Conceptualizing Civil Society in Africa: The Case of Eritrea

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ABSTRACT *The paper analyses the evolution of civil society in Eritrea. It has two sections. The first section critically analyzes the notion of civil society. It argues that the Eurocentric or conventional perception of the notion of civil society fails to capture the reality in Africa. The second section, the case of Eritrea (empirical part), deals with a specific type of civil society. The Eritrean civil society is an outcome of colonial-, liberation- and post-liberation-induced societal reality. The paper traces the emergence of civil society in Eritrea in its diverse forms through the historical trajectories of pre-colonial, colonial, liberation and post-liberation eras. It maps out the development of civil society in Eritrea.*

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Introduction

The definition of the concept of civil society seems to be rather amorphous. This makes it analytically contentious. There is a tendency that everything located outside the perimeters of the bureaucratized state and any social association is thrown into the all-embracing basket of civil society. Concerning the reality in African societies, Eurocentric informed scholars doubt the existence of civil society. For instance, Chabal and Daloz (1999, p. 30) assert, "There is as yet no evidence of functionally operating civil society in Africa." This conclusion is derived from the exclusive and special Western spatio-temporal epistemology and historical experience of the notion of civil society. This ahistorical or de-historicized and de-contextual approach, employing the method of analogical elimination, describes developing societies as undifferentiated, non-secularized and lacking individualization, hence incapable of producing associational life qualified for civil society associationalism (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, pp. 17ff). African and Africanist scholars are increasingly challenging this conceptualization of civil society charging it as Eurocentric (cf. Young, 1994; Kasfir, 1998; Tripp, 1998; Markovitz, 1998; Lo, 2006).

According to the critics of the Eurocentric perception, the emergence of civil society needs to be perceived as a product of the internal dynamism of a particular society. That is, it has to be a reflection of a given society's historical, socio-economic, political and cultural development. They are aiming for an Afrocentric methodology, approach and analysis. Departing from the understanding that the form and content of civil society in Eritrea could not be understood from the Eurocentric approach and analysis, this paper attempts at conceptualization based on a contextualized and idiosyncratic approach. It maps civil society in Eritrea. Instead of analyzing the societal formation and attempting to locate civil society within the fabric of that particular societal formation, the Eurocentric or, to borrow Kasfir's (1998) labeling, a conventional approach seeks to confirm the presence of civil society association in a narrowly defined field of opposition to the state, and where they are not found, they are constructed with the aim of instrumentally serving democratic reform (Kasfir, 1998, pp. 1-3). The definition employed here is, drawing from Young (1994), Markovitz (1998), and Kasfir (1998), is broad enough to encompass formal and informal, modern and

traditional, religious and secular, civic and ethnic, against and with state associations. It entails associations, with or against government, that strive to achieve democracy, human rights, rule of law, poverty alleviation, socio-economic development, environmental and cultural preservation, conflict resolution, peace and stability, community solidarity, neighbourhood cooperation, etc. Instead of using a normative methodology, which is the case in the Eurocentric approach, I intend to analyse and describe civil society in Eritrea deriving from within its societal formation by adopting analytical and descriptive methodology.

This article has two objectives. The first is to question critically the notion of civil society by focusing on its origin and relevance to the African situation. The second is to analyze the formation, constitution and role of civil society in Eritrea. Contrary to the assertion of some Eurocentric scholars, this article will argue for the existence of civil society in Eritrea. In an heuristic endeavour, it examines the historical trajectories that presumably led to the socio-economic and politico-cultural changes that produced differentiated social strata constituting modern civil society associations. It begins by tracing the prevalence of civil society in the pre-colonial period and advances to the colonial period. After that it examines the state of relations between the National Liberation Movement (NLM) and civil society in Eritrea. This section also examines the relation between the post-liberation state and civil society. Following this, the political opposition, diaspora Eritrean communities, intellectual elite and civil society are critically analyzed. Before concluding, a brief anecdote of future trends is provided.

Structurally, the article is framed into two main sections. The first section is on a conceptual and theoretical dimension. The second section, an empirical one, deals with a specific kind of civil society – a colonial, liberation and post-liberation one. The significance of this paper is that it deals with little-researched types of civil society.

Conceptual framework

In this section I will provide an overview of the discourse on the notion of civil society. The historical pedigree of the notion of civil society being the Enlightenment period, the concept expressed emerging societal formation. Though it still strongly reflects its Western spatio-temporal epistemological bias, the notion of civil society could be said to have come a long way over the centuries, not only in terms of vertical disposition, but also in terms of horizontality, in its efforts to widen its perimeters in terms of cultures and geographical areas.

Before the period between 1750-1850 the terms civil society and state were inextricably connected. In its modern meaning, however, the coterminousity gave way to dichotomousity: *societas civilis cum imperio order Imperium* (Keane, 1988, p. 37). Civil society as a sphere of public space distinct from the state is therefore a conceptualization of recent development in Western philosophical and political history and theory (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, p. 17).

In terms of meaning, civil society is invariably understood as 'social relations and communications between citizens' (Bryant, 1995, p. 145). Accordingly, civil society is understood as a self-organization of citizens between households and the state, and independent of the market (Bryant, 1995, pp. 144, 148; Kasfir, 1998, p. 123). The cornerstone of this definition rests on the distinct separation between state and society. Further it is viewed that the distinction between civil society and state presupposes territorial centralization of society and penetration of the state in the everyday life of citizens. Another way of looking at it would therefore be that the emergence of the territorially centralized and integrated absolute state ushered in the threshold of the prevalence of civil society. As Young (1994, p. 222) notes, "The emergence or creation of the state is antecedent to civil society." For the social

contract theorists, "Civil society was an essential construct to juxtapose with the state" (Young, 1994, p. 219).

According to Ernest Gellner (1994) civil society is characterized by the separation of the economic sphere, the political sphere, and the ideological sphere, while other definitions present civil society as the space between family and the state. Arguing along this line, Calhoun (1995, p. 5) explicates, "What civil society signifies in contemporary political analysis is the organization of social life on the basis of interpersonal relationship, group formation, and system of exchange linking people beyond the range of intimate family relations and without reliance on direction by the government." This conceptualization founded on the Hegelian notion, locating civil society between the state and family, signifies the distinction between the political, social and family. A slightly different version locates civil society in the tripartite separation of political, social and economic (see e.g. Seckinelgin, 2002).

While the Hegelian notion of civil society squeezes it between the patriarchal family and the state, for Gramsci, Polanyi, Talcott, Parsons and Habermas, civil society interacts within two spaces of contradictory interests, notably the market and public opinion. Hence, "the differentiation that underlies civil society is triple and not double: between state, economy, and society. The realm of civil society is not the market but public opinion and culture" (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 14-15). According to this understanding, its agents are perceived to be intellectuals who excel in the establishment of a hegemonic order. Voluntary association and free publicity are its characteristic features. Its relation with the state is described as paradoxical: "Although autonomous of the state, this life cannot be independent of it, for the guarantor of the autonomy of civil society can be none other than the state" (Mamdani, 1996, p. 15). For Marx and his followers, state and civil society distinction is simply an illusion; indeed for Marx, civil society and state are one and the same (Markovitz 1998, p. 21). According to Habermas the growth of civil society is intimately connected with the evolution of the bourgeois class, which makes possible associational life, along voluntary and democratic principles, a Tocquevillian conceptualization.

The presupposition for the evolution of civil society according to the mainstream discourse is seen to be the existence of a shared common space. This shared common space presupposes the prevalence of a compartmentalized sub-space, predominantly tri-space, representing state-civil society-family. In a trichotomy of social landscape, civil society is then located between the public sphere (state) and private sphere (family). Modern societies are presumed to distinctly evince the separation of these three spheres. Those who fail to adequately display this distinction are classified as lacking associational life (cf. Chabal and Daloz 1999, Bayart 1986, Chazan 1988).

A relevant question is: which social groups are included in the civil society category? Here also, of course, contingent on the amorphous definition of the concept, considerable divisions occur (Kasfir 1998). In its all-encompassing definitional perspective, the range stretches from traditional social groups such as church groups, to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (whatever its meaning is), to trade unions, to professional associations, to pressure groups, to opposition political groups.

The variety of categories -- state-civil society-family; state-economy-society; political-social-economic; public sphere-private sphere (public sphere is in turn discerned into state-public binary) -- is presumed to be the result of the complex evolutionary historical processes that brought differentiation, specialization, individualization, secularization, bureaucratization, modernity, and civility to humanity. All this was presumably accompanied by the transcendence of citizens' rights to civil and political rights guaranteed by law. Constitutional law, which was the outcome of these complex processes, was at the same time a prerequisite to guiding and regulating the processes. Differentiation and individualization

engenders heterogenization and diversification of interests, which in turn, necessitates the formation or constellation of civic social strata perching on those spheres of interest, and characteristically displaying realms of contestation and rivalry regulated by the bureaucratic formal legal-rational system. Simply expressed, civil society grows with the maturity of the liberal democratic societal order (Nangri 1998, p. 108). Constrained by constitutional law, the state recognized the rights of citizens. Rule of law, meaning law-governed behavior, was the rule; accordingly, civil society was to be interpreted as civilized society (Mamdani, 1996, p. 14).

This specific social-historical experience, where, according to its proponents, adequate bureaucratization and distinction between state and society became the hallmark, is taken out of its spatio-temporal environment and given a generic yardstick for evaluating the socio-historical reality of mankind all over the world. With this perspective, societies that fail to fulfil the underlying requirements are judged as undifferentiated and primitive, accordingly unable to produce civil society associations (cf. Chabal and Daloz 1999, pp. 17ff). The methodological fallacy committed here is that instead of a vertical (time series – evaluating a society at various period of its developmental trajectory) methodology, a horizontal (different societies juxtaposed) methodology is employed and by an analogical elimination method, developing societies are condemned as displaying primitivity. In this respect, non-Western societies are perceived as incapable of demonstrating internal dynamism, reflecting their own evolutionary differentiation, thereby producing their own specific typologies of civil society.

Referring to the presence of civil society in Africa, Chabal and Daloz (1999, pp. 17-18), talk about wishful thinking or ideological bias, but the Eurocentric universalism from which they draw their analyses and approaches is itself an ideological bias. The yardstick of the Eurocentric perception of civil society is the historical experience and societal reality of Western societies, and any other pattern that fails to fit into this straightjacket or shopping list is judged as primitive. Mamdani (1996, p. 9) expounds that "the residual or deviant case was understood not in terms of what it was, but with reference to what it was not". Instead of deriving from the specific history, culture and socio-economic structure of a given society, and applying the relevant yardstick, through analogical elimination, African societies are perceived as displaying a basic deficiency of capacity to produce a civil society sphere. Here the methodological apparatus deployed, instead of exploring what is, normative, explores what ought to be. The opposite is also true. As Mamdani (1996, p. 13-14) notes, the view that a "civil society exists as a fully formed construct in Africa as in Europe, and the driving force of democratization everywhere is the contention between civil society and the state", is also a fallacy that exaggerates the development of civil society sphere in the African societal setting. [Something is missing here. Is it the whole quote that is a fallacy? If so, then between "and" and "driving force", add "is the". Here the need of historicity and specificity in seeking transcendence of both extremes is of vital significance. But perhaps also the need for democratization of social sciences arises. Democratization in this respect would mean accepting and respecting diversity and plurality that celebrates typological varieties of civil society.

Another aspect of the controversy pertains to social formation. The social formation of the overwhelming majority of developing societies is characterized by polyethnicity. This is perceived by some as posing a formidable impediment for the smooth evolution of civil society (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). The fundamental problem of civil society in a polyethnic society is presumably its apparent weakness to overcome the ethnoregional, religious, and other cleavages (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996, p. 121). This predicament of the crystallization and consolidation of civil society has become one of its outstanding sources of feebleness, according to proponents of the view. Furthermore, according to E. Gyimah-Boadi (1996, p. 128), the weakness of civil society in Africa is to be attributed to the fact that "associational

life is dominated by traditional, ascriptive, and kin-based groups. These include clans, tribes and ethnoregional formations; their neotraditional urban counterparts such as home-area improvement and cultural-preservation associations; and Islamic and Christian-millenialist religious group." This argument seems to advocate for the preferentiality of the existence of secular and civic, in lieu of, religious and ethnic societal organizations. Further it derives from the conventional/Eurocentric notion that contends that African societies are still non-secularized, non-differentiated, traditional, collectivist breeding grounds for tribal, religious and sectarian associational life, and hence, incapable of producing civil society. Chabal and Daloz (1999, p. 17) for instance, note, "The notion of civil society would only apply if it could be shown that there were meaningful institutional separation between a well organized civil society and a relatively autonomous bureaucratic state."

A clear distinction could be observed between theoretical discourse in the academic and public policy circles. The former, more or less, deriving from the orthodox Eurocentric understanding, doubts the existence of a civil society sphere in Africa. The latter, on the other hand, deriving from a normative policy aspirational drive, designates everything that stands outside or against the government as civil society (Kasfir, 1998; Mkandawire, 1995).

The discourse on civil society is also permeated with myth, particularly when it comes to the separation between state and society. Crawford Young (1994, p. 222) notes the complex relation between the state and civil society: "The state protects and provides while it dominates and extracts; civil society responds with exist, voice, or loyalty". The so-called state and civil society separation presupposes the existence of an independent, rational atomized individual who persistently faces and challenges an emasculating and overbearing state. Again this assumption, in the African societal setting, as Osaghae and collaborators (1994) demonstrate, is simply non-existent, since the basis of citizenship in Africa is collectivist. Osaghae (1994, p. 8) notes, "The individual, in his relationship with the state, is often governed by the constitutive interests articulated and pursued by the group to which he belongs or with which he identifies." A positive trend in the discourse of civil society is the growing shift from this orthodox Euro-centric conceptualization to a more inclusive and broad one.

Amidst all these contestations on the notion and existence of Western and non-Western civil society, however, certain characteristic features transcending socio-cultural specificity and historicity could possibly be found to constitute a common domain. These include, in a minimalist perspective, the idea that people organize to do things for themselves, empowerment of the people representing the participation of people to induce a better development, and voluntary association to harness one's own interest. These are characteristic features that have accompanied all human beings regardless of their developmental stages.

Civil Society in Eritrea: Constitution and Role in a Historical Perspective

The second section of the article deals with a very specific type of society. It concerns the civil society whose evolution is determined by colonialism, liberation and post-liberation. As such it not only deals with an uncommon type of civil society but with a less researched type. By rejecting the orthodox Eurocentric conceptualization as non-applicable to the Eritrean setting, the predisposition here is to adhere to the constantly growing, more inclusive, pluralist and diversified conceptualization of the notion of civil society. Departing from this conceptualization, the section analyses the evolution of civil society in Eritrea. Questions that guide this section include: What types of civil society do exist? What factors played in the diversification of civil society? Who are the actors behind the development of the civil society in Eritrea? What are the obstacles for the development of functional civil society?

The literature on civil society associates the development of civil society with the creation or the emergence of the state (Young, 1994). In other words, the emergence of a state was presumed to be a prerequisite for the development of civil society. Although Eritrea in its current structure is the creation of Italian colonialism (Negash, 1987; Iyob, 1995; Bereketeab, 2000, 2007a, it had a long history of, at least in its various component parts [1], in one or another form, state structures and functions (Pool, 2001; Favali and Pateman, 2003; Trevaskis, 1960; Longrigg, 1945; Nadel, 1945, 1946). Over the centuries different local structures and institutions developed, displaying communal variations.

Most exposed to state structure in pre-colonial history were the highland sedentary community of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group. As such this community developed highly complex structures and institutions. Some of the oldest institutions and structures include the *baito* system of local governance, customary law that regulated social, economic, political and cultural life of the community; and finally the church that, in its 1600 years, exerted considerable control on peasant society (cf. Nadel, 1946; Trevaskis, 1960).

The *baito* system of local governance – Athenian *polis* (Habte Selassie, 2003, p. 214) – was marked by three salient features: (i) direct democracy, (ii) consensus-based decision making, and (iii) the three functions of governance incorporated in one (Trevaskis, 1960; Nadel, 1946; Elias, 2000; Bereketeab, 2007b). Favali and Pateman have recently written an interesting book about customary law. They note that it was suggested to UNESCO to recognize customary law as a "masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity" (Favali and Pateman, 2003, p. 13). The customary law documents are detailed, and most elaborate juridical documents containing more than 20 separate codes (Favali and Pateman, 2003, p. 217). Districts and villages established highly elaborate legal documents that guided, regulated and controlled daily lives in egalitarian and democratic ways.

The nomadic-pastoralist communities of the lowland had, to a lesser extent, a state-like structure that exerted political power in various forms. If we take, for instance, the Beni Amir, they are reported to have had developed a three-tiered institution and structure of power. The tribal federation presided by the Diglel, Bedena (clan) presided over by Omda, and Hessa (kinship) presided over by Sheikh (Bereketeab, 2007a, pp. 62-63) were the three tiers defining the Beni Amir power structure. Though the relations between the nobility and the subjects were characterized by loose structures, it was based on serfdom, that is, the nobility virtually owned their serfs (Nadel, 1945; Paul, 1950; Houtart, 1980).

The exercise of power seemed to be based on what Weber has designated as traditional authority. Legitimacy was invoked from either custom or religion. The state-society relation was very diffuse and precarious. It was a tributary type of relation where the state would intrude only when it needed revenue or wanted to wage a war. Indeed, in the highland Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group, the relation was appropriately expressed by the local proverb *zibereke tzehaina zinegese nigusna*, meaning "any sun that rises is our sun and any king that ascends the throne is our king". The communities run their daily business under any sun and king without being bothered by any royal decree or decision. In other words the king was far away from the local communities, whatever decree was decreed, whatever decision was taken, whoever ascended, the local communities went on with their daily life without being much affected by it. There was ample space separating the state and the society. This indicates that structural separation between state and society existed.

State penetration in particular in the rural population has invariably been very much limited, both in pre-coloniality and coloniality and post-coloniality. Therefore, following the theoretical distinction of state-society, it is plausible to purport that civil society in its natural

form has invariably existed. Yet the associational form there was akin to what is known in the literature as community-based organizations (CBOs) rather than secular, voluntary and interest-based civil society in the conventional meaning.

The emergence of modern civil society in Eritrea is connected with Italian colonialism. Colonial rule, with its penetrative capitalist political economy engendered social differentiation, particularly in the form of rural and urban binary where lower level clerks, drivers, ascaris (colonial soldiers), builders, technicians, interpreters, artisans, teachers, entrepreneurs, etc. developed (Bereketeab, 2007a; Houtart, 1980). These constitute the basis for emergent modern associational life. The physical and sociological metamorphoses were the basic cornerstones in the formation of the modern Eritrean State. In its integrative and centralizing mechanisms colonial political economy compelled society and state to share narrowly tailored space. In its functional and structural differentiating and specializing mechanism, it set apart not only society and state, but also different sections of society, engendering, in addition to the already existing one, a different type of pluralism (see Houtart, 1980; Leonard, 1980).

Italian colonialism was widely perceived as highly repressive. As the British colonial official of the time, Trevaskis (1960) put it, Italian colonial policy was marked by the attitude: "keep the Eritrean's belly filled while keeping his brain empty." Associational life was extremely curtailed in the urban centers, while the limited intrusion in the rural areas permitted the peasantry to run their daily life, to a great extent, according to tradition (Iyob, 1995; Gebre-Medhin, 1989; Bereketeab, 2007a). British rule reversed the Italian policy by "keeping the Eritrean's brain filled while keeping his belly empty."

The political liberalization introduced by British rule engendered unprecedented growth of modern associational life. In conjunction with the commencement of deliberations on the destiny of the ex-Italian territory, several political parties with divergent views emerged. By 1949 there were nine parties (Ellingson, 1977; Killion, 1985; Bereketeab, 2007a). Moreover, non-political civil society associations of teachers, students, workers, youth, etc., proliferated (Killion, 1985; Tesfai; 2001). It was not only political openness that characterized British rule, but its focus on education as well, and a real upsurge was recorded. The urban civil society comprised the new social strata: wage workers, students, teachers, artisans, businessmen, professionals (Bereketeab, 2000, p. 132; Houtart, 1980, pp. 85ff; Leonard, 1982, pp. 77-8). Workers' unions, student associations, teachers' associations, associations of professionals representing the new social strata developed and were to play a significant role in the unfolding politics. The socio-political transformation engendered by colonial political economy produced a situation depicted by one of the Eritrean political giants of the 1940s and 1950s thus: "I am afraid that we have become 'neither fish nor meat', that is, we have departed from our culture and yet we have not adopted the European culture totally, we find our selves at a cross-road" (Woldemariam, 1995, p. 124). That is, neither traditionality nor modernity could describe the colonially constructed society. In the terminology of development studies, it emerged as a transitional society.

The distinction between traditional and modern might not be easy in a developing societal setting. Traditional civil society associations based on community values, norms, customs and traditions exist side by side with associations founded on modern social strata. These, in rural areas, include religious associations and cooperative land tilling harvesting, house building) associations. Transitional societies are characterized by the interface of phenomena where traditionality is found embedded within modernity or vice versa. If the traditionality-modernity binary is perceived as parallel as well as embodied in one personality, rather than as two mutually exclusive opposites, the assumption of embeddedness then retains fruitful social meaning for the particular society. In such social constellations, there prevail social groups and behaviors that straddle the modern and the traditional.

Such social strata in Eritrea, which straddle both in geographical and mental mapping, in the urban and rural binary, produce special types of civil society. The *ekub* and *sanduke* are such associations found widely in urban centres. They are informal associations with the aim of enhancing social solidarity and contribute to ameliorating economic constraints through savings mechanisms (Mehreteab, 2004, p. 138). Other forms of associations include loose religious associations such as, for instance, Gebriel association, Mariam association, etc. where members contribute monthly or yearly certain fees and commemorate saints' holidays. Part of the money is used to purchase materials for a common good, for instance, tents that members can use for weddings, baptisms and funeral ceremonies. Long-standing urban associations consisting of individuals from the same village also became common. They celebrate common village holidays, help each other, send money and materials back to their village of origin for building schools, churches, mosques, water wells, roads, clinics, generators, etc[2]. A common denominator for all these formal and informal associations is that they take as their main objective the social welfare of their members: social welfare not only in material terms, but also having moral and spiritual aspects. These civil society associations possess characteristics that are both traditional and modern. They are based in urban centers and live in a manner that is very much influenced by colonial political economy. Yet traditional values, norms, belief-systems and village ties are very much part of their daily life too.

With the commencement of the federation with Ethiopia in 1952[3], the socio-political field was set for a new civil society configuration. The federation introduced a variety of institutions and corresponding national agents (Habte Selassie, 1980, pp. 38-42; Fessahatzion, 1998) that were aborted before they could take root. The imperial state of Ethiopia began to infringe on the associational life of Eritreans, particularly the modern ones. The infringement on freedom of speech, association, organization and demonstration (Houtart, 1980, pp. 91-2; Fessahatzion, 1998) rearranged the objectives and priorities of civil society. Those civil society organizations that advocated independence and now preservation of the federation were targeted by the Ethiopian state. The Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF), a coalition of parties that stood for independence, was immediately ordered to cease operation. The voice of the EDF, *Demtsi Ertra* (Voice of Eritrea), was closed, while the voice of the unionist *Ethiopia* newspaper continued to circulate (Bereketeab, 2007a, p. 235). The confederation of Eritrean workers was also banned, though it kept functioning underground (Habte Selassie, 1980, p. 43; Fessahatzion, 1998). Subsequently the Eritrean flag, Eritrean language and Eritrean seal were banned, even the name of the Eritrean government was changed (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005, p. 38).

This pervasive suppression, not unexpectedly, produced new oppositions and new clusters of civil society associations emerged. When the civil society associations of the 1940s were forced to go underground, new ones began to take their place. Even members of the Unionist Party were disgruntled by the encroachment of the Ethiopian state and joined the federalist forces-federal youth (Fessahatzion, 1998). The most prominent expression of resistance was the workers' strike of 1958 and student rebellion of 1957 (Habte Selassie, 1980, p. 42; Killion, 1985). Ultimately the protesting civil society opted for a violent form of struggle. The first step taken toward resorting to violence was the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), formed in 1958 (Bereketeab, 2007a, p. 175; Iyob, 1995; Gebre-Medhin, 1989). The ELM's method of peaceful *coup d'etat* to bring change proved soon to be a futile effort (Bereketeab, 2007a, p. 176). Hence, the peaceful struggle of civil society in the 1950s gave way to a new phase: the thirty-year liberation struggle.

The National Liberation, Post-liberation State and Civil Society

This section draws on the notion of civil society that refers to "that segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state, and yet is distinct from the state" (Chazan, 1990, p. 281). Accordingly, we could assume for a moment a scenario where the liberation fronts represented state structure and the various mass organizations represented civil society. We could then say, at a formal level, that there was a distinction between the state and civil society within the realm of the liberation struggle, that is, liberation fronts and their affiliated mass organizations on one hand, and the liberation fronts and the population at large, on the other. However, this was an extraordinary situation necessitated by the conditions that prevailed at that particular time dictated by the specificity and historicity of Eritrea.

The particularity defining Eritrea was that everything was directed towards the achievement of national sovereignty. Its primary purpose was overthrowing the yoke of oppression that required mobilization of every section of society. The purposive action of social actors was political goal-oriented-achieving political sovereignty. Concomitantly, the nature of state-society relation and the role and place of civil society in that relationship was governed by the need not to distinguish and defend society against the unfettered intervention of the state but to work towards the achievement of the common goal. Capturing the essence of civil society in such social reality, Crawford Young (1994, p. 240) notes, "The civil society constructed out of liberated zones, guerrilla armies, and militarily enforced solidarity was different from the kind that emerges from voluntary association and electoral campaigning." Most of the time, the civil society associations established by the liberation fronts in the liberated zones were formed by mutual consensus that is, voluntarily. The overarching political goal compelled the liberation fronts to open space for civil society affiliated with them. The fronts purposively and actively acted in the formation of mass organizations (Bereketeab, 2007b, p. 81; Kibreab, 2007, p. 101). The civil society, in turn, purposively acted not only in organizing itself but also in strengthening the fronts. It was understood and commonly accepted that the fronts as agents of independence were prerequisites for the existence and functions of the civil society.

In this respect the National Liberation Movement (NLM) and the mass organizations adopted a relationship of partnership, albeit very tightly tied together. In order to mobilize and direct the masses in the struggle, the NLM formed a worker's union, peasant's union, women's union, student and youth unions; moreover, humanitarian organizations such as Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Red Cross and Crescent Society affiliated themselves with respective liberation fronts (Gebre-Medhin, 1989; Iyob, 1995; Connell, 2005; Muller, 2005; Bereketeab, 2007a, 2007b). These trade unions and humanitarian organizations played significant roles in collecting material (money, medicine, clothes, food), organizing diplomatic and political campaigns to elicit support for the liberation of Eritrea, as well as serving as a source of manpower for the liberation struggle. The NLM model is inherently collectivist and totalizing (cf. Suttner, 2004), thus differentiation and deviation are always demonized as profane and divisive, having potentially damaging effects on the grand objective -- total liberation of the people. Accordingly, the autonomy of the CSOs was severely curtailed not only by the liberation fronts but also by self-imposed censorship.

Following liberation, this abnormal or unnatural condition was no longer a pervading social reality. Now, the crucial question was what form and content would the mass organizations and other nascent civil associations take. In other words, what would be the relationship of the civic associations and the universal state? Expectations were high, and the crucial question was whether the emergent post-liberation state would meet these expectations, and what public space it would allocate to civil society. This expectation is cogently depicted by Crawford Young (1994, p. 240): "At the time of independence many believed that the character of the mobilization that warfare involved, in the intimacy of the

links forged between guerrillas and populace (civil society as an aquarium for the freedom fighting fish, in the Maoist metaphor), offered a different and more hopeful future for the countries concerned."

The emerging Eritrean state was broadly presumed to assume the role of a developmentalist state (Hansson, 2000). In the function of a developmentalist state, priority is bestowed upon the task of accomplishing socio-economic development, usually with an authoritarian touch (Mkandawire, 1995, p. 3). Other tasks, such as distinguishing state and civil society, are deferred for some future time, and the consolidation of civil and political rights and related supporting institutions are given subordinated space. This strategy that gives priority to socio-economic development seemed to be designed in a manner that democratization and respect for human rights were subordinated to developmental projects. In short, associational life where citizens' rights are guaranteed by law was given low priority (Bereketeab, 2007c).

After independence, the liberation front was transformed into a governing party; however, a parallel transformation of the mass organizations into "proper" organs of civil society did not take place. That is, the mass organizations that had operated under the liberation struggle were not transformed to autonomous bodies that represent the interest and will of their members, which entails standing against policies of the state that affect interests of their members. They simply continued to function as extensions of the state and to implement its policies and decisions because they were affiliated with the ruling party (Connell, 2002).

The liberation era civil society associations played a docile role or supported the government in its post-liberation national reconstruction by simply redefining their functions and structures. The submissiveness of these mass organizations partly was due to historical reasons and the legacy of the liberation struggle. The historical fact that they were formed as filial to the mother organization, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), engendered a strong sense of loyalty. They continued to perceive their role as lending a supporting hand to the government in its efforts toward national reconstruction and nation-state building. In underpinning this role, the president of National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in an interview with the author in 2003 accented, "Without a nation, no civil societies"[4]. The pivotal role given to the project of nation building, notably a task to be born by every Eritrean, explains the collaborative task that was allocated to these mass organizations. The government's position is also that they should play an active role as instruments of the state in the implementation of government policies and projects[5]. Arguably, the role assigned to them by the government has constrained them from playing a rational-critical role in state policies and practices. But, it seems, at least initially, it is a role they have willingly accepted.

In addition to the civil society organizations that emerged during the liberation period, there also emerged new civil society associations of interest groups, primarily organized by ex-fighters, war-disabled association and demobilized women fighters associations, including BANA and Tesfa Association, both of which were banned. (Connell, 2002; Muller, 2005; Nielson, 2002). Those who were not banned were also regulated or co-opted by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the post-liberation governing political party. They were compelled to submit to government pressures either out of loyalty or because they depended for their material existence on the government, particularly civil society associations consisting of ex-fighters.

Another category of civil society that tried to function in the post-liberation socio-political space was the "traditional" group that had no roots in the national liberation struggle, like religious, civic and business associations. These groups were compelled to subordinate to the policies and ideologies of the liberators as well. Others, which were seen as opposing state policies, were delegitimized. We could take as examples the Jehovah's Witnesses who were

stripped of their citizenship rights, a Catholic Church newspaper that was closed on the grounds of publishing a critical article on the *mitzltzal* (dismissal of civil servants), and Islamic traditional religious schools (*khalwa*) that were closed. The recent pervasive persecution of new religious movements (see the various announcements by Amnesty International) demonstrates the uneasy relation between the state and civil society.

The credibility and moral authority of liberators began to weaken in conjunction with the debacle encountered in defending the nation state from the last Ethiopian invasion (see e.g. Connell, 2003; Habte Selassie, 2003; Bereketeab, 2007b). Now the very reason that conferred legitimacy on the liberators, the virtue of bringing national sovereignty, was threatened, and the promised socio-economic development remained merely promises. The legitimacy of the state was considerably undermined. All this gave rise to growing dissatisfaction and disappointment on the part of civil society. The failure to protect the nation compelled civil society to rethink the *carte blanche* given to the liberators to rule the nation. This was the main reason for the sudden eruption of civil society movements, particularly in the Eritrean diaspora, and dissent from within the PFDJ Government (see "Berlin Manifesto", 2000). Yet, this development further shrunk the space allocated to civil society inside Eritrea.

Failure of implementation of the ratified constitution also constituted a major obstacle in the growth of civil society associational life, seen from a legalistic point of view. The constitutionally guaranteed rights of association, which could have boosted associational life, never materialized. Constitutionality engenders the conditions whereby freedom of association, institutionalization and bureaucratization are guaranteed (Habte Selassie, 2003).

The National Liberation Movement (NLM), by its collectivist and totalizing nature, was unable to cultivate vibrant autonomous civil society associations, in accordance with the conventional perception. Also, following liberation, reforming the political culture cultivated during the liberation era proved a formidable task. The liberation era civil society mass organizations, instead of transforming themselves into robust autonomous civil society, remained ancillary appendages to the liberators. The liberator state builders also failed to demonstrate the capacity and willingness to foster new, independent civil society associations.

The Political Opposition, Diaspora, Intellectual Elite and Civil Society

We have seen in the previous section the fate of civil society under the post-liberation state. In this section I will discuss the alternative space for civil society, that is, the space within the political opposition, the diaspora communities and the intellectual elite.

The political opposition. The boundary between political opposition and civil society has increasingly become blurred. A sharp distinction between the categories becomes difficult in terms of definition and constitution, as well as function and objectives. If we take societal change and development objectives as the bedrock of the existence of the third sector, both political opposition and civil society occupy center stage. Here political opposition could either function as a significant force for change or contribute to the development of civil society associations by opening alternative space. The broadly used although simplistic distinction is that while political opposition aims at capturing state power, civil society works for societal change without aspiring to ascend to state power (Kasfir, 1998, p. 126). Here I understand a political opposition both as part of the broadly defined civil society as well as, in its own right, a political force that struggles to ascend to state power and that stands above civil society, and with a capacity for opening an alternative public space for associational life.

Here it would be of interest to make a distinction between categories of opposition that are remnants of the liberation struggle era and the recent ones. This taxonomy is necessary

because it will enable us to understand the differences in the driving motives characterizing these oppositions. Many of the old oppositions are factions of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and have their own affiliated mass organizations. The new ones are ethnic organizations (Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO)-Afar and Democratic Movement for Liberation of Kunama (DMLK)-Kunama), widely believed to be created by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Bereketeab, 2004, p. 228), and one that split from the PFDJ, the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). One distinguishing feature is that the old organizations hold grudges against the EPLF and hope for revenge, to do what the EPLF has done to them.

Apparently, the politics of revenge seeks a short-term outcome. Instead of attempting to find fundamental solutions for profound problems of substance that demand prolonged struggle and focus on social transformation, it directs its energies on the object of its revenge and consequently focuses on merely overthrowing power holders. This kind of politics of opposition can indeed lead to a vicious circle of revenge without contributing to enduring democratization and building functional civil society. Moreover, the politics of revenge is also believed to be one of the reasons pushing the political opposition to ally with Ethiopia. Uncertain about their capacity to depose the regime in Asmara, the opposition is leaning on Ethiopia to do the job for them. This in turn complicates the process of peaceful change and development of civil society.

The underlying urge for this politics of revenge is based on two reasons. First, during the liberation struggle, the EPLF defeated, humiliated and expelled the ELF from Eritrea. Second, the EPLF refused to allow the different ELF factions to return home and function as opposition parties (Bereketeab, 2007c, p. 410). The EPLF government's offer to the ELF factions to return as individuals was rejected, and they continued their opposition from overseas. Their fortune seemed to turn around in tandem with the second war with Ethiopia (Koser, 2003, p. 119). In 1999, in the middle of the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia war, ten groups and an individual convened in Khartoum to set up what they called Eritrean Alliance of National Forces (EANF) (Bereketeab, 2007b, p. 87). The formation of the EANF is widely believed to be the result of pressure by neighboring states Ethiopia and Sudan. In the propaganda war between the regimes in Asmara and Addis Ababa, the EANF sided with the Ethiopian regime in that they accused the Eritrean regime of aggression against Ethiopia and of belligerence in resolving the conflict rather than through peaceful means and mediation. This is seen by many Eritreans as exonerating the Ethiopia regime of any wrongdoing. They went to the extent of asserting that Ethiopia has no claim whatsoever to Eritrean territory or any ill intentions toward Eritrea, which constituted a great propaganda victory to the regime in Addis Ababa. In glorifying Ethiopia's performance in the war the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC) wrote,

> Ethiopia has the phenomenal history of rising to the occasion in time of adversity, which EPLF leaders have seriously miscalculated…Very soon, the Ethiopian Air Force established full control of the skies by hitting several targets inside Eritrea with impunity, among them the Sawa Military Training Centre and seaport of Massawa, causing considerable damage. Surprisingly, nothing was heard about the much-talked about and seemingly invincible and sophisticated Eritrean MIG-29 jets…Otherwise, it was quite obvious to many that there was hardly anything comparable between Ethiopia's accumulated air power and experience of more than fifty years and that of Eritrea's rag tag Air Force composed of hastily assembled Yikealos[6].

This would hardly advance the credibility of the opposition as a constructive force of change, but rather would cement the perception that it is driven by a politics of revenge. The

EANF's alignment with the Ethiopian regime in the propaganda campaign against the regime in Asmara considerably isolated them from the civil society; therefore, they were not able to capitalize on the situation and mobilize popular support outside their traditional support base.

Their isolation from civil society coupled with their unsatisfactory performance engendered complete apathy toward them. Even the supportive neighboring countries began to lose hope. In October 2002, 13 groups met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and renamed the EANF to Eritrean National Alliance (ENA). Yet, even before they could wrap up their conference, a split took place concerning leadership posts. Ethiopia was accused of interference and imposition of the new leadership of the ENA – particularly the choice of Mr. Hurui Tedla Bairu. According to the Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION) Ethiopia also urged the ENA to wage armed struggle against the regime in Asmara. Perhaps indicative of the interference, in a statement issued immediately after the Addis Ababa meeting, the controversial secretary-general Hurui T. Bairu announced that their main aim is to overthrow the regime in Asmara. The leadership of ENA was not shy to proudly declare that overthrowing the government would take place with help and active involvement of the neighboring countries – Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen[7]. These are neighboring countries that have recently formed an axis with the intention of allegedly toppling the Eritrean government (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005, p. 213). The coincidence of EANF convening its fifth conference with the formation of the tripartite axis (Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen) gave rise to further suspicion regarding the independence of the ENA. The opposition's connection with Ethiopia has already invoked anger in some Eritrean circles that there was talk about the emergence of neo-unionism (see articles that appeared in Meskerem.com)

The opposition's relation with the regime in Addis Ababa is one of the reasons that it has lost credibility with many Eritreans. An overwhelming majority of Eritreans believed the second war with Ethiopia concerned the sovereignty of Eritrea. Ethiopia's refusal to demarcate the border confirmed their belief. Accordingly, any Eritrean force that sides with Ethiopia is perceived as legitimizing the country's hostile stance toward Eritrea. Yet, in spite of this popular view, the opposition continues to flirt with the regime in Ethiopia.

As Markovitz (1998, p. 44) expressed it, civil society contains not only democrats or good guys. An indication of the negative role played by some civil society is that, driven by sectarian urge, some civil society groups are redefining the social contract of the Eritrean society, a contract that was signed when they rejected the division of the country in the 1940s; when they accepted federation as a united people; and finally when they embarked in armed struggle for liberation as a people (Habte Selassie, 1980; Iyob, 1995; Gebre-Medhin, 1989). Taking into consideration that all the ethno-linguistic groups paid the price they paid for the independence of Eritrea under the firm conviction that they are a society, a people with legitimate rights to self-determination that culminate in a formation of a sovereign state, the emergence of certain political opposition/civil society associations with sectarian divisive objectives are perceived as abominable by many Eritreans. The emergence of those marginal groups such as the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO), Movement for the Liberation of Kunama (DMLK) (Bereketeab, 2004, p. 228) and Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (EFDM) (EFDM 2004, 2005), in breach of those contracts binding Eritreans, to arbitrarily and at whim, redefine and reconstitute the Eritrean society is proof of anti-democratic engagement of civil society, contrary to what we are told by the conventional view (see e.g. Kasfir, 1998, pp. 125-6). On the other hand, the phenomenon testifies to the post-liberation state-building predicament (Bereketeab, 2007b).

It could be argued that the ethnicity- and religious-based civil society groups are trying to protect the interest of their communities. There might not be an inherent contradiction between standing for ethnic religious interest and democracy. Indeed, in the African reality, sometimes the only option marginalized groups have is to mobilize and organize themselves,

where the overall outcome could be democratic change in society (cf. Markovitz, 1998, pp. 42-3). Empirically, however, instead of promoting democracy and ethnic harmony, this is promoting community cleavages, polarization, hatred, and conflicts. Neither the Eritrean Islamic Jihad movement that wages religious war nor the EFDM that wants to divide the country on sectarian basis could be taken as promoters of democracy. The role of civil society is therefore like a double-edged sword that cuts both ways.

The diaspora. The liberation war in Eritrea produced not only a huge diaspora, but also a highly mobilized and committed one. The Eritrean diaspora has been a significant pool for the formation of civil society associations. Throughout the liberation struggle various civil society associations of students, workers, women, youth, medical professionals and teachers were formed and played a significant role in the liberation struggle (cf. Kibreab, 2007, p. 101; Bereketeab, 2007b, p. 82). Following independence, engagement of the diaspora in an organized form considerably ebbed at least initially. The diaspora-based civil society possesses enormous potential that could be utilized in engendering positive change; at the same time they could also cause unlimited harm to society at home.

The fiasco of the second war, 1998-2000, and particularly the third Ethiopian offensive, split the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) leadership. This in turn generated a widespread disaffection of members and sympathizers of the party in the diaspora that re-galvanized associational life. One of the unintentional consequences of the war seems to be the spread of civil society associations within the diaspora Eritrean communities (cf. Koser, 2003; Conrad, 2006; Kibreab, 2007). Given the fact that development of civil society associations inside Eritrea has faced obstacles, the mushrooming of civil society associations in the diaspora could be seen as a welcome development. This not only opened an alternative space for an active and autonomous associational life, but also, making use of its immense material and intellectual resources, the diaspora began to exert significant weight on the polity at home. During the second war with Ethiopia, the diaspora's material contribution was immense (see e.g. Kibreab, 2007). Generally the annual remittance from the Eritrean diaspora was estimated to be 27 percent per capita income of Eritrea (Kibreab, 2007, p. 105). Taking into consideration the crucial role the diaspora played during the liberation struggle, in post-liberation national reconstruction efforts and the second war with Ethiopia, it is beyond anyone's imagination how the government could ignore the diaspora communities (Koser, 2003). Yet, as mentioned above, it also has to be recognized that the role of the diaspora is not only positive and constructive; it could also play an extremely negative and destructive role. Personal and transnationally located identity formation could underlie this paradoxical role.

The diaspora in general and Eritrean diaspora in particular are perched on two branches of a tree manifesting transnationalism (cf. Koser, 2003; Conrad, 2006). This duality of citizenry, as expressed in transnationalism, engenders not only division of loyalty and identity, but also of social action derived from dislocation of identity. Members of the diaspora do not feel at home in the host society, neither do they feel at home in the country of origin. This split of mental habitat expressed in the perennial lingering wish to return home on one hand, and the reality of the inability to do so, on the other, has its negative effect on the engagement in the country of origin's politics.

It is not rare that diaspora political activists take extreme positions regarding political developments in the country of origin. One of the reasons for this extreme position is believed to be that the piecemeal incremental changes and improvements that might have significant meaning for the populations in the country of origin may not bring significant change in the life and expectations of the diaspora communities. They expect big and quick improvements, which always drive them to the politics of frustration and disillusionment. Probably it is this

impatience that drives emergent civil society associations to immediately convert to political opposition.

The power of the diaspora lies on the resources in their possession. These resources include financial resources, knowledge, and recently also unlimited access to the electronic media. The electronic media has become an indispensable source of political power. It can be used both ways. Its power rests not only on the rapid, cheap, and great capacity of mass dispersion of information but also on its anonymity. The rigorous accountability, responsibility, neutrality, objectivity, and verifiability demands enforced on research and researchers are not applicable to it. Another disadvantage of electronic media with regard to accountability is that many people use pennames that exonerate them from taking any responsibility for the information they disseminate. If one is not accountable for the information one disseminates, it is possible that one spreads whatever information, or rather disinformation, intended to achieve certain objectives. Therefore the Internet is a powerful force for change or destabilization; it has a double-edged role. If its utility is not handled in a responsible manner it could have extremely damaging effects on vulnerable societies like the one of Eritrea. The electronic fora that the Eritrean diaspora frequently visit and disseminate information to include Alkhalas, Alnahda, Asmarino, Awate, Dehai, Dekebat, Eritrea1, Gabeel, Hasab, Kunama, Meskerem, Nharet.

The double-edged characters of diaspora civil society associations are expressed in two ways. On the one hand, as described above, they could be voice of change, democratization, and human rights, and play a crucial role in the socio-economic development of the nation. On the other, they could also play destructive roles. Often their yardstick of assessing situations in their country of origin is the host society, and expectations are set out accordingly. They have a misguided perception of their capacity to make an impact on the politics of the country of origin; they forget that they are struggling through the remote control that is at a great distance. When their efforts fail to bring quick results, they get desperate and resort to destructive means; they advocate for violence, ethic and religious divisions and hatred (cf. EISM, 1998; EFDM, 2002, 2004). This inclination of the diaspora to contribute to the flare up of violence throughout the world is well documented (see e.g. Wiberg, 2007).

The diaspora civil society associations' engagement in the campaigns and lobbying directed towards governments and donor organizations against provisions of aid to the current Eritrean government is also a good example. Different websites owned by Eritrean diaspora devote great time to campaigning against the regime in Asmara, trying to influence international donors either to halt any aid or make it conditional. This fits well in the policy of conditionality of donor agencies. Eritrean Public Forum in Canada and Network of Eritrean Civil Societies in Europe (NECS-Europe) are some examples of diaspora civil society associations relentlessly campaigning to isolate the regime by petitioning donor and western governments. Eritrean Public Forum in Canada issued some time ago an advisory to aid organizations that their aid is not reaching the needy and appealed that they should instead use routes alternative to that of the government. In its recent appeal to the European Union, the NECS-Europe, for instance, making the link between democratization and demarcation noted,

> Pressurizing Ethiopia further may be taken by the major democracies as backing the agenda of what is generally being considered as a rogue regime…The border settlement should in no way end up in the further consolidation of the dictatorship which, to many serious observers, is the hidden agenda of the regime[8].

This is a typical example of the failure of the diaspora civil society to differentiate between people and government.

This illustrates two priority differences. For the people inside the country, demarcation means the arrested economic development could begin to move forward, the youth who are tied to the unlimited national service could be demobilized, and the continued fear of war breaking out again could be abated. In short, demarcation is of immediate importance that by no means should be conditionally connected to anything. The diaspora, on the other hand, is more interested in democratization because it would mean that they would be able to visit the home country freely; they might even return permanently. Democratization for them means elimination of the current government, which they see as a prerequisite for visiting or returning to the country. Many seem to fear that if demarcation takes place before democratization, it will prolong the life span of the regime (some of them even hope that obduracy of the border conflict may lure Ethiopians to get rid of the regime), hence delaying the possibility of their going home.

The issue of conditionality, both in terms of donation and the border issue alluded to here by the two civil society associations, hurts the people more than the regime. As the interviews I undertook in 2003 and 2004 show, the people in Eritrea want more than anything else the border to be demarcated and to get on with their lives. Cutting off aid, both in short-term and long-term, hurts the people. Its short-term effect is that it exposes them to hunger, disease, illiteracy, and poverty. Its long-term effect is that it hampers capacity building, institutionalization, local governance, and empowerment, thereby delaying democratization.

Further, it is not rare that the diaspora communities harbor archaic sentiments and feelings of a religious, regional, clannish, and sectarian nature, sometimes unexpected even at the standard of the society at home. This has become so pervasive that some diaspora forums have begun campaigning against regionalism (cf. meskerem.com). The damage this causes is that it is easily transferred to the society in Eritrea where with great certainty it impacts negatively on the social fabric. Information is conveyed within minutes; it is received and translated without any attempt at verification of its authenticity. In short, therefore, the double-edged role of diaspora could complicate the possibility of development of a robust and sophisticated civil society sphere capable of playing decisive role in societal transformation.

The intellectual elite. The rich literature on the sociology of knowledge teaches us how the intellectual elite both ontologically and epistemologically played a decisive role in the formation and transformation of state, society and civil society across historical trajectories. In this vein, noticeably the intellectual elite and particularly the elite in general were in the forefront of the formation of the Eritrean society. The political heavyweights of the 1940s and 1950s, from both the independence movement and unionist movement, who were products of missionary and Italian education, played a decisive role in shaping and reshaping of the days' socio-political reality (Bereketeab, 2007a, p. 120). To say that the intellectual social stratum is the social category that in principle is perhaps the most significant component of the diaspora communities is to express the obvious. It constitutes the cream of the diaspora civil society associations. Associationalism in this social group invariably shifts from more abstract, such as teachers in academia, to a more practical field, e.g., engineers. Civil society associations of this social stratum could take multiple forms depending on profession, but also on political inclination. A widely held perception among Eritrean diaspora currently is that intellectuals are not fulfilling their intellectual, moral and professional duties toward Eritrea. It is argued that public intellectuals have failed to emerge (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005, p. 12). The accusations come from both the government and the opposition. Although, in a general sense, the criticism might hold a grain of truth, the fallacy is that it is not made from an understanding of the need of and commitment for the existence of autonomous and unimpaired intellectual civil society associations. Every group expects intellectuals to serve its purpose. The autonomous role and function of civil society associations of intellectuals is

not therefore given due recognition. One commonly held perception, however, is that the intellectual elite have a decisive role to play.

Invariably the intellectual elite is caught between the dilemma of choosing to play one of two roles: "an instrumentalist or developmentalist orientation and a critical social analysis of social change" (Mkandawire, 1997). In terms of the latter, the intellectual elite is expected to invest its erudition in the developmental objectives of society. Appraised from this dimension, the criticism directed towards the intellectual elite in Eritrea holds some legitimacy.

The Eritrean intellectual elite as an aggregate body is facing a considerable internal dilemma. The source of the dilemma is partly self-induced and partly induced by political actors. The Eritrean intellectual elite as a social category could be divided into two groups regarding its associational life. There are those who are politically active and those who are politically inactive. The latter, the overwhelming majority, seem to have lost faith in the existing organized politics. The activists could, in turn, be bifurcated into supporters of the government and supporters of the opposition. A characterizing feature of both of the activist groups seems to be the uncompromising hatred they harbor toward each other and the political force on the other end of the political continuum. Another common characterizing feature would be that they demonstrate a tendency for simplification of the political division. The difference is invariably presented and analyzed as black and white, between the forces of good and evil, where there is no gray area. A complex social phenomenon is presented in its technical and superficial form.

Exaggeration is also another typical method employed in describing the differences between the political organizations. If we take, for example, the intellectual elite supporting the opposition, the EPLF, PFDJ and current government are presented as the incarnation of evil (see awate.com, asmarino.com). This description does not stop in the current situation, but is stretched to depict the EPLF as evil from its very birth. This obsession has reached a magnitude to which its protagonists tend to deny giving full credit to the EPLF for achieving the independence of Eritrea.

The intellectual elite on the other end of the continuum, supporters of the government, is equally obsequious. While displaying a total uncritical support of the government, they consider any criticism a betrayal of the nation, and those who entertain critical thinking are portrayed as spies and servants of the enemy of the nation, thereby renegades and saboteurs. All Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) groups are presented as reactionaries responsible for the evils Eritrea experienced (see bidho.com, dehai.org).

Political language plays an important instrument in the demonization activity. The political language used in cyberspace discourse is alarmingly appalling, vulgar and contextless, and highly inflammatory and abusive words are employed (see asmarino.com, awate.com, bidho.com, dehail.org, etc). All this illustrates the problem some of the intellectual elite in particular and the diaspora in general create for social transformation and democratization in precarious and vulnerable societies, unlike the conventional perception that tries to convince us that civil society associations are a guarantee of democracy.

The overall consequences of this untamed misuse of language coupled with the polarization of Eritrean politics have given rise to the majority of Eritrean intellectuals effectively choosing to assume the role of the silent majority. In addition, the silent majority of this social category has been driven to the state of timidity by the attack of the mob-type cyberspace masses that has grown quite vocal in recent years. The attacks not only have grown increasingly crude, but also have become indiscriminate. The end result has been that a vital social category of the civil society has effectively failed to fulfil its moral, intellectual and professional responsibility. The Sudanese political scientist, Mohammed Salih, referring to the silence (though a different type of silence) of Eritrean intellectuals said to me, "It scares

me when I see intellectuals scared"[9]. The palpable consequence of all this is the impairment of the emergence of an engaged, insightful and objective intellectual elite that could play a salient role in the transformation of society. Consequently the intellectual elite that is expected to play a leading role in the formation of the civil society movement has become an observer.

For the silent majority intellectual elite to come out from the self-imposed internal asylum and to break the cocoon it imposes upon itself, perhaps it needs to do a number of things. First, it needs to organize itself by forming its own autonomous professional civil society association. The association should embrace members across ethnic, religious, regional and linguistic parameters to reflect the polyethnicity of Eritrea as well as bridge the ethnic, religious, linguistic and political space quite often separating them. This perhaps is the only way it would be able to defend itself from the concerted attack by the "mob cyberspace masses". To be able to do this, it needs to abstain from political activism that usually makes it a target for the political nomenclature of either the government or the opposition. Political activism of the intellectual elite may certainly, in the current situation Eritrea is facing, constitute an obstacle to transcend division and consequently build a robust civil society with professional integrity that could play a responsible non-sectarian, non-partisan and non-polarizing role.

The absence of an overarching civil society association representing this social stratum could arguably be attributed to the polarization of Eritrean politics. Neither the government nor the opposition seems to have the inclination to let the intellectual social strata organize itself and perform autonomously, as it has become the norm to character assassinate anyone who takes a critical independent position. To redeem itself and resume its professional and intellectual role in society, therefore, the intellectual elite needs to form its own encompassing civil society association. Distancing itself from the day-to-day politics would enable it to discharge its professional duties, but also preserve its integrity and unity.

Future trends. Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the second Eritrea-Ethiopia war that might have a far-reaching impact on the emergence of functional civil society in Eritrea is the demolition of the seemingly monolithic culture (Bereketeab, 2007b). Both the self-imposed popular censorship and the camaraderie-based unity of leadership were shattered permanently. Until then the political leadership was given *carte blanche* to shape the nation according to its vision (Pool, 2001). The political leadership also tended to show a façade of absolute unity, although with hindsight, it seems a power struggle had been going on below the surface.

The two factors – the shattering of the self-imposed censorship and collapse of the unity of the political leadership – lifted the heavy carpet covering the society. Of course the repressive political measures that accompanied the crisis could not allow, within the country, an open associational life. Indeed, any avenue of public space was closed. The significant development, in terms of development of functional civil society, is the demolition of the suffocating political culture of the liberation era, and as a result, the change of mentality. Once it is fractured, there is high probability for the emergence of a pluralist political society.

Manifestation of societal openness, with all its negativity, was indeed expressed in the Eritrean diaspora community. Unprecedented activities, giving hope that a vibrant diaspora civil society that might eventually have an impact on the development of civil society at home, were put in gear (cf. Koser, 2003; Conrad, 2006; Kibreab, 2007; Bereketeab, 2007b). Overall it is possible to argue that the post-second war crisis had the effect of opening the society as well as the political establishment, thereby raising the opportunity for a future vibrant and robust functional civil society.

The recent slow but steady vitalization of social actors such as opposition politicians, the intellectual elite and the diaspora communities could play a significant role in thrusting forward the process of consolidation of civil society. Provided they channel their energies in a responsible and positive manner, these social actors could certainly revitalize civil society associational life and its role in society. A focused, nation-centered civil society, which goes beyond divisive politically motivated sub-national short-term interest and aims at long-term progressive objectives, would certainly contribute in transforming the society.

Conclusion

This article set out to accomplish two objectives. The first was to critically examine the notion of civil society by focusing on its spatio-temporal origin and its relevance to Africa. Second, it set out to describe and analyze civil society in Eritrea. It argued that the notion of civil society, as presented in the Eurocentric discourse, fails to capture the reality in Eritrea. It also demonstrated the existence, constitution and diversity of civil society by focusing on the various socio-historical trajectories of Eritrea. The role of colonialism, liberation movement, post-colonial state, political opposition, diaspora communities and intellectual elite in the development and activities of civil society was critically examined.

We have seen how the concept of civil society is a highly contested notion in social sciences. Not only does it have a different meaning for different people, but its ontological and epistemological specificity renders it problematic to employ outside its spatio-temporal origin (Chabal and Daloz, 1999, pp. 18-19). One of the conclusions we have drawn is that the conventional and Eurocentric notion of civil society would not enable us to understand the reality in Eritrea. We talked about a specific type of civil society in Eritrea that is a result of colonial, liberation and post-liberation social conditions. This paper has thus made an attempt to depict the manifestation of civil society in Eritrea across the historical development of the society, its role in the various epochs, and the problems it faced.

As we have seen, the different epochs of the formation of Eritrea provided different opportunities and challenges in the formation and activities of civil society. In the pre-colonial state phase, the private-public sphere dichotomy that is supposed to characterize civil society was non-existent in the sense we know today. This is arguably due to the almost non-existence of the hierarchizing and centralizing state. Society (civil society) was practically outside the control of the state. Indeed they were worlds apart. The colonial state, on the other hand, was highly centralizing, territorially integrative and penetrative, where it imposed its hegemony. This development inevitably compressed and narrowed the public space for civil society. Italian colonialism is attributed to have displayed an anti-civil society attitude that virtually impeded any possibility for emergence of modern civil society. The British administration, on the other hand, opened unprecedented space for civil society that was reversed by the Imperial Ethiopian state. So far no period has matched British rule in the proliferation of civil society associational life.

The liberation movement created its own alternative private-public sphere. The collectivist culture of the liberation struggle with its absolute demand for loyalty and unity precluded the emergence of differentiated autonomous space for civil society associations, however. The different mass organizations and humanitarian organizations affiliated with the liberation fronts served as tools for collecting material support, mobilizing the masses, and drawing the population into the struggle for independence. They were also active in eliciting diplomatic international political support for the struggle. As such a high mobilization of civil society was observed. Following independence, the possibility for either the liberation-struggle-era mass organizations to transform into genuine and autonomous civil society associations or for new ones to emerge within Eritrea proved difficult. The perception of

unison during the liberation struggle era continued in the post-liberation period too, and suffocated civic associational life. It was not only the state that was not willing to let civil society associations go, but also the self-imposed discipline and adherence to unity by civil society impeded its autonomy.

Pursuant to the second war with Ethiopia, two interrelated phenomena emerged. I have argued that the space for associational life inside the country was further curtailed; at the same time diaspora communities experienced a boom of civil society associations, which, it could be said, signalled a gradual separation between liberation movement and civil society. This could be taken as an indication that the dominant perception that the state and civil society are one and the same has begun to change. Yet, the inclination of the emergent diaspora civil society to seek a shortcut in its efforts to bring change impaired the emergence of a robust and responsible civil society. The analysis showed that diaspora-based civil society is displaying mixed outcomes when it comes to the transformation and democratization of the country of origin.

Although the prospect of the development of a robust civil society in Eritrea seems bleak at the moment, the experience of the 1940s and 1950s gives room for hope. There is a good chance for revitalization and resuscitation of associational life. But this presupposes liberation from the liberation-struggle-collectivist political culture and its divisive legacy, as well as constructing a participatory and empowering polity.

Notes

[1] Several kingdoms existed in present-day Eritrea: the Axumite Kingdom (1st-9th century), seven Beja Kingdoms (8th-13th century), and the Bellou Kingdoms (13th-16th century). Turks and Egyptians also exerted their influences (Rena 2006: 14).

[2] Informal discussion with members of such associations during fieldwork in 2003.

[3] The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 1950 to federate the Italian territory of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The federation was put in operation on September 11, 1952. Ten years later, on November 14, 1962, the federation was arbitrarily abrogated by the Ethiopian Emperor, which led to a thirty-year liberation struggle that was ended in May 1991.

[4] The author interviewed the president of the NUEW in 2003, in Asmara, Eritrea. The chairman of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students expressed similar views in an interview with the author in 2003, in Asmara, Eritrea.

[5] In an interview, in Hadas Ertra, in October 2004, in conjunction with the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the NUEW, the state president reiterated his government's position by saying that without the participation of half of the society national reconstruction could not be achieved.

[6] The Eritrean Newsletter, Issue no. 86, April/May 2001, pp.16 and 18. http://www. Meskerem.net/enla86.htm.

[7] Interview with IRINNEWS on 29 October 2002.

[8] Network of Eritrean Civil Societies in Europe (NECS-Europe), Urgent Appeal to the European Institutions. 9 December 2005.

[9] The comment was made in private discussion in 1996, in the Hague, the Netherlands.

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