

Paths toward the Nation

**ISLAM, COMMUNITY, AND EARLY
NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION IN
ERITREA, 1941-1961**

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Introduction

Islam, Community, and the Cultural Politics of Eritrean Nationalism

On June 10, 1947, the various branches of the Eritrean Muslim League organized demonstrations in almost every major city and town across the country. Unprecedented in scale, the protests represented one of the high points of nationalist activism in then-British-occupied Eritrea. One of the largest demonstrations, held in the capital city of Asmara, saw members from the local league office lead a march through the city. In a widely circulated speech that the organization later published, Shaykh Abdelkadir Kebire, the president of the league's Asmara branch, elaborated on the significance of the demonstrations taking place across the country:

Freedom is a natural right for all nations and something of value even for animals, let alone for human beings, who pursue it, make every effort to achieve it, and are willing to pay a high price to defend it. Therefore, it is no wonder that today this crowd and this nation are calling for freedom and want to destroy their chains. They raise their voices calling for it [freedom] and, walking toward it, they are guided by the light of this noble torch with which Allah has blessed Eritrea's heart. This torch is independence.¹

Kebire's speech represented one of the earliest attempts among Eritrea's nationalist leaders to frame the case for self-determination as both a moral imperative and an issue of particular urgency within the broader Muslim community.

In February 2010, more than six decades after the league's initial protests, a group consisting of many of the descendants of the Muslim League membership issued a public call for rejuvenation in the political discourse within Eritrea and throughout the global Eritrean

diaspora. Harking back to the “long tradition of Eritrean Muslims in resisting oppression and domination,” the group, referring to itself as *Mejlis Ibrahim Mukhtar*,² issued a manifesto for its new political program. Entitled “The Eritrean Covenant: Toward Sustainable Justice and Peace,” the document addresses both the current human rights crisis in Eritrea and the often overlooked role of Islamic authorities and community leaders in leading past movements for political reform and social justice. More than sixty years since the Muslim League leadership first spoke out publicly on issues of political freedom and human rights, many contemporary opposition organizations across the diaspora continue to draw ideological inspiration from this early group of activists. Yet the precise reasons for the league’s contemporary relevance as a political opposition organization and as a conduit for reframing human rights discourse in Eritrea can be understood only by first examining its role during the country’s first two decades of nationalist mobilization.

This book presents three broad and critical arguments in regard to the early period of Eritrean nationalism between 1941 and 1961. First, that the Eritrean Muslim League’s experience, among both its principal organizers and general membership, was tied to several larger social and political transformations across the region during the postwar period. Thus, the league’s dominance of the broader pro-independence discourse, coupled with the influence of those in the organization’s hierarchy who absorbed much of the anticolonial sentiment in the aftermath of World War II, gave rise to a nationalist ideology that looked to the broader Islamic world for inspiration and relied on Eritreans with links to that world as a means of furthering the cause of independence. Indeed, the intersection of Islam and nationalist politics throughout the 1940s and 1950s revealed a far broader range of ideological influences on Eritrea’s Muslim nationalist actors than previous scholars have acknowledged. This study provides an important new framework to better understand how activists helped formulate notions of an emerging Eritrean nation-state within a truly “frontier” region between the contemporary Horn of Africa and the wider Middle East. Second, I argue that as a result of these wider changes and through the league’s mobilization of the region’s various Muslim communities, the organization represented one of the most significant vehicles for developing national consciousness by contributing to the public’s understanding about what it meant to be “Eritrean.” Third, I conclude that the Eritrean Muslim League,

beyond simply developing into the largest and most influential nationalist organization of the era, embodied an integral base of intellectual thought from which Eritrea's early pro-independence movement, including the beginnings of the early armed struggle against neighboring Ethiopia, emerged.

By illustrating how intellectuals utilized the Islamic religion and helped foment Muslim community activism within the context of Eritrea's independence movement, this book also explores the often overlooked relationship between religious identity and nationalism in one particular area in the Horn of Africa. If the Muslim League's experience in Eritrea speaks to a unique example of how one region responded to external threats of domination from a neighboring power such as Ethiopia, it also echoes broader trends across the region in which activist groups relied on their own interpretations of Islam and community identity to assert their territorial and cultural integrity. While several issues germane to Eritrea's current political crises help explain some of the reasons for the league's continuing popularity, a greater explanation lies in the broader ideological significance that such early nationalist groups across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia had—and continue to have—on the public discussions about the role of Islam and its institutions in addressing broader social and political challenges.

Emerging Trends in the Post–World War II Islamic World

From the resurgence of the political wing of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood to the growing relevance of Islamic religious and aid organizations across North Africa in the wake of the supposed Arab Spring, such changes remind us of the significance of religious dynamics in shaping and informing broad-based movements for reform. This book proceeds from the understanding that the trends that emerged within Eritrea's Muslim communities between 1941 and 1961 were both part of several global developments taking place across the Islamic world as well as a reflection of the complex cultural interactions unique to the Horn region. *Paths toward the Nation* thus engages Muslim community and political activism on a global and regional level while demonstrating that Eritrea's experience enriches our broader understanding about how religion and religious-affiliated organizations contributed to what historian Elizabeth Schmidt has termed the

“inclusive nationalism” that emerged across the African and Asian continents after the war.³

While such movements are not inherently new in contemporary history, they emerged with particular vigor across the Islamic world among peoples living under colonial rule during and immediately after World War II. The growth of anticolonial sentiment and the subsequent rise of nationalism represented the culmination of a particular era in which political mobilization emerged simultaneously with a growing reliance on a broad communal religious identity to achieve societal and political objectives. The intersection of populism, nationalism, and religious-based community activism in particular echoes sociologist Martin Riesebrodt’s discussion of how societies in the midst of rapid social change throughout the twentieth century have developed either “fundamentalist” or “utopian” perspectives for using religion in overcoming a particular “experience of crisis.”⁴ That is, challenges within highly transformative societies often produce new understandings about how religion and religious teachings can be used to overcome political, social, and even economic difficulties. As a result, religious teachings may often receive a reassessment by those who either embrace reactionary, fundamentalist-leaning interpretations of their given theology or enunciate more expansive and inclusive ideas about how religious revival can achieve a harmonious, near utopian state of existence.⁵ The dramatic postwar expansion of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, the steady campaign for a separate Muslim nation under the All-India Muslim League, and the swift turn toward militarism within Indonesia’s largest Islamist organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), during the colony’s war for independence represented just some of the many ways that Islamic-influenced nationalist ideologies took on greater political significance during the period. Viewed in this context, the experience of Eritrea’s first and largest nationalist group, the Eritrean Muslim League, represented just one of many such movements that fused the quest for political independence with a genuine interest in how Islamic institutions and religious thought could more broadly serve the public. Even the leadership’s decision to name their organization the Eritrean Muslim League, a tribute to the All-India Muslim League, reflected activists’ global awareness and sensitivity toward broader nationalist struggles occurring across the Islamic world.

However, the actions of Eritrea’s Islamic leaders and their associates within the Muslim League also complicate this fundamentalist/

utopian dynamic by representing a new line of thought regarding how religious activism informed political mobilization. While the Muslim League in general displayed many broad-minded, inclusive qualities that would discount their activities from falling into a categorization of what Riesebrodt has referred to as the reactionary-minded “fundamentalist literalism” of some societies, Eritrean Muslim activism also lacked a reliance on an exclusively Islamic doctrine that qualified the movement as a strictly utopian Islamic phenomenon. The triumph of a fluid and largely inclusive Muslim-dominated nationalist discourse over more dogmatic interpretations of Islam thus demonstrates how activists within the league often fluctuated between such ideological extremes and developed a broad ideology that merged certain aspects of both “fundamentalist” and “utopian” thought.

While the post-World War II nationalist impulse occurred throughout the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds, what often defined the cause of many movements across the Middle East and Islamic Africa in particular was the growing influence of Muslim indigenous intellectuals in shaping and articulating formal political action. Developed by former civil servants in the colonial governments, religious officials, and the small group of university-educated elites, much of the emerging discourse that developed reflected the critical role of such intellectuals in facilitating early nationalist activity. From Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy’s influence in British India to Messali Hadj’s activities in postwar French Algeria, intellectual activism emerged as one of the major pillars within the early independence movements.

Viewed in this context, the impetus across the Islamic world represented a more proactive strain of nationalist thought than compared to most non-Muslim intellectual activists south of the Sahara. Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that the dominance of “Europhone” intellectuals across sub-Saharan African colonies during this period largely kept in place colonial-inspired ideas of nationalism, language use, and nation-building even amid the push to decolonize.⁶ Yet, as with many intellectual elites elsewhere in societies living under colonial rule, those in the Islamic world often sought to establish a “permanent relationship with the former occupying power” even after achieving independence.⁷ Nevertheless, there remained an underlying resistance several years before the rise of postwar nationalism to the idea of simply replacing colonial rule with a European-defined nation-state.

Falling within this categorization, the Eritrean Muslim League essentially promoted their own version of Islamic modernism in which there evolved a broad tendency to understand nationalism as a vehicle for advancing both society and individuals toward a more progressive, “enlightened” condition. Activists thus used the idiom of an Islamic worldview to embrace political goals that promoted certain aspects of modernity, such as the practicality of the nation-state and the importance of functioning democratic institutions, though not necessarily an interpretation that mimicked prefabricated Western models. Proclaiming generalized ideas about the importance of revitalizing their faith, embracing the legacy of past Islamic civilization, doing away with particular social “ills,” and adhering to the centrality of religious institutions, activists helped establish such ideas as the major tenets of intellectual nationalist thought across the broader Islamic world. In this sense, the nationalists of the 1940s and 1950s represented a continuation of many of the ideas of earlier proponents of Islamic modernism, including figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, and others.

Equally significant to the rise of postwar nationalism across the Islamic world and of intellectual activism was the often complex relationship between the leadership of early political organizations and the broader grass roots. Across the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa there emerged a trend of pro-independence organizations that often treaded a challenging path of working toward long-term political and social change while also trying to address the immediate concerns of their political bases. Indeed, peasants, urban workers, lower-level religious officials, women, and youth organizations often represented essential components in formulating and executing nationalist activities. Important interactions between nationalist elites and grassroots supporters also developed, particularly with regard to the discussions between such groups about how to frame and to disseminate the nationalist program. Expanding popular mobilization often depended on how well intellectual elites navigated the tremendous social pressures emerging from those outside the nationalist hierarchy. The push for greater grassroots participation, ongoing concerns among the “masses” that nationalist leaders could become too accommodating with colonial officials, and the movement for more decentralized power within nationalist organizations all emerged as major issues confronting the leadership within these various groups. Thus,

while many pro-independence parties represented a composite of elite intellectual influence, they also developed and formulated their strategies because of the actions of “popular groups already engaged in struggle against the colonial state.”⁸

The process of navigating Islamic-influenced notions of community alongside such “modern” concepts of nationalism also reveals some of the ways that Islam as both a faith and a value system has been richly suited for helping ease the transition from colonial rule to complex nationalist movements. According to Victoria Bernal, the Islamic faith—particularly in the context of the Horn of Africa—has been historically significant to these transformations because, as a religion that is both “local and universal,” it provides a “ready medium for crafting solutions to the contradictions between the local and global contexts that people must increasingly inhabit simultaneously.”⁹ Eritrea’s experience during this period of postwar nationalism thus reflected many of the challenges inherent in these political and intellectual trends. In part, these changes were a result of Eritrea’s unique geographic position. Indeed, the region now known as Eritrea has, historically, played a major role in the cultural, political, and economic exchanges across Africa and the Middle East in what many observers now refer to as the Red Sea world. Eritrea’s centrality to the geographic and cultural exchanges unique to this region provided the country with an ideal setting where residents experienced a literal (as well as littoral) front-row seat in which broad strands of African and Arab nationalism emerged to inform local understandings about the nature and ultimate goals of independence.

The Human Setting and Colonial Context

Modern-day Eritrea lies in the Horn of Africa, sharing its borders with three countries: Sudan to the west and northwest, Ethiopia to the south, and Djibouti to the extreme southeast. The country’s northern border rests along the Red Sea coast, and Eritrea’s location has made the region an ideal trading location from ancient times to the present day. Eritrea’s past linkages with such ancient trading powers as Damot and the Axumite Empire also allowed the region to develop as an important springboard for the spread of different spiritual traditions and religions across the region, including Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity and Sunni Islam.¹⁰ An important zone of

interaction between Africa and the Middle East, Eritrea is an integral setting in which indigenous appropriations of Christianity and Islam have developed side by side for centuries.

Eritrea's remarkably complex cultural and religious composition reflects its particular contemporary history. The country's nine officially recognized indigenous ethnic groups live scattered throughout diverse geographic zones; the majority of the country's Christian inhabitants reside in the temperate highland region (*kebesa*) and engage in agriculture, while most of the country's Muslim ethnicities reside in the more arid lowlands and practice pastoralism.¹¹ Eritrea's largest ethnic group, the Tigrinya, comprises roughly 50 percent of the population and has historically practiced Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity. Historically, Eritrea's Tigrinya people also embrace long-standing connections to the Tigrinya-dominated areas across the southern border in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which fostered ongoing kinship and community-based networks before colonial rule. The other half of Eritrea's population consists of smaller ethnic groups, including the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Nara, Hedarab (Beja), and Rashaida, who are all overwhelmingly Muslim. Other smaller ethnic groups, such as the Bilen and Kunama, have either retained their indigenous religions or adopted either Christianity or Islam to varying degrees. Each of the country's ethnic groups also speaks its own language. The ethnic groups fall into three categories: those who speak Semitic languages (Tigrinya, Tigre, Rashaida), Cushitic languages (Afar, Bilen, Beja, Saho), and Nilo-Saharan languages (Kunama, Nara).¹² Since the early twentieth century the country's religious heterogeneity has led to an almost even split between the number of Muslim and Christian inhabitants.

Modern-day Eritrea's physical boundaries are very much the product of Europe's Scramble for Africa during the late nineteenth century. The arbitrary nature of the country's borders stemmed from the political rivalries between the region's three major powers during that period: Ethiopia, Great Britain, and Italy. Italian colonial authorities claimed and secured Eritrea in 1890 and it became, along with Somalia, the principal colonial possessions from which Italian authorities hoped to establish their own East African Empire amid the wider scramble. Nearly two decades of Italian economic and military infiltration into the Red Sea coast (1869–89) and more than fifty years of colonial rule (1890–1941) forged the territory into a cohesive administrative unit. While Eritrea's coastal region had

long existed as a peripheral zone for other regional powers in previous centuries, the late nineteenth century witnessed the growth of concentrated Italian authority over the various pastoralist peoples across the coastal lowlands, as officials secured sections of the Semhar and Sahel regions in the late 1880s before acquiring part of the interior highlands extending to the Mareb River, which Ethiopian authorities ceded to Italy through the Treaty of Wichale in May 1889.¹³ Italy's failed attempts to extend its influence further into the Ethiopian highlands, best illustrated by the Italian army's resounding loss to Ethiopian forces at the Battle of Adowa, in March 1896, relegated Italian authority to the official colonial boundaries demarcated in 1889 and 1890. After its 1896 defeat, the Italian government renewed its investment in Eritrea under the administration of colonial governor Fernando Martini (1897–1907) who, according to historian Tekeste Negash, “succeeded admirably well in laying down the foundations of a colonial government more or less along the lines used by Britain and France.”¹⁴

With the growth of Italian economic influence along the Eritrean coast, during the late 1860s and the establishment of formal colonial rule in 1890, Italian officials adopted an “initial favorable tendency towards Islam” that reflected Italy's geopolitical concerns across the Horn of Africa during the late nineteenth century. These concerns included the Italian government's quest to secure colonial possessions overseas as a means of building its own imperial standing, to safeguard against both British and French influence in the region, and to encourage Italian agricultural migration to the predominately Christian Eritrean highlands.¹⁵ Because privileging some communities over others developed as official colonial policy “aimed at winning Muslim support by counter balancing and undermining the legitimacy and authority of the traditionally dominant Christian Highlanders” in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, Islamic religious authorities represented a key component in helping facilitate the Italian colonial project.¹⁶

Consequently, Muslim authorities—especially Sufi Islamic groups such as the Khatmiyya and the 'Ad Shaykh orders—became the focal point of Italian campaigns in the late nineteenth century to win the support of regional power structures across the predominately Muslim lowlands and to limit the threat of other external threats, especially the growing Mahdist movement taking place in nearby Sudan.¹⁷ The gradual privileging of Islam, and Muslim institutions more broadly,

continued throughout the 1890s and well into the twentieth century, as the Italian colonial government worked to legitimize its rule further by co-opting regional Sufi authorities in order to help solidify colonial control. Beginning in the 1920s, Italy's Fascist-led colonial administration increased Italian support for Muslim religious and educational institutions as a means of augmenting colonial authority.¹⁸

Serving as a source of manpower for conscripted soldiers used in Italy's war to secure Libya (1911–12) and as a foundation for trading relations with Ethiopia, Eritrea nevertheless remained an understaffed and largely marginal colony during its first four decades. Only during the early 1930s did investment within the colony substantially increase as authorities promoted full-scale industrialization in preparation for Italy's later invasion of Ethiopia. Capital investment, industrialization, and rapid urbanization throughout the mid-1930s also increased the Italian settler population in a short time to more than fifty thousand by the end of 1935. Italy's East African empire finally crumbled under the weight of a British-led Sudanese invasion force in April 1941. Questions emerged, however, about the future of the Italian colonies even before Britain had secured complete control over most of the territory. As with other regions across Africa immediately after the end of armed conflict related to World War II, the challenge posed by Eritrea's political future was fundamentally connected to the legacy of Italian colonialism. When the temporary "caretaker" British Military Administration (BMA) finally solidified its authority in May 1941, the colony's Italian population had grown to approximately seventy thousand, with most of those residents living in or around the capital city of Asmara.¹⁹ The colony's ability to remain a cohesive entity faced several challenges during this period that all related in one way or another to the sudden end of Italian colonial rule; the threat of social fragmentation among the indigenous population, the rapid swelling of the small but influential settler population, and the push among indigenous Eritrean elites to exercise political and economic agency all emerged simultaneously as major areas of concern by the middle of 1941.

An Overview of Early Eritrean Political Activism

Following the sudden end to Fascist Italian rule in early 1941, the mainly urban Italian population and the still well-entrenched colonial administration remained in charge of running the colony's day-to-day

operations and economic activities under the oversight of the BMA. British officials did not consider, nor necessarily care, that indigenous community leaders would be inclined to participate in the discussions about local political and economic affairs. Yet following the establishment of British authority, a small group of Tigrinya, Tigre, and Saho activists based mainly in Asmara began to discuss Eritrea's fate in the post-Italian period. In May 1941 these activists founded Mahber Fikri Hager (Party for the Love of Country; MFH), the first sizeable association to emerge from Eritrea's small intellectual class.²⁰ From its inception, the organization featured a diverse membership that included both those who called for political union between Eritrea and Ethiopia and members who argued that Eritrea's distinct ethnocultural makeup and its recent history entitled it to complete independence.

Although many of the earliest studies on Eritrean nationalist politics have argued that the organization espoused an inherently unionist stance, the more complicated reality suggests otherwise.²¹ Although some activists argued for complete union between Eritrea and Ethiopia, other members of the MFH believed that Eritrea should be "reunited" with the mainly Tigrinya-speaking peoples across the border in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia to form their own country.²² Most of the organization's highland-based Tigrinya members supported such a push for a "greater Tigray," while a minority expressed wholehearted support for Eritrea's complete political union with the Ethiopian state. Initially, the small group of mainly Muslim Tigre and Saho activists within the MFH failed to articulate a cohesive message regarding their own views on the need instead for legitimate Eritrean independence.²³ Well before the end of World War II, as political differences between unionist and nationalist members intensified, the Ethiopian government also pressed its claims on Eritrea to the international community. The political fracturing unfolded as administrators within the occupying BMA struggled to maintain day-to-day control over the region. Meanwhile, the newly created UN General Assembly had yet to take up the independence debate, having only formed in October 1945.

Not until nearly a year after the formation of the United Nations did the nationalist impetus, in the form of the Eritrean Muslim League, finally materialize as a political entity, in late 1946. Made up of a diverse constituency of clan chiefs, traders, Islamic clerics, disaffected peasants, and urban-based colonial civil servants, the league espoused a broad nationalist platform that initially meant different things to

each respective group. For some, particularly disaffected peasants living across Eritrea's Western Province, independence represented a dramatic reworking of the traditional landlord-client relationship that characterized much of rural society among the Tigre-speaking peoples in the region. Others, including urban intellectuals, former civil servants, and many Muslim merchants, expected that an independent Eritrea would provide the political mechanisms needed to build up the former colony's institutions and to revitalize the region's lagging postwar economy. Later in the decade the league's leadership, consisting largely of these former colonial civil servants and Islamic clerics, began making the case for independence in a more forceful manner. The league's program also veered increasingly toward a populist agenda that linked the nationalist movement with the need for broader social and cultural reforms. Their agenda included support for religious and educational reform across Muslim communities, attention to the concerns of the largely peasant population in western Eritrea, and efforts aimed at building camaraderie with non-Muslims in the independence movement.

Through the league's publications, political reports, sponsored lectures, and public events, the language of nationalism within the organization involved a complex discourse that addressed many of the cultural, religious, and economic concerns that different segments of the Muslim population raised throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. The sometimes contradictory and complicated nature of the league's communications illustrates historian James McDougall's point that at the heart of such nationalist dialogue, the very concept of the nation "*exists in the contests over meaning* engaged in by specifiable social actors," and within a particular historical context where those actors include the "specific symbolic, linguistic, and material sources present in the social world at a given moment in time."²⁴ The league's various factions thus often interpreted independence specifically as it related to each respective social and regional group. As a result, coastal merchants articulated that independence would bring greater commercial opportunities, Tigre-speaking peasants in the Western Province argued that independence would abolish their subservient position from the region's landowning class, and Eritrea's urban-based intellectuals viewed independence as a key mechanism needed to develop new institutions to educate the public. Such ideas represented just some of the many interpretations that possible independence embodied, especially as the organization began solidifying as a truly national party.

Modernity and the Nationalist Elite

The period between 1941 and 1961 represented an era of coalescence between long-standing ideas about the need to ensure collective security for traditional Islamic institutions and new notions about how exactly an independent Eritrean nation could deliver such refuge for Muslim residents. As a result, the Muslim League made great efforts to develop notions of a unified Eritrean Islamic community with a shared history and cultural orientation. In trying to understand how league activists worked to further indigenous understandings of this shared history, we must first address the seemingly contradictory notion that the league's leadership promoted the idea of a shared "traditional" regional Islamic cultural history while embracing and striving for the creation of a modern nation-state. Activists' simultaneous embrace of a national identity within a broader Islamic cultural continuity represents, according to McDougall, only one outgrowth of subjugated societies' confrontations with colonial modernity.²⁵ As a result of exposure to such discourse, "the development of nationalism and contemporary forms of Islam cannot be understood as integrally oppositional resistance to the imposition of 'modern, western civilization.' On the contrary, contemporary cultures of nationalism and Islam are themselves the products of the profound, global transformations effected in the imperial interrelationships of societies and cultures throughout the modern world."²⁶ Consequently, within Muslim societies under colonial rule, varying forms of "vernacular modernism" have developed within localized power structures that articulated new and meaningful historical imaginations by channeling the "interrelated fields of culture, religion, and history."²⁷

The wider process of involving various Islamic-influenced interpretations of modernity offers a useful framework to consider historian Uoldelul Chelati Dirar's point about the need to examine the role of modernity in the "Eritrean colonial context." In doing so, attention must be given to the ways in which Eritrean nationalism involved an assimilation of colonial discourse mainly through the small but influential class of indigenous elites.²⁸ According to both Dirar and historian Alemseged Tesfai, these elites emerged principally from the Italian colonial civil service, particularly during the mid- to late 1930s. The generation of Eritreans working at "the lower levels of the civil service as interpreters, telegraph and telephone operators, and clerks" as well as the "urban *petit* [*sic*] *bourgeoisie* linked to trade

and land concessions” helped fill a vital social space between colonial authorities and the broader indigenous population.²⁹ Because such a substantial portion of these elites came from Islamic backgrounds and often served as intermediaries between the colonial administration and religious officials within mosques, Islamic schools, charity organizations, and other community entities, they developed important ideas about how Islamic institutions could and should function within an Eritrean state. Many of the more prominent nationalist leaders within the Muslim League had either direct connections to the regional Islamic clergy or even functioned as members of the religious leadership themselves. Specifically, nationalist leaders’ attitudes about how to reconcile the institutional and cultural legacy of Islam with newfound political realities informed much of the intellectual dialogue on how to develop an independent state compatible with such long-standing religious and cultural traditions. The experience of this first generation of Muslim nationalist leaders paralleled many of the wider transformations among activists across the African continent who concerned themselves with the need to modernize the former colonies and employed the very rhetoric “on which colonial rulers depended for their legitimacy and self-image.”³⁰

Reengaging the Nationalist Narrative

Within a broader African nationalist context, the league’s tactics embodied what Louis Brenner termed a process of “rationalization,” in which Muslim leaders and political organizations often use Islamic institutions and engage in politicized struggles against perceived oppression and injustice.³¹ Consequently, the league relied on the centrality of Muslim community leaders and Islamic institutions, including the authority of Mosques, shari’a courts, and Qur’anic schools to strengthen the broader nationalist cause. Thus, the league’s framing of autonomy as a moral struggle that united all Eritreans helped create room for a national identity to emerge while embracing a societal “awakening of Islam.”³²

In looking at recent Eritrean history with an emphasis on how activists used religion to mobilize both political interest and social activism, there is a general silence among scholars and the public in addressing how indigenous articulations about a discernible Muslim identity influenced the emergence of Eritrean nationalism. Despite

the significance of Islam within Eritrea and the importance of many nationalist figures from Muslim backgrounds, scholars have devoted much less attention to this portion of the Eritrean population. With few exceptions, the research focus has remained centered on the political and cultural contributions of Eritrea's predominately Christian populations in the highlands. This trend has been largely a result of the politicization of religion that first emerged during the early 1970s and has remained relevant to much of Eritrea's contemporary political discourse. Yet as both the Muslim League's 1947 protests and the release of "The Eritrean Covenant" illustrate, ideas about an Islamic communal identity have had major ramifications on past and contemporary debates across the global diaspora.³³ Indeed, the ongoing fight for control of the national narrative between the current government and the various opposition parties across the Eritrean diaspora has fostered a growing preoccupation with the importance of religion—and Islam in particular—to the earliest generation of nationalist actors. The debate has only increased in recent years, as Muslim Eritreans have become some of the most vocal opponents of Eritrea's current one-party state led by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Thus, the creation of Mejlis Ibrahim Mukhtar and its public embrace of Eritrea's political past now appear as testimonies to the current relevance that the early period continues to have on the country's ongoing political developments.

This book reflects the ever-increasing "diasporization" of African historical studies by bringing together materials and testimonies from locations across North and sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America. It contributes to our current understanding of nationalism by shedding new light on how regional interpretations of Muslim communal consciousness progressed in the twenty years before Eritreans took up arms against Ethiopia. It does not presume that Eritrea's diverse and multifaceted movement toward independence was inherently Islamic or exclusively the domain of regional Muslim intellectual leaders. Furthermore, as the following chapters illustrate, the Muslim League recognized that they could not achieve an independent Eritrea without the participation of a broad range of social and religious segments of society. Thus, while the book argues that the league served as the primary political engine driving nationalist dialogue and the related cultural activism among pro-independence Muslims, it recognizes that a deeper process of social transformation took place, even beyond the confines of Eritrea's Muslim communities,

that helped nourish a truly national consciousness. My emphasis on the Muslim League's overriding ideological contributions to the nationalist cause represents a major divergence from the general trend in Eritreanist scholarship. This study thus fundamentally challenges many of the previous narratives that have dominated both the framing and overall discussion of Eritrean nationalism during the past three decades.

The outbreak of Eritrea's war of independence against Ethiopia (1961–91) led to a fixation among scholars to inquire about various aspects of the armed struggle, resulting in the emergence of several narratives that each reflected the political trends taking place within the armed revolution and, later, within Eritrea's postwar government.³⁴ At the heart of the discourse is the tendency to promote a collective experience of the simultaneous liberation war alongside the nationalist revolution that has prevented the emergence of alternate narratives seeking to understand the growth of Eritrean national consciousness away from the battlefield.³⁵ In the years immediately before and after Eritrea's victory over Ethiopia, a flood of publications appeared that provided either an elementary overview of nationalism in relation to the military struggle or only journalistic coverage of actions of the revolution's dominant political entity, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).³⁶

Within much of the scholarship, the practice of latching onto the statist narrative of Eritrea's "revolutionary nationalist project" complicated the discourse in two major ways.³⁷ First, the privileging of the period of the armed struggle subsumed and neglected much of the record on the pre-1961 independence movement. Second, the EPLF's armed victory over the rival nationalist organization, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in 1982, succeeded in framing the nationalist struggle largely along class and ethnic lines and simultaneously deemphasized religious activism as a factor in the movement. Although much of the EPLF-sanctioned narrative alluded to the development of political activism during the 1940s, scholars have rarely mentioned the issue of religion, and especially Islamic community mobilization. Part of this aversion to discussing the relevance of religion occurred because the EPLF and its supporters established a basic discourse that painted the group's emergence as a reaction against Islamist (socially conservative, exclusionary, and anti-Christian) tendencies within the ELF, the previous vanguard organization of the armed revolution. Framing the ELF's ideological

base as an uneasy mixture of Islamic zealotry and calculative pan-Arabism led by “peasant chieftains and reactionary petty bourgeois intellectuals,” the EPLF’s campaign against ELF activists succeeded in omitting any mention of the legacy of Islam or Muslim community activism as legitimate sources of national consciousness.³⁸ With the publication of several studies during the second half of the 1980s concerning the armed struggle, a broader consensus began to take hold that eventually crystallized as the EPLF-sanctioned “nation-history.” According to Tricia Redeker Hepner, the “dissemination of nation-history” served as a key aspect of the “political aims and social transformations the revolution sought to bring about,” as well as a key reason for supporting the continuation of the fighting and the need for all Eritreans to share the burdens of the war.³⁹ The EPLF-sanctioned national narrative solidified further following Eritrea’s achieving independence from Ethiopia, in 1993. The EPLF’s transformation from a military organization into the postwar political entity, the PDFJ signaled another phase in the state’s push to standardize its own national narrative.⁴⁰

The general trend within the scholarship and the wider nonacademic literature has been to downplay the significance of the pre-armed struggle period and to overlook the intellectual contributions of Muslim activists in developing much of the early nationalist discourse. With the exception of a handful of recent contributions, most of the scholarship has largely continued to echo these trends. The few alternate approaches that have emerged in recent years have been works that both speak to the dominance of the PFDJ-sanctioned narrative and have begun to reconfigure the scope and ideological nature of Eritrean nationalism, particularly in regard to the significance of diaspora communities and the nature of political violence in Eritrea’s recent history. Redeker Hepner’s innovative 2009 study *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors, and Exiles* posits that Eritrea emerged as a “transnational” nation-state amid the broad international networks that developed during armed struggle, revealing how ideas about Eritrean identity and nationalism occurred within a diaspora-based political discourse.⁴¹ Indeed, one cannot overstate the influence of such diasporic networks in facilitating and enriching the contours of Eritrean nationalism. The present study presents the argument that such trends toward transnationalism were quite pronounced as early as the mid-1940s, far earlier than previously thought. In his 2011 monograph *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa*, Richard J. Reid also observes

that Eritrea's historical experience needs to be reassessed as part of several broader regional trends. The tendency toward such intense political and cultural mobilization across Eritrea has occurred largely because the region itself exists as a "mosaic of fault lines and frontier zones" and "shifting borderlands" that often lead to competition over tangible resources and ideas.⁴² The growth of new ideologies, activism, and even politically motivated violence across Eritrea's Muslim communities during the 1940s and 1950s revealed, as Reid suggests, the full extent to which these frontier societies existed as true "zones of interaction" often as "constructive, creative, and fertile as they are destructive and violent."⁴³ By examining an otherwise neglected era of Eritrean history as part of such a frontier society, this book revises current understandings about the intellectual origins and content of the early nationalist movement.

The Nationalist Contact Zone

Within a specific intellectual arena, what I term the "nationalist contact zone," Muslim leaders and activists sought to reframe the debate about the existence of an independent Eritrean culture and historical experience. While the concept of nationhood among the majority of Eritreans may have developed only after decades of armed struggle, important factions within Muslim communities began generating their own particular sense of "national" history and peoplehood based largely on their shared cultural legacy and their relationship to the wider Islamic world. In effect, they established their own "nation language" by the late 1940s in which written Arabic commentaries, as well as broader discussions in the various vernacular languages, solidified an ongoing public dialogue that stressed ideas of political independence, argued for an embrace of Islamic values and institutions, and promoted a positive vision of Eritrean society based on its ethnic and cultural heterogeneity.⁴⁴ In the context of the growing politicization of religion, Eritrea's Muslim nationalist leaders emerged and refined their arguments in what became a nationalist contact zone of political discourse.

While the outlines of an "Eritrean consciousness" emerged only gradually from the shared experience of Italian rule between 1890 and 1941, this growing self-awareness fully materialized under BMA rule and forced the presiding colonial authorities to cope with increasingly

proactive intellectual and community leaders.⁴⁵ Combined with the increased rate of urbanization throughout Eritrea that began during the mid-1930s and continued through the end of Fascist rule, political activism developed as BMA authorities continually recruited Eritreans into the new fold as “clerks, accountants, medical orderlies, telephone operators and assistants in the public works and railway departments.”⁴⁶ Within the confines of Eritrea’s diverse multiethnic, multilingual population, Muslim community leaders facilitated early notions of civil society that correlated to continued urbanization. These transformations included several local initiatives to instill greater continuity within the Muslim population and the broader “associational life.”⁴⁷ Leaders achieved these changes mainly by facilitating increased Arabic language education along with supporting the construction of new schools for Muslim students. Such institutional changes were part of the “spectacular organization, reform and centralization of Eritrean Islamic institutions” during the 1940s and, coupled with the growing political debates, helped forge a vague, but increasingly relevant, Islamic communal awareness.⁴⁸ In particular, activists’ use and promotion of Arabic to influence perceptions of “shared religio-cultural, social-political and intellectual experiences” among Eritrean Muslims helped established the discursive anchor for many of the emerging debates.⁴⁹

Concurrent with the cultural coalescence of different groups, the Eritrean Muslim League’s experience in nationalist politics illustrated how a diverse group of indigenous intellectuals waged a broad African nationalist struggle to build what Frantz Fanon termed a tenable political party as a “tool in the hands of the people.”⁵⁰ Activism within the league also revealed how Eritrea’s unique geographic position within the Red Sea world made it an ideal convergence zone for nationalist ideologies from both sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Muslim leaders looked to movements across the Islamic world to formulate their nationalist agenda and often discussed the broader international developments as a way to address their own immediate concerns.⁵¹

The Islamic intelligentsia’s attempts at resisting threats of external domination during the 1940s echoed some of the earlier encounters that the previous generation of Eritreans confronted during the early 1920s and 1930s. Within the limits of a rigid Italian colonialism that had installed a *de facto* apartheid system and limited indigenous Eritreans’ education to the fourth-grade level, activists’ measures

to negotiate and secure a degree of cultural and intellectual space proved difficult.⁵² Nevertheless, the development of a comprehensive cultural contact zone, which Mary Louise Pratt defines as a social space where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,” characterized most of the debates and activities among indigenous intellectuals.⁵³ As Ghirmai Negash hinted at when he expanded on Pratt’s concept in an Eritrean context, the awakening of anticolonial consciousness developed through the early use of indigenous languages in print as a way of critiquing the mechanisms of Italian rule. Over time, these efforts helped establish the early intellectual parameters that, by the 1940s, provided a significant degree of “political and cultural space” against both Ethiopian and European hegemony.⁵⁴

Yet unlike these earlier discussions during the Italian era, the nationalist contact zone that developed during the early 1940s did not pertain exclusively to a colonizer-subject dichotomy. Instead, this contact zone denoted a more multifaceted space of political interaction and dialogue within the region’s diverse indigenous communities. Moreover, the intellectual and political discussions often expanded far beyond the realm of the written word of local newspapers and commentaries. If anything, according to Alemseged Tesfai, most of the organizations that emerged during the mid- and late 1940s fell short of articulating a cohesive vision of independence because their leaders too often “acted out” their history rather than engaging in creating their own historical narratives for wider consumption.⁵⁵ In this sense, the nationalist contact zone’s rapid growth during the 1940s reflected the broader intellectual trends of frontier zones across the Horn, as places where “political and cultural creativity” flourished in the public sphere in spite of rising social tensions and the looming threat of violence.⁵⁶ This intellectual nationalist mobilization within the Muslim League expanded as part of the larger public discussions that took place in mosques, private homes, and in the daily routines of urban and rural life among activists.

The nationalist contact zone also grew out of the sudden and, at times, haphazard social dilemmas that materialized in BMA-occupied Eritrea. If, as Astier M. Almedom argues, many of Eritrea’s intellectual activists clearly viewed the British authorities as being “worse than the Italians” for their deceptiveness, Eritrean leaders nevertheless took advantage of the BMA’s liberalization of political and media activity for the indigenous population.⁵⁷ Having arisen during

the previous Italian era, many members of the indigenous elite easily “integrated” into the BMA in similar colonial-defined positions, albeit with much greater leverage than under Italian rule.⁵⁸ Thus, while British authorities certainly did not dictate the boundaries of the intellectual and cultural dialogue within this zone of interaction, the BMA’s policies, initially, provided the setting for Eritreans of all political and ideological stripes to articulate their respective ideas.⁵⁹

In contrast to many of the other rival organizations with broad Muslim-majority constituencies, the league not only had the backing of the majority of the country’s Muslim residents, but also received backing from the country’s leading Islamic clerics, giving the organization added credibility through the support of its affiliated intellectuals and community leaders. Because one of this study’s primary aims is to contextualize these social and political transformations that spawned such intellectually driven discourse within the nationalist contact zone, a fresh analysis and interpretation is necessary of many key documents and primary sources that have been overlooked from this early period in Eritrea’s nationalist history.

Source Material and Organization

This book builds on three general categories of sources. First, it relies heavily on a comprehensive analysis of the Arabic- and, to a lesser extent, Tigrinya-language newspapers, reports, and commentaries that activists produced across Eritrea within the confines of the nationalist contact zone from the mid-1940s to the beginning of the armed revolution, in 1961. With few exceptions, the Muslim League’s publications and related literature have remained almost completely neglected in much of the scholarship. This neglect has obscured the organization’s ideological and political relevance during the period in question. *Paths toward the Nation* thus engages materials written in local languages to gain greater understanding about how activists themselves formulated and articulated their own respective ideas on the nature of Eritrean independence.⁶⁰ Second, as a means of putting the league and Muslim political dynamics in a broader historical context, I also use documents produced mainly by officials within the BMA (1941–52) and by American observers stationed in Eritrea during the later period of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Federation. Utilizing the extensive intelligence reports, memoranda, and private

correspondence taken from the British Foreign Office, the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Eritrea's Research and Documentation Centre, United Nations archives, and elsewhere, this research provides needed perspective on how activists shaped Muslim community mobilization as well as how colonial authorities often interpreted such developments on a broader level. Finally, this study relies on the oral testimonies of former activists and many of their descendants as a means of analyzing not only the various ways in which Muslim political activism crystallized, but also as a way to access previously silenced narratives that have either been ignored or minimized through the PFDJ-dominated discourse. In building on this wide array of sources, each of the chapters herein addresses a particular component of the wider process of early Eritrean nationalism.

Chapter 1 examines the major social and political transformations that took place during the first five and a half years of BMA rule to illustrate the origins and social context of the Muslim League's establishment. The chapter demonstrates the ways in which the movement for tigre emancipation in western Eritrea, the growth of greater Islamic institutional cohesion, and the actions of the small, urban-based Muslim intelligentsia all contributed to the league's ideological underpinning and its initial strengths as both a political and a social movement. Chapter 2 investigates specifically how the league and its leadership worked to build a political and intellectual base during its crucial first year of existence, from December 1946 to December 1947. The chapter addresses the various ways in which the organization contributed to the concerns within Eritrea's nationalist contact zone and how the leaders worked to build the organization as a truly national party, irrespective of religion. I argue that one of the major strengths of the league was the success of Muslim intellectuals and writers in presenting their organization to colonial authorities as an entity that supported the creation of a "modern" nation-state in opposition to the "uncivilized" feudal kingdom in Ethiopia.

Chapter 3 examines how the league and its allies in the nationalist movement responded to the political pressures surrounding the issue of Eritrean sovereignty as well as the crisis brought on by Ethiopian intervention and the rise of armed aggression against supporters of independence (1948–49). Building on these developments, Chapter 4 investigates how the league responded to the rise of rival Muslim political organizations that challenged its primacy in the independence movement through 1950. Examining the transitional period between

the UN General Assembly's decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia from December 1950 to the federation's actual implementation, in September 1952, chapter 5 looks at how the league's intellectual base negotiated its political agenda and nationalist discourse while the new regional government took shape. Chapter 6 discusses how political action and nationalist discourse became even more intertwined as the perceived oppression against Muslims by Ethiopian authorities increased from the federation's inauguration, in late 1952, through the rise of mass civil discontent throughout 1957. Consequently, the protection and autonomy of Islamic institutions became one of the major rallying points for activists as the decade progressed. The chapter also explores the relationship between a broad Islamic identity within Eritrea and the larger political forces of pan-Arabism and Nasserism. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the crucial three-year period immediately before the outbreak of the armed revolution (1958–61) as way of examining the various competing ideologies that emerged among Muslim activists. This section also illustrates how the period in question witnessed a final break from the previous two decades of Muslim activism and the influence of the Muslim League. The chapter also demonstrates some of the ways in which the league and its leadership, despite the new circumstances and the wider ideological changes taking place within Eritrea and across the diaspora, managed to maintain influence among the first generation of activists in the ELF. The epilogue draws several broad conclusions about the significance of Muslim cultural and political action in relation to this early period of Eritrean nationalist mobilization.

Ultimately, explaining how the league and its offshoots contributed to the development of a separate Eritrean national identity also provides new essential information about the social, religious, and ethnic complexities that defined nationalist movements within many "frontier" societies throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Illuminating our understanding of this early period has direct relevance to the ongoing debates taking place across the global Eritrean diaspora, and consequently this study speaks to broader issues about how nationalism, intellectual activism, and religious affiliation continue to influence political and social change in both sub-Saharan Africa and across the wider Islamic world.

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