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Eritrea: Denying the Influence of the Enemy

Over the last 60 years, Eritrea has fought and won a difficult battle for independence. One would think that after gaining a new found freedom a nation would promote the freedoms of its citizens, but that was not the case for Eritrea. Heavy censorship on anything the government deems as traitorous to Eritrea fiercely limits the kinds of media that Eritrean citizens were easily able to consume. Music is a catalyst for emotion that heavily influences the human perception and governments banning specific types and genres will cause listeners to have a warped understanding of the truth.

Border disputes regarding modern day Eritrea began around 1880 after Italy was given Eritrea and Ethiopia by Egypt. Ethiopia also claimed Eritrea, and they also claimed that they were independent from Italy. This led to high tension in the area that remained like this until after World War II when Great Britain was given control over both Eritrea and Ethiopia after Italy's loss. The land remained in control of Great Britain for around 14 years when it was then decided by the United Nations that the territory would be set free and allowed to rule over themselves. During this process Ethiopia claimed control over Eritrea despite protests from Eritreans. Not long after, the Eritrean Liberation Front was created because Ethiopia forcefully annexed them, with help from the UN, and deprived them of their autonomy.

It did not take long for issues to arise among the ELF and the first Eritrean Civil War began. This conflict stemmed from internal power struggles, religious disputes, and ideological differences which eventually led to the formation of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. Throughout the Eritrean fight for freedom, these two groups had many disputes and would fight again in the second Eritrean Civil War where the ELF was defeated. After 30 years of fighting against Ethiopia, a vote was called by the UN where an overwhelming majority voted for the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia (FMR).

Only eight years after Eritrea was granted freedom the first official president, Isaias Afewerki, banned all independent media allowing only media approved by the state to be published. This ban was put in place just a week after 9/11 occurred, and Afewerki used the worldwide uprising it caused to take attention off of the dictatorship that he intended to create. Now all media across the nation is heavily controlled and monitored by the state. With these heavy restrictions Eritrea has only three sanctioned radio stations and two sanctioned tv stations for citizens watch (USDoS). These restrictions reach further than just media, there are also heavy restrictions on freedom of speech and religion with only four being recognized and permitted by the government. Only two years after the initial ban even more restrictions were spread orally including a ban on all Amharic music throughout the nation due to the years and years worth of disputes between the two nations (Solomon).

Despite the restrictions placed on media both traditional and pop music are widely popular across the nation. One of the most renowned Eritrean music artists was the late Abraham Afewerki who was known for his Tigrinya – language primarily spoken in Eritrea and is found most often in the highlands – music style (Zere). One of his most popular works is “Abela” which is a folk,

pop song about love. The song tells the story of a man in love with a woman, and he has pined over her just wishing she would have given him a chance. By the end of the song it seems to have been too late. Now, all he is left with is bitter loneliness and the nostalgia of the love he still holds for her. It is easy to understand why a song like this would resonate so much with the people of Eritrea. Afewerki uses a calming and purposeful melody that initially leaves the listener with the impression of happiness highlighting the feelings of love that he holds. The impression from traditional African music can be heard in the way Afewerki uses vibrato and trills. The Eritrean government values all media that promotes the values and ideologies of the nation and songs like these that are able to incorporate traditional music with a more modern mix are crucial for them pertain the pride that many citizens have for their nation.

The Eritrean government sees any media that does not pertain to their standard to be detrimental to its citizens. By heavily monitoring what information is public authoritarian nations, such as Eritrea, are able to control the narrative by perpetuating false and propagandized information. When particular media is orchestrated for prolonged periods of time agendas and beliefs become cemented into people's minds from their developmental years shaping the way they think and view everything (Dragomir). Processes like these are integral for all totalitarian governments to ensure complete control and loyalty from its citizens. A common way that these types of governments control media is by specifically promoting traditional music that originates from the country or from a culture that many people will deeply resonate with. Eritrea takes this to the next level where all Amharic music was banned despite the many similarities between it and the Eritrean traditional Tigrinya music. Even though the ban was not heavily enforced for around 10 years, around 2018, the Eritrean government

began to punish those who played it in public. Amharic music originates from a region in the central highlands of Ethiopia which is geographically near Eritrea. It is often characterized by its use of five note scales, as well as, a syncopated rhythm (Tegbaru). These same characteristics are also often found in traditional Eritrean music. Despite these similarities, Eritrea still went through with the ban proving how at this ban was never about the music, but rather a vendetta against a nation that has been deemed as an enemy of the state.

The government's restrictions were put in place as an effort to preserve classical Eritrean culture from being influenced by any party that does not fit the values of the nation. An album titled *Eritrean Classical* was published in 2018 and contains many songs in the traditional style of Eritrean music that suit the government's values. One such song is "Miskin Wad Amir". This song, composed by Idris Wad Amir, relies on many different instruments such as the krar and the kebero drum. The krar is a bowl-lyre important to both Eritrean and Ethiopia and can be played by plucking or strumming. Kebero drums are a two headed drum and one side is larger, often representing the divinity of god, while the smaller side often represents humanity highlighting how religion is integrated into everyday culture (Ahadu Studios). "Miskin Wad Amir" also invokes a feeling of happiness through Idris Wad Amir's use of a syncopated rhythm and a catchy melody leaving a lasting impression on any first-time listener.

Music education is utilized by many nations worldwide as a method to teach young children. There are many benefits to music education as it teaches discipline while also increasing neuroplasticity and brain function (Kraus). This approach is on the rise in Eritrea and foundations like the ELCE School of Music are working primarily on modern musical instrument practice (In-House

East Africa). Programs like these will work to instill the value of classical music and other Eritrea media onto children and these feelings will most likely stick with them for the rest of their lives. While important to overall education, programs like these can also be used as a form of propaganda. In other countries – like North Korea, Russia, or China – classical music is taught as the right type of music while simultaneously pushing down more experimental and nontraditional styles. This is done as a means of preserving culture from negative influences as deemed by each nation. Due to the heavy control and censorship of media, as music education develops, Eritrea may begin to use this method due to its success in other totalitarian countries leading to the indoctrination of citizens from their most developmental years.

Even though it may seem that Eritrea inflicts these restrictions without imposition, there are many Eritrean people who are standing up to the government's censorship. Within the last ten years, there has been a mass diaspora of emigrants due to the nation's leadership and policies. Eritrean already has a significantly smaller population compared to that of the rest of the world, and it is estimated that around one-third of Eritrea's natural born population, which is around 6 million, live abroad (Poole). Many of whom leave to seek asylum from the severe repression of human rights.

The diaspora led to many people of different professions and cultures to flee to a safer country. One of the primary professions that left during the diaspora was the nation's artists and musicians. Specifically, President Afeworki's heavy restrictions on what arts can be published pushed many of these artists to their breaking point causing them to flee. While the music that comes from inside the country focuses more on love and happiness, the music of those who have fled tells a different story. These songs focus more on revealing the true nature of the Eritrean government. Even though, both

types of music rely on the same style and instruments, like Amharic music, songs of a more progressive nature are banned from being played in the country. One such song – composed by Mihreteab Michael, Andit Okbay, Kiflom Yikealo, Haile Gezu, Luam Kiflom and the *Chura Band* – titled “Nguyeyelu” or “let’s make a run for it” discusses Eritrea now and attempts to empower the youth to fight together to make a change. Deep lyricism is one of the most popular forms of communication from these types of musical artists, and it is utilized as a way of promoting reflection about who you are and who your country wants you to be. In the lyrics they urge young listeners to do something with their lives and to not waste it nor let themselves be suppressed of basic human rights (AIM). Songs like these can have a major impact on young audiences who have only ever known what their countries have taught them. Critical thinking and proper judgements can be made individuals once they have been able to see the reality they live in, not just the fabricated world that has been created for them.

Music is an artform that can be used in a myriad of ways to both hide or reveal the truth. Which approach used relies primarily on the person or party in control of it. Music is entwined so remarkably deep in the human brain allowing it to cause a listener to feel any particular way the song wants. Because of this when fascist regimes come to power one of the first things they do is constrain the media that citizens are allowed to consume. The Eritrean government has followed this model indicating that they view all non-state media to be a negative influence toward their citizens and what the government wants them to believe. By eliminating outside contact and media they can create an echo chamber praising the nation relentlessly, regardless of what the truth actually is. The right to art and self-expression is one of the fundamental human rights that everyone, no matter who or where they are, should be able to possess.

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