was one of the rare desegregated institutions. In 1935, Mussolini introduced a program of indefinite military conscription that deployed forty percent of the colony's workforce to imperialist wars throughout the continent, where Eritreans were effectively used to suppress other wars for anticolonial liberation. Those who refused to do Italy's bidding were jailed, tortured, or simply executed (Connell, 1997, 53).

With the commencement of popular mobilization against Ethiopia's occupation in 1961, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front was careful to articulate its struggle as an anticolonial one. In a revolutionary handbook entitled *In Defence of The Eritrean Revolution: Against Ethiopian Social Chauvinists (1978)*, the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA) defined their struggle as the convergence of theoretical and military opposition to Ethiopia's land-based as well as cultural imperialism (AESNA, 1978, 79). As AESNA saw it the Eritrean struggle required a diverse arsenal of theory and practice.

This thesis maintains that the Eritrean nation and state is an ideological fiction invented during Italian occupation (and perpetuated by subsequent colonial powers) to fracture the Indigenous nations in the region. My focus on trans-territorial identity seeks to interrogate taken-for-granted concepts tied to the colonial nation; such as national history, national culture, national identity and other inventions of culture used by the state to impose a sense of sameness on the historically diverse peoples who reside in Eritrea. Thus, "Eritrea" must be understood as a colonial geography that seeks to invent a historical community of people where one does not

exist (at least not before 1889). I am not proposing that all Africans do not share a fundamental cultural-historical sameness, or even that the people of Eritrea have no common experience to speak of, but only trying to emphasize the problematic nature of colonial nations especially when they are built overtop pre-existing ones.

Indigenous knowledges include the rich body of locally produced, collectively shared, and trans-generational ways of knowing that accumulate over a people's history. Indigenous knowledges can be further defined as:

...[t]he commonsense ideas and cultural knowledges of local peoples concerning the everyday realities of living. They encompass the cultural traditions, values, belief systems, and world views that, in any indigenous society, are imparted to the younger generation by community elders. They also refer to world views that are products of a direct experience of nature and its relationship with the social world.
(Dei & Hall & Rosenberg, 2000, editors' page)

This work employs the definition of Indigenous knowledges put forth by Dei, Hall and Rosenberg (2000) above. It also seeks to point out the connection between these knowledges and colonization. The growing interest in Indigenous knowledges is in large part a reaction to histories of colonization that sought to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their ways of knowing the world. Such knowledges provide us an alternative to dominant constructions of knowledge. They also work to overthrow the myth of the colonizer's monopoly on truth, power and discourse.

De-Indigenization is an original term I use to describe the state's uprooting of Indigenous knowledges and practices. This repression usually takes place during "development" or "modernization" projects, and is carried out by forces that consider Indigeneity to be modernity's antithesis. To de-Indigenize is to commit an act of sheer violence and ontological rupture, it is to sever a people from their sense of history and belonging. To speak and write against the state is to do the same against these processes of de-Indigenization.

Violence can be defined in multiple ways. For some it is defined by physiological or spiritual injury, others may prefer a more physical definition. There are literally hundreds of conceptualizations that can be made. In this thesis I opt for a broad definition of the term that is inclusive of multiple understandings. I understand violence to be any act that fundamentally disrupts a person or peoples' sense of spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical wholeness. I apply this definition to the situation in Eritrea and use it to describe the state's

attack on the *baito* and Indigenous leadership.

Wefera is a Tigrinya word that translates to English as “working together”. It is a word that encapsulates powerful notions of collectivity, common good and strong work ethic. The principle of *Wefera* is especially used amongst highlander farmers. When a farmer is behind in his or her work and requires the assistance of neighbors, s/he can appeal to *Wefera* to solicit their help. As we will see the spirit of *Wefera* can be applied to non-agricultural work as well.

Abotatna Kem Zemharuna (“Like Our Fathers Teach Us”) is a Tigrinya spiritual principle that promotes devotion and respect for our ancestral teachings. The verb is rendered in the present tense (“teach”) rather than past tense (“taught”) to emphasis the fact that our ancestors are still with us; and that the metaphysical world is intertwined with the physical one. Thus, the dead continue to interact with the living and pass on new wisdom and warnings for the future with each day. The principle of *Abotatna Kem Zemharuna* is part of the *baito*’s fabric of decision making, and the rulings of the village assembly must be made in accordance with the wishes of the ancestors. In order to compensate for the chauvinist assumption that all ancestors are “fathers”, from here onward I will refer to the principle as *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna* (“Like Our Mothers/Fathers Teach Us”).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Contentious Terrain of Political Historiography: Davidson versus Fukuyama

Those revolutionary actors who change the course of history capitalize on few lapses in time – rare moments in which the status quo can be ruptured and possible futures imagined based on radical, people-oriented politics. With each moment comes a shift in the course of history. Regimes are toppled, leaders changed, and the moral-ethical rules that govern society are re-written. Each moment offers society the chance to reconfigure its social architecture, and to address the needs of the many by democratizing the privileges hoarded by the few. The moments I speak of are otherwise understood as revolutions. They offer us the chance to think, dream and act towards radical change. Political historiography is the study of how societies have dealt with these moments. It is the study of how societies have navigated the promises and failures of revolution, and how they have informed themselves of the past in moving forward.

Basil Davidson is a central figure in the study of Africa's political historiography. He is, however, only one figure in a contested field and must be read in conversation with those who challenge his ideas. It is no coincidence that the same year Davidson published the *Black Man's Burden* (1992), Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's book quickly became one of the pillars of postmodernist thought and influenced many theoreticians of the twenty first century. His book takes up history as a linear sequence of time and events that move forward in a straight line. The extension of the straight line marks the world's gradual improvement, and the line continues to extend/improve until it comes to a final end point in thought and culture – which explains the titling of the book. Fukuyama argues that with the advent of Western liberal democracy humanity reached an end point in its sociocultural evolution and a final stage of human government.¹ In the annals of French Revolutionary history he finds a universal governing ideal. Not only is Fukuyama a disciple of the “posts” in the sense that he professes an end to modernity, but he is a “post scholar” in the sense that he believes

¹ It should be remembered that Fukuyama more than Davidson was writing under the influence of the Cold War. He felt confident to pronounce the death of ideological competition precisely because the West had survived the downfall of the Soviet Bloc. Fukuyama's writing is very polarized in this respect. He does not consider changes in the world at large so much as he does changes between Western and Eastern Europe. Davidson's analysis makes room for a more complete discussion of political historiography, with a focus on Africa and other regions of the South ignored by Fukuyama.

humanity has experienced an end of history.

If history is considered a record of humanity's trials and errors in pursuit of a truly just society, than the most effective formula as Fukuyama sees it is the liberal democratic nation-state. He puts forth his thesis early in the text, boldly claiming that

as mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially *universal validity*: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty. Two hundred years after they first animated the French and American revolutions, the principles of liberty and equality have proven not just durable but resurgent (Fukuyama, 1992, 42 – emphasis added).

Why has the liberal democratic nation-state won the battle of ideas? Because, as Fukuyama explains, in a world where the European styled nation-state reigns supreme as the most widely recognized system of governance, in spite of the critiques we may have of it, “we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own” (Fukuyama, 1992, 46).

Fukuyama believes there is no longer a need to imagine new possibilities in national or international governance. New possibilities come from revolutionary moments, and since we have supposedly peaked in our use of eurocentric traditions of governance, we should be suspicious of revolutionary moments from here onward. To imagine something different from what we know now threatens the security of the status quo, which in this case demands the state system to uphold it. He constructs the liberal democratic nation-state as a utopian bubble that protects us from the horrors experienced in its absence. In his own words, to ditch our current model of governance is to “imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance makes a comeback” (Fukuyama, 1992, 46).

The most striking difference between Fukuyama and Davidson is their understanding of cultural space and license. On one hand, Davidson believes in the importance of cultural particularity. He believes the Tigrinya *baito* may work effectively given the particular cultural conditions of northern Eritrea and Ethiopia, but a completely different system may work in another cultural setting. This is not to say that any one system is more sophisticated or effective, but that governing models should not be homogenous. They should form from the particular histories and experiences of a people. In this sense particular cultural spaces will always draw the ways they (s)elect leaders, settle disputes and make decisions from local cultural conditions. The

progress of history should not lead to a universal and homogenous state, but a community of diverse and often unrelated governing methods that respond to changing local contexts (Cabral 1966; Davidson, 1992; Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Alfred, 2009, Maathai, 2009).

On the other hand, Fukuyama believes in cultural universality and finds support for his belief amongst dominant development scholars, most recently amongst Ghani and Lockhart (2008). He is in search of a single universal cultural ideal to be superimposed on the rest of the world. According to his assessment, the liberal democratic nation-state comes closest to a universal cultural ideal. Fukuyama believes the universal ideal will naturally spread through the world's voluntary (or forced) acceptance of liberal democratic statehood. He does not believe in particularity so far as a righteous world is one that displays uniformity. Of course the uniformity he speaks of should be drawn from Western European political traditions.

Fukuyama concludes by saying that if we look not just at a specific period but at the whole scope of history, than we find that “liberal democracy begins to occupy a special kind of place” (Fukuyama, 1992, 48). His work constructs a natural and inseparable link between liberalism and democracy, as if democracy can only be practiced successfully when housed in a broader liberal ideology, and to practice democratic principles outside of liberalism would be to pull the fish from its water. As more nation-state's embrace the fruits of liberal democracy they begin to develop a single narrative of politics and history under the direction of Europe; leading to the creation of a Universal History of humanity. Fukuyama clarifies that “A Universal History of mankind is not the same thing as a history of the universe. That is, it is not an encyclopedic catalogue of everything that is known about humanity, but rather an attempt to find a meaningful pattern in the overall development of human societies generally” (Fukuyama, 1992, 55).

Those societies that resist joining Universal History are resisters of progress and post-modernity. They will forever be knocked down by the winds of change and held prisoner by their own primitiveness. As the author sees it, this is why “Zulu spears were no match for British rifles, no matter how brave individual warriors were” (Fukuyama, 1992, 73). The conquerors of history will always win the battle of ideas – be they scientific, technological or morally based.

Although he never engaged Fukuyama personally, Davidson would agree that belief in the inevitable tides of change and progress – by choice or by force – seeks to normalize imperialism. At which point imperialism becomes just another way of imposing good ideas on backwards, resistant societies. The imperial relationship between colonizer and colonized

becomes replaced by a relationship between those who embrace universal change and those who resist it. The logic then becomes that the Zulu needed to be subjugated by the British, because as the largest Indigenous population in South Africa their subjugation paved the way for the establishment of a liberal democratic state.

Davidson approaches political historiography from a very different perspective than his critics. He rejects Western takes on liberal democracy and Eastern responses in the form of socialist centralism. For him the real concern is the internal malfunctions and shortcomings of the nation-state as a structure, not the ideologies we dress it with (liberalism, socialism, big government, small government etc.). Also of concern to him is the nation-state's proliferation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through European imperialism, and how its imposition has worked to alienate colonized peoples from their own conceptions of power, authority, and political organization.

Davidson believes the state to be an inherently racist structure that uses national ideologies to construct external and internal Others. Racist national ideologies become the state's greatest weapon. Davidson is supported by the likes of Solomos (1986) in claiming that by mobilizing myths of real and measurable racial differences between "us" and "them", states rally nations to fight in wars, compete in international sports, and build antagonistic rivalries with neighboring peoples. For this reason Davidson should be read in opposition to well known scholar on nationalism, Benedict Anderson, who claims that "the dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation [or state]" (Anderson, 1991, 149).

If Fukuyama believes the post-Enlightenment state to be God returned to earth in a more rational and benevolent form, then Davidson sees it as an irrational, violent and malevolent creature through which the political elite achieve public control and deprivation. The control comes in the form of racism, chauvinism, de-Indigenization, divide-and-rule, and other tactics that distract the public from confronting the injustices of the state. The deprivation comes in the form of propaganda espousing modernity and development, and deprives the public of imagining governing possibilities beyond the state.

Between both authors much theoretical ground is covered, and yet there still appears to be gaps in the work. For starters, even though Fukuyama's thesis has been widely challenged – most famously by Derrida (1993) in *Specters of Marx* – there has yet to be a strong critique of

his common sense acceptance of the nation-state from the perspective of Anticolonial Indigeneity, which is a concept to be explained in the next section.

When Fukuyama speaks of “the Last Man” he is speaking of the idealized European subject who exists as the initiator and driver of the nation-state. The Last Man has supposedly evolved out of his Indigeneity into modern form. He no longer believes in spirituality or the sanctity of nature, he no longer sees his own history as holding the secrets to effective governance, but turns to Europe for direction. My work will challenge Fukuyama’s claim that history is in fact moving linearly toward the universal triumph of European styled nation-statism. I will expose the failures of the African nation-state while also centering Indigenous alternatives capable of governing the nation effectively.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of Davidson’s work is his paying more attention to the state than the nation. He provides a thorough critique of the state but remains quiet on the ways national ideologies are used by the state to control populations and shift their identities away from Indigenous ways of identifying. In Chapter Five I address both of these questions, while moving beyond Davidson’s critique of the African nation-state to sketch a replacement system built around regionalized forms of governance.

State Failure from Multiple Perspectives

The Dominant Western Perspective

Rather than exploring the inherent problems of the state apparatus, the dominant literature on African governance places blame on Africans themselves. Failed state discourse posits that countries like Somalia, Eritrea and Zimbabwe – emerging in international media as the Trinity of African failure – are failures because they have yet to develop a democratic cultural fabric; they have yet to learn the ways of Western nation-statism. In their book *Fixing Failed States*, Ghani and Lockhart define a failed state by what it is not. It is not a successful state, which itself has ten essential functions:

1. The rule of law
2. A monopoly on the legitimate means of violence
3. Administrative control
4. Sound management of public finances
5. Investment in human capital

6. Creation of citizenship rights through social policy
 7. Provision of infrastructure services
 8. Formation of a market
 9. Management of public assets
 10. Effective public borrowing
- (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008, 124-165)

Failed states become characterized mainly by the inability to achieve number two and eight on this list of cardinal rules. A heavy hand is necessary to beat back illegitimate rivals to state power, and national markets must coalesce around free market capitalism in order to be effective. Who as they see it has failed to achieve successful statehood?

Like many economists Ghani and Lockhart speak of state failure in geographical terms. They reference an “arc of crisis” that includes forty to sixty countries extending from Africa through the Middle East all the way to East Asia (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008, 21). The arc of crisis is riddled with failed and failing states in desperate need of Western financial or military intervention. Financial intervention comes in the form of economic restructuring by the International Monetary Fund or World Bank. Military intervention comes in the form of Western superpowers and regional cooperatives overthrowing states that oppose their authority.

Ricardo Rene Laremont and Ali A. Mazrui believe nations without states to have shaky political and legal foundations (Laremont, 2001; Mazrui, 2003). They agree with Ghani and Lockhart that the only way to create more solid state foundations where they previously failed is for regional partners to intervene militarily. Mazrui has controversially fashioned this idea as a type of *re-colonization*. Many critics see the idea as nothing more than imperialism cloaked by humanitarian claims, and maintain that military intervention in failed states breaches territorial sovereignty. In defense of Mazrui, Laremont asks, “how can we say that state sovereignty has been violated by the intervention of a regional peacekeeping force where no ‘state’ really exists to restore civil order?” (Laremont, 2001, 11).

Within Laremont’s question are three core assumptions, each more problematic than the last. First, only nations attached to states are seen as being sovereign by the international community. Second, only nations attached to states have the capability of establishing and maintaining law and order. The third and most troubling assumption is that nations without states

are seen as unprotected, underdeveloped, and ungoverned spaces ripe for invasion. Laremont proposes that only after stateless nations accept states can they claim to have sovereignty, and thus, can no longer be invaded by Western powers: “Only then can we claim that a ‘state’ exists that can assert claims of sovereignty that need to be respected. After the reestablishment of the state and order, it can be argued that intervening forces are obliged to depart” (Laremont, 2001, 12).

For Laremont and Mazrui Euro-America is positioned as the patient parent. It plays the part of the benevolent shepherd leading his developing children by the hand toward successful state centralism, law and order, and the creation of free markets. The liberal capitalist state is thought of as least likely to fail in defending its borders, generating a national consciousness, and running state institutions. Here they agree with Ghani and Lockhart again, who believe the liberal capitalist state to be the sole survivor of the Cold War’s battle of ideas. As post-Soviet states recover from misguided development strategies, the liberal capitalist state has become, just as the subtitle of Ghani and Lockhart’s book suggests, *a framework for rebuilding a fractured world*.

Over the years certain nongovernmental organizations have joined the academic fight to “fix” failed states. The American development think tank, Fund for Peace, has been a close collaborator with academics, policy makers and politicians fighting the war against state failure. Each year the Fund for Peace teams up with Foreign Policy Magazine to assess the world’s many functional and dysfunctional states. Under the rather insinuating title of *Postcards from Hell*, Foreign Policy Magazine (2010) recently released a photo essay documenting the world’s many supposed failed states. The magazine explained that it opted for a photo essay rather than written editorial because “you’ll only know a failed state when you see it” (Foreign Policy, 2010). So what did failure look like? What states did Foreign Policy Magazine compare to hell on earth? Not surprisingly the images showed failure to mostly have an African face. Familiar images of motherless children with bloated bellies, Somali pirates wielding AK 47s, clouds of smoke hovering over ravaged villages, and sexually vulnerable women played upon stereotypes of Africa being a wild terrain. Of course this wild terrain can only be harnessed at gunpoint. The only symbols of law and order were the rocket launchers, machine guns, tanks and other weapons used to stop Africans from killing each other. At least this is how we are meant to interpret it. Animalistic representations were further used to draw explicit parallels between

black bodies and wild dogs.

To explain the narrative of failure Foreign Policy Magazine opens with a parody of the Biblical Genesis in which Somalia becomes the point of origin for Africa's failure: "In the beginning there was Somalia...". The use of violent puns try dull the seriousness of Somalia's governing troubles: "Mogadishu used to be a blast!" It is hard to believe that this is widely considered the world's foremost index of government failure and success (Baker, 2003). There is something obviously arbitrary about its rankings. It is unapologetically racist; it approaches the language of "failure" from a strictly Western perspective of development ideology; and worst of all, it includes no lengthy explanation as to why states rise and fall in rank. Similar to companies listed on a stock exchange green and red arrows signify a state's condition by pointing up or down. Red means the state is increasingly fragile and sliding deeper into failure. Green means positive changes are taking place that work to strengthen state capacity. Since the list was first compiled in 2005 Eritrea has been included every year, experiencing its worst ranking this past year.

Responses to the Dominant Western Perspective

Other Western scholars have brought critical interrogation to the language of state failure used by the West, and exposed the coded racism implicit in the term. Noam Chomsky (2006) in particular has turned the language on its head, arguing that the United States is the world's foremost failed state if the criteria for failure should include a state's crisis of legitimacy at home and imperialist tendencies abroad. In his book on *Failed States* Chomsky urges readers to measure governing success and failure based on anti-capitalist theories of development.

Sardar (1999) refutes the existence of failed states altogether, and links the discourse to a Western movement promoting the nation-state as the universal form of governance as decided by European powers at the Montevideo Convention of 1933 (Ramutsindela, 2001, 93). His scholarship has been effective in interrogating modernization theorists' racist classifications of "First" and "Third" worlds while questioning whose standards are being used to measure such claims (Sardar, 1999; Tucker, 1999). Many communities of the Global South have shown they do not desire to be praised as First World citizens, just as they refuse denigration as Third World subjects. They have decided instead to measure themselves against their own failures, successes and aspirations. Sardar (1999) explains that the game of state development is rigged for Southern

peoples' perpetual underdevelopment and relegation to "other worldly" status. He elaborates that:

All developing societies are caught in a time warp where they can never really 'catch up' with the West... When the non-West reaches the point of arrival where it becomes 'developed', it has already become the past of the West. Thus the developing world cannot even live in the transcendent present... the mechanics of development are thus the ideal instrument for the Eurocentric colonization of time. With a single definitional category, the West can, and indeed has, written off the past, present and the future of the non-West. (Sardar, 1999, 46)

To live in a modern world is to accept that "modernist political theory has seen the nation-state as the only desirable and legitimate form of political organization; a people without a nation-state are thus a people without a home" (Sardar, 1999, 47). Nations without states – such as the First Nations of Turtle Island and Indigenous nations of Eritrea – become viewed with great suspicion by the state and accused of being somehow disloyal or undermining of the modernizing project.

When states nurture the Indigenous nations within them and question the validity of eurocentric developmental standards they are quickly labelled "failed states", which in itself is a branding that seeks to bankrupt the international legitimacy of states that resist Western hegemony. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, when a state becomes branded as a "failed state", it becomes viewed as somehow provoking invasion.

The African Perspective

In reality, if African states are believed to be failing it is because the state model itself is a sickly political creature. The study of statehood is effectively the study of pathology. The question then becomes not how a governing structure is being used, but what the very structure is comprised of (Samatar & Samatar, 2002).

Mainstream political science has long maintained an unbridgeable intellectual chasm between Indigenous African governing structures and "modern" ones. As a result of this chasm Africa was, and still is, denied a place within the geography of modernity. It is the opinion of Omali Yeshitela (2006) that this chasm was artificially created, not because Africa is incapable of achieving "First World" cultural norms, but because it has continuously refused the state model. From this perspective the supposed failure of the state in Somalia or Eritrea is then seen much differently. These places have not failed at state building – in the dominant sense – but

have consciously rejected the state model for various reasons. In Somalia's case, the term "failed state" becomes a term used to vilify the nation for consciously dismantling the Western-backed state. In Eritrea's case, the term is applied to describe the nation's failure to *do* statehood as the West envisions it. In both cases the dominant development industry, international community, and leading theoreticians have neglected the possibility that the state model is culturally incompatible with Africa. Leading to its ultimate dismantling by the people of Somalia, and its retraction into a totalitarian centre of power in Eritrea.

From its very inception, failed state discourse set out to force the loyalty of formerly colonized states to their "parent countries". It sought to force Africa's compliance in being moulded and remoulded to suit changing colonial interests. That this process is a dehumanizing project that seeks to rob Africans of their agency in determining the future is obvious. Indeed, "development discourse is part of an imperial process whereby other peoples are appropriated and turned into objects... the 'developed' countries manage, control and even create the Third World" in whatever image they desire (Tucker, 1999, 1).

Through the manipulative use of Western nomenclature we are witnessing the ascendance of an evolved colonialism. Much like ribbons handed out to school children to rank their performance, a paternalistic development industry hands out terminological rewards and punishments to African states. Those that bow to the interests of NGOs, international regulatory bodies, and multinational corporations are awarded "developing" status. While those that buck the system are said to be doomed for "failure". In the last decade these terms have been phased out for others believed to be more politically correct. The common language now used is "economies in transition" and "crisis states". Despite the change in terminology, these titles still seek to regulate the behaviour of African states and keep them subordinate to Western overseers. Of greater concern here is that for African societies to modernize and develop they must **a)** accept the state apparatus as the common sense form of organizing themselves, and **b)** rid themselves of Indigenous lifestyles that interfere with the modern state (Mengisteab, 2003).

The simple fact is that the dominant features of the nation-state are inconsistent with African understandings of political organization. The arrogance of trapping millions of people within arbitrary boundaries, renaming them according to colonial nationalities, and claiming to somehow represent a consensus of their interests is a uniquely European fantasy; a fantasy that seeks to deny the communities of difference and dissent that exist within each state.

The following chapters will borrow from the African perspective on state failure. I am in agreement with the position of Yeshitela and others who believe the term “failed state” to be a Trojan horse, storing within it coded associations with cultural stubbornness, political immaturity, and racial inferiority. I will adopt this perspective in tackling issues of state failure from the African perspective, and provide much needed analytical coverage of the gaps in the literature. The most important gap being that the African perspective of state failure has never been applied to Eritrea. Most of the literature on Eritrea departs from the dominant Western perspective in trying to rehabilitate the state. The second gap in literature is the failure to explore spirituality and spiritual principles as informants of effective governance, and contributing to an overhaul of the state. I will do this by speaking about the role spirituality plays in the *baito*, and how it helps structure meaningful social contracts between government and people.

These and many more ideas will be expanded upon in the chapters ahead. It is first necessary to explore the discursive framework I will use to engage the literature at hand. The following chapter outlines the conceptual underpinnings of an Anticolonial Indigeneity, and how such a framework becomes useful in addressing the problem of African nation-statism.

Chapter Three: Discursive Framework: Towards an Anticolonial Indigeneity

Always bear in mind that people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children - Amilcar Cabral (Idahosa, 2002, 1)

While giving a lecture in Havana in 1966 entitled “The Weapon of Theory”, Guinean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral outlined the features of his anticolonial praxis. For Cabral, anticolonial theory meant nothing unless it was met by its practical application. He believed that only with a meeting of theory and practice would Africa rid itself of colonization. Unfortunately, Cabral the man would never see the dawn of Guinean independence. He was assassinated by undercover Portuguese operatives in 1973. Cabral the praxis, on the other hand, survives in the fabric of anticolonial thought today. His commitment to bridging theory with practice serves as a warning to academics who remain spectators to their own ideas, as well as activists who are strong in conviction but suffer an “ideological deficiency” (Cabral, 1966, lecture). History teaches us that the two develop at different speeds. Theory is informed by and responds to action. We know this is true because at the height of the Eritrean Revolution in the 1980s, when soldiers were sketching their blueprint for the new Eritrean state, academics were still debating the theoretical merits of the Revolution.² This is not to say that one is necessarily better than the other, but to point out a fact that academics often hide from: they are nothing unless they are actors too. I say this with the understanding that actors are more than soldiers carrying guns, but include people who write their ideas with a direction towards where, why and how they will be implemented in the world. History informs us that it is when academics expose themselves to the world, when they leave the sanctuary spaces carved from libraries and classrooms, that they become actors upon it. There is no question that classrooms in themselves are contested spaces that require decolonization of another kind. The danger of classroom learning alone is that we become confined to low-access spaces that disconnect those within from those without. Praxis

² In recognizing the interconnecting functions of theory and practice, we need to critically revisit Lenin’s famous statement: “Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement” (Lenin, 1966, 69). Many Marxist-Leninist thinkers have interpreted this quote to mean that a sub-class of professional theoreticians should lead the revolutionary process. I disagree. When theory becomes institutionalized in the form of professional thinkers it becomes disengaged from mass mobilization on the ground.

allows theory and practice to coalesce around common purpose, and carves new spaces for academics and activists to meet.

All colonized peoples must develop anticolonial theories and practices from their own historical experience. It is true that anticolonialism is not an exportable commodity to be cookie cut and applied with uniformity, but a strategy that differs with each people, geography and cultural context. As the young and charismatic Cabral spoke in Havana before revolutionaries from around the world, he explained the similarities as well as differences in their fight against global imperialism: “however great the similarity between our various cases and however identical our enemies, national liberation and social revolution are not exportable commodities; they are, and increasingly so every day, the outcome of local and national elaboration, more or less influenced by external factors... *determined and formed by the historical reality of each people*” (Cabral, 1966, lecture – emphasis added). The study of history is closely connected to the anticolonial discursive framework. The related work of Frantz Fanon informs us that the crafting of a new anticolonial philosophy of history must be the toil of the colonized alone, and that Africa must lead the way in crafting it. Of course “[Europe] can offer the world no direction here in building a new history of humanity, for when it had the power to inform and unite the world, it decided instead to enslave it, and to develop all kinds of ways to deny, deform and destroy both the history and humanity of Third World people” (Addai-Sebo & Wong, 1988, 12). It is crucial that the building of this new philosophy of history employs the language of “anti” rather than “post” coloniality. The problematic use of “[t]he prefix ‘post’ in any designation alludes to a kind of conversion, a way of forgetting or repressing the past, a stage of initial forgetting” that disconnects anticolonial struggle from the historical conditions that gave rise to that struggle (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, 304). Since there is much more theoretical ground to cover in this chapter, I will wait until Chapter Four to elaborate on the connections between history and anticolonialism.

In honour of the Cabrals and Fanons of Africa my work draws from the anticolonial discursive framework. At its core, the framework is characterized by **a)** an unbridled optimism that emphasizes the possibilities rather than limitations of theory **b)** a relevant applicability to present-day communities in pursuit of decolonization. It also emphasizes that both patience and political imagination are important characteristics of the decolonizing project. Decolonization is an ongoing process riddled with speed bumps, wrong turns and dead ends. It requires a creative

interpretation of anticolonial thought to subvert the hegemonic centrist systems of power that wish to keep colonized peoples disoriented, disunited, and distrusting of one another.

Decolonization is also a personal process. Although our decolonizing paths may intersect with common interests and strategies there becomes a need to speak of both group and individual liberation.³

Although related in many respects, I have avoided “post” studies for few additional reasons. To begin with, postcolonialism has proven to be incapable of representing issues of Indigeneity and decolonization from a non-Western perspective. Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) explain the difference at length.

Whereas postcolonial theorists’ mainly depend on Western models of analysis, conceptualization, and theorization, the anti-colonial theorists seek to work with alternative, oppositional paradigms based on the use of indigenous concepts and analytical systems and cultural frames of reference. (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, 301)

The language of “anti” colonialism recognizes the continuity between the initial point of colonial disruption and its continuation well into the post-independence era. The framing of struggle in terms of “anti” colonialism further recognizes the oppositional nature of our fight against state violence, while leaving no room for people to claim neutrality. To claim neutrality is to likewise claim complicity, and if one is complicit they are in cooperation with the processes of colonial violence that the state reproduces. To paraphrase the eloquent words of former Black Panther H. Rap Brown, “you are either a slave or you are free. There is no such thing as a second class citizen. That’s like sayin’ you could be a little bit pregnant”. Like Brown, I have chosen to avoid the emptiness of neutrality and to interrogate the supposed guiltlessness of “post” studies.

Who is in history’s driver’s seat? Who decides that colonialism as we know it has graduated to a new and insistently different phase that requires our moving beyond it? “Post” studies are Europe’s answer to its own question: What comes next? Many scholars have worked hard to keep a tidy, linear sequence of history that moves from antiquity to classical, medieval to modern eras. Similarly, to adopt the historical markers of “pre” and “post” colonial eras is to organize the history of colonized peoples around eurocentric breaks in time. It allows the

³ Decolonization has no finish line or end point. It is best understood as an open-ended process rather than destination, with several fronts to be fought on. More important than one’s completion of this process is their commitment to it. A world of complete decolonization, even if impossible, is still something to be rigorously pursued in efforts to realize the best possible quality of life.

colonizer to remain in history's driver's seat (since Europe still dictates the pace and nature of conversation about colonialism). There becomes a need for colonized peoples to colour outside the lines; to break from the colonial narrative and have our own conversations about colonialism. Usually, these alternative conversations about colonialism occur through creative mediums. Linda Smith observes that for Indigenous peoples, "The Talk' about the colonial past is embedded in our political discourse, our humour, poetry, music, story telling and other common sense ways of passing on both a narrative of history and an attitude about history" (Smith, 2006, 19).

The anticolonial discursive framework makes space for these conversations to take place. It provides a site for our unapologetic opposition to oppression, in the form of *anti-racist*, *anti-colonial*, *anti-classist*, *anti-ableist*, and *anti-heterosexist* modes of thought. More than anything else it recognizes the urgency of our struggle against colonialism. The theory's great African proponents, such as wa Thiong'o (1986, 1990, 1993) and Memmi (1969), have always appreciated the urgency of state violence. Whereas the proponents of postcolonialism have not always appreciated that same sense of urgency. As one professor jokingly explained the difference to me, "anticolonial theory has never been afraid to get its hands dirty. But for postcolonial theory to actually end colonialism it would take twice as long".

In recognizing the urgency of decolonization, anticolonial thought accepts that very little has changed with the winning or granting of flag independence. The concept of *independence* must be rethought altogether. What are we now supposedly independent from? In what ways has the colonial setup changed and in what ways has it stayed the same? How much change has been experienced by the disenfranchised and underclass of the colonized world? We find very little evidence of real change since European flags flew high over the heads of Africans. We may now have our own flags to fly, but waving flags are just symbolic gestures towards actual freedom⁴. As hard fought as Africa's anticolonial wars were, in most cases the earning of independence only reoriented the colonial setup. In most cases we witnessed a race to the master's chair in which few black understudies took the - still warm- seats of their white masters. As understudies they had long studied the use of police repression, free market economics, and de-Indigenization policies used to subjugate the people. African leaders of today have no plans of ditching the effective formula of strong-armed capitalism. Many of the leaders who appeared at some point to

⁴ Which is exactly why Africa is best described as having *flag* independence.

be subversive, populist, or even anticolonial, travelled a different course just to end up in the same place. Fanon is helpful in explaining how anticolonial leaders slowly lost touch with their grassroots supporters:

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie. (Fanon, 1963, 166)

You would think the above passage is describing Kenyatta, Museveni, or any other leader who speaks the tongues of socialist collectivism but hides their fluency in capitalist individualism.

The theme of betrayal is all too familiar to the post-independence narrative. This is artfully illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. We learn the story of independence may unfold differently depending on the context, but the narrative always ends in tragedy. In the novel Achebe shares his confusion over the West's role in setting up African states for failure. His confusion is captured in the young Ikem, a hopeful nation-builder in the fictitious nation of Kangan. At one point Ikem defines Africa's poor leadership as a homegrown issue: "To blame all these things on imperialism and international capitalism as our modish radicals want us to do is, in my view, sheer cant and humbug" (Achebe, 1987, 159). However, at another point Ikem contradicts himself in attributing the problem of leadership to Western influence: "The real danger today is from that fat, adolescent and delinquent millionaire, America, and from all those virulent, misshapen freaks like Amin and Bokassa sired on Africa by Europe" (Achebe, 1987, 52). When combining both portrayals of the West we are left with a balanced theory as to why poor leadership flourishes in Africa: the capitalist conglomerate of Euro-America props up repressive African states and equips leaders with the tools to cling to power so long as they fulfill the economic agenda. In this system of proxy imperialism the granting of independence was merely a tactical move, a way for colonial powers to keep a low political profile while maintaining an economic advantage over their former colonies. The state apparatus is the central structure by which the West pushes through its policies. It is through the African state that multinational corporations are granted safe entry to rape and pillage the nation's natural resources, and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund slash government spending on health and education in exchange for state loans. These state loans then

disappear into the bank accounts of bureaucrats.

Members of the ruling party are encouraged – through the unofficial sanctioning of corruption – to plunder the state’s riches. They have first dibs on some of the most lucrative state properties, companies and loans. For example, in 2007 the Ugandan state embarked upon a privatization scheme that allowed ministers to buyout government owned businesses. During which Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa, who is coincidentally one of the wealthiest people in Africa, purchased the Entebbe International Airport at a fraction of its actual cost (Bitagira & Naturinda, 2009, 3). In South Africa, a nation believed by many to be the crown jewel of Africa’s anticolonial movements, post-independence has been remarkably more tragic. Although South Africa is often held up as Africa’s model state, the majority of people continue to face economic apartheid. In order to demonstrate the continued need for colonial resistance on the continent let us take some time to debunk the myth of the “successful state”.

Much has been made of the African National Congress’ (ANC) Freedom Charter: a people’s constitution drafted by the Front in 1955. The Charter came out of the Front’s consultation with slum dwellers, black farmers, sex workers, political radicals, and other peoples criminalized by the apartheid state. It opens with the rather revolutionary promise that “The People Shall Govern!”, and outlines few tangible steps in achieving this goal. It demands that all black South Africans be guaranteed a plot of land; living wages and shorter hours of work; free and compulsory education regardless of race or class; equal stake in the nationalization of banks, mining companies and other major corporate stakeholders; and, fittingly enough, the right to move freely throughout the state’s many segregated provinces. Since it was (materially) poor blacks who ushered the ANC into power, it only made sense for the ANC to address their needs first. The only thing in between the ANC and its delivery on these fundamental promises was the state. As it turned out, even the strong willed Nelson Mandela could not avoid the state’s red tape. The socialist ideals he espoused right up to his release from prison were not compatible with the paternalistic nature of the state, through which his government was monitored, restricted and forced to abandon its nationalization program. By the mid 1990s the Freedom Charter became more symbolic than directional for the new government. Though it remained (and still does) the party manifesto, its anticolonial contents were quickly tossed aside for more complacent politics.

Whenever ANC members quoted the Freedom Charter’s contents publically they were

reprimanded for upsetting corporate interests and discouraging investment. On one occasion during a lunch with the nation's leading investors, Mandela hinted at a return to the party's nationalization program. The following day South African gold plummeted by five percent on the All-Gold Index (Klein, 2007, 207). The plummet was a show of protest by the gold mining lobby in South Africa, and a warning to Mandela and his inner circle of idealists: if you seek to change the nature of the state and its responsibilities, we will punish you. Like Lumumba's Congo and Toussaint's Haiti before it, Mandela's South Africa would have to pay for its limited independence. By the late 1990s the ANC's anticolonial ideology of old had been completely transplanted with free market economics; a new chain around the neck of black South Africans. Leaders were successfully steered away from the subversive politics of revolutionary struggle toward the collaborative politics of evolutionary dialogue, in which the ANC worked in conjunction with the same corporations, police officials and state henchmen from the apartheid era. Many of the civil servants and ministers under apartheid retained their positions. Corporate interests made sure that the high profile financial posts were especially marked for whites. So it was no wonder that the head of the country's central bank remained in his position even after independence.

While ANC oligarchs better acquaint themselves with the new privileges granted to them by the state, which includes access to previously all-white country clubs and investment circles, underclass blacks continue to pay the cost of independence. In fact their situation has only worsened. The following statistics are telling of the ANC's "one step forward – two steps back" politics:

- Between 1991 and 2002 the black unemployment rate more than doubled, and is now forty eight percent
- As a result of high unemployment and worsening urban living conditions, the number of blacks living in shacks has also doubled (one in four live in shacks)
- In efforts to reduce poverty and generate affordable housing the ANC has built 1.8 million homes since 1994, but during that time two million people have gone homeless
- Since the ANC took power the number of people living on less than one dollar a day has doubled (increasing from two to four million)
- Whites make up only ten percent of the population but still control seventy percent of land

- Following independence South Africa surpassed Brazil as the most unequal society in the world
(Klein, 2007, 198, 215)

From these statistics we can discern that the South African example is not far from the situation elsewhere in Africa, where only a small number of oligarchs have benefited from flag independence.

Africa's post-independence oligarchs make up a small percentage of society, and an even smaller percentage of those oligarchs are women.⁵ Creating a situation in which the majority of women become non-benefactors of independence and remain spectators to the transfer of power from few white males to few black males. Thus, in our rethinking of *independence* we must gauge economic and socio-political mobility by improvements in the lives of women, while also considering how African womanhood interlocks with other oppressed social realities (i.e. queer, differently-abled, or underclass women etc.). Of the relationship between women and flag independence, Savane says

flag independence is not enough or sufficient condition. It should be accomplished by a much more profound social transformation. Feminists have also learned that changing the position of women in society is a limited agenda that at best would benefit a few and that what is needed is transforming society as a whole. (Savane as quoted in Fessahaie, 2003, 16)

Recognizing that the state is the hand that feeds them, Africa's 'big men' are more concerned with defending the state (power) from the nation (people) than the other way around. At the end of the day their beliefs and ideologies are for sale. What matters most to them is that the state remains strong, protected, and fully capable of financing their lavish lifestyles. We need only turn to the dictator in Achebe's novel: "In this job... beliefs are not my primary concern. I am no bishop. My concern is the security of the state" (Achebe, 1987, 143).

The limitations of independence teach us that physical colonization is the easier of the

⁵ I am not suggesting women should strive to join the elite club of corrupt politicians, corporate plunderers and junta leaders. I am only drawing attention to the systemic exclusion of women from positions of power. To emphasize the importance of women's involvement in political education, I call upon a Fanti proverb that is most likely attributed to Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey: "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)". The proverb speaks to women's role as the custodians of knowledge in Indigenous African societies. Given the failure of male leadership on the continent, there is a need to support female expressions of agency in the realms of political education and leadership.

two to heal from. Signs of its atrocities will fade with time. It is the ideological form of colonialism that is self-perpetuating; like a well-oiled machine that runs even when its operator leaves the room. When colonial operators left the colony their ideology remained intact, as if one final gift for the new African elite. Far from breaking with the past, the 1980s and 90s gave rise to a restored dependency between colonizer and colonized through which the former powers continued their control by proxy, operating the Mbeki's and Museveni's by remote control. If in 1952 Fanon felt the need to speak of "black skins, white masks", then today we must expand the conversation to include "black skins, white masks, and capitalist hearts". Africa's present leaders make sure that independence remains little more than a trendy catchphrase with flags and anthems to match. For Africa's underclasses the flag becomes an ambivalent symbol. In a sort of confused nationalism it conjures up feelings of victory and defeat, celebration and resentment, limited independence and continued colonization. The anticolonial discursive framework responds by ensuring that we **c)** understand the state to be an agent of proxy imperialism, **d)** we do not confuse the concepts of independence and decolonization, **e)** we define colonialism in loose and open-ended terms that takes into account its many forms, and **f)** measure change from the perspective of the most oppressed.

A natural relationship exists between the anticolonial discursive framework and Indigenous knowledges. A meeting of the two becomes necessary. While anticolonial thought urges us to rupture colonial relations of power and the structures that uphold them, such as the state, Indigenous knowledges offer us rich bodies of culture and politics to replace them with. The combination of the two, a type of *Anticolonial Indigeneity*, ensures that as we destroy we likewise build, with an understanding that building cannot take place without the re-centering of Indigenous customs. Dedicating ourselves to cultural rescue is our first task – Molefi Asante has done a lot of work in this regard through the development of *Afrocentricity* – but our second and equally important task is to orient our Indigenous cultures toward the confrontation of power. It is time Asante's work in particular is nudged in a new direction. Much of his work includes descriptive accounts of African-centered history and culture. Discussion as to how we can use these things as weapons in confronting the state and securing Indigenous livelihoods in the face of colonial encroachment often receive a back seat. For example, in much of his work on ancient Kemet Asante is successful in proving the African origins of Kemetic people and culture, but leaves little room to discuss how Kemeticism can be mobilized for resistance today (Asante,

1990; 2000; 2007). In 2007 Asante released *An Afrocentric Manifesto* to engage the major critiques of Afrocentricity. Even in this talented work he misses the boat in including a clear anti-state component to his ideology.⁶ Asante consciously avoids categorizing Afrocentricity as a political ideology, in fact he avoids the word *politics* altogether in defining it. At one point even distancing Afrocentricity from Black Nationalism because the former is a way of interpreting the world and the latter is a way of acting upon it (Asante, 2007, 21, 131). He prefers to see Afrocentricity as being a “philosophical paradigm” or “social theory”. My problem with Asante’s stance is that no cultural movement can claim to be free from politics. All culture is political, but that is besides the point. What we are after here is a culture that is not only political in nature, but steeped in unashamedly anticolonial, anti-racist, and anti-statist claims upon the world.

Anticolonial Indigeneity ensures that Indigenous culture is not reduced to an a-political body of knowledge that gets marginalized, then studied, then recovered, then reproduced. Instead, it is seen as secure enough to house revolutionary sentiments and movements. Indigenous writers such as Linda Smith, Andrea Smith and Ward Churchill have articulated similar ideas under different titles, and have worked hard to point out the necessity of merging Indigenous knowledges with anticolonial purpose (Churchill, 2002; Smith, 1999). Churchill has previously put forth the idea of *indigenism*. As an indigenist, he says, “I am one who not only takes the rights of indigenous peoples as the highest priority of my political life... This is the basis upon which I not only advance critiques of, but conceptualize alternatives to the present social, political, economic, and philosophical status quo”. Churchill continues to say that being an indigenist “gives shape not only to the sorts of goals and objectives I pursue, but the kinds of strategy and tactics I advocate, the variety of struggles I tend to support, the nature of the alliances I am inclined to enter into, and so on” (Churchill, 2002, 367). Linda Smith captures the same sense of confrontational struggle in her listing of Twenty Five Indigenous Projects. One of the projects on her list is that of *intervening*. She says “intervening takes action research to mean literally the process of being proactive and of becoming involved as an interested worker for

⁶ I feel obliged to mention that Asante’s work, particularly *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, has influenced me more than I am able to cite here. He has proven himself to be a giant in the field of African Studies and deserves acclamation for inspiring a new generation of critical thinkers. That being said, to truly do justice to his work we must engage with it in its entirety. This includes his strengths as well as weaknesses as a theoretician and the areas in which we can build upon his ideas.

change. Intervention-based projects are usually designed around making structural and cultural changes” (Smith, 2006, 147). As part of both Churchill’s *indigenism* and Smith’s *intervention* there is a focus on structural change through confrontational politics that challenge the state. There is a need to borrow from these authors and apply a distinct Anticolonial Indigeneity to the African condition. This is not to say that Indigenous knowledges are only worth studying within anticolonial struggles, but that the present moment demands a marriage between the two.

For this study it is important that Tigrinya identity and practice occupy the centre of analysis. The spatial metaphor of “peripheries” and “centres” is effective in explaining the processes and locations by/at which certain knowledges become validated, or deemed central to our understandings of the world, and others become relegated to the intellectual gutters, or deemed peripheral to bodies of essential knowledges. Indigenous knowledges serve to rupture hierarchies of knowledge while locating multiple centers for the production and exchange of knowledge theories. In a world that places great emphasis on particular centres of knowledge production, “shifting the focus of particularity to a plurality of centres, is a welcome antidote” (wa Thiong’o, 1993, 25). Through the creation of multiple centres the goal is not to move peripheries to the centre but to create new centres out of peripheries. For example, the village *baito* should not have to engage or fuse itself with the state in order to be valid. It is a valid centre of governing authority on its own. Indigenous knowledges seek to instil a confidence in these “new centers” to diagnose, name, and effectively speak to the lives of colonized peoples without having to epistemologically orient themselves towards colonial thought.

Anticolonial and Indigenous thought converge in both purpose and methodology. In terms of methodology, both systems of thought ensure that non-written forms of knowledge production are seen as theoretically valid. During our conversations about colonialism, we – as Indigenous peoples – can make use of our multiple ways of producing knowledge. We are able to see the orator as an author, or the *griot* as a philosopher. Our oral, musical and spiritual traditions are laced with sophisticated ways of explaining the world around us. Non-written mediums of conversation are seen as pedagogically equal to the written form. They are seen as having the potential to shape our anticolonial expression.

History tells us that Indigenous ways of knowing are often used for anticolonial ends. The Kemetics wrote the names of their enemies on pots and smashed them to prophesize their victory in war; Toussaint L’ouverture’s Haitian army called upon *Vudun* spirits to protect them

from bullets, allowing them to defeat Napoleon's army; the *griots* of West Africa used their oratory traditions to speak out against colonial injustice; and Tigrinya musicians travelled alongside the revolutionary Front playing their *keboros* (drums) and singing songs of liberation to motivate the fighters. From these and many other examples we see that Anticolonial Indigeneity includes written as well as non-written ways of producing knowledge, uniting people, and forging resistance.

Myths, proverbs and poetry are also useful educational tools. In Tigrinya culture myths are used to demonstrate good behaviour to children and allow them to practice critical thinking in the process. For example, children are reminded of the warthog who befriended a pack of small birds, only to eat them in a moment of greed and weakness. With no birds around to fly high above the forest and warn the warthogs of hunters, they were each captured and slaughtered, disrupting the forest's ecosystem over time. This particular story is told to remind children of the importance of collectivity. When one is too greedy or individualistic to take part in the collective they leave themselves vulnerable to being harmed. Ancient Kemetic proverbs were similarly used to instruct children on moral-ethical codes. They were widely spoken and became preserved in society's collective consciousness. Some of the more popular proverbs come from Pharaoh Khety's instructions to his young son, Merikare. In which he advises Merikare to use intellectual tact before physical strength: "be skilled in words that you may be strong – the king's tongue is his mighty arm" (Foster, 2001, 193). Others warned against greed and materialism: "let not your heart lust after riches", or the sanctity of nature: "the best and shortest road towards knowledge of truth [is] Nature" (Foster, 2001, 212).

Kemetic poetry was also integrated into classroom learning. Much of the poetry that emerged from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055 – 1650 B.C.E) theorized the connection between the living and spirit worlds. Both literature and orature allowed one to engage with the metaphysical world, communicate with spirits, and preserve a place for oneself in the afterlife. A love poem recorded in the Papyrus Chester Beatty IV explains the importance of reading and speaking when communicating with the dead. The poem is meant to illustrate the permanent connection between the living and living dead.

*Man dies, his body is dust,
his family all brought low to the earth;
But writing shall make him remembered,
alive in the mouths of any who read.*

*Better a book than a builded mansion,
 better than body's home in the West,
 Splendid above a fine house in the country
 or stone-carved deeds in the precinct of God.*
 (Foster, 1992, X; original text dated to ca. 1300 – 1100 BCE)

Poems such as this one reveal the instructional nature of Indigenous knowledges, and how that instruction is often transmitted through spiritual mediums.

Indigenous knowledges appreciate the theory within spirituality. Wane (2000) reminds us that spirituality must be treated as a discourse, and one with the potential to act as a site and tool for decolonization. Although questions of the spiritual nature are often frowned upon in the academy, Indigenous knowledges have always been inclusive of beliefs in the metaphysical, ancestor worship, and the power of the unknown. Meanwhile, disciplinary thought has proven incapable of addressing spiritual questionings. As a student in the academy I have personally witnessed the failure of the classical disciplines to address spirituality. Political scientists tell me that spirituality is not scientific enough; theologians tell me it lacks the structure and dogma of organized religion; and anthropologists claim my spiritual analysis is not objective enough given my location within it. Indigenous knowledges recognize the utility of spirituality. Spiritual ways of knowing allow us to break free from the trappings of theoretical rigidity. They allow us to move away from notions of rationality, objectivity and scientific method, in search of a more holistic way of producing knowledge. Spiritually grounded theories make room for a community of knowledges that honor the many ways Indigenous peoples explain the world and how it came to be. This includes creation stories of Turtle Island, such as the Sky Woman who gave birth to the world on the turtle's back (Antone & Elm, 2000). Just as it includes creation stories of the Tigrinya nation, such as the creator god Asgede, who after creating the first couple retreated back to his home in the Red Sea (Habte Selassie, 2007, 3).

Another characteristic of Indigenous knowledges is the belief that humans exist as part of nature. We are just one cog in nature's wheel. Other natural life includes plants, animals, elements and the spirit world, each occupying an important and interdependent relationship with the whole. Thus, Indigenous knowledges reject human-centered conceptualizations of the world that position humans as masters of nature.⁷

⁷ Many thinkers who place humans at the centre of their analysis when it comes to nature were influenced by Nietzsche. Of Nietzsche's many passages about the relationship between humanity and nature, there is

Indigenous knowledges are also critical of the idea that humans somehow live beyond nature. This critique can be summed up through the answering of a popular North American riddle: *When a tree falls in the forest but nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound?* The question is full of assumptions about nature and humanity; nature is frozen in time, only to be set into motion by humans; sound is a strictly human experience; animals are devalued life forms etc. While the arrogance of Western knowledge would emphasize the fact that *nobody is around to hear it*, Indigenous ways of knowing appreciate that nature is a dynamic force and continues to function when humans are not present. From the Indigenous perspective, when a tree falls in the forest it effects ecosystems, disrupts some animals' homes and creates new homes for others. The tree itself is a plant that experiences pain, relief, growth and other sensations similar to human emotional capacity. When a tree falls in the forest not only does it make a sound but it has real consequences and benefits for the life around it. Furthermore, far from being mastered by humans, nature is a repository of information that we are dependent on for our survival. Indigenous knowledges recognize that humans (along with other life forms) are merely custodians of the land and are obligated to take care of it. Amongst Indigenous Hawaiians this obligation is referred to as *malama 'aina* (Holmes, 2000, 44). We must listen to the earth when it speaks to us in the form of harvests, lightning, earthquakes, rises in global temperature etc. When listening to the earth we should also ask ourselves how the state apparatus works to help or hinder the preservation of our planet. Wane asks, "Why have nation-states institute[d] laws that are contrary to the laws of nature? Why do 'Third World' states allow multinationals to clear virgin forests and plant cash crops? Why do nation-states allow advanced states to dump nuclear waste on their land in exchange for food and aid, when they know the consequences?" (Wane, 2000, 66). These and similar questions expose the tendency for the state to commodify natural resources, pollute ecosystems and prioritize profit over environmental health.

Finally, Indigenous knowledges are steeped in notions of collectivity and mutual benefit. They encourage us to look beyond individual accomplishment to consider what is best for the group. In Indigenous African worldviews individuals highlight their good deeds, wealth or status by how much they can contribute to the welfare of society. For this reason "Africans reject the Hobbesian image of the comparative, isolated individual who lives in fear of others and is

one particularly troubling line: "We are at the top, we are at the top; we are the completion of nature!" (Fukuyama; 1992, 55)

protected from them by the state of community” (Dei, 2000, 75). Predatory individualism is not seen as natural or productive and is met with punishment. It is important for each member of society to see their identities as forming in relation to one another. It is important that they see themselves as representing the shared values and traditions of their community as a whole.

In an academic world where theory is almost exclusively associated with Europe’s intellectual traditions, the African thinker becomes pressured to follow the ideological path laid out by those traditions. Even in institutions of so called “higher learning” – which is itself a hierarchical and classist term that assumes the leveling of intelligence – he is often deemed a non-contributing spectator, he is considered a black body with no theory encoded in its blackness. Fanon tells us that the African intellectual only becomes “elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the [European] cultural standard. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (Fanon, 1967, 18). He is encouraged to immerse himself in the writings of Kant, Marx, Foucault and other custodians of intellectual authority, but never encouraged to see his own body as a site of theory, never encouraged to see his own body as holding any experiential knowledge of its own. The same can be said of the African woman, who is just as often silenced by the voices of white feminists who claim to speak for and from her position. I argue that the black body is indeed encoded with theory. Much of what Foucault has to say is drawn from personal experience. Similarly, part of believing the African body is encoded with theory is having the confidence to speak from lived experience, to recognize the authority of our own voices. As African intellectuals it is important we articulate our own cultural standards whenever possible, and that we speak of the unique purpose, expectations and course of our research as serving a broader African agenda. It seems fitting to quote a proverb that promises “a stick thrown in the river will never become a fish, no matter how much you want it to be”. Meaning a people’s journey to solve their own problems begins with a knowledge of self; a knowledge of who they are as a people. Only at the point of self recognition can they look within themselves to find the medicines to heal their hearts, minds and spirits.

Before developing a knowledge of self, one must first develop a strong sense of history. For this reason, it is necessary to begin the conversation of Indigenous governance with a treatment of history. The rise of the state model as the supposed universal norm is related to the purging of African history and the planting of a myth in the minds of Africans that we have no governing traditions of our own.

Chapter Four: From the Hamitic Myth to Heart of Darkness: Unlearning the Myth of an Africa Without History

In a word, to forget our history is to deny and forget our humanity. For history and humanity are dialectically linked - Maulana Karenga (Karenga, 1988, 15)

Students of history are often led to believe that Europe is the centre of history, culture and civilization. As a young student I too was encouraged to memorize the map of Europe and familiarize myself with the names of major rivers, cities and mountain ranges. I quickly excelled in the study and became familiar with the continent's course of growth. From its early steps of antiquity to the so-called "modern" era, I had mastered Europe's resume of accomplishment. Eurocentric breaks in time - such as the distinction between the "modern" and "pre-modern" eras - became my means of organizing of history. Many of my classmates were envious of my knack for the study. I would often perform my knowledge for them with quotes from the Napoleonic Code, versus by Chaucer, or meditate on Aristotle's philosophical queries. I wore my knowledge of the continent as a badge of pride. My pride, however, had nothing to do with my own history.

Over the years my interest in began to fade. I slowly became more interested in my own history, and searched for Africa in my school's vast library of whiteness and eurocentrism. Africa was never a topic of conversation in history classes until I reached university. As early as I could remember, just as I left my boots and coat at the classroom door as a child I similarly "undressed" myself of the oral histories, proverbs and other learning traditions I practiced at home. I was expected to divorce myself from the past, unless of course that past belonged to Europe. And so in the lonely hallways of my all-white school I walked with my guard up, remembering that my educators considered African history to be taboo - even divisive - in a space that claimed to celebrate diversity and inclusion in all its forms.

In secondary school I found myself with a rare opportunity to learn about African history in a course entitled "Ancient Civilizations". However, halfway through the year I realized that even though the course passed itself off as world history my teacher had no intentions of including Africa in the narrative - for the continent had no history to speak of. I was left feeling as though my Africanness had no historical legitimacy; as though there was no rich tradition of accomplishment to place myself within. Perhaps more harmful was that I became envious of the white students around me who took pride in mapping their ancestral roots as emanating from

Greece, Rome, England, Scandinavia, eastern Europe and so forth. The European students of other backgrounds may not have located themselves in these particular cultural geographies, but they still identified with the stories being told, and more importantly, with the bodies who were featured in them.

After some time I found the courage to demand inclusion of African civilizations in the curriculum. My argument was rather simple: how could I be expected to be excited about learning when I could not see myself reflected in or personally implicated by my studies? What was the point of integrating the African body into the classroom if the African narrative was still banned? After some pestering my teacher conceded and promised to dedicate an hour of the next class to the study of African history.

When we arrived for the next class there was a blank map of the continent on each student's desk. Just as I was trained to do in my study of Europe we were asked to fill in the ancient cities, empires, rivers and mountain ranges that we knew of. Only this time instead of taking the opportunity to flaunt my knowledge, I sat staring into the blankness of my map. There was something deeply troubling about that blankness. I could not label a single kingdom let alone name Africa's great philosophers. As a result my map remained blank, and did so for many years to come.

I reflect on the blank map as a useful metaphor in explaining the lack of knowledge that many Africans have of their homeland. It speaks to the processes of selective remembering and forgetting by which we study history, and the overwhelming propensity toward Africa's erasure. As a result of this erasure many of us are forced to look to Europe for identification. To paraphrase the words of Kwame Toure on the precarious battle over the ownership of history, "the particular history of Europe usually becomes the general history of the world". Of particular interest here is the relationship between African history and the development of governing structures. There were several philosophies of governance that took shape over Africa's long history of civilization. Yet, with the continent's ongoing acceptance of foreign governing models that have no resonance with African history we see that it is still European history that informs how Africans organize themselves politically.

Davidson (1992) argues that the look towards Europe is symptomatic of an acute alienation – or depersonalization in Fanonian terms – in which Africans suffer the burden of believing they exist without history. Thus, the nation-state becomes a constant reminder

inscribed in the lives of nearly one billion Africans that European political traditions are to be valorized; they are to be understood as intellectually superior systems with a universal monopoly on truth and morality, while Africa's past is to be wiped clean from the annals of history. What we require now is the unequivocal restoration of history. We need to treat history not simply as a collection of names and dates but a body of transformative knowledge that can be brought to life as a pedagogical tool in the present. History is filled with the unbroken trajectory of Indigenous values and traditions that speak to the needs of Africans today. In the remainder of this chapter, I expand on Davidson's thesis and examine the historical conditions in which Africa became constructed as a land without history.

In the so called "New World" just as in the old one, Europeans washed upon the land with great envy and admiration for their hosts. In an early diary entry describing the Indigenous peoples of Haiti, Spanish missionary Bartholome De las Casas observed that

...all the land so far discovered is a beehive of people; it is as though God had crowded into these islands the great majority of mankind. And of all the infinite universe of humanity these people are the most guideless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient and faithful to their native masters... These people are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world. They were very clean in their persons, with alert, intelligent minds (Bradley, 1978, XVI-XVII)

De las Casas' admiration was echoed by the early visitors to Africa. In 1520 a Portuguese missionary by the name of Francisco Alvarez visited the ruins of Axum in present-day Eritrea, and commented on the brilliantly crafted obelisks, ancient churches and rich traditions that were not found in Europe. When Alvarez' expedition visited the local ruler he presented him "a gold sword with a rich hilt, four pieces of tapestry, some rich cuirasses, a helmet and two swivel guns, four chambers, some balls, two barrels of powder, a map of the world, [and] some organs". All of which was sent by the King of Portugal as a show of gratitude for the shelter and hospitality provided by the "well educated, and courteous" Axumites (Alvarez, 1970, 10, 12).

In the case of Axum as in Haiti European envy quickly turned to bitterness. The intellectual and spiritual strength of the African world became - as if overnight - a point of fear rather than friendship. More precisely, it would be at the dawn of the sixteenth century with the rise of European claims to modernity that Europe's perceptions of Africans shifted significantly. Just one century after De las Casas celebrated the godly nature of his gracious hosts, Spanish

conquest decimated the Indigenous population of Haiti, followed by Napoleon Bonaparte's promise to "destroy the authority of the blacks in Saint Dominique [Haiti]" shortly after that. Bonaparte explained that his hatred for Haiti's blacks was "not so much based on considerations of commerce and money, as on the need to block forever the march of the blacks in the world" (Ros, 1991, 124). This is a quote often ignored by Napoleonic historians and deserves closer examination. As students of history we must ask ourselves few questions in relation to the quote. Chief among them is, why did Bonaparte fear a "march of the blacks" both in Africa and abroad? What was it that gave rise to feelings of fear, disdain and perhaps even jealousy where mutual tolerance and non-aggression once ruled?

As Bonaparte and his contemporaries saw it, African history and culture encapsulated both the secrets for Europe's development as well as an imminent threat to its supremacy in the modern world. It appeared at once that in the modern world Africa was to be emptied of the rich history and culture that was previously celebrated by Europe. The continent was to be first re-historicized as having no experience of antiquity, and then re-imagined as being a vast blank space that Europe was obligated to fill with the fruits of Enlightenment. Leading British Professor H.E. Egerton to conclude in 1922 that Europe's invasion of Africa was nothing more than "the introduction of order into *blank*, uninteresting, brutal barbarism" (Davidson, 1992, 66 - emphasis added).

Europe's quest to fill Africa with itself provides us the very definition of colonialism. As Fanon said of the relationship between colonialism and history:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (Fanon, 1963, 210)

In Europe's attempt to distort, disfigure and eventually destroy African history, it did, however, experience few problems. How could the surviving evidence of Africa's glorious past be explained? How could the Great Pyramids of Kemet, obelisks of Axum, astrological calendar of Dogon, or Zulu poetry exist in a continent without history? More importantly, how would Europe deny that these things were of distinctly African origin?

The answer would lie in nineteenth century theories of Africa being developed through the mysterious arrival and settlement of a Caucasoid sub-group, otherwise known as the Hamitic

Myth. One of the myth's greatest proponents, John Hanning Speke, wrote that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by Hamites. The Hamites were a group of biblical origin. They were described as "dark-skinned European pastoralists" who built the many kingdoms of Africa before leaving them to the blacks (Basaninyenzi, 2006). The myth's proliferation spread the idea of Africa being a lawless land since the only legitimate codes of law and order were those brought by the Hamites and they had since left. With the Hamites exit no political structures, laws or codes of civilized conduct were left in place. Barbarian societies sprung up everywhere and relapsed the continent into pre-Hamite darkness.

Towards the end of the century, tropes of an ungoverned heart of darkness presented Africa as free for the taking in the eyes of Western observers. As we have come to see, a central justification for colonialism was the notion that Africa was a land without history, and thus, a blank canvas on which Europe's quest for empire could be drawn. Eritrea was just one of the many colonies to be held hostage by this myth. In one document from the Italian era, authorities rationalized their occupation with claims that the territory was "without history" (Cliffe & Davidson & Habte Selassie, 1980, 27). Around the same time Joseph Conrad released one of the most influential books in shaping Africa's image in the world. In the poetic racism of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) Africa was described as a "prehistoric earth" still caught in the cradle stages of history-making. Conrad claimed that Africans themselves "still belonged to the beginnings of time" with "no inherited experience to teach them" how to progress (Conrad, 2006, 35, 40). He saw in Africa a remote kinship, a sort of similarity to Europe's distant ancestors.

In the influential writings of Conrad and his contemporaries Africa was typically associated with images of darkness. Within those images of darkness were implicit meanings that conjured up more images of evil, paganism, cannibalism and a-historicism. Of course Africa's supposed darkness contained within it a new hypothesis, one that postulated an Africa scientifically (as opposed to moral-theologically) inferior to Europe. It would be under the auspices of such biological superiority that Europe rationalized its enclosure and dispossession of the continent.

Europe's imposition in Africa may have been framed by colonial authorities as a civilizing mission, but what actually took place was the violent uprooting and displacement of Indigenous practices. Complex spiritual systems were displaced by Christian crosses and white washed images of God, Indigenous ways of identifying were overtaken by national ones tied to

colonial geographies, and perhaps worst of all, traditional governing systems were tossed aside to make way for European styled nation-statism.

We cannot simply engage the topic of African history as a “removed history” as some scholars have tried (Fukuyama, 1992). The fact of the matter is history is never as removed or static as some would have it. Instead it continues to survive, mutate and influence the present moment. African history can be understood as a living organism with the ability to effect the present. In other words, we are capable of looking back in order to serve the present as well as steer the course to the future.

It is important that the process of looking back is not mistaken for a romantic return to a mythical past that never existed. Our histories may be archives stocked full of Indigenous wisdom and transformative knowledges, but they are also plagued by instances of sex based discrimination, intra/inter-community violence, and other traditions of exclusion that should not be replicated. From Mobutu Sese Sekou’s gulags of the 1970s to Isaias Afwerki’s internment camps in Eritrea today, many African statesmen have carried out their terrorizing of the nation under the guise of defending Indigenous tradition. For this reason, *we* – as students and proponents of Indigenous knowledges – must guard against the field’s misappropriation.

While recognizing the need to re-centre those traditions that can alleviate African suffering in the present, we must also be mindful to distil the helpful elements from the harmful. In the words of Mohawk scholar Taniaiike Alfred, we must “regenerate” only those elements of the past that serve to celebrate and improve upon our traditions. In his book *Peace, Power, Righteousness* Alfred elaborates that

by ‘regenerating,’ I mean taking something old and making it new again. We are not saying, ‘Let’s go back to the way it was two hundred years ago.’ But let’s take the power of what was, let’s take what’s useful, let’s take what’s powerful, and let’s make it something we can use to go forward. (Alfred, 2009, 159)

Our regeneration of history must move past clichés of Indigeneity existing in a locked glass case, with recognition that it is dynamic, interactive and forward moving. If we are unable to rescue our histories from the clutches of colonial distortion it will remain a weapon used against us.

The lies that portray African peoples as peoples without history are dangerous even though untrue. A leading Marxist thinker once explained that lies told often enough become truths, in that after generations of living, breathing and eating those lies, the people in question will accept their lesser position in the world without a fight. They will accept the truth about their

inferiority even if that truth had grown from lies. The theft of history is a potent weapon in the colonizer's arsenal. When you control a people's history you control their relationship to the past, sense of self worth and capability in the present, and the possibilities and limitations by which they imagine the future. In short, you control their understanding of self in relation to humanity. In this way we should understand history and humanity as being dialectically linked, so that "the greater appreciation you have of your history, the greater the grasp and appreciation of your humanity" (Karenga, 1987, 21).

History has two fundamental tendencies, that which is rising, coming into being and reifying its existence in the world, and that which is dying, decaying and falling deeper into subordination. The contest over history is the contest over which people occupy which position. The tides of time are forever shifting the relations between dominant and dominated; powerful and powerless; colonizer and colonized; humanized and dehumanized; and status quo and revolution. For the oppressor the goal becomes to maintain the security of their power at all costs. There is no consideration of lost lives or damage to the planet. All that matters is their clinging to power. For the oppressed the goal is not simply to overthrow the unjust system that keeps them subordinated, but to radically reconfigure the relations of power in the world. The goal becomes to turn history on its head; to replace the oppressive dichotomy of colonizer-colonized with a new relationship based on mutual exchange. Until then the interests of both camps remain antithetical and never converge. The oppressor can never ally with the oppressed since their very privilege is justified through claims of supremacy, purity and civilization. The oppressor uses a series of historical myths to denigrate and suck the fight from the body of the oppressed. Through myth making they re-create the black body. The black body becomes re-created as being savage and godless. It becomes associated with cannibalism and hyper sexuality. Africans are then indoctrinated to live, breath and eat these lies, and to accept their lesser place in the world. The oppressor uses a separate yet related set of myths to re-create themselves. Freire (2000) notes that the colonizing process can only be achieved by "the oppressors' depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo: for example... the myth of the heroism of the oppressor classes as defenders of 'Western Christian civilization' against 'materialist barbarism' ... the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed, as well as the myth of the natural inferiority of the latter and the superiority of the former" (Freire, 2000, 139-140).

It is the ultimate opinion of this study that history is a liberatory tool. Only when we mend the chain of ancestral knowledge broken by colonial imposition can we truly speak of African liberation. Until then the concept of liberation will remain an elusive one. As African peoples, we more than any other people must theorize liberation beyond its material definition: flags, voting cards, anthems. That the African state is a residual of arbitrarily carved colonies is no secret. It does not correspond to Indigenous geographies, nor does it respect the pre-existing governing institutions of Indigenous communities. By rejecting the legitimacy of the African state a vacuum of power is created. This vacuum can be filled with solutions drawn from the annals of our own history. By rejecting the state apparatus in search of Indigenous governing alternatives we put ourselves in a position to act upon our histories. In the words of anticolonial revolutionary Thomas Sankara, we put ourselves in a position to learn from the lessons of our ancestors in order to “invent the future” (Davidson, 1992, 241).

Indigenous governing practices will play a key role in our invention of a better future for the continent. In order to speak of this process with specificity, the next chapter explores the potential of Indigenous practices used by the Tigrinya people of highland Eritrea and neighboring Ethiopia. I begin by providing an anatomy of the village *baito*, its philosophy of governance, and the core functions it performs on a day-to-day basis. Next, I apply the tenants of Anticolonial Indigeneity to examine how the concepts of Indigenous nationalism and trans-territorial identity could be used to subvert the Eritrean state, its national ideology, and the arbitrary borders it is encased in. Of importance here is the way in which borders operate to sever ancient communities and pit them against one another. I close the chapter with an examination of state violence. In this final section I am especially interested in the troubling relationship between state violence and de-Indigenization projects pursued by the state. As we will see, violence becomes a weapon used by the state to purge the nation of its traditional sites of leadership and political and spiritual ceremony. Let us begin by outlining a clearer understanding of the *baito*'s structure.

Chapter Five: Indigenous Nations v.s. Colonial States: The Case of Tigrinya People in Eritrea

For all its many shapes and forms colonization can be reduced to three fundamental types. The first type occurs at an *institutional* level. During which foreign agents seek to break the back of local systems of social, political and economic organization, making locals dependent on newly imported institutional models. In the case of Eritrea, the village *baito* was first attacked by Italian authorities who feared it as a rival to colonial authority, and second by the revolutionary Front-turned-state upon its ascendance to power in 1991. As will be discussed later in the chapter, the *baito* (along with the many other Indigenous governing institutions) continues to pose a threat in the eyes of the state, in that **a**) it provides an alternative site for political organization and undermines the state's monopoly on power, and **b**) its communal and participatory nature differs from the oligarchic nature of the state.

The second type of colonization is a matter of *consciousness*. The groundbreaking work of Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) in the area of colonial linguistics has shown us that as part of the colonizing mission, the colonizer seeks to control how the colonized self-identify at both the individual and group levels. Many African states have encouraged the re-identification of citizens, by which they emphasize national (imposed) identities overtop regional or culture (Indigenous) ones.

The third and final type of colonization is of a strictly *physical* nature. It includes the physical violence, torture and imprisonment used by the state to create an atmosphere of fear and complacency. Physical colonization also includes instances of land enclosure and dispossession, a tactic that has been repeatedly used by the Eritrean state in its attempt to displace society's "undesirables", including women, Muslims, lowlanders, Indigenous leaders and other dissenters. In this chapter I explore the ways the Eritrean state has learned and appropriated oppressive strategies from its former colonial masters, and continues to colonize its people in the aforementioned ways.

Anatomy of the Village Baito

"It may be fairly easy to understand that new nation-states, emerging from imperial or colonial oppression, have to modernize their institutions, their modes of government, their political and economic

structures. Very well. But why then adopt models from those very countries or systems that have oppressed and despised you? Why not modernize from the models of your own history, or invent new models?” – Basil Davidson (Davidson, 1992, 19)

The village *baito* has its origins in antiquity, most probably the Axumite era between 100 B.C.E. – 700 C.E. As an institution that has survived for roughly two thousand years, the *baito* has only matured through its many adaptations to local needs and circumstances. We can only assume that it survived the test of time by ridding itself of many destructive or disparaging characteristics. To provide a full anatomy of the *baito* we must include a treatment of Axumite political culture. It becomes necessary to study Axum in order to familiarize ourselves with the political historical context in which the *baito* came to be.

When discussing Axum it is important to consider the empire in relation to other global powers of the day. Stanley Burstein (1998) comments that...

At the height of their power, the kings of Axum ruled an empire that extended from the Upper Nile Valley in the west to Yemen in the east and was considered together with Rome, Persia, and China one of the four great empires that divided ancient Eurasia and Africa between them. (Burstein, 1998, 14)

Burstein’s description of the Horn of African region, which consolidated Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region and Eritrea’s highlands, is revealing of the vast territory controlled by the centralized monarchy of Axum. For this reason it is necessary to speak of the ancient land as an African “empire” rather than “kingdom” or “chieftaincy” (Kobishchanov, 1979, 36); the former is a term historians too often reserve for descriptions of ancient European powers, often inconsiderate to the fact that Africa had a number of powerful civilizations of its own. If we consider the empire’s size in terms of present-day geographies we see that it spanned at least five countries and two continents, a vast distance by any measure.

Many ancient figures had documented the rise of Axum. The Persian philosopher Mani, who was also one of the world’s leading historians during the third century, included Axum as one of the four great political forces of his day. He recorded that “[t]here are four great kingdoms on earth: the first is the kingdom of Babylon [Mesopotamia] and Persia; the second is the kingdom of Rome; the third is the kingdom of the Axumites; the fourth is the kingdom of the Chinese” (Kobishchanov, 1979, 59). As a result of these and similar first-hand historical records we have reason to believe that Axum picked up where Kemet left off as one of the world’s “supreme commercial power(s)” (Phillips, 1997, 52). It should also be noted that Mani’s writings

appear nearly two hundred years before the empire's peak in the late fourth century.

The lack of scholarly attention paid to Axum has so far prevented us from fully uncovering just how vast the empire was at its peak, and details of its rich governing institutions remain contested. The limited evidence suggests that sometime during (or before) the Axumite era the *baito* became entrenched as the preferred method of local decision making (Mengisteab, 2003, 208), where as the monarchy focused on more macro issues: tax collection, military operations, and foreign relations. Systems like the *baito* became a way for local communities to negotiate the highly centralized nature of the state. It allowed them to take matters into their own hands to ensure equitable access to land, sustainable farming practices, conflict prevention and resolution, and appointing militias to protect the village (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, 126). Of course communities were still beholden to the watchful eye of state, but much of the time state authorities (*mengisti*) – be they tax collectors or judicial representatives – did not have the capacity to monitor rural areas. As a result, the countryside became a safe haven for Indigenous institutions. It became a sort of last bastion of egalitarian models for decision making and conflict resolution. Over the years these ancient political structures remained intact, even during foreign sieges the invading forces were often restricted to major cities and ports. As the Horn of African coast came under attack by Arab expansion from the East, and then settler colonialism from the West, the *baito* continued to function in the shadows cast by foreign rule.

From its very inception the *baito* acted as a site of checking (if not fully subverting) the power of the ancient state. It provided local support networks for communities outside the state's realm of control. During the Axumite era in particular, the *baito* institutionalized concepts of communalism and democratic process in a state where the *Nagasi* (king) led a more absolute monarchy. The Christian monarchy itself was founded on concepts of divine kingship and individual title, under the guise of which the hoarding of wealth became easily justified (Munro-Hay, 1991, 150-152, 198).⁸ At the crux of the issue is a historical tension between Indigenous and imposed institutions of governance. The *baito* has never meshed well with the centralized state, whether Axumite or colonial. The tension is an ideological one. It is a matter of the Indigenous versus colonial claims to power, horizontal versus vertical understandings of that power, and populist versus oligarchic methods of sharing power. Before discussing how the

⁸ More recently authors have started to rethink the Axumite monarchy, and have reason to believe power was conferred to leaders through election rather than inheritance. Robin Walker's *When We Ruled* (2006) offers further discussion on the subject.

baito conceives of and operates power let us first take time to review the institution's internal makeup.

The *baito* is led by the village *Chiqa* (judge), sometimes called *Dagna* depending on the region. (For purposes of consistency I will use the first naming). Since a person must be widely respected by village members prior to their selection, the title comes with great prestige and confidence of leadership. For this reason it is often former soldiers, teachers, healers and medicine men, farmers, or charismatic socialites who occupy the position. The position is also exclusively awarded to elders since in Tigrinya custom political leadership is measured by one's level of experience in the world.

Chiqas are typically chosen from the eldest male members of village kingship groups (*Gebars*). One must be able to have children to prove their ability to contribute to the growth of their family, and the growth of the village by extension. *Gebars* with many children are all the more favoured since children are symbols of prosperity and accomplishment. Sterile or unmarried men are typically omitted from the selection process since they are considered to represent smaller families, and thus, deemed less essential to the growth of the village. The sociological formula for determining *Chiqas* can be understood as: age + family size + popular support + dedication to the principles of *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna*. Of course the last two variables are not quantifiable and are left to the discretion of villagers. Popular support may be shown to *Gebars* who assist neighbours at harvest, share farming equipment, mediate conflicts, or pay alms to disadvantaged neighbours. The practice of *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna* will be discussed later in the chapter.

A recent study of Mai Weini, a small village in the Akele-Guzai sub region of the Kebessa, found that village leadership rotated equitably amongst families. If there were seven families living there then each had a member serve as *Chiqa* before another family repeated the cycle (Tronvoll, 1998). In this sense we must divorce the concept of *Chiqa* from dominant interpretations of African chieftaincy. Unlike the permanency of most chieftaincies the office of *Chiqa* rotates in order to curb the power of any one family, religious group, locality etc. The office's constant rotation ensures that power is accessible at all times and immersed in the people at large. Leadership skills are popularly developed in order to create a leadership mass rather than leadership class. As a result, in case of death, impeachment or any other reason for a *Chiqa*'s abrupt removal, there is a reserve of experienced leadership ready to fill his place.

Lastly, the office's rotation avoids the development of a permanent minority since the demographics of those in power are constantly changing (i.e. a Christian *Chiqa* from X kinship can be unseated by a Muslim *Chiqa* from Y kinship). Authoritarian rule is rare if not impossible within such a system because the selection process is consensus-based, and blends new as well as ancestral practices that prevent the hoarding of power. In this way the *baito* contrasts winner-take-all types of election systems within which minorities become vulnerable to the dominant group.

Winner-take-all types of election systems have the tendency to subjugate the minority (whether they are ethnic, religious or political groups) to the tyranny of the majority. This type of adversarial election system is alien to the consensus-based traditional system of governance of the village *baito*. No doubt, elections would be essential in modern state systems but they can be modified so that they are compatible with societal values and protect minorities as the traditional institutions manage to do. (Mengisteb & Yohannes, 2005, 124)

Ultimately, the difference between the *baito* and state system could be boiled down to consensus-based versus domineering measures for organizing society.

Although there is no set term *Chiqas* usually serve several years before giving way to a successor. Their role is best understood vis-à-vis the *Shimagle*: a broad village assembly that includes elders from each major kinship group. Members of the *Shimagle* are limited to a term of one year and have no unilateral powers outside of the assembly. Their role is simply to collectively discuss and rule on village affairs. To discourage nepotism or their preferential treatment of family members, *Shimagles* are sometimes denied a voice concerning matters involving their own family. The more contentious village affairs are decided through majority vote. However, the use of voting is rare since *Shimagles* are trained in consensus-based decision making. Voting is mainly used to gauge how far or close the assembly is to consensus on an issue.

The *baito*'s ancient democratic culture works to trouble the myth that democracy is a purely Western phenomenon (Diop, 1974; Legesse, 2000, 93). The fact that democracy (as a concept) has developed a 'common sense' association with Classical Greece deserves closer scrutiny. What were the ancient Puntites doing when they selected local leaders through majority rule, if not exercising democracy? What were the Kemetics doing when they held periodic referendums on the Pharaoh's ability to rule through *heb sed* festivals, if not exercising democracy? Do these instances of democratic practice not predate and predetermine the

developments of Classical Greece? If so, then perhaps Classical Greece is not as “classical” as we once thought, but better understood as developing political traditions that were original to the region but not to the world at large.

It seems democracy cannot be traced to a particular historical period or located in a particular geography from which it supposedly spread. Indigenous societies have long practiced democratic principles ranging from notions of “one wo/man, one vote”, to judicial arbitration, to the impeachment of irresponsible leadership. In this sense democracy is not a fixed historical creation. It is a fluid conversation of responsible governance held between civilizations, and is invented and re-invented thousands of times over. With each re-invention come sociological and cultural adjustments that make its practice unique.

Democratic practices take on different names and functions in the world. In the *baito*, the consensus-building process is called *Smemeh Abeiti* (“Elders Agreement”) and is reached through the *Shimagles* coming to an agreeing on matters brought before them. This process is also used in the selection of new village leaders. A council representative goes from house to house tallying each elder’s nomination for *Chiqa*. When the most nominated person is determined, each elder is asked to pray for him before the ancestors.⁹ In the spirit of non-biased and equitable decision-making all potential *Chiqas* are discouraged from taking part in the *Smemeh Abeiti*. In few villages the *Smemeh Abeiti* is held publically. In which case all potential *Chiqas* line up before the village and *Shimagles* place an olive branch at the foot of the candidate they support. The “olive branch system” diverges from Western democratic voting systems in three key ways.

First, unlike Western voting systems which are often clouded by secrecy and left vulnerable to corruption or ballot box stuffing, the public nature of *baito* elections ensure honest and transparent politics. Also unlike Western voting systems, public votes are considered group rather than individual rights and require extensive consultation between village groups/families before votes are made. Lastly, where Western voting systems are premised on the assumption that all voters are literate (in writing), the *baito* system offers oral, written, and visual means of showing your support for a candidate, as exemplified by the olive branch.

In the Oromo *gada* system electoral powers are instilled in the *Warra Qallu* (“the family

⁹Spirituality plays an important role in the selection of a *Chiqa*. *Shimagles* are expected to bless the new leader as a sign of their support. When praying for him the *Shimagles* ask that he remain healthy, strong in conviction, and that he live up to the expectations that the ancestors have of him.

or descent group”) and take place in the *cora olla* (“the village meeting”) (Legesse, 2000, 136). The *gada* system is even more democratic in nature than the *baito*, since all votes and major decisions are held in forums open to the public. Through these and other examples it is clear that Africans have reason to claim democracy as part of our political heritage; our versions of which may take on different names and conceptual frameworks, but share in the overall pursuit of responsible and participatory government.

In spite of its many effective functions the *baito* does have its limitations. The most glaring limitation is the de facto and de jure exclusion of women. Although women are important actors in other (perhaps alternative) spaces of social organization, the village council as a whole is reserved for men; which creates an obvious gap in perspective when it comes to decision making. Here I am conscious to avoid the use of “patriarchy” in describing women’s exclusion from the *baito*. Although their exclusion is no doubt discriminatory in nature and works to reinforce male privilege in local politics, I believe patriarchy to have its conceptual origins in white masculinity. White men have historically asserted patriarchy over black women as well as black men. In this respect the term is both gendered and racialized in a particular way that fails to diagnose misogyny outside of the Western context (hooks, 2004).¹⁰

Following the Eritrean Revolution women’s organizations demanded that the new state address the gender imbalance in village politics. The Front’s women’s wing, the National Union of Eritrean Women, released a publication in 1999 confronting the issue:

in traditional Eritrean society, women neither had the right to vote, nor be elected in the village council of elders [Shimagle]. They could neither attend nor negotiate their cases at the village council of elders, nor could they attend and negotiate their cases at the village assembly. Women could only present their cases to the council through their male relatives. These exclusionist and discriminatory practices continued during the colonial era, and were reflected, for example, in the fact that women were not allowed to vote during the brief semi-parliamentary rule of the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation in the 1950s. (National Union of Eritrean Women Publication. Nov 1999, Cited in Fessahaie, 2003, 30)

This is not to say that women have not fought hard for centuries to reverse the male-centeredness of political life, but that no widespread reverse of these exclusionary practices has taken place. There is, however, a long history of women’s resistance around this issue. My mother’s village can be used as an example. In Adi Nifas, a rather small village located five miles north of

¹⁰ See the work of bell hooks for more on this topic, particularly *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) and her chapter on “Plantation Patriarchy”.

Asmara, local women have long been known for their assertiveness as political actors.¹¹ The spirit of womanhood came to anchor conceptions of local identity and historical purpose, since villagers see themselves as coming from a proud line of female figures. Having grown up in Adi Nifas as a child my mother can recall many courageous women who voiced their dissent to the *batio*'s misogynist practices. During the all-female gatherings that took place at the same time as *baito* assemblies, she quickly learned that Tigrinya womanhood was steeped in a tradition of anti-misogynist struggle. She shares, "I have found in reviewing my family's own history that our great-grandmothers and grandmothers had been voicing their opinions regarding the need to take women's needs and priorities into consideration for centuries" (Fessahaie, 2003, 29).

My mother recalls her widowed great-aunt in particular, Adai Sendek,¹² who used to sit in on village council meetings to protest women's exclusion.

At the time only men led this council. Adai Sendek used to show up at these meetings unexpectedly and voice her opinions about land and farm issues. She also voiced her own insights and shared her wisdom regarding other important village issues and spoke on behalf of other widowed women...The fact that my aunt defied tradition to attend these meetings represented a strong form of rebellion on her part against the traditional patriarchal order and provided me with a powerful role model to emulate as I was growing up. (Fessahaie, 2003, 30)

My mother's comments shed light on the contagious nature of women's protest against the *baito*. Although excluded, women do not allow their exclusion to stunt participation in other realms, such as social activism. For example, Adai Sendek shaved her head as part of her rebellion from cultural norms. In Tigrinya culture a women's hair is an important social indicator. Depending on how it is set, braided or adorned, a women's hair can indicate whether she is pregnant, looking for a partner or engaged to be married. By shaving her head Adai Sendek was acting in protest as she detached herself from a primary social indicator and directly challenged gender expectations.

Adai Sendek and others like her carry on a tradition of opposing misogyny in all its forms. With their goal being to infiltrate male-only spaces and reassert their collective interests and identities as mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, workers, healers, soldiers and caregivers.

¹¹ In fact the capital city of Asmara was formed through an alliance of four women and their associated villages (Habte Selassie, 2007). Women of the Horn of Africa are generally considered effective negotiators, informal political mediators and strategists.

¹² The title "Adai" is associated with great respect, admiration and wisdom. Although it translates literally to "mother" it is often attributed to female elders in general.

From these stories we learn that Tigrinya women act with agency and self direction in resisting misogyny. As Tigrinya men our role is not to lead women by the hand in changing the social order but to take on the role of allies and supporters. It is not up to us to initiate resistance because women like Adai Sendek have been resisting for centuries and making their presence felt and valued in the public sphere.

The second limitation of the *baito* is the reduced role of youth. Although they are able to sit-in on general discussions young people are often reduced to mere spectators of the political process. Given the cultural emphasis placed on aged-based wisdom, youth are widely regarded as being politically immature. As a result of the sidelining of women and youth the *baito* suffers from a crisis of perspective, as elderly men control the institution's structure and mandate. More than anything else this aspect needs to be updated. It needs to be fused with a more participatory culture that makes room for the voices of women and youth.

What can we learn from the *baito* and other ancient governing models of its kind? In spite of popular stereotypes that misrepresent Africa as solely a place of dictatorships and political oppression, the *baito* offers us a healthy contradiction. It provides us evidence of an ancient political system that operates on principles of shared rights, communally agreed upon authority, and processes for removing irresponsible leaders.

The *baito* also has a Pan-African familiarity. Many of its features can be found in governing structures throughout the continent. It parallels the *gada* system used by Oromo people from Ethiopia and Kenya, the *kgotla* of Botswana, and the Igbo village assembly of eastern Nigeria (Mengisteab, 2003, 209). The Yoruba also operate a hauntingly similar governing system complete with parallel positions for the *Chiqa* and *Shimagle*.

These systems, much like other localized African governing systems, are based on notions of consensual power. They make power consensual in the sense that each elder is elected to the assembly based on their age, lineage, and the good deeds they have performed in their lifetime. In situations where community members lose faith in an elder their removal from power becomes justified. These sorts of checks and balances are absent from the state system, where institutional capacity is associated with small leadership, the use of repression, and unilateral decision making.

Practices like *Wefera* and *Adetatnan/Abotatna Kem Zemharuna* in particular provide checks and balances on village leadership, and ensure that leaders remain loyal to the age-old

laws of the ancestors. These principles are found in both public and private spheres, from agriculture to financial co-ops, child rearing to conflict resolution. They command great respect in Tigrinya culture and must be understood as part and parcel of the *baito* institution. In order to enhance our understanding of the *baito* the next section outlines these two principles, and how they are applied during times of *Msigar* (naming ceremony) and conflict resolution.

Core Principles: enacting the spirit of Wefera and Adetatnan/Abotatna Kem Zemharuna

Wefera

In Tigrinya tradition there is a fundamental understanding that what we have, we share. This statement could be extended to include the belief that what we do, we do together. Our fundamental unity of being can be seen in our traditions of eating together, collective parenting, and cooperative work sharing. Perhaps the greatest example of our communal culture is captured by the spirit of *Wefera*.

Wefera refers to an agriculturally-based tradition of work sharing during times of harvest, where neighbors gather to assist farmers in need. A farmer may need support due to untimely illness, death in the family, or migration to the city. In which case they make appeals to *Wefera* to raise support. Habte Selassie recalls growing up in a community of such communal values: “At harvest time... whenever the head of the household was absent due to illness, death or other reasons during a harvest season, village social custom decreed that the harvest was gathered through a cooperative effort known as *wefera*, in which members of the extended family pitched in to help” (Habte Selassie, 2007, 6). Around harvest time there is much preparation work to be done. All available family members participate in the cutting of crops with sickles and placing them in piles to dry out in the open field. Prior to harvest the same family members would have gathered to weed the field. If the workload is too much for the extended family to cope with an appeal to *Wefera* can be made to the village at large, most probably through the village assembly.

Collective good is achieved through collective education. *Wefera* is an enticing concept precisely because it makes room for multiple sites of education – the home, the workplace, the classroom etc.. Through collective education every individual is made a student and teacher at once. The spirit of *Wefera* ensures that unity takes place through an understanding that every individual has intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual knowledge to share with the whole.

In this sense, learning occurs in the farm fields where farmers share planting methods, advice on which crops to plant, and take turns guarding each other's plot at night. Learning also occurs when villagers gather to build a family's home. Each villager contributes a specific skill set needed to complete the home. Some may have an expertise in carpentry or metal work; others may be gifted in irrigation or interior design. During times of *Wefera* each person is encouraged to barter their knowledge of one profession for knowledges in others. The division of labor usually correlates to age. Elders apply their building experience to design the home so that it is sturdy, while youth tend to do the heavy lifting. At the end of the work day all participants are thanked through the provision of food and drink. This usually includes a fist full of *injera* (traditional bread), *sebhi* (meat stew), and *swa* (homemade wine).

It is important to differentiate *Wefera* from dominant notions of charity. Charity takes place through a one-sided donation of time or resources and fails to bridge the gap between those with power and those without. In contrast, *Wefera* is seen as occurring on a mutual basis. There is no bitterness or resentment between those in need of assistance and those providing assistance, since everyone requires *Wefera* at one point or another. In this sense one's provision of assistance is more of a social investment with the expectation that the investment will be returned at a later date. The philosophy is understood as being process rather than occasion based.

Wefera's spirit of communalism and social equity is captured in similar concepts across Africa. Among them are the Swahili concept of *Ujaama*; Southern African concept of *Ubuntu* ethics; Akan concept of *Susu*; and the spirit of *Esusu* valorized by the Yoruba (Dei, 2000, 75). These Indigenous philosophies ensure that there are multiple entry points to community sustainability and development, since all members of the village have the ability to call upon the collective for help. There is no question that such philosophies play a guiding role in the continent's development and movement towards self-reliance. "According to the Economic Commission on Africa (1983), development will be achieved if, and *only* if, the continent succeeds in promoting collective self-reliance and self-sustainment" through the implementation of these and similar concepts (Elabor-Idemudia, 2000, 112). In contrast to dominant development ideologies premised on the spread of capitalism and its culture of competitive individualism, *Wefera* offers an alternative approach to development. It is one based on principles of shared labor and spiritual reward for those who lend out their labour. Meanwhile,

the mainstream development industry, forever plagued by its reliance on a charity-based relationship between rich and poor, remains trapped in a top down approach to development. As a result, “the practice of ‘doing’ development for the ‘poor’ – and now the ‘poorest’ – has contributed to the many failures to generate successful policies... the expansion of capitalism as a new model of development has heightened the polarization between the rich (developed) countries of the North and the poor [underdeveloped] countries of the South” (Elabor-Idemudia, 2000, 113). In fending off the encroachment of foreign development ideologies Africans can look to their own traditions of development, such as *Wefera*, for a blueprint in strengthening national and sub-national communities.

Although *Wefera* has its origins in farming practices its tenants can be found in other social spaces. The spirit of mutual benefit could be interpreted in financial terms too, in the form of *Ughub*. *Ughub* is best described as a traditional credit union. The fund is managed by a group of women – usually neighbors, coworkers or friends – who pay into it periodically. When a member of the *Ughub* requires money to pay for household supplies, clothing or children’s school fees, they withdraw the “pot”. She then pays back into the *Ughub* and allows other women to withdraw the pot on a rotating basis. *Ughub* enables women to access large sums of money at any given time. It acts as a bank without forcing participants to pay interest on their loans (Fessahaie, 2003, 86). Withdrawals may also be made by the group to offer support to women who suffer unexpected financial burdens, such as the death of a loved one or family relocation. It is interesting that *Ughub* is by no means unique to Tigrinya tradition and is practiced all over Eritrea with slight modifications.

As the traditional caretakers of household resources and finances, women are able to exercise power and discretion. They are in charge of designing the family budget and allocating funds however they see appropriate. *Ughub* instils great power in women’s choice to decide; over *boon* (traditional coffee ceremony) and socializing they work together to decide matters such as which schools their children will attend, how many oxen to purchase for the farm, and when to purchase new clothing. Participants are provided the start-up capital and support to make important decisions that affect their family’s wellbeing. Wane reiterates that “women’s collective efforts have given them voice and confidence, and enabled many African women to own property, send their children to school, and raise their families’ standards of living” (Wane, 2000, 107).

Not only is Ughub an effective financial framework for organizing African societies, but its practices are finding use in diasporic communities as well (Wane, 2000, 107). I can recall sitting by my mother as a boy as she participated in an Ughub circle of her own. Although we were based in Toronto, the roughly ten women who attended followed traditional practices with rigidity. They made boon and laughed deep into the night as they traded stories and updated each other on the changes in their lives. They took time to actively listen to one another, to share in each other's joys and collectively mourn their sorrows. As the lone boy in a room full of assertive female figures, my mother's Ughub instilled a powerful image of Tigrinya women in me. I can imagine the meetings were even more important for my sisters, for whom it demonstrated that Tigrinya women can forge spheres of influence in an otherwise male-dominated culture.

The circle provided the group a socio-economic safety net in times of crisis. I remember a time when one of my mother's friends broke down in tears before the group. Although I had no idea what was taking place at the time, I found out years later that the woman had been suffering domestic abuse at the hands of her husband. The women were quick to hear her story and offer their support. Money was instantly withdrawn from the pot to assist her moving out of the house, and some of the women offered her a place to stay in the interim. Although my mother's friend only worked a part-time job with limited funds of her own, Ughub granted her a great deal of leverage since she was able to access direct loans from outside her husband's stream of income, and thus, shifted the dynamic of power.

Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna

The second principle underlying the *baito* is that of *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna*. This is a popular phrase meant to remind Tigrinya people of the wisdom and life's lessons passed down by our ancestors. The vast body of ancestral lessons can also take the name *Hgi Endaba* ("the ways of our ancestors") (Ande, 2010). Within each naming there is an understanding that it is the socio-spiritual obligation of all Tigrinya people to walk in the cherished footsteps of those who came before us.¹³ In other words, fundamental to

¹³ In order to walk in the footsteps of those who came before us we must first know who they were. Similar to the *griots* of West Africa, Shimagles serve a dual function as family historians. They are tasked with memorizing the family trees that make up their village. Their ability to place ancestors within the same Great Story affirms a sense of connection to the past and continuity between the living and living

Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna is the notion that the solutions to our problems today can be remedied by **a)** spiritual consultation with our ancestors in the form of prayer or offerings, and **b)** loyalty to the rich body of Tigrinya social customs that have taken shape over centuries.

Of course the Eritrean state has tried hard to make the ways of our ancestors subordinate to the laws of the state. In spite of these efforts one Eritrean journalist optimistically notes, “I am not sure if the government has succeeded in emotionally alienating our people from Hgi Endaba”. Given their strength and dedication to ancient custom, the Tigrinya people of the Kebessa have remained loyal to their traditions in the face of the state’s “unrelenting effort to erase our cultural and religious heritage in prejudice to its socialist oriented political regimentation and acculturation” (Ande, 2010). As we will discuss the state’s de-Indigenization campaign later in the chapter, let us now focus on the conceptual fabric of *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna* as entrenched in the *baito*.

Much like the philosophies of governance used by the First Nations of Turtle Island, the *baito* governs based on a form of “self-conscious traditionalism”. Self-conscious traditionalism is two pronged in its meaning. First, it explains the need to return society to a wholly Indigenous framework of political organization. This requires “nothing less than reclaiming the inherent strength and power of indigenous governance systems and freeing our collective souls from [the] divisive and destructive colonized politics” housed by the colonial state (Alfred, 2009, 104). Of course this must be done through the re-centering of the *baito* as the supreme authority and spiritual nucleus of the highlander village unit. Second, self-conscious traditionalism defines Indigenous knowledges as forward moving and dynamic. Although our ancestors bestowed great wisdom upon us there is a need to update, reform, discard or rescue those teachings based on their applicability to us today. For example, the *baito*’s structure may have been designed with the ancestors’ best intentions in mind, but as explained earlier it silences the voices of women and youth. Although the *baito* remains a useful site of authority, unity and political organization, there is a need to update its structure to include those marginalized groups that have long been denied participation.

dead. Through anthropological field research conducted at Mai Weini, villagers proved to trace their genealogy back forty to fifty generations, right back to the legendary King Meroni who is regarded by the Tigrinya people of Akele Guzai and Hamasien as the original ancestor (Tronvoll, 1998, 48).

Core Functions: the examples of the Tigrinya naming ceremony and conflict resolution

Msigar: The Tigrinya Naming Ceremony and the Formation of Political Subjects

The *baito* oversees several social and political aspects of village life. Perhaps none is more important than the welcoming of new community members. A healthy *baito* is one that has many participants available to contribute to political discussion and decision making. For this reason child birth is considered a divine act, since it is the first step towards forming a new generation of political subjects. By sustaining a healthy population the *baito* ensures the replacement of *Chiqas*, *Shimagles* and other contributors to the village assembly. Although excluded from the village assembly, Tigrinya women set the stage for governance by giving birth to and naming children. The *Msigar* acts as a compensatory space for women where they can exert leadership and spiritual agency. Although seemingly unrelated, the *Msigar* inaugurates new members to the community, who after being named in accordance with age old traditions, become potential participants in the village assembly as either actors or spectators. Therefore, a direct connection must be made between the act of naming and the formation of the Tigrinya political subject.

For obvious reasons women are important actors in child-birthing and naming practices. As mothers they are generally thought of as spiritual guardians of the village children. Afua (2000) notes that

to mother means to master the art of the nurturing spirit. Mothering calls you to order. It demands that you move beyond weak, impatient, quick to anger. Mothering calls you to speak and act from your spiritual centre, which may supply you the ancestors for all your questions and concerns on mothering. Mothering is ultimate healing work (Afua as quoted in Fessahaie, 2003, 83)

In this way African motherhood deviates from motherhood in the Western context. Within the *baito*'s framework, mothers are granted a greater degree of autonomy than other women. They do not depend on men nor are they relegated to the domestic setting. Mothers are seen as actors of the public rather than private sphere. In the Tigrinya worldview, much like the rest of Africa, notions of a "nuclear family" are less important than notions of communally shared and openly practiced mothering (Wane, 2000). Women are spiritual guardians of their children. As spiritual guardians their most important role is to carefully select a name for the newborn.

In Tigrinya tradition, to name someone is to commemorate the act of creation. Our names house deeper, self-reflexive meanings that influence our growth as people. The spoken word is a powerful tool in bringing our names to life. When we speak the names of our ancestors, for example, we are bringing them back to the realm of the living. This tradition is poetically captured in the ancient Kemetic creation story from the city of Memphis, where the creator god Ptah is said to have *khepered* (created) the world's many creatures by speaking their names to life. The ancients applied the philosophy of spoken truth to personal names as well. They believed that to speak one's name in a respectful manner was to affirm the meaning within it, and with each affirmation the meaning was brought to life (Shafer, 1991, 178). The tradition of divine utterance and prophetic naming can be found throughout the continent today. From Yoruba Land to Oromia, the Nuers of Sudan to the Zulu Nation, a person's name holds a spiritual significance often lost in the shallow naming practices of the West (Shafer, 1991, 176). Let me use the example of my own name.

"Aman" is a Tigrinya name with historical prevalence in contemporary Eritrea and Ethiopia. It best translates to English as meaning "peace". The name was given to me to commemorate the unique timing of my birth. My parents brought me into the world in the midst of the revolutionary struggle. With a backdrop of violence and warfare my parents chose my name as a testament of hope; hope for both a peaceful resolution to the war and the realization of an independent Eritrea. The people of the Horn use naming as a way to prophesize the future. This can be seen in the number of children named "Awet" (victory) towards the end of the Revolution.

According to Tigrinya tradition, when one abandons or disfigures their name they likewise disfigure the meaning *alive* within it. They are left feeling torn, imbalanced and rather unsettled when people call them by their new name; for their new names were not given to them through ceremony and are haunted by blankness; a hollowness that is void of history. African spiritual worldviews tend to see one's name as a self-fulfilling prophecy or core truth that needs to be nurtured to be awoken. This is why so many Indigenous societies place great emphasis on a child's naming ceremony. The very moment a child is named will reinvokethe past, commemorate the present, and help define the future. Whether that child grows up to celebrate or deface that name can also have profound implications on their life.

The Tigrinya naming ceremony can span up to twelve days. It is known to Tigrinya people as the *Msigar*, meaning “transition” or “renewal”. When a child is conceived they are temporarily referred to as “Endu” for a boy and “Hintit” for a girl. These are vague names that are used as equivalents for “baby”. For the first twelve days after giving birth both mother and child do not leave the house. It is believed that our names protect us from malicious spirits. If the newborn leaves the house without a name s/he is vulnerable to attack by evil eyes and could die prematurely. Thus, extra precautions are taken by family, friends and community members to protect the newborn until they can collectively decide a name. Part of the baby’s protection includes their continuous bathing and wrapping in blankets. The emphasis on cleanliness is again related to ideas of purity and divine protection.

Following days of all-women meetings on the subject, and long discussions over *boon*, a name is selected. It is crucial to point out the prominent role that women play in the institution of naming. Prior to the Christianizing of the Tigrinya highlands and the associated spread of patriarchy, women played an exclusive role in the selection of names and mediation between the physical and metaphysical worlds. More contemporarily, the child’s father will select a name that is representative of the ancestor the child most clearly resembles or embodies. In other instances a name is chosen based on lands, totems, religious symbols, or in relation to an event that marks the unique timing of their birth. For example, my father’s brother is named Asmalash, meaning the “one who returned a member to the family”. The name was chosen for him because just prior to his birth, my grandfather had arrived home alive after being conscripted by the colonial regime to fight in Libya during WWII. Until my grandfather’s return home his family feared he might have perished in the war. When they discovered he was alive they used my uncle’s naming to celebrate his return. Another example would be my friend Mereb, who was named in tribute to the river that historically separated Tigrinya highlanders of the Kebessa from their neighbours to the west.

Regardless of which name is chosen a celebration is sure to follow. The newborn’s mother will be elegantly dressed in her finest *nitsella* (traditional shawl) with a *macombia* (ceremonial crown) to match. For the first time in twelve days she will be ushered out of the house to jovial songs of renewal and family continuity as harmonized by community members. Our names, whatever they may be, are believed to be co-produced by community members who are bounded by principles of collective participation and collective good. During the re-

emergence of the newborn's mother after twelve days of rest, her friends and enemies alike attend to celebrate the cycle of life.

Many components of the Tigrinya naming ceremony can be found in the naming practices of other African societies. Asante's description of the Yoruba naming ceremony is especially haunting in its similarity:

Upon birth, a newborn is sprinkled with water so that he will cry... Girls receive their names six days after they are born and boys are named eight days after birth. During the naming ceremony, the baby is bathed in water, which is then set outside. When family and friends arrive, they ... offer suggestions for the infant's new name. Babies are frequently named according to the circumstances surrounding their birth, or else after a particular deity the villagers worship. (Asante, 2007, 32)

The common thread in many African naming ceremonies is the importance of patience in selecting a thoughtful and sacred name. In some cases it is one week, two weeks, or even one month before the child is named.

Over the years this common thread has been captured in popular fiction. In the opening scene of Alex Haley's epic novel *Roots*, the birth of Kunta Kente is described at length: "By ancient custom, for the next seven days, there was but a single task with which Omoro would seriously occupy himself: the selection of a name for his firstborn son" (Haley, 1974, 12). Haley elaborates that in Kunta's Mauritanian village it was a priority that his name was "rich with history". It needed to position him in a historical Mandinka narrative that linked his spirit with those of his ancestors in the same Great Story.

When we rename ourselves in new environments today, we dislodge ourselves from the Great Story of our ancestors; we lose the titles of familiarity and meaning that connect us to the living, living dead, and the unborn. It is also through our Indigenous names – whether given to us or assumed later in life – that our spirit survives our physical existence. The ritual recital of an ancestor's name in order to ensure their wellbeing in the afterlife is found in many Indigenous communities today. J.S. Mbiti has noted that amongst many African peoples one's "recognition by name is extremely important. The appearance of the departed, and his being recognized by name, may continue for up to four or five generations, so long as someone is alive who once knew the departed personally by name" (Mbiti, 1989, 25). When we rename ourselves we leave this world only to be unrecognizable in the next. We remain out of touch to the descendants that wish to speak our names back to life. We die having turned our back on our authentic Self.

Perhaps worst of all, we empty ourselves of the rich philosophical meanings, geographies, symbols, ancestors, and divine principles we were named after.

I thought it would be fitting to close the topic of naming with the guidance of a spiritual giant in my life; my grandmother. Although I never had the opportunity to develop a relationship with my mother's mother, her teachings survive in my mother's memory and are passed on to me, piece by piece. Over the years my mother's stories of Mamma Biserat have painted a picture that is starting to clear. It is a picture of a remarkable woman full of wisdom and spiritual guidance, of a woman who had great pride in her heritage and humbly accepted her place within the ancestral line. In discussing the topic of naming with my mother she was reminded of a proverb used by Mamma Biserat. She shared it with me in the hopes that it would illuminate the importance of naming in Tigrinya tradition, and now I am sharing it with you:

When you name a child, you are filling their cup with the water of life

Principles of Conflict Resolution

In the Kebessa, conflicts are mediated through a body of ethics that governs inter and intra-community relationships. The parameters of these ethics are not absolute or fixed, but outline a set of basic ideas that are meant to be engaged with, challenged and built upon. These ethics are anchored by few basic understandings that are meant to guide the community's practice of conflict resolution and prevention. They include:

1. *Preference for local rather than universal knowledges.* Community members are open to the multiple sites of knowledge and its production. Each *baito* recognizes that its customs may differ from neighboring villages, and as a result, it is best to avoid imposing universal claims or broad generalizations on the world. Knowledge is understood as most effective when emanating from local contexts and responding to local concerns.
2. *Inter-community cooperation.* Townships, villages and districts are seen as living in harmony with the world at large. Inter-community harmony is protected through overarching *Endaba* codes that outline how communities are to interact with one another. For example, when a caravan from one village enters another it is granted safe entry under the protection of *Megedi ArBeA* ("the road of a caravan of forty") (Ande, 2010). This particular doctrine calls for every highland village to designate a road for foreigners to use for safe passage. If travelers are intrusive or overstay their welcome the home

village can protest by claiming “*Ngezay Ember Megedi ArBea AwTiEilu*” to the visitors’ *Chiqa*, literally meaning “[they] turned my home into an expressway by coming too frequently and uninvited”. Unwritten codes such as these serve to reduce conflict between communities, and work towards applying the spirit of *Wefera* at the inter-community level.

3. *Intra-community cohesiveness*. Community members are expected to show great trust and respect for ancestral codes. They take pride in their sense of shared heritage and set up cultural boundaries and membership criteria to sustain the community. The *baito* is tasked with enforcing these boundaries. When a village member commits a punishable act against another there is a process in place to mediate the situation.
4. *Commitment to due process*. There are clear procedures used by the village assembly to mediate different conflicts. To provide specificity we can take the example of land disputes. Arable land is evenly redistributed amongst households every so often (usually every seven years). With marriage every couple is allotted a *gibri* (share of arable land). Given the importance of land to rural livelihoods, most conflicts arise when the boundaries of farmland are contested by neighbors. When a farmer imposes on their neighbor’s *gibri* – maybe to steal harvest or plant his/her own crops – the victim can take his/her complaint to the village assembly. To do this, they along with a representative of the *Shimagle* travel to the offender’s home and speak the words “*Zidan mengisty egri egrai ketseed*”, meaning, “In the name of the government follow my footsteps”. At which point the offender is obligated to attend the assembly and will have his/her turn to speak following the victim. The *Shimagles* determine the outcome based on consensual decision making. If the offender is found to be in the wrong they pay *Kasha* (compensation), a similar restitution to the injured party is called *Mug* in the Somali system. *Kasha* is always determined in relation to the severity of the offense and provides leveled compensation for the victim’s benefit alone. For example, the offender would not be lashed or asked to pay the village assembly because that would not address nor level the harm done. Instead they would either provide the victim with a plot of their own land or give them a portion of the next harvest. This keeps the victim’s emotional, physical, and material wellbeing at the centre of the conflict’s resolution.

The following table explores other characteristics of the *baito*’s justice model and

how it deviates from the dominant state model. From it we discern that conflict resolution is not centered on punishment against the offender, but rather preventative measures that place the victim's injury and well being at the centre of analysis.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Justice Models Used by the Village Baito and the Dominant State

Concept	Response	
	<i>Dominant State Model</i>	<i>Village Baito Model</i>
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualized as operating on a vertical axis, where each level of government holds more power than the one below it (i.e. Head of State holds more power than Vice President, Vice President holds more power than Chief Justice etc.) • Power is highly centralized, vested in select individuals, and kept distant from the majority of citizens. Citizens are believed to exert power through elected representatives they may or may not support but have no direct influence over state operations • A “productive citizen” is one who participates in the electoral process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualized as operating on a horizontal axis, where governing roles are not divided into levels but complimentary parts that sustain the whole (i.e. Chiqa does not hold more power than Shimagle, but works in partnership with them) • Power is decentralized and shared in a consensual system of decision making. Elders are seen as custodians of the community's well being, but do not hold a fundamental advantage in deciding village affairs • A “productive villager” is one who works towards change in any capacity; inside or outside the nomination process
Crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined dialectically: offender versus the state. Crime is treated as a violation of state's authority, the highest form of which being treason: a crime <i>against the state</i>. The parameters of acceptable and “criminal” behavior are defined in strictly legal terms (outlined by the state), and give precedence to acts of physical violence • Crime is fault of the individual • Crime is viewed with zero tolerance • The victim becomes sidelined in the process of determining, judging and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined in relation to the victim(s) loss, pain or spiritual unrest. Crime is treated as a violation of the community's respect for life, the highest form of which being murder. The parameters of “constructive” and “destructive” behavior are defined according to ancestral code. The code is mediated by elders. It is inclusive of acts of physical, material, emotional, and spiritual violence • Crime is fault of individual first,

	sentencing the offender	<p>and second by the village community for not working to prevent it</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime is viewed in whole context – spiritually, socially, politically, and economically (i.e. one’s stealing of food may be related to poverty and hunger) • The victim(s) is placed at the centre of analysis.
Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis is on inflicting pain or financial penalty. Punishment is defined as imprisonment, execution, torture or fine. Imprisonment is meant to force offender to pay their “debt” to society; execution seeks to remove the supposed source of the problem; torture seeks to “fix” the offender without any moral-ethical interrogation of their actions; and fines seek to profit the state rather than those affected by the crime • Offenders retain a record of their offense and remain stigmatized in future dealings with the community • One social injury is replaced with another 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis is on restoring social harmony and providing support for those affected. The families of both victim(s) and offender(s) are brought together to discuss possible solutions, with village elders acting as facilitators. Space is made for the victim(s)’s family to suggest punishment but execution is not considered. Crime and punishment are believed to have long-term effects: What will it mean to the parties involved? What will it mean to the community? Offenders are indebted to the victim(s), victim(s)’s family and community at large • Offenders are given a space to express remorse or plea for forgiveness
Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice is delivered when the state establishes blame. The accused must be found either “guilty” or “not guilty”, with no room to nuance these rigid categories. Thus, the victim’s wellbeing is secondary to the state’s investigation • Justice is defined by due process and the functioning of law without human interference • Delivery of justice is dependent on law enforcement professionals (i.e. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice is delivered only when healing and transformation take place. It is witnessed first by the community’s ongoing support for the victim(s), and second by the offender’s transformation • Justice is defined by collective grieving (<i>hazan</i>), the reestablishment of social harmony, and measures to prevent reoccurrences • Delivery of justice is not

	<p>police, parole officers, prison wardens etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state's relationship with the offender remains adversarial and accusatory 	<p>dependent on professionals but instilled in the community's sense of moral-ethical grounding and obligation. Anyone is able to mediate on behalf of victim(s) or offender(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The baito's relationship with the offender remains intact, but they are expected to show changes in behavior or greater punishments follow
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Now that we have explored the *baito*'s anatomy and philosophical underpinnings, we can move on to the question of identity. More specifically, how Indigenous and state identities engage one another and define themselves by different – often competing – nationalisms. After looking at the roots of state nationalism in Africa, the next section explores the potential of Indigenous nationalism in Africa at large, and Eritrea more particularly. Indigenous nationalism becomes a way to restore group identities previously severed by colonial rule. Through such “alternative” nationalisms we can work towards restoring a sense of trans-territorial identity and nationhood.

Re-asserting Indigenous Nationalism and Trans-territorial Identity

State Nationalism

“For many groups, there is an event which takes on the dimensions of an origin myth, an event in the past which is held to have shaped the essence and the destiny of a group, and towards which everyone still orients when thinking about collective identity” – Monica Heller (Heller, 1999, 146)

It is true that every state invents its nation; every state constructs a national ideology that regulates who does and does not belong. In some cases this is a gradual process that occurs over time, while in others it is more accelerated. Through national ideology traits are invented to define the “productive citizen”, “internal enemy” and “national Other”. Essentially, the process of constructing friends and enemies is controlled by the state. It is the state that defines the characteristics of each and serves as the self-appointed defender of the national soul. This is most evident in Europe's history of nation formation.

Following the French Revolution there was a popular belief that the post-revolutionary

state would develop a national consciousness through language consolidation. The state's territory was still very much divided along lines of culture, wealth, language, and ethnicity, and desperately required a unifying force to invent the nation. Although French was previously used by the Monarchy much of the territory did not speak it as a mother-tongue. E.J. Hobsbawm (1990) provides a telling statistic. He notes that "French was essential to the concept of France, even though in 1789 50% of Frenchmen did not speak it at all", and "only 12-13% spoke it correctly" (Hobsbawm, 1990, 60). In contrast, following the revolution the newly risen bourgeoisie quickly mobilized a sense of territorial and cultural belonging in and through the use of French. How did the elite justify their promotion of French in place of other local languages? First, the language was said to be most capable of articulating the revolutionary principles of *liberte, egalite, and fraternite*. Second, the elite claimed to have masculinized the language (and national character by extension) in correction of the less grammatically structured, more "feminized" French spoken in the court of King Louis XVI.¹⁴ Third, unlike the aristocracy before them, which was unapologetic in its hoarding of land, the revolutionaries cultivated an illusion of meritocracy. They marketed French as the language of social equality. In theory, everyone had an opportunity to learn French and of those who did the most qualified were promised equal access to owning land, job opportunities, and state services (in the form of positions in the military and schooling) (Higonnet, 1980).

Language became the barometer by which one's citizenship in the new nation was measured. What is important here is that the issue of land disparity, which was a central concern of the revolution, had not changed much under the new regime. The revolutionaries-turned-bourgeoisie had been freed from under the thumb of land holding aristocrats and put in a position to take their place as national landlords. They were also in a position to exploit the liberal-democratic values they preached. Behind rhetoric of equality, meritocracy and national bonds, they introduced property rights to make their ownership of the land permanent, restrict the working class from social mobility, and safeguard their control of national markets. This created a double articulation of sorts. The new bourgeoisie was both "bourgeois in its eagerness to make

¹⁴ In reality there was little difference in how French was spoken in the pre and post revolutionary moments, but this claim served the purpose of explaining why the revolutionaries kept French as the language of politics. It is also evidence of how certain national cultures become gendered in ways that legitimize or delegitimize their character.

private property inviolable and communitarian in its reluctance to deny the political claims which might be made by those who had no property” (Higonnet, 1980, 44). In other words, the material gains (land, market access) of the revolution remained in the hands of the few, while the non-material gains (citizenship, linguistic equity) were in the hands of the nation at large.

Following the French Revolution national ideologies, complete with notions of national purity and primordial connection, became increasingly dangerous. They were dangerous precisely because they obsessively strived to rid themselves of “tainted” elements. Under the guise of defending national integrity European state’s carried out genocide, imperialism and mass violence against their own people. History offers us plenty of examples. When Napoleon inherited Europe’s first nation-state following the French Revolution he set out to expand France’s borders. German romantic nationalism then took shape in response to the terror and plundering experienced under Napoleon’s occupation. So we see that nation formation often occurs through a ripple effect, in which new nations form in reaction to old ones.

The French Revolution was a testing ground for many of the ideas taking shape around Europe in the late eighteenth century. Following the revolution’s success, Europe’s bourgeoisie used France as a blueprint for developing state-sponsored nationalism and capitalist societies.

In essence, the nineteenth century proved which half of the nation-state ruled the other. “As it was going to be in Africa in the twentieth century, it was the European state in the nineteenth that demanded the nation” (Davidson, 1992, 138). The European state not only demanded the nation but anchored it with a brand of romantic, militaristic nationalism that sought to protect – and even extend – the nation’s borders. When in *War and Peace* Leo Tolstoy asked, “What is the power that moves nations?”, the answer was staring him back in the face: the state. Hans Kohn recognized the volatile relationship between nation and state. Kohn wrote that “nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind”, a way of identifying with a broader collective for an almost divine-like purpose. As states took over nations and began engaging one another, they created rivalries and spurred hostilities. As Kohn concludes, this is when “nationalism demands the nation-state”. National communities often desire to encase themselves in states – which are equipped with militaries – to mobilize their aggression against rival nations. In turn, the “creation of the nation-state strengthens nationalism”. The two become one. A unified political entity that roots identity in specific, guarded territories (Davidson, 1992, 132-133).

The historical shift in the concept of *nacion* (nation) can be traced to the late nineteenth

century. Prior to 1884 the term simply described “the aggregate of the inhabitants of a province, a country or a kingdom”. It was often invoked to express a peoples’ common interest or purpose in the world. But the groups of people the term described were by no means fixed. Instead nations morphed, shifted and redefined themselves based on their cause. It was only following 1884 that the term took on a meaning specifically linked to the territorial state. It became used to reference “a State or political body which recognizes a supreme centre of common government”, and also “the territory constituted by that state and its individual inhabitants” (Hobsbawm, 1990, 14-15). The latter became the dominant understanding of nation used today.

A correlation entirely ignored by historians is the timing of this shift. It is no coincidence that 1884 was the same year as the Berlin Conference, during which European states sat down to carve Africa into a handful of colonies. The race to colonize Africa was fueled in part by Europe’s many competing nationalisms fueled by the search for raw materials. Thus, the relationship between contemporary nation/alism and imperial ideology becomes clear. It is no wonder then that throughout the twentieth century Europe turned its nationalism outwards, unleashing it on the unsuspecting world of the Other. In the words of historian William Langer, imperialism was “a projection of nationalism beyond the boundaries of Europe, a projection on a world scale of the time-honored struggle for power and for a balance of power as it had existed on the Continent for centuries” (Langer, 1976, 98). The question then becomes, how have Africans since internalized and reproduced state nationalism? How has state (artificial) nationalism interfered with Indigenous (organic) nationalisms? Lastly, how has state nationalism succeeded in keeping us divided according to arbitrary geo-cultural groupings that did not exist prior to 1884? Let us tackle these questions through the example of Eritrea.

It becomes clear that any “analysis of Africa’s troubles has also to be an inquiry into the process – the process, largely, of nationalism – that has crystallized the division of Africa’s many hundreds of peoples and cultures into a few dozen nation-states, each claiming sovereignty *against the others*, and all of them sorely in trouble” (Davidson, 1992, 13 – emphasis added).

The problem of Eritrean nationalism must be understood as arising relationally; as in, the nation was born and continues to survive only as much as it contrasts others nations. For many Eritreans, to be Eritrean is to *not be* Ethiopian or Somali. National identity becomes formed through a process of elimination (i.e. “I am not X or Y, so I am Z”). It is reliant on a systematic negation of exterior identities to inform itself. This problem is not unique to Eritrea, but tends to

occur whenever nations are attached to states. Each nation invents a distinct and measurable sense of relational difference. Ghanaians become constructed as honest and peaceful, but only in relation to their neighbors, the scheming Nigerians. Somalis become rambunctious and confrontational, which is all the more apparent when compared with the Christian conservatism of their neighbors, the Ethiopians and Eritreans. Nationalisms based on difference often take on antagonizing tendencies that tend to see one another as imminent threats rather than potential partners. We see this focus on difference and confrontation in the Eritrean national anthem. It is interesting that the opening line does not speak of Eritrea's greatness or distinctive character as a nation, but her enemies: *Eritrea, Eritrea, Eritrea, Her enemy decimated and her sacrifices vindicated by liberation*. The notion that there is something spiritually distinct, or worse, biological similar about these nations is grossly misguided. The existence of a real life Eritreanness is nothing short of a colonial myth. As discussed earlier, the boundaries that outline Eritrea are of recent creation, were arbitrarily formed, and do not correspond to any real cultural historical group prior to 1889.

At every turn the state polices the citizenry's performance of nationalism. It must make sure the public is carrying out the day-to-day banalities of national worship. Because the Eritrean nation and state are historically insecure they require constant reminders to reify themselves. The state must make sure that flags fly high and anthems are sung with an almost nauseating repetition; students chant national slogans in school¹⁵ and the President is exalted to an almost god-like stature. Similar to France, Eritreans look to the Revolution as the nation's moment of birth. As described by Heller in the chapter's opening, the revolution is indeed *an event which takes on the dimensions of an origin myth*. The revolution is remembered as a historical turning point in which the diverse peoples of Eritrea united in common destiny, identity, and purpose. Of course this unity did not come about during the revolution but started during Italy's occupation decades earlier.¹⁶

¹⁵ At public gatherings PFDJ officials are known to lead crowds in chants of "Hadde hizbi, Hadde libi" ("One people, One heart"). The Party's emphasis on oneness renders sub-national differences invisible. Those who openly celebrate the many distinct – and yet related – Indigenous nations within Eritrea are seen as undermining the state's project of cultivating oneness amongst its people.

¹⁶ At home, progressive Italians resisted Eritrea's occupation. It was Gramsci himself, the father of organic intellectualism, who urged Italians to see Italy's imperial policy abroad as a ploy to sidetrack internal issues of a political and economic nature. He believed the fascist regime sought to resolve land crisis in southern Italy without any real reform, but by selling the nation on the illusion of endless land being secured abroad.

The Italians were notorious for using colonial schools as sites of indoctrination. By 1938 there were twenty state-run elementary schools in operation that were attended by 4,177 Eritrean students (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, 96). Each armed with teaching materials and instructors to promote the five main purposes of colonial education:

- a) To convince the colonized of their moral, intellectual, and spiritual inferiority in relation to Europe in general, and Italy in particular
- b) To convince the colonized of their a-historical existence, and the need to tap Italy's past for the technological advancements that would secure their future
- c) To force the loyalty of the colonized to the Duce (Mussolini) and his empire¹⁷
- d) To re-constitute Eritrea as a single nation rather than a group of nations, and foster a new identity that differentiated the people from their African neighbors

The last point is of special concern here. It is of little debate that early national consciousness was a result of colonial design. State-run schools acted as assembly lines of learning, where students went in using Indigenous ways of marking identity, and along the conveyor belt of colonial conditioning, came out loyal subjects of the Eritrean nation. Central to this process was Italy's rehistoricizing of the Eritrean colony-state as a unitary creature with primordial origins. The vilifying of Ethiopians and other neighbors whom Eritreans were a threat to align with in anticolonial struggle was another key strategy. The Catholic Church was contracted to administer colonial education. The Church assumed a leadership role in recording the first accounts of "Eritrean history", and designing curriculums that cultivated a love for being Eritrean. In documents recovered from the Italian colonial era, the Church applauded colonial text books and instructional material for its effectiveness in cultivating a sense of distinct Eritreanness.

Leggendo queste pagine gli Indigeni apprezzeranno l'opera nostra, e nascera nel cuore pi vivo e pi intenso l'affetto per l'Eritrea, figlia primogenita dell'Italia.

Reading these pages the Native appreciated our opera, and in the heart the affection was more lively and intense for Eritrea, first born daughter of Italy (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, 94 – translation my own)

¹⁷ This was demonstrated through indefinite conscription to the Imperial Army, where many Eritreans fought in Italy's wars against Libya and Ethiopia. During Italy's occupation of Ethiopia between 1936-41 soldiers comprised 40% of active male labor (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, 96).

Over the coming decades, Eritrean nationalism thrived beyond the expectations of colonial officials and took on a personality of its own, becoming harder for Italy and Britain to manage through education. It hosted the resentments and frustrations of a people building since 1889, who had been repeatedly beaten into the ground by colonial rule. By the 1950s it became clear that Eritrean nationalism was an ideological freight train moving full speed ahead, on course for a direct collision with colonial forces. When Ethiopia inherited the colony through U.N. Resolution 390 A (V), which united it with Eritrea in a federal setup, it likewise inherited a population prepared for armed resistance. Eritrea was, at this crucial stage, no longer vulnerable to petty divide-and-rule tactics. Eritrean national consciousness provided a fertile ground for shared identity, shared destiny, and a shared narrative of anticolonial struggle. With the beginnings of armed resistance in 1961 the *Tegadelti* (nationalist guerillas) simply capitalized on the budding sense of national unity and aimed it at Ethiopian occupation. That being said, there were few cracks in the wall of national unity.¹⁸

In 1973 President Afwerki authored a pamphlet entitled, “Our Struggle and Its Goals”. In the pamphlet the nationalist leader shared some of his frustrations with the ongoing revolution: “It is a big shame that there should exist religious, ethnic, and other divisions within the Eritrean liberation struggle. As freedom fighters, our role should be to eradicate this and other ills of Eritrean society; and in no way should we create a situation wherein such ills could be accentuated” (Redeker Hepner, 2009, 43). Given the task at hand – winning a revolution – one could hardly blame the frustrated guerilla leader for arguing to eradicate such potentially divisive distinctions. As a step towards eradicating differences within the Front, Isaias chose to mix up fighters of different backgrounds in the hopes of preventing coalition building by way of religion, ethnicity or other factors. What is interesting about this passage is that it remains a guiding philosophy for the President’s policy on sub-national difference. Differences in religion, ethnicity, or Indigenous nationhood are at best, discouraged by the state, and at worst, punishable by death. Room has yet to be made for the articulation of these identities. Since the onset of flag independence the state has propagated a form of nationalism that sees difference as weakness, and forces uniformity on a culturally plural Eritrean nation. Those who express culture from

¹⁸ The liberation Front eventually split into two rival factions: the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). The first was comprised mainly of Muslim lowlanders. The second was led by Christian and secular highlanders and went on to permanently defeat the ELF in a civil war fought during the late 1970s and early 80s.

outside the hegemonic nationalist discourse are seen as politically undesirable. This has been the case with many faith-based groups within the country. Pentecostals have been specifically targeted for their belief in pacifism. According to the Eritrean state, pacifism stands in the way of Eritrea defending itself against antagonistic foreigners and should be treated as a type of treason.

The relationship between nation and state is as such that the state directly controls the nation. It draws from a number of strategies in monitoring, controlling and indoctrinating the people with national mythologies that service the state. In other words, it becomes necessary for the state to convince the nation of its lesser position between the two. One of the ways it does this is through state-organized celebrations. The state isolates particular moments in the nation's history that it deems worthy of celebration. This can include Independence Day, the birth or death of a nationalist leader, or the day an important battle was won. The very fact that it is the state who determines which moments are worth being entrenched as national holidays is problematic, and speaks to the state's tendency to hijack nationalist narratives. As for the people, they become reduced to onlookers at parades or audience members at government speeches, and are rarely empowered to decide for themselves which moments in their history are worth celebrating.

Through a series of warped equations and reductionist assumptions, the state then tries to make itself synonymous with the nation (i.e. "the martyrs died for the Eritrean state", "when you go against the state you are going against the nation", "citizens must build the nation through voting"). Of course in reality, the martyrs did not die in service of the state but in defense of the nation. The problem here is that the state tries to chain itself to the nation, in hopes that the people embrace it with the same legitimacy with which they embrace the nation. Of course national freedom and state freedom are two different topics of conversation that should never be confused. Critics of the Eritrean state are not questioning the Eritrean people's right to exist. They are questioning whether the European styled state is the most effective method of governing the nation. Granted, earlier in the chapter I explained the problem of viewing Eritrea as a natural or historically rooted nation. Despite the troubling roots of Eritrean nationalism the goal should not be to dismantle the nation so much as it is to dismantle the state chained to it. As Tekle M. Woldemikael found in his study of the state's celebration of Independence Day:

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. (Woldemikael, 2009, 2)

Constant gestures of remembrance and celebration keep the masses drunk with nostalgia; keeps them trapped in the romantic reenactment of revolution. The state encourages them to reflect on the feelings of optimism and perseverance that characterized the Revolution without considering the failure of revolutionary promises to take shape in the present. Nonetheless these moments/holidays provide a temporary escape for the people of Eritrea, who are desperate to forget the state death squads, milk lines, and *teff* (grain) shortages that fill the rest of their days. That being said, two very eventful decades have passed since flag independence was won. The present moment poses new challenges, oppositions and acts of violence against the people. Although the thirty year Revolution has taken a great toll on the mental, physical and spiritual strength of the country, a new revolution from within is still necessary.

Indigenous Nationalism

“Frontiers come and go, administrative groupings can be modified by a stroke of a pen, but geography and physical distribution of peoples are permanent”

– Stephen Longrigg, 1946 (as quoted in Abbay, 1998, 21)

Few years ago I was travelling on the subway and came across three *habesha*¹⁹ women. They caught my attention when I overheard them speaking in Tigrinya. In a city of only few thousand Tigrinya speakers I am always excited to meet others I could practice with. So I approached them. I struck up a conversation with one of the women while the other two chatted. She joked about how bad my Tigrinya was and we quickly switched to English. After few minutes of chatting I asked where she was from. To this she awkwardly paused and then asked me the same question in return. I found her awkwardness a little defensive to say the least. I told her I was Eritrean and asked her again, only for her to respond with another question.

“Are you Tigrinya?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m like you”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we are the same people.”

¹⁹ The term “habesha” describes all peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Within Ethiopia it is usually pronounced “abesha”. The term has several possible translations, one of them being “people of mixed race”.

Her response was too abstract for me. I wanted something easy, something more direct. I wanted her to name a country. After all the answer was simple, she was either Eritrean or Ethiopian. I was determined to get an answer from her so I asked a third time. This time she gave me the answer I was looking for by telling me she was in fact Eritrean. After she left the train I turned to chat with her friends. In our conversation it came out that they were actually all from Tigray²⁰, a northern province in Ethiopia.

As insignificant as this story may sound, it is what compelled me to study the trans-territorial identity of Tigrinya peoples. It made me question the borders that lock us into self-contained identities as “Eritrean” or “Ethiopian” and explore the ways language, culture and even nationhood often stretch beyond state ideological boundaries. In the colonized world, where new nations are built atop old ones, once united peoples have been dispersed across several political geographies. This has led to failures in “Eritrean” or “Ethiopian” identities to describe the ways in which Indigenous culture and peoples complicate these borders. The Somalis are a good example. They make up almost 10% of the combined population of Ethiopia and Kenya, and nearly 100% of Djibouti and Somalia. How is it then that a people who overwhelmingly express common nationality are split between four nation-states? The same can be asked of the Afar, Kunama, Saho and Tigrinya peoples, whose sense of national wholeness was ruptured when the Treaty of Wachale (1889) split them between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Looking back I see that the woman I met on the subway only wished to emphasize our sameness rather than difference. She wanted to avoid the simplicity of telling me she was Ethiopian and the assumed set of hostilities and differences that come with it. She may have been more reluctant than usual given the political backdrop of our meeting. We met just few years after the 1998-2000 war between Eritrean and Ethiopia and tensions were still running high between communities.

The “border war”, as it was branded by both sides, was fought over the disputed village of Badme that straddles the border between Tigray and Seraye in the southwestern highlands of Eritrea. The dispute came as a surprise to many since the Ethiopian and Eritrean states came into existence conjointly, and for a long time supported each other in the joint overthrow of the

²⁰ “Tigray” is the region and “Tigrayans” are the people who live in the region. Indigenous Tigrinya people who live in Tigray often opt to name themselves by the geography (Tigrayan) rather than the community of people (Tigrinya). That being said, at different points, and depending on the context, I will refer to them as both Tigrayans and the Tigrinya people of Ethiopia.

Soviet backed Ethiopian government in 1991. What is more ironic is that both movements were Tigrinya dominated, with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front taking power in Asmara and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front next door in Addis Ababa. Throughout the Revolution it was the Indigenous connection of the two groups that acted as a catalyst for mutual cooperation. In fact, in early political debates many TPLF figures favored union with Eritrea in the form of a Greater Tigrayan state.

Only following flag independence did the Fronts-turned-states seek to rehistoricize their relationship to one another. In the propaganda war that raged alongside the border war each country created a new language to describe the Other. Believing the names "Tigrayan" and "Tigrinya" were too similar and shared a common linguistic origin, the Eritrean state started referring to Tigrayans as "Weyane" (in reference to the 1943 Tigrayan uprising), and the Ethiopian state appropriated the name "Shabia" (Party). This process marked the beginning of a much deeper seeded antagonism between the two.

Writing in service of the state, many Eritrean anthropologists have lent credence to the project of difference-making between Tigrinya and Tigrayan peoples. In a piece of especially shotty scholarship uncharacteristic of his work, the otherwise brilliant Asmarom Legesse writes:

The Tigrayans and the highland Eritreans are next door neighbors, they speak the same language, and have a common history. However, they diverge sharply from each other in culture and character. The divergent developments are not merely a function of the colonial experience of Eritrea: the divergence goes back to the fourteenth century when Eritrea began writing her own customary laws and developing her own grass roots democratic institutions. The deep antipathy that some Tigrayans have now developed toward ethnic Eritreans is, however, a new phenomenon and will probably subside once the hate campaign runs out of steam. (Legesse as quoted in Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, 138)

Dominant discourses on the border war are influenced by the same project of difference making found in Legesse's work. For example, in the above passage Legesse makes reference to "ethnic Eritreans". We see that Eritreans only begin being categorized as a separate and distinct ethnic group following the border war. Describing Eritreans as an ethnic group is an attempt by the state, along with academic co-conspirators, to once and for all remove Tigrayans from the national narrative by locking Eritreans into a sense of shared national as well as ethnic singularity.²¹ With the onset of the propaganda war fought between the regional neighbors,

²¹ Although I disagree with his conclusion it is worth reading from Legesse's study at length. In attempts to strengthen his thesis, the subtitle reads, "A Scientific Survey of Ethnic Eritrean Deportees from

Eritrean history started to lose the fluidity that once allowed scholars to speak of trans-territorial identity, and became, quite literally, the history of only those people and events that took place within the borders of Eritrea. Even Eritreans raised in Ethiopia, commonly known as *Ameche*, meaning “made here but sent abroad”, were excluded from the new nationalist narrative and became constructed as enemies of the state.

The shaky historical foundations of Legesse’s argument need to be critically interrogated. If the divergence he speaks of occurred in the fourteenth century when “Eritrea began writing her own customary laws and developing her own grass roots *democratic institutions*”, then two critiques come to mind. First, the *baito* was being used in both rural Tigray and the Kebessa during this period. As explained earlier the philosophical basis of the *baito* is one of democratic collectivism. Which means a culture of democracy was being spread throughout local communities in Tigray as well as the Kebessa in the fourteenth century. Second, Legesse’s analysis seeks to impose the politics of the present on the past. This is evident in his use of present-day geographies to describe ancient ones. When he speaks of “Eritrea” and “Ethiopia” as cultural groupings and political geographies in the fourteenth century, he fails to consider that at that historical juncture the two had not yet come into existence. The notion of a trans-Mereb community is better suited to explain the relationship between Tigray and the Kebessa during the fourteenth century (Abbay, 1998).²²

The trans-Mereb is a uniting concept that is based more on people’s linguistic and spiritual identity than the borders that may restrict, divide or enclose them. It also speaks to the trans-territorial nature of highlander identity which transcends mountain ranges, rivers, and other natural boundaries. By the fourteenth century the trans-Mereb had been linked by common history as experienced under the Axumite Empire and Kingdom of D’MT before it. Leading Tigrayan scholar Alemseged Abbay to comment, “the main port of the [Axumite] Empire, Adulis, in Eritrea, is as much Tigrayan as Eritrean; like-wise, the capital of the Empire, Axum, now in Tigray, is as much Eritrean as Tigrayan” (Abbay, 1998, 2). (Of course it would be more accurate for Abbay to speak of the interchangeability between Tigrayans and Tigrinya, not

Ethiopia”. His use of “science” exposes his attempt to make difference between Eritrean and Ethiopian a matter of biology.

²² The Mereb River is considered by both states as the dividing line between Tigray and the Kebessa. To distance the Kebessa from its siblings across the river, it is sometimes called the Mereb Mellash, or “Land on our side of the Mereb”.

Tigrayans and Eritreans).

In the fall out of World War II the Liberal Progressive Party (LLP) of Eritrea ignited a movement to reunite the trans-Mereb peoples. In its attempt to avoid geographical markers the Party referred to the region as the Nation of Agazi. “Agazi” became a way of naming people who belonged to the trans-territorial Tigrinya nation. The LLP argued rather convincingly that the Nation of Agazi was a longstanding community of people joined by common history, religion, language, customary laws, and origin myths, and was only disrupted with the death of Tigrinya Emperor Yohannes IV (Abbay, 1998, 37-39). It was Yohannes’ death in 1889 that created a vacuum of power in the Horn. This vacuum, however, was quickly filled by one of his crowned chiefs Menelik II of Shoa. In an attempt to permanently shift the centre of power from the Tigrinya north to the Amhara-dominated south, Menelik signed the Treaty of Wachale with Italy to fracture the Tigrinya nation into two halves, one remaining under Ethiopian control and the other forming present-day Eritrea. Menelik’s success in eliminating the main rival to Amhara hegemony in the region allowed the Amhara peoples to impose their culture and language on neighboring Somali and Oromo peoples while controlling the seat of power for nearly a century.²³

By the spring of 1991 a new identity politics took hold of the region. It became fashionable for the leaders of both countries to frame their partnership in a language of cooperation *between* nations. Earlier debates about the historical oneness of the Tigrinya people had now disappeared. Conversations about redrawing the lines of either state to better accommodate the Indigenous nations within them also went quite. In Ethiopia, Tigrayans had fully adjusted to their new role as vanguards of the reconstructed Ethiopian state. In Eritrea, the Tigrinya-dominated state found it strategic to play down sub-national differences in domestic politics. As apparent from Afwerki’s earlier statement, Eritrean nationalism was to be articulated

²³ With Menelik’s unprecedented cooperation with colonial powers and subsequent coup from below, the Amhara people began a century long monopoly on power. During which the Amhara political elite proved themselves incapable of balanced and equitable leadership, epitomized by the Amhara saying “*Amhara yazzal inji aytazzezim*” (the Amhara is to rule not to be ruled).

Under the guise of nation-building the regimes of both Haile Selassie I (est. 1930) and Mengistu Haile Mariam (est. 1974) continued Menelik’s drive to strengthen Amhara cultural hegemony; superimposing Amhara language, religion and material interests on Ethiopia at large and eliminating political rivals when need be. All three Amhara regimes were especially fearful of the restoration of the trans-Mereb nation and eliminated popular proponents of Tigrinya nationalism. Well known nationalist Woldeab Woldemariam survived at least seven attempts on his life by the state (Abbay, 1998, 74; Mengsiteab, 2002, 182).

as a culturally singular creature. The new relationship between Tigrinya and Tigrayans became characterized by an “us and them” dichotomy with each side pitting themselves against the other to heighten their claims to uniqueness. What threat does the national Other pose to the state? The threat is that if one looks hard enough, past the aesthetic differences in flags, anthems and other symbols of banal nationalism, they recognize a part of themselves in the Other. At which point they are likely to understand that they are at war not with a distant enemy, but with a long lost sibling.

Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll (2000) have applied this logic to the border dispute. Instead of accepting the dominant description of the war as conventional inter-state warfare, they see it more as a “civil war” fought between peoples on opposing sides of the Mereb battling for supremacy in the region. Dan Connell has similarly referred to the dispute as “domestic violence” on a grand scale (Connell, 2003). There is a particularly convincing detail that supports the categorization of the war as an intra-community conflict. In responding to the bombing of Asmara in June 1998, rather than responding with a similar airstrike against the densely populated and vulnerable Ethiopian capital, or by disrupting a major artery of Ethiopian industry, the Eritrean command decided to attack Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. This set the political and moral tone of the war to come. It would be ruthless, reactionary, and costly to the people who lived in and around the disputed region. Due to the rapid militarization of the border at least 600,000 residents were forced from their homes (Tekest & Tronvoll, 2000, 2). Most of whom suffered displacement during the Battle of Badme, which now holds the infamous title of being the largest military engagement in Africa since WWII.

Of course this realization of sameness amongst the people at war is considered a threat to both states, who would rather exploit the rising sense of difference to raise support for military offences against one another. Now more than ever regional stability in the Horn depends on the ability of Tigrinya and Tigrayan peoples to align with their Indigenous siblings on either side of the Mereb. We must be confident in re-asserting Indigenous nationalism and trans-territorial identity. There is reason to be hopeful that this will happen.

The people of both countries have not wholly bought into the narrative of difference and division, especially in rural areas. Many people continue to see their identity as being trans-territorial in that it is shared across state lines. Rural Tigrayans, for instance, prefer to

“intermarry” with Tigrinya people rather than other peoples in Ethiopia. As one Tigrayan farmer put it,

I have blood lineage in Seraye, Meraguz, on both my parents sides. Many people in Axum have that kind of relationship with Kebessa. It is the Italians who created a difference between us and them. Otherwise, we are one people – integral organs of Tigray-Tigrignie.

The belief in trans-territorial identity is echoed by many rural dwellers of the Kebessa: “We are related to Tigray by marriage. That has been going on throughout history” (Abbay, 1998, 6). The same blurring of lines occurs at the state level. It is not unusual that both presidents have mothers from either side of the Mereb, or that Woldeab Woldemariam, who is considered a founding member of the revolutionary movement, was himself a full Tigrayan (Abbay, 1998, 153). This should point out the lack of credibility with which the political elite view their own narratives of difference.

So, what is to be done? How can the people of Eritrea resist nationalist ideologies created by colonial powers and used by the contemporary state? Once again history provides us the answer. A closer reading of our history informs us that Indigenous nationalism is based on an *organic* connection between people. Why do I call it organic rather than artificial or “imagined” in Andersonian (1991) terms? Because Indigenous nations within Eritrea were formed through a patient process in which history came to a certain point of arrival. They are legitimized through shared spirituality and a deep dedication to the metaphysical. In the Tigrinya example, the nation is locally governed through a belief in people power, with a participatory and consensus-based system of decision making. On the other hand, the Eritrean nation was formed through the forceful bending of history to suit colonial interests. History did not come to a spontaneous point of arrival but was violently and abruptly stopped short. State nationalism is always violent – in that it tramples pre-existing nations – and abrupt – in that it literally makes single nations out of many overnight.

In returning to the topic at hand, a distinction must be made between *ethnic* and *Indigenous* nationalism. As Mamdani points out in his studies of Rwanda and Sudan (Mamdani, 2002; 2009) ethnic communities in Africa were largely formed through colonial intervention. As a strategy of divide-and-rule ethnic groups were often created through the combining, severing, and reshaping of pre-existing communities that posed a threat to the colonial order. In Rwanda and Burundi colonial anthropologists based ethnicity purely on physical traits and labour

identities, going so far as measuring noses and height to distinguish Tutsis from Hutus. Going back to the early nineteenth century, a German anthropologist even claimed he could prove a standard 12-centimeter difference between Tutsis and the shorter Hutus (Mamdani, 2002, 44). In Kenya, the Kalenjin were not regarded as a single ethnic group until changes in British social policy in the 1950s. Just as the Bangala of northern Congo were first “discovered” by Henry Morton Stanley and were only considered a definitive group in 1907, when an anthropological volume was dedicated to describing their features (Lemarchand, 2003, 90). In Eritrea too, the British tried and failed to create three distinct ethnicities (although they use the term “countries”) out of the Kebessa. In a handbook produced by the British Military Administration to educate new settlers to the colony, it was written:

To the people of Eritrea at large, the three Plateau Divisions, Hamasien, Akkele-Guzzai, and Serae, are different ‘countries’ in the true sense of the word, with different history, different character, even different customs, and the people of the different Divisions are conscious of these differences almost as one is conscious of different nationality (S.F. Nadel, 1944, 67)

By no means can we refer to the different regions of the Kebessa as separate countries or ethnicities. Despite the differences that come with differing regions, each group expresses an identity that is shared with, connected to, and informed by the other two. The British attempt to incite rivalry and division within the Kebessa was never taken much further. This has much to do with the fact that the British occupied Eritrea for only eleven years (1941 – 1952). Given a longer occupation they surely would have pursued a larger scale ethnicizing of the Tigrinya people, much like they did elsewhere in Africa.

In effect, many of Africa’s contemporary movements of ethnic nationalism are based on colonial identities. Take the Hutu Power movement in the Great Lakes region. In the last fifty years Hutu nationalist ideology has been a catalyst for genocide, civil war and insurrection in Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. Even though the very Hutu identity that people organize around is, as Mamdani explains it, an attempt to “*naturalize* political difference as a simple and unproblematic reflection of cultural and biological difference” (Mamdani, 2002, 43). The rigid distinction between Hutu and Tutsi is a purely political difference because it arose from colonial politics of divide-and-rule. Prior to the 1950s one could not speak of being “Hutu” and be understood. Nonetheless, in the summer of 1994, motivated by beliefs in an imminent race war, Hutu nationalists led one of the largest slaughters in recent history in which almost one million

people were killed in three months of fighting.

These are the pitfalls of ethnic nationalism: it often carries with it the same hostilities, chauvinism, and claims to difference dreamed up by the colonial state. The Hutu example in particular serves as the exact opposite of Indigenous nationalism, which is characterized by an emphasis of inter-nation cooperation. Indigenous nationalism does not dwell on difference or division, but works with the currents of Pan-Africanism to forge new associations, alliances, and shared struggles. When we study Indigenous African principles of organization we see that a core principle is the *unity of being* (Mazama, 2002, 422; Bankie & Mchombu, 2008, 240). By emphasizing the many ways in which our histories overlap, intertwine and engage with one another in the historic past, we can work towards mending the links of Pan-African unity broken by the colonial encounter. There must be a necessary shift away from ethnicity as being a tool of divide-and-rule as learned under colonialism, while allowing for diverse communities to be celebrated as contributing nations in a broader Eritrean identity.

Discourses on ethnic pluralism have so far been unable to achieve Pan-African linkages between hostile groups. Ethnic power sharing has most recently failed in post-revolutionary Ethiopia, where under the doctrine of *ethnic federalism*, President Zenawi has carried out a small-scale cleansing of the Indigenous Anuak peoples of the Gambela region and Somalis of the Ogaden (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The cleansing comes as an attempt to crush resistance to the state's hoarding of resources in these regions. It occurred even though on paper Article 39 of the federal agreement ensures that "every nation, nationality and people shall have unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession" (Laremont, 2005, 106). The agreement is actually a very revolutionary piece of literature that does well to frame the country's diverse peoples as "nations", but in reality is a paper tiger with very little checks and balances on the state's actions.

In a recent survey conducted in Ethiopia amongst 251 participants, 44% of the Gambella peoples and Southern Nationalities described ethnic federalism as "very ineffective" in fostering national identity, group relations, and national unity. The Oromo make up the country's largest "ethnic" group, and 66% of them answered with the same scepticism of ethnic federalism (Laremont, 2005, 125). Mounting ethnic tension can be attributed to the fact that the ethnic groups are, firstly, often aberrations of colonial design, and secondly, when they are organic they are not attributed the rights and sovereignties of nations. In effect ethnic groups take the status of lesser beings in relation to the nation-state. As was discussed earlier, when the Amhara occupied

the seat of power they ceased to be an ethnic group and became expressive of the nation at large. Now it is the turn of the Tigrayans to do the same. “Ethnicity” then becomes a term used to describe those disenfranchised groups who remain peripheral to the machinations of power.

There are still other reasons to avoid the language of ethnicity in Pan-African bridge building. The word “ethnicity” is never far from the word “tribe” in conversations about Africa, and tribes are the basis for “tribalism”, a racist term appropriated by the West to explain inter-community conflict in Africa. Unlike its treatment of Africa the West does not treat itself as a collection of tribes, but a collection of nations. The Quebecois are considered a “nation within a nation”, and Catalonia is awarded certain privileges from that Spanish state that is otherwise associated with nations. In the same vein Africa requires a new language to explain itself, free from the stereotypes and conceptual baggage attached to tribes and ethnicities. We are nations in our own right.

This brings me to another competitor to Indigenous nationalism, that of post-nationalism. Nowadays it is trendy to claim that nationalism is a thing of the past; that globalization has led to greater population movement and the creation of “fragmented” or “hybridized” diasporic identities as a result of this movement. Post-nationalist proponents would have us believe that in the world today, in which national culture is a commodity to be bought and sold, we are constantly gaining and losing connections to different groups and our emotional attachment to the nation is in flux because of this.

Contrary to these claims we often draw support, values and power from our nations to transform the world. It becomes important to question post-modern claims to hybridity and fragmentation that leave our identities with no common ground to stand on. In the case of Africa, those who preach difference at the expense of unity are merely post-modern provocateurs that would rather discuss colonialism to death rather than fight it (Adeleke, 2009). Whenever someone tells me my nationalist bond with Tigrinya people (and all Africans by extension) is socially constructed, I reply by saying that a chair is also a social construct, but if I hit them with it they will surely bleed. By this I mean even things that are imagined are attached to physical realities and have material consequences. The nation is no different.

Throughout history people have fought and died for the nation-building project. It has served as a catalyst for revolution and genocide, occupation and liberation. At any given point it is both real and imagined in the minds of the people. Today’s fight is over *who* does the

constructing and how state and Indigenous nationalisms engage one another in the process. Thus, we must avoid post-modernity's claims to radical individualism, and the belief that after centuries of blurred lines and miscegenation nationalism is a thing of the past.²⁴

Earlier I said that the resurgence in trans-territorial identity must come through a closer reading of our history. By this I mean that as colonized peoples we need to start seeing ourselves as existing beyond state (colonial) boundaries. We must be well versed in the history of who we are as people. It is true that people need something to believe in, and rejecting colonially formed nations could sometimes leave us feeling emptied or detached of any sense of community. This is where the past becomes important. In the archives of our histories we can locate and re-assert our Indigenous nationalisms and use them to subvert the centralized state. Dei and Asgharzadeh agree that

Within the colonized peoples' historiography, for instance, the historic past offers an important body of knowledge that can be a means of staking out an identity which is independent of the identity constructed through the Western ideology. This helps to challenge and resist the continual subordination of other lived experiences and reinforce their status as valid and effectively relevant forms of knowledge. (Asgharzadeh & Dei, 2001, 29)

Just to be clear, I am not advocating that we bury our heads in the sands of history and let the events of the present pass us by. I am simply pointing out, as Dei and Asgharzadeh did above, that the past offers us useful identities and purposes to organize around in challenging the African nation-state's control of power and identity formation.

It is equally important that we do not relegate Indigenous nations or identities to the past. As Alfred warns his readers, "framing indigenous people in the past as 'noble yet doomed' relics of an earlier age allows the colonial state to maintain its own legitimacy by preventing the fact of contemporary indigenous peoples' nationhood to intrude on its own mythology" (Alfred, 2009, 83). Claims that Indigenous peoples and identities are somehow passé or in constant threat of extinction only work to the state's advantage, since the state can claim it no longer needs to address them. That being said the revival of Indigenous nationalism in the region is discouraged by the uneasy relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Having already fought what was essentially a civil war between the Tigrayan and Tigrinya political elite, a second and more conclusive round of fighting appears to be imminent. The same tension between states has

²⁴For a critique of social constructionism as a weapon of post-modernism see Asante's *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (2007, 130).

spilled over into academia, where scholars from both sides continue to demonize the other.

Tigrayan scholars have been more likely to emphasize the common history between the two sides, but do so on terms that favour Eritrea's return to Ethiopia. For many of these writers the only way to remove the border that currently splits the Agazi nation is to dismantle the Eritrean state all together. The obvious problem with this solution is that it simply trades one state for another. The Tigrinya of Eritrea would still be viewed as a distinct and separate people under the control of a Tigrayan-led Ethiopian state. Not to mention that having just been released from a century long colonial experience, asking the diverse peoples of Eritrea to return to Ethiopia is both unrealistic and ignorant of the role the Ethiopian state played in their subjugation. This group of scholars also refrain from using a language conducive to dialogue and restoration, and tend to speak of "taking back" or "occupying" the Kebessa and its access to the sea. They also locate blame for the failure of trans-Mereb linkages on the Eritrean side of the Mereb, where the EPLF implemented policies that made expressions of Indigenous nationalism illegal.

Tigrinya authors have ignored the possibility of Indigenous nationalism all together, preferring to believe that Tigrayans have irreconcilable cultural differences learned under Amhara rule, and that the Italian experience consolidated Tigrinya and other peoples into a united Eritrean identity. For this group of scholars, to speak of trans-Mereb linkages is to resurrect a dead idea that belongs to the 1940s, before Tigrinya identity became overtaken by a stronger sense of Eritreanness.

In beginning to work towards a restored sense of Indigenous nation building and trans-territorial identity, the borders of both states need to be immediately softened and ultimately dissolved altogether. A progressive step in this direction came in July 1993 when Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a Friendship and Cooperation Agreement between states. The agreement had five main resolutions:

1. The use of Ethiopian *birr* by both countries until Eritrea introduced its own currency
2. Ethiopia's continued access to the Red Sea via Eritrean ports
3. The drafting of a shared foreign policy that considers the unique needs of each nation, including
4. A harmonization of customs policies
5. Free flow of goods and services, capital and people across borders

Although the agreement was nullified shortly before the civil war, the last resolution would have been a useful first step in re-establishing trans-Mereb nationalism. The lifting of borders to allow for the free movement of people is crucial to fostering a more fluid definition of citizenship. The catch is that in order to do this both states would need to restore the diplomatic relations that were severed in 1998, which is unlikely to say the least. Thus, there becomes a need to invoke Indigenous movements and solutions that are not dependent on state support, since in the greater scheme of things an ideal political setup in the Horn of Africa would not include European styled states to begin with. This leaves anti-state strategists with only one other option going forward.

A second and decidedly more radical solution is the full regionalization of governance. What do I mean by regionalization of governance? We can begin our definition by borrowing few useful – yet poorly implemented – aspects of Zenawi’s ethnic federalism. To recap, federalism creates working relationships between a central authority and its constituent political units. Ethnic federalism is the formation of political units based on distinct ethnic geographies with each ethnic geography counting as one unit in the federation. Because each unit displays relative power and decision making on its own – for example, in areas of education and language use – the overarching state is considered to be decentralized.

Studying the ways in which federalism has failed in Ethiopia can teach us how it can be improved and implemented elsewhere. Most obviously, the Ethiopian state has proved to be much more centralized than initially thought. The right to secession promised in the constitution has been outright blocked. Rather than seeing ethnic (or Indigenous) communities as contributing parts to an overarching Ethiopian identity, the state has punished what it believes to be “splinter” groups with imprisonment or cleansing. It becomes apparent that as long as there is a central state that antagonizes the relationship between the cultural and political centre and its peripheries, federalism will never work in Africa. This is where alternative ideas of regionalization become useful in theorizing creative solutions to the governing crisis. As I see it, the regionalization of governance has two main tenants that I will discuss here.

The first and most important tenant is the *softening of state boundaries*. The fact that Africa’s boundaries will continue to exist going forward is an unfortunate starting point we must accept, but one we can still work with. The problem of boundaries is that they work to exclude

more than they do include. They create parameters that form identities that stand in opposition to one another. One only knows they are Eritrean because they, first, reside or have roots within the country's borders, and second, are geographically separated from their neighbours. As exemplified by the border war, boundaries are the foremost cause of state rivalry and aggression. Given the connection between the two, wars over boundaries are simultaneously wars over identities; and will continue to be fought until an emphasis is taken off of physical borders and placed on the communities of identity that transcend those borders. But how can this be done?

If the Indigenous nations of the Horn formed regional councils to stimulate dialogue amongst their divided constituents, then much of the violence that presently plagues the region would disappear. The Somalis of the Ogaden region in Ethiopia would have an outlet of communication with Somalia proper; the Oromo of Ethiopia would finally be granted a moderate level of self-determination; the Afar would no longer be split between three states; and the trans-Mereb nation would be restored within the framework of a broader Horn of African community. With the softening of borders there could be free movement of people and goods between the Tigrinya border of Eritrea and Ethiopia; which would allow Tigrinya people to access and organize with their siblings across the Mereb. Regional councils could even be used as lobby groups that engage governments on behalf of particular groups no matter where in the Horn they may reside. Obviously a people's condition changes significantly depending on which country they are located in, but at least the council would provide an institutional home for Indigenous nationalism. In effect, each country in the Horn would have to nurture the differences in sub-national communities and allow them to engage in political dialogue with others of their kind in the region.

Certainly, few African countries – notably, Tanzania under Julius Nyerere and Senegal under Leopold Senghor – have successfully crafted nationalist movements while downplaying sub-national differences. The problem is that these countries are the exception to the norm.

In Eritrea and Ethiopia today, we see that the majority of armed secessionist movements are formed by disgruntled Indigenous nations that wish to reunite themselves with constituents in neighbouring countries. These include the Oromo Liberation Front, Ogaden National Liberation Front, Afar National Liberation Front, and Rashaida Free Lions just to name a few. Similarly, political parties vying for state control are fractured along Indigenous lines. These include the Kunama People's Democratic Party, the All Amhara Peoples Organization, Gambela People's

Democratic Unity Party, Somali People's Liberation Front Party, Gurage People's Revolutionary Movement, and many more. We must take these movements seriously and work *with* rather than *against* their organizational momentum (be it armed or diplomatic momentum). We must see these groups not as armed militants or secessionist politicians, but as regional stakeholders that have legitimate concerns about the current functioning of the nation-state. The many breakaway political parties and fronts are a sign that we have exhausted the current political set up, and that the currents of Indigenous nationalism will continue to pull these communities together in contesting the present borders that restrict them.

Well known scholar in African Studies Ali. A. Mazrui has forwarded a similar proposal for regionalization. The key difference between Mazrui and myself is that he suggests placing newly integrated regions under the control of stronger states, which is not far from what Zenawi has tried in Ethiopia. Crucial to Mazrui's idea of African regionalism is the combining of countries with weaker nationalisms with a larger trustee state that shares foundational similarities with the countries joining it. He believes the Great Lakes region to be an ideal testing ground for the idea. In order to circumvent the possibility of renewed ethnic violence between Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda, Mazrui suggests combining both Rwanda and Burundi with neighbouring Tanzania (Mazrui, 2003, 37). He believes Tanzania to be an ideal trustee state since it is "politically stable" and shares the Swahili language. I diverge here with Mazrui in two ways. First, grounds for regional merger should not be based on language alone. Between Eritrea and Ethiopia there are 15 widely spoken languages, four of them are considered vital to business and politics. That being said the Horn of Africa more than any other region demands regionalization, and is better suited for it than the Great Lakes region. Second, merger should not take place around ethnic groupings since that would only reify identities that have formed through colonial divide-and-rule policies. Instead I prefer the concept of Indigenous nationhood and the drawing up of new regions based on more historically credible groupings (Maathai, 2009).

The second tenant of regionalization is the full *pluralisation of power*, in which power moves away from an all consuming centre and becomes institutionalized in localized groups (Mazrui, 2003, 30). This means an eventual dissolving of the state into a Pan-African Assembly that represents the collective interests of all Indigenous nations. Of course each nation would determine for themselves what political set up is most effective in governing the nation, and would be encouraged to draw from local traditions and philosophies of governance. The

government of Somaliland is already working towards crafting a culturally responsive government that harmonizes the Western state model with *qabil* (clan) based representation.

In principle the pluralisation of power seeks to dismantle the centralized state altogether and redistribute its reserve of power, force, and decision making amongst decentralized regions. In its place, each nation would possess powers that are both equally ascribed and relationally exerted. A Pan-African Assembly can even be set up similar to Zenawi's Federal Council, which would include at least one member from each nation and an additional member for every million of the nation's population; blending formal and substantive styles of equity to create a hybrid model of representation (Mengisteab, 2002, 183). A central military would leave the region vulnerable to military takeover, so the Pan-African Assembly should be instilled with the power to issue sanctions against nations that militarily threaten neighbours or compromise regional stability.

Although the pluralisation of political power can be accused of being idealistic idea, it is not an idea without a precedent. The formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other regional economic blocks have integrated markets and strengthened trading relationships across borders. All that is needed is to now infuse the concept of regional cooperation with a political purpose.

I have only provided a rough sketch of potential regionalization in the Horn of Africa. There is still room to debate and amend its tenants in pursuit of a more sound understanding of the concept. All that is known right now is that while the nation-state remains the *de facto* and *de jure* system of political organization, much more subversive ideas are needed to draft a more effective regime of governance. Whether these ideas will ever be taken off the shelf and implemented is yet to be decided, and at the moment does not look likely. The potential of regionalization has been ignored by Africa's political elite, who would rather keep the nation-state propped up with band aid reforms, inconsequential restructurings, and recycled promises for change. Yet we must continue to theorize new and creative governing relationships that re-attach severed nations and redistribute the state's overgrown powers. Given the acts of protest, violence, and civil war on the continent, it is time to match radically escalating conflicts with equally radical solutions. If not, violence will only continue to be used to subvert the African state, and the state will respond with even greater violence. The next chapter takes a look into the sociology of state violence, why the state commits the gruesome acts it does, and how

Indigenous leaders and practices become targets of state aggression.

Resisting State Violence and De-Indigenization

“Tell a man today to go and build a state and he will try to establish a definite and defensible territorial boundary and compel those who live inside it to obey him”

– S.E. Finer (Finer as quoted in Laremont, 2005, 4)

The Effects of War on Education and the Economy

Any discussion of state violence should consider the grave effects that violence has on ordinary people. With that said, our attention is once again turned to the border war with Ethiopia and its lasting effects on the people of Eritrea. As we will see in this short section, the state’s use of external violence is often exploited as a scapegoat for worsening internal conditions. For example, war with Ethiopia became a blessing in disguise for the Eritrean state – which was becoming increasingly unpopular in the eyes of many disenchanting citizens at home.

For the regime in Asmara the Weyane problem became a welcomed distraction from addressing internal problems. On September 18th, 2001, roughly one year after the war’s end and just days after the towers fell in New York, Afwerki made use of the reduced attention on the region to silence his critics. He started by jailing eleven high ranking party members under the pretext of national security. He then more aggressively enforced the country’s policy of indefinite military service, closed all private media, and permanently threw out the constitution (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005; Connell, 2005). The attack on the “G-15” (eleven were jailed) came as a result of the group’s public criticism of Afwerki and his handling of the war. For this they were quickly accused of being spies for Ethiopia and have been held incommunicado ever since. Even on the surface of the Eritrean political landscape it was not hard to tell that the border war was being exploited as a smoke screen for mass arrests, detentions, and state assassinations in order to purge the party of rivals and resisters to Afwerki’s growing totalitarianism. No one was safe from Afwerki’s new measures of violence, coercion and control. Even Mohamed Sharifo, a famed hero of the Revolution and widely considered to be the country’s unofficial Vice President, was included in the mass arrests and is now believed to have died in prison. Two former foreign ministers were also jailed.

The state’s policy of indiscriminate terror at home and warfare abroad eventually led to the collapse of the education system and national economy. The most obvious reason for this

collapse was the arms-race that the state engaged in with Ethiopia and the several hundred-millions of dollars spent on weaponry. The opportunity cost of this spending was felt most in the area of public education. Where at 1.4% of GDP the Eritrean state's spending on education is amongst the lowest in the world (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, 108). With these grave cuts all pretensions to student-centered education have been lost, and since 2006, high schools have become used as prime recruitment grounds for the military. In 2006 the PFDJ moved the final year of all high schools to Sawa, the country's main military training ground. Thus, a seamless and problematic connection has been made between schooling and soldiering. The former becomes a bridge to the latter. Leading to unfortunate changes in how young people view education within the country. For young men in particular the classroom space has come to symbolize state abuse.

Although the numbers are unconfirmed, it is known that many young girls drop out of school following grade eleven due to the widespread rape and sexual violence they are likely to face at Sawa. Scholars have often misinterpreted low secondary school enrollment rates as resulting from early marriage or household responsibilities (Narayana & Rena, 2007, 8). Although this is true in many cases, the main reason why only 13% of school-aged girls attend high school has more to do with the looming threat of sexual violence that follows. In order to avoid rape at the hands of army commanders, senior officers and rank and file soldiers, they opt for lives without formal education. This has created a generation of female youth without high school diplomas or the basic written literacy skills associated with it. In fact women's written illiteracy rates almost double that of men (Narayana & Rena, 2007). In the workforce employers are quick to hold this fact against women by streaming them into underpaid and menial job ghettos. In urban settings they are confined to simple food processing plants or small tailor shops. By the state's own conservative estimate, the deskilling of women has created an income gap of 20-50% between genders, which is easily amongst the worst in Africa (UNO, 2001).

Because of the constitution's non-implementation there remains no legal framework to ensure women's safe access to education and equitable treatment in the workforce. Nor is the political environment conducive for women's rights activists to challenge the state on its institutionalized gender inequities. Women who are outspoken critics of the government are treated with a special kind of brutality. In an especially gross act of public terror and lawlessness, a former liberation fighter by the name of Aster Yohannes was kidnapped by military soldiers

after returning home from the United States in 2005. Aster's husband was detained as part of the G-15 and she was returning to look after her four children left without parental care. Witnesses observed that before she could even leave Asmara International Airport, a bag was pulled over Aster's head before being dragged by armed guards to a prison of unknown location. While being dragged away she urged those watching, "If I am arrested, tell the world" (Amnesty International, 2005, 20). Before returning to Eritrea Aster was assured by Eritrean immigration officials that she would not be punished for her criticisms.

Since the majority of men between 18 and 50 have been mobilized to guard the border with Ethiopia, operate underground prisons, police public spaces, or serve in armed duty, women have the burden of tending to almost all household duties. As heads of household they are put in the urgent position of making ends meet while facing the double oppression of educational and economic exclusion. The work of Ravinder Rena (2007), currently one of the state's leading intellectual apologists, has repeatedly celebrated the increased hiring of female teachers at the primary and secondary levels. Unfortunately this trend again comes more from necessity than state preference, since the military has absorbed most male labor from the workforce.

Education cutbacks also occurred at the post-secondary level. In 2006 the state permanently closed the University of Asmara claiming it absorbed too much government expenditure. The excuse at the time was that there were other national priorities arising, namely military buildup. Of course a second and equally important reason for this decision was to disband the hotbed of intellectual criticism hosted by the university.

Many scholars on post-secondary education in Eritrea appear detached from the reality on the ground, and take the state's pro-education rhetoric at face value. For example, just prior to the government crackdown of 2001 the state ordered the sweeping arrest of 2,000 leading student activists who were critical of the state. The main criticism was of the state's Warsay-Yikeallo program that requires all students to work for the state through the summer months at sub-livable wages.²⁵ The student protestors were sent to a detention camp halfway between Massawa and Assab in the eastern desert adjacent to the Red Sea. (This particular detention camp was very purposely constructed in one of the hottest deserts in the world). Eye witness reports describe the students being routinely tied in the "helicopter" position (hands and feet tied behind their

²⁵ High school students are also required to provide *Maetot* (public service) during the summer and often have trouble raising fees to survive the school year ahead.

back), turned on their chests with the face of each buried in the scorching hot sand, and left in 113 degree heat for extended periods of time (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, 95). Two students eventually died from heat stroke and many more were hospitalized. The trend of sweeping arrests and transport of critical students to remote torture centers continued until the university's closure in 2006. These brutal acts not only violated the most basic principles of academic freedom, but sent a clear message of forced compliance to intellectuals in and outside the country.

In spite of the many documented cases of academic terror and restraint, the state's intellectual 'hired guns' have praised the Eritrean state for "striving hard to develop its higher education" (Rena, 2007) and "financing education like a blood to the human body" (Rena, 2005). It seems that although the current state was once dependent on a necessary partnership between guerrillas and intellectuals, that partnership has since been broken. In place of the Bereket Habte Selassie's and other noble intellectual nation-builders is a new crop of rubber stamping researchers, policy makers and academics for hire.

A second and more dangerous consequence of the border war was the collapse of the national economy. Geo-political hostilities took a great toll on the market relationships Eritrea had built with its neighbors. Prior to 1998 80% of Eritrea's exports went to Ethiopia and Sudan. With the outbreak of the border war and increased tensions with Sudan these markets immediately closed themselves to Eritrean goods (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, 99). In a young nation-state that had yet to develop strong market relationships overseas, this left Eritrean industries with goods to produce but no markets to sell them on. Leading to a rather unhealthy shift in the country's import-export ratio, in which the state became overly dependent on importing finished goods for consumption. Given the secrecy in which the Eritrean state operates it is hard to tell exactly what kind of state the economy is in. The most recent estimates place the import-export ratio at 40:1, which is easily twice as lopsided as the 2005 estimate (Woldemikael, 2009, 9). As a result the country's economic deficit has reached alarming proportions. As if a lack of overseas markets was not bad enough, the state has taken over many factories and successful small businesses. The takeovers are obviously not for the betterment of the common people but to fund the overseas excursions of state officials. Kidane Mengisteab and Yohannes Okbazghi (2005) have commented that the takeovers are nothing short of the forced creation of a third sector of the economy owned and controlled by the ruling party.

The ruling party sector ensures that the PFDJ will forever be tied to the state since the party owns huge industry from fisheries, textile plants and shipping companies, right down to the corner store where mothers buy their milk in the morning. The party's exploitation of the state for financial gain has made democratization, if such a thing could even sprout from the totalitarian foundations of the state, an impossible project in Eritrea today.

Uprooting our History: The Workings of State De-Indigenization

States are taken for granted structures that are presumed to have been around forever. The same can be said of the African state, which “seems at once to present itself, in some unexplained but altogether persuasive sense, as having always existed”, and covers the nation with reminders of its existence (Davidson, 1992, 133). In reality, the state requires these reminders to compensate for its historical insecurity. No contemporary African state can trace its origins to before 1884. They are all recent inventions that suffer the burden of having no distant past to turn to, of needing to deal with the problem of a-historicism, and a resulting crisis of legitimacy.

Through its use of intimidating sights and sounds the state comes to know itself – marching soldiers, flags, maps, images of leadership, anthems, radio and television broadcasts work to remind people of its existence. In many African countries it would be hard to walk fifty feet in any direction without seeing a large hanging portrait of the president adorned in the country's military or civic symbols and accompanied by a quote promising peace, stability, and the like. On a recent trip to East Africa I was shocked to see presidential portraits in almost every shop, bank and government office. Above one portrait of President Museveni it was written, “Let us defend the nation together”. These and similar expressions by the state work to convince people of its constant surveillance, of its guardianship of the nation, and its pretensions to being an instrument of the people. Without such propaganda the African state exposes its core weakness: its inability to govern the people by accountable and transparent means. Without such propaganda it slips into a gradual invisibility. At which point the people stop believing in its omnipresence and gain the confidence to confront state violence. The relationship the state has to the people is simple, it is either rendered visible or invisible based on the logic of being *out of sight, out of mind*. But as long as propaganda surrounds them they remain fearful. They remain fearful that if there is no portrait of the president hanging on their wall they stand out in the worst

of ways. This became apparent to me when I asked a Kampala shopkeeper why Museveni's image was splashed across the walls of his store. He replied with a grin, "I don't even like him, but it keeps the police away".

This is the nature of state violence in Africa. It is reactionary and proactive, sloppy and yet sophisticated, and is aimed at any and all who refuse to bow to state authority. Here is also where de-Indigenization comes into play. Much of the time it is Africa's sources of traditional leadership – in the form of chiefs, healers, spiritual teachers, kings, queens, and elders – who refuses to bow to state authority. These figures answer to the Indigenous nation within the broader nation-state and are not reliant on the state for local decision making. The state's propensity toward de-Indigenization tactics comes from a desire to rid the nation-state of alternative sites of authority; it comes from the state's quest to erase the symbols of difference in order to preserve the supposed homogeneity of national identities.

Nations without states have historically been seen as secretive, untrustworthy, and disloyal threats to the central government that houses them. This was the case with the Armenians of Turkey in WWI, the Jews of Germany in WWII, and the Buganda of present-day Uganda. In the last example, the threat of a strong Buganda nation has led Museveni to comment:

A leader should show the people that those who emphasize ethnicity are messengers of perpetual backwardness. This process of undermining a sectarian mentality of "my tribe, my religion" is linked with the process of modernization and overcoming underdevelopment... *Eventually, the society will be transformed and modernized. The moment that process takes place, one's tribe or religion cease to be of much consequence.* (Museveni, 1997 – emphasis added)

The most striking thing in this passage is Museveni's dialectical understanding of Indigeneity as being modernity's antithesis. For him Indigeneity is associated with a barbarity that European contact has since pulled Africans out of. To celebrate our Indigeneity would mark a return to our barbaric pasts. In Museveni's own words, the Indigenous principles by which people learn, work and organize their lives become signs of their "perpetual backwardness". He may use terms like *tribe* and *ethnicity* but these are just bastardizations of his real concern: the many historical *nations* vying for power within the Ugandan state.

Museveni's stance on the issue borrows heavily from eurocentric understandings of monarchy-state relationships, where the distinction between Buganda leadership and the

Ugandan state becomes one between symbolic and applied power. When local media asked the president to comment on the rising tensions between his government and leaders from the Buganda nation, he scoffed, “[s]hould we even discuss these issues with the kings? Or should we leave it to the political leaders?... Prince Charles doesn't talk about partisan politics in Britain, and nor should they” (Greste, 2009).

President Afwerki’s policy of de-Indigenization was heavily influenced by Museveni. For Afwerki, Indigenous leadership is not taken seriously by the state. It is deemed purely ceremonial and deprived of any real self-determining power of its own. Also similar to Uganda, Afwerki uses violence as a weapon to amputate society of its Indigeneity. The state’s use of such violence can be traced back to 1976, when the TPLF next door began theorizing a revolutionary strategy that would not only overthrow the Ethiopian state, but remap it into federated sub-states based on boundaries that resonated with Indigenous national communities. The TPLF spoke of its goals as leading to the eventual “liberation of nationalities” and embarked upon a reformist path that led to the current system of ethnic federalism. The EPLF quickly opposed ethnic federalism for fear that it would drastically change the region’s borders. It also warned the TPLF of the dangers of empowering the region’s ancient communities and the threat they pose to the unity of the colonial nation-state. In a published response the EPLF said of the TPLF’s strategy:

It is not just going to create problems for Ethiopia, it is also going to create problems for TPLF, because now these [Indigenous nations] may be junior allies because you are stronger, you have more resources. But tomorrow, when these people become stronger they will think about themselves not as Ethiopians but say Oromos or whatever. (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000, 15-16)

The PFDJ has since organized its de-Indigenization policy into two general types. The first includes the state’s attempt to break the back of Indigenous structures of governance, such as the *baito*, believing that these structures undermine the state’s monopoly on power and decision making. The second includes the state’s attempt to rid the nation of Indigenous principles of organizing society, by this I am referring specifically to the principles of *Wefera* and *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna*. The state sees these principles as too egalitarian for the state framework and inconsistent with totalitarian rule. Let us start by examining the first type of de-Indigenization.

During the revolutionary struggle the *baito* provided a political sanctuary for EPLF guerilla forces. Through these and similar rural institutions EPLF forces were able to recruit new

fighters and distribute food aid to the community. Convinced of the need to take the fight to the people, the EPLF began strengthening village assemblies with the purpose of undermining local representatives of the colonial administration. Noticing how effective the strategy was next door, the TPLF built similar links with Tigray's local Indigenous leaders. The Ethiopian state was well aware of the new alliances being forged between old and new leadership and grew fearful that the alliance would lead to an unmanageable rurally-based workers uprising. In one of the state's security reports the author warns, "they [TPLF] have appointed administrators who can *administer the people according to their wishes and traditions*. As such, the TPLF has managed to win the confidence of the people so much so that now it is the people who can fight for it" (Abbay, 1998, 121 – emphasis added).

The confidence of the people was mainly won by supplying them with free textbooks, writing supplies and revolutionary reading material. *Baitos* became subversive centers where villagers would take part in educational workshops that oriented them on the region's colonial history and the necessity of anticolonial struggle. It was important that education was approached from an Indigenous-centered perspective that included written, visual as well as audible learning methods. The Ethiopian state was unable to appreciate the usefulness of proverbs, mythical stories, folk music and other methods used in the EPLF/TPLF curriculums. A second security report failed to take these things seriously: "Most of the TPLF army is made of peasant forces who do not know why they are fighting. Due to their low level of political consciousness, they were only intoxicated by folk music" (Abbay, 1998, 122). What the state did not realize is that learning by way of their own language and history returned a long forgotten sense of confidence to the people. That confidence quickly became translated into *baitos* becoming increasingly self-reliant, and in many cases, going as far as severing ties with local colonial authorities.

What is peculiar is that immediately following flag independence the former guerilla fronts set out to severely weaken the *baito* in hopes of turning it into a strictly cultural rather than political institution. Where the partnership between Indigenous and guerilla leaders was based on a two way exchange of roles and ideas, the power dynamic had now become entirely one-sided. By the start of the 1990s village assemblies no longer answered to the local *Chiqa* but to a state-appointed leader who monitored village life on behalf of the state. This was not the first time state authorities had tried to sideline the *Chiqa*. The Italians wholly invented the position of

Meslenie (district emblem) to preside over the *Chiqas* within a given territory.²⁶ The point of the *Meslenie* was to curb the power of *Chiqas* defiant to the colonial state while strengthening the power of those more cooperative with colonial rule. Thus, after careful review of Eritrea's colonial history we see that Afwerki's strategy to sideline Indigenous leadership is nothing new. It is informed by previous policies and strategies used by the Italians.

In an ironic reproduction of colonial violence Afwerki has even reopened the Alla and Nakhura Island prisons. The two were initially built by the Italians to house and torture Eritrean nationalists, and are not used to torture state dissidents including *Chiqas* (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Under the current set up the *baito* is reduced to a mere instrument of the state and hollowed of its real decision making power. As a result it is losing control over village life, while the underlying principles that ground it are also under threat. Those *Chiqas* who resisted the changes that followed flag independence were coerced into accepting a lesser role, dismissed from the assembly, or imprisoned for their non-cooperation. The removal of elders from political leadership was encouraged by the president himself, who in 2001 was approached by several respected elders who volunteered to mediate his conflict with the G-15. According to Tigrinya custom an elder's request for mediation is more of an obligation than anything else. It is an obligation one cannot (or at least should not) refuse. Not only did the president refuse the request for mediation but he jailed all the elders who came forward (Connell, 2003). The jailing of the elders was an act of violence in two meanings of the term. First, it was an act of physical aggression that witnessed the unlawful imprisonment and ruthless beating of several highly respected leaders. Second, given the sanctity of *Adetatnan/Abotatnan Kem Zemharuna* as enshrined in the authority of elders, the jailing of elders is likewise an act of spiritual violence against the ancestors who bore us; it is a direct challenge to the system of ancestorship that has guided African societies since time immemorial.

Afwerki's attack was not one in a far off semi-mystical place. Ancestors are intermingled with the world of the living and hold functional roles in the here-and-now. For example, Tigrinya kin groups traditionally believe themselves to be communities comprised of the living, living dead and alive unborn. By cutting off the *baito*'s political and spiritual heads so to speak,

²⁶ To add insult to injury, the word *Meslenie* is an Amharic word meaning "I am the emblem", that is "I represent" everything around me. Through an odd re-writing of history the Italians tried to pass the *Meslenie* off as a position Indigenous to the *baito* structure even though the word derived from elsewhere.

Afwerki sought to disrupt the functionality of the specific communities he affected.

Yet another attack against the *baito* came with the Land Reform Proclamation in 1994. The allocation and regulation of land is one of the *baito*'s core functions. The village assembly has the ability to expropriate and award land based on its rulings. In this sense, although land is tangibly owned by the household it is theoretically owned by the *baito* institution. The land reform policy made several major changes to land tenure. Let us review the major changes and the effects they had on village life.

1. *Ultimate ownership of land rests with the state; the state also determines the allocation and use of land.* The *baito* becomes a “second in command” in administering land. This change directly undermines the historical authority of *Diessa* (village ownership of land) in deciding how land should be distributed and for which purposes it is used. The *baito*'s authority in ruling on non-land based issues is also affected since its authority as an institution is derived from *Diessa*. The traditional cooperative and democratic values that the village system represents may also be eroded.
2. *Village farm land will be re-allotted to include a portion reserved for private investment.* The *baito* becomes vulnerable to corporate and state interests overtaking the village. Harmful uses of land – in the form of pesticides, chemical disposal, and soil exhaustion – are no longer curbed by the *baito*.
3. *The existing boundaries of villages, districts and administrative regions will be redrawn.* With the redrawing of the countries administrative zones, some villages are divided and others are combined into unnatural groupings. New conflicts arise due to major changes to local demographics and arising leadership struggles. In few cases the village assemblies that were unable to adapt to the new zoning collapsed altogether. Resulting in the *baito* – as the most important source of identity and livelihood outside the family unit – being replaced by other, probably less supportive, bodies of decision making.

These and other state reforms have had devastating effects on villages throughout the nation. As a result the village *baito* has been brought to its knees, and so long as the state continues its project of eliminating rival sites of power and decision making, Indigenous institutions will remain empty of any real political purpose.

At the crux of the issue is the question of leadership. At the helm of the state apparatus is

an elite group of personalities that have grabbed power and refuse to restore it to the people. Hope that the situation may change comes from the fact that if these personalities are removed then so too is the violent, overly centralized Eritrean state. After all, it is the class of morally bankrupt leaders and state bureaucrats that define the structures they operate within, and not the other way around. In beginning to theorize alternatives to the African state we must first theorize new types, sites, and expectations of African leadership.

Chapter Six: “Inventing the Future”: On the Crisis of Leadership... and Beyond

The Igbo have a saying that sums up the problem of leadership in Africa: “a person who took no oath is never guilty of breaking one.” In other words, because past generations of African leadership have almost wholly refused to work in the interests of the people we should not expect them to start now. African statesmen are not bound by the oaths or laws they impose on the people. Nor are they adherents to the moral-ethical expectations they have of the nation. They are political outlaws who only answer to the forces of global capital. As exemplified by Emperor Haile Selassie during the Ethiopian famine of the 1970s, they do not hesitate to sip cognac and rub shoulders with dignitaries while the masses starve beyond the palace gates. Nor do they mind plotting the overthrow of their president (backed by foreign regimes) with the promise of assuming the seat of power, as exemplified by Mobutu Sese Sekou in the 1960s. These examples may be few decades old but we have no reason to believe things have changed much.

It is crucial to understand that the problem of African leadership is not a matter of failure. Failure is a concept that assumes the goals of leadership have not been met. In reality the goals of leadership have been met. It is the goal of state leaders to put their populations to sleep with poverty and violence while they bask in the riches that the state affords them. It is often said that Africa lacks “good leadership”. However, the problem is not a lack of good leadership as much as it is the uses of leadership to fulfill the colonial order of things.

Good leadership is not to be confused with good character, and should be measured by the level of structural change and social transformation a leader is able to bring about. When we hold Nelson Mandela up as a benchmark of effective leadership we forget that South Africa remains a stronghold of de-Indigenization and free market capitalism. It remains a colonized space still in need of real independence. Leading Archbishop Desmond Tutu as recent as 2001 to question the effectiveness of Mandela and Mbeki’s leadership, commenting, “I mean, what’s the point of having made this transition if the quality of life of these people is not enhanced and improved? If not, the vote is useless” (Klein, 2007, 233). This is not to say that Mandela is not a courageous and knowledgeable man with the best intentions in mind for his country, but that the country has yet to see real transformation in any sense of the word. The truth of the matter is

people like Mandela prove to be strong leaders. But they are leaders who head states, and those states have proved to structure the parameters within which change occurs in the lives of the people.

As proven throughout this thesis, the state apparatus has failed to resonate with the political culture of African peoples from Asmara to Johannesburg, Freetown to Windhoek, while African leaders have sat by and watched the state fail its people with limited intervention.

The first two decades of flag independence in Eritrea should also be questioned. At what cost was this “independence” secured? How many lives were sacrificed so we may experience an oppression eerily similar to that experienced under colonial rule? The answer to these questions reveals that flag independence has merely transferred the riches of colonialism from the hands of an elite group of whites to an elite group of blacks. And so history returns to its bitter origin and Eritrea’s future looks no brighter now than it did in 1961, the year the armed struggle began. But history demands a new struggle for the people of Eritrea today. It demands a direct challenge of the state and its antagonistic national ideologies; it demands that the region’s forgotten nations envision themselves as existing beyond state boundaries; and it demands that state violence is met, if need be, with resistive violence that defends those local governing traditions under threat of annihilation.

Who will lead this fight? Who will fill the rank and file of a new generation of African leadership? I am always frustrated when people suggest that Africa is without leadership. In actuality the men and women who occupy the hallways of power today are pathetic stand-ins for the continent’s real leaders. Real leaders are rarely found in the hallways of power or academic institutions, but remain amongst the bulk of society; amongst the most oppressed and downtrodden. Real leaders lead from the nexus of knowledge, emotion and understanding. That is, an understanding that decolonization is an ongoing process that was not realized with flag independence. As Gramsci said of his organic intellectual, “the people have feelings, they feel and act: intellectuals understand, but they do not feel”. An organic intellectual is any person who combines the two (Freire & Faundez, 1989, 28). This includes those *baito* representatives who toil for their communities in the face of state imposition, the brave critics who currently rot in underground prisons, and the youth who dare to imagine a life different than their own. The continent is not deprived of leadership. It is simply in need of a re-empowerment and re-mobilization of those Indigenous leaders and institutions rendered derelict by the state.

What Africa requires now is a second breed of leadership that displays confidence in the continent's ability to feed, protect and pull itself from the political quicksand it finds itself in. This is most important at the level of regional and continental governance, where leaders tend to underestimate the ability for Africans to govern themselves based on homegrown solutions. It was the secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity, Edem Kodjo, who in 1988 said "Africa is nothing, does nothing, nor can do anything" (Davidson, 1992, 13). One would think Kodjo's words were spoken from the lips of someone unfamiliar with the continent and not an elected leader.

There is a need to move beyond the crisis of leadership and beyond the Kodjos of Africa. A Yoruba proverb promises that "you know how much you have passed through; you do not know how much you still have left". The same can be said of our anticolonial struggle. The toil of colonized peoples is nothing new and yet it rages on with no end in sight. All that can be said is that the flame of resistance and Indigenous resurgence continues to burn into the darkest of nights; and that the colonized will never give up their fight for true independence.

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