

This Dictatorship Is a Joke

Eritrean Politics as Tragicomedy

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In a repressive system, the truth is dangerous for both ruler and ruled, and cryptopolitics flourish. Repression operates in part through complicity and duplicity as Gail Kligman's (1998) brilliant study of Romania under Ceaucescu makes clear. In the case of Eritrea, official narratives, orchestrated public rallies in Eritrea and in the diaspora, and pro-government posts to Eritrean websites present one picture (Bernal 2014; Hepner 2009). A different picture emerges from the experiences of daily life in Eritrea, posts on opposition websites, journalistic reports on international news outlets, and the findings of international organizations. To describe conditions this way, however, makes it sound as if the contradictions are clear and stand external to society. Things are far more complicated for Eritreans because repression does not simply produce opposition; it produces uncertainty, complicity, duplicity, and ambivalence. It also produces humor, which is the focus of this chapter.

Cryptopolitics permeate Eritrean society as fear compels people to dissimulate and perform support for the regime that is not genuine (T. Woldemikael 2009). In David Bozzini's (2013: 48) words, there is in Eritrea "a necessary double game, manifested in the distinction between a public and a hidden discourse—a duplicity that can be overcome only by exile." Amanda Poole similarly describes social life in Eritrea as "characterized by a pervasive sense that everything done publicly, and perhaps privately, was under observation, subject to suspicious scrutiny, capricious interpretation, and punishment. And nearly everything, beneath the surface, seemed to hold within itself a double meaning" (2013: 77). A UN inquiry found "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government" and that "Information collected on people's activities, their supposed intentions and even conjectured

thoughts are used to rule through fear in a country where individuals are routinely arbitrarily arrested and detained, tortured, disappeared or extrajudicially executed” (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2015). A UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights accused Eritrea’s government of crimes against humanity and reported that Eritrea practices a shoot-to-kill policy on Eritreans who try to leave the country.¹

Eritreans respond to these tragic conditions in many ways, including through comedy. Why do people choose humor as one response to soul-crushing oppression? What makes such humor funny, and, aside from producing mirth, what possible effects might such humor create? What is distinctive about political humor compared to serious politics? These questions animate this analysis of Eritrean humor that focuses, in particular, on jokes Eritreans produce and circulate about President Isaias Afewerki. I approach humor as a form of cryptopolitics. Through its structure of double meanings and ambiguity, moreover, I argue that humor works in part as critical discourse about representation. In considering what it means that Eritreans choose to laugh about some of the political suffering they and their compatriots endure, I suggest that the structure of comedy, how things are made funny, which involves copying with a twist, has a particular resonance with dictatorship, which, like humor, involves insincere performances and distorted logics.

This chapter explores contemporary Eritrean political humor that circulates online in texts and videos and also by word of mouth inside Eritrea and among the diaspora. Zeroing in on jokes about President Isaias Afewerki helps get to the essence of dictatorship in the figure of the dictator. Isaias Afewerki is independent Eritrea’s first and only president, a guerrilla hero of the victorious independence struggle that ended in 1991, and the individual who has done the most to shape Eritrean national political culture. The analysis draws on material posted by Eritreans on diaspora websites, Twitter accounts, jokes that were told to me, and jokes collected and translated for me by Eritrean interlocutors. The analysis draws on my long-term research on Eritrean politics including four sojourns in Eritrea, the first in 1981 and the most recent in 2016 and extensive observations of activities on Eritrean diaspora websites.

The essay is organized as follows: “Under Isaias: Cryptopolitics Territory” describes the character of the regime and the quality of life it produces. “Humor as Politics: What’s in a Joke?” explores theories about humor as a genre of expression and its political significance. I then turn to an analysis of “Dictatorship and Duplicity” before focusing on President Isaias and Eritreans, humorous responses to his regime.

Under Isaias: Cryptopolitics Territory

Life inside Eritrea's borders is defined by the attempt of the Isaias regime to leave no sphere of activity outside state control. Some Western media outlets call Eritrea "the North Korea of Africa" for its state-controlled media and severe state practices.² Eritreans are subject to indefinite years of national service with no control over their assignment and only token payment. There is no constitution, and the ruling party allows no space for civil society (Riggan 2009; T. Woldemikael 2013). The regime's exercise of power, moreover, is often unpredictable and seemingly irrational. Sometimes this is rather farcical as when censors at Eritrea's Ministry of Information refused to allow Eritrean singer Ghirmay Andom to release an album of love songs, arguing that: "When the country is facing lots of adversaries, it is unjustifiable to consistently sing about romance."³

Walking around Asmara, Eritrea's capital city, one can see the heavy-handed state management of the economy reflected in the austere atmosphere of the city compared to other African cities that are enlivened by the hustle and bustle of a myriad of microenterprises that spill into public space. As I meandered the urban landscape in the summer of 2016 there were no hawkers or street vendors plying their trade on the streets of Asmara, only children here and there selling chewing gum, a few scattered beggars, and on some street corners people selling the seasonal treat, cactus fruit. Many shops were closed for lack of goods and lack of customers according to a couple of merchants with whom I spoke. The nakfa (Eritrean currency) had recently been devalued and shopkeepers could not afford to restock their goods. The regime of Isaias Afewerki no longer espouses the Marxism that informed the politics of national liberation in Eritrea, yet the regime has something of the flavor of the old socialist regimes that similarly attempted to centrally control political culture, close borders, and isolate the population from outside influences.

One of the starkest and most contentious policies is the national service requirement that takes young teenagers from their families to receive training and complete their final year of high school in a remote military camp. Young people are then retained indefinitely in national service. Often referred to as Sawa (the name of the first remote training camp), this policy has been likened to slavery by Eritrean organizations based in the diaspora because of its unlimited time frame. Young people I talked with who had completed their training and were performing national service work described conditions in the camps in terms of inadequate food, poor health care, and harsh corporal punishment

that left one individual I met with a permanent injury. When I asked one person whether they had cried on the bus to Sawa, they said “we were all crying.”

Eritreans pride themselves on stoicism and resilience, but a new sense of depression, resignation, or even perhaps despair seemed palpable during my visit in 2016. At the extreme were numbers of mentally ill individuals who roamed the streets. Someone explained to me that the state decided it could no longer afford to keep them institutionalized and simply released them. Several years have since passed, and I hear that people not in their right minds are still wandering the streets. As one Eritrean quipped, “Insanity here starts at the top. We have a crazy leader. He has driven us crazy. All the sane people have left the country.”

In a post on the Eritrean diaspora website Asmarino titled “Eritrea: Why I Am Optimistic about 2015,” the author, while comparing the Isaias regime to a psychopath, points to humor as a reason for optimism. He argues that:

the public becomes increasingly astute in identifying the deficiencies and underlying pathological web maintaining the system. A shared language against the system develops . . . one of the earliest signs is the rise in humour . . . an irreverent humour against the system that shackles society . . . (rings a bell does it?) . . . eventually people wake up to the reality that pathocrats are not impressive or admirable but malicious incompetents and begin to disobey them turning the tables by identifying the pathocrat’s weaknesses and exploiting them . . . when this starts it can be said that pathocracy, or in our case pfdj [the ruling party], is indeed in its twilight . . . (Asmarino 24 December 2014, ellipses and parentheses original, bracketed material added)

Eritrean political humor contributes to and complements diverse forms of serious politics that seek to pressure, persuade, resist, or undermine the Isaias regime. Dissent and protest activities can be pursued openly only outside Eritrea’s borders, and therefore outspoken and organized opposition happens among Eritrean diaspora communities. Websites established by Eritreans in the diaspora, in particular, serve as a public sphere where freedoms of expression not possible within Eritrea can be exercised (Bernal 2014). Inside the country, subtler forms of resistance involve obstruction, avoidance, and indiscipline (Bozzini 2013). Humor can take subtle forms and operate underground. Verbal jokes, like rumors, require no authorship and can circulate anonymously. Political jokes may even draw authority from the fact that they cannot be tied to a particular individual whose motives and knowledge might

then be impugned. A joke originates with someone at a given place and time, but jokes that circulate do so independent of their original author and context; jokes survive by invoking a social condition that audiences recognize. Jokes about President Isaias relate to a figure with whom all Eritreans are familiar.

Humor as Politics or What's in a Joke?

This study draws on and contributes to a growing body of new scholarship on humor in anthropology (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Carty and Musharbash 2008; Goldstein 2003; Hasty 2005; Haugerud 2013; Mole 2013; Pype 2015; Trnka 2011). It further develops themes and arguments I began to formulate in an earlier article (Bernal 2013). Much of the scholarship cited above explores the entanglement of humor in power relations. Donna Goldstein's notion of "laughter out of place" draws attention to the paradox of how tragedy can be met with humor. Through her analysis, humor can be seen as a denial of passive victimhood, serving poor women in Rio de Janeiro as a way of expressing and understanding their experience. Goldstein observes that "humor both masks and reveals . . . the very structures and hierarchies on which the humor depends" (2003: 273). This meme of Isaias Afewerki as Hitler could be understood as unmasking the president's true character as a ruthless dictator.⁴

One of the great puzzles of humor is how it can unmask if it must rely on what we already know in order for us to get the joke. Slavoj Žižek points to this conundrum when he writes that "comedy relies on the gesture of unveiling" while noting that funniest of all is when "after removing the mask, we confront exactly the same face as that of the mask" (2005). This dynamic of humor, which I argue unmasks by drawing attention to the mask, is at work in an Isaias joke told to me by a young man during my 2016 stay in Eritrea. He explained that at one point the government had closed down all the truck repair shops (which like virtually every business of any consequence in Eritrea were run by the government). The joke says that "when truckers went to complain to President Isaias, asking 'why have all the repair shops been closed?,' Isaias replied, 'I don't know. They shut down mine, too.'" The humor in this joke lies in the way it builds on mythic anecdotes that have circulated about Isaias Afewerki's behavior and lifestyle since the beginning of his presidency to show that the president chooses to live like an ordinary Eritrean. In this respect, Isaias stands in contrast to many elites, especially the African leaders depicted so vividly by Achille Mbembe (1992) who demonstrate



Figure 7.1. Meme of Isaias Afewerki as Hitler from public Internet sources.

their claims to authority through extravagant lifestyles. The joke uses the theme of the president who is just like everybody else to speak to conditions of power and powerlessness. Even if Isaias subjects himself to the same conditions as citizens there is a major difference: Isaias (and not everybody else) has the decision-making power to decide what those conditions will be. The joke pokes fun at Isaias acting as if he is an ordinary citizen to whom something bad is happening, when in fact, he is the one making it happen. One could interpret the joke as suggesting a wider criticism of Isaias as a leader who refuses to take responsibility for the consequences of his policies.

One Isaias story about how the president chooses to act like an ordinary citizen rather than a person of authority and privilege was told to me by an older man during that same summer in Asmara. We were in the city on the day in July when the young people were required to board the buses for Sawa to begin their military training and national service. In the distance we heard shouting and cheering as the teenagers were seen off by their families and the buses pulled out. Despite the cheers we both knew it was a sad day as families complied with the government requirement and sent their children away from home to a year of hardship and severe discipline. To soften the melancholy atmosphere, the man said, “Isaias’s children were sent to Sawa. Isaias went with everybody else like any parent to the bus to see them off.”

There was a surprise ending, however, to this Isaias story. Whereas during earlier fieldtrips such a story would simply have ended there, a

tale of an exemplary man of the people, in 2016 the story had a post-script. After a slight pause, the storyteller added: “But what good does that do? He should let the children stay at home with their families.”

Both the joke about Isaias and the closed truck shops and the man’s serious comment reveal something about how Eritreans are critically analyzing the status quo. A joke packages its message in a format that facilitates its circulation to new audiences and its entry into cultural discourse, while a critical comment like that of the older gentleman may not go beyond a private conversation.

The political significance of humor is an unresolved question. George Orwell wrote: “A thing is funny when—in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening—it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.” A joke is not an actual revolution. Yet, a revolution like the Arab Spring or the fall of the Berlin Wall may come as a surprise, but it never comes out of nowhere. The processes through which subversive subjectivities and underground culture are produced are important to understand. The political potential of humor, like art, pop culture, graffiti, and other unconventional forms of expression, can easily be underestimated. Mbembe asserts that:

The question of knowing whether humour in the postcolony is an expression of “resistance” or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards authority, is thus of secondary importance. For the most part, people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the commandment. (1992: 8)

Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (2012) dismiss humor’s political impact as a “myth,” arguing that humor is a means of social control even when it expresses criticism of the status quo, since the invocation of dominant values serves to reinforce them. However, their key measure of political change (or lack thereof) is voting behavior, and this approach may obscure humor’s political work. I suggest, for example, that when humor invokes dominant views, they become more distinct and humor, by decontextualizing or recontextualizing dominant views renders them more malleable in the public sphere. Humorous representations allow the status quo to become subject to new forms of reflection. While subversions can operate as safety-valves rather than threats to the dominant order, the border between these is fluid and has the potential to overflow. Considering humor as a form of cryptopolitics highlights its ambiguity and the complexity of its political effects.

One definition of humor explains that: “Based on the violation of what is expected or considered normal in given circumstances, humour

emerges from two overlapping but opposed scripts” (Tsakona and Popa 2012: 4). Henri Bergson (1998) helpfully describes the comic as based on repetition, inversion, and what he calls “reciprocal interference” by which he means a setup where the same situation has the possibility of two entirely different meanings. These formulas for producing humor, I argue, have a distinctive resonance with the conditions of dictatorship.

Žižek writes that comedy entails an “attitude of self-estrangement” where “Hegelian ‘reconciliation’ works: not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as the redoubling of the gap or antagonism” (2005). This aspect of humor that doubles through alienation, widens gaps, and conjoins opposites while resisting synthesis may be especially important where powerful forces promote a dominant perspective. This is true of contemporary Eritrea where the state works tirelessly to saturate society with its narratives and to silence any other views. As Dominic Boyer observes, official discourses lend themselves to humor not least because “overformalization and monopolization [render] authoritative discourses and practices self-caricaturing” (2013: 276–77). Repetition is a central element of both comedy and propaganda.

Humor works by distorting the copy (through such means as caricature, parody, and recontextualization) and this carries political potential because it creates a gap between the original and its representation or between competing representations of the same thing. In this respect, humor, I argue, can be understood as a discourse about representation. Through producing estrangement and confronting audiences with “overlapping but opposed scripts” humor conjures an opening in the seemingly monolithic and impenetrable façade of power. Lisa Wedeen found in the Syrian context that “comedy and laughter can enable and enact an estrangement from the established order . . . allowing for penetrating diagnoses and, sometimes, political openings” (2013: 863). Perhaps as Angelique Haugerud suggests, “subversions of the status quo require humor as well as earnestness” (2013: 21). At the very least, humor is another tool in the political toolkit, and what needs to be explained is how it is used and what humor might accomplish that is different than what is done through serious politics. I next analyze conditions in Eritrea, showing why dictatorship fosters cryptopolitics in ways particularly suited to comedy.

Dictatorship and Duplicity

Overlapping but opposed scripts are a mechanism of humor, but also an apt description of the Eritrean national condition. A growing gap exists

between President Isaias's autocratic, violent methods of governing and the regime's narratives of progress and national well-being (Connell 2011; Kibreab 2009). Hundreds of thousands have fled the country despite grave risks, yet the president claims everything is fine thanks to his leadership (Belloni 2019; Poole 2013). International reports documenting abuses and poverty present a dim view of life in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch 2021; U.S. Department of State 2021). But they may not capture the political culture as well as Mbembe's (1992: 4) description of "commandement":

the commandement seeks to institutionalise itself, in order to achieve legitimation and hegemony (*recherche hegemonique*), in the form of a fetish. The signs, vocabulary and narratives that it produces are not meant merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable and which one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge. So as to ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts; but they also have resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain.

Eritrea's ruling party calls itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), but the Eritrean state is characterized by "arbitrariness, despotic modalities of governance, and erratic and unstable rules" (Bozzini 2013: 39). President Isaias, meanwhile, promotes an image of popular support and claims that grave threats to Eritrea necessitate the tight discipline and militarism he imposes. The regime's political tautology holds that no true Eritrean is critical of the regime; any Eritrean who does not support Isaias is aiding Eritrea's enemies as either a dupe or a collaborator. In his 2014 Independence Day speech, President Isaias repeated many of his familiar themes. Western powers, he said, especially the United States, seek to undermine Eritrea's sovereignty and have subjected Eritrea to "intense and unremitting acts of subversion comprising of military, political, diplomatic, economic as well as human-trafficking ploys that are accompanied by psychological warfare." Even so, he continued, "the progress we have achieved in laying the robust foundations for a sustainable economic order is substantial and that it is growing, sector by sector, with time in terms of quantity, quality, and capacity can be gauged easily by the facts on the ground." Concluding his speech, the president expressed appreciation for the people of Eritrea who are "engaged with the nation-building process day and night in a spirit of patriotic devotion to the homeland."⁵

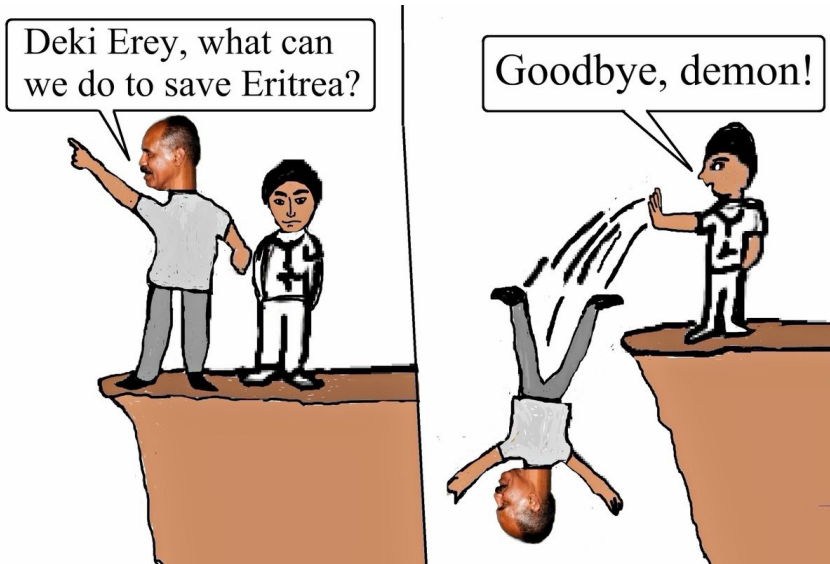


Figure 7.2. Eritrean political cartoon from public Internet sources.

While Isaias conflates patriotism with loyalty to his regime, this cartoon upends that assumption.

Contradictions and ambiguities are embodied in the figure of President Isaias Afewerki. Isaias Afewerki is larger than life. He is not only Eritrea's leader; he symbolizes the nation. In this he may be like other powerful and long-lasting rulers who become synonymous with their nations (O. Woldemikael 2015). But in Isaias's case, this entanglement of man and the nation is particularly powerful because his life history as a guerrilla fighter allows him to embody the national history of sacrifice and struggle that have been established as the foundations of contemporary Eritrean political culture (Iyob 1995; Pool 2001; T. Woldemikael 1991). There is a Facebook group called "We Are All Isaias Afewerki." One of its members explained,

We are because he is the embodiment of what Eritrea is all about. We are because he is and has been the face of Eritrea past, present and has set a precedent for the future. We are because he is what Eritrea is all about; grit, determination, perseverance, commitment and he is a finisher. We are because he is like every one of us; humble and determined to leave within his means while focusing on the future sacrificing a great deal.⁶

Isaias is also a ruthless dictator who has killed and disappeared perceived political enemies and caused a massive exodus from the nation.

On the one hand, [Isaias] has become something of a semi-mythical figure, and his character and psychological makeup has become a favourite topic of awed conversation (necessarily subdued) in the bars and cafes of Asmara. At the same time, he has become the butt of so many jokes, particularly among the warsai [younger generation]. Many resent the power he has accumulated; yet he is also grudgingly admired as the only one capable of providing some measure of direction and leadership. (Reid 2009: 214)

On the Eritrean diaspora website Awate.com a poster called the domination of political culture by this one man, “Isaiasism” (or in his spelling “Isaiasim”), which he describes as follows:

Isaiasim—if we can call it that—requires a total surrender of individual rights; complete mistrust of the international community; vehement anti-Americanism; intolerance to dissenting views; hyper-nationalism, communism, nepotism, anti-intellectualism, militarism and the devaluation of human life. To defeat Isaias Afwerki is then to stand for the complete opposite of his traits and attitudes that are now part of the fabric that make up our society. Isaiasim may have been created by the dictator but it was cheered, cherished, applauded and cared for by the freedom fighters and a large portion of general public, be it knowingly or naively. (Awate, 10 June 2011)

As this post suggests, opposing Isaias requires rejecting the values and beliefs about him and about the nation that many Eritreans had embraced and absorbed over the course of decades. This produces a politics of ambivalence. Is Isaias a national hero or a ruthless dictator? President Isaias is both revered and reviled, sometimes by the same people. Eritreans generally cast Isaias as a hero in the early years of independence. Now, that view may be in the minority. On some Eritrean websites, for example, the shorthand reference PIA for President Isaias Afewerki has been replaced by DIA, Dictator Isaias Afewerki. Even today, however, President Isaias is not without support. On the website Dehai where pro-government sentiments remain strong, a post extolled “Eritre’s President Admirable Personal Traits” (Dehai.org post May 2009; spelling and grammar original). Formatted like a poem or prayer in which each sentence began with the words “Our president,” it asserts that “Our president has lots of sense of humor and sometimes helps us to see the funny side of politics.” This, along with statements like, “Our president is honest, dedicated and adores his people, he lives it every single day” made me wonder if irony was intended. But the author ends

by saying: “Above all our president is the leader of our fallen and alive heroes who continues to defy the CIA and western conspiracy striving to doom our existence.” This line makes clear the author is serious because Eritreans do not joke about their “fallen heroes,” the “martyrs” who have died for Eritrea. Despite everything, at least for some people, Isaias remains the revered leader and protector of Eritrea.

It would be easy to see the question of whether Eritreans see Isaias as a hero or a dictator as a matter of temporality—he was a hero when he led the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) to victory and inspired Eritreans everywhere to support Eritrean independence. Later, Isaias became a dictator when Eritreans publicly criticized his regime (particularly after the disastrous 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia), and he jailed critics, including top members of his own government. Alternatively, whether Isaias is a hero or a dictator might be seen as a matter of perspective: for loyal supporters like the poster quoted above, Isaias is a hero, while for others Isaias’s actions make him a brutal dictator.

Yet the hero/dictator question cannot simply be answered in terms of a before and an after or an us versus them because Eritrean politics are shot through with ambiguity and ambivalence. Eritrean cryptopolitics are such that expressions of support are often compelled and criticism is silenced, while secrecy and censorship make it hard for those inside and outside the country to really know what is going on. Furthermore, even Isaias’s supporters are troubled by the violent excesses of the regime and its constrained economy, while dissidents share the regime’s concern to guard Eritrea’s hard-won sovereignty and maintain national unity. In some ways, then, the figure of Isaias Afewerki can be understood as a double, both a dictator and a hero. This contradiction and joining of opposites I contend characterizes not only the president, but the political habitus of many Eritreans. Their political condition, thus, shares with comedy an underlying structure of doubleness. The concept of cryptopolitics offers the insight that such doubleness is much more complex than simply an issue of deception.

The most profound example of doubleness, or more specifically “reciprocal interference” to use Bergson’s term, is the fact that the celebrated thirty-year long struggle that won Eritrea’s independence also traumatized the population and dispersed and destroyed many Eritrean families and communities (Bernal 2017). National liberation, moreover, has not brought peace, prosperity, and freedom as promised. This conjoining of opposites, while tragic, is also ripe for humor. A parodic political subjectivity emerges because everything positive might contain its own negation, just as the overblown praise of the “Admirable Personal Traits” of the president could at first be read to mean the opposite of

what it says. These conditions undermine sincere politics (whether for or against the regime) by engendering cynicism and conspiracy theories rooted in the profound understanding that nothing and no one can be trusted at face value. Here, then is another explanation for why humor is a response to extreme repression: because humor does not rely on truth claims to communicate its message, it is suited to a context where the trust on which such claims rests is absent.

Eritrean communications are fraught with self-censorship and infused with a sense of fear, distrust, and uncertainty about what it is permissible or safe to communicate to whom (Bernal 2014). As another scholar rather understates it: “There is tremendous sensitivity about what is said in Eritrea: government officials, researchers, and citizens are circumspect, and critiques of the government are veiled” (Riggan 2013: 751). Even in the ostensibly open context of an international conference in Asmara in 2016 in which I participated, the issues of political prisoners, press freedoms, the practice of keeping a large segment of the working population in indefinite national service, and the reasons why Eritreans are fleeing the country in droves were never discussed publicly. Uncertainty, suspicion, and pretense create a situation that is more complex than a dichotomy between public and hidden transcripts (Scott 1992). This is cryptopolitics territory.

There are ambivalences and contradictions at work. For one thing, there is no simple way of predicting a person’s political position based on divisions of class, urban/rural origins, or ethnicity, though some opposition to the Isaias regime has deep roots in Eritrean Muslim experience and the history of the Eritrean Liberation Front as a largely Muslim-led movement that was marginalized by the EPLF. Isaias is known to imprison members of his own government, while government officials have been known to defect when sent abroad. Eritreans who escape illegally later seek rapprochement with the authorities, a practice that has become institutionalized with forms they can fill out stating they left only for economic rather than political reasons. Government insiders sometimes leak information to dissidents outside the country and warn individuals in the diaspora when it is not safe for them to enter the country. The fact that even those working in or for the regime may not be its supporters is one explanation of how, as happened in the Arab Spring, seemingly entrenched regimes can fall surprisingly rapidly, because the degree to which they already were hollowed out from the inside had not been fully evident.

Such conditions invite a parodic sensibility alert to the artifice and falsity by which people get by and through which the regime sustains its power. “[P]eculiar also to the postcolony is the way the relationship

between rulers and ruled is forged by means of a specific practice: simulacrum (*le simulacre*)” (Mbembe 1992: 10). Lisa Wedeen’s discussion of how people had to behave “as if” in Syria under Hafiz al-Asad helps to ground the notion of simulacrum in the everyday (2015: 6). In contrast to the Syrian experience where the performances were “transparently phony” to citizens and the regime, among Eritreans they remain ambiguous and tinged with some true feelings, perhaps because Eritrean nationhood is so deeply entangled with the only regime it has had since winning independence.

As Tekle Woldemikael observes regarding national rituals established by the PFDJ, real emotions are aroused even though participation is compelled (2008). Around Independence Day 2016, interlocutors on a diaspora website discussed whether it was hypocritical for opponents of the regime to celebrate Eritrean independence. Their desire is conflicted not only because the regime orchestrates the celebrations in the diaspora as well as in the homeland, but because Independence Day marks the EPLF’s assumption of state power. Independence Day can be seen as yet another double—liberation and repression bound together so that to celebrate one can also mean to celebrate the other. The means of authentic political expression in such a context is unclear, as the online discussions indicate.

Dissimulation and simulacra are techniques of the ruler as well as the ruled. President Isaias repeatedly asserts bold, positive claims about conditions in Eritrea and denies all evidence to the contrary. Sometimes it seems he is not even trying to match his statements to any plausible reality. In a televised, widely circulated interview with Swedish journalist, Donald Bostrum in May 2009, President Isaias replied to the question of how he would describe the political and economic system of Eritrea by saying: “It is the best in the world. It is better than the system you have in Sweden.” In a parody based on this interview, Swedes are so enticed by this that they seek asylum in Eritrea (see Bernal [2013] for an extended discussion). In another on-camera interview, this one with Al Jazeera journalist Jane Dutton, Isaias is asked to respond to critical reports and UN statements about conditions in Eritrea. His standard response is, “These are lies,” and he comments several times, “This is a joke,” finally adding, “When jokes are repeated it becomes boring.” At one point, Dutton presses the president on the lack of political freedoms in Eritrea, confronting him with the facts that Eritrea jails more journalists than any other country and that the UN had reported 63,000 asylum cases brought by Eritreans. To this Isaias responds: “Lies, lies, lies. These are all your lies . . . Its undermining your credibility as a media outlet.”⁷

One can surely question whose credibility is being undermined in such exchanges. The president's references to lies and jokes are interesting, however, given the cryptopolitics that make it difficult for Eritreans to know what or whom to believe. Everyday existence is predicated on innumerable public secrets that everyone knows but of which they must feign ignorance, including it seems the dictator himself. Rumors circulate, motives are called into question, and facts on the ground are hard to come by given the government's tight control over information. Eritreans can only speculate, moreover, to what degree President Isaias himself believes all of the things he says. It is intriguing that in the Dutton interview Isaias chooses to draw attention to the possibility of damaging one's credibility. Just when it would seem to many observers that his credibility has hit bottom, being publicly confronted on television with the documented abuses of his regime, Isaias performs another kind of doubling, a reversal through which his refrain of "lies, lies, lies" puts the journalist's credibility at risk, rather than his own.

Dutton's Al Jazeera interview of Isaias illustrates the limits of straight political responses to dictators since the journalist and President Isaias become stuck, in effect calling each other liars. This presents audiences with a simple either/or choice of whom to believe, rather than offering any stimulus to insight. Humor, in contrast, is structured in a way that breaks out of such deadlocks. As Gary Alan Fine explains, humor reflects "a contrast in meaning between two incompatible views of a scene. Humor results from the audience resolving these two conflicting images in a way that makes sense, given the distorted logic of humor. Humor is a puzzle, a problem that must be solved for mirth to result" (Fine 1983: 160). The agency involved in solving the puzzle, deciphering the joke in comedy's "distorted" logic has political potential, opening up new analytical avenues.

The potential for political play offered by the Al Jazeera interview was not lost on Eritreans and clips of the video were remixed to highlight the contradictions in his statements, literally disrupting the official narrative. One remix posted on the website Asmarino.com included footage of Eritrean children in refugee camps accompanied by a new soundtrack with the upbeat refrain "I'm alive" from the Celine Dion song of the same name. This made an exuberant, taunting response to Isaias's serious denials and deadpan expression. Examples like this attest to the pleasure in the production and reception of humor. Humor's entertainment value need not detract from its political impact, and may even contribute to it because the pleasure humor evokes helps fuel its circulation and consumption. The Al Jazeera interview also figured in a post on Awate.com titled, "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road? (The Eritrean

Version; A Satire).” The author tacks between solemnity and humor in his introduction:

With due regard to the seriousness of our discourse, I attempted to satirize, and caricaturize supposed dominant themes of our writers in an effort to lighten our mood and exact some humor along the way . . . May we (all the opposition) get to see and relish our beloved Eritrea again . . . For now, let us hear what some of our writers and notables answered when asked why the chicken crossed the road. (August 2010; parentheses original)

The post caricatures the styles and perspectives of government officials and supporters as well as critics. The parodic sensibility, as I suggest, is not merely something deployed against opponents, but forms part of a political culture characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity. When he gets to the president, the satirist titles the blurb “Issayas Afewerki: On Al Jazeera,” thus referencing the interview with Jane Dutton. Isaias’s answer to the proverbial question reads in part: “The chicken never crossed the road. I don’t know what you are talking about. It is all lies, lies . . . Where is the evidence? It is boring. We know the chicken was made by CIA . . . Where is the chicken? This is CIA fabrications. Is there any evidence Eritrea has chickens?” The last line echoes Isaias asking Dutton for evidence, even in the face of the data she cited such as the number of Eritrean asylum cases. Chicken, moreover, is the main ingredient of a favored national dish, *zighni dorho*, that contains both chicken and eggs, making the question about the existence of chickens in Eritrea especially ridiculous.

This parody of the president substitutes the inane “chicken that crossed the road” for the troubling Eritrean circumstances raised in the interview such as the lack of press freedoms, indefinite national service, and the ongoing exodus of Eritreans who fear their own government. The parody presents the president as someone who habitually denies the facts, since the existence of chickens in Eritrea is obviously not in question and the answer to the riddle has no importance. The parody switches out tragedy for comedy in substituting road-crossing chickens for border-crossing asylum seekers, among other things. This substitution serves as a means of unmasking since, by altering the content of the statements, what becomes most visible is their form—blanket denials and accusations. In addition to suggesting Isaias’s propensity to lie and to blame things on US conspiracies, the joke could also be interpreted as trivializing Isaias’s power by engaging him in a senseless debate over a chicken.

A satirical Twitter account under the name H.E. Isaias Afewerki (H.E. can be assumed to stand for His Excellency) describes himself thus in the profile: “fulltime killer dictator father husband . . .” As these examples illustrate, Eritrean diaspora websites and social media platforms provide a space for carefully crafted satirical texts, cartoons, memes, and videos. Once posted online, they may be consumed and circulated by unknown audiences.

Shorter jokes circulate orally and pass through private channels. One theme of such jokes about Isaias concerns his militarism. One joke has Isaias convening ministers and generals to discuss Eritrea’s economic problems. Isaias suggests that Eritrea should incite the United States to “invade us like Iraq and they will give us money for recovery.” To this one of his generals replies: “That is a brilliant idea, but what should we do if we defeat them?” The humor here uses a preposterous premise—that Isaias would welcome a foreign invasion as a solution to Eritrea’s problems—to criticize Isaias’s leadership by depicting him as advocating war without regard to the lives that will be lost and the damage Eritrea will suffer. The joke echoes some Eritreans’ view of Isaias’ readiness to embark on the disastrous 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia soon after independence. Since border hostilities continued to simmer until recently, some Eritreans feared that Isaias might propel the nation into war again. Ultimately, by proposing a US war as the solution to Eritrea’s problems, the joke implies that Isaias will risk destroying Eritrea in order improve it. Since the general calls this outrageous plan “brilliant” there is also a dig here at the sycophancy that insulates Isaias from any criticism. The punch line is absurd—generals believing Eritrea could defeat the United States in war. But the serious message the punchline conveys is that the regime is far out of touch with reality. The mistaken optimism about Eritrea’s prospects for victory over Ethiopia in the 1998–2000 border war caused much suffering that is not forgotten by Eritreans. The general’s foolish optimism in the joke thus has multiple resonances.

Another joke has President Isaias commissioning his ministers to develop a nuclear bomb to “show the world what we are capable of and regain our dignity.” When Isaias presses the button to launch it, however, nothing happens. Someone is sent to investigate and reports that it could not launch “because everyone in Asmara hopped on the bomb so that it can take them abroad.” This joke, like the one above, contains a critique of Isaias’s militarism, where here instead of an invasion, a nuclear bomb is what Eritrea needs. The joke is on Isaias, however, since what was to be his demonstration of power fizzles, thwarted by his own population. The ridiculous, yet macabre image of Eritreans trying to get

out of the country by riding a bomb invokes the desperate, life-threatening lengths to which Eritrean migrants go to get to other countries. This joke can be interpreted as suggesting that Isaias's grandiose plans for Eritrea fail because they do not take the Eritrean people into account. It could be read as a parable of contemporary Eritrea: the state's efforts to create a strong nation and a militaristic citizenry through conscription is undermined as many thousands of citizens flee the country to avoid national service. The jokes depict a distorted version of a perverse reality, and thereby bring it into sharper focus.

Conclusion

Under dictatorship, official narratives and claims about how people benefit from the regime contradict citizens' everyday experiences and informal knowledge. Cryptopolitics is a survival strategy for the dictator, who must deny reality, and for the people, who must feign support, ignorance, or indifference to the conditions imposed by the regime. Humor that often operates by stating on the surface the opposite of what it means or combines contradictory narratives is well-suited as a response to such conditions. Eritreans' jokes about their president reveal a productive parallel between the duplicity of dictatorship and the mimesis of comedy. Comedic methods such as exaggeration, substitution, and recontextualization subject the contradictions at the heart of dictatorship to a distinctive kind of scrutiny. Rather than seeking to replace one truth-claim with another as sincere opposition attempts to do, comedy points to ambiguities and highlights the possibility of multiple interpretations and alternate realities. It encodes and decodes uncomfortable predicaments. The creativity and playfulness involved in humor is also a means of asserting one's humanity in the face of a regime like that of President Isaias that contrives to reduce people to mere subjects of power (Bundegaard 2004; Hirt and Mohammad 2013; Human Rights Watch 2009).

I argue that humor, moreover, is more than just another register through which to represent reality; it is a way of representing representation itself since its very structure involves the *open* deployment of artifice and distortion. This is an important source of its potential as a political intervention because it invites agency, foregrounding contradictions without resolving them. This stands in particular contrast to the didactic messages of dictators and state propaganda. It also contrasts with straightforward politics that can leave opponents deadlocked in an exchange of competing truth claims. Humor does more than simply replace one

claim with another as earnest opposition so often does. Instead of seeking to offer closure with some definitive answer, humor opens up a conceptual space of imagination, exploration, and skepticism.

In this context, Michael Taussig's ideas about mimesis are stimulating. He argues that "in imitating, we will find distance from the imitated" (Taussig 1993: xix). Through humor, Eritreans create conceptual distance between themselves and the enveloping political culture of the Isaias regime. This distancing also may be politically important as a way to manage fear. To live in fear of Isaias is incapacitating, and a sober analysis of his brutal regime, however critical, could have the effect of further disempowering people. Humor, by creating distance, suggests a space in which some maneuvering is possible; it stands outside the totalizing worldview of dictatorship and provides a viewpoint from which to behold it. In these ways, humor as a political tactic accomplishes something distinctive compared to direct, literal critique. Here the representational gap or what Taussig calls "slippage" is significant. Taussig's (1993: 115) observation that we find in mimesis "not only matching and duplication but also slippage which, once slipped into, skids wildly" relates to how humor represents the familiar but with a twist that can change everything. Taussig could be describing political jokes when he writes: "It is the precariously contained explosion of the transgressive moment that allows for and indeed creates the 'mimetic slippage' whereby reproduction jumps to metamorphosis" (1993: 126).

Mimesis is a source of power because the making of a representation "gives one power over that which is portrayed" (Taussig 1993: 13). Seen from this perspective, Isaias jokes are, in part, a claim to power and may even be experienced as such by their subject. Indeed, I like to imagine Isaias Afewerki nervously googling himself every day to see what is being said about him. This may not be far from the truth as it is well known that the regime is extremely image-conscious and pays close attention to who is saying what about it, be they Eritreans in the diaspora, journalists, scholars, or international organizations. Perhaps the author of the post "Why I Am Optimistic" I quoted earlier is too optimistic about what humor portends for the Isaias regime, but his reference to "the public" reminds us that humor's political potential lies not only in the ways its form and content operate at an individual level to produce laughter, catharsis, and possibly new insights, but in its capacity to enter and alter cultural discourse by representing collective experience.

It may be useful to view humor as knowledge-producing. It is not simply that knowledge is necessary to create the joke as well as to get the joke, but that jokes can be knowledge-producing because humor works by suspending the normal rules where censorship and self-censorship

operate. Humor is often subtle in structure if not in content, conveying messages indirectly, stimulating the audience to forms of interpretive agency to deduce the double meanings. This encouragement of intellectual agency runs counter to the stifling of thought under totalitarian regimes. Humor thus may be especially politically important under the conditions of extreme repression. The capacity for humor is part of what it means to be fully and socially human. Therefore, when Eritreans respond to human rights violations and state brutality by circulating jokes and satires, they are, in the process, resisting the dehumanization to which the population is subjected.

Humor, through its alienated, distorted logics hints at the existence of the elusive, that which can never fully be confined or defined, and therefore exceeds even a tyrant's reach. These are powerful political activities that stand in opposition to authoritarian practices. My reading of Eritreans' jokes suggests that humor communicates in distinct ways that afford it a special grip on autocracy and that comedy can serve as a special means to expose the flaws and expand the fissures of a totalizing system fraught with suspicion and distrust. Authoritarian rule and dictators who hold onto power for decades are not unique to Eritrea or to Africa, unfortunately. In revealing how the cryptopolitics of such power are represented through the distorted logics of humor, Eritrean political humor informs us in ways that resonate beyond its own peculiarities.

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