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Abstract

In this paper I have applied root narrative theory to the case of conflict in Eritrea, a small African country along the Red Sea that has been embroiled in conflict with its neighbors and the international community on and off since at least 1961. Examining a small sample of representative texts from the government of Eritrea and from international critics of the regime, I demonstrate that these parties—different moral languages that make it almost impossible for each side to see the point of view of the other. Using the semiotic structure of the story system implied by root narrative theory I point out possible moves that both international actors and interested scholars and journalist could make to improve relationships with Eritrea, which has been erroneously maligned with the title, “the North Korea of Africa.” I’ve titled this paper struggle and martyrdom to signal the most efficient way to come to terms with the current leadership of Eritrea. Any policy proposal or technical solution that is not in some way compatible with the Liberation narrative implied by this imagery will be bitterly opposed, not only in the short term but also into the foreseeable future.

Keywords: *Power, Identity, Narrative, Values, Conflict Resolution, Eritrea*

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Struggle and Martyrdom: Abusive Power and Root Narrative in the aftermath of the Eritrean Revolution

Solon Simmons

On December 10th, 2019, Abiy Ahmad Ali, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, presented his Nobel Peace Prize speech, drawing great applause from Berit Reiss-Andersen's introductory statement, "your country has a unique history also within an African context since it was never colonized by any western power." (*The Nobel Peace Prize 2019*, 2019). Missing from the stage was the man prime minister Ahmad described as his "partner and comrade-in-peace," the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki. Given that the Nobel Peace Prize is perhaps the world's most prestigious prize, it may be no surprise that the committee decided that it was simply impossible to bestow that honor on the long-running leader of the country the Obama administration labeled the North Korea of Africa. Of course, the prize had been granted in the past to contentious figures like Henry Kissinger, Yasser Arafat, and Teddy Roosevelt, among others, who have been cited as less than peaceful actors, but Isaias, described in a leaked cable from the U.S. government as a dictator who was leading the youth of his country to "a hopeless future of open-ended National Service at survival-level wages," was not seen as an acceptable awardee (Wikileaks, 2009). Nevertheless, as the award to Arafat highlights, it is extraordinary just how marginalized the Eritrean regime has become in the eyes of the international community. Subsequent events suggest that perhaps neither Abiy nor Isaias were ideal candidates, but it seems reasonable to assume that if the prize for a bilateral deal belonged to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, it also belonged to the President of Eritrea as well. How are we to understand a discrepancy like this? What lies behind this puzzle of Eritrean exclusion?

In this paper I want to provide preliminary answers to questions about what it was that was so unacceptable about President Isaias and to provide broad guidance on this curious puzzle of Eritrean exclusion more generally. Central to these answers and guidance is the issue of power—power not in the sense of the relative lack of it that Eritrea has in international relations, important as that might be, but instead power's impact on memory, on the effects of power on global political culture, on the conflicting and incommensurable stories of abuse that place the leading voices of the international community on one side of a profound divide and the small country of Eritrea on the other. Using this case as an example of how narrative traps us in cycles of conflict even when we are desperate to escape them, it provides a theoretical basis for

studying problems of protracted conflicts around the world, solutions to which might arise from similar analyses.

The vehicle for this analysis is what I call root narrative theory (S. Simmons, 2020), a perspective developed to overcome the stale dichotomies that paralyzed and bounded twentieth century social science in oscillations between rational action and psychological motivation, permanent interests and enduring identities. Instead of taking sides in this battle between what Nietzsche called Apollo and Dionysus (Nietzsche, 1967), narrative approaches promise a happy middle ground, a *via media* between rational actor and social identity paradigms that make it possible to precisely identify the nature of the conflict and to point to the kinds of inherently political and rhetorical processes that will be necessary to overcome them. Narrative theory, and in particular root narrative theory has the great advantage that it draws its solutions from data hidden in plain sight, namely ritualized and relevant public discourse, which provides us with answers that we could have always known if we were just willing to accept what we can plainly hear.

Identity is too Hot, Interest is too Cold, Narrative is Just Right

In this section I will paint with very broad strokes to make the case for a ternary theory of narrative and conflict resolution that avoids the problems that various binary theories have presented to previous scholars. I argue that a ternary theory helps us to combine the best aspects of the polarizing binary between rational actor and identity theories without losing sight of either side of the binary. In this sense identity is too hot, interest is too cold and narrative is just right.

If we can admit that the two most successful social science enterprises of the 20th century were psychology and economics and that these two mega-disciplines have contributed their paradigms and methods to other areas of research it will be easier to see the challenge facing the field of peace and conflict in the current phase of its development. Obviously, many of the other social sciences were successful and influential over the past century as well, but psychology and economics dominate in terms of student interest, public awareness, federal funding, and career opportunities. In both psychology and economics, you can get licenses to work and jobs that are specifically tied to your degree in a way that is rare in other fields. Both of these two powerhouse perspectives have influenced how we think about conflict, peace, and politics in important ways, and yet are each limited in their own way. Each has prospered at the boundary of the other and

has emphasized a critical pole of the human experience while ignoring the other. This binary is beginning to destabilize but the full implications of the breakdown is yet to become clear.

Because a discipline is so diverse and intertwined with all the others, the following claim can only apply at the broadest level, but psychology has made its progress using insights from the biological basis of human experience, while economics has made its progress using insights from its rational basis: the fruits of Dionysus and Apollo respectively. Psychology has helped us to think about the role of emotions and identity, and economics has helped us to think about the role of reason and interest in political affairs. The first approach lends itself to experiment and predictions of autonomous responses that occur below the level of consciousness and the second approach lends itself to analytical models of sensible courses of action in competitive games. Both are useful, and yet both are bounded. Human action rarely plays out in either the psychological or the economic level alone, the level of the beast or the angel. Instead, these two forms of human experience tend to be synthesized in a distinctly human form. Psychological theories help us to understand the role of emotion and the processes of identity formation. These are the quick and autonomous responses that power any given conflict, which are essential to understand commitments and motivation. Economic theories help us to understand the role of reason and processes of policy competition. These are slow and reflective modes that are the basic subject matter of institution building. Human beings think both fast and slow (Kahneman & Egan, 2011), and if we are to understand macro-processes like the breakdown between a nation-state and the various institutions of the international community, we need to see the value of both, and there are experts to specialize in one or the other if rarely both.

Working on the most general level, we can say that studies of conflict and international relations have tended to build first on what I have described as economic theories, the approach that accents the rational, calculating and strategic aspects of the human condition. As the foreign minister of Iran, Javad Zarif, put it, “International Relations is not about falling in love; international relations is about respecting obligations” (*BBC World News America*, 2018). With the end of the Cold War, the Soviet empire that had contained so many ethnic conflicts within its umbrella of universalistic ideology collapsed and combined with various nationalist impulses in the global south it soon became clear that there was another force in international relations, that of emotion and intuition: which came to go by the name of identity (Korostelina, 2007; Rothbart & Korostelina, 2007). This psychological side of international politics was less predictable and

more uncertain. It relied on emotions in a way that was unsettling to previous generations of scholars. The mood of identity in foreign affairs might best be captured by the otherwise bizarre statements of Donald Trump about Kim Jong-un of North Korea, "I was really tough and so was he, and we went back and forth...and then we fell in love, OK? No, really, he wrote me beautiful letters, and they're great letters. We fell in love." The foreign policy realist sees little room for falling in love in international relations, but it probably signals just how different the identification process of politics is from the economic model undergirding rational choice theories in politics. This strong binary, this obvious dichotomy has come serve as a kind of orthodoxy in the field. There are those who specialize in one side or the other, and although the rational choice theorists are no longer in a position to dismiss the identity theorists, they are usually separated by a gap as wide as their founding mega-disciplines.

Although recent scholarship has demonstrated a certain narrowing of this gap, it has preserved the stark dichotomy that divides the modes. An apt example is the otherwise compelling work of Ronald Krebs who has introduced a theory of narrative in international relations that helps to explain how, when and why narrative is important in international affairs, and does so in a way that the strategic realist can understand (Krebs, 2015). Krebs device is to distinguish two "rhetorical modes," the first he calls argument and the second, storytelling. In this distinction he follows the example of Jerome Bruner (1986):

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another...arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude. (p.11)

There are many things to recommend Bruner's argument, but I have always taken issue with this hard distinction, primarily because it does not appear to fit with the empirical data of political discourse. No doubt there are stark differences between storytelling and scientific argument in political affairs, but this is not the right way to specify the original binary. For scholars working in a discipline with strict scientific norms like Krebs in international relations and Bruner in psychology, it might be appealing to appeal to a single point of escape from the rational choice paradigm, but we can make a finer distinction if we draw the line instead between rational action

on the one hand and emotional identification on the other, the very distinction that is now so commonly made in psychology after the founding experiments of Zajonc (1980), Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and more recently Haidt (2001). These dual-process models distinguish between two modes of thought but they are not distinguished in terms of rational argument and storytelling, but instead in terms of rational argument (the central route) and emotional identification peripheral route. In this binary, the emotional and fast side tends to dominate the rational and slow side. As Jonathan Haidt describes it the emotional dog wags its rational tail. Although scholars in this area do not tend to stress this aspect of the binary, the emotional side is also concerned with identification with signs that signal who we are and how we ought to feel about them. One hint at the nature of the contrast exists in the classic argument about “levels of conceptualization” by Philip Converse in which “group interest” was proposed as a lower level than abstract, conceptual thought, as well as in the enduring importance of party identification in its effect on voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). Scholars who study persuasion and attitude formation have long grappled with the clear distinction between modes of thought or decision-making to which the more recent close analysis of narrative adds a chapter, but the relevant contrast is perhaps best drawn between reason and emotion, interest and identity as opposed to narrative and reason, although there clearly is also something distinctive about storytelling as compared to explanation as Bruner and then Krebs have argued.

Figure 1. A Ternary Theory of Public Narrative

The solution I propose is a ternary rather than a binary theory of public narrative. Unlike the older theories in political science that render identification as a lower species of rational thinking, I follow the dual-process approaches like those of Petty and Cacioppo, Kahneman, or Haidt that imagine two pathways to moral judgment, one fast and one slow, one emotional and symbolic, and one rational, and linear. However, I also introduce a third level of consciousness, one that brings the other two together that I distinguish as narrative. Like Krebs, I agree that argument is constrained by political narrative: “Only those policies that can be legitimated within the terms of the prevailing narrative are sustainable” (p.42). Where I differ from Krebs is that I don’t see storytelling as a distinctive mode from explanation, but rather see explanation as a distinctive mode of storytelling. In this view, scientific explanations are effectively stories about the social world that tend to rely on quality evidence, conditional qualifications, and feedback loops of various kinds. They are complicated and superior stories (Tilly, 2006), but stories nonetheless. Any explanation of social or political life cannot work within the confines of the prevailing plights, characters, and plotlines that define and prefigure the explanation. In place of what Krebs calls storytelling, I will place identification, reserving the term for those kinds of stories that are superficial and largely symbolic accounts that do little more than identify events, characters or policies with morally relevant emotions. These kinds of accounts that Hardy (2008) calls melodramas are light fare and require little or no cognitive processing to rehearse. Many times, they amount to little more than scene painting that crystalizes the critical actors in the scene. Here is an example from my own experience:

Whereas the Packers are America’s real team and will always be winners in the hearts and minds of the people of Wisconsin, therefore, I, Tommy Thompson, Governor of the great State of Wisconsin, do hereby proclaim January 27, 1998 all over Wisconsin, Green Bay Packer day, in honor of all of you, the fans! (*The Rachel Maddow Show, Transcript 2/2/2017, 2017*)

There is clearly no policy content to this kind of assertion, but it has narrative impact all the same. The people of Wisconsin are the real Americans and they demonstrate their allegiance to one another through their celebration of the Green Bay Packers. It is quite easy to turn this sort of identification to political purposes as this governor well knew.

In this ternary theory of narrative, explanations are a form of reason-driven storytelling that link actions to outcomes through some kind of theory. Identifications are a form of emotion-

driven storytelling that link outcomes to relevant emotions. They signal how we should feel about things. A person can consider the consequences of an action through the central route along a line from action to outcome to emotion. This would be a process of explanation and identification guided by reason, what might be called substantive rationality (Jay, 2016) used by a deeply reflective thinker, one who marries what Immanuel Kant (1987) called determinative and reflective judgement. Narrative is a third force in this mix, one that brings this process of determinative and reflective judgment into alignment. Rather than working through the theoretical implications of a course of action or reflecting on how we do or should feel about a concrete event, narrative makes use of our left and right brains simultaneously. It employs our theories in plots and characterizations of various levels of stylization, and while at the same time it attaches emotional evaluations to them. There are stories that become so abstract that they are not recognizable as stories, and these become what Chuck Tilly (2006) called technical account. There are stories that are so impressionistic that they become little more than emotion-laden scenes like that of the Packers in Wisconsin, but they all form species to the genus narrative. The ternary theory adds the third term to both unify and subsume the two modes of thought described by Bruner in a more general account of how political discourse actually works.

If narrative is the general mode of thought that unites the two aspects of human nature the angelic and the bestial, the economic with the psychological, then it would be a great advance if we could find a way to reduce the complexity of the narratives we encounter in political data so that we could classify arguments into their constituent categories. One place to look, and one that is the basis of the root narrative theory approach is to look to what Bruner called plights, but the sort of plights that have collective or public significance. In an interview about the role of story in medical ethics, he describes the problem as follows:

More interesting is where do people get knowledge of plights? I wish I knew the answer to that. I struggle with making my law students recognize that this isn't just a case, this is a client in trouble. And trouble is a narrative idea. You have to have a story for there to be trouble, Aristotle's *peripetia*, and that requires a notion of normality or canonicity, and so on. (Bruner et al., 2002, p. 7)

Root narrative theory builds on this insight of types of plights as the key to classifying political stories and finds them in the range of forms of social power that can be misused in a way that leads to human suffering and injustice. The core insight of root narrative theory is that a

root narrative is defined by the form of social power that has been abused. The story structure of a root narrative is quite primitive, incorporating a protagonist and an antagonist function, both with plot and character elements. The simple form or grammar of a root narrative is as follows: *the antagonist used abusive power to cause injustice to the protagonist* (Simmons, 2020).

Because the story can't stop there if we are to return to justice, the protagonist always implicitly serves as both a victim of the injustice and the hero who will overcome the abusive power. We can identify as many root narratives as there are forms of abusive power. Each form of abusive power has a characteristic and associated form of injustice that defines it. Root narrative theory relies on a neo-Weberian classification of forms of social power to come up with four basic root narratives. These are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Primitive Sentences of the 'Big Four' Root Narratives

Root Narrative	Antagonist Function		Protagonist Function	
	Character Element	Plot Element	Plot Element	Character Element
	Antagonist	Abusive Power	Injustice	Protagonist
Defense	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Consent	Governments	use force of law	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Reciprocity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create unfair competition	for the People
Recognition	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other

Although these four primary root narratives are considered to be exhaustive of the basic political plights in the theory, they can be combined in a limited number of permutations. This process develops as a result of the difference in meaning that each of the root narratives implies for the other three. The number of permutations is constrained by semiotic contrasts described by Greimas in his concept of the semiotic square (Greimas & Rastier, 1968; Greimas, 1983), with the antagonist function of one story being matched with the protagonist function of another. In this way the four primary stories can be distinguished into twelve, three versions for each of the big four root narratives. These twelve root narratives are illustrated in Table 2.

The way the theory works is that it assumes that any text can be classified with the twelve categories of root narrative theory. Not all text in political texts contains codable content, but text that does will draw on the elements associated with the twelve root narratives: characters, scenes, institutional mechanisms (war, coercion, cheating, disrespect), goals, and actions. Any given sentence might well combine elements from several of the twelve root narratives and could be coded into multiple categories. This makes it possible for rhetors to hit many different notes in a single song, all of which might speak to different audiences.

Table 2 Primitive Sentences: The Full Set of Twelve Root Narratives

	Antagonist Function		Protagonist Function	
	Character Element	Plot Element	Plot Element	Character Element
	Antagonist	Abusive Power	Injustice	Protagonist
Defense	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Unity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Stability	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Consent	Governments	use force of law	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Property	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Merit	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Reciprocity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create unfair competition	for the People
Nation	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create unfair competition	for the People
Accountability	Governments	use force of law	to create unfair competition	for the People
Recognition	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Liberation	Governments	use force of law	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Inclusion	Elites	use bargaining power	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other

Most useful to the conflict analyst, root narrative theory is designed so that it can be operationalized. Once a text has been sorted into its associated root narrative codes, a summary of the document can be produced that renders a “root narrative profile.” This can be a simple count of the proportion or percentage of the words in a document that have been associated with each of the twelve root narratives. This root narrative profile then serves as a portrait of the working worldview of the author of the text—a measure of ideology that recognizes the complexity of the relationships between explanations and identifications unavailable to other measures (Simmons, 2019). With a further assumption that people will respond best to arguments that fit their own root narrative profiles, we can make recommendations about how people might learn to better communicate with one another, fitting their factual and technical

arguments into story structures that their interlocutors are best prepared to accept. In this way, root narrative theory provides a philosophical framework for a narrative approach to conflict analysis and resolution.

Martyrs Day and Human Rights Watch

One of the challenges of a narrative approach to conflict analysis is to identify the discursive data that can be used to produce a portrait of the narrative context in which the conflict takes place. Discourse happens all the time in so many settings that it can be hard to settle on a stream of conversation that will be revealing, representative, and meaningful. This is where careful case analysis is essential. Ultimately there is no single solution to the problem of discursive sampling or any single recipe, but there are better and worse solutions that can be determined in context. The general plan is to map the conflict to determine the most important fault lines, the players who seem to be best positioned to speak to the most broadly shared perspectives, and the most revealing settings in which these players share their accounts of what is going on in the conflict: 1) why there is something to speak about (the plight); 2) who is speaking (the characters); 3) and the setting for the speech (the context).

Most of the time the fault lines are fairly clear, in the case of Eritrea it is the self-determination of the Eritrean nation positioned against the agenda of the international community with its focus on human rights, international norms, and regional stability. There are many other ways to approach the case, but this enduring tension between the Eritrean leadership and the international community is a powerful and widely recognized plight. The leading voices are often fairly obvious as well. In Eritrea, little happens that is not in some way sanctioned or approved of by the country's president Isaias Afwerki. His words will almost certainly be the place to look for the Eritrean side of the story. On the other side, there are many choices, which mainly rest on the interest of the researcher and depend on the question being asked. In this case, I am interested in why the Eritrean story is so widely demonized even though there are many problem areas in Africa that are more pressing and tragic. This means that I need some representative voice for the international community and its typical criticisms of Eritrea. Among the many choices, I have settled on the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), an organization originally formed to produce critical material on the behavior of states associated with the Soviet Union that now produces highly regarded reports on human rights abuses around the world in

any country. HRW is not as authoritative a body as the United Nations, but it is less inhibited in promoting its perspective to name and shame regimes that are out of step with the norms of international human rights and Western liberalism. HRW is specifically important in this case because they have directed a great deal of critical attention to the Eritrean case, and the results of this attention have been a series of salient reports on conditions in the country that have been influential on popular views of the regime around the world.

If we know the plight and the characters for our story, what material are we to work with to tell it? This is where the art of discursive analysis becomes most critical, but there are features of public discourse that simplify the process. First, we should recognize that discourse, especially public discourse, is not some great undifferentiated manifold of stimulation. Instead public discourse is highly stylized and often institutionalized as well. Those who favor a rational actor model, would be tempted to look to settings like the smoke-filled room where strategic elites share their true motivations. Those who favor the emotional psychological model would be tempted to develop etiological histories of critical actors to determine how processes of identification have structured motivations. Luckily, a narrative perspective encourages us to do something different. We are entitled to look to much more public, much less intriguing sources of data. Our data are hidden in plain sight, and any novice to the study of the case would recognize them. In the United States, Presidents give State of the Union speeches to speak about the events of the previous year. Elites appear on what are called “the Sunday shows” (Simmons, 2013) to defend important actions taken that week. Presidential candidates appear in less scripted but quite predictable debates. The front page of *The New York Times* reveals a certain kind of accepted interpretation of the previous day’s events. The list goes on and on. The trick is to identify what the function of a given ritualized series of public statements is, and to determine if it speaks to your problem in a meaningful way.

Given that I would like to identify the major fault lines that define the conflict between the Eritrean government and the international community, I have settled on two data series that are particularly revealing. The first is the annual Martyrs Day speech that President Isaias gives on June 20th to celebrate the public holiday of remembrance for those who fought and died for the country. The second is the annual report on Eritrea put out by HRW. Both are stylized and repeating events that speak to the events of the previous year and are intended to share the topline concerns of each organization. The natures of the speech acts are quite different, but they

each capture the salient justifications made by each side to this conflict, even though they are not developed in or intended to be in direct conversation with one another. By examining the root narrative structure of these two streams of discourse, we can develop insights about the root causes of the conflict between the Eritrean government and the international community.

As with most public narrative, these documents are easy to locate and retrieve on the web. The Martyrs Day speeches are delivered in Tigrinya but are regularly translated into English and the HRW reports, first published in 1990, are intended to be read broadly and are maintained on the organization's website. For this paper, I compare the past five years of these two data-streams, including data from 2015-2019. The first data point on the Eritrean side is drawn from a similar speech given on Eritrean Independence Day but follows the general form of the Martyrs Day speeches. Obviously, this contrast between Martyrs Day speeches and World Reports does not exhaust perspectives on the tensions between the Eritrean government and the international community, but it does provide insight into the most pressing concerns of each side and what would need to be done to begin overcoming the radical disagreements that separate them.

The Clash of Root Narrative Profiles

One of the great advantages of using root narrative theory is that once a careful selection of contrasting discursive materials has been chosen, it allows for a very efficient comparison of worldviews, often pointing to necessary changes in how the parties speak and think about the conflict and about each other. Part of the reason for this statistical efficiency is the knowledge of the parties themselves about the important features of the conflict; they are very well aware of the stakes involved and use their subtle discursive resources to convey their empirical and moral warrants for action in the context. These warrants, the first explanatory and second indicative of social identification are captured in the stories they tell and can be represented with a simple device called a root narrative profile. The idea behind a root narrative profile for a text is quite simple. The goal is subject the data to qualitative coding using the twelve categories of root narrative theory as a template, and then to simply summarize the proportion or percentage of the text that is covered by that code. This can then be visually represented with a bar chart.

For example, if President Isaias, were to rely upon the securitarian story structure called the Defense narrative for 60% of his speech, then the bar for the Defense narrative would reach to 60% on the graph. The primitive form of this story structure reads, *foreigners use armed*

violence to create physical deprivation in the state. It is based on the fear of outsiders who use military force to undermine the safety and integrity of the state apparatus represented by the sovereign. In fact, this common resort to a narrative of protection from foreign threats to the state is precisely what one would expect of an authoritarian ruler, but this is not what the data reveal. Instead, President Isaias never resorts to language that fits well with that story structure. His most common stories are better represented as liberation stories.

In the Liberation narrative, the identity assumed by the speaker is not that of a ruler of a state. It is the member of an oppressed national or ascribed group. For example, in liberation stories it is common for the speaker to point to abuses perpetrated by existing state structures that are directed to members of the marginalized group, whether racial, gendered, national, or other. In fact, more than half of the material in President Isaias's Martyrs Day speeches can be coded as Liberation stories. This takes a form like the following:

The end of the Cold War has ushered in a process of dynamic transformation in the global order in the past quarter of a century. This reality notwithstanding, certain powers prompted by greed and domination and spearheaded by the United States continue to harass us and derail our efforts of nation-building in a serene and stable environment. (Afwerki, 2015)

A liberation story has the following primitive form, *Governments use force of law to create cultural disrespect of the Other*. The protagonist in the story is "the Other" the marginalized group who is defined outside the mainstream of cultural privilege. The antagonist is not the discriminating ingroup itself, but the governing structure that has been taken over by majoritarian impulses of the ingroup that uses that government to oppress the outgroup. In the excerpt above, the governing structure is represented by "certain powers prompted by greed and domination. The protagonist is "us," the Eritrean people, and we simply want to continue "our efforts of nation-building" outside of the destabilizing efforts of the U.S. backed international community. Liberation stories are the stories of the oppressed (or those who feel themselves so) and are directed against existing governments with often violent forms of resistance. Nevertheless, there is a close relationship between liberation stories and defense stories, they stand in perfect structural opposition. The Liberation narrative is what you get when you cross a dignitarian perspective with a securitarian one: when Frantz Fanon meets Thomas Hobbes. In the Liberation narrative, the abusive power is majoritarian bias that has been weaponized with the

state apparatus. In the Defense narrative the abusive power is the minoritarian subversion that has been weaponized with illegal armaments. What separates them is identity. In the Liberation narrative, the speaker takes on the identity of an oppressed minority who is forced to fight back, think Malcom X or even #blacklivesmatter. In the Defense narrative, the speaker takes on the identity of the legitimate representative of the state, complete with the rights to sovereignty that come along with this status.

In many respects defense and liberation stories mirror each other, but their logic is radically different, and they have to be approached with this difference in mind. This is why although right-wing and left-wing forms of authoritarianism appear quite similar from the outside, they are quite different from a cultural and ideological perspective. The victim of authoritarian violence may not much care that it is performed in the spirit of a left-wing instead of a right-wing ideology, but the identity of the victim in the eyes of the perpetrator is one of bigoted oppressor in the former case and rebellious subversive in the latter. And while the victim might have little reason to care how his suffering is justified, those of us who would like to resolve the conflict must care. This is because the imagery of abusive power (the identity of the victim of authoritarian violence) in each case is so different. The dignitarian and the securitarian may occasionally share techniques of struggle, but they do in support of very different missions.

In an important sense, this divergent conception of power is the very cause of the conflict. The left-wing authoritarian who uses the Liberation narrative is attempting to overcome bigotry with armed violence. The right-wing authoritarian who uses the Defense narrative is attempting to defend its monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. The first has the identity of an oppressed minority and second a threatened sovereignty. If one of these is approached as if he were the other, he will be dumbfounded, both intellectually and morally. The interlocutor will be dismissed as if she were out of her mind as was an interviewer of President Isaias for Al Jazeera was when she asked him how he could afford to be on a war-footing (a question that might be thought to assume that the President relied on a securitarian logic):

This is a fantasy of those who think we are on a war-footing. It's crazy, it's an imagination of people who can only be categorized as insane, who will fantasize about things that do not exist in real terms. (*President Isaias Afwerki / Talk to Al Jazeera*, 2010)

A liberal thinker who sees this interview might well dismiss the President as an authoritarian who is simply lying to the press to protect, but as he had said just prior to the excerpt above:

This is a fantasy in the minds of those who want to sell this idea and create a sense of threat and fear in this region so they can manipulate it for their own agenda.

Not only does the question and its assumptions about him and his regime not make sense, it can only imply another nefarious agenda, one couched in the terms of the Liberation narrative, in which the real governing powers of the world like the U.S and the U.K and manipulating the story to present Eritrea in the worst possible terms. Such a person is either corrupt or insane. This is because the root cause for President of the conflict he faces is the abusive power of bad actors within the international community who are trying to impose their own agenda on the oppressed people of Eritrea. Of course, one would need a rebel organization to stand up to such an oppressive power and so he maintains military rigor in the country and an extended program of national service. One need not agree with the president, but if we only rely on a libertarian root narrative that accuses the President of dictatorial intentions in support of his rule, we miss the point of the conflict entirely. In his mind and of many of those around him, he is not defending a sovereign nation from subversives, but subverting an oppressive sovereignty. Unless these subtle points of difference become an explicit point of focus in discussions about the conflict, both sides are doomed to repeat endless cycles of escalation in which each side accuses the other of mythmaking, insincerity, and psychological disorder. The only hope for beginning a productive discussion with a party to protracted conflict is to at least accept the narrative premises that he puts forward. This is no recipe for bringing the conflict to a close, but it does point to what would open the conversation. Failure to honor the root narrative structure of the other party is the surest way to escalate a conflict whether that is intended or not, and while this is true in general it is certainly true of leaders like Isaias who are not susceptible to the pressure of public opinion in the way that others might be.

Given this insight about conflict dynamics, it is interesting to note how HRW responds to the liberation focus of the President and his government. Instead of framing their criticisms in the broader narrative of Eritrean marginalization by larger and unsympathetic forces, they resort to the liberal language of “small l” libertarian principles. In Figures 2 and 3 we can see the relative

use of liberation and consent story structures in the past five years of Martyrs Day speeches as compared to HRW World Reports. On average, President Isaias uses elements of the Liberation narrative is over 51% of his speeches. In contrast, less than 1% of the text of the HRW reports can be characterized as liberation stories. If we think of these two data streams as matched pair responses to the events of the same year in Eritrea, we can test for the statistical significance of the difference, which is significant at the $p < .01$ level. This is a striking contrast. These document streams are not using the same story structure.

Just as striking are the findings of Figure 2, which demonstrate that HRW is even more committed to its worldview than President Isaias is to his. HRW uses elements of the Consent narrative in over 74% of its report, where President Isaias uses consent in just over 3% of his speeches. Statistically this finding is even more robust, a matched-pairs two tailed t-test yields a $p < .001$ level of significance. These are not documents developed with stories that are meant to

speak to one another, and the differences are not at the level of policy but of narrative. The two sides simply tell different stories about the challenges facing Eritrea. They resort to different values, liberation versus consent, rely on different plot lines, and most importantly different images of abusive power. For President Isaias, abusive power lies with the international community. His people are its victims, and their struggle will lead to liberation. For HRW, abusive power lies with the Eritrean government. They hope to use the pressures of international outrage to shame the regime into compliance, protecting the victims of government coercion and empowering individual Eritreans. We can this contrast in these two excerpts from the Martyrs Day speech and HRW Report of 2018:

The Eritrean people, but also the Ethiopian people, have lost an opportunity of two generations for over half a century due to policies designed to promote external global agendas (Shabait.com, 2018).

Eritrea remains a one-man dictatorship under President Isaias Afewerki, now in his 26th year in power. It has no legislature, no independent civil society organizations or media outlets, and no independent judiciary. The government restricts religious freedoms, banning all but four groups (Avenue et al., 2017).

Again, this is not a fight about policy, it is about the story. Neither side is even trying to take the criticisms directed at it seriously, if by seriously we mean they suspend disbelief about the plausibility of the story line proposed by the other side. Instead each side see the other's story as a myth, a set of lies or fabrications, and a way to distract from the real problems facing the country. In this sense, the conflict is predicated on a misunderstanding. Facts and policy proposals will be powerless to move it. This is the hurting stalemate mode of narrative competition (Zartman, 2000).

Of course, it would be naive to assume that either side could simply change its language to meet the demands of the other side or that both are parties are not being strategic in their use of language, but this does not dilute the potency of the findings of a root narrative gap of the magnitude we see here. Even corrupt and strategic actors use the language that they know their audiences will respect. The root narratives anchor both the empirical and the moral warrants of the argument they make. If the Eritrean people and/or leadership cadres were themselves

committed to consent stories, Isaias could easily reframe his arguments in those terms. Clever rhetors can associate almost any policy with their chosen narrative. The fact that he relies so heavily on the Liberation narrative and that HRW relies so heavily on the Consent narrative says something fundamental about the worldviews of the two sides. They are both theoretically and morally committed to their perspectives, even if only for strategic purposes. In this way the surface of things demonstrates something quite profound.

We should also take note of the statistical power of root narrative theory to demonstrate empirical gaps in ideological perspective. Consider that we are only dealing here with a sample size of five years, each producing two reports. To get significance levels suggesting that we would be wrong to claim that the root narrative commitments of the two sides were the same in only one of a hundred or one of one thousand samples is quite striking. This suggests that with fairly minimal data collection, we can diagnose the root causes of the disagreement between two parties. In this case, a modest sample of five years producing ten documents is able both to diagnose the moral gap between the two parties, but also to produce fine-textured language about how to advise the parties to reimagine their own political commitments.

Although it is unlikely that one could convince an organization whose mission it is to expose human rights abuses to pivot to another story line, those of us in the international community who would like to make inroads in dealing with Eritrea might well consider that insofar as we frame our criticisms in this language, we are unlikely to be heard. We could instead accept the critique of power put forward by the Eritreans and their demonstrated sense of national persecution while at the same time pointing out the limited likelihood that that certain purportedly problematic policies will promote durable liberation. It is not an easy lift, but it is the only way to move forward in such a polarized narrative context apart from outright confrontation. If your goal is to convince the other party, you have to become better at framing arguments in the context of her root narrative commitments.

Areas of Narrative Overlap and Narrative Pivots

If liberation and consent are the two ideological domains that divide the Eritrean government from the leading critics in the international community, there are areas of modest ideological overlap as well. The two sides are starkly divided insofar as the Eritrean government employs a dignitarian imagination and the human rights advocates employ a libertarian imagination. Because neither side is much moved by the threat narratives of the other, there is

little room to hope for persuasion or collaboration insofar as events are framed and imagined in these terms. The argument of the other side, itself, represents the abusive power that mobilizes the partisans. Even so, both President Isaias and HRW use two root narratives with some frequency, both of which are securitarian story structures. The modest overlap in these two domains might provide evidence for an opening in conversation for those who have an interesting in working through political bottlenecks with the Eritrean leadership.

In Figures 4 and 5, we see the relative usage of two securitarian root narratives by both President Isaias in his Martyrs Day speeches and by the authors of the HRW report on Eritrea. As you can see, the securitarian themes are common in the Martyrs Day speeches than in the human rights reports, but there is substantial use in both cases.

If we had to make a general claim about the use of securitarian narratives in these reactions to the Eritrean context, it seems fair to say that both sides are concerned about stability and that there is a weak tendency for considerations of unity to arise, especially when the peace agenda is topical. President Isaias uses the Stability narrative in these speeches for roughly 33% of the speech on average, where HRW uses it for less than 10% of the report. The Unity narrative only become a substantive concern in the 2017 and 2018 speeches of President Isaias in the run up to the election of Prime Minister Ahmed in April 2018, although we should note that the unity theme was already present in the President's speech in June of 2017. The statistical difference between the use of Stability narrative between the two data series is again significant in a matched pairs two-tailed t-test with four degrees of freedom, this time at a $p < .001$ level. The difference on the Unity narrative between 18% and 6% for the speeches and the reports is not significant.

There is little in the use of a root narrative category that suggest that the concrete stories told by each side is similar to the other, although there may be evidence that the two sides could share ideological affinities. When President Isaias uses the Stability narrative, it is passages like the following one from 2015:

And as we confront the challenges in unison with all those working for the security, stability and harmony of this region, time will tell that we will emerge victorious by bolstering our resistance and resilience.

President Isaias' uses of stability themes are rarely independent. They overlap with his larger liberation story. He sees the destabilizing forces in the colonial oppressors and global interests that seek to benefit from chaos in the region. The abusive power is uncoordinated action, but also the colonial powers. In contrast HRW reports employ the story structure in passages like the following from 2019:

National service is not the sole reason thousands, including unaccompanied children, flee Eritrea each month but it remains a primary factor. Almost 15 percent of the population has fled since the 1998 war. After the Eritrea-Ethiopia border opened, the number of fleeing Eritreans, especially unaccompanied minors, increased significantly, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (Avenue et al., 2018)

This storyline is not independent of the larger themes of consent that motivate the HRW authors, but the major concern here is the instability that is caused by the policies of the Eritrean government. Nevertheless, even though the authors blame the Eritrean program of national service, they point out that its worst effects are on the refugees who flee the country, "especially unaccompanied minors" who are placed at obvious risk from the lack of coordinate systems to protect them. Both sides would agree that the "chaos" of "fleeing Eritreans" is a problem that should be managed better than it now is. One side blames the abusive power of the global interests and the other that of the tyrannical government, but there is room to look for common ground to address the instability problem about which they are both concerned. Again if we remember that the HRW reports are only interesting here as a proxy for the narrative of the international community about Eritrea, we can see that there is room to work on this issue on the terrain of the stability narrative, suggesting that concerned actors in that community like the

United Nations Development Programme should work to develop accounts for acceptable policy compatible with that story structure.

The Unity narrative presents very differently in the data. You will see unity used to criticize opponents, as in this example from 2018, “The TPLF [Tigray People’s Liberation Front] clique, and other vultures, are dumbfounded by the ongoing changes. And, as they know full well that their game has come to an end,” but he also uses positive passages like the following one from 2017, which are quite typical of the stories you will hear if you speak with the leaders and people of Eritrea:

The special values our martyrs bequeathed to us constitute a value system that characterize our identity and patriotism nurtured during the armed struggle for independence. National value system is not an option or charity; they are human necessities for existence. Our liberation would not have materialized short of these values. (Afwerki, 2017)

This is an example of unity as collective values that is an almost unspoken theme that is quite typical in the region and one that stands in tenuous contrast to the individualism so typical of human rights discourse. Although it may not be realistic to assume that the authors at HRW will embrace this communitarian language and philosophy, they are susceptible to the pull of unitarian thinking. It is the rare exception to their critical and shaming model of adversarial advocacy as with this excerpt from 2019:

After decades of near total diplomatic isolation, 2018 was a year of significant change in Eritrea’s relationship with its neighbors. In July, the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a five-point declaration to usher in “a new era of peace and friendship,” formally ending a border war that began 20 years earlier. A month later, Eritrea and Somalia resumed diplomatic relations after 15 years, and Djibouti and Eritrea did the same shortly after. In November, the United Nations Security Council lifted its nine-year arms embargo against Eritrea.

Root narrative theory points to areas of severe ideological tension and potential ideological overlap, but it also can be used to explore ideological pivots from one root narrative category to another. For example, because each of the root narratives is part of an interconnected system of semiotic constraints, if a party tends to rely on one root narrative, it might be the case that another related narrative would also be appealing to him.

One of the forms of connection between root narratives is a shared protagonist. We have seen that President Isaias tends to use the Liberation Narrative in his speeches. He is animated by opposition to the experience of cultural discrimination and disrespect for his people perpetrated by global governing structures. The national liberation movement is not an ethnic movement as it was in Ethiopia, but it is a national movement for respect and autonomy of the people of Eritrea. He is not calling for the workers of the world to unite.

There are two other root narratives that share this concern for cultural respect, and these are the Inclusion narrative and the Recognition narrative, either of which could be quite compelling in this context. It is unlikely that international actors will find clever ways to raise their concerns national service, conscript labor, lack of democratic accountability, arbitrary arrest, and freedom of the press in these dignitarian modes, but they might find far more sympathetic audiences within the regime if they were to raise questions about how to support the Eritreans in terms the Inclusion narrative as opposed to shaming them with the Consent narrative.

What would this mean? Inclusion provides its users with a very powerful political vocabulary, one that opposes racial and other forms of discrimination and that focuses on economic opportunity and educational attainment. The Eritrean people are very hungry for these things and they surely believe that they have been targeted for their national origins, their race, and their pariah status in the international community. Imagine if international actors became as concerned about the terms of the mineral rights to be shared with the people of Eritrea as they are about the conscript labor being used to mine those resources? In Eritrea as in most other parts of the global south, international corporations look to deals that work against national interests. Eritrea has been criticized for its 40% stake in the returns to the mines, but they tend to see this as a way to protect the people's interests in their resources. This could be framed as a form of class conflict or as a cause of Eritrean inclusion as they struggle to promote the interests of their own people. This kind social and economic right is consistent with the language of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and could balance the unbalanced focus on the individual that is typical of the horror stories told about the regime, whatever their basis.

This pivot in root narrative could influence the behavior of international actors and also of journalists. Consider this piece written about mining at a mine for gold, copper, and zinc called Bisha for *The Guardian* on November 23, 2017:

Since Nevsun owns 60% of the Bisha Mining Share Company, which owns and operates the mine (the other 40% is owned by the Eritrean government), the plaintiffs claim the Canadian company must have been aware of the reported abuses, but failed to prevent or stop them. (Kassam, 2017)

The article is only focused on the use of conscript labor, which is no small concern, but it ignores the astounding deal that the Eritreans got for their countrymen. Note that 40% of the stake is government owned and the government claims that it uses these revenues for social programs. Critics may well doubt this use and suspect that it is funneled to corrupt elites instead, but surely some progressive voices in the international community can see the advantages of directing such a large stake of the country's resources to the benefit of this African people. Isn't it more typical to hear the opposite kinds of stories like those in which the giant firm left a country environmentally decimated and little better off for all the economic development? If we told a story like that, if as a journalist the writer examined her own convictions, her own root narrative profile, before writing the story, wouldn't we have moved the ball forward a little? The Inclusion narrative has great potential to inform the way we narrate economic development in Africa and might well be weighed against our natural tendencies to emphasize libertarian over dignitarian concerns in the West.

This issue of mining revenues points to another potential narrative pivot that could improve the state of the conversation with the Eritrean leadership. We have seen that the overriding story structure for international critics of the Eritrean regime is the Consent narrative, which is defined by the protagonist as individual and the antagonist as the coercive government. Pivoting on the antagonist, we have two other root narratives that might be appealing to these international critics. Ironically the first one is the Liberation narrative in which an oppressed cultural group stands up to an oppressive governing structure. Because this is the nature of the radical disagreement, it will not be helpful here, but the other option, the Accountability narrative might be.

In an accountability story, the oppressed people stand up to a corrupt government whose agents and officers are on the take. Surely many people suspect that the Eritrean leadership is taking that 40% of the mining revenues from the Bisha mine and others to buy lavish villas and to stock their Swiss bank accounts. Although we have no of knowing exactly where these revenues are directed, there is little prima facie evidence to suggest that government officials are

pocketing much of it. Consider the President himself. Based on the footage of Prime Minister Abiy's visit to Isaias' family home, I can't say that he lives any better than a typical professor in the Washington DC metro area (*ERi-TV, Eritrea*, 2018). In fact, the latter might be much better off, especially in terms of resale value of the home. Of course, there are countless ways to sequester one's wealth, but this example of the President's home is intriguing. Nor does he govern from Saddam Hussein style palaces. The government buildings are all functional but humble, and I can attest from personal experience that not all of the facilities are in working order. These are not the trappings of a predatory elite that lives off the backs of a slave workforce.

From a narrative perspective, this aversion to government corruption is potentially useful for potential international partners because the Eritrean administration prides itself on its lack of government corruption and this is a story structure that shares an antagonist with the Consent narrative. Even dire critics of the human rights abuses of the government should be able to see the value of the constraints that the Eritrean leaders have placed on government corruption framed as economic exploitation. If the conscript workers lack their liberty, perhaps it is not to line the pockets of a wealthy nomenclature. Therefore, if journalists and international leaders were to begin to stress this line of interpretation of Eritrean events, perhaps it could build a sense of goodwill with its leaders that would render them less suspicious of what they see as "the powers that encroach on our independence and sovereignty" (Afwerki, 2015).

To get a sense of the depth of this commitment to the dignitarian narrative project, consider this Eritrean press release directed at the Saudi Minister of State for Africa who was speaking about the formation of a new council to help stabilize relations in the Red Sea but did so in a way that stressed his country's leadership in the effort (*Arab-African countries form alliance in Riyadh—World News*, 2020):

And while we recognize the goodwill of our international partners, a condescending narrative that belittles Africa and its achievements is not only improper but also fraught with blighting the image of the Kingdom. (Shabait.com, 2020)

So jealous are the Eritreans of their national independence, so sensitive to even nascent colonial impulses, and so committed to the vital truth of the Liberation narrative are they that

they are willing to reprimand anyone, friend or foe, who fails to fully appreciate it. This is more evidence of the power of narrative.

From this brief analysis of a very small number of representative and publicly available documents, we can see how we can learn about the root causes of a conflict and the possible moves we might make to begin to improve conditions there.

Conclusion

When conflicts have gone on for a long time, and when they have led to a great deal of human suffering and widely shared cultures of mutual criticism, they can be extremely challenging to approach, let alone resolve. These are conditions of radical disagreement. If we would ever hope to improve conditions such as these (and what else are we to do but try?), we will have to develop methods that cut to the root of problems and point to ways to grow out them from those replenishing sources. This is precisely what root narrative theory is intended to do. It provides us with a theoretically complicated but easy to use system for classifying statements in texts so that they can be summarized with what is called a root narrative profile. Serving as a summary of the worldview of the author of the text, the profile can be used to help parties to conflict to reimagine their own positions in a conflict so that they better fit those of their adversary. In this way, understanding may lead to more efficient negotiations and more durable outcomes.

Root narrative theory is intended to support peace and conflict scholars in their efforts to come to terms with the problem of asymmetries of power in negotiation and peacebuilding. When power is asymmetric—when one side has a lot more of it than the other—there is little room for fair negotiation and any peace settled on will likely be so wracked by injustice that it serves little more than ceasefire between uprisings. If we want to deal with the problem of unequal power in its relationship to peace, we have to understand what the effects, the lasting effects, of power are on the parties themselves.

The solution posed here to this problem of power is perhaps less than obvious. I argue that power has effects on narrative; it structures the stories people tell about the history of the conflict, and this history carries the conflict into future generations who fight the old battles according to the same old story line, even if the abusive power opposed is no longer in operation, nor need no longer be in operation. This helps to explain why racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism

can be such potent forces even in communities in which strong majorities would consciously like to overcome these abuses. The narrative structure locks them in.

How does this work? Conflict narrative are defined by the abusive power that they are designed to overcome. Because both sides to a conflict have some form of power, there are always abuses on both sides, even if these abuses are highly imbalanced toward one side of the conflict, as with the case of racism. Both sides develop stories according to story structures that I call root narratives that bring together reason and emotion, identity and interest into compact and flexible packages. These root narratives then have lives of their own that can be studied in living discourse. I have applied this methodology to the case of Eritrean marginalization in the international community and find that the regime and its critics do, indeed, speak in radically distinct moral languages. They are trapped in a process of radical disagreement that only brave, informed, and conscientious attention can hope to overcome. I hope to have sparked that attention here.

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