

The Changing Subjectivity of Eritrean Asylum Seekers

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As a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, I have been working with Tricia Redeker Hepner as her research assistant on a long term project comparing the experiences of Eritrean asylum seekers in the US, Germany and South Africa. This work examines how the 30-year nationalist war for independence from Ethiopia resulted in patterns of transnational governance and civil society in independent Eritrea and its global diaspora. In recent years, however, the Eritrean government has become increasingly authoritarian and militaristic, leading many younger, educated people to flee

coherent legal environments leads many young refugees, and other Eritreans, to reconceptualize themselves as rights-bearing individuals and citizens.

Engaging a Transnational Political Community

Inside Eritrea, the single-party state promotes and enforces exclusivist nationalism while discouraging citizens' engagements with the global context. Pervasive human rights abuses have invigorated struggles for autonomy and freedom within the historic transnational social field. For Eritreans who have recently fled the country, it seems that the act of becoming a political refugee and applying for asylum

politics: an indigenous movement that draws on international and domestic law to combat human rights violations by Eritrean and transnational government agents, while promoting the rights of refugees in countries of safe haven.

In order to explore these changing identities and political strategies, Tricia Hepner and I are pursuing several avenues of inquiry. Most generally, we are compiling demographic data about Eritreans seeking asylum in the US, Germany and South Africa; examining asylum documentation to understand patterns in human rights violations committed by the Eritrean government; and systematically analyzing the interface between international human rights claims and national refugee and asylum procedures in the three locations. We are also investigating how new refugees experience the asylum process and how their very presence may be precipitating structural changes in the existing transnational field. In particular, we are finding that new human rights organizations provide spaces for international collabora-

tion, signaling a shift away from more narrow nationalist ideologies and practices. This wider analytical scope has space for several smaller projects within it, including investigating the changing asylum policies in the US after September 11, 2001, in Germany following the EU's opening of borders, and in South Africa amidst the dramatic rise of immigration rates.

Conceptualizing Information Networks

Another important angle is investigating the information networks that create a web of connections among Eritrean asylum seekers, detainees and political activists. I have been focusing on this particular aspect of the project as part of my graduate training and research assistantship. In the transnational sphere, asylum seekers, detainees and activists develop and maintain crucial lines of communication, even when secrecy and subversion are necessary. Details of life in detention, circumstances in Eritrea and international news are channeled through these networks so that communities across the globe are kept abreast of developments despite the government's restrictions

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the country by any means necessary. Our current research continues this investigation of the relationship between forced migration and political consciousness and action in Eritrea and in exile. In particular, we are examining how the process of seeking asylum in relatively more

in a new country shifts consciousness and activity within this transnational political community. The increasing number of Eritrean organizations with agendas based on human rights, rather than exclusivist nationalism, suggests a new direction in Eritrean transnational

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Practical Challenges of Multi-Sited Ethnography

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Movement across international borders provides fertile but challenging ground for anthropological research. Responding to increased mobility and displacement worldwide, more anthropologists are moving beyond the single locality as the boundary and privileged site for the study of cultural production, extending their ethnographic inquiries to a multiplicity of sites, flows and circulations. However, when doing ethnography of transnational spaces and subjectivities we are faced with a number of practical, methodological and analytical challenges not encountered in single-sited ethnography.

I have encountered these challenges in my own work on the role of communicative practices in shaping social cohesion in contemporary Andean migration from Peru to the US. In this project, spanning two countries (US and Peru) and five locales (Miami, FL; Washington DC; and Paterson, NJ in the US; and Huancayo and Lima in Peru), I was long struggling with how to frame migrants' and family members' transnational communicative practices and the forms of sociality and community that they index and enable as a "doable" research project. A real challenge with multi-sited fieldwork is that the researcher has less time at each individual site and with each localized population, thus having fewer opportunities to "get to know" people and their social worlds, and to establish more profound social relationships in ways that allow

us access to more existential fields of experience. Hence, our ability to see how people are constructing themselves, their families, their neighborhoods, localities, communities and the connections among them is more limited. This limitation itself must be approached analytically and addressed directly through varied and versatile research practices implemented for their appropriateness to particular sites, questions and situations, such as team-based research, fieldwork in transit (moving with migrating individuals and groups) or interdisciplinary work.

In a time when transnational spaces and subjectivities are seen as almost paradigmatic of the very experience of postcolonial modernity, we need more thorough discussion of how research projects spanning various sites can be best designed, what research strategies can be practically pursued, what kinds of multi-sited projects are more "fundable" and what kinds of analytical categories might be useful to best capture the complexities of the social processes and events that make up such extended field sites as the one described above. Now more than ever, movement across international borders and its impact not only on culture and social life, but also on our discipline and its methods, merits the full attention of anthropologists.

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