

Abstract

During Eritrea's 30-year guerrilla war for independence from Ethiopia (1961-1991) over one million people fled the country. Today, almost 20 years after Eritrean independence (1993), the country finds itself in a deep political, economic and moral crisis. Young Eritreans in particular are fleeing in alarming numbers and under life-threatening conditions, making Eritrea once more one of the world's "top refugee-producing" countries.

Focussing on the dialectic relationship between Eritrea and its sizable diaspora, this work seeks to make a contribution to current research on three levels: First of all, it addresses a research gap in the field of Eritrean Studies, analysing the role and relevance of the "absent" diaspora with regard to Eritrea's unfinished nation-building project. Second, this work critically examines the mechanism of long-distance nationalism and its implications for the relationship between (a) home country and diaspora (b) diaspora and country of settlement and also between (c) various groups within the diaspora. Finally, this study also contributes to filling an almost blank spot on the map of German Migration studies: to date scarcely a handful of publications on the large Eritrean community in Germany is available.

Most of the empirical data presented in this work were collected during "multi-sited" and "virtual" fieldwork in Germany and the Eritrean "cyber-diaspora" between 1999 and 2005/6. A first fieldwork phase included participant observation of various meetings, open interviews with members of Eritrean youth groups, political cadres and social workers as well as a small-scale survey among Eritrean youth throughout Germany. During a second fieldwork phase in Eritrea (summer 2001) participant observation as well as formal and informal conversations provided the main methods for soliciting data. In a third phase individuals and groups were interviewed about their experiences in Eritrea after their return to Germany. During that phase additional interviews were carried out with "newcomers", i.e. Eritrean post-independence asylum seekers and members of the old and new opposition in exile.

This study is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter one sketches the development of Eritrean diaspora networks from the mid-1960s to Eritrean independence in 1993, serving as a historical backdrop to the results of the empirical research presented in the following chapters. Chapters two to four then outline some of the most pertinent issues of current diaspora research: the second generation, the effects of improved transport facilities between "home" and "diaspora," and the emergence of cyber-diasporas. The findings highlight the ambiguous role of new, faster and more affordable means of communication and transport. Chapter five turns to the larger, transnational political arena where government and opposition battle for support while the situation in Eritrean is becoming more and more desperate. The chapter concentrates on the years after the border war and the contradiction between the diaspora's economic power and its political impotency. While beneficial activities of diasporas have recently been hailed as a new and politically correct means of promoting economic (and even democratic) development, the finding of this research indicate that diasporas connected with authoritarian home country governments are severely limited in their chances to contribute to positive developments at home. Disillusioned by this situation, many Eritreans in Germany try to disengage from active politics and search for alternative support networks such as family, religious communities, ethnic or regional groupings. The sixth chapter looks more closely at religious communities as one of these emergent alternative networks. The last chapter finally offers an analysis of Eritrean memory culture. It provides a look at the production and maintenance of an "official memory," but also traces the gradual re-emergence of alternative narratives by those that have begun to challenge the Eritrean authorities that are currently monopolizing Eritrea's (and the diaspora's) cultural memory.