

# OSCILLATING IMAGINARIES: WAR, PEACE, AND THE PRECARIOUS RELATIONS BETWEEN ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA

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**Abstract:** While the 2018 peace declaration between Ethiopia and Eritrea was widely celebrated, Eritrean refugees expressed concern that peace would be destabilising, and their status in Ethiopia would change. Their concerns were shaped by a long history of oscillating imaginaries of how Eritrea “fits” with Ethiopia. Drawing from historical analysis and ethnographic fieldwork leading up to the peace agreement, we explore how these oscillating imaginaries create an uncomfortable and unstable situation for Eritreans in Ethiopia, rendering refugees vulnerable to unpredictable violence. Better understanding the way identity categories have been subject to constant slippage and have been instrumentalised by political elites could help to forge a more peaceful future among Ethiopia’s nationalities and between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

**Keywords:** *multiple nationalisms, slippery citizenship, vulnerability of refugees, the precarity of peace, the politics of war*

## Introduction: The Precarity of Peace

Ethiopia and Eritrea took the world by surprise when they declared peace in 2018, thereby ending a nearly 20-year stand-off that followed a three-year border conflict. We visited the Mai Aini refugee camp in northern Ethiopia only days after peace was declared. In contrast to the celebrations happening elsewhere, and the celebratory tone of national and international reporting, Eritrean refugees were worried. “The new peace agreement exposes us. It will harm us. It will not benefit us,” one refugee assessed. This was a common sentiment, and an astute one. At the present time of writing, two of the four refugee camps housing Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region have been closed, and, by many accounts, destroyed in the fighting that broke out in the Tigray region in November 2020. The other two camps, including Mai

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Aini, have been incommunicado behind an information blackout. There are accounts of widespread hunger due to severe food shortages and mass atrocities being committed by all sides in the conflict (Goldberg 2021; OHCHR -EHRC 2021). In the fighting over the past year, it was reported that refugees were attacked, abducted, and raped by Tigrayan militias (Paszkiwicz 2021) and forcibly returned to Eritrea by Eritrean forces who were in Tigray to support the Ethiopian government forces (UNHCR 2021; HRW 2021).

The extreme vulnerability of refugees in times of war is a recurring story. Scholars have argued that refugees are liminally situated vis-à-vis the national order of things, lacking clear categorical belonging to a nation state (Malkki 1995a, 1995b). They are, effectively “matter out of place” (Douglas 1984 [1966]), which may be perceived as threatening to the national order overall or to residents of a particular nation (Malkki 1995a, 1995b). This situation is amplified in times of war, in which anxieties about the purity and completeness of the nation-state are brought to the fore (Appadurai 2006). This situation is particularly amplified when refugees’ home and host countries find themselves in conflict. Although Eritrean refugees could never have anticipated the level of devastation and atrocity that the recent war in Tigray has caused, they anticipated that peace would not bring them peace and, in fact, would be destabilising.

Refugees had many reasons to fear what peace would bring, including their precarious status as refugees and a lack of trust in both the UNHCR and the Ethiopian state and its Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA).<sup>1</sup> Most importantly perhaps, refugees’ concern about peace was framed by the long history of Eritreans slipping between various identity categories in Ethiopia. The slipperiness of Eritrean belonging in Ethiopia precedes their presence as refugees in Ethiopia and draws on the complex ways in which Eritrea – and Eritreans – have been imagined, particularly as Ethiopia has contested and reworked its own national narrative several times. In this article we draw on fieldwork conducted with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia between 2016 and 2018, earlier research on deportations during the border war (Riggan 2013) and Eritrean nationalism (Riggan 2016; Poole 2009), and an analysis of scholarly literature relevant to the topic, in order to explore successive ways in which Eritrea and the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been imagined and reimagined under successive governments in Ethiopia.

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1 ARRAs has currently been renamed Refugee and Returnee Services (RRS). At the time of our fieldwork it was referred to as ARRA, so we use this terminology here.

We make two interlocking arguments about the importance of what we call oscillating imaginaries. First, these oscillating imaginaries of Eritrea are dependent on both political shifts in Ethiopia and, perhaps more importantly, on the ways in which these political shifts reframe the role that identity plays in Ethiopian politics. As Ethiopian politics reconfigures itself around ethnic identity, the way Eritrea is imagined vis-à-vis Ethiopia shifts, but does so in different ways for different ethnic groups. Second, these oscillating imaginaries of how Eritrea “fits” with Ethiopia create an uncomfortable and unstable situation for Eritreans in Ethiopia, rendering refugees vulnerable to unpredictable violence. The positionality of Eritreans in Ethiopia has been highly politicised by different factions. The war, which began in November 2020, has further politicised the status of Eritreans living in Ethiopia and, although this process of slippage began long ago, the peace declaration and subsequent war has accentuated it.

We begin this article by developing a theoretical framework to demonstrate the slipperiness of formal citizenship status and other categories of political belonging for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. This highlights the particular vulnerability of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and makes a claim that their vulnerability helps us understand often overlooked facets of the complex identity politics of the two countries. We then use these ideas about the slipperiness of belonging and anxieties about national completeness to explore oscillating imaginaries of Eritrea across three time periods: Ethiopian and Eritrean imaginaries of Eritrea prior to independence; imaginaries of Eritrea under the rule of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF); and imaginaries of Eritrea from the time of peace to the time of war under Abiy Ahmed’s rule. In this last section, we draw on consecutive periods of ethnographic fieldwork in and around the refugee camps in Tigray leading up to the declaration of peace in Spring 2018. We conducted fieldwork in Addis Ababa and three refugee camps in Tigray (Adi Harush, Hitsats, and Mai Aini) as part of a larger study on local integration, temporality and higher education among Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Although not the original intent of our research, refugees insisted on talking with us about how they expected peace between the two countries to affect them. We draw on these conversations to argue that peace reconfigured an already complex and fluid politics of belonging in Ethiopia. Placing these three time periods in conversation allows us to explore how these multiple and conflicting ways of imagining Eritrea have political salience for the well-being of refugees. We conclude with comments on why the slippery status of Eritrean refugees makes them particularly vulnerable to violence from all sides in this conflict.

## **The Slipperiness of Citizenship and Other Forms of Political Belonging**

Benedict Anderson notes that the nation is an imagined community, but also that these imaginaries must reconcile several paradoxes (1991). One of these paradoxes is that nations are naturalised by being thought of as belonging to groups of people who have a shared past and, thus, the nation must project itself into history, the further back the better. However, simultaneously, the nation is a modern entity, so nations must also root themselves in modernity. Other scholars have specified how these dilemmas play out in post-colonial states which must also contend with the problem of colonialism (Chatterjee 1993). Arguably Ethiopia has been highly successful at projecting this twin imaginary of ancient and modern into the world. However, this success relied on the promotion of a hegemonic narrow nationalism which centered on two key ethnic groups (speakers of the Tigrinya and Amharic Semitic languages, often referred to as “habesha” people) (Donham 2002, Tareke 1991); the assimilation of other ethno-linguistic groups into habesha identity (Yates 2020); and the marginalisation of those who could not or would not be assimilated due to racial, religious, cultural, or political differences (Smith 2013). Eritrea was traditionally, if problematically, imagined as part of the *habesha* hegemonic core. Thus, Eritrea’s assertion of itself as a nation with a history different from that of Ethiopia posed a problem for the Ethiopian national narrative as a whole.

The case of the Eritrean and Ethiopian national projects illuminates arguments made by what is now an extensive literature that demonstrates that national imaginaries are typically contested, and national projects are always incomplete (Appadurai 2006). Nations, and popular imaginaries of them, even in nations that successfully project an imaginary of themselves as stable, are highly unstable entities that generate a politics of belonging that is particularly fraught for refugees and other groups who occupy liminal categories. Eritreans in Ethiopia are liminal both by virtue of being refugees and by virtue of being Eritrean.

Nations are founded on the myth of purity. But purity is just that – a myth. These myths include the distinctiveness of the national population in religious or ethnic identity, or allegiance to common ways of imagining the nation. Slippery citizenship takes place in the interstices between the imagined purity of the nation and the inevitable incompleteness of that project. Appadurai describes this impetus toward purity and its inevitable blurring as “the anxiety of incompleteness” (2006: 8). This anxiety is amplified by perceived threats to national sovereignty and national purity, like global

mobility, the increased political voice of both transnational and subnational actors, and the increasing force of identity politics. And it is the “anxiety of incompleteness” that creates a “new economy of slippage and morphing which characterises the relationship between majority and minority identities and powers” (2006: 10). But even as it aspires to produce bounded, clearly defined identities, there are groups that fall in-between. Refugees represent a challenge to the sacred “national order of things” (Malkki 1995: 5) and the presumption that states can effectively order social and political life.

States and members of majority populations respond to slippage by imposing increasingly rigid categories to maintain a nation’s purity. The deportations of Eritreans during the border war with Ethiopia, which we discuss below, can be seen as an attempt to make porous identities rigid. Categories of belonging can be politicised, hardened, and manipulated for political gain – becoming political resources themselves while reinforcing identity-based politics (Riggan 2011, 2016). These processes may lead to forms of containment in some cases, or violent cleansing of those seen as not fitting into narrowed categories of belonging. The situation of Eritreans in Ethiopia is reflective of what Appadurai refers to as “the narcissism of minor difference” (Appadurai 2006). Appadurai argues that the most threatening differences are the minor ones between people who live in proximity and share a common lifestyle, as they “are a constant reminder of the incompleteness of national purity” (Appadurai 2006: 84) and “the slippery two-way traffic between the two categories” (Appadurai 2006: 11).

When Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1991, under the rule of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, Ethiopia rewrote its constitution and reorganised itself around a system of ethnic federalism. The move to reorganise the country into a system of ethnically oriented states initially appeared to be an attempt to reverse centuries of hegemonic rule of Ethiopia’s highland, Orthodox Christian populations over the “others,” to devolve power to the regional level, and to challenge the hegemony of previous Ethiopian nationalisms; however, it failed to do so effectively.<sup>2</sup> Ethnic federalism can also be viewed as reflective of a trend towards forms of political organisation that rely on autochthony, or a claim to political belonging

2 While the shift to federalism appeared to be a way of reworking the way the core-periphery relations in the Ethiopian nation were imagined, it failed to effectively do so while it did successfully consolidate power around the EPRDF. A full discussion of the scholarly debates about the intentions and the outcomes of ethnic federalism is far beyond the scope of this article. It should be noted, however, that ethnic federalism and the rule of the TPLF faced opposition both from Amhara nationalists, who saw it as radically undermining the Ethiopian nation, and from “others” who remained marginalised.

that derives from deep rootedness in the land and a deep attachment to place (Geschiera 2009; Geschiera and Cueppens 2005; Geschiera and Jackson 2006). As noted in the work of Peter Geschiera and others, autochthony often functions as an exclusive principle and narrows the parameters of belonging to a polity. Claims to autochthony often present themselves as based on a natural tie between people and the land, but these claims are often shifting and contested. Like the nation itself, autochthony is based on a principle of purity, but may extend this principle to regions within nations or across borders when people with common identities span those borders. They are often politically problematic because purity is always an incomplete condition. People are inevitably left out of autochthony claims or included against their will. They are also displaced by those who profess a longer attachment to place and a deeper claim to belonging or are told that they possess an identity they did not previously adhere to. The move to ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has attached ethnic identity to each regional state and has made political belonging (and access to rights and resources) contingent on membership to an ethnicity and a state. It has become highly controversial by raising concerns about national unity (Fiseha 2006; Turton 2006), and has also led to violent exclusions and border conflicts between and within ethnic states (Aalen 2011).

The move to create these kinds of autochthonous, rigid identity borders in Ethiopia was put in place at the same moment that Eritrea had become independent and was reimagining itself as a unitary nation that had a history and culture different from Ethiopia. Both processes challenged traditional Ethiopian national narratives and were seen as threats. What happened to the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopians in the midst of this slippage of categories and increased anxieties about national belonging in Ethiopia? Alternately imagined as outsider and insider, Eritreans have long found themselves in a slippery location, vulnerable to shifts in political discourse and pressures, particularly in times of war. As such, they remain a repository for different groups' anxieties and fears, multifaceted as they may be. Because they slip between categories, Eritrean refugees are naturalised as "a part" of one group or another and simultaneously rejected as a security threat.

### **Imagining Eritrea under Ethiopian Emperors**

Ideas about Eritrea have always circulated through Ethiopian nationalist imaginaries. The imaginary of Ethiopia is not a singular one, but rather has shifted in different time periods and across different political and ethnic

groups. In this section our main objective is to highlight dominant ways in which the Ethiopian national imaginary has been projected onto Eritrea and Eritreans, as this history is important for making sense of the ways in which imaginaries of Eritrea have shifted more recently.<sup>3</sup>

If we take up Benedict Anderson's assertion that the nation must imagine itself as both ancient and modern, Ethiopia, at first glance, appears to be extremely successful. However, the case of Ethiopia also reveals the inherent problems for nations in this project. Lahra Smith (2013) describes the debate among historians over the starting point of the narrative of the Ethiopian nation, noting that some scholars contend that the Ethiopian state is 3,000 years old while others root its origins approximately 150 years ago with the "age of princes" that preceded Emperor Menelik's consolidation of the modern Ethiopian state. But it is the coexistence of these two narratives that gave Ethiopia its compelling storyline. Those who contend that the Ethiopian state is 3,000 years old regard Ethiopia as having a contiguous, centuries-long, if not millennia-long successive, stable state. This assertion rests on the national origin story that begins in the Old Testament with the mythic union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, extends these biblical origins through the Axumite empire, and draws a continuous line to the last of the Ethiopian emperors, Haile Selassie. Indeed, in both the 1931 and 1955 constitutions it states that the Ethiopian emperor is a direct descendent of the Solomonic line (Smith 2013).

Pre-1991 state narratives of the Ethiopian nation not only hinge on this historiography of a continuous Ethiopian state dating back to the 4th century but cast Eritrea as a central part of the Ethiopian polity. The Axumite Empire spanned Northern Ethiopia and a large part of Southern Eritrea, including the Port of Adulis on the coast. Thus, territory located in what is now Eritrea is central to this traditional Ethiopian origin story. The Axum origin story not only imaginatively binds Eritrea to Ethiopia, but also legiti-

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3 Scholars of nationalism have noted that it is difficult to differentiate the histories of nations from the history of the nation-making project (Bhabha 1990). The telling of history and the nation-making project are tangled together: history is often co-opted for nation-making purposes, and historical projects often adopt a stance vis-à-vis the national project. In writing this section, we recognise this problem, but will not be able to resolve it. There is an array of excellent reviews of Ethiopian historiography, many of which examine debates over processes of state and citizenship formation in Ethiopia (see for example: Zeleke 2019, Smith 2013). We are making no claims to recount a definitive version of the history of the development of the Ethiopian nation or its nation-building project. Neither are we taking a stand on these debates. We will inevitably neglect nuances on debated historical points and apologise for doing so, but in order to keep our focus on Eritrea and stay within the confines of an article, it is necessary.

mates the narrative of an unbroken line of kings, and the successive reign of Ethiopian, highland, Christian people over sovereign Ethiopian and Eritrean territory, including extending dominion over many people who did not share this religious or ethnic history or adhere to this particular narrative of what Ethiopia is (Clapham 2002; Donham 1999). Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity plays a central role in this history. Axumite kings converted to Christianity in the 4th century, and, since then, Orthodox Christianity has been centered as the state religion of Ethiopia. The 1955 constitution goes further to assert the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the church of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has also successfully projected this image of Ethiopia as an ancient, continuous, Christian nation into the world through the auspices of tourism among other things. Ethiopia as an ancient Christian nation is a romantic and compelling notion.

Rooting the origins of the Ethiopian state in the Axumite Empire also centralises ethnic groups that speak Semitic languages (Amharic and Tigrinya), both of which originate from the parent language and script, Gēez. Haile Selassie implemented policies of “Amharisation” through which the Amharic language and culture spread throughout the country, enabling some non-Amhara people to become Amhara.<sup>4</sup> This process of Amharisation, which began under Menelik and continued through the Derg regime, is partly what led Donald Levine (1974) to argue for the cohesion of a greater Ethiopian cultural area. These ethno-linguistic groups historically hail from the central highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia, thus, the anchoring of Ethiopian nationalism in Axum also binds Eritrea to Ethiopia.

The vision of “greater Ethiopia” described by Levine (1974) is highly contested. When seen from one vantage point, “greater Ethiopia” is the story of a natural process of nationalisation over time. When seen from another vantage point, it resulted in a sort of manifest destiny on the part of Ethiopian, Christian highlanders (“habesha”) that justified the incorporation of non-Ethiopian Christian peoples into the Ethiopian nation (Donham 1999; Sorenson 1993).

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the centuries of complex history in which the Ethiopian central state extended its reach throughout the territory now regarded as Ethiopia, but here we observe that for Amhara and Tigrayan ethnic groups in particular, the loss of Eritrea was felt keenly

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4 For a deeper discussion of this phenomenon, see Brian Yates (2020) *The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1913*. See also Donham 1999; Smith 2013 and others.



as a rupture in their understanding of what their nation was. When Eritrea became independent, this was not seen as pulling away of a marginal hinterland, but rather as a shearing off of part of the core of the highland, Christian, “habesha” Ethiopia. Eritrean independence took not only what was thought of as Ethiopian land, but also challenged the narrative hegemony of the *habesha* core. This rupture has never been fully resolved and is one of the reasons why Eritreans’ status in Ethiopia has changed so many times, why any state hospitality towards them is often regarded with suspicion, and why they remain vulnerable to discrimination, marginalisation, and violence.

Although the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 replaced the Emperor Haile Selassie with Soviet-backed military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, the core tenets of earlier imaginaries of Eritrea – that Eritrea was a natural and integral part of a “greater Ethiopia,” remained largely unchanged (Donham 1999). Donham describes the celebrations in Addis Ababa on the tenth anniversary of the revolution, including a parade that depicted Ethiopia’s national narrative, beginning with Lucy’s bones, moving on to photographs of the Stelae in Axum, depicting the 1896 battle of Adwa in which Ethiopia defeated Italy, and concluding with the overthrow of Haile Selassie. Even though the communist government no longer exalted the long line of emperors and the church, the march to revolutionary modernity passed through Axum and therefore inherently depicted an Ethiopia inclusive of Eritrea. During this period, while there was some debate on the left over whether Eritrea should have the right to secede, the party leadership was unequivocally of the opinion that the rebellion in Eritrea should be squashed. The projection of Ethiopia onto Eritrea, the naturalisation of the idea of Eritrea as a core component of Ethiopia, and the assertion of Ethiopia’s right to the Red Sea coast, all continued through the Derg period as did the war for Eritrea’s independence (1961–1991).

There was potential for a shift in these traditional Ethiopian imaginaries of Eritrea in 1991 when Eritrea became independent and Mengistu was deposed by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Because of the centrality of the Eritrean highlands and coast to the imaginary of not only Eritrea but also Ethiopia, the loss of Eritrea challenged the national narrative as a whole (James et al. 2002). With the introduction of ethnic federalism, the potential existed to reorient Ethiopian leadership away from traditional narratives of Semitic/highland dominance, something which held great hopes for some and anxieties for other. The anxiety for many Ethiopians was about how to reinvent the nation without relying on previously hegemonic narratives. The anxiety for others was about the loss of these narratives. These divergent

anxieties meant that the national narratives described above were weakened (Bariagaber 1998; Mains 2004). However, despite the present devolution of power to ethnically based, semi-autonomous regions, traditional symbols of the Ethiopian nation and the allocation of power to the state proved hard to displace completely (James et al. 2002; Mains 2004; Sorenson 1993). Although the legendary origins of Ethiopia in the biblical union of Solomon and Sheba are commonly thought of as a myth and have seldomly been used to shore up arguments for political legitimacy in contemporary Ethiopian politics since 1991, they still have an affective heft. Even more compelling are imaginaries that suggest that Eritrea was wrongfully taken from Ethiopia during the Italian colonial period. These narratives cast Ethiopia as a victim of colonial aggression and therefore normalise Eritrea as a component of Ethiopia.

In contrast to Ethiopia, the Eritrean national project pivoted away from a focus on ethnicity and a reliance on antiquity. While the legitimacy of long-standing national imaginaries and nation-building projects is at stake for Ethiopia, Eritrea contends more with the lack of legitimacy of the state than the nation (Riggan 2016). Eritrea, in contrast to Ethiopia, does not attempt to create a projection of the nation into antiquity, but rather roots its origins in the contemporary struggle for independence against Ethiopian imperialism. To say that this narrative of Eritreanness is universal would be a vast overstatement, but it is widely accepted among both critics and supporters of the current regime, among the various generations in the Eritrean diaspora, and among Eritreans residing in Eritrea. Thus, the time frame and temporality of the Eritrean national project is very different from that of Ethiopia, with the former lasting less than a century and the latter spanning millennia. According to Eritrean government national narratives, Eritrea did not exist as an entity prior to Italian colonialism although there were pre-national civilisations, including Axum, that existed on a part of Eritrea's territory. By acknowledging that the nation did not exist prior to Italian colonialism, Eritrea creates a rationale for inclusion of all of Eritrea's religions, ethnic groups, and geographical regions into a common polity. However, this concept of nationalism holds little room for alternate forms of allegiance or belonging to religious, ethnic, or civil groups that supersede the level of the nation.

In contrast to Ethiopian national imaginaries, the Eritrean nation-building project roots the common national culture in the shared values of the struggle for independence from Ethiopia (Iyob 1995). National leaders in Eritrea emphasise the struggle for independence as foundational to the Eritrean na-

tion, focusing on sacrifice and shared suffering – values forged during the struggle that persist in dominant state-led discourses (Bernal 2017). This approach to nation-building not only creates a national narrative that tries to avoid amplifying the story of one ethnic group over another but rejects the claim that a nation needs to project itself into antiquity. Alongside the values of shared sacrifice, the concept of self-reliance has been central to the discourse of nationalism in Eritrea and has facilitated top-down state control of economic and social development funds and projects (Dorman 2005). As Ethiopian national imaginaries are intimately connected to Eritrea, Eritrean national imaginaries are connected to Ethiopia, particularly through the scaffolding of the values of self-reliance and shared sacrifice forged during the struggle for independence.

What concerns us here are the ways in which Ethiopian national imaginaries clash with those of Eritrea and seek to appropriate and re-imagine Eritrea to suit their purposes. In moments of conflict these become particularly salient and put people in danger. While Eritrea centres the wrongful occupation of Eritrea by Ethiopia in its national story, Ethiopia regards Eritrea as a natural part of its own territory which was wrongfully taken by Italy. Additionally, this imaginary posits Eritrea not only as part of Ethiopia, but as a part of the Ethiopian core that faced new dilemmas in the multi-ethnic federation model formed after 1991. These divergent historical claims frame popular imaginaries of each nation and its respective other (Iyob 1995, 2000; Sorenson 1993). New governments in both countries have had to contend with these imaginaries as they sought to reshape their respective nations according to new configurations of power after 1991.

### **Slippery Citizenship and Oscillating Imaginaries under the EPRDF**

With the 1991 overthrow of the military Derg regime, a great deal changed. As with many former empires whose national pride revolved around the nation's success at forcefully acquiring territories, when the era of the empire came to an end, the nation struggled with its legitimacy. In 1991, Ethiopia reconfigured itself as an ethnic federation, thereby shifting from a centralised, hegemonic concept of the nation which centralised the dominance of Ethiopia's Semitic peoples, and reorganised the country in a series of ethnic states (James et. al. 2002). The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front introduced a new Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) subject as a required subject at all levels of education. Arguably, the CEE curriculum attempted to shift the national narrative in this direction.

Ethnic federalism emphasised autochthonous attachments to the nation through ties with particular places (Geschiere 2009; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Dorman, Hammett and Nugent 2007). The 1995 constitution required diverse people to define their positions in the nation and lay claim to being authentically national by virtue of their attachment to the blood and soil of a particular ethnic state. Unlike the earlier phase of nation-building, which was intent on creating a synthetic, cohesive nationalism, the system of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was designed to avoid co-opting identity. And yet, instead of truly devolving state power to these ethnic states, the EPRDF party retained centralised power, leaving Ethiopia with a centralised state and a decentralised nation. Although centralised state power was never truly decentralised, the move to ethnic federalism did challenge longstanding conceptualisations of the Ethiopian nation (Bariagaber 1998; Mains 2004).

During the period of EPRDF rule, imaginaries of Eritrea and Eritrean belonging in Ethiopia underwent significant shifts as well. Even after Eritrea became an independent country in 1991, many Eritreans continued to live in Ethiopia. The number of Eritreans and people of Eritrean descent in Ethiopia has always been hard to pin down due to migration, intermarriage, and a porous border throughout much of the Tigrinya-speaking regions spanning the two countries. This was particularly so before Eritrea became independent while under Ethiopian rule. Ethiopia estimated at the time of the border war that there were approximately half a million Eritreans in Ethiopia. Others note that the population prior to the deportations was probably closer to 130,000 (Kibreab 1999). Prior to the 1993 referendum, the Eritrean embassy in Ethiopia enumerated the Eritreans living throughout Ethiopia and placed the number at 160,000 (Kibreab 1999).

The question of the citizenship and nationality of Eritreans residing in Ethiopia was not clarified for many years after Eritrea's independence. There was never a process in place to determine the citizenship of people of Eritrean descent in Ethiopia, nor for Eritreans in Ethiopia to formally declare or renounce their Ethiopian or Eritrean citizenship (Campbell 2013; Human Rights Watch 2003). The citizenship status of Eritreans in Ethiopia was legally a grey area, but in practice Eritreans living in Ethiopia believed themselves to *legally* retain their Ethiopian citizenship even if they *felt* Eritrean. Ethiopia, which at that time had undergone a radical political transition of its own, did not disavow Eritreans of either the notion that they were Eritrean, or that they could hang on to their Ethiopian citizenship.

In 1993, Eritreans in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and around the world voted in a referendum for Eritrea's independence. In Ethiopia, the referendum on Eritre-

an independence did not lend any clarity to citizenship questions. Instead, citizenship continued to be a grey area. 78 polling stations were set up in Ethiopia and 57,706 Eritreans in Ethiopia voted in the referendum (Kibreab 1999). At this time, Ethiopia did not require Eritreans to renounce their citizenship. Eritreans voted in the referendum and continued to live, work and function as if they were Ethiopian citizens (Campbell 2013; Human Rights Watch 2003).

The border war was a moment of rupture for Eritreans living in Ethiopia and for ways in which Ethiopians imagined Eritrea and Eritreans. In May 1998, tensions over disputed sections of Ethiopia and Eritrea's shared border erupted into an all-out war. Through the border war, it appeared that Ethiopia was intent on delineating both territorial and identity boundaries with Eritrea, leaving a large number of people feeling trapped "in between nations" (Riggan 2011). For the first time, Ethiopia rejected the membership of Eritreans in the national polity. The rationale for the expulsion was that, by virtue of voting in the referendum and engaging in several other nationalistic activities, Eritreans had chosen Eritrean nationality and therefore were foreigners in Ethiopia (Human Rights Watch 2003).

The deportations were a watershed moment in determinations of not only citizenship and nationality but also of belonging. In an interview with Radio Ethiopia on 9 July 1998, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi declared, "As long as any foreign national is in Ethiopia, whether Eritrean or Japanese... [he/she] lives in Ethiopia by the *goodwill* of the Ethiopian government..." (Kibreab 1999). This quotation is significant because the prime minister indicates, publicly and for the first time, that Eritreans in Ethiopia are *not* Ethiopian and casts them as *guests* who can be disinvited. The deportations themselves signified that Ethiopia intended to treat individuals of Eritrean descent not only as aliens, but also as citizens of a hostile enemy nation and effectively as unwelcome guests. This was not only a declaration of enmity, it was a declaration that, for the first time, Eritreans *did not belong* to Ethiopia. When deported, their documents were stamped, "Deported, never to return" (Campbell 2013: 95).

In August 1999 the Ethiopian government ordered all Eritreans above the age of 18 who had voted in the referendum for independence to register and obtain an alien residence permit. They were given a residence permit which stated that they were Eritrean even if they were born in Ethiopia (Campbell 2013: 46). The stipulation that those who voted in the referendum were alien residents, and therefore not Ethiopian, illustrates the Ethiopian gover-

nment's retroactive claim that Eritreans who had voted in the referendum were of Eritrean nationality by virtue of voting in the referendum, even though there had never been a process in place for them to renounce Ethiopian nationality. From this point on, people who had voted in the referendum were regarded as having Eritrean nationality.

The mandate that all Eritreans register was implemented in an arbitrary manner. Some Eritreans were targeted; others managed to keep their identity obscured. For their own safety, some Eritreans hid their Eritrean identity from the authorities, sometimes at great risk. Several of the author's interlocutors told stories of having to change jobs, avoid friends, or move to a different part of the city, sometimes several times, to avoid someone finding out that they were Eritrean and reporting them to the authorities. Eventually, many fled to other countries in order to avoid persecution.

The border war continued until a peace treaty was signed in 2000. However, once the decision about the border was announced, Ethiopia refused to accept it without further talks with Eritrea, launching the countries into a period of frozen conflict that would last until the 2018 peace agreement.

By 2003, Ethiopia had gradually begun to warm up to Eritreans themselves, but not to the Eritrean government. The numbers of Eritrean refugees fleeing to Ethiopia gradually began to increase. Ethiopia established the Shimelba Camp in 2004 in order to house the continuous influx of Eritrean refugees fleeing the country, and to provide safer accommodation to the thousands who had been living in Waala Nihibi, a temporary camp located on former battle grounds close to the border (Treiber 2019). However, questions of the nationality of people of Eritrean descent remained unclarified until the Ethiopian Nationality Law Proclamation of 2003, which restated that "a person shall be an Ethiopian national by descent where both or either of his parents is an Ethiopian." The 2003 Proclamation also stated that "any Ethiopian who voluntarily acquires another nationality shall be deemed to have voluntarily renounced his Ethiopian nationality." This means that people of Eritrean descent in Ethiopia who voted in the referendum, were either registered as alien residents, or were deported have been retroactively classified as Eritrean, not Ethiopian.

In the twenty-year period of frozen conflict that existed between Eritrea and Ethiopia up until June 2018, Ethiopia adopted a *prima facie* policy toward accepting Eritrean refugees, and in the absence of normalised relations between the countries, Ethiopia arguably established a relationship of hospitality with Eritrean citizens in an attempt to win over the "hearts and minds"

of its neighbours (Connell 2012). Representatives from the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), the government agency tasked with managing refugees, consistently described refugees as future “ambassadors,” ultimately returning to their country of origin with positive and familial-like ties formed with the Ethiopian state during their time in the country (personal communication with ARRA officials, 2016). In Ethiopian government media publications, explicit connections were made between policies intent on welcoming Eritrean refugees and peace building (Abebe 2017; Gebru 2017). Four camps for Eritrean refugees were established in the Tigray region, and two in the Afar region. Concomitantly, Ethiopia established itself as one of the largest refugee hosting countries in the world, taking a leadership role in global migration compacts designed to shore up the borders of the Global North by opening opportunities for education and local integration in hosting states in the Global South. Eritrean refugees were the early targets of many of these initiatives in Ethiopia, including an Out of Camp program and a refugee college scholarship program. However, despite a series of pledges made by the Ethiopian state, the move toward local integration was slow and fraught: many Eritrean refugees continued to face severe restrictions on social and spatial mobility. Macro-level concepts of local integration, peace, and open borders have translated into waiting, containment, and vulnerability for refugees.

Eritreans have alternately been citizens of Ethiopia, enemy aliens and now refugees/guests. They have moved in and out of stages of being welcomed and expelled, but more importantly, the modality of belonging shifted to one in which hospitality came to frame the regional political relations between refugees and the hosting state. Eritreans were seen to belong *in* Ethiopia, but not *to* Ethiopia. Their status is precarious in a country that has previously oscillated between the forcible incorporation of Eritrea (and Eritreans) into Ethiopia and the violent rejection of Eritreans as enemies. Eritrean refugees were cast as guests who should be grateful for protection, rather than people who might demand rights of and from the state on the one hand, or people who had been victims of that same state on the other.

During our fieldwork between 2016 and 2019, we witnessed several more shifts in the categorisation of belonging of Eritreans in Ethiopia. During visits to Northern Ethiopia in early 2017, we began to hear increasing numbers of Ethiopians from the Tigray Region (a region that shares a border, language, and ethnicity with Eritrea’s dominant Tigrinya ethnic group) state that, “We are one people with one language, one culture, and one religion. It is only the governments that separate us.” Others added that they longed

to visit Eritrea and would be the first in line to go to Asmara when peace came. This commentary became widespread enough, particularly among Tigrayans who worked in the NGO sector, many of them directly with Eritrean refugees, that it seemed a clear trend.

Eritrean refugees living in and out of camps in Ethiopia navigated these shifting sentiments in various ways. Refugees attending university in the Tigray region noted that it was more difficult to blend in there than it might be in Addis, a much larger, diverse city. One Eritrean student described how Eritreans stood out in Tigray due to how they look and speak, and that people either loved them or hated them for being Eritrean. However, others told stories about attempts to blend in as Ethiopian in Addis, only to be found out and forced to register themselves with the government, which at various times involved a forced return to the camps for a three-month period. For refugee students living in other parts of Ethiopia, blending in or standing out was a strategic contextual act. As a student attending university in the capital city described, “Hardly anyone knows my status. I don’t want people to know that I am a refugee. People might want to attack me. Better to look like a normal student.” In the Amhara region, however, another refugee described his decision to distinguish himself from Tigrayans by being open about his status as an Eritrean refugee: “They hate the Tigray people. But if you tell them you are Eritrean, they like you. I think it’s because many Ethiopians see themselves as victims of the political situation. They like Eritreans.” The various calibrations of what it means to be Eritrean in Ethiopia were shaped by the tense domestic politics.

On our second to last visit, in January 2018, things were changing in Ethiopia. Ethiopia continued to lean into its promise to support refugees, including Eritrean refugees. The pledges seemed to be making headway and Ethiopia was still getting praise for its role in hosting refugees. But something else was going on too. In conversations with Ethiopians in the region, like staff involved with the various education programs we were tracking, we heard a deepening narrative that emphasised unity between Tigrayans and Eritreans.

One of our interlocutors, who we will call Desale, worked for an INGO in the camps. He came from a farming family that lived along the border. He recalled a recent funeral in his home village that Eritreans crossed the border to attend, which he saw as a moral right to practice a common culture. “People feel as if they are the same,” he emphasised. He was aware of how the government of Eritrea had worked to create hostility toward Tigrayans and a sense of superiority on the part of Eritreans. Yet, he argued, people learn that it is only the gover-



nments that divide them: “when people meet and find out there is no ground for this, attitudes change.” Desale was disillusioned by both Ethiopia and the TPLF. He also explained that the recent acts of violence and racism towards Tigrayans in Ethiopia disgusted him and made him feel as if he did not belong there. In contrast to the other groups in Ethiopia who were “too different,” “there is no difference,” he argued, “between the Tigrayans and the Eritreans.”

The term Agazian frequently came up in conversations with Desale and others. Agazian refers to a fringe movement calling for the establishment of a Tigrinya-speaking Christian Orthodox state, based on an imagined common highland’s identity rooted in antiquity that could serve as a platform for reuniting Tigrinya speakers. Desale’s comments, which were reflective of broader imaginaries among many Tigrayans, seemed to reflect a specification and a reworking of earlier imaginaries that posited Eritrea as an integral part of Ethiopia. However, whereas earlier narratives posited Eritrean land and history as integrally linked with a Semitic “habesha” Christian nation, Tigrayan’s imaginaries of linkages with Eritrea were more intimate and specific – relying on shared language, culture, and ethnicity. In our conversations at that time, we were surprised by how many people said, “we are one people, one language, one religion, we should be together.”

This imaginary of Eritrean-Tigrayan unity or sameness seemed to leave out many people in Eritrea who are not Tigrinya speakers, residents of the central highlands or Orthodox Christians, in other words millions of Eritreans who do not share a religion, language, or culture with Tigray. These large components of Eritrea’s population have a distinct history and identity apart from the Ethiopian highlands. Additionally, as with earlier imperial Ethiopian imaginaries that focused on historical linkages between highland Eritrea and highland Ethiopia, the more specific imaginaries of the inherent bond between Eritrea and Tigray also neglected Eritrea’s distinct history of struggle against (rather than within) Ethiopia. Finally, narratives of the inherent unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia seem to promote an amnesia of Eritrea’s last three decades as a sovereign nation.

The volatility of what it means to be Eritrean in Ethiopia persists, and within this emergent discourse there are clear tensions. Around 2017, there seemed to be a shift from thinking of Eritreans as refugee guests to viewing them as brothers who belong in the Ethiopian polity, or at least in the Tigrinya-speaking polity. At the same time, this was occurring alongside a sort of colonial amnesia and neo-colonial erasure of Eritrea’s quarter-century history as a distinct and independent country. What it means to be Eritrean in Ethiopia has undergone profound transformations. Understanding these shifts is essential

to understanding the particular political configuration, and the vulnerability of being an Eritrean-refugee-guest in Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians still imagine Eritrea and Eritreans to be a part of Ethiopia, but this imaginary has historically led to confusion, ambiguity, anger, and violence around the question of Eritrean belonging. Eritreans have been, and continue to be, configured alternately as insiders, outsiders, enemies, special friends, and guests. This configuration plays out through shifting categories of legal citizenship, also in the grey area between the written law and the use of force on behalf of the state.

### **From Peace to War: Vulnerability and Violence**

A little over a year later, it seemed that Ethiopians had gotten their wish for peace and the possibility of travel to Asmara. We arrived in June 2018 to find Addis Ababa filled with posters and images of the new Prime Minister. Abiy Ahmed came to power that spring against a backdrop of government protests that led to the resignation of the former Prime Minister and EPRDF-chair Hailemariam Desalegn. An ethnic Oromo leader, Abiy promised sweeping reforms and an era of peace and unity to confront the ethnic divisions that fuelled the recent protests. He moved quickly to release political prisoners, lift media restrictions, and end the stalled border conflict with Eritrea – an act that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. The news on the day of our arrival featured Abiy's declaration that people should pack their bags as flights to Asmara were poised to resume for the first time in two decades. Main city thoroughfares flew Ethiopian and Eritrean flags side by side for the arrival of a high-level delegation from Asmara. Less than two weeks later, Abiy and Isaias met in Asmara to declare the end of the war and "a new era of peace and friendship." As events unfolded, and phone lines opened up, peace felt euphoric in Addis. Even the pledges looked more hopeful in getting passed into legislation.

In contrast to the euphoric atmosphere in Addis, there were far fewer signs of celebration in the Tigray region, like the popular images of Abiy on signs or shorts, or the rhetoric of peace and change at official functions. People in Tigray seemed deflated and tense – peace was moving forward without them. We no longer heard a narrative of unity. Almost as soon as peace was declared, Eritrean refugees and citizens of the Tigray region expressed concern that peace might be deeply destabilising. Refugees were concerned that the border resolution had happened without the Tigrayans; they expressed fears that they would be vulnerable in the context of an open border, and that their status as refugees might be stripped away.

Peace, while widely celebrated, was not seen as a harbinger of future prosperity and stability by everyone. Due to political shifts in Ethiopia, the Tigrayan leadership was left out in the cold. The Tigrayan political and military elite, who had consolidated control of Ethiopia's ruling party and effectively led Ethiopia since 1991, was displaced by a populist Oromo leader from further south. Eritrea's leadership, who had strong animosity towards the Tigrayans since the border war, relished and flaunted the fact that they had made peace, not with their Tigrinya-speaking "brothers" in the north, but with the rest of Ethiopia. Refugees, the majority of whom resided in Northern Ethiopia, once again faced ambiguity around questions of status and belonging. Would they continue to be welcome guests of Ethiopia? Of Tigray? Brothers of the Tigrayans? Enemy aliens? The status of Eritreans in Ethiopia had not seemed so precarious since the era preceding the border war in 1998.

They were right to be concerned. In many ways the border opening happened faster than anyone expected, but it was both short-lived and unstructured – rife with symbols, rituals, and celebration but thin on working out many of the issues that led to the conflict in the first place. When the leaders opened the border on New Year's Eve in September 2018, it symbolised the link between the countries and an end to war, but there was little substance addressing any of the complexities of the border itself, including trade or the refugee issue. Indeed, the five-point peace declaration signed in July 2018 declared "a new era of peace and friendship," the resumption of trade, transport, and diplomatic ties, and the implementation of the border agreement without any details about how these processes would unfold (Shabait.com 2020).

Symbolically, the politics of peace also made many Ethiopians feel closer to Eritrea. In her January 2019 visit, Jennifer Riggan spoke to many Ethiopians who had little or no familial link to Eritrea who got on a plane just because they wanted to see Asmara. For many Ethiopians, the border opening and particularly the presence of flights contributed to the fetishising of Eritrea, particularly Asmara. The fetishising of Asmara as a civilised, modern, feminine city had been shaped by the circulation of narrative, poetry, and novels about Asmara for an Ethiopian audience (Wedesenbet 2020). Also, many Eritreans in Ethiopia and in the diaspora expressed concern that Ethiopians were talking about the border opening as if it meant they were getting Eritrea back – a narrative that we have argued here haunts discourse about Eritrea among Ethiopians. On social media and beyond, this narrative is buoyed by the fetishisation of Eritrea, and rests on amnesia about the last thirty years of independence.

For Eritreans, the politics of peace meant a dramatic increase in the numbers of people seeking asylum in Ethiopia, along with new instabilities in the long-term promise of protection there. After the euphoric celebrations of the first flight in July 2018 and the border opening on New Year's in September that year, there were reports of a thriving cross-border trade as well as a mass influx of refugees and other Eritreans who came to visit relatives whom they had not seen for years. In January 2019, an estimated 6,000 Eritreans per month continued to arrive, a nearly five-fold increase from the year before (HRW 2020), many fleeing the same political conditions and forced conscription that persisted after the peace accord. But by the time Jennifer returned in March 2019, all but one of the border posts had closed and even that one closed shortly after. Still, the border was not closed as it had been previously. From local accounts, it seemed that informal border crossings were tolerated while formal border crossings were forbidden. Trade slowed down and vehicles were blocked, yet people continued to cross on foot and one contact described a thriving donkey porter business.

The politics of peace legitimised the concerns of refugees about Ethiopia's commitment to continuing to provide protection in light of the new alliance between Ethiopia and Eritrea (which at least initially painted Eritrea in a positive manner). In January 2019, Ethiopia finally voted its new refugee proclamation into law – two and a half years after the pledges were introduced. However, none of the specifics, particularly about work permits, were forthcoming. In January 2020, Ethiopia stopped registering some categories of Eritreans arriving over the border, reversing a decades-long open-arms policy of *prima facie* or group recognition for asylum. Soon after, Ethiopian authorities announced the planned closure of Hitsats Camp. The newest of the four refugee camps in Ethiopia, Hitsats was constructed in 2013 in response to crowding in the older camps. Refugee leaders raised concerns about forced relocation to the older, crowded camps during the Covid-19 pandemic (Creta 2020).

When Tigrayan leadership was in charge and held out hopes for making peace with Eritrea, the refugees—and being a good refugee host—were part of that political calculation. It is not at all clear that Abiy's government has the same commitment. His loyalties seem to lie with the government the refugees have fled from. Peace between the two countries forged alliances at the national level, which endangered the safety of refugees and made their future more unstable. In doing this, the political concerns of refugees and their dissenting voices were further silenced and marginalised, thereby empowering the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) regime, the successor in Eritrea to the EPLF, even as it appeared more liberal by opening borders and enabling travel between

the two countries. Even worse, the politics of peace left refugees on no one's side when the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out again in November 2020.

The precarious position of being targeted from all sides seems to play out in the accounts of violence reported from the refugee camps. Eritrean refugee camps in the Tigray region were targeted soon after the war began. Between November 2020 and January 2021, Eritrean and Tigrayan forces alternately occupied the Hitsats and Shimelba camps, which housed approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees at the start of the conflict. When the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies were able to visit the camps in late March 2021, after a protracted news blackout, they found them empty and destroyed, with many of the shelters and aid offices burned to the ground (HRW 2021). Residents of Hitsats camp reported a period of occupation by Eritrean forces aligned to the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) that included killings and looting in the camp and town as well as forced abductions back to Eritrea. When Eritrean forces withdrew, Tigrayan militias forcibly returned refugees who had fled Hitsats back to the camp. Refugees reported killings, sexual assault, looting, and arbitrary detention without food during the occupation of the area by Tigrayan militias, who also sought out and punished refugees who were suspected of participating in looting the local town. Similar to those in Hitsats, refugees in Shimelba, many of whom are ethnic Kunama, were forced to flee due to heavy fighting around the camp, intimidation by both sides, and concerns about possible revenge attacks by the host community for the reportedly widespread killings and rapes of Tigrayan civilians committed by Eritrean forces (OHCHR-EHRC 2021). Some of the refugees displaced from Hitsats and Shimelba arrived at the older camps of Mai Aini and Adi Harush, facing crowded conditions, dwindling water supplies, a lack of health services, and reports of violence and looting from armed militias. Others returned or were abducted back to Eritrea, scattered to other regions, or remain missing. A new camp, Alemwach, is being constructed 135 kilometres to the south, in the Amhara region, yet war has spilled over into neighbouring provinces, with Amhara militias accused of ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, expressed his concern that refugees were being used to “score political points,” stating: “We have received credible and corroborated reports of reprisal attacks, abductions, arrests, and violence meted out against Eritrean refugees for their perceived affiliation with one side or the other throughout this bloody conflict” (Grandi 2001). A UN dispatch report paints a more complex picture of the multiple actors involved: “Eritrean refugees in Tigray have been kidnapped, attacked, killed, raped, harassed, and threatened by nearly everyone party

to the conflict: Eritrean troops, Ethiopian forces, Amhara militia, Tigrayan forces, and other groups” (Goldberg 2021). In the politics of war, and the extreme violence through which ethnic border-making is taking place, Eritrean refugees seem to become what everyone wants them to become. The complicated dynamics in the politics of war are rapidly evolving, with much that remains unclear. It does seem however, that few are looking out for refugees, and that various warring factions are reading them through different lenses: It seems that Tigrayans, who most Eritrean refugees have found to be good hosts and neighbours, are now against them because they are Eritrean. The Eritreans are against them because they are refugees who fled Eritrea. The Ethiopian State’s actions also suggest the temporariness and volatility of the hospitality that had been used to frame their status in the country. Welcome, it seems, was conditional, pending political developments.

### **Conclusion: Implications of Oscillating Imaginaries for the Future of Eritrea-Ethiopia Relations**

Ethiopia and Eritrea ended a 20-year stand-off when they declared peace in 2018. Almost as soon as peace was declared, Eritrean refugees and citizens of the Tigray region of Ethiopia expressed concern that peace would be deeply destabilising, a fear which has become reality with the recent conflict. In the present article we have explored what the experiences and perspectives of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia may teach us. As the politics of peace have transformed into a politics of war, the category of being an Eritrean refugee has been reconfigured once more. Peace between the two countries has forged alliances at the national level that have endangered the lives of Eritreans in Ethiopia.

We can find the roots of this vulnerability in the oscillating imaginaries of Eritrea and Eritreans that predate Eritrea’s 1991 independence. Eritrea’s independence and its refusal to be bound by traditional Ethiopian national imaginaries not only challenged Ethiopia’s sense of its territorial integrity, and its sea access, but also played a role in unravelling Ethiopia’s nation-making project. That project was, in many ways, successful, if highly problematic and exclusionary. Eritrean independence not only sheared off territory, it cleaved Ethiopia’s very sense of itself and challenged the legitimacy of narratives of an Ethiopia that had its origins in the ancient Axumite empire, and continuity in a long line of Christian kings. Even in the face of successive challenges to the legitimacy of this narrative of Ethiopia, the idea of Ethiopianness as centred around the habesha, Christian, highlands persisted. The Eritrean national

project, in contrast, chose a different origin story rooted in the recent past and chose to emphasise the country's multi-ethnic, multi-religious origins.

Eritrean independence alone is certainly not responsible for the fracturing of the hegemonic Ethiopian nation-making project, but it is telling that fantasies about linkages between Eritrea and Ethiopia keep resurfacing across very different kinds of regimes and from the vantage point of Ethiopian ethnic groups that have very different historical relations with the Ethiopian state. Many Amhara still envision a return to an older version of Ethiopia and fantasise about a reunification with Eritrea. Many Tigrayans long for a linkage with those with whom they share a language and culture. And Abiy Ahmed seems to politically instrumentalise some of these longings all the while situating himself as an ally of a sovereign, independent Eritrea, an ally that might one day be granted port access or enjoy favourable political or trade relations. In these processes of imagining and reimagining Eritrea, there is a great deal of amnesia and nostalgia, but also creative futuristic thinking.

Another element of this reimagining of Eritrea is the coupling and decoupling of the Eritrean people with the Eritrean state and military. As various armies, militias and civilians try to work out who Eritreans in Ethiopia are, and who they are aligned with, the possibilities for misrecognition abound and individual Eritreans residing in Ethiopia are more vulnerable to the slipperiness of politics and categories of belonging, as well as to the violence that accompanies slippage. More broadly, until Ethiopia reimagines itself in a way that is inclusive of *all* Ethiopian people and exclusive of Eritrea, imaginaries of Eritrea are likely to continue to oscillate, the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea are likely to remain volatile, and the status of Eritreans in Ethiopia is likely to continue to slip between categories.

Scholarly work on the evolution of multiple nationalisms in Ethiopia and Eritrea can help Eritreans, Ethiopians, and their respective leaders better understand the circulation of the concept of the nation and the identities that form around it. Rhetoric about the nation and nationalism in both countries is currently highly politicised and often inflammatory. Arguably, contested meanings of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and anxieties about who might be included or excluded from whichever definition of the nation emerges as dominant, are at the core of the current conflict. A better understanding of the way identity categories have been subject to constant slippage, and the way all of this is instrumentalised by political elites, could help forge a more peaceful future among Ethiopia's nationalities and between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

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