

# **“We are the Prisoners of our Dreams:“**

Long-distance Nationalism and the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany

Dissertation

zur Erlangung des Grades des Doktors der Philosophie

im Fachbereich Sozialwissenschaften

der Universität Hamburg

vorgelegt von

Bettina Conrad

aus Simmern/Hunsrück

Hamburg, April 2010

Gutachter:

Prof. Dr. Rainer Tetzlaff

Prof. Dr. Cord Jakobeit

Datum der mündlichen Prüfung:

14. Juli 2010

Copyright Bettina Conrad, 2012

# Content

---

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Illustrations</b>	vi
<b>Abbreviations</b>	viii
<b>Glossary</b>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The absent diaspora (or how I came to research “Eritrea Abroad”)	2
Researching “Eritrea Abroad”: chances and challenges	8
Some relevant themes and research questions	15
Conceiving the Eritrean diaspora: key terms and concepts	17
Overview and organisation	24
<b>Chapter 1: From Exile to Diaspora: A Short History of the Eritrean Refugee Community in Germany</b>	<b>28</b>
Of nationalism and exile: a background note on the beginnings of the Eritrean struggle	26
Early years of exile in Europe: before the EPLF, before “Unity in Diversity”	34
Eritreans for Liberation and the EPLF’s struggle for domination at home and abroad	40
Mass-flight and mass-mobilization: building the EPLF’s “infrastructure of absorption”	44
<i>Adi ertra</i> abroad: life in exile and the need for community	51
Beyond <i>adi ertra</i> : mobilising international solidarity and financial support	54
Free at last: going back or staying on?	60

<b>Chapter 2: “A Culture of War and a Culture of Exile.” Young Eritreans in Germany and their Relations to Eritrea</b>	<b>69</b>
Long-distance nationalism, diaspora and the dilemmas of the second generation	66
Exile childhoods	71
Eritrean youth groups in Germany: between alienation and agitation	78
War and the transnational “Generation Warsay”	85
Strange encounters and lost illusions: ambiguous experiences	89
From myth of return to myth of origin: reinventing the diaspora	96
Beyond war and <i>warsay</i> : a transnational second generation in the making?	100
<b>Chapter 3: CyberEritrea: Wars, Voices and (Di)Visions</b>	<b>107</b>
Diasporas and the Internet: some ideas and questions	104
A short history of Eritrea-online	107
Dehai: from virtual home to cyber war	110
Other on-line warriors	116
Freedom or fragmentation? The un-imagining of Eritrean unity on the web	118
<b>Chapter 4: The Warsay of Eritrea in Diaspora: Contested Identities Contested Identities in an On- and Off-line Diaspora Youth Organisation</b>	<b>128</b>
<i>Warsay</i> of Eritrea in diaspora: the story of an on- and off-line youth movement	126
Warsay.de: whose <i>warsa</i> ? – Claiming a virtual heritage	131
Squaring the circle, or ‘how to be a critical patriot’	136
Transcending boundaries or creating new ones – limitations and chances for Web-use in the diaspora	142
Summary and outlook	149
<b>Chapter 5: We are the Prisoners of our Dreams: Exit, Voice and Loyalty in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany</b>	<b>156</b>
Diasporas and homeland politics	153
Dilemmas of exit, voice and loyalty	155
The double face of loyalty	162

No channels for voice?	167
Of dreams and nightmares	174
Considering the alternatives: exit or disengagement	181
By way of conclusion: some consequences for the diaspora and for Eritrea	186
<b>Chapter 6: From Revolution to Religion? The Politics of Religion in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany</b>	<b>192</b>
Religion in Eritrea	191
From a religious to a revolutionary people	193
“Back to the roots?” The revival of religion in the context of diaspora-building	199
Precarious relations: religious and political networks in the diaspora	202
<b>Chapter 7: Out of the ‘Memory Hole:’ Alternative Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution in the Diaspora</b>	<b>211</b>
Ghosts in the closet	208
Eritrean “official history” and the exigencies of a nationalist mass movement	212
Diasporic nationalist narratives: collective memory and collective amnesia	215
The (re-)emergence of alternative diasporic narratives	221
Reconciling memories: some concluding remarks	227
<b>Conclusion &amp; Outlook</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>Lebenslauf</b>	<b>256</b>

## Acknowledgements

---

The list of people who contributed to this work in one way or the other, is long, and got all the longer as its completion drew out towards the end. While I am most grateful to all of them, any possible misinterpretation or factual fault is my sole responsibility.

A large debt remains with numerous Eritrean interviewees and conversation partners, though for various reasons not all of them can be mentioned by name. Let me say *Yegeeniele* - Thank you - *Danke* in this place! Others I can and must name personally: Goitom Ahferom helped me to make my first contacts within the Eritrean community in Germany. Sifaf Adem welcomed me to various events organised by and for Eritrean youth groups in Germany. Special thanks go to Huria Ogbamichael for the fruitful conversations and co-operations we had over the years. The *Warsay* youth group in Frankfurt has been particularly patient and hospitable and more than once offered me a platform to discuss my research with members and others that were interested. A group of friends took a lot of time to critically debate my research. With fondness I remember the late Bahlbi Kubrom as an open-minded, humorous interview partner, and a gifted narrator. Mehari Dunfo and Dr Abraham Gebreyesus, two more wonderful “storytellers,” have helped me to understand the complex challenges and social problems Eritrean exiles were, and still are, confronted with in Germany. Warm thanks also go to Salomon Ykealo for many a fruitful debate and the occasional liberating lament over the state of affairs in Eritrea, Germany and the world at large. I also wish to thank Zeresensay Ogbai for his friendship and guidance through the maze of *Adi Ertra Frankfurt*. In spite or because of our divergent political views, I learned a lot from our discussions. In Gaffar Kaladus, too, I found a friend and “battlesome” discussion partner to whom I owe many insights. Hagos, Isaac and others from the Eritrean opposition welcomed me to their Club and to various events. Temesghen Kubrom, as well as Abraham Gebreyesus Mehreteab and Yohannes Kidane from the Eritrean Anti-militarist Initiative, alerted me to the situation “new” Eritrean asylum seekers are faced with. Thank you for your interest, hospitality, patience, criticism and encouragement. Even where I choose not to adopt your views, they still have influenced my analysis and challenged me to probe my own world-view and level of tolerance.

In Asmara, Yirgalem Keleta of NUEYS helped me to participate in the Know-Your-Country-Tour. Thanks also go to the tour participants for sharing their “home coming experience” with me. Kiflom Kidane, Ermias Adhanom, and “my little brother,” presented me with a local Eritrean perspective on the diaspora and provided insights into Eritrean everyday life. I am aware that there is little I can offer in return. I just hope this study may at least serve as a – however coarse, faulty and fragmentary – record of Eritrean diaspora life, and perhaps will inspire others to do further work on this topic.

On the academic side, I was more than fortunate that Professor Rainer Tetzlaff agreed to supervise this study. I owe him great thanks for the enthusiasm and patience he accompanied this project with, and also for finally pushing me to complete it.

Looking back, I realize how privileged I was to have experienced a remarkable spirit of cooperativeness, solidarity and integrity amongst the small transnational community of “Eritreanists” – including academics as well as activists and journalists. Eva-Maria Bruchhaus read my first exposé and facilitated many interesting contacts. Wolbert Smidt, too, put me in touch with other Eritrea-researchers and provided a sounding board for my early ventures into the “field.” Tom Dassel has been a knowledgeable and loyal friend to bounce ideas with: Thank you for sharing research materials and experiences and for providing technical support on many occasions! Mussie Tesfagiorgis, who also helped with some translation problems, and Christine Matzke, my “sister-in-crime,” were sympathetic listeners when times were rough. The amazing Günter Schröder served me as an all-around resource book on Eritrea and the Horn of Africa. Like few others, he embodies the spirit of academic sharing: not only of his sources, but also of his unparalleled insights and experiences. Heartfelt thanks go to Tricia Redeker Hepner for her continued “long-distance” friendship, the wonderful cooperation on the Diaspora issue of the Eritrean Studies Review and other projects. I am also very grateful for the advice, expertise and encouragement I received from Mengsteab Tesfayohannes, Nicole Hirt, Tekle Woldemichael, Abdulkadir Saleh, Amanuel Mehreteab, Victoria Bernal, the late Tekie Fessehazion, Gaim Kibreab, Amanuel Melles, Jonas Berhe, Asia Abdulkadir, Yohannes Kidane and many others.

Afe Adogame, Gabriele Cappai, Dieter Götze, Robert Hettlage, Roman Loimeier, Leif Manger, Munzoul Assal, Abdoulaye Gaye and Jim Spickard commented on parts of my work and/or invited me to contribute to a publication, but also inspired me look beyond the field of Eritrean studies.

My fieldwork in Frankfurt would have been impossible without the hospitality of Jörg Rohm and the Matzke/Fey family. The lovely Michaela Koch did some last-minute proofreading of revised chapters. A big thank you goes to family and friends for various acts of kindness as well as for bearing with me when I would turn all conversation into a lecture on Eritrea.

I am deeply indebted to Nikolai Weiss: thank you for your invaluable technical assistance, but even more so for your love and patience, and for forcing me to leave the treadmill occasionally – especially during the last nerve-racking stages of this endeavour.

My largest personal debt, however, is with my colleague, friend and companion Tilman Schiel. All the way through the long process from developing a research idea to writing-up, I benefited immensely from your scholarship and your readiness to act as a sounding board. Thank you for your intellectual as well as your moral support and, most of all, for your continued friendship.



# Illustrations

---

## Introduction

**Figure 1** Eritrean Community in Birmingham/UK: invitation to celebrate Independence Day 1993

## Chapter 1: From Exile to Diaspora

**Figure 2** "Ethiopian" nationals in Germany 1961-1993. (Graphic Koch 2002, modified B.C.)

**Figure 3** Eritrea-solidarity brochures in the 1970s. (Photos: Mao Projekt).

**Figure 4** Plaque at main entrance of the Eritrean-German Management Centre in Asmara. (Photo B.C.)

**Figure 5** Poster advertising the annual Festival Eritrea 2001 in Asmara (Photo B.C.)

## Chapter 2: "A Culture of War and a Culture of Exile"

**Figure 6** Cover of the first and one of the last editions of Selam Eritrea.

**Figure 7** Flyer advertising Eritrean Youth Festival in Germany.

**Figure 8** Beles I: Cactus fruits sold on the streets of Asmara. (Photo B.C.)

**Figure 9** Beles II: Young diaspora Eritreans in Massawa. (Photo B.C.)

**Figure 10** Beles III: Diaspora Eritreans visiting the trenches near Senafe in 2001. (Photo B.C.)

**Figure 11** Flyer advertising the 2008 "Know-Your-Country-Tour."

## Chapter 4: The Warsay of Eritrea in Diaspora

**Figure 12** Warsay.com logo

**Figure 13** Invitation to Warsay e.V.'s 10th Anniversary in 2009 (Flyer)

## Chapter 5: We are the Prisoners of our Dreams:

**Figure 14** Two paintings illustrating the religious aspect of Eritrean nationalism. (Photo B.C.)

## **Chapter 7: Out of the ‘Memory Hole’**

**Figure 15** “Transnational symbolism 2001:” celebrating the 10th anniversary of the country’s liberation in Asmara and Frankfurt. (Photo B.C.)

## **Conclusion & Outlook**

**Figure 16** Group of diaspora youth visiting the former Italian prison camp on Dahlak Islands (Photo B.C.)

## Abbreviations

---

AESE	Association of Eritrean Student's in Europe
BMA	British Military Administration
DEJD	Dachverband der eritreischen Jugend in Deutschland
EAI	Eritrean Anti-militarist Initiative
EWGU (also EGWU)	Eritrean Women's General Union
EDP	Eritrean Democratic Party
EDYU (German: EDJU)	Eritrean Democratic Youth Union
EFLE	Eritreans for Liberation in Europe
EFLNA	Eritreans for Liberation in North America
EHD	Eritrea Hilfswerk Deutschland
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front - Revolutionary Council
ELF-PLF	Eritrean Liberation Front – People's Liberation Forces
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPP	Eritrean People's Party
ERA	Eritrean Relief Agency
FEYO (German: FEJU)	Federation of Eritrean Youth Organisations
FKP	Fachkräfte Rückkehrer Programm (Return Programme for Professionals)
GTC	German Technical Cooperation
GUES	General Union of Eritrean Students
KYCT	Know-Your-Country-Tour
MKEFU	MahbereKom Eritrea in Frankfurt und Umgebung
NGO	Non-government organisation
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students
NUES	National Union of Eritrean Students
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLC	Party for the Love of the Country
Y-PFDJ (YPDF)	Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice

## Glossary

---

<i>ab wesaii znebru ertrawyan</i>	Eritreans who live abroad (exile, diaspora)
<i>adi or addi</i>	village, village of one's origin
<i>agelglot</i>	lit., service, as in National Service
<i>AMCE (pronounce: amitshe)</i>	originally the name of an Italian car company that had a branch in Ethiopia where cars were assembled. Also: derogative term for Eritreans born and grown up (i.e. "assembled") in Ethiopia
<i>ascari</i>	Italian, term for soldier in native units of the colonial army
<i>awet nhafash!</i>	Victory to the Masses! (Slogan of the Eritrean Revolution)
<i>awraja, awrajanet</i>	region, regionalism
<i>bado seleste</i>	lit. „0-3“ – familiar term for rumor mill, sometime allegedly fabricated by the Eritrean national security.
<i>Bahti meskerem</i>	1st September; celebration of the beginning of the armed struggle for Eritrean independence
<i>bahli</i>	cultural show; also used as a synonym for dance party in German-Eritrean diaspora
<i>baito</i>	assembly, village council
<i>beles</i>	cactus, cactus fruit; also slang for seasonal visitors from the diaspora
<i>biddho</i>	lit. "challenge," also name of a campaign to mobilize the Diaspora as well the name of a German-Eritrean youth group and an Eritrean website.
<i>dehai</i>	news, voice
<i>equb</i>	informal rotating credit association
<i>ferenji</i>	familiar term for foreigner
<i>f'tHi</i>	justice/fairness
<i>Ge'ez</i>	ancient Semitic language, today only used liturgically in Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches; also term for the script used to write Tigrinya, Amharinya and other regional languages

<i>giffa</i>	round-up of draft avoiders
<i>gual</i>	daughter
<i>guayla</i>	traditional party with live music, food, and circular, collective dancing
<i>habesha</i>	lit. “Abyssinian;” familiar term for highland Eritreans and Ethiopians
<i>hade hizbi, hade libbi</i>	one people, one heart
<i>hafash</i>	the masses
<i>halawi/halewti sawra</i>	lit. “guard/guards of the revolution” – name of the internal security service with the EPLF that operated both in the field and in the diaspora.
<i>Hamadei (also spelled: hamade)</i>	Tigrinya acronym for National Union of Eritrean Women: <i>Hagerawi Mahaber Dekianisteyo Eritrea</i>
<i>Higdef</i>	Tigrinya acronym for People's Front for Democracy and Justice: <i>Hizbawi Genbar ne Democrassen Fithen</i>
<i>hizbawi genbar</i>	lit., “people's front,” familiar term for EPLF and PFDJ
<i>hizbawi mekete</i>	lit. “people’s resistance” name of a campaign to rally diaspora behind Eritrean government in 2003 and 2004
<i>hizbi</i>	people
<i>injera</i>	traditional spongy flat bread; staple food usually made from <i>taff</i> (in the diaspora it has been common to use <i>taff</i> substitutes such as a mixture of wheat and corn flower)
<i>Jebha</i>	Arabic, lit. “front.” Familiar term for ELF
<i>kebessa</i>	highland regions
<i>keda 'at</i>	traitor
<i>keremtawi ma'etot</i>	student summer campaign; mandatory work programs for high schoolers, part of national reconstruction
<i>kifli hizbi</i>	lit. “peoples' department,” Department of Public Administration (EPLF), in charge of mass organizations
<i>mahber</i>	society, association,
<i>mahber; mahbereKom</i>	formal association; community association
<i>m'alti deki-anistyoy</i>	International Women's Day, March 8
<i>m'alti natsinet</i>	Independence Day, May 24
<i>m'alti semaetat</i>	Martyrs' Day, June 20
<i>menenet</i>	lit., “identity;” used to refer to Eritrean ID card or citizenship
<i>Menka'</i>	lit. “bat.” 1973 dissident movement within EPLF
<i>mieda</i>	“the field” – the areas controlled by the liberation fronts
<i>mogogo</i>	special stove used to bake injera

<i>Nakfa</i>	Eritrean currency, named after town of Nakfa ( a town which EPLF control for the first time and never conquered by Ethiopian troops) where EPLF had its headquarters and decisive battle with Ethiopia took place. It symbolize Eritrean challenge.
<i>natsinet</i>	liberation; independence
<i>(Enda) Sab'an Kiliten</i>	lit. "72," name of EPLF secret service, familiar term also for Eritrean National Security Service
<i>sawra(na)</i>	(our) revolution, also the name of an EPLF publication
<i>seb</i>	human being
<i>sedet</i>	condition of being a refugee (IDP are also included in this terminology)
<i>sedetegnata</i>	exiles, refugees (sing., sedentegna)
<i>semaetat</i>	martyrs
<i>selali/selalay</i>	spy/spies
<i>Sha'bia (Shaebia)</i>	Arabic „people; popular,“ familiar term first ELF-PLF and EPLF
<i>shahi</i>	tea
<i>shida (also spelled: shidda)</i>	Local manufactured plastic Sandal, symbol of the independence struggle
<i>shifta</i>	bandits
<i>shimagille</i>	committee, elders, or lords/landowners
<i>taff</i>	small local kind of sorghum grown mainly in Eritrea and Ethiopia, used to make the staple dish injera
<i>tegadelay, tegadelti (pl.)</i>	guerrilla fighter(s)
<i>tsibah (also spelled: tsebah, tsbah)</i>	lit. “early morning”, ELF youth organisation
<i>warsa/</i>	lit. „heritage,“ EPLF cultural Band,
<i>warsay/warsot</i>	lit. “inheritor/ inheritors“ synonym for the young national service recruits adopted after the 1998 war.
<i>wedi/weday</i>	son/my son
<i>ykealo (also spelled: yikealo, yekealo yke'alo etc.)</i>	lit. “make the impossible possible, person who can realize the impossible;” synonym adopted for the ex-EPLF fighter after the 1998 war.

# Introduction

---

*The choice of an analytic perspective or  
research hypothesis is not an innocent act*

*-- Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 1993*

In the course of this research, it was the encounters with Eritreans of all walks of life that left a lasting impression with me. Often I was touched and humbled by the amount of trust my conversation partners showed me. Their willingness to share their stories with me – an outsider, who was not half fit to grasp what it meant to flee or to be exiled, to live through war, loss and perpetual fear for years on end – could not be taken for granted. Of course, it took time to establish a basis for conversation, and often this involved discussions about who I was and what I was actually after. Sooner or later most of my Eritrean conversation partners would therefore turn the tables on me to interview me about my interest in Eritrea and Eritreans. My declared aim of writing about Eritrean refugees must have seemed odd in an environment that was commonly not very interested in their lives as exiles, or their place of origin. Apart from this general curiosity, however, quite a few of my interviewees – especially those with a long record as unpaid political lobbyists for Eritrea – also questioned my motivation and background as they were acutely aware of the potentially beneficial or damaging effects of “being written about.” They assumed, not wrongly, that academic interest may well be shaped by personal experiences and motifs, and in the end would be reflected in the way scholars interpret the data they collected. Hence, if I was to write about Eritrea or its diaspora, my motivation had to be considered before deciding *whether* they would talk to me at all, and if so, *what* I could be told and *how much*.

Usually my vis-à-vis would start by retelling the official version of the Eritrean independence struggle for me – narrated inevitably in first person plural. In return I would then embark on a similarly constructed story – told in first person singular – of how I first developed an interest in Eritrea. My interviewee’s as well as my own narrative would

involve a certain amount of mythmaking and could be adapted to the situation and the respective listener. And in both cases doing so was no attempt to deceive the other side, but an effort to safely get our messages across a cultural divide of varying width.

Some of my interviewees also wondered why I had chosen to study the Eritrean diaspora over doing “proper” research in Eritrea. Focussing on the *ab wesaii znebru ertrawyan* (Tigrinya for “Eritreans living outside their home country”) seemed unusual, even dubious. Outsiders with an interest in Eritrea normally wanted to learn something about the country, its cultures and customs, or about its history. All of these are colourful topics that are happily talked about and that make the diaspora seem a dull and dreary non-place by comparison – even to its inhabitants. Other than the “real Eritrea,” diaspora society seems bereft of any exotic lure, lacking that feel of “authenticity” that traveller’s journals, but also some researchers, still seek to uncover when looking at “obscure” African regions. So: why, of all places, did I choose Eritrea as a regional focus of my academic endeavours? And more curiously still, how did I end up studying the Eritrean community in Germany?

In this introduction, I attempt to answer these questions, not least for those who have not been able to ask me personally, but whose lives are still somehow reflected in my writings. At the same time I also aim at sketching out the sources, methods, concepts and questions that have formed the framework of this research, though this is done in more detail in the following chapters most of which have been published previously as separate journal articles or chapters of edited volumes.<sup>1</sup>

## **The absent diaspora ( or how I came to research “Eritrea Abroad”)<sup>2</sup>**

Talking about Eritrean refugees nowadays most likely conjures up television images of African boatpeople stranding on the shores of southern Europe as they flee general misery, hopelessness and political oppression in a country that has recently been dubbed “(t)he world’s largest prison”, and one of the “most militarized countries in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This goes for chapters two to seven that were originally written in 2005 and 2006. All of the texts were updated in 2009 or 2010 and were either abridged or expanded in order to provide a coherent picture of the Eritrean diaspora in Germany to date. Chapter one was written in late 2010 and offers the historical backdrop to my empirical work that is documented in the above-mentioned chapters two to seven.

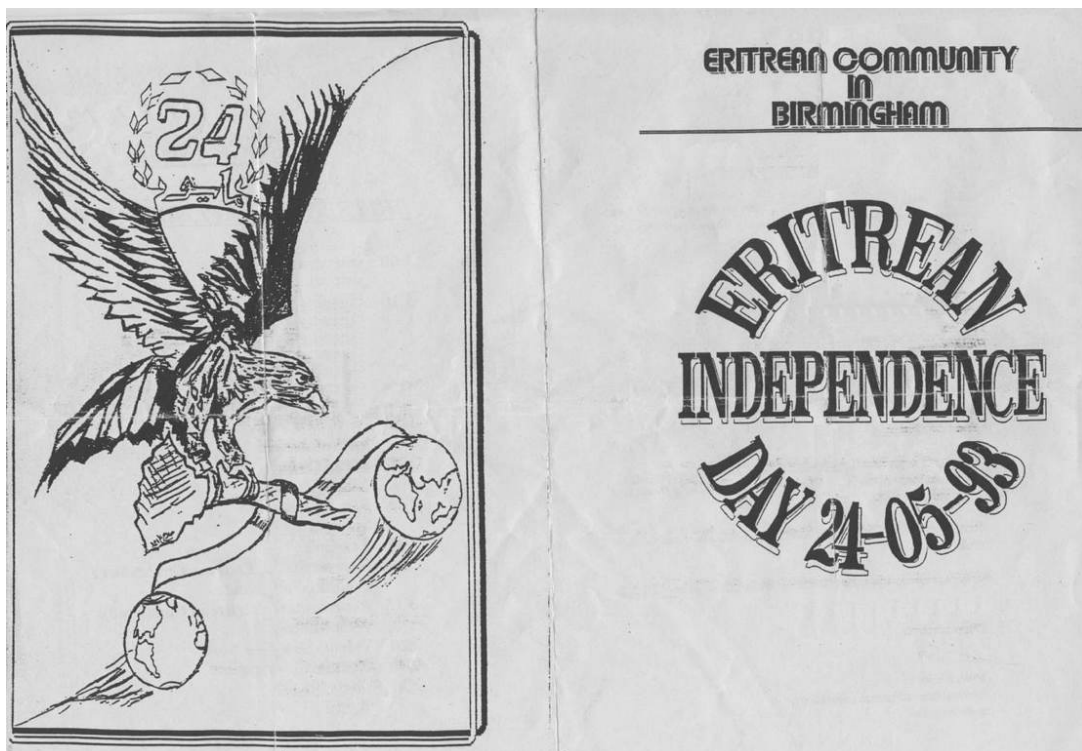
<sup>2</sup> The phrase “absent diaspora” is taken from “Eritrea Abroad,” a special issue of the Eritrean Studies Review, that was co-edited and co-written by Tricia Redeker Hepner and myself (Hepner and Conrad 2005: viii)

<sup>3</sup> Much-quoted article in The Guardian International, 17 April 2009, also published online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/17/eritrea-human-rights>; last accessed 28 December 2009.



The Eritrea I first became acquainted with had a much different press. Back then, in the early 1990s, the small, new country in the Horn of Africa was hailed as a shimmering beacon of hope, a possible “African Switzerland” (Hermann 1994). Eritrea was the tiny David who had fought and won independence against the Ethiopian Goliath, armed to the teeth first by Western and later Eastern superpowers. What made the Eritrean cause “special,” and often led to romanticising notions of the Eritrean rebels, however, was not just their perseverance and eventual triumph “against all odds.” It was just as much the liberation movement’s vision of a united and reformed Eritrean society promising justice and a better life for everyone. Eritreans at home and abroad as well as their foreign supporters and observers ardently wanted to believe that at this time and in this place, the “struggle for peace and justice” could be won. As a late, but sympathetic observer, I shared the enthusiasm about Eritrea and its people, and in some ways still do.

My own interest in Eritrea had been sparked by a field trip to northern Ethiopia in late 1991, only shortly after the end of the liberation war. It was rekindled two years later when I was studying in the United Kingdom. A Sudanese friend from the University of Birmingham



**Figure 1** Cover of invitation letter to celebrate Eritrean Independence 1993 with the Eritrean community in Birmingham, UK.

---

See also Boemcken 2009, Arens 2009, Financial Times 22 August 2009, on-line: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/6fd976ae-8c57-11de-b14f-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed 12 September 2009).

invited me to come along to an Eritrean event in his neighbourhood. It turned out to be the local celebration of the 1993 referendum result and the subsequent international recognition of Eritrean independence. This invitation led to my first, and for some time only, meeting with diaspora Eritreans.

I left Birmingham a few months after the independence function of the Eritrean Community, only to return in autumn 1995 in order to do research for an M.Phil thesis on Eritrean nation-building at the Centre of West African Studies.<sup>4</sup> Still, the refugees I had met in 1993, as well as other Eritreans who lived scattered across the globe, remained but a footnote of my work (cf. Conrad 1997), even though they made up almost a third of the entire Eritrean population (cf. Hepner and Conrad 2005).<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, my oversight of the Eritrean diaspora at that time (even though it had been right “under my nose”) can be seen as symptomatic: though the refugees’ support of the independence movement was crucial to sustaining the thirty-year war of liberation, they remained largely absent, not only as recognized actors in the struggle, but also as a topic of research in their own right.

In fact, much of the research produced prior to or shortly after independence relates to Eritrea’s uncertain status and struggle for statehood (see for example Okbazghi 1987 and 1991; or Firebrace and Holland 1984 for a pro-Eritrean approach, and Erlich 1983 for an opposed stance). The EPLF’s nation-building (e.g. Markakis 1988 and 1990; Pool 1980; Woldemikael 1991) and “Social Revolution” projects (Gebre-Medhin 1989; Houtard 1979, 1980; Pateman 1990a) also produced a sizable body of academic literature. Some works also focus specifically on certain aspects of the EPLF’s “Social Revolution,” on woman’s rights issues (see for instance Wilson 1991; Burgess 1980), land reform (Dines 1980; Fullerton Joireman 1996) and, of course, on the movement’s political reforms (see Cliffe 1987a,b; Pool 1980). Other popular topics with regard to Eritrea include humanitarian and human rights (e.g. Legum 1983; Houtart 1979) and, more rarely, cultural, ethnographic (Kemink 1991) and historical topics (Negash 1984, 1987, Greenfield 1980). Finally, a number of

---

<sup>4</sup> I am much indebted to the Centre of West African Studies (CWAS) for accepting an MPhil thesis on Eritrea in 1995/6. In particular, I owe thanks to Professor Margaret Peil and the CWAS’ former Director, Arnold Hughes, who supervised my work, for their readiness to encourage and support my research, even though it did not fit neatly into their usual field of interest. My PhD research would not have been possible without the crucial support I experienced in Birmingham.

<sup>5</sup> The majority of the refugees got no further than Sudan or Ethiopia. A far smaller number made it to the Middle East, especially to Saudi Arabia. Only a relatively small percentage eventually settled in Europe, North America or as far a-field as Australia (see also chapter 1).

monographs and essay collections cover most of these aspects (Davidson and Cliffe 1980, 1988; Matthies 1981; Lewis 1983; Pateman 1990b; Iyob 1995, Connell 1997).

Looking at the names of the above-listed authors, it is obvious that Eritrean academics, mostly being exiles themselves, have contributed substantially to all these debates. And, just like their non-academic co-exiles, many of them were intimately involved with organisations supporting the Eritrean independence struggle from abroad. One explanation for the stunning absence of exile as a topic of both academic and non-academic writings on Eritrea, could be that “The intensity with which Eritreans and their supporters focused on the goal of independence, and the fact that exiles did not perceive themselves as occupying ‘a world apart’ ... generated little interest in the diaspora itself.” (Hepner and Conrad 2005: vii).

An exception to this general lack of academic interest in Eritrean exiles as a research topic, were approximately 900,000 refugees in Sudan, who have indeed been subjects of a number of studies, notably by the prolific Gaim Kibreab (e.g. 1987, 1991, 1995), and authors such as Elias (1992), Sendker (1990), Pezaro (1987), and Schönmeier (1988). These refugees’ massive and highly visible presence in Sudan, as well as their precarious situation, pinpointed to the “forgotten” war in Eritrea and was therefore of humanitarian and political relevance. The Eritrean liberation movements also had bases in Sudan. They doubtlessly “used” the refugee camps for recruitment, but also provided humanitarian aid through their own relief organisations. Another reason for the heightened interest in Eritrean refugees in Sudan might have been that the 1980s saw a general increase of research projects focussing on inner-African refugees and their impact on development (e.g. Doornbos et al. 1992).

At the same time, the overseas refugee communities remained obscured from view, in spite (or perhaps because) of their deep involvement with the Eritrean cause. The exiles’ own interest and that of researchers or journalists concerned with Eritrea mainly circled around ideology-ridden issues of nationalism, self-reliance and social revolution. Eritrean as well as “non-Eritrean academics and observers of the struggle also became so embedded within the transnational social field blending Eritrea proper with its communities around the globe, and rarely, if ever examined the diaspora’s particular significance” (Hepner and Conrad 2005: vii). The far and between papers on Eritreans in the West that were carried out prior to independence, are mostly authored by migration researchers or sociologists with limited interest in the conflict situation in the Horn. Instead they were looking at Eritrean refugees through the lenses of migration, refugee, integration, or asylum studies and other

related fields such as psychology and social pedagogy. In short, their focus was on the host countries rather than on the country of origin or the refugees' continued involvement with a nation-in-the-making.

After Eritrea's liberation (1991) and independence (1993), a body of research emerged that looked into post-independence challenges in Eritrea and the wider Horn region. Having completed my rather bookish M.Phil research in 1997, I became especially interested in studies focussing on the resettlement and reintegration of Eritrean refugees from Sudan (see for example Doornbos et al. 1992; Allen and Morsink 1994, 1996; Elias 1996; Grünhagen und Meier 1998; and again Kibreab 1995, 1996, 2004, 2005). As I was planning for a field study on post-independence nation-building in Eritrea, I thought the returnees a particularly interesting group. I discussed these ideas with an Eritrean colleague I had met shortly after my own return from England to Germany. At that time he was doing postdoctoral research at a German university. It was his second sojourn in Europe. Having completed his studies at a European University, he returned to teach in Asmara. But like many other returnees he found it hard to reintegrate into Eritrean post-war society, so eventually he decided to emigrate a second time. Though our acquaintance began with the rather characteristic circuitousness of many first-time meetings with diaspora Eritreans, we soon began to talk openly about Eritrean situation and our ideas for future research. Little did we know that our plans were soon to be dashed – as were the high hopes we, and others, had had for independent Eritrea.

I vividly remember the telephone conversation we had in June 1998. Independently, we both had just listened to a radio news feature reporting that the smouldering border crisis between Eritrea and Ethiopia was turning into a fully-fledged war. The Ethiopians had bombarded Asmara airport, and the Eritrean Air Force had flown an attack on the North-Ethiopian town of Makale, fatally hitting a school. I remember my colleague's despair and my own shock. There had been no hint that a conflict of such a scale was imminent. Only some months before the outbreak of this new war my colleague had been in Asmara. Only a few days before we had believed that post-independence Eritrea could "win the peace" (Caputo 1996).

As the tragic events in the Horn unfolded, reliable news were hard to get by. My colleague introduced me to "Dehai," an Eritrean diaspora mailing list and website that had been established in 1994 and was now becoming the main source of information on the war (see chapter 3). As the conflict continued all through the summer, it also became obvious

that planning for research in Eritrea was no longer a realistic option. Tens of thousands of Eritreans were again fleeing to Sudan or to safe regions within Eritrea, and there was little hope for a short-term peace settlement. Following Dehai, however, I was surprised by the size and the influence of the globally scattered Eritrean diaspora. It is difficult to reconstruct exactly how the idea eventually took shape, but it was in this context that I first began to think about researching the sizable Eritrean community in Germany. And just as the Eritrean struggle for independence influenced academic projects on revolutionary Eritrea, the 1998 - 2000 war has doubtlessly left a mark on my research on the Eritrean diaspora.

Searching for whatever little information was available on Eritrean refugees in the West, I eventually found some interesting studies from the late 1980s and 1990s, most of them carried out among Eritreans in the United States. Researchers like Tekle Woldemikael (1991, 1998) Lucia Ann McSpadden (1987, with Helen Moussa 1994, 1996) and John Sorenson (1990) had explored Eritrean refugee issues in North America, pertaining to issues of ethnicity, integration, return and psychological well-being. For Germany, Günter Schröder's 1992 study of the Eritrean community provided a rare and invaluable source of demographic material that was immensely helpful, especially at the initial stages of my research.<sup>6</sup> Within time, however, I managed to locate a number of further sources on Eritreans in Germany that can be divided into five categories:

The first category includes published and unpublished texts from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, written and compiled by Eritrean exile organisations and/or their German supporters.<sup>7</sup> Unpublished reports, case studies and working papers written by the German branch of the International Social Services in the 1980s, form the second category of papers I drew on.<sup>8</sup> A third group of sources are graduation papers. Most of them were written for a degree in social work or education (Mindt 1989, Wittenberg 1990, Brixius and Tewes 1992, Asgedet 1983). Others were authored by sociology or anthropology graduates (Bauer 1991 and Schlüter 1983, Mussie 1988 as quoted in Schröder 1992). A fourth category consists of

---

<sup>6</sup> The writings of Eritrean exiles during the years of the war often reflect and comment upon the diaspora - albeit from the perspective of participants rather than that of a systematic observers. Today, these writings prove exceptionally valuable as primary sources.

<sup>7</sup> These include publications by the Eritreans for Liberation in Europe – EFLE (1975 and 1976) and the mass organisations of the ELF (see Eritrean Democratic Youth Union – EDYU 1977 and Eritrean Women’s General Union – EWGU 1977) and EPLF (e.g. *Sawrana Report*, diverse issues from 1985 and 1987). *Sawrana* contained more or less selected articles from *Adulis* (the organ of the EPLF’s Office for Foreign Relations) translated into German. A useful reference from the 1990s is *Selam Eritrea*, published by a youth project.

<sup>8</sup> The International Social Services (ISS) is an NGO that offers counselling to migrants and refugees. The German branch of the ISS is called *Internationaler Sozialdienst*.

a rather small number of published sources: research papers, newspaper and encyclopedia articles - all written shortly after Eritrean independence (Bauer 1992; Wong 1992, Clayton and Pörksen 1994, Hartmann 1994, Daffa 1995).<sup>9</sup>

Eritrean online publications, starting with *Dehai*, finally represent a fifth and relatively recent source of information on the formative years of the Eritrean diaspora. They include interviews with contemporary witnesses, or biographical and autobiographical accounts of Eritreans involved in the goings-on of early exile movements (cf. Hepner and Conrad 2005). Otherwise, knowledge of the Eritrean community(ies) in Germany and elsewhere was, and still is, surprisingly limited. In the cause of 1999 I therefore began to take part in a number of Eritrean events only to learn that the challenges of literature research were easily matched by the challenges of empirical research.

### **Researching “Eritrea Abroad”: chances and challenges**

The fieldwork period for this study drew out over a rather long span of time.<sup>10</sup> 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. Though it certainly had a number of disadvantages for me personally, the extended fieldwork period also gave me the chance to meet a number of my interviewees two or three times, rather than just once. With several key informants I have continuously remained in touch throughout the research period and beyond. The “online” connection, too, has proved to be a formidable way of staying up-to-date. During 2008 and 2009 I also had the opportunity to follow up some contacts within the framework of the DIASPEACE project.<sup>11</sup> Though this research had a different approach and aim (cf. Conrad et al 2009), it nonetheless enabled me to keep abreast with developments in the Eritrean diaspora in Germany.

Before going deeper into the process and the challenges of researching on Eritreans abroad, a short note should be added with regards to the socio-graphic features of the

---

<sup>9</sup> More recent writings on the Eritrean diaspora in Germany and elsewhere will be discussed in more detail and thematic context in chapters one to seven.

<sup>10</sup> Nowadays diaspora studies of all kinds abound. Therefore it might seem hard to believe that in Germany in the 1990s the interest in such a research topic was very limited, especially since the group I was planning to study, is not exactly one of the most prominent ethnic minorities in the country. Consequently, it was very difficult and time-consuming to secure funding for my project. Not wanting to give up my research plans, I eventually settled for the existence of a part-time doctoral student while working as a free lancer.

<sup>11</sup> The project’s full title is “Diasporas for Peace: Patterns, Trends and Potential of Long-distance Diaspora Involvement in Conflict Settings. Case Studies from the Horn of Africa.” It received funding under the 7th EU Framework Programme.

Eritrean community in Germany. For 2008, the German Federal Statistical Office gives a meagre figure of 5,988 Eritreans living in Germany. With an average age of 31.1 years and an average length of stay of 8.6 years, it can be deduced that a large proportion of this group left Eritrea only after 2000. These official statistics, however, do not include naturalized Eritreans, people with Eritrean roots born in Germany, Eritreans with Ethiopian or other passports and unrecorded persons. Based on estimates from within the community and on the extensive demographic materials compiled by Günter Schröder (1992, 2004), however, it can be assumed that by the time my research was ended more than 27,000 people of Eritrean origin were living in Germany. This makes the German-Eritrean community the largest Eritrean diaspora community in Europe, and the fifth largest worldwide after Ethiopia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and North America (Schröder 2004).

Within Germany, the majority of Eritreans live in the conurbation of the Rhine-Main region, Stuttgart, Kassel, Cologne, the Ruhr area, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin. Frankfurt, with more than 5,000 inhabitants of Eritrean origin, is the Eritrean ‘capital city’ not only of Germany, but also of continental Europe. It is here that most political, social and cultural events take place. It is here that the largest density of Eritrean organisations, bars, restaurants and other businesses can be found. The presence of the Eritrean Consulate and daily flights from Frankfurt to Asmara further intensify the impression of an ‘*Adi Ertra* Frankfurt’ (*adi* meaning ‘village’, but also ‘home’ in a broader sense). Since the late 1990s, Frankfurt has also hosted the Eritrean government-sponsored ‘Festival Eritrea,’ an annual event attracting thousands of Eritreans from Germany and all over Europe. A rival festival, organised by a splinter group of the former Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), takes place in Kassel. Eritreans who attend the Kassel Festival usually count themselves among the opposition to the Eritrean government.

Besides political fault-lines, Eritreans in Germany are by no means a homogeneous group. Tigrinya speaking Christians, originating from the Eritrean highland regions Hamassien, Akele Guzei and Seraye are in the majority, but there are also minorities of Bilen, Tigre, Saho, Kunama, Jeberti and Afar, many of whom are Muslims. Another major distinction can be made between those who arrived in Germany prior to independence, and those who only left their home country later on. Especially the most recent refugees (who came during or after the 1998 - 2000 border war with Ethiopia) constitute a group apart from the pre-war community. The same is true for the second generation, albeit for different

reasons. This diversity, as well as the latent or open conflicts within Eritrean diaspora society, are also reflected in the organisational structure of the community(ies).

\*

Gaining access to “the community” was not an easy feat. In late 1998 colleague put me in touch with my first interviewee, whom he knew well. This interviewee then kindly passed me on to another person he thought would be interesting to talk to, and so on. This snowballing system of finding interviewees was to remain the most successful strategy throughout my prolonged field research, together with the participation in Eritrean events and online forums. In terms of (my mainly qualitative) research methods, it has been conversations, interviews and (participant) observations that formed the basis of my data collection throughout the research period. The bulk of my fieldwork took place in Germany. But I also did some interviews with diaspora Eritreans in and from the USA, Canada, Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden as well as with locals and diaspora Eritreans in Eritrea proper. Some helpful information was also gained through interviews with Eritrean and non-Eritrean experts in various locations.

A first fieldwork phase in Germany included participant observation of meetings in Darmstadt, Bielefeld, Frankfurt and surroundings (1999/2000-2001). I also carried out open interviews with members of Eritrean youth groups, political cadres and social workers. The collaboration with an Eritrean youth association was another inspiring and fruitful experience. Together with a study colleague of the group’s chairwoman, we designed a small-scale survey to find out more about second generation Eritreans, their attitudes towards Eritrea, Germany and the diaspora community. The questionnaires were then distributed at the Eritrea Festival 2001 in Frankfurt. Though the results (partly documented in Koch 2002) can certainly not be seen as representative, the project itself was an interesting learning process for all parties involved. Seemingly this also made a lasting impression on some of the participants. We had called the project “Between two Worlds.” In 2006 I watched a short film by a group of Eritrean students. They had called it “Beles. Between Three Worlds.”<sup>12</sup> In the film’s making-of, the director explains that our survey project had inspired him to make a film about young Eritrean migrants and their lives “in-between”.

---

<sup>12</sup> They called it “Between *three*,” rather than “... *two* Worlds,” because they included Afro-American or Black Culture that many young diaspora Eritreans model their lives and styles on, even if they have grown up in Europe. For more information on the film-project see: <http://www.get-beles.com> (accessed 5 January 2010).



Shortly after the above-mentioned 2001 Festival, I was able to travel to Eritrea to participate in the first (and so far only) Eritrean Studies Conference. It was held in Asmara in commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Eritrea's liberation. After the congress I stayed in the country for another six weeks of field research. This period of time coincided with the summer holidays during which thousands of diaspora Eritreans visit their country of origin every year. Participant observation as well as formal and informal conversations with both locals and diaspora Eritreans, provided the main methods for soliciting data in this context. Particularly insightful was my participation in an organised tour around the country together with a group of young diaspora Eritreans from Europe and North America.

In a third fieldwork phase individuals and groups were interviewed about their experiences in Eritrea after their return to Germany (2002-2003). These data were later supplemented by more random interviews with Eritreans from other countries I had either met at academic congresses (mostly in the USA) or at Eritrean gatherings in Germany. Around the same time (2002-2005) I also started talking to three "new," but overlapping sections of the Eritrean diaspora in Germany: members of old and new opposition groups, recently founded Eritrean civic and human rights groups, and members of the latest vintage of Eritrean exiles that had arrived in Germany after 2000.

Apart from conducting narrative interviews, I observed and participated in public and private events in places all over Germany, as well as in Eritrea and also in the realm of Cyber-Eritrea. Both, multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and virtual fieldwork (e.g. Horst 2002), brought with them new chances and challenges. As Cindy Horst has pointed out:

In order to truly grasp 'translocal linkages' (Hannerz 1998: 247), it is not sufficient to study transnational communities or networks in multiple localities. In addition, it is essential to develop new research methods *between* sites... (Horst 2002:2; emphasis as in original text)

Researching a scattered community is necessarily different from a classic ethnographic field research or a research based on expert interviews. Similar to Horst's experience I soon found myself, at first not even deliberately, using diasporic organisation and communication structures. Starting my research at the time of the Ethio-Eritrean border war, the Internet was the obvious medium to connect with Eritreans of different social backgrounds, generations and political persuasions. I joined mailing lists, frequented popular web portals, read and participated in online forums and communicated with individuals via email. Most importantly, the virtual space also helped me to connect with real-life people and find out

about real-life events I later attended. Reversely, Internet media would then help me to follow up on the activities of a group or individuals I had met in real-life.<sup>13</sup>

Being so “close to,” or even partly “integrated into,” the field another challenge was that the line between my rôle as a researcher and the private person occasionally became blurred.<sup>14</sup> This dilemma is of course not new, but it seems especially pertinent in a context where the “field” is not geographically separated from the researcher’s home location (see Sökefeld 2002). In some respects I had to become part of the diaspora networks in order to learn how they functioned. This, however, meant that I was also drawn into the personal lives of some of my informants, gladly providing information on asylum laws, counselling, translating a petition, or serving as a “courier” of letters and gifts from here to there. In a way this also helped to balance the otherwise uneven relationship between researcher and those researched. It only became difficult when I had to decline requests such as taking on an official post within an association I studied, or speaking at a political event I meant to attend as a mere observer. By and large, however, I often (and unintended) gained not only trust and credibility, but also valuable insights I would have never received by means of a standardised interview or mere observation alone.

Since the 1998 - 2000 border war and the following clamp down on the Eritrean reform movement in 2001, Eritreans at home and in the diaspora have “been acutely aware of the high ... stakes involved in socio-political debate, including that initiated by scholarly research” (Hepner and Conrad, 2005:xv-xvi). This also affected my work. My position as an observer (seen by the observed) clearly changed over time and, accordingly, my approaches and responses had to be adapted. Similar to Eritrean critics of the government, my moves in *adi ertra Germany* were observed: whether I attended a seminar given by former Eritrean student leader Semere Kesete in Hamburg, or visited the ELF-RC Festival in Kassel: the information found its way to the consulate in Frankfurt. Though this was not particularly worrisome to me personally, I felt an even greater necessity to protect the privacy of my sources, especially when they were critical of the happenings in Eritrea and the diaspora.<sup>15</sup>

In Frankfurt, my main fieldwork site, a contagious sense of paranoia emerged in the early 2000s. When uttering criticism, people would carefully look around them and lower their

---

<sup>13</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of online fieldwork, see chapters three and four.

<sup>14</sup> Incidentally the term “field” is also used in the Eritrean context. But when Eritrean speaks about “the field” or *mieda* in the context of the liberation struggle, she or he is talking about the guerrilla front.

<sup>15</sup> It is for this very reason that I have to refrain from citing lengthily from interview scripts, or even giving full details of the interviewees and the interview situation.

voices, even in locations where the immediate danger of being overheard seemed minimal. It also became difficult to record interviews. Instead, I resorted to writing detailed notes from memory after my interviews or conversations. But quite apart from the growing nervousness in Eritrea and its diaspora, formal interview situations in general – whether taped or not – often failed to produce much relevant information. As many other researchers before me, I found that the conversation would regularly become more natural and also more relevant as soon as I had switched off the recording device. Especially for first meetings I therefore resorted to what Roland Girtler has called – perhaps somewhat fanciful – “ero-episches Gespräch” (ero-epic conversation). The term is derived from the ancient Greek *erotema* – question, and *epos* – narrative:

...(The ero-epic conversation) is about telling stories that may relate to just about any topic relevant to a specific group or culture. But it is not just the researcher who asks questions but also the conversation partner ... Maybe he wants to know what the researcher is doing, or how he would react in a certain situation. Both sides take part in the conversation. Both are learners. ... (Girtler 2001:147, translation B.C.).<sup>16</sup>

Once some mutual trust had been established, follow-up conversations could be more structured or focused on certain topics. Another means of creating trust, and at the same time making my work as transparent as possible, has been to present and discuss preliminary research results. This was done, for example, in seminars organised by youth groups, but also in more private settings. Another positive effect of using such “feed-back-mechanisms” was that I received valuable information and criticism, and often met new conversation partners I would not have come to know otherwise. Through my participation in the 2001 Eritrean Studies Conference, and through Eritrean festivals and mutual colleagues, I also came in touch with Eritrean academics interested in my work. They, too, helped me to bounce ideas (cf. Horst 2002:8) and to critically assess my work. Most of these exchanges would later be followed up by email or telephone, at another event, or in the course of a private meeting.

\*

Quite obviously, as a researcher, I have been influenced by the political situation in Eritrea and the crises that befell the diaspora during and after the so-called border war with Ethiopia

---

<sup>16</sup> A couple of times my “interviewees” have even explicitly complimented me for adopting this approach. “This was a very enjoyable afternoon ...” said one interviewee ... : “It was more like a very interesting debate.” (Field notes, August 2001).”

(1998-2000). Insisting on objectivity therefore seemed not only insincere, but was often mistaken as an attempt to hide my true opinions and sentiments. Others even suspected ulterior motifs behind the inscrutable façade of academic neutrality. Opting for a frank approach, I decided to share my private evaluation whenever interviewees asked me for my opinion. This not only proved to be the more successful research strategy (at least compared to my doomed diplomatic efforts), but also seemed to be the only ethical and upright way of dealing with research in a conflict setting, and with my double-rôle as a researcher and a fellow human being.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, my “frank approach” together with the ongoing political polarisation and the increased suspicion vis-à-vis inquisitive outsiders, both closed and opened new avenues of research. Some pro-government conversation partners I had interviewed during the first stages of my fieldwork would no longer talk to me when I started interviewing to members of the opposition camp. Non-Eritrean observers have always been included in the strict friend/enemy dichotomy within the respective political camps. This becomes quite clear when looking for example at Eritrean publications of 1970s and 1980s. Foreign supporters and sympathisers were thanked for their solidarity attendance of festivals and congresses while other observers, taking a less favourable view of the independence struggle, were summarily dismissed as agents of Ethiopia.

Attending festivals and events of one Eritrean group (be it pro- or anti-government) continues to be understood as supporting their politics. Consequently, my presence at the 2004 Festival in Kassel, organised by the oppositional Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), was viewed as a betrayal in the eyes of my government-friendly contacts. The Kassel organisers, on the other hand, interpreted my presence as statement of solidarity and ask me to make an ad-hoc speech. Neither wishing to offend them, nor wanting to surrender my non-partisan rôle, I settled for a very short “Thank-you-for-inviting-me” address. The line between allowing myself to make an open statement of my (political) views and my simultaneous insistence on political non-affiliation became very fine in such moments. I certainly did not always handle this insider/outsider dilemma (cf. Cappai 2005) very well. In the Kassel, my evasive tiptoeing most likely neither endeared me to my hosts, not could it dissipate the

---

<sup>17</sup> During my time in Eritrea I had experienced first hand the deportation of the Asmara students to Wi’a in August 2001, and had listened to the loud criticism within the country in that summer before the clampdown in September muted all voices of dissent. By email, chat and text messaging I stayed in touch with some of the people I had come to know in Eritrea, though by now most of them left the country or disappeared. In that situation it definitely did not seem right to insist on stone-faced neutrality.

suspicion of my “pro-government” contacts that I was now “with the enemy.” Obviously, my rôle of an “objective,” or at least non-partisan, researcher and observer was not always understood and/or accepted.

In situations such as the one described above I have tried to heed the recommendations of Ezra Chitando, who said “(a)lthough these identities of being a scholar in one context and an activist in another are constantly shifting and blending it is crucial that the researcher should always be clear of which role she or he is playing an when.” (Chitando 2005:90). As far as possible I have always made an effort to explain in no uncertain terms that while I had an opinion of my own that might, or might not, coincide with that of a particular political group or individual, I would remain non-partisan in terms of political affiliation: while I might join a certain project, sign a petition or offer advice when asked for it; I would not become a member (or follower) of this or that political grouping.

On either side of the political divide, I was fortunate to meet a few people that even became friends in spite (or because) our divergent views and my resistance to be integrated into Eritrean party-politics. We would have very animated discussions, but in the end managed to agree to disagree (something that is rather rare – not only – in Eritrean culture). Others who did not share my evaluations on Eritrean politics apparently decided that I was personally “OK”, and thereafter seemed to purposely ignore anything I said or did that was not in line with their own political opinion. Still, I have always been aware that my contacts, my attendance of various events, and also my writings were under scrutiny.

### **Some relevant themes and research questions**

Just as I did not wake up one morning with the idea of studying Eritreans living abroad, I did not start this work with a clear-cut, ready-to-use research focus. Rather it has been shaped and twisted in on-going observations of and conversations with members of the Eritrean community. Originally I was intrigued by the question of return or non-return of Eritrean refugees from Germany to Eritrea. Other than Eritrean refugees in Sudan, most “German-Eritreans” had not returned to their home country, in spite of the availability of financial assistance (see also chapters one and two). Was that because they were so well integrated in Germany? First explorations into the “field,” however, soon showed that questions such as integration in the settlement country did not figure at all in Eritrean on- and off-line debates. Around the time I started my empirical research, the outbreak of the

border war galvanised the whole community, even the second generation. Everyone was discussing the war, collecting money or organising protest events. And though this was an exceptional situation, it nonetheless highlighted very clearly that the diaspora's major point of reference still was Eritrea, and that this would most likely continue to be true for quite a while to come.

I adopted the diaspora's focus on Eritrea and began to research various aspects of the continued connections between (organised) Eritreans abroad and their homeland. The main research question that links the seven chapters of this study thus is: are the lives of Eritreans abroad still determined by developments in Eritrea and the country's unfinished nation-building project? And if so, how? Over time a whole range of more specific questions emerged that were connected with this main theme: What and how do Eritreans learn about the situation at home? What impact does travelling to Eritrea have on homeland-diaspora relations? What role does the Internet play? Which direct or indirect influences of the homeland are felt abroad: socially, politically, personally? How do these influences play out in the diaspora? Why does the diaspora, that was so loud and active during the border war, suddenly seem so silent in the face of the growing repression in Eritrea after 2001? Why have not more of them spoken out against the regime in Asmara? And the few who have been doing so: are their voices being heard in Eritrea? What, on the other hand, is the rationale for those who continue to support the government? How has the emerging rift between government supporters and opponents changed diaspora society? Who controls the discourse on Eritrean past and present politics at home and abroad?

The attempt to answer the above questions in this work can be seen as a contribution to at least two different fields of research. The first is the rather small and specialised field of Eritrean Studies. As outlined above, there has been a considerable research gap in Eritreanist scholarship with regard to the diaspora. Moreover, Eritrean studies (for obvious reasons) have long been grappling to find a balance between scholarship and ideology. Thus, what my colleague Tricia Hepner and I state in our introduction to an essay collection on the Eritrean diaspora also rings true for this study:

...our primary focus on the diaspora and its relationship with "home" allowed us to develop an oblique perspective on Eritrea itself: from the viewpoint of both a non-Eritrean and the Eritrean exiles with whom we worked, the patterns of territorialism and insularism that have characterized Eritrea and its scholarship became more visible. The Eritrean diaspora has therefore defined both a new

field of study, as well as helped shape a critical perspective on Eritrea and Eritreanist scholarship generally. (Hepner and Conrad 2005)

The second contribution this research hopes to make is to the much larger and interrelated fields of “diaspora” and “transnational” studies. A major focus of interest has so far been directed toward the diasporic “in-between-situation” itself: many publications are dealing with questions of cultural hybridisation, identity construction, citizenship and the transfer of goods, ideas, information and people between places. More recently still, the diaspora’s economic (and more rarely political) engagement in countries of origin has generated much interest (cf. Angoustures, and Pascal 1999; Johansen 2005; Tewelde 2006a; Lyons 2006).

Though not ignorant of the above aspects, this present work’s focus is not so much on either the “in-between” situation of a diaspora community, or on its potential for development at home. The main concern of this study is rather with the “dialectic relationship” (Cassanelli 2001) between homeland and diaspora, examining the potential, extent and nature of diaspora engagement “at home,” which in turn is determined by the influences the home country is able to exert on its citizens abroad.

### **Conceiving the Eritrean diaspora: key terms and concepts**

Examining different aspects and layers of the Eritrean migrant community in Germany and its relationship with “home”, this study uses no single overarching theoretical concept, although it can certainly be labelled a “diaspora study” or a “research on Eritrean transnationalism.” I have already used these terms above, but would now like to briefly highlight their value as well as their limitations for the Eritrean case.

For more than two decades, “diaspora” and “transnationalism,” have been key terms used to describe a huge variety of different phenomena addressing the relationship between globalization, international migration, and the nation-state.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the increasing popularity of these two terms has also led to some confusion and has made them appear overused and conceptually fuzzy. As Steven Vertovec writes:

---

<sup>18</sup> It would go beyond the scope of this empirical study to discuss in full the very extensive body of literature that has emerged in this field. Some authors and works that are relevant to this research include are for example Basch et al 1994; Pries 1996; Cohen 1997; Van Hear 1998; Glick-Schiller 1999; Portes et al 1999; al-Ali et al 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Levitt 2001; Faist 2003; Sheffer 2008. Some will be discussed in a more specific context in the following chapters.

A review of recent research across several disciplines not surprisingly finds a wide variety of descriptions surrounding meanings, processes, scales and methods concerning the notion of ‘transnationalism.’ Here, several clusters or themes are suggested by way of disentangling the term. These include transnationalism as a social morphology, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural reproduction, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement, and as a reconstruction of ‘place’ or locality. (Vertovec 1999)

In the following chapters, this study on the Eritrean community in Germany touches most of the themes mentioned by Vertovec. Indeed, Eritreans in the diaspora as well as their compatriots within the country are moving in a “transnational social space” (Pries 1996) when they communicate with one another online or offline, when they negotiate their identity, support their families and government bodies via remittances or when they develop new modes of living between places. It certainly is also correct to say that especially “transnationalism as political engagement” is a recurrent theme of this study. Yet, I continue to feel uncomfortable with the term “transnationalism” in the context of this study. On the one hand it does not quite seem to capture the essence of the relationship between Eritrea and its diaspora; on the other hand it implies qualities and developments I cannot detect in the Eritrean case.

In social and cultural studies the term “trans-nationalism” began to be used in the 1990s to describe phenomena that transcend the national, or even seem to have the potential of breaking the supremacy of the nation-state (cf. Mayer 2005:17-18). It soon became obvious, however, that the era of the nation-state was not over yet. Quite contrary, nation-states have successfully utilised transnational social fields and mechanisms in order to expand their sphere of influence beyond their physical boundaries. This is also true for independent Eritrea; for example when the Eritrean government attempts to tax its former citizens living permanently abroad. In the days prior to independence the inclusion of Eritreans abroad within the aspiring nation was, if anything, even more pronounced. As “forced migrants”, the lives of Eritreans in exile have first and foremost been shaped by and embedded in an ongoing nation-building process in their place of origin. The majority of them were (and still are) compelled to move in a transnational space not because they wished to overcome national boundaries, but because they wanted to see them established in the first place. And when Eritrean sovereignty seemed threatened again in 1998, they rushed again to the defence of the national borders – even from afar (diaspora engagement in border war). Put in a nutshell: without Eritrean nationalism, Eritrean transnationalism is unthinkable. I therefore maintain that relations and activities between Eritreans at home and in various locations



abroad, may be more accurately described using Benedict Anderson's term "long-distance nationalism" (Anderson 1992; see also Fuglerud 1999, Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001, Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001).<sup>19</sup>

In their book on Haiti and Haitians abroad, Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) define "long-distance nationalism" in a way that can also be applied to the Eritrean case. They make out five specific characteristics of long-distance nationalism: first, it is an ideology which links people to a territory (usually a nation-state, or an aspiring nation-state) thus enabling the government of that state to define itself as a *transnational nation-state* that includes citizens dwelling abroad. Second, long-distance nationalism expresses itself through action: "Long-distance nationalists may vote, demonstrate, contribute money ... fight, kill and die all for a "homeland" in which they may have never lived" (2001: 20). Third, long-distance nationalists subscribe to the idea of a nation-state as a "separate, sovereign" territory, while simultaneously challenging both traditional theories of the state and the nation with their "notion that relationships between the citizens and their state are confined within that territory" (2001: 21). Fourth, in the words of Glick-Schiller and Fouron, "conditions in the homeland or the new land may encourage or subvert the beliefs and practices that contribute to long-distance nationalism." (2001:22). Lastly, the authors see long-distance nationalism as different from other concepts such as "diaspora," criticising in particular the un-reflected use of the term "diaspora" in both historic and present-day situations: "... we differentiate between identifications with a particular existing state or the desire to construct a new state, which we call long-distance nationalism and other forms of transborder ideas about membership, such as those based on religion or a notion of shared history and dispersal." (2001: 23).

I share the authors' reservations vis-à-vis the use of the term "diaspora." Similar to "transnationalism," "diaspora" has become an ubiquitous keyword used in connection with an unclear range of different groups, as Ruth Mayer has impressively shown in her comprehensive and critical discussion of the term (Mayer 2005).<sup>20</sup> Following the most

---

<sup>19</sup> This is at least true at this stage, and for the first and 1.5<sup>th</sup> generation of Eritreans abroad. The younger generations, if they maintain their sense of Eritreaness, might be a different case. See also chapters 2 and 3. I need to emphasise that of course certain actions and processes taking place between Eritrea and its communities abroad can and will be described as "transnational" – which is of course no contradiction to qualifying the Eritrea-diaspora relationship as one that is determined by long-distance nationalism.

<sup>20</sup> For similar reasons that make Glick-Schiller and Fouron insist on a differentiation between long-distance nationalism and diaspora, she cautions against conflating the terms "transnationalism" and "diaspora." To her a diaspora is not necessarily "transnational" in character; neither in the sense that it aims at overcoming nation-statism (it might well seek foster it), nor in the sense that all diasporas possess a dense network of transnational

widely accepted “diaspora” definition developed by Gabriele Sheffer in 1986 and refined by William Safran 1991, today’s scattered Eritrean communities abroad may well be given the label “diaspora” without stretching it too far. However, in doing so we inevitably lump Eritreans together with “the Black diaspora”, “the Jewish diaspora,” “the Turkish diaspora” and other groups, that have little in common with Eritreans abroad, or indeed, with one another. Like “transnationalism,” “diaspora” may be used as a very general label; yet it does not seem to be the most apt analytical tool to help us to understand the distinctive characteristics of Eritrean communities abroad and their complex relationship with home.

All the same I have decided to use the term “diaspora” throughout this work; partly for reasons of convenience and convention, but more importantly, because in the late 1990s Eritreans abroad also began to use the term diaspora as a self-designation.<sup>21</sup> It therefore seems permissible to me to talk about an “Eritrean diaspora” – at least when referring to the period after Eritrean independence. But I see also some limits of applying the term diaspora with regard to the pre-independence period, and also with regard to certain groups of people.

Prior to the 1990s, Eritreans abroad hardly saw themselves as a group apart from their compatriots in Eritrea. At that time the nowadays widely used term diaspora was virtually unknown.<sup>22</sup> Instead, most Eritreans identified themselves simply as *sedetegnata*, meaning exiles or refugees in Tigrinya. This self-ascription emphasised both the temporariness of their stay and a clear differentiation from economic migrants. Introducing the term “diaspora” *ex post* to describe Eritrean communities prior to independence therefore seems not quite correct to me (whereas even back then, Eritreans abroad doubtlessly were long-distance nationalists). Moreover, using the term “diaspora” to describe the refugee community of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s **and** the Eritrean community of today, clearly fails to capture the qualitative change that occurred with the advent of Eritrean independence.

In order to better describe the transformation process following Eritrean independence, we need to make a distinction made between the “refugee” or “exile

---

contacts. Many members of diaspora communities are more deeply rooted in a specific locality of their settlement country and have fewer contacts with their country of origin or diaspora groups in other locations than they officially claim (see also Kokot as cited in Mayer 2005:16).

<sup>21</sup> While “Long-distance nationalism”, describes the relationship between Eritrean and its citizens abroad most accurately, it simply cannot be used as a collective term for a group of people, such as Eritreans living abroad.

<sup>22</sup> Even in the early 2000s Eritrean conversation partners residing in Germany asked me what I actually mean by “diaspora.”

community” on the one hand, and “diaspora” on the other.<sup>23</sup> It was a work of literature that first made me think about the difference between an “Eritrean exile” and an “Eritrean diaspora.”<sup>24</sup> When I had just started this research project I happened to read a novel by German exile writer Oskar Maria Graf. His novel “Die Flucht ins Mittelmäßige“, is set in post World War II New York, where his protagonist addresses a meeting of German refugees, discussing possible return:

...someone who is a political refugee and has not gone home right after the war might as well forget about it. ... Our exile is only about to start now that the war is over. So far it has only been a period of waiting. From now on it will be something entirely different: ... **the diaspora** ... (Graf 1984:5, translation and emphasis B.C.)

This speech might just as well have been made in an Eritrean club in Frankfurt, Rome or Toronto. Similarly, US-Eritrean researcher Tekle M. Woldemikael describes the situation of Eritrean refugees after liberation in 1991 as „self-imposed exile” (as opposed to “real exile” that is imposed by others):

...they found themselves alienated from the villages, towns and cities they considered “home“, because their own experience in exile ... has changed their sense of self. ... In other words, they discovered that they could not go back to the „home“ they left a long time ago. The „home“ they know remains only in their memory which they could cherish and remember while continuing their lives in self-imposed exile. (Woldemikael 1998:106)

For this study I therefore want to defined **exile** as an ostensibly temporary, politically motivated forced migration, characterized by an almost exclusive mental focus on the country of origin, including plans to return home as soon as circumstances allow. **Diaspora** on the other hand, may or may not have its origin in political exile. Though it also is characterized by preserving a distinct identity, the diaspora nonetheless accommodates itself permanently within its host society, thus creating a home abroad. In the process, return plans often become mythical rather than practical (cf. Gabriele Sheffer in 1986 / Safran 1991).

As will be shown, this transformation from an Eritrean exile community to a diasporic community after 1991 has had very real implications for the relationship with host

---

<sup>23</sup> I am fully aware that a diaspora may well be a refugee or exile community; in fact it is a typical feature of a diaspora to originate in an event of forced migration. Yet, not every refugee or exile community may also be labelled a diaspora.

<sup>24</sup> Exile literature, often written by exiles themselves, occasionally seems to be more adept at describing the nuances and dilemmas of *émigrés/immigrés*.

and home country alike and, consequently, also for the community structure itself. But, of course, no one went to bed in exile one night and woke up in the diaspora on the following morning. The transformation was a slow process that affected the majority of Eritreans living abroad in the 1990s. Most of them have by now arrived in the diaspora, though others still live in a mental or actual state of exile.

Present-day Eritrean exiles can roughly be subdivided into three groups: first, the “permanent exiles” who have remained in exile even after the country’s liberation. This group is mostly comprised of ELF veteran leaders who used to be in opposition to the EPLF, and who now continue to oppose the current Eritrean government (that has emerged from the ranks of the EPLF leadership). Consequently, their exile was not ended by Eritrean independence. A second group are former EPLF members and supporters or who have originally supported the EPLF-led Eritrean struggle (causing them to flee) and have only more recently become dissidents of the present government (barring them from returning to Eritrea). Theirs is a “second exile.” The third group, finally, is composed of exiled members of the present government and (mostly young) Eritreans who have left the country illegally during or after the border war and are thus considered deserters or draft avoiders.<sup>25</sup> This last group can be described as “new exiles.”

\*

A last conceptual aspect that needs to be mentioned is closely related to the fact that we find both an Eritrean diaspora and an Eritrean exile/refugee community existing side by side: “**the** Eritrean diaspora” does not exist. Though Eritrean communities abroad have often been accredited with a high degree of internal cohesion, this should not obscure the real heterogeneity of this group. Apart from the obvious divisions along gender, generational, social, religious, ethnic and, most importantly, political lines, I found the distinction of different flight groups or “vintages” an important concept when trying to understand the complex dynamics of diaspora politics.

Writing on the dynamics of refugee movements and patterns of integration in the 1970s and 1980s, refugee theorist E.F. Kunz developed a model that allows for the distinction of different groups of refugees (Kunz 1973, 1981). He argues that refugees from one country rarely constitute a homogenous group as individuals react differently to the

---

<sup>25</sup> In Eritrea every man and woman from the age of 18 to 40 is under obligation to fulfil his/her National Service. Generally exit visa are hard to obtain for this group of the population, and leaving the country without such a paper is regarded as desertion. See also chapters two, five and seven.

oppressive situations that ultimately necessitate flight. According to their subjective perception of danger, some exiles left sooner or later than others.<sup>26</sup> Such groups of individuals who decide to flee at one time, rather than at another, constitute a distinct „vintage“ or „fate-group.“<sup>27</sup>

As the political situation ripens they will leave the country as distinct ‚vintages‘ each usually convinced of the moral and political rightness of his actions and implicitly or openly blaming those who departed earlier or stayed on. ... [A]cute refugee situations ... produce a variety of vintages, each distinctly different in character, background, and avowed political faith. ... Vintages are essentially departure-and-transit cohorts uniting people with shared experiences before and during displacement, who ... often hold common views and attitudes... . (Kunz 1973, 137ff)

Much cited in the 1980s, the “vintage” concept had almost been totally forgotten in the 1990s, when “diaspora” and “transnationalism” became the new buzzwords of migration and refugee studies. Nonetheless “vintage” remains a valid and useful tool for studying transnational refugee or exile communities. The happenings in Eritrea over the past century have undoubtedly produced their own vintages of emigrants, exiles and refugees. In fact Eritreans themselves also tend to classify their comrades-in-exile according to “vintage.” Although the actual term is not used, behaviour, attitudes and opinions of fellow Eritreans are often explained by pointing to the particular time someone left Eritrea and arrived in Germany. These “generations of arrival” as Anna Arnone (2008: 326) calls them, may well be labelled “Sudanese” or “Arabian” (Arnone 2008:331), depending for instance on flight routes taken or a prolonged stay in another exile country. These labels tend to stick even after many years and are often taken into account when assessing an individuals’ (especially political) utterances or actions: “If s/he says that, s/he is surely one of those who arrived just before liberation/ lived in Addis (or Sudan) for a long time/was a fighter ...” are typical examples of such statements that bundle Eritrean refugees into smaller units (field notes January 2002).

---

<sup>26</sup> Kunz’ model case are refugees from Nazi Germany. Of course, the historical context in Eritrea is different not only in so far as the subjective perception of danger differs, but also the objective one. Over the years and decades Eritreans were in danger of the persecution by different regimes and also for different reasons, making the differences between one Eritrean refugee wave and the next all the more pronounced.

<sup>27</sup> Note: a refugee ‘vintage’ is not to be confused with ‘generation’ in a genealogical sense. The term ‘first generation’ is usually used to distinguish those refugees or migrants that have still been brought up in their home country from the ‘second generation’, i.e. their offspring that has been raised or was born in exile. Hence ‘generation’ usually refers to the arrival in the exile location (or to being born there), while ‘vintage’ is defined in reference to the moment of departure from home. Since my study focuses primarily on the effects of home politics on a refugee community, the vintage concepts appears much more appropriate to capture nuances of social distinction.

As mentioned above, “vintage” is not the only criterion applied when pigeonholing fellow exiles. It often coincides with other markers such as the exiles’ regional, religious, political, social and generational background. For instance Eritrean refugees who arrived in Germany the early 1980s are likely to have a rural background or – especially when they are Muslims – an affiliation with the ELF.<sup>28</sup> Asylum seekers from the late 1980s often lived in Addis for some time before fleeing to Europe. Because of this they are labelled *amitshe* – meaning “Amharised” or “Ethiopianised” Eritreans.<sup>29</sup> The new post-“border war” asylum seekers finally tend to be high-school or university graduates with an urban background and relatives abroad (cf. chapter two and five). Moreover, “vintage” may also determine the degree of a refugee’s integration into settlement society and his/her current connections with home (“He came as an unaccompanied youth and lived with a German foster family ... lost all Eritrean values and has become ‘a real German’...,” field notes April 2002, B.C.). In reversed fashion, the perceived degree of adaptation to the host culture may give a clue about a person’s “vintage.”

These -emic classifications are taken into account in the following attempt to provide an overview of the successive Eritrean immigration vintages and the different phases of development that Eritrean exile organisations in Germany have been going through since the 1960s. Coarsely speaking, seven distinct phases can be made out. Each is characterised not only by the influx of one or more new refugee vintages, but also by shifts in the social fabric and the political landscape of the Eritrean diaspora, as well as changing conditions within the German environment:

1. The “**early years**” started around 1965 and ended in the mid-1970s. During this time the first independent associations of pro-independence Eritreans living abroad were founded.
2. The second half of the 1970s then saw the rapid rise in refugee numbers and the EPLF’s strife for hegemony within Eritrea and among the refugee communities abroad. The following “**long decade of the true believers**” covers the time from the

---

<sup>28</sup> Eritreans coming to Germany in the early 1980s tended to be part of the mass refugees movements caused by Ethiopian military offensives in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Others were members or sympathizers of the ELF that was driven out of Eritrea in 1981.

<sup>29</sup> The term *amitshe* derives from the name of an Italian car manufacturer AMCE. AMCE used to have a factory in Ethiopia where imported car parts were assembled. Similarly, Eritreans grown up in Ethiopia were seen as “assembled” in Ethiopia.

late 1970s up to liberation in 1991 – a period that was marked by the establishment and steady expansion of the EPLF’s transnational infrastructure.

3. The third phase might be labelled **“the limbo years.”** It spans the time from Eritrea’s “liberation” in 1991 to official independence in 1993, and was characterized by the evaluation of return plans and the general sense of both euphoria and disorientation.
4. The beginning transformation **“from exile to diaspora”** covers the short period from 1994 to 1998. During these years return plans were postponed in favour of (annual) trips home. The community organisations were restructured and accommodated themselves more firmly in both their settlement country and in the deterritorialised Eritrean nation-state.
5. The unexpected border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1998 to 2000) prompted a fifth phase of diaspora development that might be summarised as **“the revival of radical nationalism.”**<sup>30</sup> During that period which coincided with the worldwide rise of Internet media, Eritrean long-distance nationalism, too, was transplanted into the digital realm.
6. The border war was followed by a briefer period of political opening, starting in 2000 and ending in late 2001. During this time influential groups within the diaspora finally appeared as transnational actors with an agenda calling for political reforms and transparency. This short phase of a **“diaspora for democracy,”** however, was left in a limbo, when the Eritrean government resorted to a course of repressing dissent within and outside the country, using both physical violence and coercion.
7. Since late 2001, when reformers from within the government were arrested and disappeared, the diaspora has become both politically polarised and fragmented. Diaspora Eritreans who are committed to reform or regime change have since been experiencing **“a second exile”**. They are being joined by thousands of **new exiles** who have left Eritrea since the end of the border war.

### **Overview and organisation**

This study is comprised of seven chapters. The first chapter sketches the development of Eritrean diaspora networks from the mid-1960s to Eritrean independence in 1993. It covers

---

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion of the war, see Fessehazion 2004, Mussie 2007, Trivelli 1998, Tronvoll 1999.

what I have above termed “the early years,” “the decade of the true believer” and also “the limbo years.” With chapter one thus serving as a historical backdrop, the results of my empirical research are presented in chapter two to seven. Each of them highlights a different aspect of life in the Eritrean diaspora in Germany.

Chapters two to four 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. Chapter two centres on the activities and journeys of second-generation diaspora Eritreans, drawing on my fieldwork in Germany and Eritrea. Other than often assumed, my research suggests that journeys home do not automatically and inevitably help to foster a transnational social sphere, but may also contribute to widening the gaps between homeland and diaspora. This is particularly true for the second generation. Starting with the encounter of young Eritrean from Germany with local peers during a summer holiday in Eritrea, chapter two traces the youth’s upbringing during the independent struggle and their difficulties in coping with a life between two worlds. The outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean war in 1998 brought forth a new sense of belonging among this generation, and many young diaspora Eritreans responded to this crisis by organising themselves in an effort to support their country of origin. Following these activities, the chapter also provides a coarse overview of different youth groups that have emerged (and largely disappeared) in this context.

While chapter two revolves around the travels, trials and tribulations of the second generation, chapters three and four examine how communication within the transnational Eritrean community has been changed and influenced by the advent of the Internet. Chapter three maps out “Cyber-Eritrea.” It sketches the developments of Eritrean online communities from the early 1990s to 2005/6, distinguishing different phases of Internet use. Chapter four is thematically interwoven with both chapters two and three. It investigates the contradicting impacts of Eritrean Internet use in a specific local setting. While the Internet connects, for example, Eritreans in Frankfurt with those scattered across Germany and the rest of the world, the grassroots perspective also reveals that large sections of the local (and global) community are - either by default or by design – completely or partially excluded from direct access to Cyber-Eritrea. Internet media have been instrumental in helping new and marginalised groups to create their own platforms, thus fostering more diversity and participation. At the same time, however, they may also reinforce political and social fragmentation within the community. The example of the local *Warsay* youth group



shows that any activity on the web is under close scrutiny by various local and/or transnational interest groups. This has made it difficult for Eritreans to establish an open and tolerant discourse on the Internet without facing the danger of repercussions in real-life.

Having cast a spotlight on a local diaspora community and its contradictions in chapter four, 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 directs the reader's attention on the years after the border war and the contradiction between the diaspora's economic power and its political impotency. Using Albert O. Hirschman's conceptual framework of exit, voice and loyalty, the chapter investigates how the Eritrean state/government (in a continuation of EPLF politics) successfully uses transnational mechanism and channels to include the diaspora within a „de-territorialized“ Eritrean nation state. Imposing its discourse on the diaspora, and controlling opinions and activities within the communities abroad (albeit to a limited extent), the Eritrean state also seeks to secure political loyalty, and with it the flow of taxes and remittances. Being denied “exit” as well as “voice” many Eritreans at home and abroad have disengaged from active politics and are turning to alternative support networks such as family, religious communities, ethnic or regional groupings.

The sixth chapter looks more closely at one of these emergent alternative networks in the Eritrean diaspora: religious communities. Taking a local perspective once again, the chapter explores why religion has played a minor role during the years of exile and how a careful revitalisation has taken place after independence. 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 cultural memory.

## Chapter 1

# From Exile to Diaspora

A Short History of the Eritrean Refugee Community in Germany 1961 – 1993

---

*Exile is the nursery of nationality.*

-- Lord Acton

*Eritrea is exiled. (...) the ultimate truth of the decade is Eritrea in its essence is found in exile.*

-- Ghezae Hagos Berhe (2009)

### **Of nationalism and exile: a background note on the beginnings of the Eritrean struggle**

*I meet Tekle in a new Eritrean restaurant that seems to tolerate guests of any political hue.<sup>1</sup> With his dark hair and slim build he looks much younger than I would have imagined a man with a 30-year history as a guerrilla fighter and exile politician. He was barely of age when he joined the Eritrean Liberation Front, the ELF. From his mid-20s he has been holding high ranking positions. Nowadays, Tekle, who is still known by his nom de guerre rather than his birth name, leads a truly transnational life, hopping between three continents to campaign for the Eritrean opposition. For the next two months it is Germany, then the USA, then Sudan, then Europe again. We talk for hours, mainly about recent developments. When he walks me back to the train station in the evening, he asks about my interest in history. I tell him how I had gradually come to understand that I needed to know more about the Eritrean past to comprehend what is happening in the diaspora today. He nods: “When do you think “the diaspora” actually started?” – “Well, that depends on how you define the term, I guess, but ... most certainly, when the struggle started. Perhaps earlier ... . Like the ELM – was that not founded in Port Sudan?” “Yes,” he replies, “... and the ELF, too, was started abroad ... in Cairo.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> Fieldnotes, B.C.; Name changed.

This short conversation made me think again about the intimate connection between the emergence of an Eritrean national identity and exile. Starting perhaps with pre-colonial connections of individual Habesha travelling to Europe (and back), as documented by Smidt (2005), I argue that Eritrean identity is strongly based on the experience of migration. Especially during the times of Italian colonisation (1890 - 1942), migration became a major factor for the emergence of an early Eritrean nationalist sentiment. Rural-urban migration, immigration and emigration to and from Ethiopia, the large-scale integration of Eritreans in the Italian “Ascari”-army, as well as the settlement of Italian migrants in Eritrea all contributed to creating a notion of “we-ness” among Eritreans that gradually led to the “imagining” of an Eritrean (proto-) national identity. During the post-war period of British military rule, Eritrea’s forcible federation to, and later annexation by Ethiopia, it was Eritrean exiles, student and labour migrants who were the driving force of the incipient national liberation struggle.

As mentioned in the conversation above, both of the early liberation movements, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) were founded abroad and also inspired by external influences (Markakis 1987). And even their successor, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) with its strong emphasis on self-reliance and in-the-field-leadership, was by no means an isolated island of Eritrean-ness as popular myth has it. ELF and EPLF cadres travelled to China or the Middle East for military and ideological training; returning students and exiles from Ethiopia, the Middle East, North America and Europe were integrated into the liberation army. Various contacts existed with other movements fighting for autonomy in other places of the world. Most important, however, the EPLF’s nation-building project could not have been achieved without the support and engagement of the worldwide Eritrean exile communities. The “bases abroad” provided the “forgotten struggle” with cash and kind, injected ideas, and kept the rebels connected with the world at large. Before jumping to the particular case of the Eritrean exiles in Germany, which is at the centre of this study, a short historical excursus is needed in order to introduce some of the early actors of the Eritrean nationalist movement.

What is today Eritrea only became a clear territorially and politically defined entity with the beginning of Italian colonisation. Geographically, economical and ethnically Eritrea can be roughly divided into two parts. The Eritrean highlands, or *kebessa*, are rather densely inhabited with Tigrinya-speaking Christian farmers, Muslim Jeberti traders, and the Muslim Saho living on the edges of the eastern highlands. The Bilen settle in and around the

town of Keren. The eastern and western lowland regions were originally mainly inhabited by semi-sedentary and nomadic such as the Saho, Afar, Tigre, Beni Amer, Kunama, Baria and Rashaida, most of who adhere to Islam.<sup>2</sup> Italian rule brought deep-going economic and social changes affecting the overall social, economic and political fabric of the diverse communities as well as their relationships with one another (cf. Trevaskis 1960, Markakis 1990). Especially in the 1930s, increased industrialisation and urbanisation led to a radical modernisation process. Tens of thousands of Eritrean highlanders in particular left their villages to seek employment in the rapidly expanding towns.<sup>3</sup> Thousands more from all over Eritrea joined the colonial army. By the end of Italian rule in the early 1940s about 20% of the population lived in towns, making Eritrea one of the most urbanised countries in Africa at that time (Matthies 1981:16).

In 1941, after the Italian defeat in the Second World War, Eritrea was put under British Military Administration (BMA). The wartime economy still guaranteed jobs, but after 1945 many factories were closed down, and there was little employment in other sectors. The few positions created by the BMA were often given to the better-trained Italians. Some Eritreans were taken into the new police force, or filled "subordinate posts" such as health assistants, medical orderlies, telephonists, clerks, or accountants. Still, unemployment was high, and grew further with the return of the Eritrean *ascari* soldiers, who arrived home unrewarded for their services (cf. Trevaskis 1960). Lacking other alternatives, many urbanites and ex-soldiers started their reverse exodus back home to their villages, but often found their plots occupied. (cf. Gebre Medhin 1989). While the original inhabitants had worked or fought for the Italians, some 13,000 impoverished Tigrayans from Northern Ethiopia had filled some of the voids in the county side. Now their presence led to frequent legal debates over land and a growing scorn against "outsiders".<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Today Tigrinya settle all over Eritrea, and (semi-)nomadic lifestyles are declining. Still, the lowlands are mostly Muslims with pockets of Christians and Animists. For a more detailed historical introduction into land and people see Longrigg (1945), Nadel (1944), Lewis (1983); for more recent one see for instance Tronvoll (1998a) Paice (1994) or Abdulkader et al. (2008).

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the Asmara city dwellers were Christian Orthodox Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group in Eritrea. From the mid-1930s to the early 1940s the population of Asmara more than quintupled (Matthies 1981).

<sup>4</sup> See Longrigg (1945), Trevaskis (1960), Gebre-Medhin (1989). The Ethiopian Tigrayans are closely related to the Eritrean Tigrinya, but not much liked in Eritrea (though this also has some more recent reasons) and derogatively referred to as "Agame" (a poor region in Tigray; origin of many Tigrayan migrant workers). On my first day in Asmara I gave some change to a young mother and baby begging on Godena Harnet. An elderly woman observed me. She took me by the sleeve and dragged me away, pointing her finger at the

Tensions between Eritreans and foreigners, but also among Eritreans of different origin and religious affiliation, were even more pronounced in the towns that accommodated a culturally, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous populace. As elsewhere in Africa on the eve of decolonisation, this situation brought forth two seemingly opposed trends. On the one hand, the closeness of the different communities, economic breakdown, intervention from outside, and not least the competition between various groups created conflicts and led to the cementing of particularist ethnic and religious identities (cf. Miran 2005:207). On the other hand, a comparatively strong notion of (anti-colonial) “Eritrean-ness” emerged, welding together people of different walks of life. Merchants, workers or administrative employees formed a new ethnically and religiously heterogeneous social group that was urban, relatively educated, and aspiring to social and political influence (see Conrad 1997).

Political activities began as early as 1941/2 as a reaction of the emerging Eritrean intelligentsia to “the continued presence of Italians in all spheres of state activity” and as a means to lobby Eritrean interests vis-à-vis the British (Markakis 1990:62). Under British rule political engagement became not only legal but was officially encouraged. Education, too, was made accessible to a larger part of the Eritrean population, local newspapers were founded (cf. Asgede 1998) and trade unions were allowed to operate (Killion 1998b). Though this was perhaps not the intention of the BMA, these measures certainly fostered and facilitated the emergence of an all-Eritrean identity. Before long, the first Eritrean political party, *Mahaber Hager Fikre Eritrea*, or “Party of Love of the Country Eritrea” (PLC), as the Tigrinya name is commonly translated, was established, and many others were to follow.

In the second half of the 1940s (after Eritrea’s return to Italy had been ruled out) two blocs emerged within the country’s emerging political landscape.<sup>5</sup> One was the “Independence Bloc,” that campaigned for national sovereignty. The other was dubbed “the Unionists,” and advocated unity with Ethiopia. The Ethiopians intervened massively by cajoling and coercing the Eritrean highland population to “return” to “Mother” Ethiopia. To

---

ragged figures repeating: “No, No, Agame!” urging me not to give them money (in her logic they *had to be* “Agame”, as Eritreans would never beg).

<sup>5</sup> The most prominent Eritrean parties advocating independence at that time were the Muslim League, known as *Rabaita* (Arabic “unity”), and the Eritrean Liberal Progressive Party. They later formed the Independence Bloc together with the New Eritrean Pro-Italy (after a return to Italy had been ruled out). The Eritrea-Ethiopia Unionist Party that favoured “return” to Ethiopia was financially and logistically supported by the Ethiopians and did not shy away from waging a terror campaign against groups and individuals in favour of independence (see Markakis p. 62-67 for an account on the happenings in the 1940s; see also Trevaskis 1960, Killion 1995)

many Christian Tigrinya this solution seemed indeed not unattractive, yet the mostly Muslim lowland population was literally up in arms against becoming a part of an Ethiopia that still saw itself as “a Christian island in a sea of heathens”. Astonishingly, however, hardly anyone in Eritrea favoured the so-called *Bevin-Sforza* plan to divide Eritrea (along geographic, ethnic and religious lines) between Ethiopia and Sudan. In 1950 a UN commission was sent to Eritrea to establish the wishes of its population, but came to no unanimous conclusion.<sup>6</sup> The eventual decision over Eritrea’s future was a compromise based on international geopolitics rather than on the wishes and feelings of its people. Considering Ethiopia an important ally in the emerging East-West confrontation, a majority of the UN General Assembly voted on 2 September 1950 for Eritrea to be federated with Ethiopia.

After the federation with Ethiopia in 1952, Eritrean federal rights were step by step dismantled. Political parties were banned and public meetings became illegal. The leaders of the former Independence Bloc were either sent to prison or forced to leave the country. In 1953 Woldeab Woldemariam, the “father of Eritrean nationalism” and co-founder of the erstwhile “Party for the Love of the Country,” fled to Sudan after narrowly surviving a seventh assassination attempt. He settled in Cairo that was to become a main centre of Eritrean exiles. Many other “early nationalists”, like Ibrahim Sultan Ali and Idris Muhammed Adem, were to follow him into exile. Cairo had long been a destination for Muslim Eritreans pursuing higher education (Miran 2005). Since 1955 the Egyptian government had been funding an Eritrean Student’s Club in Cairo. In 1959 the Club became the Eritrean Student’s Union. By that time about 400 Eritrean students attended either the Al Azhar University or institutions providing secular schooling for Eritrean secondary students. Among them were also the later co-founder of the ELF Idris Osman Galadewos and other prominent figures in the ELF. Not surprisingly, the Eritrean exiles and students soon established close contacts (Killion 1998: 130-131).

In the meantime the Eritrean flag and seals had been banned in Eritrea. Ethiopian administrators more or less took over public life. At school, too, Amharic became the only official language. All these measures clearly aimed at an *Amharisation* - a process that took

---

<sup>6</sup> The UN commission’s procedure to establish Eritrean feelings on the matter of independence can only be described as dubious. See for instance Markakis (1990:66); Fenet (1988:33). For a more general description of this UN-mission see United Nations Commission (1950), see also Semere Haile (1988).

place not only in Eritrea, but in all non-Amhara regions of Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> More than its purely symbolic content, the introduction of Amharic meant that Eritrean students of all ethnic backgrounds were at a disadvantage compared to Amharic-speaking children. At the level of higher education only those who had passed a test in Amharic were permitted into University, although the language of instruction was English. Moreover the country suffered also an economic setback, as industrialists in Eritrea were forced to move their factories to Ethiopia. The goals of this policy were to prove the non-viability of Eritrea's economy and to lash out at Eritrean labour organisations that had started to challenge Ethiopian violations of federal rights (Bereket 1980: 42). At the same time the bleeding out of Eritrea, gave a boost to the Ethiopian economy: the relocation of Eritrean factories and the subsequent exodus of skilled labourers to Ethiopia led to a first large wave of emigration from Eritrea.

By the mid-1950s the Eritrean assembly had ceased to function and the few politicians who dared to protest against Ethiopian interventions had reason to fear for their lives. Gradually even those Eritreans that had been neutral, or even favourably inclined towards Ethiopia, began to utter protest. From Egypt Woldeab Woldemariam broadcast "Radio Free Eritrea" which could be received in his home country. The Tigrinya programme was also translated into Arabic and apparently greatly encouraged the growing Eritrean resistance within the country (Gebre-Medhin 1989:162). In 1958 the banned trade unions organised a very successful general strike in Asmara (cf. Killion 1997). Its brutal crushing marked the beginning of a new era: as neither peaceful demonstrations nor appeals to the UN bore any more hope, organised underground resistance spread and with it the need to rally Eritreans of all backgrounds:

By 1958 the Eritreans had come to realize that the facade of federation could not accommodate the autonomy granted. In an environment characterized by swift and brutal repression, opposition to increasing Ethiopian domination was driven underground. New leaders, strategies, and means of resistance emerged in the struggle to salvage Eritrea's future as a distinct political entity. The party leaders and traditional elites of the 1940s were replaced by young exiles who focussed on the reconciliation of the fragmented nationalism .... Their first venture was to organise widespread acts of civil disobedience, ushering in an era of organised political protest. (Iyob 1999:99)

---

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account on Ethiopian policies see for instance Christopher Clapham (1988).

The first underground movement with the declared aim of liberating Eritrea from Ethiopian rule was set up in 1958 in Sudan. The founders were five Eritreans who had grown up in Port Sudan, which had a sizeable Eritrean community. Mohammed Said Nawud, Saleh Iyay, Yasin El-Gade, Mohammed El-Hassan, and Said Sabr were all young Muslim Eritreans in their twenties (Markakis 1990). Mohammed said Nawud had been a member of the Sudanese Communist Party which also served as a model on which the five structured their movement *Harekat Tahrir Eritrea* – the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM).

Travelling to their hometowns in Eritrea they started to establish clandestine cells of seven. Each member had to recruit six new members who would again recruit six friends and so forth. Due to this practice, the Tigrinya called them *Mahber Shewate*, the Union of Seven.<sup>8</sup> The largely urban-based ELM grew rapidly in 1958 and 1959. It hoped to win over parts of the Ethiopian-controlled Eritrean police force and administration in order to topple the regime by a *coup d'état*. The ELM soon recognised the urgent need of reconciling the Christian and Muslim parts of the Eritrean population. “Muslims and Christians are brothers, and their unity makes Eritrea one”, they stressed in their statutes (Markakis 1990:106). In 1960 the ELM also approached the exiled former opposition leaders in Cairo about a co-operation, but only Woldeab responded favourably, later becoming the ELM’s representative in Cairo. The other veterans seemed to fear competition for their own quests for Eritrea’s liberation. In particular they rejected the ELM’s communist connections and its anti-sectarian positions (Markakis 1990:107). More important, however, was that the old guard itself was in the process of organising an armed resistance movement.

In July 1960 Idris Mohammed Adam announced the foundation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo. He led the organisation together with Idris Osman Galadewos, a law graduate of the University of Cairo, and Osman Saleh Sabbe, a teacher who had just gone into exile to Jemen (Markakis 1990:110). Like the ELM, the three started to create cells in Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, as well as inside Eritrea. The main aim of these cells was to collect funds for the military wing of the organisation that started to operate in the western lowlands of Eritrea from around 1961/2. Instead of working together, ELM and ELF became open rivals. The conflict between them damaged the ELM’s camouflage, and the movement suffered heavy blows at the hands of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Eritrean migrants in Port Sudan translated the ELM’s constitution into Tigrinya. Members of a visiting football Club from Asmara were recruited to organise further cells in the highlands. One of the players, Tuku’e Yehedego, a student activist from Asmara, later joined the ELF and became an important contact person for the Eritrean students in the USA (cf. Hepner 2005:45).



Ethiopian police in 1961. When Ethiopia finally declared the federation nil and void in 1962, the ELM was unable to react, and more and more of its members joined the ELF. The remaining members decided to launch an armed front of their own. According to Markakis (1990:109) an armed group of the ELM met the ELF in the western lowlands in 1965. The confrontation ended with the virtual wipe out of the ELM, marking the unfortunate incident as the first in a long series of violent internal strife within the Eritrean liberation movement. All the same, the ELM is remembered as a largely peaceful organisation that made a crucial contribution to the emergence of a “secular Pan-Eritrean nationalism” as Ruth Iyob calls it (1999:103).

Many of those who later went abroad to the Middle East, the United States, Eastern or Western Europe had as young people been observers or student activists in Asmara or even members of either ELM or ELF (or both), and were highly politicized and deeply affected by the happenings of that crucial period in Eritrean history. And following in the footsteps of their elder generations, many started Eritrean groups in their countries of exile, gradually weaving a worldwide transnational network of Eritrean organisations supporting the prolonged and arduous struggle for national unity, social justice and sovereignty in Eritrea.

### **Early years of exile in Europe: before the EPLF, before “Unity in Diversity”<sup>9</sup>**

In the 1960s only a few hundred Eritreans lived in Germany. Officially they remained undistinguished from Ethiopians (Schröder 1992, Wong 1993). Most of them were male and between twenty and thirty years of age with an urban background and a solid education or training. Considering the high level of politicisation among young, urban Eritrean workers or students it is likely that many of them had been involved in protests and underground organisation back at home, or in a first country of exile. Still, more often than not they entered Germany as students, sailors and labour migrants rather than as political refugees. Applying for asylum status was not attractive at that time, as it was comparatively easy for Ethiopian nationals (and that included Eritreans) both to enter the country, and to find a legal way of staying. Ethiopians were free from visa obligations and could relatively

---

<sup>9</sup> “Unity in Diversity” is a popular EPLF slogan to emphasize that Eritreans in spite of their diverse backgrounds are united in their strong nationalist sentiment. Here it is used rather ironically, as the advent of the EPLF – at least for the independent exile organisations – marked the end of political diversity in favour of a streamlined network of EPLF-affiliated organisations.

painlessly obtain residence-permits as students or so-called “guest workers” – owing perhaps to the special relationship between post-war Germany and Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia. In November 1954, Haile Selassie had been the first foreign head of state to visit the Federal Republic of Germany, making a lasting impression on many of its natives. The Ethiopian emperor gained a kind of “cult status,” which both helped and handicapped Eritreans arriving in Germany. As Ethiopian nationals, they benefited from the positive Ethiopia-image. As Eritreans, they found it hard to relate why they were less than keen on remaining subjects of the Negus.

Many of the early Eritrean immigrants had indeed come to Germany with the intention to work or study. They only became “post-emigration” exiles when the situation at home worsened and made return dangerous – especially for those who had become involved with political exile movements. Others were actually sent abroad by the liberation fronts to organise support. Though little is known about these early days, it seems that the emerging Eritrean exile organisations in the 1960s were not confined to one country, but very soon took a distinctive transnational shape. Eritrean political activism in Germany was closely linked with that of Eritreans living in other European and Middle Eastern countries (who themselves, had close connections with Cairo). The following overview therefore attempts to trace the development of Eritrean exile organisations in Europe that set parameters for the emergence of a fully-fledged global network of Eritrean exile groups in the late 1970s and 1980s.

According to an EPLF-commissioned documentation of the Bologna Festival, the first Eritrean exile organisations in Europe were founded as early as 1965 (Tabacco 2001). Some ELF sources even speak of an earlier date, around 1963/64 (cf. Saleh 2002). That is only a few years after the official foundation of the ELF by Eritrean students and “old-guard” exiles in Cairo, and only another couple of years before the split of the organisation and the foundation of the later EPLF. In an interview carried with *awate.com*, Dr Habte Tesfamariam of the Eritrean Liberation Front - Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC) recounts his experiences as one of the co-founders of the Eritrean Student’s Union in Europe (Saleh, 2002).<sup>10</sup> As a secondary student he had participated in Eritrean student and workers protests in Asmara in the late 1950s and had also become active with the ELM. In the early 1960s

---

<sup>10</sup> The ELF-RC is one of the successor parties of the first armed Eritrean Liberation front, the Eritrean People’s liberation Front (ELF) that disintegrated after being driven out of Eritrea by its rival EPLF in 1981. The ELF-RC emerged in 1982 as a result of the break-up of the old ELF. Dr Habte has been one of the parties leading members since these days. (Schröder 2008: 30-31).

Habte attended the American college in Alamaya, Ethiopia, where he co-founded a group called “Eritrean Cooperative Group.” From Alamaya they expanded their network to Haile Selassie University and the Engineering College in Addis Ababa, as well as to others colleges throughout Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> The group also managed to establish direct contacts with the ELF in Eritrea and started to send money on a monthly basis. After graduation, Habte and five other Eritrean students left Ethiopia to study in Warsaw, Poland:<sup>12</sup>

Six days after our arrival, we met three other Eritreans and we formed the Eritrean Students Union. .... I remember Dr. Gerghis Tekhlemicael (now with the PFDJ) Michael Yohannes, Abraham, Michael Isaac, Berhane, Embaye, and Amare Fitwi, who had already been living in Poland. Amare knew students in Germany and Hungary and informed us of interested students, including in Vienna and we wanted them to join us in preparing our constitution. Amare was given the task of making contacts and introducing us to the other students. We used to go to Berlin during vacations. The person who was holding the membership documents as a Chairman was Semere Michael [who lived in Berlin, BC]; he was struggling alone. When we met him, he was pleased to see us. We briefed him about the situation in Eritrea.... He said that since our number in Poland was bigger, he would come to Warsaw and hand us the documents. Later, we [sic!] the responsibility was handed over to us and I was elected the General Secretary of the Students Union. .... While in Europe, we observed that we couldn't be effective in our scattered form. We decided to have small groups [chapters] in different places. It was of course difficult to meet openly, therefore we used a cover: The Ethiopian Students Congress. We participated in Ethiopian Students Congress and meeting; by day we are with them, at night the Eritreans would meet alone. In 1966, in Dimchurch, under the guise of the Ethiopian meeting, Eritrean students met by night secretly.<sup>13</sup> Twelve countries send their delegates. In the congress that we held in 1967 – by now we started to have our independent congress - we held that meeting in Leipzig [Former East Germany]. We named our movement, Eritrean Students Union Abroad. (Saleh 2002)

The EPLF's Bologna documentation confirms Dr Habte's recollections about a first meeting of Eritrean Students in Europe taking place in Poland in 1965. It also agrees that an organisation called “Eritrean Student's Union [Abroad],” was formed and that is was

---

<sup>11</sup> At that time Eritreans made up the largest group of non-Amhara students in institutions of higher education in Ethiopia, even though access to Ethiopian educational facilities was more difficult for Eritreans and other non-native speakers of Amharic as admission to university was only granted after passing a test in that language.

<sup>12</sup> Why they went to Poland, the source does not tell. It may be assumed that, like many socialist countries, Poland offered scholarships to Third World students (as did the famous Lomonossov University in Moscow).

<sup>13</sup> Other than Eritrean students in North America that – often coming from Addis Ababa University - had mostly been active members of the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA) until 1970 (cf. Hepner 2005: 40), it seems that Eritrean students in Europe had from early on used the Ethiopian student's organizations as a cover-up to build a network amongst themselves.

divided into different country sections: Poland, West Germany, Soviet Union, Hungary etc. (Tabacco 2001:21).<sup>14</sup> Both sources make it clear that the leadership, based in Poland, seemed to have good relations with the ELF. Still there was also some criticism of and confusion about the ELF leadership amongst some other sections of the organization – notably students based in the Soviet Union. In his interview on *awate.com*, Dr Habte also offers some details on how, in 1967, the cooperation between Eritrean students in Europe and Eritrean groups in the Middle East came about:

... we observed the fact that we were limited to Europe and that there were student unions in the Middle East and that they were closer to Eritrea. Also, since our struggle was only diplomatic it had to be connected with the armed struggle in Eritrea, we wanted to have closer relations with the students in the Middle East so that we could work on projects jointly. At that time, I was the chairman of the union and the congress delegated myself and Ahamadani to travel to Cairo for that purpose ... . They were very pleased. We agreed to name our combined organization, General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES) and also agreed to have a congress in Syria. Of course then ... there was conflicts among the ELF and the main place of the conflict was Cairo and that is why we agreed to have our congress at a distance and decided to meet in Syria. We even got assistance from Syria. The GESU [sic! - GUES] was formally formed in December 1968 - January 1969 in Syria. (Saleh Gadi 2002)

The students who met in Damascus were delegated by the various sections of Eritrean students living in Europe, as well as Eritreans from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Somalia. The General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES) was effectively a kind of umbrella organisation. Some of the member associations had strong links with the ELF. In Syria, where the meeting took place, ELF cells had already been established in the early 1960s. The ELF had an office in Damascus and was actively supported by the Syrian government that also gave military training to several groups of young educated ELF recruits in the mid-1960s (cf. Markakis 1990:111; Pool 2001:53)<sup>15</sup>. Since this was about the same time when GUES was formed, it seems not unreasonable to assume that some contacts were established between the students and exiles and the ELF-fighters-in-training.

GUES also claimed to represent students within Eritrea proper. It probably saw itself as a successor organisation of an earlier “General Union of Eritrean Students” in Asmara.

---

<sup>14</sup> Though it is not mentioned in the interview with Dr Habte, my own interviews and the Bologna documentary (Tabacco 2001) suggest that further sections were most likely based in the U.K., Sweden, Italy, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Norway, and possibly also in Austria and the Netherlands.

<sup>15</sup> In 1967 and 1968 others (among them the later EPLF leader Issayas Afewerki) were sent to China and Cuba for training.

The organisation, founded in 1966, had been closely connected with the student-ELF network. GUES-Asmara existed only for a year before being “broken by defections and arrest” as Killion (1998:385) reports in agreement with Wolde-Yesus (1997:66).<sup>16</sup> However, it is not unlikely that there was some continuity of membership of the GUES in Asmara and the one founded in Damascus. The Eritrean student body was small, and people fleeing the breaking up of the GUES Asmara, may well have ended up joining the new GUES in Damascus.<sup>17</sup>

Quite obviously, the internal dynamics within Eritrean political parties and movements at home – back then as today – were reflected in exile/diaspora. While Eritreans in North America initially found it more difficult to keep abreast with the developments at home (cf. Hepner 2005:49-59), news reached Eritreans in Europe amazingly fast via their connections in the Middle East. Still, details about internal goings-on were hard to evaluate from afar as the sources of information were often limited and biased. This had also been the case in the early to mid-1960s when rivalries between ELF and ELM caused concern and confusion among the exiles. After all some of the students, like the above-cited Dr Habte, had been members or sympathisers of the ELM or ELF, or both.

\*

Shortly after the demise of the ELM in 1965, another rift opened up within the ELF. Initially, the rank and file of the ELF had consisted of some 300 expatriate Eritrean students (most of them Muslims) and a growing numbers of Eritrean exiles from other countries as well as members in Eritrea and in Ethiopia. The military wing of the organisation that operated within Eritrea was made up of a mixture of various Eritrean dissident groups and individuals. The great majority of them originated from the Muslim western lowland societies of Eritrea and were linked to the leadership in Cairo not only by political, but also by ethnic loyalties. After 1965, reflecting the increase of Ethiopian pressure on the Eritrean highlands and the crack down on the student movements in Asmara and Addis, more and more newcomers joined the ELF units in West Eritrea. Many of them were (Christian) urban workers, college or university students from Asmara or Ethiopia. They represented a

---

<sup>16</sup> Following the crackdowns by the Ethiopians “the student movement ... was in a state of utter collapse, paradoxically, at a time when global student militancy was at its peak,” (Wolde-Yesus, 1997:66 quoting GUES publication *Fajjir-al Wihda*, No 37, 1990: 2-4).

<sup>17</sup> The situation today is actually not that much different. Even in the past decade (until the closure of Asmara University) the Asmara student body has been rather small, and émigré and exile students in South Africa, the US and Europe maintain contacts and all seem to know each other.

new generation whose educational and ideological background stood in stark contrast to that of a majority of the veteran fighters. The young Muslim recruits returning from training camps such as the one in Syria also had ideas that could not be accommodated within the old structures. Before long discontent was widespread and prompted wave of politicisation within the ELF, culminating in the demand for reform:

...the process of integrating culturally distinct fighters from the Christian highlands into a formerly Muslim ... dominated front was interconnected with ideological in-fighting within the national liberation movement. Moreover demands that political control should be in the hand of the fighters, for a unitary structure, and for a political programme that built links between the fighters and the people, were not confined to the new student recruits from the highlands, they were voiced by other seasoned fighters. (Cliffe 1989:137)

In a series of meetings in 1968/9 newcomers as well as some of the veteran fighters criticised the political leaders in Cairo for their absence from the field and the “ethnic” organisation of the zonal commands in Eritrea (cf. Markakis 1990:122).<sup>18</sup> In August 1969 it was eventually agreed to establish a General Command (GC) inside Eritrea. This “impossibly large body of thirty-eight members” was thought to be a provisional, elected body. Its creation had the main purpose to prepare the ground for a national congress and extensive reforms (see Markakis 1990:125). The political leadership body (called Supreme Council) was to remain in power for one more year until the meeting for the national council was scheduled. When leadership failed to turn up in the field for the scheduled meeting in December 1969, the General Command suspended the Supreme Council without further ado. This step was not unanimously welcomed – especially the veteran fighters rejected it – and plunged the ELF into disarray. When a group of young Christian recruits from Addis, suspected of being Ethiopian spies, were massacred, other Christian fighters, too, began to fear for their lives and defected. This again fuelled suspicions about their

---

<sup>18</sup> The first ELF congress in Khartoum in 1965 resolved to adopt a structure of territorial divisions based on the model of the Algerian guerilla forces. Eritrea was divided into four zones, each headed by a commander. Above zone level, a new body, the *Revolutionary Command* (RC) was established in Kassala/Sudan. It was supposed to “provide centralised administrative and military leadership” and to link the zones with the *Supreme Council* (SC) of the political leadership in Cairo. But the zonal division only reinforced sectarian, ethnic and clan identities. Clashes ensued among the zonal divisions about shares of ammunition and other supplies. The situation worsened when more and more Christian recruits arrived. To accommodate them, a fifth zone was established. It comprised the highland regions, but did not enjoy patronage of any of the SC members. Several reform movements emerged, “... asking for the dissolution of the five divisions of the army and the formation of one command; the calling of a national congress and the adoption of a political programme...” (Schröder 1988, Interview with Saleh Iyay). The following summary of the attempted reforms within the ELF is merely thought to serve as a rough background to the developments in exile, and mainly follows Markakis’ detailed account (1989).

loyalty. The leadership did not deal well with these dangerous developments. In the following years dissent within the ELF grew, and led to the breakaways of three different groups in 1970, two of which soon got together to form the later Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) under the leadership of Issayas Afewerki, that was to dominate the Eritrean independence war until its final victory over Ethiopia in 1991.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Eritreans for Liberation and the EPLF's struggle for domination at home and abroad***

The confusion within the ELF, the emergence of EPLF as an alternative liberation front and the ensuing power struggle between the two also brought debates and divisions within the (mostly Christian) Eritrean students groups in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and the umbrella organisation GUES. The discussion about whether to support ELF or EPLF ultimately led to a split of the GUES and the Eritrean student organisations in Europe and overseas.

In 1970 a both decisive and divisive Europe-wide congress of Eritrean students and workers took place in Munich, in the south of Germany. EPLF written and told history hails the event as “the first Europe-wide congress of Eritreans” and forerunner of the famous annual Bologna Festival. It is, however, important to note that at the 1970 Munich conference ELF supporters and the supporters of the dissident groups were both present as the delegates of various country branches. Eritreans from Poland and Hungary in particular, were not willing to condemn the ELF and commit themselves to support the reformers. In 1969 GUES had adopted an organisational structure with three centres: one in Warsaw, one in Cairo and one in Baghdad. Each of them was responsible for a different task. At the Munich congress, GUES-Cairo decided to side with the pro-EPLF faction. Those who remained loyal to the ELF leadership came to be known as GUES-Baghdad (Tabacco 2001:22-23, cf. EGUW 1977). The Eritrean Student's Union in Europe decided to rename

---

<sup>19</sup> The three dissident groups were the so-called ELF-Obel, the PLF (1) led by Osman Sahle Sabbe, and the Ala group (PLF 2) under the leadership of Isayas Afewerki. The latter two started to cooperate in 1972 under the unwieldy name Eritrean Liberation Front - People's Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF). In 1973 they united and became known as Eritrean People's Liberation *Forces* (EPLF). The name Eritrean People's Liberation *Front* was officially adopted only in 1977. As Ruth Iyob explains: “The PLF 1 and PLF 2 agreed to a complete merger ... and became the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (EPLF). Although the English initials for the EPLF remained the same, the Tigrinya version - *Hizbawi Hailtat Harnet Ertra* (HH HaE) - was changed into *Hizbawi Genbar Harnet Ertra* (HGHE) at the EPLF's first Organizational Congress in 1977. The change of name denoted a transition from *Hailtat* (forces) to *Genbar* (front)” (Iyob 1995:116). For the sake of better readability, however, the term “EPLF” will be used in this text for the time from 1970 onwards.

into “Eritrean Students and Workers Union in Europe” in order to better integrate non-student members and sympathizers.

The follow-up of the Munich conference was to take place in Nuremberg on 12 August 1971. On 10 August of the same year, GUES Baghdad organised a congress, too.<sup>20</sup> Both sides allege that the proximity of dates (as opposed to the distance of the venues) was by no means coincidental, but aimed at making it virtually impossible for anyone to take part in both events.<sup>21</sup> The EPLF’s Bologna documentation laconically states that this situation “...forced the association of the students in Europe to denounce GUES Baghdad openly” (Tabacco 2001:23; translation B.C.). To some extent this split, and its consequences for the exile organisations, also explains the diverging names, dates and developments related by different interviewees. While ELF and EPLF both claim Eritrean student activism in Europe (and the Middle East) in the 1960s as a part of their respective histories, some developments are interpreted differently or simply not mentioned. After the parting of ways, parallel exile structures of ELF and EPLF evolved that have left a lasting imprint on Eritrean diaspora communities until this very day.<sup>22</sup>

In 1972 the Eritreans in Europe held their third congress. Again it took place in Munich. Again the group renamed. Possibly following the newly established “Eritreans for Liberation in North America” (EFLNA) in the USA, they now called themselves “Eritreans for Liberation in Europe” – short EFLE.<sup>23</sup> The following years were marked by more violence in Eritrea proper. Ethiopia extended its attacks into the Eritrean highlands. Atrocities against civilians, such as the massacre of more than 600 people in the village of Ona in 1970, had already caused more and more Tigrinya to support the rebels and also galvanised the exiles. But the split of the ELF also led to a period of internal strife and bloodshed. A civil war ensued between the ELF and EPLF that was only stopped in 1974

---

<sup>20</sup> Here the name GUES was discussed and pro-EPLF GUES Cairo was advised to change their name as to distance themselves from GUES Baghdad – a suggestion that was refuted by GUES Cairo.

<sup>21</sup> Methods of enforcing a “with-or-against-me” decision are still used in the Eritrean diaspora today. The annual Eritrea Festivals in Frankfurt (“EPLF”) and Kassel (“ELF”) for example, usually both take place within two weeks in summer. With most participants coming from all over Germany and neighbouring countries, even those who might want to attend both events would be logistically and financially hard put to realize their plans.

<sup>22</sup> For reasons elaborated in the introduction, the ELF’s exile organisations have not been part of this study.

<sup>23</sup> A certain trend towards unification and standardization cannot be denied and foreshadows the global network of Eritrean mass organisations that the EPLF was to build (cf. Hepner 2005).



(but resumed in the early 1980s). Moreover – although this was hushed up at the time – the persecution of actual or presumed dissenters within both ELF and EPLF cost many lives.<sup>24</sup>

While the situation within Eritrea was thus far from clear, the political direction that was to dominate the next two decades of Eritrean exile finally became manifest in a joint declaration of EFLE, EFLNA, and GUES-Cairo. Issued at their fourth congress in Italy in 1973, the so-called “Declaration of Pavia” set the parameters for Eritrean exile politics for years to come and cemented the split between ELF and EPLF supporters:

We, the representatives of EFLE, EFLNA, and GUES-Cairo meeting at the Fourth Annual Congress of EFLE in Pavia, Italy, from 25-29 August 1973, would like to take this opportunity to declare the common guiding principles of our organizations and affirm our genuine desire and determination to coordinate our activities and work towards principled unity of all progressive Eritrean organisations engaged in ensuring the continuation and intensification of the heroic struggle of the Eritrean masses for a true national liberation headed and guided by the Eritrean Liberation Front-Peoples Liberation Forces [the later EPLF], the only genuine Vanguard of the Eritrean struggle for national independence. ...

We firmly believe that in this vital struggle ... there should not be, and cannot be any neutral position ... We are therefore, neither spectators nor sympathizers of the Eritrean struggle but active and committed members whose activities and commitments are geared towards the realization of the final Victory of ... the Eritrean Revolution. ...

We strongly condemn the so-called “revolutionary council” of the Eritrean Liberation Front for its anti-people, counter-revolutionary and fascist [sic!] program .... We further condemn the activities of the handful lackeys of the so-called “revolutionary council” who arrogantly call themselves General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES-BAGHDAD).<sup>25</sup>

The strong words of the Pavia declaration make it unmistakably clear that the Eritreans for Liberation (EFL) had taken sides with the EPLF. *Vice versa*, the ELF, too, condemned the GUES Cairo. At the first congress of the Eritrean Women’s General Union (EWGU), an ELF mass organisation, calls for:

---

<sup>24</sup> For more details on the various reform movements within the ELF and EPLF, see, e.g. Markakis 1991, Pool 2001, or Schröder 1988 and 2004. For a couple of years there has been a new trend amongst a small section of Eritrean diaspora society trying to record eye-witness reports and various other sources in order find out or at least to document what actually happened within the ELF and EPLF.

<sup>25</sup> Pavia Declaration 1973, last accessed 3. December 2007 at [http://eri24.com/Article\\_10014.htm](http://eri24.com/Article_10014.htm). (Cf. appendix 1) For the Italian version see Agostino 2000: 26ff. (Any typing errors are left as in original text).

The firm condemnation of the G.U.E.S.'s leadership attitude which distorts the struggle of the Eritrean democratic mass organizations and considers these position as irresponsible and not revolutionary. (The Eritrean Women's General Union 1977:23)<sup>26</sup>

But soon new divisions arose. Thus far EFLNA in the USA and EFLE in Europe had seen themselves as independent organisations, both vis-à-vis the ELF and the EPLF. Now they found themselves pushed to become structurally linked to the EPLF. Additionally, some dubious happenings within the newly created EPLF raised doubts. Especially the crackdown on an internal reform movement, dubbed *Menka'*, in 1973 shook the confidence of the EFLNA and EFLE members.<sup>27</sup>

The front's harsh response to the dissident movement *Menka'* astonished many EFLNA activists raising questions about the EPLF's putatively democratic nature ... The *Menka'* members who were later executed by the EPLF had many friends and former classmates within EFLNA, and the incident disillusioned more than a few. (Hepner 2005:50)

The following intrigues and infightings within EFLNA in the USA are well documented by various sources, notably Hepner (2005), Beyan (2007) and Mehretab (2007). According to Hepner (2005), those who were critical of the EPLF, or simply wanted EFLNA to retain its autonomy, were systematically discredited in the second half of the 1970s. This eventually led to the split and demise of EFLNA. Its remnants were reorganised by EPLF cadres and finally became the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA) – a mass organisation of the EPLF. The highly dedicated leader of the “anti”-EPLF faction of EFLNA, who had warned keenly against surrendering the group's independence, was made a scapegoat for the crisis. Rumour has it that his tragic fall out of his New York apartment window in the late 1970s – was neither accidental nor suicidal (cf. Hepner 2005, Beyan 2007).

While the same wealth of material has not been available for the European situation, it is highly probable that a similar development took place. Both the *Menka'* incident and the conflict between EFLNA and the EPLF were hotly debated issues that are well

---

<sup>26</sup> In the same document the EWGU “praises with admiration the democratic forces inside the G.U.E.S.”, and assert that: The Congress stands firmly by the above mentioned democratic forces.” (The Eritrean Women's General Union 1977:23)

<sup>27</sup> Initially, EFLNA had adopted the of the emergent EPLF's reasoning for its split from the ELF (Hepner (2005:48-49). The tide only turned during the early and mid-1970s, as new arrivals with personal ties with the ELF questioned the split, and the *Menka'* crisis sparked further doubts.

“remembered” by Eritreans in Germany, and have been given much new consideration in recent years (cf. chapter 5 and 7).<sup>28</sup> A former EPLF cadre who had studied in an Eastern European country before settling in Germany recalled what he knew about the EFLE (or ENAE – the Tigrinya acronym) and its demise.<sup>29</sup>

... they were called ENAE [*Ertrawien nNatsinet Europa* - that is Eritreans for Liberation in Europe, B.C.] or ENASA [*Ertrawien nNatsinet Semien Amerika*, B.C.] in America. I don't know who the founders were over there ... . But in Europe it was some compatriots that lived in Munich, in Bavaria, who started the ENAE [EFLE]. At the beginning this was an independent organisation ... When around 1973, after the split within the ELF, the EPLF was founded, they sent their members into the groups. And without asking the other members they decided that ENAE should be a part of the EPLF. In America, the ENASA were totally against this [unification]. ... Some worked very hard. One is no longer alive. It is believed that he was killed. A very competent man, he was.... Those in Europe were simply swallowed by the EPLF. ... around 1975/76 ... (Interview April 2004, translation from German, B.C.)

The strategy of infiltration, defamation and coercion that led to the demise of the Eritreans for Liberation as an independent organisation, was to become a preferred tactics to split, destroy and/or take over groups that resisted integration into the organisational structures of the EPLF (see also chapters 2, 5 and 7). That the EPLF was ready to take such measures, however, also indicates that it regarded the exiles' undivided and unconditional support as crucial for the struggle against both the ELF and the Ethiopians. Especially after 1975, when the EPLF's main fundraiser Osman Saleh Sabbe – who had this far been very adept in securing funds, e.g. in the Gulf states – pulled out of the EPLF, the organisation increasingly sought to built a reliable source of income from the exile communities in the Middle East, Europe and North America (Pool 2001:98, see also Kibreab 2007). An interview with Haile Menkerios suggests that the plan to organise the exile communities

---

<sup>28</sup> The story of a young Eritrean student in Germany who returned to Eritrea to fight with the EPLF in the early 1970s and then disappeared at the time of the *Menka'* crisis is vividly remembered by several observers and former activists I talked to. The German girlfriend of the young man later confronted EPLF leaders at a congress about his disappearance and was advised to mind her own business. - A major difference compared to the USA, was the existence of a relatively strong ELF network in Europe, and particularly in Germany. The ELF's continued presence provided an alternative space for exile politics in Europe/Germany. In communities with a large ELF followership such as Nürnberg and Kassel, EPLF could merely build parallel structures, yet without ever integrating or absorbing the pro-ELF organisations. To this day, Kassel remains a “Jebha” i.e. ELF) stronghold.

<sup>29</sup> See also [www.eri24.com/article\\_440.htm](http://www.eri24.com/article_440.htm) (accessed 2 December 2007)

may indeed date back to at least 1973.<sup>30</sup> He had studied in the USA, but returned to Eritrea in 1973 to join the EPLF, where he was asked to go to Europe as a so-called “mobiliser”. In an online interview he recalls:

I and Mehari Gimatsion from the USSR were told that we should go abroad and organize students, workers etc organizations and to return to Europe. I did not want the job after come determined to fight in the field... (Aida 2005)

The EPLF’s efforts to mobilise Eritreans abroad for financial and moral support were matched by its aversion against independent voices. Rooted perhaps in the experience of the ELF’s failure to create unity among its various factions, the EPLF became zealous in silencing potential or actual dissidents and forging not only “national” but also organisational unity. An internal secret service, the *halewti sawra* (meaning “guardians of the revolution”) operated both in the field and abroad, keeping people in awe. For the time of the struggle, however, there was little criticism regarding such measures. “We were not always happy with their [the EPLF’s] decisions” says one former cadre of the EPLF’s student’s union, “but we swallowed our discomfort, because at that time we were all fighting for one aim: independence.”

### **Mass-flight and mass-mobilization: building the EPLF’s “infrastructure of absorption”<sup>31</sup>**

In Germany the constant trickle of about a hundred Eritrean and Ethiopia newcomers per year, rose to almost 200 new arrivals in 1975 (Schröder 2004).<sup>32</sup> The increase mainly foreshadowed a much larger wave of refugees that was to arrive in the late 1970s following the 1974 overthrow of Haile Selassie and the socialist revolution in Ethiopia (Clapham 1988). Apart from the political unrest in Ethiopia proper, the pressure on Eritrean rebels and the Eritrean population in general grew more intense, causing both Eritreans living in Ethiopia and in Eritrea to flee the country (Schröder 1992:8-9). These new arrivals, too, were mostly single young men with an urban background, but also included a small number

---

<sup>30</sup> After independence Haile Menkerios became Eritrea’s permanent representative to the United Nations. He later defected and since then has held several senior position with the UN. For other prominent Eritrean politicians with a background of exile activism in the USA see Hepner (2005: 45).

<sup>31</sup> The term is borrowed from David Pool (2001: 98).

<sup>32</sup> The following summary of immigration waves is based on the data collected by Günter Schröder (1992, 2004). He also gives a very detailed account of the available demographic data, including age, gender ratio, distribution of Eritrean/Ethiopian refugees across Germany and further insightful details that cannot all be included within the scope of this study.

of young Eritrean women. Most of the latter were school or university students, but there were also professional women and housewives who had been clandestinely involved in the Eritrean independence movements (Schröder 1992:9, Abeba 1991).

Others, too, who already had a permanent or temporary legal status in Germany (e.g. as students), or who arrived as sailors in German harbours, now applied for asylum. Many were rightfully afraid of having to face severe punishments for their exile activities, if they had been forced to return to Ethiopia. Another group of politically active exiles, that certainly helped boost the existing organisations (that since 1973/4 were mostly pro-EPLF), were students coming to West Germany from Eastern Bloc countries in the second half of the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> After the socialist revolution in Ethiopia in 1974, many EPLF-organised Eritreans studying in the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries experienced growing difficulties. Since revolutionary Ethiopia had secured the political and military support of the USSR, Eritrean EPLF supporters found themselves in an awkward position in spite of their own socialist ideology.<sup>34</sup> An Eritrean studying agronomics in Moscow in 1974 recalls:

At the beginning we, that is the EPLF groups, could still work undisturbed. But when the Russians started to support Mengistu, we had to continue our work clandestinely. There were secret service people amongst the foreign students, too. You had to be careful. ... (Hannken 2003:197)

Not only Soviet spies amongst the student body, but also other Ethiopian students were potential informers on Eritrean activities in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Consequently, many Eritreans were blacklisted and dared not return to Eritrea/Ethiopia where the internal political conditions had reached crisis point in the late 1970s. Many Eritrean (and Ethiopian) graduates therefore decided to migrate westwards rather than to return home:

During the holidays I went to West Germany and helped in agriculture. ... In 1975 I graduated. We were the first to end our studies in the Eastern Bloc and we were supposed to get a good job in Ethiopia. When I heard how bad the situation had become.... I went to Germany. (Hannken 2003:197)

---

<sup>33</sup> According to Bauer (1992), Schröder (1992, 2004), Hannken (2003), and diverse narratives of Eritreans I interviewed between 1999 and 2006, Ethiopian and Eritrean students had been sent to Eastern Europe in the days of Haile Selassie, and especially thereafter, when the Haile Mengistu Mariam's main foreign support came from the USSR. They mostly studied technical and economic subjects, but also medicine in East Berlin, Leipzig, Warsaw, Prague, Sofia, Bucharest, Budapest, and various towns all over the USSR.

<sup>34</sup> The question which brand of socialism should be embraced or condemned also was a big issue of contention (cf. Hepner 2005), though it is beyond the scope of this work to go into the details of this debate.

The fact that many Eritrean students already had “West” contacts may have made that step easier. Travelling to Western countries was relatively easy. Other than the residents of Warsaw Pact States, foreign students enjoyed freedom of movement. Some not only travelled to join political meetings, but also to upgrade their stipends. They took on holiday jobs in the West, and on return traded Western goods in their Eastern University towns. Wong et al. (1992:77) report that the establishment of an Eritrean community in Nuremberg can indeed be traced back to students from Prague who first spent their semester breaks working for the Americans stationed nearby and later settled permanently in Nuremberg.

More difficult than travelling abroad, was to avoid “repatriation” after having graduated from an Eastern European University. In this situation, however, Eritreans soon found out how to benefit from the cold war situation that effectively turned them into political refugees fleeing a communist regime. As such, they were relatively easily granted “political asylum” status in the West. A student reaching Germany from the USSR in 1975 was brought to the CIA headquarter in Munich where he was interrogated and then offered to resettle to North America. He comments: “There was highly [sic!] competition between East and West. So when you come from the East you are always special.” Even in 1980, while Eritrean refugees coming for instance from Sudan were confronted with the new visa obligation and tougher asylum laws, another Eritrean from the USSR recalls receiving red carpet treatment from the West German Embassy in Moscow: “They bought me a plane ticket, Moscow - Frankfurt/Main - Bangkok - Addis Ababa, so that the Russians accompanying me to the airport would not make a fuss ...” (Hannken 2003: 217 and 198).

The influx of Eritrean students from the East continued all through the 1970s and 1980s (Schröder 1992: 11). Albeit relatively small in numbers, this group played an important rôle in shaping and leading the Eritrean political community in Germany (cf. Wong 1992). A further significant increase of new Ethiopian and Eritrean exiles coming (sometimes via Sudan) from Ethiopia could be observed between 1978 and 1980. Ethiopians, but also Eritreans, were fleeing the *Dergue's* (i.e. the Ethiopian regime's) “Red Terror” of 1977-1979, a ruthless campaign to oust opponents of the regime. The Eritrean refugees had left their homes because of the massive military offensives against the Eritrean liberation movements between 1978 and 1980. In Germany the immigration of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees reached its peak in 1979/80 with almost 3,000 new arrivals – the majority of them coming originally from Eritrea. (Schröder 1992:9).

By the late 1970s, the EFLE (as well as EFLNA) had already become integrated within the emerging structure of EPLF mass organisations. The first edition of “Volks-Revolution in Eritrea,” a three-monthly German language bulletin published in 1975 by EFLE/Germany, states: “This is the first German language account of the history of the colonial suppression of the Eritrean peoples... and its heroic struggle for national independence.” The publication already bears the emblem of the EPLF and calls the EFLE “a democratic and anti-imperialist **mass organisation**” (EFLE/BRD 1975:2; translation and emphasis B.C.). The EPLF indeed organised their supporters in (peasants’,) workers’, women’s and students’ unions starting from the mid-1970s. The structures of the mass organisations were systematically replicated in the Eritrean communities abroad and organised under the Eritrea-based *Kifli Hizbi* – the Department of Public Administration (see Pool 2001:85; Hepner 2009:50).

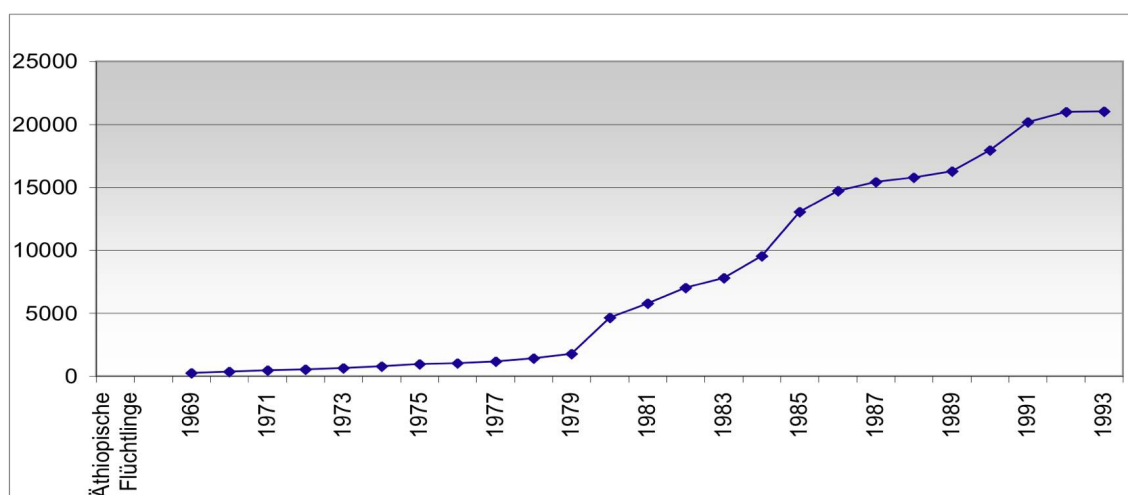
After the EPLF’s first congress in 1977, a student’s organisation called “Association of Eritrean Students” (AES) was formed, most likely with the aim of replacing GUES. The AES held its first congress in Keren/Eritrea in May 1978. The meeting was also attended by student activists from exile countries, including EFLE representatives from Germany. Following this event, EFLE renamed itself “Association of Eritrean Students in Europe” (AESE), affirming its role as an EPLF mass organisations.<sup>35</sup> In some ways the mass organisations became more successful in exile than in Eritrea proper where the EPLF’s influence was largely limited to the liberated areas, and not unanimously welcomed by a conservative peasantry (Tronvoll 1998). This was most certainly true for the student’ union that did not gain much importance in Eritrea. In exile, however, the students represented the educated faction of the mass organisations and were responsible for all kinds of lobby work and public relations. The members of women’s and worker’s organisations, too, represented only a small part of the Eritrean population at home whereas abroad they had become mass-organisations in the true sense the word.

Apart from their political work, the mass organisations in Germany and elsewhere also provided services, a link with home and an opportunity for socializing with other Eritreans. As will be shown later (cf. chapters five and seven), this effective bundling of

---

<sup>35</sup> Frequent renaming of the mass organisations sometimes leads to confusion. After the EPLF’s first congress in 1977, The EPLF’s women’s association held a congress in Sahel in 1979 at which the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn) was constituted. In 1987, after the EPLF’s second Congress, the Association of Eritrean Students (AES) became the National Union of Eritrean Youth (NUES). After independence NUES reconstituted itself as the National Union of Eritrea Youth and Students (NUEYS) in 1994. The workers association was called National Union of Eritrean Workers (NUEW). However, after the demise of the workers union in 1989, NUEW became the acronym for the re-created Women’s Union.

forces and resources was not only achieved by appealing to the refugees' undoubtedly strong sense of loyalty and dedication, but also by systematically using of control mechanisms and coercion (cf. Pool 2001, Hepner 2003, Conrad 2005, Woldemichael 2005). Still, it were these EPLF – and to a smaller extent also ELF – mass organisations, led mostly by former students of the early days of exile, which the larger number of new arrivals found in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 2** "Ethiopian" nationals (including Eritreans) in Germany 1961-1993. The data have been compiled by Günter Schröder (1991; 2004) using figures of both the Statistische Bundesamt SBA (Federal Statistical Office) and the Ausländerzentralregister AZR (Central Registry of Aliens).<sup>37</sup>

While the mostly well-educated, young, male exiles arriving in the 1960s and 1970s, had settled in Germany with comparative ease, the situation in the 1980s was a different one. The new arrivals were often less well prepared for a life abroad, and much more heterogeneous in terms of their social and educational backgrounds. Additionally they faced increasing difficulties in being granted entry and asylum in Germany. With the end of Germany's economic boom the need for migrant labour declined and xenophobic tendencies were on the upswing. Defamed as *Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge* ("economic asylum seekers") that scrounged off the German social security system, refugees and exiles were the first victims

<sup>36</sup> In the mid 1970s students – not only in exile countries, but also in Eritrea proper – became the driving force of the liberation war. As Tom Killion writes: "During late 1974 and early 1975, tens of thousands of Eritrean students joined the liberation fronts, forming the core of the nationalist forces through the end of the ARMED STRUGGLE." (Killion 1998:385; emphasis as in original).

<sup>37</sup> According to Schröder and estimates from within the community it can be assumed that in 1993 about 17,000 of the "Ethiopian" refugees in Germany were actually of Eritrean origin. For more details on Eritrean sociology in Germany see Schröder 1991 and 2004. The table was originally designed by Jan Sören Koch (2002), and updated by the author (BC).



of populist policies that aimed at curtailing the number of immigrants as a cure-all for Germany's economic ills. After rising numbers of asylum seekers in the late 1970s, nationals of the main "refugee producing" countries could no longer enter Germany without a valid visa. 1980, the last year that Ethiopian nationals were free from visa obligations, brought almost 3,000 "Ethiopian" refugees into the country (see Figure 2). Most of them had fled to Sudan and, from there, came by plane on direct flights to Frankfurt or Stuttgart.<sup>38</sup> Two years later a further tightening of German immigration laws made it possible to refuse refugees entry at the border without any hearing.

Legal means to appeal against deportation orders were also curbed. And, what is most important, asylum seekers were bureaucratically distributed to camps and hostels all over Germany to await the outcome of their appeals. The arrivals were not allowed to move freely beyond the borders of the town or district they were sent to. The shortening of social benefits and the banning of asylum seekers from the job market for two, later even five years made it even harder for Eritrean refugees to rebuilt their lives (Mindt 1986:170, Die Grünen 1987, Neußner 1987). The result of all these preventive measures, aimed at deterring potential asylum seekers, was dubitable. While new legislation meant a serious infringement of Germany's hitherto relatively generous asylum laws, and made life for refugees more difficult, it did little to stop the immigration of refugees in the years to follow. The numbers of "Ethiopians" in Germany had trebled between 1980 and 1985. From the mid-1980s numbers of Eritrean/Ethiopian refugees rose less rapidly than before – also due to the stricter laws – but soon new (and more dangerous) flight routes were found (for details see Schröder 1992), and legal means of family reunification also contributed to a continued increase of the Eritrean refugee community.

Ironically, the tougher legislation helped Eritrean political activists to "organise the masses" and rally the majority of new arrivals behind their cause. The centralised accommodation of asylum seekers, for instance, had clear benefits seen from the perspective of the EPLF's "mobilisers": "...they were all huddled together there" says an Eritrean EPLF activist in Nuremberg cited by Wong et al (1992:82). One of my interviewees also reported that EPLF cadres were specifically dispatched to Bremen and possibly also to Hamburg and other places of entry, to recruit new arrivals there. What Wong et al. (1993) write about the

---

<sup>38</sup> After 1980 this flight route became problematic as airlines transporting passengers without visa, were fined up to DM 10,000 (Mindt 1986:170). Additionally, there was growing pressure from the German government on the Sudanese authorities to enforce stricter controls (Schröder 1992:20). For detailed accounts on the Eritrean refugee situation in Sudan see Habte-Selassie 1992; Sendker 1990; Kibreab 1987, 1991, 1995, 1996.

situation in Nuremberg, seems mirror the situation in other places of Eritrean settlement in Germany and also, for example, in the USA (Hepner 2005, 2009). Both former student activists and EPLF cadres, delegated from the field, began to organise the “masses,” and also tried to lobby for support among Germans and other migrant groups:

The core of this leadership group consists of former students from former Czechoslovakia, the GDR and the Soviet Union who have come to Nuremberg directly and who, thanks to their education and language skills, have become representatives of the others – both within the political organisations and vis-à-vis the German authorities. The permanent political demands and the needs of their compatriots come at a high personal cost for this group. The enormous amount of time and energy spent for these purposes is missing when it comes to building a new professional career. Hardly anyone has finished a re-training and most of them have to make a living as unskilled labourers in spite of their educational qualifications. (Wong et al 1993:83, translation B.C.)

Amongst the newcomers in the early to mid-1980s were many families and women with or without children as well as some unaccompanied minors (cf. Wittenberg 1990). Gathered in so-called “asylum shelters,” the newcomers were offered help in the name of the EPLF (and ELF) organisations. They usually gratefully accepted the assistance and were thus quickly integrated into the political networks, which in turns had to be adapted to accommodate and organise a much larger, less independent, and more diverse group of people. In spite of the initial distribution of Eritrean refugee all over Germany, towns like Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Kassel, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Nuremberg and Munich, Wuppertal and Mannheim/Karlsruhe became centres of Eritrean refugee settlement in Germany and gradually Eritrean “refugee communities” developed in these town (for more socio-graphic detail cf. Schröder 1992, 2004).

### ***Adi Ertra* abroad: life in exile and the need for community**

The sheer increase in the number of Eritrean refugees within only a few years (late 1970s to mid-1980s) brought its own challenges and changes – for the “established” exile community as a whole as well as for those trying to mobilise and organise them. And whereas the early arrivals had been merely divided by their ideological views and their support for vying liberation movements, the arrivals of the 1980s, brought a diversity that not quite mirrored Eritrean society at home, but came much closer to doing so. On the one hand this brought new conflicts into exile society. On the other hand, it also enabled the refugees to re-create

an “Eritrean life” abroad. Another profound difference – compared to the early years – was that the perceived temporary character of one’s exile could no longer be upheld. The massive USSR-supplied Ethiopian offensives in the late 1970s and the subsequent “strategic withdrawal” of the EPLF 1978 made way for the sober realization that a return to Eritrea would not be feasible in the near future, and that some amount of accommodation in exile was necessary. Both the new perspective of a prolonged exile and the refugees’ extended possibilities of choosing contacts from a wider circle of compatriots, posed a challenge for the EPLF cadres abroad. There was a growing demand for social services and the need to integrate persons of different ethnic, regional, religious and social origin to avoid the emergence of particularist groups.

During the 1980s migration-related difficulties such as the integration of a German-born or -raised second generation also became more acute. These created a need to respond to social problems and to the challenge of maintaining a cultural identity beyond the first generation of refugees. A special case was that of unaccompanied Eritrean minors (from infants to adolescents) that had been sent abroad “to safety.” While some found a home with relatives in exile, many more grew up in children’s homes or – mostly German – foster families. The NGO Internationaler Sozialdienst (ISD), that provided counselling to refugees, even set up a special team dealing with the diverse problems Eritrean child refugees were faced with (ISD 1982). During my work with Eritrean youth groups I met quite a few young adults from among this group, who had arrived in Germany as unaccompanied minors and were now joining Eritrean associations. Not all of them, however, had been able to re-connect with their families or other countrymen or -women, leading to a great deal of personal misery. A former cadre of the student’s union and social worker remembered a situation he witnessed in the 1990s: a teenage boy who grown up in a German foster family at a very young age walked into an Eritrean party one evening: “He had forgotten his mother tongue, but he knew that he was no German either. He sat down and looked at us, and cried and cried... .” (Interview, April 2004, B.C.).

Needless to say, also grown-ups and children fleeing with one or both parents encountered numerous problems (see for instance Bauer 1991, 1994, Brixius und Tewes 1991).<sup>39</sup> Like other Third-World refugees they had to fight with both individual and institutionalised discrimination and racism, difficulties in finding suitable housing and

---

<sup>39</sup> For an excellent and detailed analysis of the living conditions as well as identity and integration issues of Eritrean refugees living in Germany in the (late) 1980s, see Heike Bauer’s unpublished MA thesis “Eritreer in Frankfurt. Ethnizität unter Bedingungen des Exils” (1991).

employment, or continuing their education. To varying degrees Eritrean newcomers also found orientation in a Western culture challenging and were consumed by loneliness, homesickness, survivor's guilt and fear for those that had left behind. Psychosomatic illnesses, mental disorders, and high suicide rates were symptoms of untreated trauma, permanent stress, frustration and other migration-related pressures. Many experienced not only the German climate, but also its inhabitants and interpersonal relations as "cold" or "reserved" (Bauer 1991:184ff; Mindt 1986:181; also Nolting 2001; Hannken 2003). Time and again my interviewees marvelled at the extent of German ignorance concerning the Horn of Africa. Some had assumed that technological and economic advancement would find a parallel in high educational standards, open-mindedness and an interest in the world at large. Having a generally high opinion of "European civilization," especially educated Eritreans were disillusioned to learn that most Germans could not even put Eritrea on a map.

From the 1980s onward new Eritrean refugees had to spend months and years in asylum shelters, uncertain whether they would eventually be granted asylum status and able to build a life. Many of them had a rural background and lacked language skills necessary to communicate with their German environment. This situation doubtlessly contributed to the strong commitment Eritreans showed towards the support of the struggle at home. The other way round, their immediate absorption into exile organisations, also left little room and energy to learn about German culture or to make friends with non-Eritreans. Integration efforts on either side were further curbed by the notion that Eritreans would return "home" as soon as Eritrea was free. Thus feeling relatively isolated, opportunities for socializing with other Eritreans were highly important for the socio-psychological well-being: "To have a day with ... an old friend here is better than any kind of medicine ... ." Mindt quotes one of her Eritrean interviewees (1986:187). Accordingly, events organised by the EPLF, especially those that brought together Eritreans from all over Germany or even Europe, were not only political, but also social and cultural highlights.

Besides bearing witness to the diaspora's intimate connection with the struggle at home, the famed "Bologna Festival", that was held annually in Italy, also satisfied a deep longing for communion with old friends and scattered family members. Bologna was a wedding market and gossip exchange; a valve for "letting off steam," a place for dancing, listening to music, eating Eritrean food, listening to and speaking Eritrean languages and generally recovering from the pressures of managing life on the margins of European societies. The same was (and still is) certainly true for smaller festivals, holidays and events

held in each town were a sufficient number of Eritrean refugees had settled.<sup>40</sup> As each of these events also served as a fundraiser, it can indeed be claimed that they were crucial elements in the creation a moral economy that helped to sustain the independence struggle at home (cf. Radtke 2007, 2009).

In the early to mid-1980s a new form of association made its appearance that also illustrates how the refugees' social needs were tied to the EPLF networks: The MahbereKom, Eritrean Community Association or self-help organisation.<sup>41</sup> The exact origin of the MahbereKoms, as most of the Eritrean community associations are called in Germany today, is unclear. There are different versions of the story: One is, that the EPLF came up with the idea as a means of integrating new refugees that had been affiliated with the ELF and were reluctant to join the EPLF's mass organisations. The MahbereKom with its focus on social and cultural aspects seemed more apt to integrate them, but according to some interviewees this was largely a vain effort. Another version maintains that the EPLF's MahbereKom concept was indeed copied from the ELF (there are still some ELF community organisations, e.g. in Frankfurt and Stuttgart, that operate parallel to the EPLF groups). Yet another story claims that the early MahbereKoms had previously been independent parent's associations that were "taken over" by the EPLF.<sup>42</sup> Either way it can be stated that the MahbereKoms have never become truly independent of the political organisations – neither financially, nor organisationally, nor with regards to the persons in charge. After independence the Eritrean representations in Germany established a close relationship with the MahbereKoms.

Within the MahbereKom structures, the football clubs, cultural groups and others found a home and contributed to the local communities' quality of living. Some *MahbereKoms* also offered language classes for children born in Germany, or alphabetisation courses for adults. Another important feature of the MahbereKom was and still is to organise self-help. The community organisation, for instance, hires out equipment

---

<sup>40</sup> The current Festival Eritrea in Frankfurt goes back to the festival organised by the mass organisations in Germany prior to independence. It took place in connection with their annual congress (at country level) in the run-up to Bologna. Back then, as today, there was also a special programme for "guests," including "reports" by delegates from Eritrea (cf. National Union of Eritrean Students/Workers/Women – BRD 1985:15).

<sup>41</sup> The very name MahbereKom (or MahaberKom) only began to be used just before independence when they were thought to replace the dissolved mass organisations. For the sake of readability, I use the term MahbereKom also for its predecessors.

<sup>42</sup> The parent's associations were not an Eritrean invention, but had become common institutions among the larger migrant communities in Germany – often initiated by social workers. In fact it seems most likely that the different version stories relate to the happenings in different places.

for family celebrations. It also organises and co-organises parties on all major Eritrean holidays, such as *m'alti deki-anistyö* (International Women's Day on 8 March), *m'alti natsinet* (Independence Day on May 24) or *m'alti semaetat* (Martyrs' Day on June 20) and the annual Festival Eritrea in Frankfurt. Most MahbereKoms offer social services, for example help with translating official letters and documents, assistance in legal matters, or advice on how to deal with German authorities. In case of family conflicts, "elders" from the community association sometimes try to mediate. However, some members of the wider Eritrean community seemed to have doubts about the effectiveness of these services and interventions (cf. chapters 2 and 5).

Beyond "official" community life there was little time or space left for self-organization during the independence struggle. Family networks, as far as they were functional, have always been important, and some small and suspiciously observed religious groups began to cater for spiritual and social needs in the early to mid-1980s (cf. chapter 6). Other means of more informal socializing included get-togethers in social clubs for the men (though these were usually run by either ELF or EPLF) and private coffee meetings for women. The latter were often organised in the shape of traditional savings and credit circles, called *ekub* in Tigrinya. In exile, the *ekubs'* social meaning was perhaps more important than its original function (cf. Gärtner 2001).<sup>43</sup> It provided an opportunity to rest, drink coffee and, perhaps most importantly, to gossip. The cohesive and disruptive effects of gossiping continue to shape community life to this very day (cf. Wrong, 2005b). Gossip serves as a means to control individual behaviour in the anonymous setting of a foreign city, but it also helps to recreate a feeling of community, of *adi ertra* in exile, even though it is a broken and haphazardly reassembled version of life in *adi*.

### **Beyond *adi ertra*: mobilising international solidarity and financial support**

In spite of the multiple challenges the refugees were faced with at an individual level, Eritrean political and social organisations in exile effectively bundled nationalist sentiments to benefit the EPLF's struggle at home. By the mid-1980s a great majority of Eritrean refugees was organised with the EPLF, making it one of the most efficiently run (trans)national liberation movements worldwide. Even the few formally independent

---

<sup>43</sup> More detailed information about the original form and function of highland *equbs*, can be found in the monograph "Mai Weini. A highland village in Eritrea (Tronvoll, 1998a).

Eritrean relief, self-help and professional agencies were personally and structurally linked to the party.

Enviied by other liberation movements for its disciplined and thorough organisation, the Eritrean exile community also formed “a key element in the financial network of the EPLF” (Killion 1998:166). Hepner states that even during the 1970s EFLNA alone had sent about \$200,000 per year directly to the EPLF - with a membership of no more than 500 people (Hepner 2005:58). Killion (1998:165) gauges the average contribution at 20-50% of people’s salaries. He estimates that the total contribution of exile Eritreans (coming mostly from those living in the Middle East, North America and Europe) to the EPLF added up to at least US\$ 50 million. Considering inflation, the equivalent of that sum would be considerably higher today. The money (as well as support in kind – e.g. medical equipment) was contributed by exile Eritreans in the form of donations, a “revolutionary tax,” entrance fees to EPLF organised events and membership fees. Additionally, (street) collections were made in the various countries of settlement as part of a general strategy to mobilise support also from non-Eritreans.

Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Eritrean student activists abroad became immersed in the global student’s movement.<sup>44</sup> A strong-felt sense of solidarity and communality with Third-World revolutionaries became a broad-based phenomenon, that provided Eritrean as well as Ethiopian, Kurdish, Palestinian or Vietnamese exiles with a platform to lobby for support of their respective causes and movements. Bahman Nirumand, exile Iranian and one of the leaders of the German student revolt, recalls:

We all belonged together ... [the students] in Berlin, the Vietnamese, the blacks in the USA, the independence movements ... There was an incredible tension. I had the feeling that what I was saying at that moment, reaches millions of people and is part of the world revolution. (Schmitz 2007:94, translation B.C.).

Eritrean exile organisations in Germany and elsewhere were a part of the worldwide student movement.<sup>45</sup> The EPLF with its socialist structure of a cadre party and mass organisations

---

<sup>44</sup> Few researchers have so far looked into the relationship between exile organisations and their solidarity networks. If so, the focus has largely been on material inputs, but rarely cast a look at their influence of the exile’s politics. While it is beyond the scope of this study to do so here, it should at least be briefly considered that Eritrean activists were of course influenced by the *Zeitgeist* and political thinking of the country they lived in. Talking to former EPLF cadres who had come to Germany in the 1970s, it was hard not to notice how much they were in line with the ideals and principles of left-wing Germans of the same generation.

<sup>45</sup> The candid biographical account of Kassahun Checole (2006) illustrates the interrelatedness of Eritrean exile nationalism and the exiles involvements in international and national political movements abroad.

was at that time by no means “exotic”, not even in West Germany. In many ways it resembled the multitude of socialist organisations and parties brought forth by the student’s revolt. Not surprisingly, EPLE, the AESE and finally the EPLF, successively find mentioning in the various magazines’ and pamphlets of German leftists groups for joining demonstrations and seminars, signing petitions and solidarity notes, or failing to do so (see Figure 3 next page).<sup>46</sup> The EPLF apparently developed close relations with the KBW (Kommunistischer Bund Westdeutschlands – Communist Union of West Germany) and also enjoyed this organisation’s political and material support. Until independence, the EPLF mass organisations had their offices in the KBW’s headquarters in Frankfurt.<sup>47</sup> When KBW later disintegrated and some of its members (and property) found a new home with the new Green Party, the latter continued to lobby for the Eritrean cause. In 1986, Ursula Eid, a long-term EPLF supporter and member of the German parliament for the Greens, instigated a parliamentary enquiry on the “Eritrean Question” which was accompanied by an international conference. Later still, after independence, Eid supported and worked for a return programme for Eritrean refugees, that was co-financed by the German government.

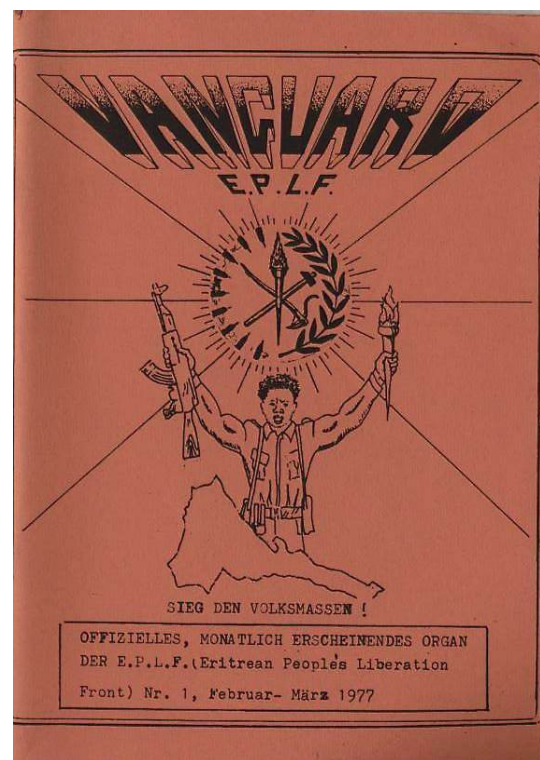
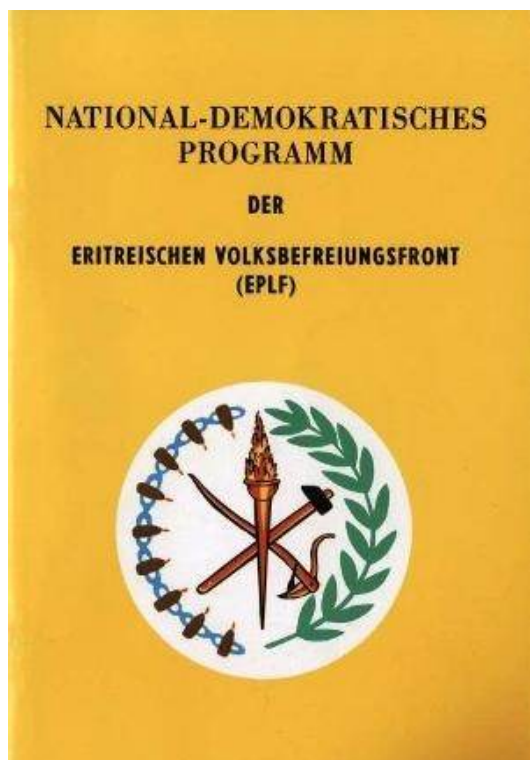
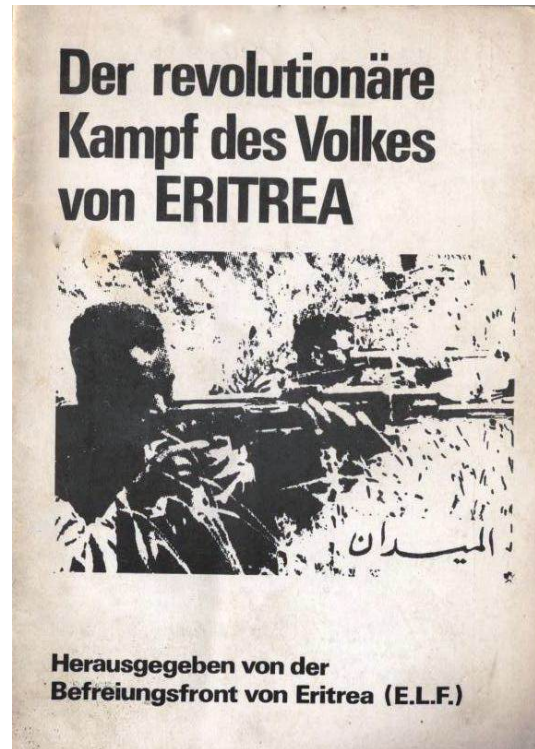
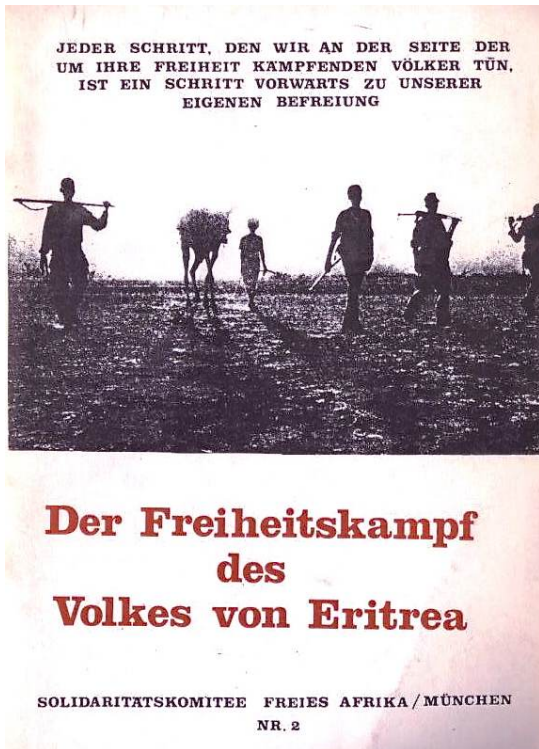
At a transnational level, too, not all organisations supporting the Eritrean liberation war were “Eritrean-only.” As is richly documented in “Eritrea Information” – a monthly bulletin published by the Research and Information Centre on Eritrea (RICE) from 1979 to 1988 – Eritreans abroad managed to rally substantial political and also financial support for the Eritrean cause. “Eritrea Information” was “run as an independent body with both Eritrean and non-Eritrean members” and explicitly set up in order to create “an alternative communication system for informing and educating people about the real nature of the Eritrean question which was so rarely presented in the mass media.” (RICE 1987).

---

<sup>46</sup> For an interesting spotlight on Eritrean involvement the German left wing activities in the 1970s, see Jürgen Schröder’s online data base „MAO-Projekt.“ Available at: <http://www.mao-projekt.de/INT/AF/Eritrea.shtml> (accessed 29 December 2009).

<sup>47</sup> After the KBW’s dissolution the building and other assets were transferred into the ownership of an association also named “Assoziation” that had been founded to support the “Green Movement.” Nowadays the MahbereKom in Frankfurt resides in the “Öko-Haus” a DM 30-million-multi-purpose-building constructed by the Commerzbank for the legal successors of the KBW in exchange for the former KBW’S headquarters in the Mainzer Landstraße (cf. for instance *Der Spiegel*, No 41, 1991: 105 and No. 4, 2001:78/79). Since Eritrean independence the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (HBS), a political foundation of the Green party, facilitated various Eritrea-related programmes, meetings and workshops (e.g. on environmental and media issues). Today Eritrean government supporters blame the organisation for being anti-Eritrean: in 2001 The HBS facilitated a meeting of Eritrean exiles whose “Berlin Manifesto (2001)” expressed concerns about the situation in Eritrea.





**Figure 3** The top-right booklet was edited by the German Committee for Solidarity with Africa. The text above the photo reads: "Each step we take by the side of the peoples fighting for their freedom, is a further step to our own liberation." The other three pictures show the covers of typical ELF (top left) and EPLF brochures (party programme and the EPLF organ "The Vanguard") aiming at a German audience in the 1970s.

Source: <http://www.mao-projekt.de/INT/AF/Eritrea.shtml> (last accessed 4 January 2010)

The Research and Information Centre of Eritrea (RICE) was established in February 1979, following an international symposium convened in London by the renowned Africanist scholar and writer, Basil Davidson. RICE was a foreign-based, autonomous institute entrusted with responsibility to conduct research and to collect and disseminate information on Eritrea. Italy was selected as the initial headquarters since there was already a large collection of literature on Eritrea there. RICE branches were set up within Eritrea, Europe and the US. Scholars of the Horn and Eritrean scholars in exile also contributed to the activities of RICE and the publication of new materials on Eritrea, such as the *Eritrea Information* magazine (1979-1988) and the first *Journal of Eritrean Studies* (JES, 1986-1991). RICE conducted considerable research on Eritrean culture and history. After the end of the liberation struggle in 1991, the name RICE was changed to RDC (Research and Documentation Centre).<sup>48</sup>

Over the years Eritrea Information gained a wider readership, and the support of individuals such as the writer Gabriel Garcia Marques, Italian politician Luciana Castellina, researchers including Johan Galtung, Basil Davidson, Francois Houtard, Immanuel Wallerstein, Lionel Cliffe and Claude Meillassoux to name the most well-known among them.<sup>49</sup> In the editorial of back issues from 1979-1981 various NGOs across Europe and are named for helping financially. A note of thanks also goes Eritreans living abroad:

Financially, we have gradually become more independent also through the sale of publications such as the present one. Organizationally, RICE has remained a loose and informal structure, with local RICEs being set up (in the U.S.A., the Federal Republic of Germany, the U.K., Sweden and Canada) according to the initiatives of Eritreans and their supporters in the different countries. In this context it should be said that, without the dedicated support of Eritreans abroad, in Europe, in North America, in Australia, it would never have been possible to keep the whole work going. And one of the significant developments, perhaps not foreseen by those initiating RICE, has been the great interest that ERITREA INFORMATION has aroused among the Eritreans themselves: It has been yet one more strand in the cords that keep the migrant Eritreans close together. (RICE 1987:IV)

In Germany, besides the local branch of RICE in Heidelberg, the still existing “Eritrea Hilfswerk Deutschland” (EHD), also an Eritrean/non-Eritrean cooperation, had already been founded in 1976. Officially it was an independent NGO, but nonetheless had close links

---

<sup>48</sup> Available at <http://www.eritreanarchives.org/> (accessed 29 December 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Some of these supporters have also made important academic contributions to the research of Eritrean liberation struggle, notably Davidson, Cliffe et. al 1980; Cliffe 1988, 1989; Houtart 1979, 1980. In Germany some major supporters of the Eritreans included academics, politicians and journalists such as Günter Schröder (numerous publications), Volker Matthies (1981), Martin Zimmermann (1990), Konrad Melchers, Frederike Kemink (1991), Ursula Eid and many others.

with the EPLF's Eritrean Relief Association (ERA). ERA had been established a year earlier in Khartoum/Sudan. ERA's German branch was based in Cologne, together with the EHD. With the help of Eritrean exiles ERA became eventually linked with support committees such as EHD in 14 countries (Pateman 1998:182, Killion 1998: 205; Sorenson 1994:70). In the EHD, Eritreans and Germans cooperated to improve the humanitarian situation in Eritrea's (EPLF) "liberated zones" and in the Sudanese refugee camps. Projects included emergency food aid, medical care, etc., but also longer-term development objectives. Through the contacts that individual members had established with church communities, schools and Third-World initiatives, they also tried publicise the political background of the so-called "Eritrea conflict" in Germany.

The EHD became a registered charity and had soon gained an excellent reputation with regard to effectiveness and transparency of its work. Within a decade the organisation had established branches in 30 German towns that collected funds of altogether roughly DM 5 million.<sup>50</sup> According to Killion (1998:206), ERA's overall budget totalled US\$ 39 million by the late 1980s. Somewhat contrary to the popular doctrine of self-reliance, ERA also received donation from up to 120 international donors.<sup>51</sup> Although these amounts were small in comparison to those given to the official Ethiopian agencies by various donor countries and the large NGOs, it shows that the EPLF was not successful because of a proclaimed "splendid isolation," but rather because of its capability of mobilizing global support. Not a small part of this success can be attributed to Eritreans living abroad and their untiring lobby work. Here the general ideology (and later myth) of total self-reliance seems strangely at odds even with the declared aims and realities of ERA and its satellite organisations.

Without wanting to belittle the achievements of the EHD (and others), ERA and the EPLF in the field of humanitarian and development aid (both home-grown and with the help of successful international lobbying), the nexus between humanitarian ideals and EPLF politics should not be ignored. Though EHD/ERA money did not go to the armed wing of

---

<sup>50</sup> The sum of DM 5 million is my rather conservative estimate based on figures published in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary leaflet of the organisation that summarises the organisations achievements up to mid-1986 (EHD 1986). Interestingly, the EHD apparently also received contribution and donations from farther a-field such as Saudi Arabia, Scandinavia, France and Belgium (cf. Sawrana-Report No 3, May/June 1985).

<sup>51</sup> Organisations supporting the Eritrean struggle included for instance the U.K.-based Eritrea Support Committee, the Norwegian Medical Help Committee, Norwegian Church agencies, The International Committee of the Red Cross, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches (cf. Sawrana-Report No 3, May/June 1985; Killion 1998:205).

the EPLF, the donations were exclusively channelled to the needy groups via EPLF organisations. This helped to boost the Front's image and thus to ensure crucial civilian support for the protracted guerrilla war. According Eritrea Information almost 105,000 Eritreans were totally dependent on ERA during the drought in the early 1980s alone (Eritrea Information 1981:2). And if the cruel calculations of the *Dergue* were to weaken the guerrillas in the North of Ethiopia by depopulating Eritrea and Tigray, it was one of ERA's proclaimed aims to stem the refugee waves (Pateman 1988:182). First and foremost this was done to alleviate human suffering, but of course, it also had the effect of safeguarding the movement's support base and source of new recruits.

### **Free at last: going back or staying on?**

Though the breakdown of the Ethiopian military regime was already palpable and the EPLF controlled most of Eritrea, another sizable cohort of new refugees joined the Eritrean exile community between 1989 and 1992 (see table 1). Most of them came from Addis Abeba, where the ground had become hot for Eritreans or anyone associated with the rebels in the North that were about to bring the Dergue to its knees. Eritrean liberation came while they were still "in transit."

When the EPLF marched into Asmara in May 1991, boundless joy galvanised Eritreans at home and in the diaspora. For a brief moment all rifts and conflicts seemed to be erased. And though the joint-victory of EPLF and its *rival cum ally*, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was partly owed to developments that shook not only the Horn of Africa, it was hard, even for non-Eritrean observers, not to feel a certain admiration for this achievement.<sup>52</sup> In exile plans were made to meet family members after years and decades of separation. But the joy also remained linked to the pain of loss. Until the end of the war, the EPLF had never disclosed the names of those killed in the struggle, and families who had had no news from their loved ones, had to brace themselves for sad news.

In 1993, the refugee communities participated in the UN-referendum for Eritrean independence. In Germany 7407 Eritreans were registered to vote. Of them, 6972 voted for

---

<sup>52</sup> With the break down of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc States, Ethiopia lost its main support base and was no longer able to finance the costly war against the EPLF and TPLF.

independence (Schröder 2004:7).<sup>53</sup> On 24 May 1993, two years after liberation, Eritrea was officially declared an independent state and welcomed as the youngest member of the United Nations. For Eritreans in Germany and elsewhere in exile, it was also time to make a decision: “Shall we go back or stay here?” For years, or even decades, they had dreamt of returning home to a liberated Eritrea and to be reunited with their families and friends. Now that this dream had a real chance to come true, it suddenly became obvious that it was not simply a matter of packing ones bags and buying an air ticket. Going “home” would also mean saying goodbye to whatever they had managed to achieve in exile and to face an uncertain future yet again. Even before that date many former refugees had gone back to Eritrea to embrace their families and to evaluate the feasibility of return.

A remigration programme sponsored by the German government, was set up to assist people who wanted to go back.<sup>54</sup> The *Fachkräfte Programm Eritrea* (FKP Eritrea), as it was called, had been started by a group of EPLF-affiliated Eritreans in Germany in 1990. Originally they had had in mind to set up a scheme enabling Eritrean volunteers to return to the liberated areas in order to share their professional skills (cf. Gebreyesus et al. 1991, Schröder 1992). After the complete liberation of Eritrea the plan was transformed into a returnee programme for Eritrean professionals. Financed by the German Ministry of Development Cooperation and co-implemented by the German Technical Cooperation (GTC), the *Zentralstelle für Arbeitsvermittlung* (Central Placement Agency for Manpower) and the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (CERA), it started to operate in 1992 (Clayton and Pörksen 1994). Part and parcel of the FKP was the construction of an Eritrean-German Management Centre, which included not only the offices of the FKP) and other business facilities, but also a kindergarten, a library, a café and a large hall with a stage. All of these amenities, however, looked rather deserted in summer 2001 when the programme celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Most of the 600 Eritreans who eventually made use of this programme had already gone back to Eritrea in the years following formal independence in 1993, 1994 and 1995 (cf. Nigisti and Yosief 1997). Opinions as to whether this should be considered a success or

---

<sup>53</sup> These figures seem relatively low at first sight. However, it has to be considered that a relatively large section of Eritreans in the diaspora was not registered because they were simply too young to be allowed to vote, or had problems with their legal status. Some members of the ELF never even got registered.

<sup>54</sup> In Hesse, for instance another smaller programme existed that offered relatively refugees who had arrived relatively recently and had no asylum status yet. However, many of the new arrivals did not want to return empty-handed and planned to work in Germany for a few years, during which they also hope for a consolidation of the political and economic situation in Eritrea.

a failure are divided. After 1995 there was a considerable decline in new applicants. The Eritrean side claimed that this was due to a tightening of prerequisites: the applicants now needed to prove that they had indeed held positions as professionals in Germany rather than doing jobs below their original qualification (which had almost always been the case). Understandably, the renewed outbreak of war with Ethiopia stopped further applications as of May 1998. However, the programme had already been virtually frozen in 1997, after the Eritrean government's had decided to expel most foreign NGO's, including the GTC. As a consequence, the Asmara FKP office was also closed. But even without these impediments, it seems unlikely that many more exiles would have returned. Why?



**Figure 4** *Plaque at main entrance of the Eritrean-German Management and Cultural Centre in Asmara. (Photo: BC 2001)*

The reasons for the limited return rate of Eritreans from Europe and North America are not immediately obvious, especially considering the devotion with which Eritrean exiles had served the cause of the liberation struggle. Many, perhaps most Eritrean Exiles had dreamt of returning home, but the realisation of these dreams was fraught with many practical obstacles, with the question of the children's education or the prospects of finding a job and housing in Eritrea being only the tip of the iceberg. In some instances, the hesitation exile Eritreans lead Germans as well as people at home to the simple conclusion that the former refugees rather wanted to continue an allegedly „comfortable“ life in exile. This notion becomes apparent in an interview with an Eritrean government official about the returnee programme in 1994: “Our people abroad should come home now, prepared to live under comparatively harsh conditions. Those who only want to come back when everything is

done are not welcome” (Bartelt 1994, 28). Yet, many of those who did return (be it with the assistance of the FKP or on their own) also experienced unexpected difficulties and limited acceptance.

The majority of Eritrean exiles decided to remain abroad for the time being, not giving up, but postponing their return plans. As argued in the introduction, their exile – so far perceived as temporary – was gradually transformed into a diaspora: a community that accommodates itself permanently within another society, although trying to preserve a separate identity. This transformation brought with it the need to rethink one’s relationship with Eritrea on the one, and with Germany on the other hand. A young Eritrean by the name of „Gesgasi“ (Tigrinya for “progressive“) asks:

„...what is the concept of our life in exile? Do we still follow the motto: Today it’s Germany, tomorrow Eritrea. Is Germany only a kind of train station for us, a place with a transitory function?“<sup>55</sup>

Apart from the psychological change that independence had brought for the *sedetegnatat*, it also brought a far-reaching rupture of the organisational structures built in the various counties of settlement in the 1970s and 1980s. Even prior to independence, in 1990, on the eve of liberation, the EPLF leadership had ordered the mass organisations at home and in exile to be dissolved, leading to a *de facto* break down of Eritrean infrastructure abroad (cf. Hepner 2009). To the EPLF – now the transitional government of Eritrea – the immediate need for a bundling of forces based on membership in the mass organisations seemed to have become obsolete. Instead, new and more broad-based groups were formed aiming to include all Eritreans into the wider nationalist project – especially those who so far had not been the EPLF partisans.

However sensible this move might have been with regard to the situation in Eritrea, the dissolution of the EPLF mass organisations hit the exiles hard. Abroad, the mass organisations had been the backbone of the refugee communities, providing not only political guidance, but also a home away from home. Their demise led to much confusion and anger among the EPLF’s loyal supporters as it seemed to denigrate their work and to put them at one level with those who had sacrificed little or nothing during the struggle (Hepner 2009). To provide some replacement the EPLF tried to foster “civil organisations”

---

<sup>55</sup> Gesgasi, 29 April 2000, on [www.eritrea.de/gaestebuch/index/html](http://www.eritrea.de/gaestebuch/index/html); accessed 20 May 2000, transl. B.C.

in the diaspora. In Germany, and elsewhere, the relatively new community organisations were “reformed” yet again in order to make them more attractive to non-EPLF supporters. This even included the merger of some EPLF- and ELF-affiliated community organisations or MahbereKoms, though with little success. In spite of these efforts, ELF and EPLF sympathisers by and large remained within their respective circles. Around 2004/2005 “pro-Eritrean-government” MahbereKoms in Germany formed an umbrella organisation. This organisation coordinates for instance the annual Festival Eritrea in close collaboration with the Eritrean Embassy and Consulate, and serves as a link between the Eritrean state and Eritrean diaspora organisations in Germany.<sup>56</sup>

After 1991, “Bologna”, the symbol of the exile’s solidarity with home was also discontinued and transplanted to Asmara as “Festival Eritrea.” To this day, however, locals and diaspora visitors alike still refer to the event as “Bologna.” As not everyone in the diaspora has been willing or able to travel to Eritrea for the Festival, many Eritrean communities worldwide eventually started to stage their own “Bologna Festival” (see Figure 5, next page). The local “Bolognas” take place around the same time as the Festival Eritrea, usually between late June and early August. Eritrean musicians and politicians are flown-in for the occasion. One of the oldest of these events is held in Germany. In the 1980s Eritreans in Germany used to meet for a “national” congress in Frankfurt before travelling to Bologna. After independence this meeting was gradually transformed into the “Eritrea Festival”. Since 1998 it has taken place every year (until very recently in Frankfurt), attracting visitors from all over Germany and neighbouring countries.

Similar to the mass organisations and the Bologna Festival, other diaspora institutions and structures had to be built or rebuilt after 1991. The originally voluntary contributions to the EPLF were transformed into a “tax” (see Araya 1996; Berhane 1995, 2000; Kibreab 2007) Generally it can be said that relations with the home government became increasingly institutionalised after independence. This in itself is certainly not unusual for a country that has won its sovereignty by fighting a protracted guerrilla war (cf.

---

<sup>56</sup> Setting up MahbereKoms as registered non-profit organisation with the official goal of improving Eritrean-German relations and/or integration into German society helped to secure additional funds. In every day practice, however, integration-related activities rarely get first priority in the average MahbereKom. Nowadays between 40 and 50 MahbereKoms are affiliated with EPLF/PFDJ all over Germany. They serve as links between community members and embassy/consulate; a function that does not make them universally popular (see chapter 5). Overall, the MahbereKoms’ efficiency seems to vary from town to town, as do membership numbers and range of activities. The *Mahbere-Kom Eritrea Frankfurt und Umgebung* (MKEFU), for instance, claims a membership of between 100 (paying) members and 600 members (cf. Nolting 2002:34 and Hannken 2003:280). Some of my conversation partners claim that the number of active members is actually around 20 to 30 people.

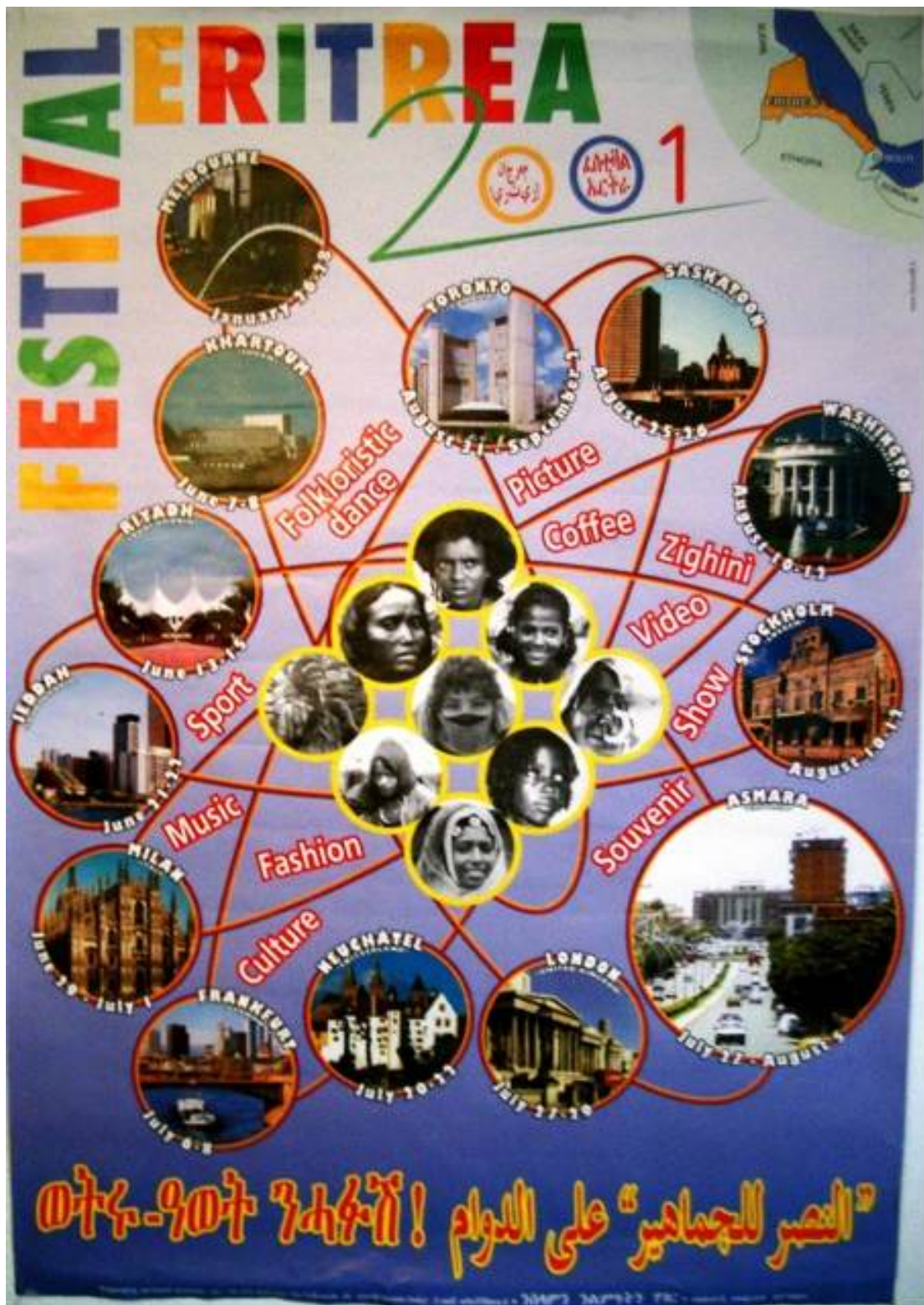


Köbler and Schiel 1996). Still, the process had strong implications for the future relationship between Eritrea and its citizens abroad. New patterns of long-distance nationalism evolved after independence and Eritrean diaspora society went through a decade of political “de-mobilization”, soul-searching and identity struggles at various levels.<sup>57</sup>

This process had still not reached any accommodation in the late 1990s when the outbreak of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia shook up the communities again. And here is where my research starts, looking in particular at those aspects that have lent the Eritrea - diaspora relationship a new quality. In the following chapters I will look at the consequences of the availability of cheap travel, the much-enhanced global communication infrastructure, and the emergence of a new generation. All these aspects, I argue, are interwoven and have a janus-faced quality: on the one hand they serve to maintain Eritrea-diaspora relations, while adding to a growing sense of estrangement on the other. Moreover, as I will show, they have not only allowed the diaspora population to partake in Eritrean affairs in the homeland, but, vice versa, have also given the Eritrean powers-that-be a means to exert considerable influence on the diaspora communities.

---

<sup>57</sup> A more detailed discussion about various aspects of the situation in the 1990s is provided in the following chapters. The study frequently needs to take recourse to that crucial period, even if the main time frame of the research is the years between 1999 and 2007.



**Figure 5** Poster advertising the annual Festival Eritrea (“Bologna”) 2001 in Asmara and diaspora festivals held in various locations around the world. The picture impressively illustrates the transnational connections between the diaspora and Eritrea: the scattered Eritrean diaspora communities are orbiting around Eritrean “unity in diversity” (i.e. the portraits of traditional Eritreans each symbolising one of Eritrea’s nine “nationalities”). The distance between this “authentic” local Eritrea and the “Eritreas abroad” is bridged by profanities of diasporic life such as souvenirs, videos, food, fashion, music and dance.

## Chapter 2

### “A Culture of War and a Culture of Exile:”

Young Eritreans in Germany and their Relations to Eritrea<sup>1</sup>

---

#### *Desta*

*Desta, Daughter born in exile,  
Come home the first time.  
Meet your grandmother  
Her family, her neighbors --  
Your family, your neighbors,  
Your country, our home.  
Please eat  
These vegetables and meat  
And a special treat of wild roots.  
Or have I spoiled you?*

*No, Daddy, I love this.  
But we need windows.*

-- Reesom Haile<sup>2</sup>

#### **Long-distance nationalism, diaspora and the dilemmas of the second generation**

As outlined in the first chapter it had been the dream of an independent nation that drove Eritreans into exile. It was (long-distance) nationalism (Anderson 1992, Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001) that continued to shape their individual lives and the communities they built abroad and that sustained their hope of returning. Yet, it is the diaspora where most of them seem to have arrived today. At least if we apply Cohen and Safrans' much cited set of features that characterise a diaspora (Cohen 1997: 26, after Safran 1991), Eritreans in

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an updated version of the authors' article by the same title that was published in the *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, Vol 22, no.1, 2006, pp: 59-85.

<sup>2</sup> The late Reesom Haile is one of Eritrea's most celebrated poets. He also is one of the signatories of the so-called "Berlin Manifesto" (cf. chapter 3 and 5). "Desta" and for other poems of his have been published in several languages at <http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/haile/rht-eng.htm> (accessed 27 December 2009).

Germany may well be labelled a diaspora. Until recently, however, "diaspora" was not an -emic term, and even today many Eritreans prefer to speak about the Eritrean "community," a term used in a highly flexible manner.<sup>3</sup> It may refer to the members of particular local community association as well as to the totality of all Eritreans living in a certain town, region, or country - or even worldwide. The term "community" has also often been specified by adding "refugee" or "exile" to it, thus drawing a sharp distinction between themselves and labour migrants. This again reflects their strong emphasis on the forced nature of their immigration, and highlights long-distance nationalism and the myth of return as the community's most outstanding features.

As argued in the introductory remarks, Eritreans in Germany were most aptly characterised by calling them an "exile community" – at least until independence. With their focus almost solely directed towards home and their involvement in the ongoing nation-building project (see also Conrad 2003, 2005) they were metaphorically speaking "sitting on packed suitcases". Their sojourn, no matter for how long it had lasted, was perceived as only temporary - a notion that was very much in line that of their German hosts. In this regard, one diaspora characteristic listed by Cohen was almost completely absent during the Eritrean liberation struggle: "... the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in host countries..." (Cohen 1997:26).

Paradoxically it was only after the successful war for Eritrean independence (1962 - 1991) that a more permanent settlement in Germany also began to be considered as an alternative to return - even if only for an intermediate, undefined period of time. I have tried to show earlier that choosing this option forced exile Eritreans to redefine their relationships with both home and host country, and literally re-form their organisations to make them suit their changed needs. These changes, which set in with the event of independence, can also be described as a transformation process from exile to diaspora, from a provisional to a more settled community, from birds of passage to "strangers who come today, and stay tomorrow" as Georg Simmel (1968:509; transl. B.C.) once put it. Moreover, this development coincided with, and was accelerated by, the maturing of a second generation that only knew life in Germany. It is this generation and its continued – troubled and broken, enthusiastic and close – bonds with their "country of origin" that are at the centre of this chapter.

---

<sup>3</sup> The term diaspora became "fashionable" among educated German Eritreans only a few years ago, mainly through its use on US-Eritrean websites that have been talking about "diaspora" since the mid-1990s. When I giving a talk to an Eritrean audience in Germany, however, the meaning of the term is still an issue, as there is no adequate Tigrinya translation for it.

Another feature of Cohen and Safran's diaspora definition is the sustaining of a distinctive identity "over a long period of time." This clearly applies for instance to the worldwide Jewish, Greek or Armenian diasporas, as well as to the "old" Black diaspora in the Americas all of which have indeed retained a "strong ... group consciousness" spanning across many generations (Cohen 1997:26). But what about more recent diasporas, like the "new" African diasporas among which Eritreans can be counted? Are they here to stay, or will they prove to be first generation phenomena? Clearly the conception of transnationalism, as well as the (perhaps premature) labelling of a growing number of highly divergent transmigrant communities as diasporas, "must grapple with the question of whether it extends beyond the immigrant generation" (Levitt and Waters 2002:3).

While there has recently been some skepticism, especially from those who question) the analytic value of the "transnationalist" concept (Vertovec 2002) authors such as Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2002) argue in favour of a transnational definition of the term "second generation" that includes also of the migrant children's peer group in the homeland. As a contribution to this on-going debate this chapter seeks to highlight both: the emotional and practical links that bind Eritrean youth to their parent's country of origin, but also their experiences of rejection in both "home countries" that force them to re-negotiate their sense of belonging.<sup>4</sup>

In the first part of this chapter I ask, how Eritrean discourses on nationalism have been shaped by the experience of exile. And, more specifically: how has growing up in exile impacted the second generation's notion of Eritrea and their own sense of Eritrean-ness? The second half of this text then focuses on the meeting of diaspora and local Eritreans. In what ways are the exiles' views reshaped when meeting with the local again? What consequences arise from these meetings for the transnational links between Eritrea and the diaspora: for the exiles? for the locals? And how do these encounters between a local Eritrean culture (of war) and an Eritrean exile culture influence the ongoing internal trans/formation of the Eritrean diaspora in Germany?

The following thick description of an Eritrean "homecoming" captures one of the dark moments of the transnational experience; the realisation, that being at home here and

---

<sup>4</sup> Aspects of integration, assimilation and discrimination that define the second generation's relationship with their "host" countries are not discussed in great detail here. The reason simply is that doing so would have extended the paper beyond reasonable length. However, there exists a comparatively rich literature focussing on the integration of immigrant children into settlement society. For Eritreans (in Italy) see e.g. Andall 2002

there, can also turn into being at home neither here nor there. It further introduces the main characters of this chapter: second and 1.5 generation Eritreans living in the diaspora in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Taking this confrontation between the local Eritrean youth and their peers that have grown up abroad as a point of departure, I want to analyse the ambiguous and conflicting relationship between a "culture of war" and a "culture of exile," that – although fighting for a common cause and inhabiting a single transnational space - have also grown apart in many respects.

*It's the third day of the Zura NHagerka, or "Know-Your-Country-Tour." The bus carries about 50 young diaspora Eritreans and one ferenji up a winding mountain pass. Having escaped the suffocating heat of the Red Sea port Massawa, spirits are rising as we head for Adi Keyh, a small town on the Eritrean highland plateau. My fellow passengers are dressed in fashionable western style and equipped with digital cameras. They joke, curse and gossip in Swedish, Dutch, British and American English, Italian or German interspersed with the local Tigrinya in varying degrees of fluency<sup>6</sup>. But right now it is too loud to talk much in whatever language. Traditional gwayla music being played at high decibels fills the vehicle. It is accompanied by spontaneous outbursts of sing-along and rhythmic clapping, especially when some old revolutionary song sets in. As on a school trip, the atmosphere is charged with excitement and a shared determination to have fun.*

*When we reach Adi Keyh night is falling. ... The town has few tarmac roads and our bus bumps awkwardly through the potholes before stopping in front of a three-storey building. Its walled compound harbours a simple hotel and a daytime café that is about to close. The room I share with Harnet from Germany and Selamawit from Sweden is damp and sparsely furnished. We drop our luggage into a corner and try to wash off the grimy layers of sweat and dust. There is no time for more elaborate styling. The local branch of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students has invited the guests for a dance party. It takes place in a hall some 100 metres down the road. When we arrive there, women ululate at the entrance and throw popcorn for a traditional welcome. We are offered freshly brewed tea, coffee and himbasha, a delicious homemade bread. The otherwise dismal looking room is decorated with a banner reading "Welcome" in various languages. In the rear red plastic folding chairs have been arranged in two neat blocks of rows. They face a stage at the front of the hall where a band is getting ready to play. We are ushered into one block of seats and urged to have more tea and bread. The other half of the room gradually fills with locals - mostly boys and young men between thirteen and eighteen, a reminder that most of the 18+ generation are still serving in the*

---

and Koch 2003. FEYU, myself and Koch collaborated on a small-scale survey on the situation of young Eritreans in Germany between 14 and 29 years of age.

<sup>5</sup> The definition of the 1.5 generation varies significantly in the respective literature (cf. Andall 2002 for a discussion of various approaches). Like Andall I define 1.5 generation as those who came to Germany after they had started school.

<sup>6</sup> Note: "ferenji" means foreigner.

army. Only a year ago Eritrea was at war with Ethiopia. Even now peace is fragile. Adi Keyh is not far from the contested border area. Very likely most of these youngsters that are now staring at us with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion have a brother or sister in the trenches.

After the official welcome the band starts playing. We clap our hands, but the clapping seems more restrained than earlier on the bus. Suddenly a young man of about 17 jumps on the open space between stage and audience. He moves wildly, exaltedly, tries a break dance element, stumbles; his limbs jerking grotesquely in mid air. But this is not some humorous stunt. Something is wrong with him. Two locals try to haul the youth off the dance floor, but he paddles free and dances on. Only when the music stops he slouches off throwing a dazed look at the crowd. The band plays the next piece everyone gets up to dance, but the atmosphere remains tense. The third dance is for me. This time three young "misfits" occupy the floor, and one of them has sought me out as his dancing partner. He gestures me to join him, then moves closer, takes my hand and pulls me onto the dance floor... There's nothing for it. For a while the three young men and I remain the lonely entertainers of an awkward audience. Eventually some of the on-lookers join in. I manage to retreat to a chair in the back row where Harnet approaches me with a worried look: "Let's go back to the hotel," she says, "This is no fun. Selamawit has already left."

But as we are leaving the hall, our roommate comes back in. She is upset and angry. On her way she had run into a drunken elderly man. Brandishing his walking stick he had shouted at her: "I'll beat you, I'll kill you ... ." She fled to the hotel, but found the front door locked. Some soldiers offered to show her the back entrance, but then tried to lure her into the wrong direction. Finally a passer-by, who "rescued" her, expected to be taken to her room as a "thank you". Unable to shake him off, she decided to return to the crowd... Now as we are walking back together the street is empty and eerily quiet. Selamawit leads the way around the hotel where a huge iron gate opens into the yard. She is still contagiously nervous. We chat for a while, but as we are getting ready for bed a tumult raises outside. We rush to the balcony overlooking the dimly lit courtyard and see Fiori running through the gate, screaming. She is followed by a group of people. For a split second I think it's some locals chasing her, but then I recognise other tour members. One of them slams the gate shut crying in German: "Come here! Help me!" Two guys hold fast against the gate while Yonas bolts it. The next moment a cascade of stones and furious voices hit the corrugated iron sheets from the other side.

After some frantic counting of heads it is established that we are complete. ... Provided with tea "on the house" and huddled around two tables in the closed café some of the group try to reconstruct the happenings: Not long after Harnet, Selamawit and myself had left, the other Know-Your-Country-Tourers also decided to go. Outside the hall another group of local youth had gathered and tried to provoke the departing guests with insults. When one of them grabbed at a girl from Sweden, she said something rude to him. He spat at her in reply whereupon she slapped him squarely in the face. Others intervened and the situation threatened to escalate into a fight. Within the diaspora group someone had the good sense to call for a retreat. Yet when they turned to go, the locals began throwing fist-sized stones at them. They panicked and ran away, the locals at their heels.

*(...) Though no one got hurt, the shock is profound. Sara and Almaz look wide-eyed and scared. Bereket is simply bewildered. This is his first visit in eleven years and so much has changed. Yonas mutters to himself in German that he'll take the next plane back home – to Frankfurt. Sam shrugs: "... can happen anywhere." Paulos shakes his head violently: "But we are not anywhere! I thought Eritrea was the place where I belong! This is like running away from the Neo-Nazis in Frankfurt." - "Worse!" Yonas exclaims, "At least there are no stones in Frankfurt!" He does not really mean it as a joke, but the laughter that follows releases some of the tension. It also makes Harnet emerge from a long silence. She straightens up to declare defiantly: "This will bring **us** only closer together." At this moment, her appeal to group solidarity even includes me, the ferenji. But at the same time the "us" separates the diaspora Eritreans from "them," the local Eritreans outside. This feeling is still present when we leave in the early morning, discussing rumours that the attackers were Amitche and whether or not they have been arrested. As our bus is pulling out of Adi Keih Henok, who is sitting next to me, says: "We aren't Eritreans anymore." <sup>7</sup>*

### **Exile childhoods**

The participants of the "Know-Your-Country-Tour" (KYCT) 2001 had in their majority been born or grown up outside Eritrea and did not know each other. A few "transnational" contacts existed among those who had already taken part in the KYCT 2000 and had kept in touch since. Some of this latter group also actively helped to advertise the 2001 trips among the holidaying youth in the Eritrean capital Asmara, e.g. by distributing flyers or just by telling anyone they met. Those who joined the tour mostly came in small groups from one particular diaspora country, or even city. During the five-day journey these "national" groups were never entirely dissolved, yet a general sense of we-ness became palpable, especially when singing along to old EPLF songs everyone knew by heart. Their "performance" seemed so well coordinated and rehearsed that it created the impression of a school reunion conjuring up shared memories and experiences by singing their old tunes.

The music seemed to provide a bridge between the foreign raised Eritreans, no matter where they came from. It was a rendezvous of similar childhood memories of Eritrean feast and festivals, demonstrations and meetings experienced in different places in

---

<sup>7</sup> The above account is based on my field notes dating from 11/12 August 2001. All names and places of residence outside Eritrea are changed. I am very grateful to both the organisers (the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students) and the travellers for letting me join their party on this eventful journey. Especially I want to thank Yirgalem Keleta and Huria Ogbamichael who sensitised me to many problems I might have otherwise overlooked. The story I recount here, however, is that of an outsider and may therefore not always overlap with the individual recollections of my co-travellers, though I was fortunate to get some feedback on earlier drafts of this paper from some of the tour-participants. Any possible misinterpretation or factual fault, however, is entirely mine.



exile. It also recreated an imagined home country that music and lyrics helped to reinforce. Music-making and other forms of popular culture served as a site for the creation of an imagined Eritrean identity. As an Eritrean diaspora youth group writes in the late 1990s about a dance performance:

Our knowledge about these dances comes mainly from the EPLF's videos and festivals which were supposed to keep up a link with the liberation struggle. Most of us grew up with those videos, they are part of our own history. (Beles 1998:36, translation B.C.)

Some 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Eritreans have also had a more "hands on" experience, as they had been members of Eritrean youth groups. With the new refugee families arriving and others establishing families in the 1980s came the need to accommodate the growing young generation. The Eritrean nation-building project was competing with the host society for the loyalty of the children, because: "... children ... are the flowers of our revolution, and the harbingers of our future society," Matzke (2003: 172, citing an EPLF report from 1982).<sup>8</sup> In Germany, members of the National Union of Eritrean Students (NUES) coordinated a children's group, the "Red Flowers". It was named after a children's cultural troupe that had been formed in the EPLF liberated zones of Eritrea in the late 1970s. The original "Red Flowers" toured villages and refugee camps performing traditional and revolutionary songs as well as "short didactic sketches on education, illiteracy, and ... dances" (ibid. 2003: 173). The diaspora "Red Flowers" also sang revolutionary songs and staged short plays at EPLF meetings and major Eritrean holidays. Many of the children who came to Germany had before spent some time as refugees in Sudan. Some of them had attended EPLF-led schools there. In a group discussion in autumn 2000 one young man remembered that singing nationalist tunes had figured prominently on their curriculum. From my field notes:

"I still know them [the tunes]," he says. The others nod in agreement. Yet, in hindsight some are critical of the ideological education and the quasi-militaristic training that went along with it. Another young man ponders how he and the other kids wanted to fight and die for Eritrea. Whenever there was a celebration

---

<sup>8</sup> The ELF, also had a similar youth organisation and also ran a school in Sudan. Some time after the publication of the biography of German raised Eritrean singer Senait Mehari a debate broke out about whether the ELF's childrens troupe known as *tsebah* this has been a school, or indeed a military training camp for child soldiers. The struggle over the past intensified when Senait's book was not only translated into several languages, but also made into a film that was shown at the Berlinale Film Festival 2008. A number of former classmates, living in Germany and Sweden eventually took the singer to court for libel (for detailed documentation of the controversy between Senait and the Tsebah group see <http://feuerherz.blog.de> and also <http://www.tsebah.de> (both last accessed 17 April 2008). In 2009 they won a compensation.

to honour some distinguished fighters, they all dreamt of being in their place one day. "In a way, we were brainwashed," the speaker adds. "you know, when I later read Morton Rhues' 'The Wave,' I could totally relate."<sup>9</sup>

Yet, while the original "Red Flowers" epitomised the vision of a new revolutionised Eritrea, the exile youth groups also had another function<sup>10</sup>: It was here that children learned the basics of their mother tongue and the unique *Ge'ez* script, and were also given some ideas about their country, society and culture. Yet, as many elements of "traditional" Eritrean culture(s) and society(ies) were scorned by the EPLF as feudal, reactionary and in need of reform, the Eritrea narrated here consisted of highly selective images designed to inculcate exile youth (and adults) with the EPLF's vision for country and society. Lacking a reference frame or first hand experience from the home "culture" the youth's image of their home was formed by these EPLF narratives.

Also within the families the image of Eritrea was reproduced in a selective fashion highlighting some values and cultural practises, while suppressing others. Yet, hoping for an eventual return home, most Eritrean parents try to socialize their children according to the Eritrean "values". Apart from trying to impose the dos and don'ts of their home society, the parents also narrated Eritrean history and genealogy to their offspring. It's important to mention here, however, that some of this narrated history and memory was revised and influenced by the political indoctrination of the EPLF mass organisation. This often led to a distorted picture. Officially, for example, awareness of ethnic origins, religious differences were denounced as divisive and "bad." Privately however, they continued to be important, for instance when choosing a marriage partner. Another example is the EPLF's campaign

---

<sup>9</sup> Still, some of the very same people who were present in the above group and critically reassessed their childhood memories, later vehemently argued against a book written by an Eritrean singer claiming to have been a "child soldier" with the ELF. There was shift of focus between the insider-debate about the "utilisation and indoctrination" of children during the liberation war, and an the outside representation of these children as "child-soldiers." The very term evokes disturbing pictures and stories connected with the wars and conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Kongo, where children have been systematically abducted and trained for military purposes. This clearly has not been the case – neither with the ELF nor with the EPLF. Still, children and teenagers were involved in the struggle; be for propaganda purposes, as go-betweens (several of my interviewees e.g. clandestinely distributed EPLF materials in Eritrean towns) or as members of one of the rebel movements (again some of my interviewees said they joined ELF or EPLF at the age of 15, 16 or 17 – claiming to be older). An "inside" discussion about the role of children in the liberation fronts is therefore certainly overdue, especially in the light of the fact that children and adolescents were also involved in the 1998-2000 war. For an interesting excursus on the topic see also Christine Matzke (2003: 150-52).

<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to establish how many of the second generation were members of such a group. It certainly depended on their age of arrival in Germany and their parents' political engagement. And of course, it was only available for those living in a town with an organised Eritrean community. However, judging from my fieldwork experience it seems that most children growing up in the 1980s have at some stage been members of such a youth group.

for women's equality that stood in stark contrast to the attempts of many refugee families to raise their daughters to become demure and obedient housekeepers and to uphold a patriarchal tradition in a "libertarian," "western" environment (Ghebray 1998:37) Not surprising, the images of Eritrea and Eritrean culture that dominate among the second generation sometimes are contradictory as they blend narratives of a traditional past with those of an utopian future.

Being in its core an "anti-establishment" youth movement (cf. Pool 2001: 129), the EPLF drew strongly on the mobilization of young men *and* women who joined the movement not exclusively for patriotic reasons, but also because it provided a chance to escape from traditional constraints and hierarchies (cf. Tronvoll 1998, Quehl 2002). In other words, like any revolutionary movement, the EPLF was a "destroyer" of tradition and the societal order of old. In the exile countries, however, (traditional) culture and values gained new importance as a means of re-ascertaining one's identity. Exile organisations thus had to embark on a tightrope walk between being keepers of a tradition they partly renounced, yet had to draw on for reasons of mobilising, uniting and maintaining an identification of the refugees with their culture and country of origin.

Eritreans mainly moved into towns that already had a sizable Eritrean community. Apart from the obvious reason of looking for an Eritrean support network and infrastructure as well as for better job opportunities, Günter Schröder offers an interesting interpretation:

For these "new urbanites" [Eritreans who still have roots in rural areas, but whose parents have moved to Asmara or another larger town] ... in particular, city-life is a re-affirmation of their belonging to the "modern" society of those countries, which eventually are also perceived as a part of the larger "worldwide modernity" that expresses itself not least in patterns of consumption and a certain attitude towards life. ... To find oneself in the deepest rural provinces of Bavaria or Lower Saxony, is a situation that consciously or not runs counter to the self-perception and way of life of a "people in the process of urbanisation," ... and which finally makes them flee from their rural "exile" to metropolitan areas. (Personal conversation, August 2006)

Despite looking like a patchwork quilt with many gaping holes in it, the narrated image of Eritrea provided young exiles with a strong sense of patriotic pride and belonging that offered protection against the ignorance and insults they invariably experienced as an African minority in Germany. Stories about Eritrean heroism as well as the wrongdoings the Eritrean people had suffered yet not succumbed to, doubtlessly helped the younger generation to face a foreign, often discriminatory, and widely indifferent environment, and

to give meaning to individually felt hardship. Most of all, however, the narratives, that were almost invariably presented from a “we”-perspective (cf. Nolting 2002, Matsuoka and Sorenson 2005) allowed also foreign-born or -raised Eritreans to put themselves into one line with past and present Eritreans fighting for their country's independence, as well as for recognition, dignity and social justice.

This conjuring up of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1992) was further strengthened by the lived solidarity with Eritreans at home and among the exiles. The children attended political, cultural and social gatherings together with their parents, helped with street collections, the organisation of demonstrations and charity events, but were also engaged in an elaborate private network of mutual support. Individual families had, albeit to varying degrees, contacts with their families left in Eritrea or living in Sudanese refugee camps. The sense of obligation and responsibility towards their relatives and their country contributed to making Eritreans less prone to adopting the image of the helpless, homeless, uprooted refugee. They not only helped to further the cause of the Eritrean struggle financially and morally, but always felt and acted as active, integral part of the Eritrean national movement. Apart from a continued willingness to make financial contributions this is also manifested in their readiness to act as ambassadors of their proud (proto-)nation. Until today, the question: "Where do you originally come from?" prompts diaspora Eritreans of all ages to embark on a lengthy (and always very similar) account of their country's history. Structure, vocabulary and vantage point of these narratives identify them unmistakably as products of the EPLF's nation-building efforts.

The strong focus on Eritrea thus boosted the refugee's self-esteem and empowered them to move successfully in their host society. But the prioritisation of supporting the struggle also had its downsides, especially for the upbringing of the 1.5 and second generation. Being often entirely consumed by the on-goings in Eritrea and in their organisations, parents erroneously assumed that return to Eritrea would one day end their life in exile and make integration into and deeper understanding of the host society unnecessary. Political and social activities drained most of the refugees' energy as well as their financial and emotional resources. Membership in the EPLF (or ELF) mass organisations meant to take part in regular, sometimes daily meetings that reduced time for family life, careers or focussing attention on the children's education:

...as all Eritrean citizens love their family and country all [their] mind and thoughts were to help [their] family and country during the ... struggle. Although

it cannot be said that [the families] forgot their children ... they did not give care to them as required... Moreover, most had the unstudied ambition: 'once the liberation of the country is achieved, I will go to my country taking my children! (Abraham Tekle 2001: 38; Translation from Tigrinya: Mussie Tesfagiorgis.)

The following quotation highlights the extent to which life in exile was directed towards past and future Eritrea, rather than taking place in a here and now. Eritrean author Abeba Tesfagiorgis recalls:

... it was undeniable that I had been preoccupied all those years with the welfare of Ruth and Tamar [elder daughters who had become fighters], my family [those left behind], my country. I had tried to make true Eritreans of my [younger] daughters within a strong American environment. Was I really right in doing so? ... It was Muzit's first tennis lesson and she wanted her parents to be there. We *were* there in body, but where was my heart? And what year was it? Why did I not take a photograph? (Abeba 1992: 208; emphasis as in original)

Abeba's quote illustrates that life in exile was - understandably - perceived as provisional and incomplete. Many families had been broken up by the war. A large number of Eritrean women arrived in the 1980s without their husbands in Germany or, like Ababa, accompanied by only some of their children. Others had had to stay behind for various reasons, had moved to other exile countries, had joined the EPLF, or worse, were imprisoned or even dead. In other cases, the children were sent abroad on their own. Especially among the 1.5 generation there are quite a substantial number of "unaccompanied child refugees" who grew up in German children's homes or foster families.

Even when families were eventually reunited, they frequently experienced problems and break-ups. The long separation and the very different experiences had estranged wife and husband, or parents and children. The newcomers found the more settled part of their family changed as they had adapted to the new environment. Traditional gender roles and hierarchies were tumbled up or even reversed (see also McSpadden and Moussa 1994). Parents had to rely on their German speaking kids to master everyday life. Wives had become the family's breadwinners. Not the least source of trouble was the use of the meagre families resources: Whose family at home would first benefit from their hard currency? Whose brother would next be helped to flee?

Thus the varying living conditions, family status, the parents' political affiliation, their education and understanding of their children's situation have it that the second

generations' knowledge about Eritrean culture and history, the cause of their exile and extent of their transnational contacts may vary enormously. Moreover, children were more exposed to German culture and society. Depending on their age and experiences, they also developed other interests besides their parent's home country. The constant reference to Eritrea seemed at times tiresome to them or even provoked resentment: "Eritrea for breakfast, Eritrea for lunch and Eritrea for supper," Nolting (2002: 65, translation B.C.) quotes a young Eritrean woman, reflecting on her parent's pre-occupation with Eritrea. Similarly, many of my interviewees also expressed the feeling of having to compete with a far-off country and unknown relatives for their parent's attention.

For some of the second generation "Eritrean-ness" is reduced to a few stereotypes and political slogans completed by a set of arbitrarily selected customs and cultural practices and the love of Eritrean food and music (cf. Brixius and Tewes 1992: 39; Lehrerkooperative 1994: 10). Then again you find others having a remarkably detailed and critical knowledge about the country's history and culture(s). For the great majority of young Eritreans that I met something in between seems to ring true. Being formed through narratives strongly tinged by the party's nationalist ideology and their parent's nostalgia, their image of Eritrea seemed like a collage combining pictures of a paradise lost and a future utopia. <sup>11</sup> Glick-Schiller and Fouron come to similar findings in their research on second generation Haitians in the USA:

"These young adults took into their experiences ... also their parents' imagery of a beautiful Haiti that once was: ... Past becomes linked to the future. Politics and nostalgia meet in concrete organizations [and] practices..." (2001:166).

Moreover, while Eritrean nationalism within the country had a largely inclusive character aiming at moulding people of different denominations, ethnic and regional groups into one nation, the Eritrean exile's long-distance nationalism, inevitably contained a strong element of exclusiveness, too. As a tiny minority in danger of getting "lost" in their host-society, nationalism provided them with a tool to preserve a separate identity both as a group and as individuals (see also Sorenson 1991).

---

<sup>11</sup> A German journalist and Eritrea lobbyist I interviewed told me about the reactions of exile Eritreans to the videos and pictures he had brought from the war-affected, EPLF-controlled, rural areas during the liberation struggle. Some of his younger Eritrean audience was shocked by the absence of infrastructure and the dismal living conditions they saw. They were convinced that the footage did not show any part of Eritrea, but perhaps came from neighbouring Sudan. Eritrea, the filmmaker was told, was not like that. It was an industrialised country, with tarmac roads, shops and factories -- almost like Europe.

### **Eritrean youth groups in Germany: between alienation and agitation**

Eritrea's formal independence brought the chance of realizing the "return" plans that had occupied the dreams of Eritrean exiles for so long. All the same, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the majority opted to stay on in Germany or at least to postpone a return into the future. Yet, staying did not mean that life continued the same way it had been before 1991. The years between 1991 and 1997 saw contradictory developments: on the one hand a process of formalisation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of "official" links between the diaspora and Eritrea took place. On the other hand, social networks within the diaspora and with home became more "privatised" and decentralised.<sup>12</sup> This also affected the younger generation and their "sense of Eritreanness"

While Eritrean diaspora youth growing up in the 1990s now had the chance of actually visiting their parent's home country, they had less exposure to transnational Eritrean politics<sup>13</sup>. According to Schröder (1992: 29) about a third of the Eritrean population in Germany was less than 16 years of age when independence arrived. Youngsters who had been pre-adolescents at that time – and thus too young to be seriously involved – were now in their teens. By the mid-1990s there was a whole generation that had been entirely raised in Germany. Having been exposed to the German education system, German mainstream culture and/or a migrant subculture, they had also adopted cultural and moral values that differed from those of their parents. Not surprisingly this led to conflicts within the families (Berhe 1999:42).

Moreover, community events and meetings which used to provide room for socialising and learning about the situation in Eritrea took place less frequently than in the 1980s (cf. chapter 4). Besides, most teenagers felt out of place there. The elder generation's problems were not theirs, their parents' continued preoccupation with Eritrea, and the constant talk about developments "at home," led some youngsters to say: "What's that to do with us?" or "Who cares about our problems?" Often the youth also interpreted efforts to get

---

<sup>12</sup> Gradually some new groups formed in the diaspora, e.g. with the aim to support their home village, but soon met with displeasure on the side of the Eritrean government. Rather than allowing direct support for a selected project in Eritrea, the diaspora citizens were asked for financial contributions, whose redistribution on certain projects would be controlled by the government. The official reason was, that this should make sure that no group or region in Eritrea was marginalised.

<sup>13</sup> A mini-survey carried out by Eritrean youth groups (FEYU), Jan Sören Koch and myself at the Eritrea Festival in Frankfurt in 2001, we found that find two thirds of about 100 youth between 14 and 29 years of age had already been in Eritrea since independence. For most of them, however, it had been a one time experience, lasting between a few weeks and three months.

them involved as yet another attempt of their parents' to keep them under control. An interview with Sifaf Adem, one of the former leading cadres of the NUES (later renamed Eritrean National Union of Youth and Students - NUEYS) in Germany, mirrors this dilemma:

Sifaf: Generational conflicts are natural – in any society...I recommend parents to be tolerant to remember their own teenager years and how he fought against his father.... Especially here in Germany with TV and Internet and emails and mobile phones etc. These are things that make it hard for Eritrean parents to keep control over their children. I think one family alone can maybe raise one or two children, and maybe wrong. But within the community you can provide a lot of education...

B.C.: But I think it is often that very control the youth seek to escape from...

Sifaf: Yes, that's right. That's right... . There is no MahbereCom in Germany that really provides a place for youth. That doesn't exist. I remember: in 1996 the chairman of Eritrean Youth in Eritrea [Mohyedin Shengeb] sent a letter via the Consulate to all Eritrean communities asking them to establish a committee within the MahbereComs – following the motto: "Friends of the Youth." [It meant] that older people should call themselves "Friends of the Youth" and help the young with the activities they wanted to do.... To work for the concerns of the youth in the community ...to learn from the youth, to be their advocates within Eritrean society, This paper turned yellow!... And therefore, that is right, there is a generation conflict. ...Today we are presented with the bill, because at that time we missed the opportunity to teach those children playfully why we are here. Now – I am sure – [they ask] like the German, like the Turkish youth: What is Eritrea for me? Why? What do I get out of it?<sup>14</sup>

In an interview conducted in summer 2001, the long-time chairman of NUEYS, Mohyedin Shengeb, acknowledged omissions on the Eritrean side - according to him mainly due to a lack of funds.<sup>15</sup> Asked about the problems faced by the diaspora youth groups, he pointed to the reluctance of the older generation in the diaspora to let the younger ones take over the reigns before they turn away in frustration. He further stated quite frankly that if no immediate measures were taken, the link with the Eritrean diaspora would be moribund.

Still, even in the in-between years from 1993 to 1998 there were various attempts to (re-) organise Eritrean youth in Germany and keep them connected to their country. For one thing there were several football Eritrean teams scattered all over Germany that usually also had a youth team. The *MahberKoms*, though to varying degrees continued to provide Tigrinya lessons. So did some of the Eritrean religious communities that gradually became more influential as the dominant political organisations had broken away.

---

<sup>14</sup> Interview Sifaf Adem, 13 November 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 20 Aug. 2001. Until he defected in 2004 Shengeb was a member of PFDJ's executive committee.



According to Sifaf Adem, he and some others had privately and as early as 1993 tried to informally get people from the old NUES back together. At least one group resulting from these efforts was still active in the early 2000s, but could hardly be labelled a "youth group", as most members were well above thirty. The official also said they experimented with bringing Eritrean youth into then still existing German-Eritrean friendship societies, hoping this would be a more suitable environment to get them interested in engaging themselves for their home country.<sup>16</sup> Until the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia, however, it seems that the success of such endeavours had only been modest.

In a conversation in 2002, then in his function as the Eritrean embassy's Youth Attaché, Sifaf Adem, tells of his efforts to keep or bring the old NUES branches together after 1991:

B.C.: But after independence, who was responsible [for the youth]? The youth organisation didn't exist anymore.

Sifaf: Yes, the youth organisation didn't exist as institution then, but the relationship with the youth organisation in Eritrea, with the old members, was [still] there. When I started re-organising the old [members] in order to pave a way for the [younger] generation you are talking about, this relationship was there. ... I continued this work and the contacts with the other two – we were three people here in Europe: myself, someone in Erlangen and someone in Vienna. ... [he refers to local chairmen of National Union of Eritrean Students in Europe]. And we actually did work here, more or less successfully.... But then in 1996 I started to look not only at purely Eritrean youth groups or MahbereKom or the like, but also to look around... . After independence there had also been certain changes in the structure of the EHD, there were not as many local branches anymore....

B.C.: EHD??

Sifaf: There were Germans, teachers or so on, who had started [Eritrea] initiatives in their towns. And the Eritrean generation who are born here speak better German than Tigrinya. And then I tried to get in touch with this initiative, this German initiative, and then in 1996 organised a meeting in Bielefeld for the first time.<sup>17</sup> Those Eritreans from the MahbereKom, or students and so on, youth who showed sporadic interest in Eritrea, or had flown there [to Eritrea], I tried to bring then along to these meetings. That way I tried to open a way for these youth, who speak the German language and a bit of Tigrinya, and to repair a bit of the damage...

Indeed Eritrean-German friendship societies, e.g. the one in Darmstadt, but also German social workers and NGOs also provided for Eritrean refugee children, especially for the relatively large number of unaccompanied youth that had arrived only in the late 1980s. In

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview in autumn 2002.

<sup>17</sup> According to my records the first Meeting of Eritrean and German Eritrea Initiatives should have taken place in 1994, since 6th Meeting was held in 2000 in Darmstadt.

Frankfurt a German teachers' association (with the help of Eritrean students) ran the "Eritreff", providing free tuition and leisure time activities for Eritrean pupils and their friends.<sup>18</sup> Eritreff's work has also been introduced in the "Selam Eritrea" magazine no 12 (Sang-Ho Becker 1998: 38-39). In 1993 they organised a trip to Eritrea. The tour of a group of teenage Eritreans and their partly Eritrean, partly non-Eritrean tutors was documented in a booklet titled "Späte Heimatkunde" (Lehrerkooperative e.V. 1994). According to the acknowledgements, the brochure was sponsored by the GTZ's returnee programme FKP Eritrea. It mainly focuses on the individual experiences of a late "home coming," the group dynamics and the evolving identity issues during and after the trip. Interestingly many of the problems and issues mentioned here, shortly after independence were still the same that were discussed amongst the young people I accompanied in 2001.

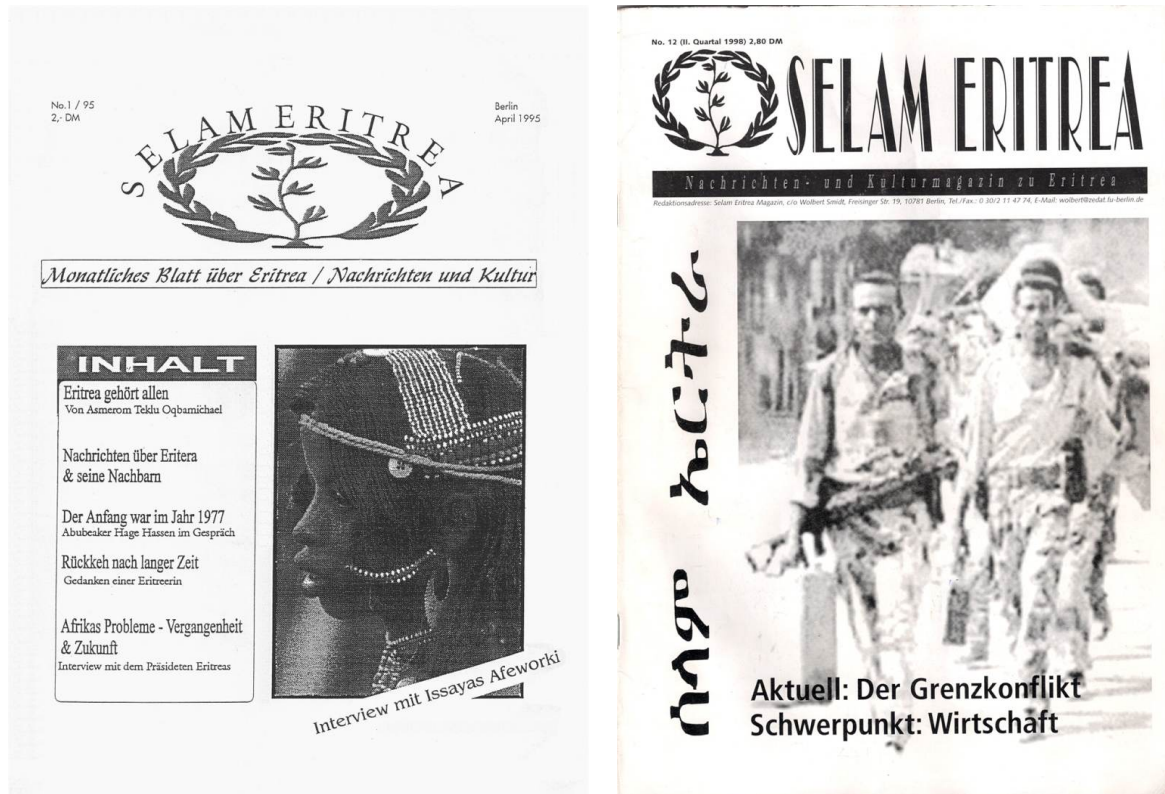
Another Eritrean-German project in Berlin, called "Workcamp Eritrea" started in 1994. It organised for Eritrean and German youth to plant trees together with young local Eritreans in a summer project in Eritrea. This project, too, has been documented, though the publication focuses more on development in Eritrea and the experience of a heterogeneous group working together (Appenheimer et al 1996) than on diaspora issues. The project not only brought Eritreans together, but also some young German researchers, like Wolbert Smidt and Thomas Dassel, who later formed the core of Eritreanist scholarship in Germany. They also actively supported Eritrean initiatives such as the Selam Eritrea project. For years the Berlin-based German language magazine "Selam Eritrea" (1995-2001) was edited or co-edited by Smidt and David Habtu, while Dassel did the layout.

It was out of such groups that further initiatives developed. But also "Eritreans only" groups emerged out of this environment. Perhaps not coincidentally, some youth who had taken part in the Eritreff journey in 1993, became members of *Beles - Young Eritrean European, Beles*. The group was founded by Eritrean pupils and students in Frankfurt in 1997 (Amaniel 1998, Beles 1996, 1999). As the choice of the name *Beles* suggests – a local nickname for diaspora Eritreans visiting their home country the group's work focussed strongly on questions of an in-between identity. *Beles* was supported by a non-Eritrean

---

<sup>18</sup> In 2000 Nina von Nolting was told that Eritreff and MahbereKom cooperate (Nolting 2001:37); Helga Hannken reports that until late 1999 the Mahberekom regretted that no cooperation had come about – making it sound as if that was due to a lack of interest on the side of Eritreff. It is further noteworthy that until the early 1990s the LehrerKooperative and the EPLF mass organisations both resided in the same building in the Mainzer Landstraße 147 that belonged to the KBW (Kommunistischer Bund Westdeutschlands, cf. Chapter 1) The KBW's successor organisation sold the building and built the so-called „Ökohaus Arche,“ where the MahbereKom e.V. and the Lehrerkooperative e.V.) both have offices.

social worker, and engaged in many, mostly cultural activities such as theatre, dance and a small-scale survey amongst Eritrean youth, excerpts of which were published in the “Selam Eritrea” magazine and shown at an Eritrea Festival in Frankfurt as a kind of poster session.



**Figure 6** The first edition of *Selam Eritrea* and one of the last issues that was published during the border war

Around the same time another group, “Mogogo,” partly with overlapping membership came into being in Frankfurt. This name, too, tells of an obvious effort to connect with Eritrea. A *mogogo* is a traditional “oven“ to bake injera, a flat, spongy Eritrean bread and staple food. Once again there is a story behind the name. As one of the group’s founders explained to me, the *mogogo* can be seen as the quintessential tool of Eritrean survival. Moreover, being used on the fire it is “as black as we are.” He adds: “In 1990s it was not as hip to be black as it is today.” As a third reason he lists the *mogogo*’s shape: “It is round, like a wheel, which is ... a symbol for revolution”. Mogogo first functioned as a youth club for Eritreans and their friends, and like Beles it drew part of its membership from Eritreff.

It seems that Eritreff, as well as the evolving self-organised youth groups served as a room that was not entirely “Eritrean” provided more space for second generation Eritreans to develop their own ideas about their country of origin and ways to relate to it, than more

“traditional” settings such as the MahbereKom. This is probably the case, because at the Eritreff they felt less pressured by their parent’s generation, and free to relate to Eritrea and other Eritrean (and non-Eritrean) teenagers on their own terms.

Still Beles as well as Mogogo (and certainly Da’aro as we shall see) existed not entirely apart from Eritrean community networks and transnational political structures. Beles for instance took part in the organisation of the Eritrea Festival, trying to introduce youth topics and performing traditional dances also to show the adults that they had an interest in Eritrean culture. Mogogo apparently tried to intervene in an ongoing “football-war” between different Eritrean teams, but took damage itself in the process and eventually dissolved. It’s “follow-up,” Mogogo Promotions, was more a business start-up than a youth group. Founded by two former Mogogo members, Mogogo Promotion was a kind of event agency, organising parties, the Miss Eritrea Contest, or concerts – catering for the entertainment of young Eritreans in Germany. The mini company stopped operating after the onset of the Eritrean-Ethiopian “border war.” Some hinted that there had been massive criticism along the lines that organizing parties was no longer apt during war times, but whether or not this was the only reason for the company’s demise may be doubted.

The group Da’aro seems to have had a slightly different history, though its origins are not entirely clear. While a prominent member of Biddho claimed that Da’aro was a branch of NUEYS, Sifaf Adem, the former chairman of NUES/NUEYS and later the Embassy’s Youth Attaché, lists Da’aro as an example for an independent youth group, but also mentions that he and others tried to keep the former NUEYS together. One reason for these confusions (that also reappeared in a similar fashion with Warsay) may be that the Tigrinya term for youth group, *mahber meniseyat*, is also used as a short form for the National Union of Youth and Students. One ex-member of Da’aro rather convincingly reports that he became a member of a so-called Eritrea Coordination Group around 1998 at the university of Frankfurt. The group’s membership was composed of mostly older Eritrean students that were about to hand over responsibility to the next generation. Another ex-member of the Coordination Group later joined Warsay e.V., where he had a similar agenda of keeping the next generation in touch with Eritrean issues.

Also around 1998, the Coordination Group was indeed taken over by younger and new members who decided to re-name the group “Da’aro.” Between 30 and 40 young people were Da’aro members, ten of which formed an active core group. The name *Da’aro* is Tigrinya for sycamore tree. Similar to the baobabs in other parts of Africa, sycamores are

used as gathering places for Eritrean village assemblies. In Eritrea such assemblies are called *baito* and are popularly regarded as early democratic institutions. Not surprisingly some Da'aro members were rather critical *vis-à-vis* the Eritrean government. A very active student who had close friends amongst the Da'aro and Beles groups remembered that there had been a meeting with the Eritrean Consul after the start of the border war: "It was not easy for them. Da'aro were "interviewed" by the former Consul .... – or was it Beles? I think he ordered Da'aro and Beles, or whoever was left of them, to the Consulate and [pause] well [pause] they didn't depart amicably, they didn't [pause] get on so well..."

As for Beles, Mogogo or Da'aro - all of them recruited their membership predominately from among those of the second generation who had enjoyed higher education. Another commonality was that they developed in a space that was not under direct control of the established diaspora networks of the first generation of Eritrean immigrants. Also, all these groups proved to be rather short-lived. This had two main reasons. One simply was that – as with many self-organized youth groups no matter what nationality they have – their members fell apart, moved away, developed other interests or simply had to prioritize school, studies or jobs. Another reason seems to be the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This war both divided and galvanised the Eritrean youth (and not just them). Beles, Mogogo and Da'aro dissolved around 1999/2000<sup>19</sup>. At the same time the Warsay movement came into being and absorbed many of the Beles Da'aro or Mogogo activists. The dissolution of the earlier groups, it seems, was partly voluntary, partly succumbing to force. For a while Da'aro co-existed with Warsay, but merged later in 1999. Asked about the involvement of the Eritrean authorities in Germany, and the reactions of the youth one ex-Da'aro member smiles and says:

Nothing ever happens without their interference, politics is everywhere. And yes, some people really hated that and eventually withdrew. It was the same with me actually. I am not against the government, you see? But I want more explanations; I want to know what is happening. (Interview, January 2003, B.C.)

Most youth groups existing until the end of my field research in 2005 were only started between 1998 and 2000 under the impression of the war with Ethiopia. Often they were initiated by Eritrean college and university students. And at least the founding of the *Warsay* movement in Frankfurt, which came to be the largest and most influential group,

---

<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to give an exact date, as the groups' disintegration happened gradually.

was also the result of the joint-mobilization efforts by the PFDJ (the Eritrean ruling party), the local *MahbereKom* and the Eritrean diplomatic mission in Germany.<sup>20</sup> As will be described in more detail in the following chapter, local students felt addressed by the Consulate General's appeal to their solidarity. They initiated a movement aimed at organising the youth in and around Frankfurt. The momentum of the war brought them all together and initially seemed to make the existence of several differently organised youth groups in Frankfurt redundant. The big topic now was no longer culture, identity, or how to meet discrimination in Frankfurt, but the mere survival of the "home country". Da'aro and Warsay officially joined forces in 1999. As a differentiation within the movement "financial," "social," and "info" task forces were established.<sup>21</sup> The latter also created a website and e-group that attracted members from all over Germany who joined the often very emotional and patriotic debate about the situation "at home."

### **War and the transnational "Generation Warsay"**

The Warsay movement in Frankfurt that has been introduced in more detail in the previous chapter was but one powerful reaction of the transnational Eritrean community. Apart from *Warsay* Frankfurt other youth groups were founded throughout Germany during the war, most of them pursuing similar aims. In March 1999, an umbrella organisation for Eritrean youth groups was created (Sifaf 1999: 32). Again, Sifaf Adem, former NUEYS cadre and later on the Eritrean Embassy's Youth Attaché, encouraged and coordinated this effort when he was still working with a non-profit organisation in northern Germany (see Selam Eritrea 2000, No. 13/24).

The organisation was first simply called *Dachverband Eritreischer Jugendgruppen in Deutschland - DEJD* - (Umbrella Organisation of Eritrean Youth Groups in Germany) Before long, however, several members complained that the very term "umbrella organisation" smacked too much of control and hierarchy. It was then renamed Forum of Eritrean Youth Organisations (FEYO)<sup>22</sup>, and eventually a structure based on regional and topical committees (reminding very much of the mass organisation's structures) was set up

---

<sup>20</sup> Warsay/warsot means "heir/s" in Tigrinya. It is however, also a term for the young soldiers in the Eritrean army that fought alongside the EPLF veterans in the 1998-2000 war.

<sup>21</sup> The setting up of committees shows that real-life organisations and networks are still modelled on the organisational structures of the independence movements.

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the German version of the group's name "Forum Eritreischer Jugendgruppen in Deutschland" and its acronym FEJU were used.

(Ambassador 2000). Its main aims were to represent young Eritreans living in Germany, to provide a platform for exchanging information and experiences, to build a bridge between youth in Eritrea and the diaspora and also to actively contribute to Eritrean reconstruction and rehabilitation (Ogbamichael 2002). Up to 16 Eritrean groups from different German towns (with southern Germany being somewhat underrepresented) sent representatives to the bi-annual DEJD/FEYO meetings. Yet, in spite of many good ideas, realized and planned projects, the organisation lost its momentum after 2001. In April 2002, three years after its founding meeting, FEYO gave up on its attempt to become a permanent institution representing and uniting Eritrean youth in Germany. For the time being it continued to exist as a loose cooperation of various groups working together as project partners.

One serious problem FEYO was faced with had been to find volunteers who were willing to take responsibility for a longer period of time. Many a member's schedule was determined by his or her education or professional career. Another problem was the lack of regular face-to-face contact. It is arguable that living in the diaspora in its original meaning of dispersion poses a serious problem to non-hierarchical, supra-local organisations and often fosters segmentary patterns or, as a FEYO member once put it: a "Somalia Syndrome". Hence it is not surprising that FEYO or other groups often seem to waver on the brink of disintegration. In spite of its short period of existence and numerous obstacles, a quite impressive list of events and projects had been realised. About half a dozen meetings had taken place with up to 70 participants from towns all over Germany. Among the most successful of them were sports- or cultural events such as the annual Youth Festival. FEYO also participated in Africa-related workshops and conferences, carried out a youth survey in cooperation with a social science graduate and myself,

The first difficulty the umbrella organisation had faced, was to get in touch with all the existing groups. Even though the Eritrean Embassy in Berlin, as well as the Consulate in Frankfurt, have made efforts to establish links with all sorts of Eritrean diaspora organisations, there was no more "central institution" with which they were registered. A list compiled by an Eritrean student in 2000 was used keep in touch amongst each other as well as with NUES Eritrea (this is where I obtained the list). It contains 22 contact addresses from all over Germany. There were groups in Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Bielefeld, Kassel, Freiburg, Recklinghausen, Essen, Wuppertal, Köln, Siegen, Gießen, Wiesbaden, Mainz, Mannheim, Karlsruhe, as well as two each in Frankfurt and in Stuttgart.

Not on this list were three other groups I came to know during the early stages of my fieldwork: Ere Watla in Tübingen, founded in 1999 and JEF (*Jugendforum von Eritreern aus Frankfurt und Umgebung*), founded in 2000. Wegachta (meaning “sunrise”) from Kassel was only founded after the war in 2001, yet it was considered a junior group of an “older” youth group that had formed relatively soon after independence and whose older members had been active with the former mass organisations.

Wegachta and JEF were both organised under the umbrella of the local MahbereKoms. Their members included teens and twens from 14 or 15 to about 25 years of age. JEF had about 20 members, eight of which were young women. Wegachta said they had about 30 members. The group in Tübingen, was smaller (10-20 members) and seemed to be more of a typical students’ and young professionals’ organisation. All three had the main goals of bringing together young Eritreans in the diaspora, and perhaps kindling some interest in their common country of origin. About their aims JEF says:

“JEF wants to be a platform for Eritrean youth in Frankfurt and its environs, helping them to come together and exchange information and experiences. To foster such an exchange, JEF wants to offer leisure activities, such as sporting events or excursions” (translations from German B.C.)<sup>23</sup>

Wegachta, too, states that that they want to bring Eritrean youth in Kassel together. They also formulate as a further aim to improve “communication between children and parents,” and “to provide information about our home country, e.g. by organising seminars.” Similarly, Ere Watla sees its mission in trying to bring youth together. However, they also see their objective in eventually inspiring an interest in Eritrea.

In terms of activities all three groups (as well as many others elsewhere) organised sporting events such as bowling or basketball tournaments, leisure activities such as barbeques, excursions or parties. The latter are often used as fundraising events. Like Warsay in Frankfurt, Wegachta was also divided into four task forces: Party, Donations, Sport and Newsletter (one of which has at least been produced).

Between 1999 and 2003 a number of DEJD/FEYO meetings, joint events and projects were organised. Among the most successful of them were sports- or cultural events such as the annual Youth Festival, which first was held on 10 and 11 June 2000 in the city of Gießen (near Frankfurt). According to an internal report by the initiators, about 2000

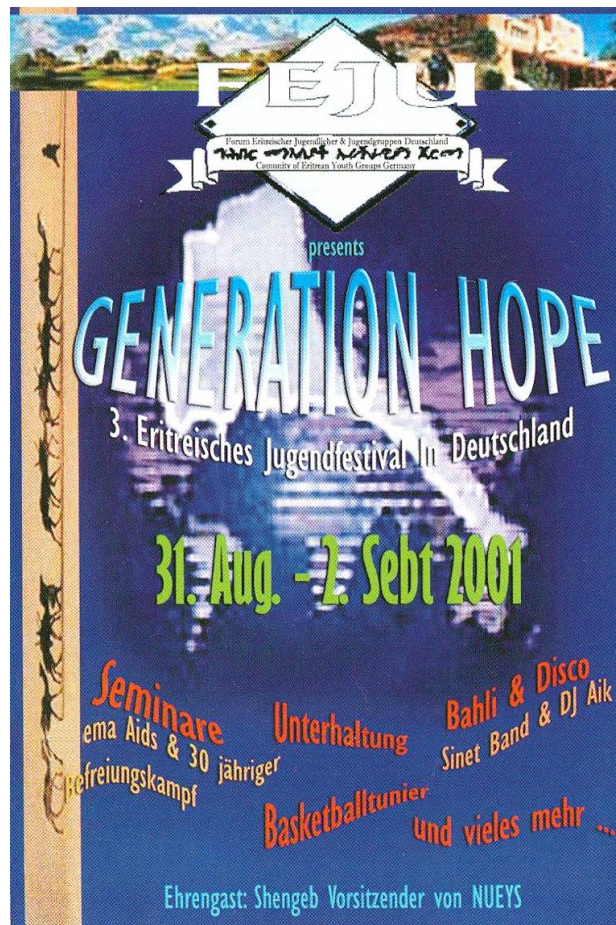
---

<sup>23</sup> Information provided by Ere Watla’s contact person on 13 July 2002.



Eritrean youth from Germany and The Netherlands took part in the festival (Festivalplanungsgruppe 2000). The Eritrean Embassy and Consulate supported the event financially and organisationally. Guests of honour representing “official Eritrea” the umbrella organisation of MahbereKoms in Germany and Zegereda Samuel of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW).

I personally came in touch with the DEJD (the later FEYO/FEYU) in November 2000 at a meeting in Bielefeld organised by members and Sifaf Adem (then member of the Eine-Welt-Haus Bielefeld). The 30-something participants and guests had come from all over Germany. One item on the agenda was a member’s reported about her work experience with a ministry in Eritrea and her participation in the "Know-Your-Country-Tour" that had taken place in summer 1999 despite the ongoing war at the border. It had even included a tour to the front and to the military training camp Sawa. The young audience received the report enthusiastically, and indeed I was to meet at least half a dozen of them on the 2001 tour to Massawa, Dahlak Kebir, Adi Keyh, Quohaito, and Senafe.



**Figure 7** Flyer advertising one of the very popular Eritrean Youth Festivals in Germany that were usually attended by representatives of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students in Eritrea.

### **Strange encounters and lost illusions: ambiguous experiences**

Not all of the younger generation that visit Eritrea do so out of their own initiative or with the same enthusiasm shown at the FEYO meeting. And even if they wanted to join their parents on a trip “home”, many saw themselves enjoying beach life at the shores of the Red Sea rather than being dragged from one house to the next to be presented to an extended family. Not surprisingly, most youngsters eventually coming face to face with Eritrea (often for the first time) find it difficult to recognise the place as the Eritrea of their imagination. Especially teenagers, being not always firm in *Tigrinya*, are quickly bored by the daily routine of visits and are often bribed into Sunday behaviour by allowing them to roam the streets of Asmara after nightfall. Here they are likely to bump into like-minded youngsters from their own or other countries of resettlement.

Walking along Liberation Avenue and its busy side streets in the late afternoon and evening you cannot fail to notice groups of diaspora teenagers monopolizing certain meeting places, street corners, bars and restaurants, some of which are obviously tailored to suit their “western tastes“. The same goes for a handful of nightclubs catering mainly for exiles, tourists and foreign experts - not only in regards to decoration, food and drink, but also when it comes to entrance fees and prices. Still low by western standards they are yet beyond anything most locals can afford (cf. Treiber 2003: 169).

Eritrea Profile, the countries English language newspaper commented benevolently on the Babylonian mix of languages one will hear in Asmara during the rainy season and listing the places favoured by the exiles:

... walking down the Liberty Avenue passing the Cathedral and onto the famous meeting places .... one can never avoid hearing more than one language at a time. .... As you stroll the steps of this beautiful old Italian Church it is obvious that it is the easiest spot to fix an Appointment [sic!]. Moving on towards the well-known corner “Royal bar” gives you the feeling that you are walking through the cold Scandinavian countries hearing things like “wie geht’s?”...(German) “hej da” ... (Swedish) “Morn!” (Norwegian) [sic!] “ Hallo, Hoe gaat het met je” ... (Dutch) ... A few steps to the right of the Royal Bar, you notice some guys swearing with the pure Arabian accent “Wallahi Al’Azim” Take a walk onto the next block between the Mask Place and Alba Bistro and in your mind, you will be walking down the cities of London, New York and Toronto hearing phrases like: “Whaz up Men!!” “How ya doing??” Go ahead and keep on walking towards the ‘Casa degli Italiani’ and you will find yourself in the middle of the old Italian cities exchanging greetings such as Ciao!!! Come stai? ....(Asmeret 2001: 8)<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Punctuation and spelling as in original newspaper article.

Not all locals – including the local youth - seem amused by these cosmopolitan graces. With a mixture of envy and scorn they view their “cousins“ from abroad who hang around displaying their branded clothes, spending money and paying them little or no heed. There have been reports of tensions between exiles and locals virtually from the beginning of the annual pilgrimages in the mid-1990s (cf. Lehrerkooperative 1994: 23-28; Hartman 1998). When I talked to Eritreans before my field trip quite a few, especially elder people, denied that there were any problems, or put them aside as childish squabbles. However, during my sojourn in summer 2001, there was no pretending that all was fine between diaspora and locals youth. One year after the end of the Ethio-Eritrean border war (1998-2000) the families of those killed had not been notified and were anguishly awaiting news from the front. In this situation the happy-go-lucky lifestyle of some young Eritreans from abroad provoked considerable resentment. Also, the regular fights between local youngsters and diaspora youth could no longer be brushed aside as “normal“ in-fights between teenagers. The lines of conflict were neatly drawn between “us” - the Eritreans from abroad and “them” - the locals: “...between the young adults from the less-educated and poor sections of Asmara and vacationers from the diaspora there is deep mistrust that regularly culminates in violent confrontations” (Treiber 2005: 245).

But not only the diaspora-raised youth, the adults faced adaptation difficulties even though there conflicts remained less visible. It was remarks here and there that showed how hard it was to readjust to an Eritrean way of life, to deal with the exaggerated expectations of relatives, to handle the fact that the years abroad had brought changes not only to Eritrea, but also to those who had left. As the mother of one of my interview ones summarised it when her daughter complained about her alienation: “My child, it’s not just you who have become German – I have become German, too!”

In the summer of 2001 talked to a number of elderly diaspora visitors, who took the opportunity of talking to an outsider to vent their obvious irritation with the local state of affairs. As a researcher from Germany, I must admit, I was sometimes rather dumbfounded at the praise of Teutonic secondary virtues listed by my interview or conversation partners, who in Germany might have described the very same values as cold and inhumane. Many diasporites I talked to bemoaned the lack of punctuality and cleanliness, the pressure they feel under to provide for their extended families, the disregard for environmental matters, and, lo and behold, even the lack of work ethics. A young Eritrean from Germany commented (in the dialect of a German “tribe“ feared for its industriousness) on the usually

highly praised Eritrean work ethics: “Die welled nix schaffe...” (“They do not want to work.”). On the background of his exile experiences, he referred to the attitude of a certain strata of Eritrean - or rather Asmarino - society. Regarding some kinds of work as demeaning, they prefer living on remittances sent by relatives from abroad. Another young man who made a point of being very Eritrean when I first met him in Germany, said to me in Eritrea: “I’ve only noticed how German I am since I’ve come here. Or maybe I should say, I am German in Eritrea, and Eritrean in Germany.”

The nicknaming of the exiles as *beles* might illustrate this. *Beles* is the Tigrinya name for the prickly pear. Its sweet and juicy inside, but its skin is rather tough and thorny, making it hard to pick and open it. The fruit are harvested during the rainy season when the diaspora Eritreans also come to visit. One explanation I have been offered for this nicknaming gave it a more metaphorical meaning: “The exiles are like *beles*, they are only here for a short time bringing a promise of sweetness. But when they are gone you are just left with a pile of rubbish.” In any case, calling someone *beles* is usually not meant as a compliment and also understood this way. Some of the exiles thus retaliated by calling the locals for example *kiraf beles* - beles skin - alluding to the local youth’s endeavours to imitate their western habitus and fashion style.



**Figure 8** *Beles I: Cactus fruits sold on the streets of Asmara. The figs are harvested in summer, around the same time the diaspora Eritreans come to visit.*



**Figure 9** *Beles II: Young diaspora Eritreans, touring their country of origin are often nicknamed “beles” by the locals, indicating a coincidence between the harvest time of the fruit and the arrival of diaspora visitors. Here a more touristy scene in Massawa. (Visible faces blurred to protect the participants’ privacy).*



**Figure 10** *Beles III: A more sombre spot for sightseeing were the trenches from the 1998-2000 war, close to the border town of Senafe. (Visible faces are blurred).*

After our return to Asmara the Know-Your-Country-Tour travellers participated in a NUEYS organised panel discussion between local and diaspora youth. Both sides blame each other for the lack of communication and the frequent violent incidents. Local youngsters accused the diaspora youth of being arrogant show-offs with a lack of regard for Eritrean culture and tradition. They also made them responsible for rising taxi fares and restaurant bills. Older Eritreans pointed a finger at diaspora parents for giving their offspring not enough information about local sensitivities. In particular they bemoaned the

behaviour of girls from abroad, who smoke in public, talk “disrespectfully” to their elders and dress in fashion that is considered indecent. The diaspora girls on the other hand complained of being verbally and physically harassed by locals.

In private conversations Eritreans from abroad often voiced the opinion that envy, rooted in the economic inequality between the diaspora and Eritrea, was the main source of conflict. Yet, different behaviours and standards of living are only the visible expressions of an unacknowledged alienation between what I have termed “culture of war” and “culture of exile”. All rhetoric of (trans)national unity notwithstanding, the image of Eritrea and Eritrean-ness is not the same in Asmara and *Adi Frankfurt*<sup>25</sup>. Especially for younger people, whose knowledge about “home” is handed down by their elders’ and the liberation movements’ selective narratives, it is difficult to distinguish what is “Eritrean exile culture” and what is locally “lived” culture. An anecdotal incident may illustrate this: in a cafe a group of teens from Italy questioned me about what I thought of Eritrea. Every favourable answer, however, spurred them into even louder complaints. Having covered the weather, the boredom, the state of hotels and toilets, we turned to the local *cuisine*. Finally one boy exclaimed exasperatedly: “But they cannot even make proper *injera* (a flat spongy bread eaten with most meals)! It’s so dark here. In Italy, we make it nice and light in colour“. In fact, the light-coloured *injera* you often get abroad is the result of using corn- and wheat meal as a substitute for the local *taff* (cf. Amanuel 2001c) What is very telling, however, is the lopsided view of what is “authentic“ Eritrean culture. For the kids diaspora culture is true Eritrean culture, whereas local Eritrean culture is just a bad try. And what goes for food also rings true for less material ideas about Eritrean-ness.

Another not unusual story is that of a German Eritrean who is shocked at her relatives' consumerism. Brought up on stories about Eritrean virtues and values such as self-reliance and industriousness, she had expected her cousin in Asmara to invest the money she gave to her, but found her relative had spent it on fashion items instead. Local Eritreans on the other hand tend to believe that living in “the West“ automatically means being rich. How difficult it is to make a living abroad is not grasped, and less so, as many overseas Eritreans like to gloss over the downsides of their diaspora lives. In order to prove their success and ease a guilty conscience, gifts are made which sometimes financially ruin diaspora families for the rest of the year or longer. Consequently both sides feel

---

<sup>25</sup> *Adi* means village or place; Frankfurt in Germany is nicknamed „adi“ as it is home the largest Eritrean community in Germany.

misunderstood. The exiles feel their efforts are not fully appreciated while their relatives think them both arrogant and unwilling to do more for their poorer relations.

The obvious estrangement of the young generation is also seen with concern on the side of the Eritrean authorities. Depending on the diaspora's hard currency remittances, the government has started some initiatives to encourage continued solidarity (and cash flow) from the second generation<sup>26</sup>. The "Know-Your-Country-Tour" organised by the National Union of Youth and Students (NUEYS) is but one example of trying to keep the second generation "in touch" with their place of origin. Yet, as experiences narrated in the first part of this paper above show, the results of this endeavour can at best be called ambiguous. Other attempts at integrating diaspora youth more firmly within the Eritrean transnational field – such as a programme offering internships with the Eritrean administration – sometimes also proved to be potentially alienating experiences.

Young Eritreans from abroad coming to Eritrea as interns, volunteers, or to collect material for academic studies, are mostly well in their twenties. Many of them still used to be members of the "Red Flowers" as children, are active in Eritrean youth association, or had chosen an "Eritrean" topic for their graduate papers. The majority of them represent the more educated segment of diaspora society and also tend to be successful and "well-integrated" in their country of resettlement. Apart from "searching for their roots" and gaining work and life experience, most of these young people also wanted a chance to become acquainted with an Eritrea out of *beles* season, outside family homes and beyond prearranged trips to the Red Sea in air-conditioned Toyotas.

Still, even though this group makes much more of an effort to adapt, personal experiences vary enormously. A NUEYS official who facilitated these internships reported that while some were happy and planned to come back; others had vowed they would not even return for a holiday. Rahwa, a young woman I met in Asmara had just left a volunteer job after being told by an Eritrean colleague that she was not a "real Eritrean" after all. The incident also led her to contemplate about her future:

I used to think some day I would go to live in Eritrea, perhaps with 30 or 40. It was always in the back of my mind. Now I cannot even imagine going back with 60. [Pause] But neither can I imagine growing old in Germany. I feel quite homeless now - like a Kurd. (Field notes, August 2001, B.C.)

---

<sup>26</sup> „In no other African country are remittances as important as in Eritrea, where remittances comprise slightly less than one third (30 percent) of the GDP.“ (Tekie 2005: 168).

She was referring not only to her personal disappointments, but also felt that the Eritrea she had come to know did not have the bright future she used to imagine, but was sliding into authoritarian rule: "Even in 50 years there will be no democracy here," she said in late August 2001. Less than a month from then political dissidents and journalists were arrested and private newspapers banned. And with the situation in the country growing increasingly tense, the diaspora (youth), too, became fragmented and paralysed.



**Figure 11** Flyer advertising the 2008 “Know-Your-Country-Tour” and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Eritrean Youth Festival at the military training camp Sawa. In 2001 when I participated in the Zura N’Hagerka, there was no festival yet, but apart from the tour to the Western and Southern part of the country,, another trip was offered including an stop in Sawa. Thus, safe for some small details, the tours have not changed much since their introduction.



### **From myth of return to myth of origin: reinventing the diaspora**

By and large official as well as private “Know-Your-Country” experiences lead to some disillusionment among Eritrean diaspora youth, and force them to re-negotiate what it means to declare “I am Eritrean“. Unsurprisingly, the “real,” present day Eritrea diverges from the images the youth had created based on their parents’ and the exile organisations narratives. All nationalist “*hade hizbi, hade libi*” – rhetoric notwithstanding, only few of the young travellers felt fully part of Eritrean society.<sup>27</sup> Far from solving the question of belonging, these transnational journeys often complicate them. Before coming to Eritrea, the feeling of not being totally at home – or being marginalised –in Germany was made more bearable by seeking refuge in the thought that one’s “true home” was elsewhere. For a majority of young diasporites, encountering similar alienation and rejection in Eritrea, any however vague idea of “return” no longer seems to provide a realistic point of refuge from, or an alternative to life in the diaspora.<sup>28</sup>

What does that leave them with? Feeling German in Eritrea, and Eritrean in Germany – as one of the “Know-Your-Country-Tourer” suggested? Feeling both German *and* Eritrean?<sup>29</sup> Or neither? Not rarely, the initial reaction is indeed one of expressing disorientation and feeling “quite homeless,” as Rahwa put it. Other young people I interviewed emphasised their German-ness. Yet most of them remained aware that their problem of belonging cannot be solved either by “simply“ adopting e.g. a German identity – no matter how much they have internalized values and ideas of their resettlement country. It must also be noted that these immediate evaluations were often revised after returning to Germany, and might be revised again as individual and external circumstances change. Something that remained was a stronger feeling of we-ness among the diaspora youth as a group of Eritreans apart from their compatriots within the country.

When presenting the findings of my research in Eritrea to an audience of mostly young Eritreans in Germany, I tentatively titled my presentation “The ‘Beles’ - A Tenth Ethnic Group?“ I added it was meant somewhat provocatively. During the discussion a young man said: “Actually, your title is not provocative at all. It’s the truth!“ Some of the

---

<sup>27</sup> Slogan that came up during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia. It means „one people, one heart,“ and was used to emphasize the need of solidarity and single-mindedness amongst Eritreans.

<sup>28</sup> In her graduate paper of April 1998 (i.e. before the border war), a second-generation Eritrean describes similar problems, but states that one day, she will return forever (Ghebray 1998:46-48). After the war, and with the lasting political and economic crisis, only very few youngsters would make similar statements today.

<sup>29</sup> “...I am an Eritrean in Eritrea and a German here in Germany.”one young man put it (Beles 1999: 34).

older listeners flinched, but the younger ones nodded or at least did not contradict the speaker. As the sojourns in Eritrea have shown, the "culture of exile" not only set them apart from Eritrean society but serves also to create a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among fellow exiles from all over the world. This also explains why most young people go back to Eritrea for another holiday in spite of negative experiences. As a young woman from Frankfurt put it:

They [the locals] gave us a hard time, but still I feel quite homesick now, not for the Eritreans there, but for the friends I made there. I mean other Eritreans from abroad. In Asmara even people you hardly say hello to in Frankfurt are suddenly your best buddies. (Field notes B.C.)

I argue that journeys to Eritrea make most youngsters aware that something like an Eritrean "exile" or "diaspora culture" in its own right exists at all, and that it might be something of an asset, rather than a stigma. But as any other diaspora, the Eritrean diaspora cannot exist without a common point of reference: and this remains Eritrea. But rather than the myth of return, it is now the reference to a common origin that makes Eritreans abroad a community. Thus the summer holiday is no longer seen as a rehearsal for a potential return, but more like a celebration of one's origin and community. Like an Eritrean version of the Jewish diaspora's "Next year in Jerusalem," the pilgrimage to Eritrea has become a part of diaspora culture; maybe even a *rite de passage* for the youth from abroad.

Forging truly transnational links with Eritrean diaspora youth from other corners of the world or only from other towns within the same country of residence. As Treiber finds: "The holiday guests from the diaspora gather in and around Bar Royal and mainly make contacts amongst each other" (2005: 245). Some of these links are maintained via modern means of communication, such as phones and Internet: Eritrean websites, on-line forums, mailing lists or associations play a certain role, but very often global social networks, such as Facebook are used to stay in touch.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally even marriages result from meetings

---

<sup>30</sup> These discussions would be a topic that alone would fill another chapter. Underlying the frequently chauvinist, sexist and discriminatory statements towards women and non-Eritrean "races", is a quest for a unique identity and its protection against a western culture that is perceived as "stronger" and "more powerful" than the Eritrean culture. At the same time a border is drawn between "Habeshas" and "Africans" who are often described as "ugly" and inferior, the same as white people, that are at best good for a one-night stand or a provisional relationship until a "good" Habesha girl or boy is found for a lasting relationship. The terminology used is frightfully reminiscent of that employed by white supremacists. Interracial, and indeed also bi-national relationships e.g. Eritrean-Ethiopian, are frowned upon or even labelled as an act of treason or „tainting our beautiful race.“ A ranking of acceptable to tolerable to absolutely intolerable partners is discussed (Germans are still better than Black Americans or Turks etc.). Also it seems more acceptable for males to "have fun" with non-Eritrean partners than for Eritrean women. Question such as "My sister is going out with an GI, what

like those in Asmara (or follow-up visits in the youth's respective settlement country). In Internet forums it is widely discussed why it is easier or better to marry another Diaspora Eritrean rather than a local Eritrean or a non-Eritrean from one's country of residence.

But apart from romantic relationships, the sense of a distinct diaspora-identity and the existence of a transnational community of Eritreans have also had an impact on the youths' self-perception and future plans. Especially Eritrean-German school- and university graduates use their diasporic family and friendship networks to gain valuable information about living conditions and job and educational prospects elsewhere. Quite a few of those I came to know during my research have now emigrated, either temporarily or permanently. They have gone to the UK, North America, or one of the Scandinavian countries in search of for better job or study opportunities, to gain new experiences or to find better integration in societies that are perhaps more inclusive of immigrants than Germany.

In any case there is a growing realisation that in spite of the existence of a wider transnational field that embraces both Eritrea and its diaspora, there is also a "here" and "there"; a "culture of war" and a "culture of exile." In an article published in the Eritrean-German magazine "Selam Eritrea" in 1998, the youth group *Beles* very articulately embark on a discourse on identity, reflecting such experiences:

Parallel to Eritrean society an exile society is developing whose young generation is closely historically linked to the war and the country, but sometimes feels ... that their country of origin is a strange place to them. Beles is the attempt to overcome this feeling of alienation ... by acknowledging the social reality of exile and thus finding a new way of seeing ourselves as Eritreans. Beles is a fruit that grows during the rainy season in the highlands of Eritrea. About this time also most of the Eritrean exiles arrive in Eritrea... Hence the local Eritreans named them "beles". The youth group "Beles- Young Eritrean Europeans" has adopted this name in order to build a bridge between Africa and Europe. What is usually considered to be two mutually exclusive places (Africa and Europe) comes together in "beles" - a "life in between" ... Our mother tongue, the feeling of home, the relationship to our parents are no longer easy to define. To explain contradictions which are none is our aim and this will make us capable of living in exile. (Beles 1998: 36/37, translation B.C.)

Thus Eritrean diasporic youth, while still having a sense of looking back to the homeland maybe on their way to an articulation of a new culture and mode of survival. To focus (as

---

shall I do?" elicit answers from "Kill the bitch" to "Talk to her and try to tell her that she is ruining her life" to "If it is love, you should not interfere." Of course, there are also outraged voiced calling for tolerance and non-

*Beles* did) on a “life in between” may also help them to re-define their rather mythical relationship with their country of origin. Further travels and activities in and on behalf of Eritrea are undertaken no longer under the illusion that all Eritreans are “one people,” but from a distinct exile perspective, that makes it possible to relate to Eritrea (and perhaps also to their settlement country) in new ways. This ability to negotiate one’s identity might even give this transnational youth an advantage when dealing in international contexts. As one young Eritrean put it rather pragmatically: “...you have to learn when to be German and when to be Eritrean.”

The shocked and saddened “Know-Your-Country-Tourers” we met at the beginning of this chapter have since developed their own versions of Eritrean-ness and expressions of feeling a connection with their origin. This process has partly been made more difficult by the Eritrean state’s attempt at controlling, co-opting and hindering independent individual and group activities even abroad. On this background Henok’s disengagement from the “official community” is as much an expression of his continued sense of connectedness with home as is Sam’s cooperation with political cadres and participation in government-sponsored events.<sup>31</sup> Selamawit moved from a German provincial town to multi-cultural London, then went on to work with an NGO operating in an African country. Almaz gives hip hop courses for immigrant kids in Frankfurt. Bereket married to his German girlfriend and is hardly to be seen in Eritrean circles anymore, though he occasionally writes on Eritrean web sites. Yonas has become a human rights activist opposing the Eritrean regime. His close friend Paulos tries to be politically “neutral,” but has founded a small organisation to support orphans in Eritrea. Sara’s is no longer much interested in what is happening in Eritrea, but she has started an Internet business that caters mainly for an Eritrean niche-market. These personal developments reflect what *Beles* expressed more than ten years ago:

... we have noticed that the connection to our Eritrean culture of origin is not either there or not, but exists on different levels and is continually a-changing ... But although our relationship with Eritrea is characterised by alienation, it still exists. Eritrea is part of our life – only in a different way. (*Beles* 1998:36, translation B.C.)

---

discriminatory language. Behind this language, however, these discussions reveal a lot about issues of belonging, racism, discrimination, gender roles and nationalism.

<sup>31</sup> To protect my interviewees identities, names are changed and activities do not reflect those of the „real“ KYCT participants. However, the activities are no „fiction“ but provide a small selection of a broad range of ways in which Eritrean youth relate to their homeland.

### **Beyond war and *warsay*: a transnational second generation in the making?**

I have so far described the encounters between young local Eritreans and diaspora-Eritreans and their consequences mainly from the latter's perspective. But the contact between both groups also impacts the lives and identities of the local youth, especially so in Asmara. In spite of the negative feelings vis-à-vis the *beles*, contact with them clearly changes and shapes the locals' perception of self and their ideas about the world outside. Similar observations have been made by Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2001: 175-177) who conclude that we need an extended concept of a transnational second generation that includes both young people in the diaspora and their cohort in the homeland.

It can indeed not be denied that the massive presence of diaspora Eritreans in Asmara (and other transnational contacts) has left a mark on urban youth culture in Eritrea. The encounters accelerate changes in the patterns of consumption and put pressure on youngsters in Asmara to conform for instance to certain standards of clothing set by the exiles. Wanting to adopt the exiles' more liberal lifestyle doubtlessly aggravates generation, social and gender conflicts. Also, the local youth's worldview and aspirations are - at least this is true for the urban centres - are shaped by their contacts with the diaspora.

The most visible consequence of the high degree of interconnected-ness between Eritrea and its large diaspora is certainly the ongoing out-migration that continued also after the country's independence. All through the relatively hopeful 1990s, Eritreans joined the diaspora - at that time mostly for reasons of family reunification, marriage or education. Especially marriages between diaspora men and women from Eritrea were and still are the order of the day.<sup>32</sup> It is likely that this practice, though it constitutes a new bond not only between individuals, but also between the diaspora and Eritrea, also brings with it a few new problems and yet again a new chain of migration.

In summer 2001 the popular Eritrea Profile columnist, Amanuel Sahle, produced several satirical articles about Eritreans living in the (German) diaspora. On the issue of marriage he writes:

It is good to be living single abroad. You can always come back and pick your bride, and you can choose the prettiest girl in town and obtain easy consent from the eager family ... Every family wants to have his [!] daughter get snatched by

---

<sup>32</sup> Even recently many „older youth“ I have come to know during my research have married a woman from Eritrea. Many of them belong to the third vintage of unaccompanied male youth. The main reason is that there are not enough Eritrean women of their age group in the diaspora in Germany. Hence, unless they are ready to settle with a non-Eritrean partner, the only chance is to look out for a bride in Eritrea.

someone rich. And who can claim to be richer than the one who lives in America or Europe. ... The eventual disruption of the much advertised marriage between a diasporan and an Asmaraina. ... is the perpetual testimony to the fact that many of those alleged rich are not so. No wonder that eloping and escapades by disillusioned brides after a brief stay with their spouses abroad has become the order of the day. (Eritrea Profile Vol. No., 4 August 2001, p. 7)<sup>33</sup>

Something that is again alluded to in the above quotation is that Eritreans from abroad are considered rich and also tend to present themselves accordingly. How difficult it was for the former refugees to make a living is often not grasped, and less so, as many overseas Eritreans like to gloss over the darker sides of their diaspora lives. Likewise, the psychological problems many refugees went through can hardly be made comprehensible to an Eritrean youth desperately wishing for a “better life” (Treiber 2005).

Access to education was and continues to be another reason for going abroad. In 1998 more than thirty percent of unaccompanied underage refugees in *Hesse* were Eritrean, many of them hoping to go to school in Germany.<sup>34</sup> With the rigid German immigration laws, their dreams were bitterly frustrated: youth above sixteen will usually not even be allowed to visit schools while awaiting a decision from the asylum authorities. In 1998 German social worker describes his experiences as follows:

Of the last refugee generation many are found in youth detention, psychiatric clinics and the drug scene. ... the youth are finally send back wrecked [to Eritrea] ... where they will become a social problem for the government. All this is a problem which must be tackled immediately by the Eritrean educational system in order to stop the country losing more hopeful young people. (Rettig 1998:23, translation B.C.)

Since the above text was published in *Selam Eritrea* more than ten years have past and the situation has progressed from bad to worse. Reforms of the Eritrean education system have taken place, but rather serve to aggravate the situation. The 12th and final grade now has to be concluded on the premises of the Eritrean military camp in Sawa. The university has been virtually dismantled for the benefit of decentralized colleges, many of which are led by former military personnel rather than educationalists (cf. Hirt and Abdulkader, n.d.).

---

<sup>33</sup> In his article “An Eritrean in Germany,” Amanuel (2001a) concludes: “Some Eritreans in Germany spend their time doing nothing. They get money from the government and loiter the whole day ... If such people are hated by the host population and are told to go home they deserve it.” – Given the fact that these and similar pieces (see Amanuel 2001c) were published during the main travel season for the diaspora, one can hardly imagine that they contributed positively towards understanding between diaspora and local Eritreans.

<sup>34</sup> With its international airport in Frankfurt the German Federal State of Hesse is one of the major important entrance points for asylum seekers.

Even if the picture of life in the diaspora has become more realistic in recent years, and out-migration of young people has become an illegal and highly risky endeavour, more Eritrean youth than ever are leaving the country. War, militarization, economic depression, growing political tensions and the deteriorating human rights situation give little prospect for building a future within the country. Even mere survival is precarious. Left to make a choice between “the devil and the deep blue sea,” migration seems the best – or only – coping strategy. Especially the thin strata of already well-educated young Eritreans are leaving the country in droves causing a severe brain drain. According to an UNHCR report, in 2008 there were almost 10,000 Eritrean youth in one Ethiopian refugee camp, mostly waiting to migrate on towards “the West.” Others cross the Sudanese border and embark on a costly and dangerous journey to Libya and from there on to Malta or Italy (cf. Welge 2006; Treiber and Tesfaye 2008). Also, most of the 600 Eritrean Students in South Africa will hardly return to Eritrea.<sup>35</sup> A new and equally dangerous flight route, which has been resorted to since 2008/2009, leads via Egypt to Israel.

While only few of the students manage to leave the country legally or even equipped with scholarships, the majority of those willing to emigrate will again turn to their often financially strained exile relatives for help. When they arrive in the diaspora these new refugees are often confronted with suspicion, or even hostility from some sections of the established community. Especially to the die-hard EPLF supporters, who refuse to acknowledge that today’s Eritreans have in fact any reason to flee or immigrate, the young generations exodus seems like a slap in face. Worse still: some of these newcomers have initiated transnational movements campaigning for human rights and political change in Eritrea (cf. Hepner 2007; EAI and connection e.V. 2004, 2006). Their public discussion of issues that were traditionally “kept within the family” receives support from some quarters of the older Eritrean diaspora, yet the “mainstream” community remains either silent or even hostile, viewing the rights campaigners as traitors of the Eritrean cause. In a public seminar on human rights violations in Eritrea, government supporters who had come to disrupt the presentation eventually told the campaigners to stop soiling the image of Eritrea and to go back home to defend the country.

---

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication with a student concerned (summer 2004). Many of the students in South Africa became politically active and challenged the Eritrean government over its grave human rights violation (see Mekonnen and Abraha 2004). For them as well as for other students in the North America and Europe who failed to return “in time;” returning home now would almost certainly lead to a their arrest (cf. Amnesty International 2004).

Similar to the diaspora youth's experience of being attacked and not accepted as Eritreans in Eritrea (as described in this chapter), the new refugees find themselves insulted as cowards, deserters and traitors by the "old diaspora", or are even told that they are no true Eritreans: "They are deserters. They leave their country when they are needed most. Deserting is also punished in Germany, isn't it? So why should they be given asylum here? To me they are no real Eritreans," comments a *shaebia* supporter in an informal discussion about the increased number of Eritrean asylum seekers (for similar findings see Arnone 2008:332-333). Here, the conflict between a "culture of war" and a "culture of exile" emerges again, only in a different setting and an opposite constellation. And pointing their fingers at the contradictions the old diaspora has chosen to ignore, the new refugees have again started to change the diaspora-homeland relationship, and also the diaspora community itself.



## Chapter 3

### **CyberEritrea: Wars, Voices and (Di)Visions**

Has the Internet Transformed the Eritrean Trans/nation at Home and Abroad?<sup>1</sup>

---

#### ***DEHAI (Voice)***

*Speech online  
Can set you free  
It lights my voice  
On a screen like the sun  
Voice. Voice!*

*The net sets me free  
To think in poetry  
The sad will rejoice  
The weeping will laugh*

*In the news like food and drink  
In the dark with a candle to think*

*Sisters, brothers, citizens, drums!  
ezm! z-ezm! ezm! z-ezm!  
ebum! b-ebum! ebum! b-ebum!  
Voice! Voice!*

*We share the screen  
Like the sun  
And our freedom of speech  
Reads the poetry in thought*

*-- Reesom Haile*

#### **Diasporas and the Internet: some ideas and questions**

One new development that set in after independence was the linking up of diaspora Eritreans all around the world via the Internet. This and the following chapter therefore aim at addressing the development of “cyber-Eritrea”, analysing its value for mobilizing the Diaspora during the 1998-2000 war and finally, to examine the modes of connection between real and virtual diaspora life. Doing so, the common notion of the Internet as a medium that facilitates equality and democratic developments is critically re-examined.

---

<sup>1</sup> Revised version of the first part of an article published under the title “‘We are the Warsay of Eritrea in diaspora:’ Contested Identities and Social Divisions in Cyberspace and Real-Life.” (Conrad 2006b).

The widely unexpected outbreak of the so-called "border-war" between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 stirred Eritreans abroad. It was perceived as a threat to Eritrean sovereignty and produced a knee-jerk reaction of solidarity. But this crisis did not only spark an amazing show of solidarity with home country and government, it also led to the first serious questioning of the policies of the Eritrean leadership (made up of former EPLF veterans). The cracks that appeared on the surface of Eritrean national unity showed most clearly in the diaspora. The ensuing debate about the government's legitimacy, its past and present rights and wrongs, and the question of the future course in Eritrean politics has largely been fought out among government supporters and an ever-growing number of dissident and opposition groups - most of them based abroad. Their preferred battleground is the Internet: Welcome to cyber-Eritrea.

\*

Academic and popular discourses on the Internet have often stressed its role as an agent of globalisation and its great potential for changing our ideas about the ways societies are constructed. The Internet is also assumed to be an essentially democratic medium - bodiless, borderless, inclusive, interactive - combining the accessibility of a local meeting place with the unlimited possibilities of a whole new universe. It promises to smooth out differences between individuals, cultures and nations, and connecting people from different walks of life and living in different parts of the world thus rendering location meaningless, and virtually liberating its users from the constraints of the real world. As such it seems perfectly apt to suit the needs of scattered populations, exile and diasporic communities, whose state of mind and cause of suffering has so far been determined by the separation from their place of origin and from one another.

From the early and mid-1990s the Internet therefore began to feature prominently in studies on transnational social spaces. Together with other means of communication and transportation, authors inevitably listed the Internet as one of the facilitators of transnational existences and as a catalyser in the gradual process of de-nationalisation (Basch et al. 1994; Appadurai 1996, Pries 1996). It is not my aim here to refute or minimise such findings. Yet, looking at my empirical data I came to wonder whether some of the impacts attributed to the Internet are not too optimistic. Can a "virtual space", within which borders allegedly do not exist and locations do not matter, offer a real chance to solve real-life dilemmas of integration, return and belonging? Can the "virtual" mend or overcome divided realities or exist apart from them? And if so: in which ways and for whom?

And I am not alone with my doubts either: Recent studies have suggested that while the Internet has indeed accelerated the creation of a global space, the reverse is happening too: We find transnational or global spaces such as the Internet being used for nationalist or other exclusive projects, that not only aim at maintaining or enhancing real life boundaries, but also lead to a spatialisation of cyberspace itself (Bernal 2001). In fact this should not surprise us too much. Borders and boundaries, in close association with identities, are products of imagination and interaction with others. You can imagine them in the bodiless realm of cyberspace as well as, or even more easily than, you do in the physical world. And here as there you can make your imaginings consequential: be it by fighting for national independence or by creating exclusive, members-only e-groups. In her article on Eritrea and the "nationalisation of transnationalism", Victoria Bernal argues along the same lines when she says:

As the example of Dehai [Name of an influential Eritrean web site] illustrates, even the transnational and deterritorialized place of cyberspace is ... a ground upon which can be projected national imaginaries. Constructions of globalisation, transnationalism, and the wired world that emphasize their unboundedness and their unifying and universalising effects are overlooking the very powerful ways in which people re-inscribe difference and belonging, and reassert loyalties and identities even as they engage in global processes and inhabit transnational spaces. (Bernal 2001: 29)

My concern here is not so much with the overall effects of the Internet and other transnational spaces as such. Nor is it with the particular ways in which the concept of nationalism undergoes a transformation because of its stronger "embedded-ness" in global processes. Instead I want to highlight the effects of a multi-level Internet usage in a local diaspora community. As outlined above, I never treated the Internet as a closed "virtual" fieldwork site, but as an integral part of "real" life in the diaspora. Here I find myself in accord with a recent anthropological approach to the Internet (Miller and Slater: 2001), which suggests that:

We need to treat the Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness. ... new mediations indeed, but not a new reality.... That is to say, these spaces are important as part of everyday life, not apart from it. (Miller and Slater 2001: 5-7; emphasis as in original text)

Similarly, I try to open up a perspective from "below" and to show (as far as this is possible) how people in the Eritrean diaspora make use of the Internet media and how their ways of doing so are shaped by real-life locations and situations. Yet, before looking more closely at

the grassroots level in chapter four, we need some sort of an idea what "Eritrean cyberspace" actually consists of. This chapter thus endeavours to provide both an overview over the historical development of Eritrean cyberspace and a rough sketch of its present day extension. Of course I can merely capture a moment in time here. In previous years the Eritrean web and the real Eritrean world diaspora have gone through various stages of change at an amazing speed, and there is no reason to assume that even some degree of accommodation will be reached in the near future. At the time this text is written, however, a growing fragmentation, compartmentalisation, polarization and localisation of the Eritrean web can be witnessed. I therefore argue that "Cyber-Eritrea" today not only represents a "deterritorialised" Eritrean nationality, as rightfully observed by Bernal, but that it also provides room for competing (sub- and intranational) models of Eritreanness. Doing so it both reflects and influences real-life divisions in the diaspora. Unlike terms such as "cyber-diaspora", "virtual Eritrea" etc. imply, there is no clear-cut line between the real and the virtual. Rather, both overlap and interact in complex ways that are difficult to trace or reconstruct.

### **A short history of Eritrea-online**

Today, more than a decade after the emergence of the user group Dehai as the first Eritrean representation on the world wide web, the number of Eritrean web sites, chat rooms, mailing lists and e-groups continues to grow. At the same time Dehai's link list alone - which makes no claims to completeness - featured more than 250 Eritrea-related websites, from business sites and semi-professional news sites to privately owned web space- and this is without the numerous opposition websites that Dehai omits in its list. The purpose and topics are quite diverse as are the background and locations of those who created them.<sup>2</sup> You find a site owned by US-Eritrean Evangelicals wanting to spread the gospel, a Canadian youth group campaigning against the practice of unlimited National Service in Eritrea, a Germany based Eritrean band promoting their music, or an Eritrean amateur photographer in Italy using the web as a gallery for shots taken in Asmara. Other sites offer services such as online purchase of goats to be paid by credit card and delivered to your loved ones' doorstep in Eritrea. Yet another category of site provides online Tigrinya lessons for Eritrean children grown up in the diaspora.<sup>3</sup> Self-declared representatives of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Internet use is, for example, likely to differ in Germany and the US. The host country's infrastructure, language, the composition of the diaspora, patterns of settlement etc. might all play their rôle.

<sup>3</sup> Tigrinya is one of the major languages spoken in Eritrea and the mother tongue of the majority of Eritreans living in Europe and North America.

Bilen or Jeberti ethnic groups introduce their cultures on the web. But you can also try to find your "Eritrean sweetheart" via a dating site and later share your online wedding pictures with your globally scattered friends and family.

The various sites, like those linked with Dehai, differ in quality, popularity and outreach. While many are very specialized and attract limited interest, others have become household names in Eritrean (diaspora) society, even with those individuals that do not use Internet media. Some sites -which I will label "transnational" sites - are accessed by Eritreans all around the globe. Other "national" sites draw their main readership from the narrower circle of Eritreans living in a particular host country. Finally, you will even find "local" sites that are only of interest to Eritreans based in a region/city or belonging to the same community or association. Another distinction concerns not so much the location of potential users, but rather their political, ethnic or religious affiliations. Websites of a certain political hue will for instance hardly be visited by Eritreans of other convictions – except, perhaps, for reasons of curiosity.

Most sites of the "transnational" category are devoted to disseminating news about Eritrea and discussing Eritrean politics: asmarino.com, dehai.org, awate.com, shaebia.org etc. feature prominently among them. The news article and comment sections are dominated by an ever increasing number of contributors. Chat facilities, discussion forums and guest books that offer space for participation to a wider group of visitors supplement the information provided by the main authors. Eritrean radio programmes can also be accessed from some of those sites and extended link lists connect scattered "islands of Eritrea-ness" and make them "nodes" in the decentralised realm of the web. Asmarino.com, for instance, also sports advertising banners of Eritrean businesses or promotes books and CDs by Eritrean authors and artists. A commonality of all the "big sites" is that they use English (but increasingly also Tigrinya and Arabic) as media of communication. The majority of these sites are owned and maintained by US-Eritreans, who also seem to dominate the discussion. This is certainly not to say that other Eritreans, for instance those residing in Europe, are absent from discourses taking place here, but very often they have created additional sites which mostly use their respective host country's vernacular as language of communication. "Eritrean" web sites, in the sense that they are hosted in actual Eritrea or are created by Eritreans still living in the country, did not emerge before late 2000, when Eritrea - as the last country in Africa - finally got connected to the Internet.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> From 1997 it was possible to receive email via private service providers, but access to this technology was limited <<http://www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/cea/countrystories/eritrea/20001116.phtml>> accessed 25 Nov. 2002.

Looking at the development of Eritrean online activities, three fairly distinctive phases can be made out. Each corresponds closely to the socio-political development in Eritrea proper. The first phase is more or less congruent with the Eritrean post-independence "honeymoon" from 1993 - 1997. During this period, Dehai, a popular, yet comparatively exclusive mailing list/website dominated early Eritrean cyberspace. The discussions of the mainly intellectual Dehaiers revolved around all sorts of Eritrea-related topics, in particular the challenges of rebuilding the country. The start of the second phase was marked by the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean "border war" in 1998, which led to changes both in terms of quantity and diversity. Though some degree of diversification could be made out prior to 1998, it was doubtlessly the war that triggered a virtual explosion of Eritrean online activities. For one thing, the web gained more importance as a mass medium for wider parts of the Eritrean diaspora population. But with a rising number of activists (including the Eritrean state) Eritrean cyberspace also became more diverse. A plethora of web sites, e-groups, mailing lists etc. burst onto the scene, most of which were fiercely nationalist in tune. The declared purpose of most of these new sites and e-groups was to provide information about the war and to counterbalance Ethiopian propaganda as well as serving as a place to discuss the latest events. The transition from the second to the (ongoing) third phase was less clear-cut.

From 2000 onwards more and more dissident voices made themselves heard. They questioned the necessity of the war and, more generally, wondered about the political course taken by the Eritrean government. Gradually a gap opened between government supporters and opponents, leading to a polarisation, fragmentation and compartmentalisation of the Eritrean cyberspace as well as of real life diaspora communities. At the end of the decade, this situation seems unchanged, but the formerly passionate online passionate debates are showing signs of fatigue. There have also some new alliances such as the cooperation of former rival activists of [asmarino.com](#) and [awate.com](#) and the former opposition website [meskerem.net](#) takes a more pro-government stance. To date, however, the latter are losing importance as new websites such as [assenna.com](#) and others have emerged, some of them (e.g. [assenna](#)) are run by a new generation of refugees focussing strongly on the human rights situation in Eritrea and the asylum countries. Likewise the list of government (sponsored) websites is expanding and many of them specifically targeting a diaspora audience, trying to both entertain and mobilise them, for example for a new pro-government campaign, dubbed in 2009.

## **Dehai: from virtual home to cyber war<sup>5</sup>**

But let's begin at the beginning.<sup>6</sup> In November 1992, a few months prior to Eritrea's *de jure* independence, "virtual" Eritrea emerged in the shape of an English language user group, called Dehai. Dehai is a Tigrinya word that is commonly translated as "news" or "voice [from home]".<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the fact that the news and the topics of discussion almost solely revolved around actual Eritrea, Dehai was a product exclusively for and by diaspora Eritreans (Bernal 2001, Rude 1996: 18). As mentioned above, Eritreans living in Eritrea proper could not partake in any online discussions prior to 1997, when email facilities were first introduced. Hence, the Dehaiers, as they later called themselves, remained a literally exclusive diaspora club of mostly college and university educated Eritreans living in North America or Europe.<sup>8</sup> To join you were required to register and find a member who would vouch for you. This emphasis on exclusivity clearly ran counter to common notions of the Internet's inclusive nature and its globalising force. Yet, it was very much in line with developments in Eritrea and its diaspora, and in a way reflects the creation of an independent Eritrean nation state (also seemingly anachronistic at a time when the nation became to be seen as a concept that was moribund).

In 1994 the user group had started its own web site, and when John Rude published his article early in 1996, Dehai had about 500 members. Bernal estimates that the number of those who shaped the character of Dehai through their commitment to participation in it "hovered around 15-20 individuals" (Bernal 2005b: 664) They wrote messages on various topics concerning Eritrea, first only a few per day, later, during the war, more than 50. One example for the lively and controversial debates going on the mid-1990s was the discussion about the drafting of an Eritrean constitution. The diaspora was drawn into this process not merely via discussions on Dehai, but also by holding seminars and public discussions in various places around the globe. Additionally a number of exile Eritreans represented the

---

<sup>5</sup> The term cyber war is usually used to for physical attacks on a certain computer via Internet, or for Flaming (verbal attacks) as Birgit Bräuchler (2005:63) explains. In the case of the Ethio-Eritrean war the cyber war mostly was a flaming war. However, by mobilising support as well as filtering and spreading news, the Internet had an impact on the happenings in real-life.

<sup>6</sup> As my own "webservation" does not reach back into the early days of Eritrean online activity the following description and analysis of the Dehai mailing list and web site draws mainly on three articles: one by John Rude, who wrote the first ever article on Eritrean web presences entitled "Birth of a nation in Cyberspace" in early 1996, and two by Victoria Bernal dating from 2001 and 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Dehai Eritra was also the name of a newspaper published by the Eritrean Independence Bloc – an alliance of eight parties that campaigned for Eritrean independence in the 1940s und 1950s (Asgede 1998:76)

<sup>8</sup> Or rather what Bernal, quoting Pnina Werbner, terms a "hidden intelligentsia" (2005:199). And though it is harder to conclude from written text whether the writer is a man or a woman than to make an educated guess

diaspora in the constitutional commission. As some of them were Dehai members, Rude concludes that "the virtual debate and the real one overlap" (Rude 1996: 19) and Bernal suggest that Dehai constitutes a "a virtual public sphere" which "has provided a unique form of expression and debate that was not available in other contexts ... and has impacted politics and policies in Eritrea." (Bernal 2004:186). Apart from emphasizing Dehai's impact on Eritrean politics, and the construction of Eritrean nationhood, both authors acknowledge the medium's role as "a virtual home" or "surrogate homeland."

Bernal (2001) and Rude (1996) principally focus on the two questions of how the emergent Eritrean Cyber diaspora has impacted developments in Eritrea proper and what it does for the diaspora Eritreans themselves. While I agree that the Internet did eventually impact the ways in which Eritreans connected to one another, helped to influence opinions at home and in the worldwide Diaspora and shaped identities, I suggest that these processes must be seen as part of the developments in Eritrea and in the diaspora rather than apart from them (terms in italics borrowed from Miller/Slater 2001: 7). Rather than constituting a "virtual homeland" or a "laboratory" for the real one, representations of Eritrea on the web are an extension of real-life forms of socialisation, networking and communication. They have not evolved entirely independently from the real world and other past and present forms of communication. Hence it can be said that Dehai was also a continuation of the transnational networks that had been developed during the struggle for independence. Bernal suggest something similar when she says:

Eritreans in the diaspora were already ... highly networked before the rise of the Internet ... The new technology did not give rise to transnational circuits of sociality, information and resources. But the development of both the Internet and Dehai did create a unique forum for expression that transcended the geographic dispersal of diaspora ... (Bernal 2004:187).

While the focus of Bernal's article - albeit clearly aware of the complex interaction between the real and the "virtual" - is with the new dimensions and possibilities of the web, I want to pick up the other thread and examine more closely in which ways Eritrean activities on the Internet were linked and shaped by these earlier "circuits of sociality, information and resources" in the diaspora. Which (trans)continuities do we find, in terms of organisation, socialising, networking, and the persons involved? Has the Internet managed to overcome some of the more negative features of real-life associations in the diaspora, e.g. self-censorship, political rifts, exclusiveness and a strong element of control? In which ways are

---

about his/her education; Dehaiers and analysers alike seem to agree that the majority of dehai members (particularly the active ones) were indeed male.



Internet activities aimed at influencing real life either in Eritrea or the diaspora backfiring at the face-to-face communities?

I argue that - the liberalising features of the Internet notwithstanding - it's possibilities have so far been limited by real life conditions in the Eritrean diaspora as well as by the developments in actual Eritrea. For one thing, the reach of Internet publications is curtailed by high levels of both actual and computer illiteracy, but also by the lack of language competence or financial means. Other limits are set by certain norms, taboos and traditions of real world networking shaped by the long war of independence. It is coincidental that Eritrean independence and the rise of the World Wide Web happened around the same time. But if we conclude from that that the use of the Internet has changed Eritrean diaspora society (as it doubtlessly has) we are missing one link in the chain of causality: before the Internet could lead to changes in real life, real life determined the way the Internet was used by Eritreans. This becomes evident when we compare Eritrean usage of Internet media with that of other diasporic groups, such as the Trinidadians described by Miller and Slater (2001). In other words it was not so much that the Internet shaped the new post-independence diaspora, but that the diaspora in its new situation was forced to find new ways of relating to Eritrea as well as amongst each other. Here the Internet came handy and was used according to the needs and the ideas developed within this period of time.

As outlined in chapter 1, the EPLF disbanded the mass organisations at home and abroad in August 1991. They argued that these organisations were obsolete within an independent nation. In the diaspora, however, the mass organisation had not only funnelled resources and provided support for the liberation movement. They had also served as substitute social structure facilitating self-help initiatives and giving people a purpose for living and a feeling of home. Of course, they had also been the main bodies through which information was passed down from the "field" in Eritrea to virtually every single individual in diaspora. At the weekly or even more frequent meetings news and policies were discussed, projects planned and put into action. All these were suddenly things of the past. The demise of the mass-organisations and their satellites left a void that was only temporarily filled by return to privacy and considerations about return. In some ways it can be said that the growing popularity of Internet activities was also reinforced by breakdown of the real-life exile organisations and the need to re-position oneself in relation to independent Eritrea.

Only when it eventually became clear that their sojourn abroad would not come to an end, the disintegration of the exile structures was felt as a loss by diaspora Eritreans. Efforts were

made to substitute them, e.g. by strengthening the community organisations by creating new links and organisations. In Germany, for example, Eritreans tried to establish umbrella organisations of youth groups, professional associations, community organisations etc. though their success varied. On the whole this process seemed to oscillate between two poles: the attempt to reinforce "independent" horizontal structures within the diaspora (on a regional, national or even transnational basis) and the wish to be recognised as an integral part of Eritrean society (which also meant a more hierarchical approach and some sort of subjugation under the auspices of Eritrean ambassadorial representatives and/or PFDJ officials).<sup>9</sup> In a way Dehai was part of that re-structuring, and like the real life organisations struggled with its ambiguities, as the following two quotes from a presentation given by one of the Dehai founders, Ghidewon Asmerom, might illustrate:

We wanted to make it a free and independent forum to discuss issues ... "That's what democracy is. It's not 'shut up. I will talk. You listen.'" (Asmerom as cited in Bernal 2005:665)

One [person] said: 'You are creating a monster', because Dehai is a free forum and traditionally we don't have free forums. So they said, 'It will be taken over by the opposition.'" (Asmerom as cited in Bernal 2005:664)

The first quote, "shut up. I will talk. You listen", consciously or not, summarises an attitude that had prevailed within the mass organisation's strict cadre hierarchy. It also hints that people like the founders of Dehai saw that it was now time to introduce new and more open forms of discourse which might be helped along by Internet media (cf. Bernal 2005b: 665).<sup>10</sup> The second quote is very interesting as it illustrates three points: Firstly that the potential of Dehai to become a truly independent free forum scared some Eritreans used to the "old ways". Secondly, that *Dehai* despite its "independence" still was a forum whose members saw themselves devoted to the political aims of the EPLF and its exile organisations (at this time talking about "the opposition" could only mean the ELF and its splinter groups. This again indicates that most participants in Dehai seem to have been former members of the EPLF or at least sympathisers). Finally the fear of being "taken over" clearly shows that Eritreans did not see "virtual" space as a place apart from mundane experiences. Guerrilla strategies such as trying to infiltrate groups and organisations were

---

<sup>9</sup> On its 1994 Congress in the EPLF renamed itself People's Front for Democracy and Justice, PFDJ.

<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it would be interesting to compare the *Dehaiers* (and their relationship to the Eritrean government) to a group of intellectual EPLF supporters mentioned in the first part of this study. The „Eritreans for Liberation in America/in Europe,“ too, had seen themselves as advisers and equal partners of the incipient and later the established EPLF before being swallowed by them. It is more than likely that some of the *Dehaiers* have been members of the EFLA/EFLE.

assumed to work on the net as they did in real-life settings. The paradox of Dehai being a free forum while at the same sticking to self imposed cultural norms and political convictions that show continuity with the past also led to much suspicion among observers: “Extreme *shaebia* [EPLF] supporters will claim that we are anti-*shaebia* and the critics say that Dehai is *shaebia*“ (Asmerom 2001 as quoted in Bernal 2005b:665). I will come back to this point in the case study presented below, as both the real life youth group I studied and their web presence have been confronted with very similar problems.

One last aspect should be mentioned. Even if Dehai can be seen as an attempt to fill the void left by the demise of real life exile associations, early Dehaiers perhaps did not so much miss the happy family life of the mass organisation. Though these organisations certainly can be seen as the stabilising backbone of Eritrean refugee community, they were nonetheless also straightjackets, especially for those members that would have preferred more autonomy. These individuals, were now rather thrilled to find the Internet providing for a platform for something they had missed: namely the company of and the exchange with other Eritreans with whom they could not only relate on a level of national loyalty and common fate, but who also shared their interests and created an intellectually stimulating atmosphere. It is in that sense when a former member of the NUEY in Germany jokes about the "illis" (referring to the members of the NUEW, many of which came from a rural background and were often illiterate) and adds that some of the Eritreans he has been forced to associate with in exile he would never have associated with back in Eritrea. This might sound elitist or arrogant, but it reminds us that difference in education and social background did of course exist and also created problems within the outwardly egalitarian Eritrean liberation movements. Meeting Eritreans online had the great benefit of making it possible to meet like-minded individuals and to (re-)construct "circuits of sociability" not only based on all-embracing Eritreanness but on other commonalities such as education, origin etc. It is foremostly in that context that Dehai created “a homelike atmosphere“.

To sum it up briefly: in the early years Dehai was an integral part of the general restructuring of the Eritrean exile communities. It was shaped by this particular historical situation and it also contributed to the changes that can be observed. Like the members of real life organisations, Dehaiers were walking the plank between the wish to gain more independence, and the equally strong wish to remain within the framework of the Eritrean nationalist struggle. Practically this meant a continuation of some sort of self-censorship while trying to introduce horizontal structures and a culture of open discourse. This new freedom, however, was not for everyone. It was curtailed by the individual's education as

well as his/her location. This exclusivity may even be seen as first stage of creating new social divisions: a) between Eritrea and diaspora, and b) between educated exiles and the "rest".

My own experience with Dehai starting only in 1998/9 also left me with the impression that competing views seem to have taken place within a framework of the three basic assumptions: a) that developments in Eritrea were generally progressing, b) that the Eritrean transitional government was by and large doing what was good for the country and was headed for economic progress and gradual democratisations, and c) that diaspora Eritreans should try and support this process as good as they possibly could. Whether this was reflected in continued self-censorship on a number of topics prior to 1998, however, would need to be looked at more closely in the context of a more text-based analysis. In any event, self-censorship certainly marked the following period of the war with Ethiopia and ended a period during which constructive and critical debate was not only possible but desirable, and even could take place within one forum. Of course, criticism, even of a much stronger kind, was to resurface after the war. But it had a quite different quality then, and ultimately led to Eritreans of various political factions to create rivalling web spaces that feature competing images of Eritrea and "true" Eritrean-ness.

When the war started in May 1998, Dehai was soon almost entirely given over to conflict-related postings. Dehai membership figures and postings rocketed. I remember my mailbox being blocked by Dehai messages after only a short absence. What's more Dehai more clearly took over the functions once held by the real-life exile organisations, such as organising fundraising campaigns, coordinating the logistics for protest marches, monitoring the western media's coverage of the war, mobilizing diaspora Eritreans by appealing to their solidarity with their brethren at home and finally also providing an outlet through which the Eritrean government and its representatives abroad issued official statements (cf. Smidt 2000: 235).<sup>11</sup> In the course of the conflict Dehai opened its members-only news list to a wider audience and added a sub section with war-related background information (Smidt 2000: 235).<sup>12</sup> And with Eritrea not yet connected to the Internet, Eritrean newspapers reprinted Dehai postings and articles including analyses of the situation by diaspora Eritreans such as Tekie Fessehazion. Other articles that were reprinted can be seen as "moral boosters." In its issue of 20 November 1999, the Asmara-based English

---

<sup>11</sup> I also learned about the first Eritrean event I participated in through a Dehai posting but was also invited by telephone. Neither then nor today are Internet media more than an additional means of communicating. Important information is still passed on personally or via telephone.

<sup>12</sup> This conflict page is still accessible under: <http://dehai.org/conflict>, last accessed 12 Dec 2007

language newspaper Eritrea Profile prints a Dehai report on the “Appeal from Cologne.” It was an initiative of Eritreo-German non-profit organisations, including the EHD, Selam Eritrea Magazine, the Warsay Movement, as well as various Eritrean youth groups and Eritrean-German Friendship associations (all listed in the article), that had written a letter in support of the OAU peace plan.<sup>13</sup> Some months later Eritrea Profile’s headline read “Eritreans Worldwide Make a Clarion Call for Peace.” (Eritrea Profile 4 March 2000:1)<sup>14</sup>

### **Other on-line warriors**

But also beyond Dehai there was an enormous upsurge of both real life and cyberspace activities. New Eritrean websites (some of which had started from the scratch while other only became more widely popular now) mushroomed. One reason for this increase in web-activities was that up-to-date news about the war and its background were only to be obtained on the net. Another factor was that the war also coincided with a period when the private usage of the Internet in the western world became increasingly popular. Eritrea itself was still excluded from the blessings of IT technology except for a few individuals, notably students and government employees, that had access to email facilities (since 1997) and were in touch with exile Eritreans that e-mailed, posted or faxed them information available on the web. These texts were often clandestinely copied and distributed in friendship circles (cf. Smidt 2001).

Clearly the war brought a rush of nationalism into cyber space (and into real life organisations) that rallied all Eritreans behind a common cause again. Once again it is difficult to assess to which degree the medium Internet was involved in mobilising Eritreans to help their government defend the country. According to Tekie Beyene, governor of the Bank of Eritrea, the sums transferred were “beyond anybody's wildest imagination”.<sup>15</sup> Likewise it could be asked in how far the involvement of the Web made this conflict different from the previous that had taken place prior to the usage of Internet media. Wolbert Smidt finds that the Internet indeed did a lot to "democratise" the spread of

---

<sup>13</sup> I remember receiving the appeal via the Warsay e-group in early December 1999, about the week after its publication in Asmara. It also took another couple of weeks before the text was published as a half-page advertisement in a major German quality newspaper. It had been initiated mainly by Sifaf Adem, the former chairman of the German NUES branch, who later told me in an interview that he had been trying to bring Eritrean youth associations and Eritrean-German support groups together, even before the 1998 war (Interview 13 November 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Discussing the war itself is beyond the scope of this study. However quite a substantial number of publications analysing the war have been published in recent years, e.g Tronvoll 1998, Iyob 2000, Fessehatzion 2003, Link 2004, Berdal and Plaut 2005, Mussie 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bernal (2001: 29), quoting from Voice of America, 25 June 1998

information. Not only was simply much more information available (documents, maps, letters, reports etc.), it was also available much quicker and could be directly accessed by greater number of people thus making it impossible for the governments on either side to control its spread or contents. Nonetheless, Smidt finally comes to the conclusion that the increase of freely available information alone did not lead to a more sober analysis of the events. Rather, facts and accusations were interwoven in such a way as to denounce the opposing side rather than to evaluate were "the truth" lies: "... debates hardly led to a discussion with the other, but all the more against the other side." (Smidt 2001: 32, translation B.C.).

In real life as well as on the web the incipient Eritrean dissident "corners" mostly kept quiet during the war. Many voices warned against challenging the government at that time, arguing along similar lines as one Dehaier writing on Asmarino.com towards the end of the war:<sup>16</sup>

I have abstained from participating in debates that are not of direct relevance to the timely issue of the defence of the nation .... I have fiercely advocated ... refraining as much as possible from any overt criticism of the Government of Eritrea in areas I considered as outside the timely issues national security and defence. I still believe that the dangers to our sovereignty posed by the Weyanes are not completely lifted, and that we need to exercise prudence in our debates lest it would create the impression to our enemies that there exists in the Eritrean body politic a rift and a tiredness from the war imposed upon us. ([http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/Oct2000/EliasA\\_10-30.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/Oct2000/EliasA_10-30.asp))

To the larger part this "standing together" was indeed an individually and collectively felt need in the face of a danger that threatened to render all sacrifices of the 30 years liberation war vain. Thus anyone who still dared to voice criticism was angrily silenced. In real life "anti-Eritrean" utterances or (such as questioning the government's diplomatic efforts, let alone suggesting that the war came in handy to divert public attention from shortcomings within the country) could lead to a de facto ostracizing. Online it led to an increase of offensive language and accusations that the critic in truth was a *weyane*.<sup>17</sup>

Especially in the diaspora, where many people are imbued with a deep sense of guilt for having left behind friends and family and for having survived while others died, the war made the ghosts and traumas of the past emerge from the closet again (cf.

---

<sup>16</sup> Merely a part of the ELF did not show any solidarity but even sided more or less openly with the Ethiopians, leading to a deepening of rifts between this group and the majority of exile Eritreans that will take a long time to heal.

<sup>17</sup> Term for Ethiopians, or more precisely, the Ethiopian government that like the Eritrean one emerged from a liberation front, in this case the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).

Matsuoka/Sorenson 2001). Along with that, postponed dreams of return and other projects (like investments made) were endangered. These very real fears and their manifestation in patriotic gestures and the sometimes over-generous financial aid given to the government were further enhanced by government propaganda. But there is also evidence that people were coerced into giving more than they could actually afford, e.g. by publicising the given sums and praising the generous, thus creating considerable social pressure on individuals to make a sufficiently large contribution (cf. chapter 5 and Al Ali et al 2001: 593).

The pressure to contribute was reinforced by Dehai postings giving results of fundraising efforts and pledges to contribute a certain sum per individual or household (cf. Bernal 2005b:671). Such reports created a competitive atmosphere. The same goes for the actual collections that were often carried out on a door-to-door basis. Most Eritreans know one another so it is not difficult to access addresses. According to both “pro- and anti-“ government informants embassy name lists, originally compiled for the independence referendum, are also being used for such purposes. A community committee was sent knocking on all Eritrean doors known to them. Being approached that way can certainly put intense group pressure on individuals and households to comply with the call for donations. Anyone who has had fundraisers on their doorstep knows how awkward it is to say “no” – even if you do neither know them, nor identify with their cause. For most Eritreans this situation was aggravated by the justified fear of being badmouthed in the community. This method was by no means new. Civilian projects such as the introduction of EriTv and securing supplies for drought victims had also been partly financed that way. Collections were also made at meetings called by the embassy and/or the community associations. Here the pressure to contribute was even higher as people felt directly watched by other participants and the authorities.

Some time after the outbreak of war it was decided that all diaspora Eritreans should pay a certain fixed sum for the defense: "In Germany in December 1998, the rate of 2 per cent ["diaspora-tax"] was raised for one month to 10 per cent, while there was a request too for a one-off payment of DM 1000 [DM 1 was roughly US\$ 0,50] and an additional monthly contribution of DM 30" (Al-Ali, Black, Khoser 2001:587). In the USA and other diaspora location similar pledges were made by the community organisations (in accordance with the Eritrean authorities). The community members largely complied. Some ELF-affiliated Eritreans in Germany, however, refused payments, and in several instances turned to the German authorities for help. They said they had been threatened, or reported being denied services such as the renewal of their papers. Chapter 4 looks more closely at how

such measures also led to growing resentment amongst formerly loyal government supporters once the immediate danger to Eritrea's independence was banned.

### **Freedom or fragmentation? The un-imagining of Eritrean unity on the web**

Discontent first began to be voiced openly on the Internet, were the benefit of being able to hide behind pennames made it possible to avoid real life repercussions of one's criticism (among the not-so-virtual-repercussions was the sending of computer viruses to people voicing dissident opinion).<sup>18</sup> Anyway, soon after the conflict was ended the Eritrean government's role in it was scrutinized and some criticism concerning previous omissions of the government's such as the non-implementation of the constitution became more widespread, provoking fierce replies from those who regarded criticism as treason (cf chapter 4).

In October 2000, a group of predominantly diaspora intellectuals, commonly referred to as the G13, wrote a letter, dubbed "Berlin Manifesto" to the Eritrean president<sup>19</sup>. In this paper, the signatories urged Issayas Afewerki to embark on democratic reforms and to finally implement the Eritrean Consitution (cf. Melchers 2000). Eritrean cyberspace was buzzing with outrage. Yet, it was not so much the issues raised in the letter than the fact that it was leaked to an Ethiopian (!) web page that was criticised most fervently at that particular time.<sup>20</sup>

Conspiracy theories continued to spread and in a way the G 13 affair paved a direct road from "cyber war" against Ethiopia to "cyber civil war" between the supporters of the Eritrean government and an ever growing number of emerging opposition groups. Before long the two factions would not even share the same virtual space anymore, but set up separate websites. Individual web authors drifted from one page to another, as most of the existing sites themselves decided to join this or that front. Only a few web sites continued to display diverging political opinions, (as it had been the case on Dehai for a long time).

---

<sup>18</sup> In Dehai most people had still signed contributions with their real names, after the war the use of nicknames increased.

<sup>19</sup> Resolution of Eritrean Academics and Professionals. Meetings held in Berlin, Germany, 3rd October, 2000. Its signatories were Araya Debessay, Assefaw Tekeste, Bereket Habte Selassie, Dawit Mesfin, Haile Debas, Kassahun Checole, Kaled A. Beshir, Lula Ghebreyesus (who later withdrew her signature), Miriam M. Omar, Mohamed Kheir Omar, Mussie Misghina, Paulos Tesfagiorgis and Reesom Haile.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the G13 had met in Berlin with the support of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, a political foundation that is affiliated with the German Green Party. Later Green politicians had been involved in the 1960s and 1970s student movement had brought the "Eritrea issue" to attention of the German parliament in 1986 (Die Grünen 1987). Some of them also remained lobbyists for Eritrea after independence and helped broker the Eritrean Return Programme co-financed by the German State (cf. chapter 1).



Dehai itself, however, was being transformed into a largely "pro-government " forum at that time. Its main rival and successor as the most popular Eritrean website, *asmarino.com*, gradually became a forum of the reformers.

Much might be and, indeed, has been speculated about infiltration or "take-overs" of certain sites, but in most cases it seems that the polarisation along pro- and anti-government lines was "a natural process:" politically likeminded web users simply gathered in one forum where they could safely slap each other's shoulder.<sup>21</sup> Users that still dared to voice dissent to the majority opinion were then attacked and insulted (and in some cases censored), until they left in frustration. What Smidt found for the Ethio-Eritrean Internet war rings true once more: "The ties of the familiar easily lead to a clinging to those user groups and web sites that reinforce one's own point of view. In spite of the total absence of censorship opinion gets disciplined". (Smidt 2001:33, translation B.C.)

Apart from the pigeonholing of existing websites, many new sites made their more or less successful appearance. After Eritrea had finally gone online in November 2000, the Eritrean ruling party (not the government or the state of Eritrea!), eventually launched *shaebia.org* in 2001, a web site named after the popular term for the EPLF, meaning "of the people".<sup>22</sup> *Shaebia.org* doubtlessly caters mainly for the diaspora. It seemed that the Eritrean government had finally discovered both the Internet's potential as a means for mobilising and its danger of providing room for dissident opinion. As it is to control cyber activities in the diaspora, *shaebia.org* can at least counterbalance unwanted information on other sites with information of its own. Accordingly *shaebia.org* provides selected information on mostly positive developments, congratulates exile Eritreans on their various engagements for their home country, but also denounces the opposition and other critics. Still, this is done in a fairly civil form; something that cannot be said of other web sites such as (formerly) German-based *biddho.com* that is widely believed to have received financial support from the Eritrean government and did not refrain from committing character assassination or even threatening opposition politicians in a fairly undisguised manner. Not surprisingly, the EPLF's old adversaries, splinter groups of the ELF, also discovered cyberspace. Along with them self-declared representatives of ethnic groups such as the Kunama, Bilen, or Jeberti; religious groups (be they Muslim, Orthodox, or Evangelical); and a whole array of new political (opposition) parties founded abroad introduced themselves to a wider public on the

---

<sup>21</sup> It is curious though how this process resembles the origins of Dehai, that - according to Asmerom (as quoted in Bernal 2004: forthc.) was also initially started to evade „fruitless“ discussions with „anti-Eritrean“ Ethiopians on an all-African mailing list formerly frequented by some of the Dehai founding fathers.

<sup>22</sup> In 2003 a government web site named *Shabait.com*, maintained by the Ministry of information, got online.

web. Some of their sites appear to be one-man-shows with no mandate to speak for whomever. Others seem to have found their online constituency and are often blamed for creating divisions that have not existed before.<sup>23</sup>

The growing political polarisation into pro- and anti-government factions has not led to a reduction of national symbolism on the latter group's web sites: it has merely been replaced or amended by other symbols. The *Jebha* (ELF) splinter groups for instances use the blue UN flag with a green olive branch (often combined with other heraldry that clearly points to their political background) instead of the "official" flag of the Eritrean state. The web sites' names and changing slogans (biddho.com: "The Power of Eritrea. Enjoy Eritreanism!"; awate.com: Reconciliation: "Inform. Inspire. Embolden. Unite for Victory!"; shaebia.org: "For the People, By the People") also often indicate their political standing. Awate.com is named after Idris Awate, a lowland Eritrean "bandit turned rebel leader" that allegedly fired the first shot in the Eritrean war of independence and later joined the ELF. Contested identities find their expressions on the web in a visible and outspoken way that is not imaginable in real life. Here two Eritreans meeting for the first time will carefully try to figure out the others political standing, and perhaps also their regional origin before going beyond the exchange of niceties. One informant jokingly suggested that establishing one another's position could be done quicker by asking him about his web-habits: "Tell me where you surf and I tell you who you are." But also the non-political sites present themselves unmistakably as Eritrean sites striving to represent Eritrea on the web in one way or the other (cf. Miller/Slater 2001). Patriotic slogans and national symbols abound on these sites: waving flags, currency converters, buttons to play the Eritrean national anthem to name but a few. Some also visualise their hyphenated identities, e.g. as German-, US- or Canadian-Eritreans, by displaying a flag or some other symbol of their host country/city etc.

A word needs to be said about the situation in Eritrea. Until 2000 Eritrea was excluded from Eritrean cyber space by lack of infrastructure. After the introduction of the Internet Eritreans soon faced other inhibitions to enjoying the "freedom" offered by IT-technology. Most Eritreans do not have a computer at home or at work. Hence the majority frequent the budding Internet cafes, where you can surf, chat or access your email for a relatively affordable sum of initially 10 Nacfa (about one US Dollar) per hour (Smidt

---

<sup>23</sup> Amazingly, one rift that has become rather prominent in real life settings is conspicuously absent from cyber space: regional identities (often closely connected with political affiliation) among the Tigrinya ethnic group. Especially in the diaspora the re-emergence of these regionalisms is widely seen as a perhaps more dangerous threat to Eritrean unity than Muslim-Christian problems. Though everyone claims that many people only move in „regional circles“ these days, I have never found someone who openly tried to mobilize support on the basis of regional belonging (at least not in English language online publications).

2001:32).<sup>24</sup> Yet, with the crackdown on independent newspapers and dissidents in September 2001, a narrow time corridor of open discussions was closed again and the general fear of repression also entered the Asmara Internet cafes. Even before that period of time there had been some amount of monitoring e.g. e-mail correspondence.<sup>25</sup>

In autumn 2001, however, as a colleague of mine reported from Asmara, people using public Internet facilities “were glancing nervously over their shoulders for telltale signs of ‘spies’” (Hepner 2003: 284) for fear of being observed when reading opposition web sites. Some of the people I had met during my sojourn a few months earlier (and with whom I had lively debates about the political situation in cafes and other public places) afterwards sent only e-mails asking about my well-being or commenting on the weather. Simultaneously, however, the lure of getting Internet information has become all the bigger as there is not any other (independent) source of information available any longer besides the state-controlled media. Correspondingly, several e-pals have hinted darkly that there is nothing new and anyway, if there were, I would know better than them because I “surely follow the news on the Internet”<sup>26</sup>. Still, as Smidt (2000:32) finds, the old method of photocopying texts for distribution in the Eritrean “Samizdat” has become far more effective since the introduction of the Internet.

Up to about 2000 the Internet had mainly served to reinforce an all-embracing transnational Eritreanism. With growing disillusionment in the face of war and in the absence of socio-economic development, the post-war period has seen a process of fragmentation and compartmentalisation. Networks below the national level (family, religious and regional) were rediscovered as a source of stability and security, but have also been used for political mobilisation, not least in the diaspora. Developments on the Internet both mirrored and accelerated these segmentary tendencies. Topics such as religious and ethnic origins that used to be taboo during the independence struggle and the early years of independence suddenly came to the fore. And with the Internet there was a also forum available that allowed to break with these taboos without facing immediate social consequences. At the same time Internet experiences have shown that online activities did not always remain without repercussions in real life. This is not only true for Eritrea proper,

---

<sup>24</sup> Even that is of course more than many people in Asmara can afford, especially as the connections are slow and often break down altogether.

<sup>25</sup> In 2001, a member of the diplomatic community in Asmara had for instance been summoned to the Eritrean foreign ministry to be questioned and reprimanded about the content of critical (though private) email. According to my informer, the content of message could have only been gleaned from actually reading it.

<sup>26</sup> Personal correspondence in May 2002.

but also for diaspora Eritreans, or indeed anyone involved in “Eritrean affairs”<sup>27</sup>. People like the members of the G13, but also non-Eritrean human rights activists and critics, became *personae non gratae*. Apart from facing slander on the Internet, outspoken Eritrean government critics are known to face difficulties on visits to Eritrea, while critical non-Eritreans have simply been denied a visa.

Summarising the above, it can be stated that a “cyber civil war” broke out in the course of which net users of different political hues sorted themselves into neat containers arranged along an invisible frontline. Each of them created and maintains its own version of Eritrean-ness that usually defines itself in opposition to other images, foremost the official one. Indeed, this “process of spatial division” has been described by Peter Waldmann (1999) as one of the first stages of civil strife in real life:

... often there is an éclat at the beginning [G13 and G15 – B.C.] ... tensions that before had been present in everybody’s mind but had not determined everyday life now suddenly become visible and turn into the dominant principle which subjects all other spheres of life. A profound restructuring and reordering of society takes place as much in a mental as in military geographical respect.“  
(Waldmann 1999: 66)

Apart from being roughly sorted into “pro-“ and “anti-government”, a growing number of Eritrean representations on the web are also divided by their affiliation to “traditional“, re-invented or newly found particularist identities below the national level. They challenge the EPLF’s (and/or the opposition parties) vision of Eritrean-ness by radically re-interpreting memories of key events and collective ideas about Eritrean nationhood that until recently have served to justify and legitimise the EPLF’s/government’s leadership in shaping the nation. This frontline is marked by symbols, and names. According to their convictions the various sites emphasise some topics and news while omitting others that do not fit into their interpretation of historic and current developments. The general political direction of a website (even if it is not outspokenly political) is usually also visible in form of link lists that show mostly the names of like-minded forums. The more “pro-government“ sites you find even on a private home page, the greater the likelihood that the owner is a *shaebia* supporter and *vice versa*. Hence, anyone wanting to obtain a halfway “balanced“ picture of what is happening will for example need to consult more than just one or two sites. There

---

<sup>27</sup> In a limited way I also came to experience this myself when in autumn 2002 I signed a letter (subsequently published on several Eritrean web sites) protesting against the continued detention of Eritrean dissidents and journalists. Some informants criticised me openly for having done so and demanded an explanation. Others stopped talking to me altogether or - as I later learned - made inquiries about me and my „motifs“. By contrast Eritreans who were critical of the government became noticeably more open. See also chapter 8.

were and are also “virtual alliances“, e.g. between *Biddho.com* and the Sweden-based site *Alenalki.com*, or, more recently, between *Asmarino.com* and *Awate.com*. Yet, as the following quote shows, many web users are confused and frustrated with this development:

Today I had a bit of time to browse through many Eritrean sites. The more you read, the more confused you get, I think. biddho/alenalki [pro-government] versus hadishtesfai/n-d-p [dissidents, claiming the current government is in fact “agame“ and advocating for “real Eritreans“] versus nharnet/meskerem [ELF opposition]. It is absolutely sad and in parts even mad to see that the Internet has become a melting pot for communists, fascists, Islamises [sic!], indeed racists etc. For some \*\*\*\*\* [President Issayas Afeworki] is the bad guy, for others the Jeberti [Muslim Tigrinya speakers, often found in opposition to the government], the highland Christians ..... the Agame [derisory term for the Tigrayans of Ethiopia], the Tedla Bairus, the Mesfuns, the Melekins [names of opposition politicians], the Harestot [peasants - in a derogatory sense], the Doctors, the Professors and, and, and ... (Warsay.com: Guest book entries from 3 March 2004 13:13 - 13:19, translation from German, BC.)

It might be claimed that the Internet’s segmentary structure has greatly facilitated the fragmentation of Eritrean diaspora communities along those various fault lines. At least, the Internet seems to have some impact on real life divisions in terms of spreading mistrust, discontent and making critical opinions more socially acceptable. In a way it has become a manifestation of a fragmented society, serving to cement political polarisations and proving an "natural" ally of segmentary forms of organisation (Zurawski 2000:223), both real and virtual. Still it would be ridiculous to claim that it was the Internet that has brought about these divisions in the first place. When Zurawski (2000:228) finds that “...‘virtual‘ ethnicity in cyberspace cannot take any imaginable form, but is always historically connected to earlier forms of ethnicity which are rooted locally (in a cultural as well in a geographical sense)“, this is also true for the (re-)emergence of particularist identities in Cyber-Eritrea.

The following chapter therefore presents the case study of a local Eritrean youth group in Germany and its various uses of Internet media: How do diasporic people living in one particular location place themselves within the transnational field of cyberspace? Or do they at all? Who can be reached using the Internet media and who is excluded from these technologies? Who exactly are the actors on this local level? What impact does the Internet have on people's daily lives and organisations, on their image of themselves? And finally: how are developments such as the growing fragmentation in real-life, local community(ies) and in cyberspace influencing one another?

## Chapter 4

### **The Warsay of Eritrea in Diaspora**

#### Contested Identities in an On- and Off-line Diaspora Youth Organisation<sup>1</sup>

---

*IT WOULD BE A MONUMENTALLY WRONG undertaking to divide the Eritrean youth in the diaspora along political fault lines. ... Politicizing the youth is extending the divisions in the community. The illnesses ... of previous generations should not be passed on to the youth. ... Youth that have grown up in the diaspora. ... should be our bridges to come out of isolation. The communities have to support their way of doing things and not hold them hostage to the past.*

*-- Amanuel Melles, 2000*

Having sketched out the wider transnational framework of developments in chapter three, I now want to turn the focus on a specific diaspora community, showing how the virtual and the real overlap and intersect on a local level. The case of the Eritrean Youth group Warsay in Frankfurt illustrates local expressions and limits of Internet usage in the Eritrean diaspora in Germany. The period during which I observed and accompanied Warsay spans more than five years, from 1999 to 2005.

The very beginnings of my research on the Eritrean diaspora even date back to the outbreak of the war in 1998 and, not surprisingly, I found myself using Internet media in ways similar to those of the people I did research on. E-mail, Eritrean web sites, search engines, e-groups and chats proved to be useful tools to get and stay in touch with individuals and organisations, keep up to date with developments in Eritrea, find out about

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is the second part of a revised version of “‘We are the Warsay of Eritrea in diaspora:’ Contested Identities and Social Divisions in Cyberspace and Real-Life.” (Conrad 2006b). However, in parts this chapter also draws on another text of the author (Conrad 2006a) published in the Proceedings of the XV<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Hamburg. I would like to thank panel members and the audience for their helpful comments and suggestions.

events in the diaspora and follow the transnational discussions on current issues.<sup>2</sup> But gradually, the Internet also became a complementary part of my fieldwork, not in form of a strictly systematic analysis of the ever-growing number of Eritrean websites, but based on what might be labelled "participant webservation".<sup>3</sup>

While the use of the Internet for purposes of social science research is usually curtailed by the anonymity of those observed, my great advantage was that I actually came to know many of the people on the net in person, learnt about their affiliations, their interests and motivations to take part in cyber debates. This allowed me to continue debates started in real life settings (such as the meeting of an association, or an interview). It also gave me insights into topics most people would have been reluctant to talk about in my presence, and it generally helped to become sensitive to the issues that really mattered to my interviewees. The material for this chapter is largely drawn from a) my long-term observations and analysis of an (German) Eritrean e-group of which I became a member in 2001, b) regular visits on successive "local", German speaking Eritrean web sites, and c) the frequent "webservation" of some transnational, US-based Eritrean web sites, where English, and increasingly Tigrinya and/or Arabic, are the standard languages.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Warsay of Eritrea in diaspora: the story of an on- and off-line youth movement***

In summer 2000 I joined a new German-Eritrean e-group, called Warsay. Warsay means "heir" or more precisely "my heritage" in Tigrinya, but *warsay* is also the term for the

---

<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with my colleague Tom Dassel, I also co-founded an "Eritrean" web site containing a literature databank: <<http://www.eritrea-online.de>>.

<sup>3</sup> It is unknown to me who coined the term "participant webservation." A workable definition is provided by a website on cyber-ethnographic studies: "A research method in which the investigator takes part in the social phenomenon of interest by participating in an Internet-based exchange (such as a blog, bulletin board, or email exchange) with a group and observing the interactions between them". See: <<http://moogit.com/fabian/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=54>> (accessed in 10 May 2004). This article is based on both interviews and "classic" participant observation in a real-life setting, as well as long-term "webservations" (2001- 2004), e.g. as a member of the German-based yahoo group "warsay-eritrea" (which today has largely fallen into disuse). During this time I also followed the development of two related "German" Eritrean websites: <http://www.warsay.de/> and <http://www.warsay.com/>. Other (though less frequently) "webserved" sites include various "transnational", US-based Eritrean websites, e.g. <<http://www.Dehai.org>>; <<http://asmarino.com>> and <<http://www.awate.com>>, as well as the Eritrean government site <<http://www.shaebia.org>> and the "old" <<http://www.biddho.com>> (Biddho.com went offline for some time in 2004, but was relaunched some time later).

<sup>4</sup> The e-group (warsay-eritrea@yahoogroups.de) has since more or less fallen into disuse. The German web sites are: <<http://www.warsay.de>; <http://www.warsay.com>>; (to some extent also <<http://www.biddho.com>>, which started off in German, but has now become an English/Tigrinya language site). The English language sites include: <<http://www.dehai.org>; <http://asmarino.com>>; <<http://www.awate.com>>. I also frequented the Eritrean government site <<http://www.shaebia.org>>.

young Eritrean soldiers who fought in the recent war against Ethiopia. Like many other youth groups and websites Warsay e-group, too, was a child of this war. It was exclusive only in the sense that you had to register with your full name, but other than with Dehai, no guarantor was required. The majority of the subscribers I came to know more about were well-educated Eritrean men between 20 and 40 years of age. Most had completed at least 11th grade (A-Levels) in Eritrea or Ethiopia or had had a comparable education in Germany. Many of them had come to Germany as unaccompanied youth or young men in the mid- and late 1980s. Most of the fewer female members had been brought up in Germany and were now Eritrean students. There were, however, also a number of interested Germans: journalists, researchers, members of solidarity movements, spouses of Eritrean members etc. Interestingly, many e-group members were again members of other transnational and German-Eritrean groups, both virtual and real: This linking up was to a some extent the doing of one very engaged individual who had helped to set up the group and functioned as one of the administrators.<sup>5</sup>

For more than two years the group, which had been started in May 1999, worked well. It provided both information on Eritrea and the diaspora and also offered a platform for open discussion. Texts posted by its 78 subscribers (message by e-group administrators from 17/03/02) came from various sources such as other English-language websites, German and international newspapers, UN-publications etc. Easily the most popular topic was Eritrean politics. There were lengthy discussions about the G13, the issue of democratisation or the best way to criticise German media for incorrect footage of the war. A critical stance of Eritrean government politics was tolerated, but usually provoked some defiant replies (resembling Dehai in that respect). Other postings included various issues from German development policies to the advertising of political, cultural and sports events.

It was some after I had joined the e-group that I realized there was also a real life youth group, or rather movement, in Frankfurt that was called Warsay. At first I failed to understand the connection between them. The Warsay members I eventually met in late 2000, however, were only the “remnants“ of the 1999 movement, which had been started as a reaction to the war. While it is mostly depicted as a grassroots movement I later learned

---

<sup>5</sup> There were members of Dehai, Nepe-g – the yahoo e-group for the Network of Eritrean professionals, the youth groups Da'aro, Beles, the Warsay movement, and the Forum of Eritrean Youth Associations (FEJU), the umbrella organisation of Eritrean youth in Germany. Moreover, members of some Eritrean-German organisations and institutions were also present: the makers of the Selam Eritrea Magazine, the EHD, the organizers of the “Workcamp Eritrea“, and various local Eritrea groups such as the “Freundschaftsverein Eritrea“ in Darmstadt.



that the first impulse for the foundation of the Warsay movement had indeed come from the Eritrean consulate and the Eritrean community association in Frankfurt. It can thus be described as part of a concerted campaign to mobilize the Eritrean diaspora youth in reaction to the “border war”. According to one of the founders, the later arrested Consul General Bsrat Yemane had called a meeting and appealed the youth to do something to help their home country<sup>6</sup>. A group of about a dozen young Eritreans rose to his call and began to organise themselves. One of the founders describes their motivation:

There was a seminar informing about the situation in Eritrea organised especially for the youth in Frankfurt and vicinity by... the Eritrean Consul Ato Besrat Yemane .... "MENESEI TERAKA ENTAI EYU?; TERAKA FLET, GUBUEKA GBER, TELEAL!!" [You (Young man), what is your role? You have to know your role, do your duty, Stand-up!!]. This were about Ato Besrat's words .... about 10-12 young people (including myself) decided to think about this .... as founders of the movement we had taken over the task of mobilising youth in Frankfurt as quickly as possible in order to contribute to improving the situation in Eritrea. ... First of all we wanted to make Eritrea's problems public and secondly, we wanted to show our unconditional solidarity with our people ... (E-group message from 12/04/02, emphasis as in original German/Tigrinya text, translation B.C., quotation authorized by author)

Though the first impulse had come from “above“ - the quote shows that the Warsay movement's involvement in the struggle was rooted in the deep-felt wish to do something for Eritrea and not to remain mere on-lookers of the unfolding drama in the Horn of Africa. Despite the sombre background of their engagement, former members get nostalgic when they talk about the impressive number of youth that came to discuss what to do for nights on end. They also recall working together in a tolerant and disciplined manner - the lack of which is often bemoaned today. In its heydays this mostly local group of youngsters counted up to 500 members of diverse social and educational backgrounds and including ages from about 14 to 30 plus. This time of crisis had them operate together in a way that invoked memories about the sense of solidarity of the days prior to independence. Amongst other things Warsay marched in protest against the war, invited experts to speak about the current situation and organised parties to raise funds that were sent to Eritrea. They also became active on the web. Apart from a “financial“ and “social task force“, an "info task force" was established within the Warsay movement.<sup>7</sup> This latter group - with the help of

---

<sup>6</sup> Consul Bsrat was a polarising figure while in office in Frankfurt. While some declared him arrogant and interfering, other described him as willing to listen to the needs and suggestions of the Eritreans in Germany.

<sup>7</sup> The setting up of committees shows that real-life organisations and networks are still modelled on the organisational structures of the independence movements.

the “networking specialist“ mentioned above - set up both the Warsay e-group and a web site called warsay.de. The e-group then came to exist more or less independently from the actual warsay movement and its web site warsay.de, as it became popular with Eritreans living all over Germany.

Not surprisingly, the real life movement lost its initial momentum after the war. Some of “these *warsot* in diaspora,” however, realized that it would be necessary to do something for the younger generation to keep them interested in Eritrea and also to help them with their lives in Germany.<sup>8</sup> They wanted to continue their work and shift their focus on the youth in the diaspora rather than merely rallying support for Eritrea. Personal quarrels and diverging interests led further members to drop out while new ones joined. It also seems likely that the growing criticism of the Eritrean government that was to be observed in Eritrean cyber space (including the Warsay e-group) did not leave the Warsay movement unaffected. But there were also rumours that Warsay – like other organisations that were not entirely under EPLF/PFDJ control – was being undermined by government agents.<sup>9</sup> A former member of Warsay claimed that the Consulate and the local MahbereKom who had initially called for the youth to get more engaged, felt overwhelmed and possibly threatened by Warsay’s success and soaring membership numbers: “They [the consulate] were really trembling. The MahbereKom, too. They didn’t know what was brewing there....” The same source went on to say that the consulate sent “someone” into the organisation to keep it on government course.<sup>10</sup> Several other former members also complained that there had been “too much interference...”

For sure is that a much smaller Warsay registered as a non-profit youth association later in 2001. Warsay e.V. (e.V. stands for “eingetragener Verein” and means registered association) continued their mixture of organising parties and seminars and also joined the Stadtjugendring, an umbrella organisation of Frankfurt's youth associations, providing them with a solid financial background and the possibility to extend their networks beyond Eritrean circles.<sup>11</sup> During the time of my fieldtrips to Frankfurt from 2001 to late 2005, Warsay e.V. met once a week and had a small office in the Guild of student’s building at the Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe University (later they met for some time in the building of the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Warsot* is the plural form of *warsay* (see glossary).

<sup>9</sup> Similar cases have been described by Woldemikael (2005: 155) and Hepner (2003:278). Another interviewee told me about a group he had started together with some students doing research in various fields of the humanities.

<sup>10</sup> (Interview 7 November 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Which has been happening only to a very limited extend so far.

German Trade Unions Association). Seminars and parties also often took place there, even though most of the *warsot* I knew were not students at the University.

Between January 2002 and December 2003 I joined Warsay on various occasions, sometimes invited, but also once or twice just “popping in“ as I was nearby. The meetings were usually attended by about a eight to 20 people.<sup>12</sup> Most of the core group were men between 20 and 40 years of age. Topics varied, but very often concerned the planning of upcoming events, for which a far larger number of members and sympathisers who did not attend the meetings regularly could be mobilised to help out. The beginning as well as the end of each meeting were marked by a one-minute silence for the Eritrean “martyrs“ that ends with a slogan of the liberation war: *awet n'hafash*.<sup>13</sup> The language of communication was usually Tigrinya interspersed with German. For some of the younger participants who were more fluent in German than in Tigrinya this made it sometimes difficult to contribute to the debate.<sup>14</sup> Asked whether she could translate a list with planned events written in *Ge'ez*, a young woman admitted that she found it hard to decipher the script. A friend, sitting next to her said she, too, thought it very laborious to read Tigrinya. Still, the minutes taken at the session were also in Tigrinya, and I sometimes got the impression that using Tigrinya as language of communication also had a ritual aspect going along with the silence for the war heroes and, indeed, the group's name. After the meetings that usually took between two and three hours, the group often went out together. Whenever I joined them we went to one of the more than 20 Eritrean restaurants in Frankfurt. Just as with any other associations it seemed that the informal part of the evening was for some participants the main reason for coming. At the restaurant, the debates were often continued in a more lively and inclusive manner, with everyone speaking the tongue he or she preferred.

Some Warsay members were also active in other Eritrean associations, for instance in the MahbereKom (community association), the football club, Eman-tv, and another youth group called JEF.<sup>15</sup> Others were actively involved with the Eritrean Orthodox *Medhane Alem* congregation. Still, Warsay e.V.'s standing in the Eritrean community in Frankfurt is a

---

<sup>12</sup> According to a posting from 3 August 2002 by the warsay.com web master 40 active and 300 passive members.

<sup>13</sup> “Martyrs” is the official term for the Eritrean war dead of both the independence war and the recent war. The slogan *awet n'hafash* translates as „victory to the masses“ and is also a popular sign-off in Internet communication.

<sup>14</sup> Some younger people that are organised with another youth group even said that language was one of the reasons for their not joining Warsay as they felt uncomfortable with speaking Tigrinya.

<sup>15</sup> JEF is an abbreviation for Junge Eritreer in Frankfurt und Umgebung - Young Eritreans in Frankfurt and Vicinity.

difficult one. Like Dehai in its first phase, Warsay was often accused of being too much "pro-government", by some people, while others counted them among the government opponents. Warsay doubtlessly and openly had contacts with the Eritrean Consulate General in Frankfurt and with the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) in Asmara, though these relationships have - for various reasons - not always been free of tensions. And while Warsay did not refuse cooperation either with NUEYS or the Consulate on a project-to-project basis, they strongly emphasised their autonomy. Therefore, one recurring problem - seen from the perspective of Eritrean authorities has been the integration of Warsay into the structures of a transnational or extended Eritrean nationalism. In other words, there have been repeated efforts to get Warsay to join NUEYS as a branch, something they have so far avoided. In this context, registering as a non-profit association ("e.V.") within the framework of German legal structures, and joining the umbrella organisation of Frankfurt's Youth, may be seen as a measure to safeguard some autonomy vis-à-vis Eritrean national demands.<sup>16</sup>

### **Warsay.de: whose *warsa*? – Claiming a Virtual Heritage**

Warsay.e.V., though differently composed in terms of membership had more or less inherited the Warsay movement's web site warsay.de. Or so they thought. In 2001 at least two former members of the info task force that had left the Warsay earlier were among the founders of a new web site called biddho.com. Biddho, meaning "challenge" in Tigrinya, was initially planned as a German-Eritrean Magazine by that name. Like with Warsay, many Biddho's originally members dropped out. The remaining members kept the name, but

---

<sup>16</sup> Independently from one another two long-term observers (both until recently supporters of the EPLF/PFDJ) from within the Eritrean community interpreted the Consulates efforts in terms of control and interference. Pointing at the EPLF/PFDJ's long history of either incorporating or destroying potential rival organisations they found (I paraphrase): The EPLF will never allow for independent organisations to grow. Quite obviously there are competing versions of Warsay's origin. A member of the now defunct youth group DA'ARO claimed that „the Warsay movement was founded by the then active youth and students of the Union of Eritrean of Youth and Students Frankfurt (NUEYS-F), better known as DA'ARO, and the Consulate of the State of Eritrea in Frankfurt. (Warsay e-group, 11/04/02) Yet another source (also a former Da'aro and Warsay member, supports that Da'aro and Warsay had been two separate organisations until they merged in early 1999 under the impression of the border war. (. There are other Warsay groups, e.g. in Washington D.C. or San Diego (USA) that are indeed branches of the NUEYS. However, when I interviewed the official „youth coordinator“ of NUEYS in Germany in his office at the Consulate, he mentioned DA'ARO as one of many youth groups that came into being in the mid to late 1990s, but made no reference to the fact that DA'ARO, or for that matter Warsay, had ever been a NUEYS branch. Nonetheless, a contact list of Eritrean groups (compiled by the Eritrean Consulate in Frankfurt) that I came across later, names Warsay as a NUEYS branch. Similar attempts of the EPLF/PFDJ trying to "take over" independent groups have also been describes by Sorenson and Matsuoka (2005:107) and Woldemikael (2005).

changed the aims of the projects. To launch the Biddho website its new owners installed a eye-catching link on warsay.de, and some time later simply incorporated the site into Biddho. Then Biddho.com suddenly turned professional and it was widely rumoured (by friends and foes alike) that they had received support from the Eritrean Embassy and/or Consulate. Indeed, parallel to the closing of independent newspapers and the arrest of opposition politicians in Eritrea in autumn 2001, biddho.com adopted an increasingly fierce pro-government stance. When Warsay e.V., wanted to use the Warsay section of biddho.com the Biddho makers first offered their help, but later asked to be paid for these services (field notes, summer 2003), something the Warsay e.V. was both unable and unwilling to do.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the Warsay e-group had become completely independent of the real-life developments in Frankfurt, despite overlapping membership. But apparently the e-group was also a thorn in the side of the Biddho-makers, Some of them had helped to set it up when still members of the Warsay movement, and thus felt that they somehow “owned” the group. Trouble started in early 2002, when one of the e-group administrators (and also Biddho webmaster) began to criticise certain postings. He started by blaming members for forwarding "anti-Eritrean" newspaper articles. A heated debate ensued about this barely disguised censorship as well as about the question of the group’s origin and actual “ownership“. Eventually, the e-group administration decided that all members ought to renew their membership, giving more information about who they are and accept that the group is "pro-Eritrean". As the debates got more and more harsh in tune, including insults and attempts at character assassination, some of the more liberal-minded members left in protest. Others followed silently. And though it was never officially declared, this was the beginning of the end. With warsay.de and Warsay e-group more or less defunct, Warsay e.V. found themselves disowned of the Warsay movements Web heritage. In April 2002 they started a new web site, whose launch was announced on the dying e-group saying: “We have news for all who want to enjoy free discussion without preconditions. Warsay e.V. ... has got a new web site: ... [www.warsay.com](http://www.warsay.com)“ (Warsay e-group, 20 April 2002, translation B.C.; quote authorised by person who posted the message).

---

<sup>17</sup> In the following years Biddho became notorious for slandering Eritrean government critics and opposition politicians and using foul language together with flashy patriotic images. It finally disappeared from cyberspace as mysteriously as it had risen to fame, allegedly, because its makers were offered a more lucrative position on another government-sponsored site.

The new website, warsay.com, tried to be both a platform for debates among Eritreans in Germany, as well as an online extension and media organ of real life Warsay e.V. Since 2002 it has changed its design a few times but retained most of its features. From 2002 to about 2004 two young webmasters from Warsay e.V. ran the show, but several other members could also access the site to load up files or make changes. For a long time the web site's logo showed a "coat of arms" crowned by the Skyline of Frankfurt. Below you could see the outlines of Germany with a sketch of Eritrea drawn within its borders. Above and below the sketch it reads in Latin and *Ge'ez* script: "Warsay Ertra" and "Warsay Germany".



**Figure 12** *Warsay.com* Logo

But not only the symbolic referred to the local. Until today, the language of communication has been German with occasional use of English and Tigrinya transliterations. Warsay.com was and is a typically "local" site in the sense that it mainly caters for German Eritrean, or even Frankfurt-Eritrean visitors. Unlike the "transnational" sites or the Warsay e-group, it is less of a place to get information about and exchange thoughts on the developments in the worldwide diaspora and Eritrea proper. On the whole it is geared towards younger, more local visitors that are encouraged to join the real life Warsay youth group or at least come to their parties and seminars. This is still the case as this text is being written, though there have been some major changes, too. There used to be a huge link list with various sub-

categories referring the net surfer to hundreds of Eritreans sites.<sup>18</sup> Today, the list is more selective and hints that Warsay has embarked on a “pro-government course. Another interesting feature was the photo album, which used to display pictures taken on Warsay parties, seminars, demonstrations, outings and holidays. There still is a photo gallery, but just like the organisation of parties, their online documentation, too, has moved to another, commercial website, called eryp.com.

However, by far the most interesting and also the most popular feature remains the warsay.com guest book. Warsay visitors have used it as a discussion forum ever since it became available: “Finally a chat room for Habesha living in Germany“ enthuses one of the guests in July 2002.<sup>19</sup> Though debates here mostly lack the intellectual depth of the Warsay e-group discussions, it has been very interesting to note how the "guests" have made themselves at home and that it is mainly Eritrea and local Eritrean matters that are touched upon in this forum. Broadly the guest book is used on two levels and by two groups of users: The first group are younger Eritreans that have presumably been born or brought up in Frankfurt. The second group are made up of Warsay members, and other older Eritreans most of which still grew up in Eritrea or Ethiopia. They can be identified not only by the contents of their messages, but also are distinguishable by their orthography, syntax, style of writing, greetings and the use of abbreviations commonly used in text messages or chat rooms. For the group of youngsters the guest book is rolled into one message board, chat room, meeting place, gossip exchange and flirt line - a virtual meeting place. Topics such as parties, concerts and other events, exchanges about Music, relationships, questions concerning Warsay etc. figure most prominently among their postings. Their background knowledge about Eritrea varies greatly. From some of the entries, it is quite obvious, that the topics debated on the transnational Eritrean websites, be they independent, pro- or anti-government, are more or less by-passing those who posted them.

---

<sup>18</sup> Aimed at providing an overview of Eritrean sites, Warsay's former link list could be read as yet another attempt to avoid political classification via their chosen links. That links were indeed seen as indicators of political opinion might be illustrated by the following sarcastic comment of the Biddho/Warsay e-group administrator. In reply to the launch of warsay.com, he wrote: „...of course I visited the website to experience the new freedom. There is a guestbook, the dates of some cool and interesting events as well as a few links. What I rather liked was that I find my favourite sites Awate.com and Asmarino.com straight away now [seen as anti-government and critical respectively]. Wow, beautiful free world.“ (Warsay e-group, 16 May 2002)

<sup>19</sup> „Chat room“ is here used synonymously with „forum“ or „guestbook“, though technically it is of course something quite different. „Habesha“ is the term for highland Eritreans and Ethiopians. Eritreans in Germany and elsewhere in the diaspora, however, use it as a self-description. One of the reasons for preferring the guest book to the discussion forum as a place to utter opinion might be that (unlike using the forum) making an entry in the guest book does not require registration.

It is noteworthy that the topics and debates have hardly changed since the guest books inception 2002. Nowadays Warsay is certainly less popular as a virtual meeting place than it was before. The most important reason for this seems that the aforementioned eryl.com (co-founded by Warsay members) is more appealing to young people and has a large number of chat and discussion forums. Also the declared aim of Warsay has shifted. While it had originally taken up the cause of showing solidarity with Eritrea **and** supporting Eritrean youth in Frankfurt and its vicinity, its now mainly a charity collecting donations for the youth and the poor in Eritrea, e.g. by organizing fund-raisers or sponsoring needy families.

But let me return back to the early days of warsay.com, when Warsay's political direction was still not as unambiguous as it seems now. The battle over the organisation's "political soul," was also fought out on the Internet, especially in the guest book. In the course of 2002 entries became increasingly political. Seemingly the guest book had been discovered as a forum for political debate. Some of the guests appear to have been involved with the original Warsay movement, or other youth groups.<sup>20</sup> Some of them even I could identify rather easily, and the occasionally heated exchanges seemed to be the continuation of older real life or virtual disputes. Apart from various more or less sober debates revolving around the criticism or support of the current government and the role of diaspora Eritreans, there were also discussions about Eritrean history. Most of these discussions were dominated by two or three individuals, seconded by their respective supporters.

Two very lively and open exchanges about love and relationships in the diaspora, were the exception. Not only were these discussions some of the rare non-political ones but, judging by the postings, they also involved a greater number contributors including both genders and different age groups. Recurring topics of discussion (and that is still true today) have also been the role and positioning of Warsay itself (as a web site and as a real life organisation): the name "Warsay", the groups aims and activities or the lack thereof, its political standing and its practice of censoring or not censoring guest book entries, have repeatedly been praised and criticised by "guests" of different political hues. In the following I will analyse their entries (and Warsay's reactions) more closely as they illustrate how the real and the virtual interact and how local conditions are reflected and reinforced, but possibly also re-configured on the web.

---

<sup>20</sup> Though one can never tell for sure who hides behind a nickname, it seems that online discussions (especially about politics) are still a male-dominated field. This impression is substantiated by my real life observations. Many women not only abstained from making utterances, but often also professed a dislike of politics in general.



## Squaring the circle, or ‘how to be a critical patriot’

In summer 1999, in the middle of the Ethio-Eritrean border war that was to cost the lives, health and sanity of thousands of Eritrean *warsay*<sup>21</sup> and their Ethiopian peers, a Swedish Eritrean youth group posted a very emotional message on Dehai (cross posted on the Warsay e-group) inviting young Eritreans to join them to celebrate the millennium shift in Eritrea:

... This is not just about partying ... *We are the warsai of Eritrea in Diaspora*, at this special occasion [the millennium shift] we want to join the warsais which are defending and building our home country and show our belongingness with them! *This is about making a new oath to our martyrs and our people, a new dedication* that we Eritrean youth where ever [sic!] we are shall strive for Eritreas [sic!] prosperity and always will be ready to defend her whenever threatened! The new millennium is ours! (Dehai posting “CLUB 2000 ERITREA“, 19 Aug 1999, emphasis mine, B.C.)

It is not unreasonable to assume that the Warsay movement in Frankfurt was spurred into action by similar sentiments. The adoption of the name “Warsay“ alone is highly symbolic. It signifies both, continuity with the past and integration into the Eritrean nation at present. It provides a sense of pride, belongingness and identity. It’s very much emotionally charged and has an almost semi-religious quality in as much as almost every one in Eritrea and its diaspora has lost relatives and friends during the independence war. Thus to say “We are the Warsai of Eritrea in Diaspora“ is more than a rhetoric. Claiming your “warsa“ or heritage also means to take on a twofold “sacred“ duty, once towards the bestowers of this heritage (including the war dead or “martyrs“) and twice to the “real“ Warsay (peers still living in Eritrea). This duty or obligation includes coming to the defence of what earlier generations have achieved and continuing their struggle for a free, peaceful and prosperous Eritrea.

The legacy of the independence struggle, the solidarity with the Warsay at home and the fight for better future are, however, inextricably interwoven with loyalty to the Eritrean government (the former EPLF) as the main bestower, guardian, and embodiment of Eritrean independence. In this version of history Eritrean-ness and loyalty to the Eritrean government have become two inseparable sides of one medal. Especially the *sedetegnatat*, the Eritreans in diaspora, who lived “comfortably“ abroad while others sacrificed their

---

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, Warsay also is the name commonly used for the new generation of Eritreans that have been conscripted into the regular Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) since the country’s independence. The Warsay are distinguished from the *yikealo*, EPLF Ex-fighters that also form a part of the EDF.

health and lives, grew up with a feeling of indebtedness to the EPLF and its “martyrs“. Hence when Consul General Bsrat said: "... You ... have to know your role, do your duty. Stand-up!!", he was appealing to a sense of guilt and a sense of duty of the young diaspora Eritreans to give at least material and moral support, while, again, had to risk their lives.

During the war there was no apparent contradiction between unconditional loyalty with the Eritrean government and the vision of a prosperous and democratic Eritrea. Unfortunately, the increasingly repressive post-war politics of the Eritrean government on the one, and growing criticism of the Eritrean leadership on the other hand, there was also pressure on the Warsay movement to choose sides. A compromise was hard to find because the general tune was one of “who isn’t for us, is against us“. More than that: Who’s against the government is against Eritrea and the Eritrean people, and indeed can no longer be regarded as a “true“ Eritrean. It appears that within the dissolving Warsay movement decisions were eventually made on a rather individual level. The majority, not wanting to openly challenge the government or join the ranks of a yet undefined and often dubious opposition, chose the “exit“ – option (cf. Chapter 5). Others, like the founders of *biddho.com*, finally decided to link their fate to that of the Eritrean government.<sup>22</sup>

The remaining Warsay, i.e. Warsay e.V., found themselves in an unacknowledged dilemma: Trying to be true to their “legacy“ as Warsay they found it impossible to condemn the Eritrean government. Yet, influenced by Western ideas such as pluralism and democratic principles they also refused to succumb to the government’s totalitarian demands on their loyalty, that allow neither criticism nor autonomy. Warsay’s way out of this predicament was showing themselves loyal to the Eritrean state, whilst acknowledging the general right to freely utter diverging opinion in their meetings and on their website (something the government does not allow). In practice that meant for instance advertising government events on the Warsay homepage, but also offering a space like the guest book to voice dissent. The same rational seemed to be behind the decision to become a registered association and to join Frankfurt’s union of youth groups while continuing to cooperate with Eritrean government agencies. In other words, Warsay tried to square the circle and fulfil both: demonstrate “loyalty“ to the Eritrea government (which is part and parcel of the oath

---

<sup>22</sup> Financial aspects are said to have played a role as well as the acquisition of „power“ and status. The *Biddho* „kids“ as well as other „pro-government“ groups have meanwhile split and seem to quarrel about money. In some instances people were allegedly also promised remuneration for their cooperation or services. And like in any human society, personal animosities played an important role and were often inseparable from political conflicts that also tended to be highly personalised.

to stay true to their legacy as Warsay), and cling to some “liberal“ principles. Both elements were part of their self-perception. But bringing them together also could be seen as an attempt to carve out some space within the community, giving them a wider scope of action in order to influence developments from within. This is illustrated by the following quotes from the guest book, in which Warsay e.V. members reply to inquiries about their group’s name and aim:

Warsay means = heritage. The heir/heirress should continue, cherish and develop his/her traditions and customs.... yes ... that is Warsay e.V. (Warsay guest book, 2 April 2003).

Warsay e.V. is the youth movement that stood demonstratively at the Eritrean government’s side during the war. It is anti-imperialist, against neo-colonialism and racism. Warsay fights for a tolerant and democratic society. Warsay is against narrow-minded nationalism ...“ (Warsay guest book, 10 September 2002).

Warsay e.V. ... strives to develop theories by cooperation, to suggest solutions and contribute actively towards their implementation .... In Warsay there are thinkers and doers, who become active to solve our problems (Warsay guest book 11 September 2002).

Moreover, while the group itself seemed to find no apparent contradiction in both, advocating democracy **and** supporting a government that is all but democratic, some of the guests took a different view. Numerous guest book entries demanded that Warsay show their “true colours“ or else accepted being seen as traitors either to the government or the vision of a democratic Eritrea. Often it was the name Warsay that was regarded with suspicion. A critic wrote:

... call yourselves differently. When I hear Warsay I always think about war. It’s too nationalist, reminds me of isejas [sic. Issayas Afewerki, the Eritrean President]. Consider it, brothers... (guest book, 24.02.2003).

Another, almost dadaist version reads: “warsay=say war!!!!!! war say!!!! say bush!! bush say: war say!!! afewerki=bush=war....“ (guest book 24.02.2003). One entry hints that the “real“ *warsay* are no longer partisans but conscripts. Thousands of which have deserted since 2000, seeking escape from unlimited national service (symbolized by Sawa, the main military training camp) and a life controlled by the state and overshadowed by the threat of war: “Warsay e.V. who are you? ... What is your identity? Warsay flee from Sawa and you

are on the side of the government....hypocrites...“ (27.05.2003)<sup>23</sup> . But also government supporters who think Warsay e.V. unworthy of carrying its name, had their say: “Why can warsay not longer demonstrate that it stands by the Eritrean population and the government? So-called Warsay e.V. should first earn the right to call themselves warsay..“ (10 September 2002).

Warsay’s equivocal standing was aggravated by the fact that it had a heterogeneous and not always clearly defined membership. Someone who later became either opposition or staunch government supporter might say “I’m Warsay“, referring to his or her participation in the original movement. But also Warsay’s tactical shifting and turning, both on the web and in real life, has contributed to the confusion. In a climate of mutual distrust, fear and polarisation of political opinion their efforts to reconcile “loyalty“ and “liberty“ resembled a tightrope walk and were often interpreted either as plain opportunism, or badly concealed support of either the pro- or the anti-government side. Accordingly, Warsay members were called “traitors“, “weyane“, “*adgi*, “anti-Eritrean,“ and “regionalists“ by the pro-government faction.<sup>24</sup> Those who counted themselves among the opposition, used terms such as “hypocrites“, “opportunists“, “government agents“, and “spies.“ Occasionally, however, Warsay was also praised by both, admitted government supporters and opponents. But rather than helping to extent their scope of action, this ambiguity made both Warsay.com and Warsay e.V. easy prey to manipulation, instrumentalisation and “collective character assassination“.

As we have already seen, infiltration, or alternatively the destruction of politically unwanted forums works also on the web. Below an example for such an “attack“ on *Warsay.com*, It was allegedly master-minded by the same person that destroyed the Warsay e-group. After someone nicknamed *Ezewedehankum* [meaning “This is all (I have to say)“] had posted several comments criticising the Eritrean government, self-declared *Halawi Ertra* (meaning “the guard of Eritrea“) emerged on the scene to complain about *Warsay’s* lack of intervention:

Why does Warsay e.V. look on? Do they still think what "Ezewedehankum" does is all right? The silence and the looking on may be an answer. But maybe "Ezewedehankum" and Warsay e.V., too, have really become Ethiopia fans?

---

<sup>23</sup> Translation mine (B.C.)

<sup>24</sup> *Adgi* means donkey and is a derogatory term for Ethiopian soldiers.

"ESEM" (or "EMES"), a Warsay e.V. member, replied:

Everyone can voice his opinion freely as long as Eritrean sovereignty is respected. You are trying to play Warsay e.V. off against the Eritrean government. You'll never succeed because Warsay e.V. is the government itself. [this is but another version of the EPLF's "one people, one heart" motto meaning that the Eritrean people and the Eritrean government are one]

But *Halawi* did not give up so easily:

As I conclude from your comment you think it is ok when someone here in this guest book openly talks about a coup-d'état in Eritrea? Don't you ask yourself why Warsay e.V. looks on when such entries and opinions are made? Don't you think Warsay e.V. should say something about this?<sup>25</sup>

After several similar entries, *Halawi* finally announced to leave the guest book, yet not without denouncing Warsay e.V. as "pro-Ethiopia" – one of the worst insults for an Eritrean:

Had I known right from the beginning that Warsay e.V. guest book represents the Ethiopian side I would not have stayed here. Now I understand why all these anti-Eritrean comments have been tolerated. Long live the Eritrean people!<sup>26</sup>

Whoever *Halawi* was, he used the guest book very cleverly by alternately provoking anti-government users into making radical comments and then accusing the webmasters of conspiring with the critics. This was clearly done in an attempt to put Warsay in a catch-22-situation. If they censored the critical voices they could no longer claim to be an open forum. If they did not, they would be ousted as traitors, or even as Ethiopians in disguise. For if they did not conspire with the government opponent, would they allow such postings? Thus both, censoring and non-censoring, caused considerable problems for their real life work and their attempts to cultivate an image of Warsay as critical but devout patriots.

---

<sup>25</sup> Two more details might be added here: Firstly, *Ezewedehankum* had never called for a coup-d'état but had predicted that if politics in Eritrea continued as they did there would be an uprising which the current government would not survive. (guestbook entry, 19 September 2002). By saying that Warsay "represents the Ethiopian side," *Halawi* might also have intended to support rumours about the origins Warsay members. Some were said to be no "real Eritreans", but of mixed Ethio-Eritrean origin. Others, and this was actually no secret, were *amitche* – Eritreans that had lived or were brought up in Ethiopia before coming to Germany. Such allegation might have had serious consequences for the individuals concerned. During and after the war, people of mixed origin or with Ethiopian spouses often faced severe discrimination. One case that became known to me was that of an Ethio-Eritrean couple that even moved into another neighbourhood after their Eritrean neighbours had repeatedly hassled their school-age children.

<sup>26</sup> Original German quotes from <http://www.warsay.com>, guestbook entries from 28 September to 4 October 2002, translation and emphasis mine.

According to a Warsay member, the confusion got perfect when some individual(s) pretended to be Warsay members and made radical pro-government statements contradicting earlier statements by the group that they wanted to create an open forum. Similar attempts to discredit Warsay also happened in real life, for instance when another, formerly befriended group wrote a letter to the Eritrean Embassy and the local *MahbereKom* (Community association) accusing them of being against the government.

Not surprisingly, Warsay e.V., were therefore eager to keep criticism at bay, either by a cautiously practised censorship (which again infuriated the users concerned and casts the shadow of doubt over Warsay's devotion to pluralistic principles), or by the contributions of individual members that tried to counterbalance critical postings or told the "guests" to remain civil and reasonable.<sup>27</sup> A more radical form of "de-escalating" certain "hot" debates was to reset the guest book in such a way that older messages could no longer be read and exchanges therefore got discontinued. Another time the guest book was closed after a debate about an Eritrean youth festival in the military training camp Sawa that had been advertised on the site by the Eritrean embassy and heavily criticised by some "guests". When the guest book was re-opened after more than two weeks, its closure was explained by technical difficulties. Like the government side, various opposition groups also attempted to exert some influence on Warsay, or at least to use the guest book to raise awareness for their issues, e.g. by posting their links to critical articles or calling to boycott certain events. And as with the pro-government side it is hard to distinguish if such was "concerted" from above, or was the unmasked-for work of some individual zealots.

In spite of these shortcomings and difficulties, Warsay.com had nonetheless something to offer that neither real life organisations nor "transnational" web sites could provide. It has become both a link between "local" and "transnational" Eritrean cyberspace as well as a link between various local groups that are difficult to bring together in a real life context where circuits of opposition and pro-government groups hardly overlap. Interestingly the benefits of virtual versus face-to-face meetings once even became a topic of discussion on warsay.com itself, when Warsay members challenged on-line critics to attend their real life meetings in order to discuss. Some guest book writers then pointed out the main benefits of online discussion: reaching a wider audience, more freedom for

---

<sup>27</sup> The censoring I observed was partly justified e.g. when deleting messages which contained flaming, but sometimes also used to remove „too“ critical entries, e.g. a link to an unfavourable *Amnesty International* report on Eritrea.

everyone to really say what s/he thinks without risking verbal attacks, ostracism or even getting mugged by "HiGidefs" [=PFDJ/government] "street rambos" (guest book 14 April 2004). An unaffiliated Eritrean government critic I asked to come along to a real life seminar co-organised by Warsay voiced similar reservations: "At the moment I see no chance of getting together. We are not yet that far. I wouldn't feel good there either. Haven't you heard of the incident in Sweden?"<sup>28</sup>

The above described advantages of cyber debates over "real" ones have given rise to hypotheses that the Internet might indeed provide a space for an incipient Eritrean "transnational" or "cyber civil society" (cf. Hepner 2003; Bernal 2004). Yet, while I am not generally adverse to the idea, I have my reservations when looking at the concept from a local perspective, such as the one provided by Warsay. And where, if not locally, can "civil society" take place? The creation of a "civil society", real or virtual (if indeed such a thing exists), is about un-coerced participation. This is also the crucial problem when we talk about cyber-diasporas and their impact on real life communities, including their home society. Who are the participants or "citoyens" on the net? How many do we need? How can they change perceptions "on the ground"? In the previous two subchapters I have tried to roughly portrait one such group of local actors. However, the most pertinent question is not only who becomes active on the web, but also whom they can reach at all.

### **Transcending boundaries or creating new ones – limitations and chances for Web-use in the diaspora**

As pointed out above, Eritrean cyberspace used to be an elite thing, and in some ways it still is. Apart from the costs involved and necessity of having at least some basic technical know-how, there is the language problem. Those sites that are considered to have an impact on Eritrean politics and dominate the political debate tend to use English as medium of communication. This already inhibits a fair number of Eritreans living in Frankfurt from using these sources as they lack the necessary language competence (either at all, or to a degree that allows only for a biased picture of what is going on, and prevents active participation). But even though there has been a considerable increase of online publishing in Tigrinya or Arabic, does not mean that at least those sources are accessible to anyone

---

<sup>28</sup> Field notes 2004. He referred to a seminar organised by a Swedish Eritrean refugee and opposition group that was severely disrupted by government supporters shouting abuse and throwing chairs at the discussion panel and the audience.

who has access to the Internet. One group that is excluded from this information too is the relatively large number of illiterate or semi-illiterate rural refugees who came to Germany via Sudan in the mid-1980s. The same goes for a many belonging to the so-called second generation. One should also note that throughout Eritrean diaspora society (as elsewhere) women seem to be underrepresented on the web, both as consumers and activists.<sup>29</sup>

Eritrean children and teenagers growing up in Germany are in a particular predicament. Especially in places with, like Frankfurt, the schooling they receive is often inadequate. With large classes, and a high percentage of migrant pupils, overstrained teachers hardly manage to teach migrant children sufficient German, let alone to provide them with the necessary proficiency in English that would enable them to read websites such as [asmarino.com](http://asmarino.com) or [dehai.org](http://dehai.org).<sup>30</sup> The same goes for their knowledge of Tigrinya that is often limited to oral communication on a family level. While the majority still speak their mother tongue in varying degrees of fluency, most youngsters grown up in Germany are unable (or at least find it very hard) to decipher the *Ge'ez* script. And even though the MahbereKoms and various other institutions offer Tigrinya lessons for children, these classes are rarely sufficient to gain solid reading and writing skills in *Ge'ez*. For those whose mother tongue is not Tigrinya, eg. Eritreans of the Tigre or Saho ethnic group, the situation is worse still – though some of them communicate well in Arabic, the *lingua franca* of the Eritrean lowland population. However, very often the only written language Eritrean teenagers can communicate in is German and that, too, is difficult for some. Eritrean websites using German language are therefore certainly the ones used most frequently visited by the younger generation, apart from those with higher education.

The use of language on the web always *volens nolens* leads to the (partial) exclusion of groups such as the less educated and diaspora-raised kids. While this is for the larger part unavoidable, it seems that the choice language is not always an innocent act. Choosing one language over another can also be a political statement, or may even be part of a policy

---

<sup>29</sup> There is no „hard evidence“ of this, yet it mirrors both studies on the worldwide use of the Internet by women as well as my fieldwork observations. Also Eritrean women tend to be less formally educated than men (cf. Schröder 1992) and constituted a minority among those of my informants that were interested in cyber-Eritrea's favourite topic: Politics.

<sup>30</sup> As part time English language tutor I have not least managed to earn my keep thanks to the shortcomings of foreign language teaching at all sorts of German schools. Especially graduates from schools that do not prepare for higher education (“Hauptschule”), usually have utmost difficulties in understanding even a simple English newspaper article. Not surprisingly children whose mother tongue is not German tend to have even more problems. An interesting aside is that Eritreans you grew up away from the conurbations of the Rhine-Main, Stuttgart or Ruhr areas, tend to perform better at school, speak perfect German, excellent English and often attend university.



aimed at in- or excluding certain groups of people. At least three such forms of “language policy“ can be distinguished:

Firstly, there is the general preference of one or two languages on certain websites, appealing *per se* to a certain constituency and excluding another. An example for this is the extensive use of Arabic on some Eritrean (political or religious) web sites. Since most highland Tigrinya speakers are less likely to speak Arabic than their lowland compatriots, choosing to write in Arabic on a website (a language used widely to communicate among lowland Eritreans speaking different mother tongues) effectively limits immediate access for this group, whether intentionally or not.<sup>31</sup> A positive effect of this “discrimination” is that it again *includes* non-Tigrinya and non-English speakers that have so far been *excluded* from most other online discourses.

A second measure of using language in a discriminatory fashion is the preference of Tigrinya and/or Arabic (as opposed to English) for particular announcements, comments and publications on the Internet. An example is the web-coverage of the *hizbawi mekete* (roughly: “in defence of the people/nation“) seminars conducted throughout the diaspora. The campaign started in autumn 2002 and a new one again in 2007/8. The seminars mainly aimed at rallying moral and financial support for the Eritrean government’s efforts to protect the country from internal and external “enemies“ in relation to the still pending border demarcation. In 2002 additional money was raised for Eritreans suffering from drought. Interestingly, in 2002 pro-government sites such as biddho.com, that usually used mainly English, almost exclusively announced these events in Tigrinya.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand this ensured reaching a greater number of Eritrean non-English readers, on the other hand (especially in 2002) it prevented too much publicity outside Eritrean circles at a time when Eritrea’s deteriorating human rights situation came under international scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> Opposition web sites, however, soon reported about *hizbawi mekete* events in English.

---

<sup>31</sup> The majority of diaspora Eritreans are Christian, highland Tigrinya. And though it is officially denied, there is a growing nexus between being a Muslim lowlander and being close to opposition or dissident movements (this goes especially for the diaspora). Many Muslims feel marginalised by the Christian highlanders, who in turn eye them with some suspicion. In this context the issue of language policy - not on the Web, but in Eritrea proper - has become highly politicised.

<sup>32</sup> In 2007/8 I did not follow the campaign closely enough to make a valid statement in this regards, but from what I could tell, it seemed to follow the same lines as the *hizbawi mekete* in 2003/4, though some reports were now in German or English. Even more than some years ago, the events were covered by professional EriTV crews and are shown also in Eritrea to demonstrate diaspora support for the Eritrean government.

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes the announcements were distributed as pdf-documents with *Ge'ez* texts that could easily be forwarded, printed, and copied.

Other cases of using language as a means of avoiding the attention of outsiders include threats to government critics and opposition members published in Tigrinya.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly a third, mostly individually employed method is the occasional switching from English/German/Italian etc. to transliterations of Tigrinya which can be observed in “local“ discussion forums, e-groups or guest books.<sup>35</sup> This too seems an acknowledgment of the fact that the Internet, despite Eritreans using it exclusively for “national“ purposes, is yet a public sphere, that can also be accessed by interested or “nosy“ *ferenjjs*. Thus transliterations of Tigrinya are used as regulative to limit access or “close” certain debates even within a formally open forum. This goes particularly for the discussion of controversial issues belying the myth of unity and therefore feared to weaken Eritrea *vis-à-vis* malevolent external forces. In contradiction to what “The Internet“ stands for, such considerations and strategies illustrate that the “culture of secrecy“ and “self-reliance“ (stemming from the days of the liberation war) continued to shape the way Eritreans use the Web.

The language question illustrates the complexity of Internet usage. Language at once limits and expands the participation of Eritreans on the Web. 75% of all Eritreans within the country are excluded from Internet communication in any language as they can neither read, nor have the means to access and use the Internet.<sup>36</sup> And even within the diaspora sections of the Eritrean population are excluded, either by default or by design, as they cannot read the language(s) used in “Eritrean cyberspace,“ or simply have no “culture of reading.” Biniam, an Eritrean student of media studies, thought that especially amongst the older generation of Eritreans in Germany even hard copy newspapers such as *Haddas Ertra* are not widely read.<sup>37</sup> “Some read it, but not thoroughly,” he said, adding “ours is an oral culture.” Obtaining news from the Internet is even less common among the older

---

<sup>34</sup> These are very sensitive and complex issues, and I assume that the aspect of „inclusion“ is mostly more important than the one of exclusion. After all, the events were eventually controversially debated on web sites of all political hues, both in English and in Tigrinya. Still an amazing fact is that despite the fiercest political infighting Eritreans have a strong tendency to „to keep the problem within the family“. And even though there cases of libel and character assassination are frequent on the web, one rarely hears about someone taking legal action.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, one should be careful not to overstress such phenomena: mostly the use of Tigrinya in such forums is pragmatic, e.g. when it is difficult to translate a phrase, proverb or term into the generally used language of communication, or an emphasis is made. Moreover, interspersing one’s postings with Tigrinya phrases also is a means of demonstrating competence in one’s mother tongue or showing a deeper knowledge of traditions, history and literature.

<sup>36</sup> According to the 2003 report of the US State Department, about 75 percent of the Eritrean population are illiterate.

<sup>37</sup> Field notes from 2 September 2002. The name “Biniam” is a pseudonym.

generation. Today, many diaspora Eritreans have a computer at home: “The neighbour bought one, so we need one too,” says Biniam with a smile. Yet the concept of reading e.g. *Haddas Ertra* online, is “totally alien” to them: “They cannot relate the actual paper to an electronic version. Most don’t even know that Shaebia is on the Internet as well, and to them all that is said on Asmerino and Co, isn’t but a bunch of lies.” He reckons that this attitude has to do with the fact that Eritreans in Europe tend to be less educated than e.g. in the USA. It might also have to do with the warnings issued by some *MahbereKoms*. As another interviewee recalled with palpable disgust in his voice: “They [pro-government members of the *MahbereKom*] read from the newspaper from Asmara there and say ‘please don’t read the Internet.’ What a mockery! Imagine!”<sup>38</sup>

Taking this into account, it can be said that a culture of orality, political prejudice, and language barriers in combination with gender, education and (to a lesser degree) material means that inhibit access to the net for a sizable group of Eritreans in Germany. Only three identifiable groups of Internet actors and users have more or less “full“ access to Cyber-Eritrea on both a “local“ and “transnational“ level:

1. Younger German-raised Eritreans with higher education and sound knowledge or Tigrinya and/or Arabic
2. Relatively well-educated younger men in their twenties and thirties who came in the 1980s and 1990s directly from Asmara or Addis
3. A small group of now middle-aged and elderly men that arrived in Germany in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s - either as students or political activists

What these groups do, however - and the same is happening in Eritrea - is that they serve as mediators, interpreters and disseminators, passing on news from the Internet to those who lack access to the web. Also the growing choice between various languages on the web might be seen as a positive development towards creating equal opportunities and a wider platform for participation to include Eritreans of all backgrounds. However, as the use of a particular language often goes hand in hand with a certain political, ethnic or sectarian bias, it also serves to reinforce ideologies, fragmentation and polarisation (cf. chapter 5).

Another point must be made concerning not so much the issue of language itself than the general attitude towards the written word. For a fact vernacular literacy is not a strong

---

<sup>38</sup> Interview 4 April 2003.

feature of Eritrean culture, neither at home nor abroad. Even in diaspora, oral information transmitted in a face-to-face context is still considered more “trustworthy“ than written sources,<sup>39</sup> especially when their origin seems dubitable (as it is the case with the Internet). This lack of trust into information found on the Internet is also related to the high degree of (assumed) manipulation described above and the difficulties to establish which website is owned or used or (secretly) financed by whom (e.g. by the government, the opposition, the Ethiopians or even the CIA). Hence many Eritreans will rely more on the *bado seleste* (Tigrinya equivalent for “the rumour mill”) than on news gathered on an Eritrean website which, let it be admitted, often are nothing but online *bado seleste*. But also “hard facts“ and documents about widely debated events that are published on the web seem to directly reach a far smaller number of people than one might expect.

Two incidents made me aware of the gap between those who actually *read* news on the Internet, and those who talk about the topics featured on the net. The first incident was the leakage of the aforementioned “Berlin Letter” or “Manifesto“. Despite the considerable stir up caused by this document, I found that hardly any of my informants had actually read the *corpus delicti*, even though it was to be found on numerous Eritrean and Ethiopian web sites. They had *heard* that the letter said this or that; they had *heard* rumours about the leakage, and had *heard* that X, Y and Z were among the signatories. Even in online debates, some participants admitted to not knowing the contents of the letter they either praised or condemned.

The second incident involved another letter published in a German quality newspaper and (some time later) on Eritrean web sites. It was a petition to release Eritrean prisoners of conscience and had been signed by numerous German journalists, politicians, activists and researchers, many of whom – including myself – had some “history” with Eritrea. On my arrival in Frankfurt some days after the Internet publication I was promptly reproached by an Eritrean acquaintance I knew from a Warsay event: “I *heard* you signed *that* letter. Is that true? I cannot believe you did something like that!“ Like him, most Warsay members and others were convinced that the letter demanded to stop humanitarian aid to Eritrea and this at a time of severe food shortage. It turned out that the letter I had signed had been posted on *Asmarino.com* together with a second one that neither myself nor

---

<sup>39</sup> Nor is this notion particular to Eritrea or other developing countries. The German phrase “Lügen wie gedruckt“ (meaning literally “Lying like print“), for example, hints at a similar reserve towards the written and (especially) the printed word.

the other signatories knew, nor had ever signed. This second letter actually appealed to the European Union to keep development (not humanitarian!) aid frozen lest the Eritrean government committed itself to democratic reforms. Someone had read and misinterpreted the admittedly confusing postings, and then the news had been spread word by mouth. I sent an explanatory e-mail with a clarification to several people in the community. But I suspect, that it was not my written word, but rather the fact that some individual(s) spoke out in my favour that finally led to my "reputation" being at least partially restored. Regardless of the problem as such, however, this incident shows that the Internet has indeed become an important source of information (no one reacted to the letter's publication in a German print medium), but only when combined with *bado selesté*.

The cases of the Berlin manifesto and the petition also hint very clearly that the Internet transports themes and topics rather than facts or detailed news. Topics flow from the transnational level of discussion to the local level, from the realm of the Internet to real life settings. This also becomes obvious when looking at the late Warsay e-group or the warsay.com guest book and its successors. Here issues discussed on "transnational websites" were debated again in a local context using German language. Warsay, as well as other groups and individuals with "full" access to both the local and the transnational level of Eritrean cyberspace, serve as mediators, interpreters and disseminators. They pass on news from the Internet to those who lack access to the web or parts thereof. This can for instances happen by printing texts out and taking them along to the local Eritrea bar, like some of my informants do. More commonly, you discuss what you have read in family and friendship circles, add your own ideas and perhaps return to your computer to post a comment that reverberates the opinions of your real life discussion partner or group, thus bringing also the local back into the transnational or global space of the Web. It seems to me that much could be learned about how and to what extent Internet contents are transported into local communities (and *vice versa*) by doing further research into the rôle such intermediaries play. Being not only mediators but also interpreters in both the literal and figurative sense of the word, they certainly have considerable influence, e.g. via the selection and assessment of the news they pass on in either direction. In the words of a US-Eritrean this makes the Internet a place where

... the literate and the young technologically savvy become in some sense responsible for the communication and creation of an "Eritrean" culture. The elders in the community, who have hitherto been responsible for transmitting knowledge of Eritrean history, politics, religion and culture are largely excluded

from this form of diasporic communication, although they are often informed about the discussion which takes place here ... . Young Eritreans who have had limited direct contact with the actual history of Eritrea are engaged in redefining community and identity in the global and largely impersonal arena of cyberspace, a space which largely excludes both elders in the diaspora and Eritreans in the homeland<sup>40</sup>. (Email correspondence, March 2005)

This also rings true in the case of *Warsay*, whose engagement on the web and in real-life also shows a component that can merely be mentioned here: a "power struggle" between established local community leaders and those who challenge them, between different flight vintages and generations, veteran cadres and newcomers. This process is abound with political overtones, but it also reverberates regionalist, ethnic, religious, gender, vintage and generation struggles in the diaspora, and judging from *Warsay's* continued political tightrope walk, this is only the beginning.

### **Summary and outlook**

The beginnings of Eritrean cyberspace clearly mark it as an extension of Eritrean national space and a continuation of networking strategies deriving from the liberation struggle. The novelty was that forums such as Dehai replaced or added to the "traditional" top-to-bottom patterns of information flow by creating new horizontal channels of communication. Nonetheless their usage of the Internet media remained curtailed by both norms and values of a national culture defined by the EPLF, and by the exclusivity of the Eritrean web-community, composed mainly of male, middle class, diaspora-"intellectuals". With the Ethio-Eritrean war the number of users rapidly multiplied. Since 2000 the Internet has then both reflected and helped to "establish" competing images of Eritrean-ness: dissidents and sub-national groups began to use the web as a screen for their own projections of Eritrean-ness - challenging the "official" pictures of a united Eritrea that had so far prevailed. Parallel to the establishment of new, diverse "transnational" sites that are used by Eritreans in the worldwide diaspora, there are a growing number of "locally based" sites. These sites often use the vernacular of their settlement country and are extensions of real life associations. Unlike most global sites, some of them offer space for competing views.

Nevertheless: age, gender, education and lack of material means still inhibit unlimited access to the net for a sizable group of Eritreans in the diaspora. But although

---

<sup>40</sup> According to the 2003 report of the US State Department, about 75 percent of the Eritrean population are illiterate.

relatively small, the group of Internet actors and users with full access to Cyber-Eritrea, serve as mediators, interpreters and disseminators, passing on news from the Internet to those who lack access to the web. It seems to me that much could be learned about how and to what extent Internet contents are transported into local communities by doing further research into the rôle these mediators play. Being not only mediators but also interpreters in the literal sense of the word they have considerable influence, e.g. via the selection and assessment of the news they pass on. Another problem is that the mediators themselves are not per se seen as trustworthy or competent. They are judges according to their standing in the community, their age and gender, their ethnic, religious and regional identity. If their political opinion is unequivocal, they will be rejected by the respective "other side." If they are seen as ambivalent, they will be distrusted by everyone. Yet, if the "messenger" is only accepted if he shares the views of his real life audience, and the topics passed down by him stem from web sites that again reflect this particular viewpoint, little is gained. On the contrary: this might again lead to a re-enforcement of existing divisions.

In this chapter I have analysed the contradicting impacts of Eritrean Internet use in a local diaspora community. The case study clearly shows that the Internet has not created a kind of "third space" that will radically change a diasporic society and the way people connect. Rather, the opposite rings true: it seems that real-life exigencies, traditions, norms and forms of organisation have played a dominant role in mapping out the limits and possibilities of virtual Eritrea. Also, while the Internet connects local Eritreans in Frankfurt with those scattered across Germany and the rest of the world, the grassroots perspective also reveals that large sections of the local (and global) community are - either by default or by design - excluded from direct access to Cyber-Eritrea or parts thereof. Internet media help new and marginalised groups to create their own platforms, thus fostering more diversity and participation, but again, at the same time reinforce fragmentation within the community. As the example of Warsay shows, anyone who gets active on the web is under close scrutiny by various local and/or transnational interest groups, making it hard to establish an open and tolerant discourse without facing real-life repercussions. Partly this is due to personal conflicts and power struggles on the local level, but it also reverberates the current regime's totalitarian demands that do not stop at the Eritrea's physical borders but extend into the real and virtual diaspora.

This setting is also what makes me little hopeful about the Internet's role in creating an Eritrean civil society in the near future - be it in Eritrea proper, in a however virtual

realm of cyberspace or in a concrete diaspora community. For sure is that the media itself cannot work miracles. Discourses need to be transferred from cyberspace into real-life in order to evoke changes. This means developing a more open and transparent culture of communication in real-life, too, as well as structures and channels to utter voice that are accepted by a majority as legitimate and trustworthy (cf. Conrad 2005). So far the impact of using the Web in a locality such as Frankfurt has been contradicting and whether it will rather serve to widen and cement rifts and fissures remains to be seen. There are however, positive and hopeful signs, too, that ways might be found to reconcile the various factions or at least to foster a dialogue. At the time being this may not be possible across the main polarisation of pro- and anti government sides, but only within these factions. It is partly the merit of Internet forums that diverging opinions within these two circles can no longer be completely suppressed or ignored, but have actually become topics in real-life discussions, too.

In contrast to other studies on the Internet's powers to overcome this-wordly obstacles for diasporic people (cf. Levine 2003), the picture I have drawn here seems largely pessimistic or ambivalent at best. But a picture, or rather a snapshot of a moment in time is all that it can be. Some time after my fieldwork in Frankfurt had been concluded younger members of Warsay started a new and different attempt at conquering the World Wide Web. Even though the group appeared to be standing more firmly on the side of the Eritrean regime these days than it did some years ago, they perhaps saw the limitations that an all too clear political stand would bring for their personal career and business ambitions. The new website [eryp.com](http://eryp.com) avoids blatant political statements and sidesteps political pitfalls by focussing on "international" Eritrean festivals, parties and concerts as well as providing a growing database of Eritrean businesses.

Their political tendency towards siding with the government supporters shows merely insofar as the site omits links to critical websites, ignores opposition events, but advertises "official" ones. The site's guestbook and chat rooms have become popular meeting places for the mostly apolitical local second generation. Here, too, occasional attempts are made to spread propaganda, but regime opponents are not immediately censored. Most of their audience use the Internet in much more matter-of-factual and liberal manner than the older generation. If, and when, they stray into a political topic, they seem to worry less about the "behavioural templates" the older generation remains straightjacketed into even when moving in an anonymous virtual realm. This rift between the differently



socialized generations perhaps is the most convincing evidence that the Internet does not simply shape our reality but has indeed become an integral part of it.

Warsay itself celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in autumn 2009 with a big party. The group has changed a lot, especially in terms of membership. Some years ago a lot of new and younger members joined while the old guard (and guardians) have largely remained the same, even though they are less often to be seen in the front row. Many of the new and old members have also joined the government sponsored transnational “Young PFDJ”. Modelled on Western political parties’ youth sections, the YPFDJ seems to be the latest attempt at securing the on-going support of the second (and third) generation of diaspora Eritreans. In the past, Warsay (itself a PFDJ brainchild as was shown earlier in this chapter) successfully resisted being organisationally swallowed by NUEYS. At the moment Warsay, and the YPFDJ seem to coexist with an overlapping membership. If this situation is to remain, and if Warsay will persist against the bigger, and more powerful YPFDJ, remains to be seen.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 13 Invitation to Warsay’s 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2009

<sup>41</sup> The YPFDJ now also organises both local and international youth festivals and congresses in settlement countries and is also involved in the annual staging of an all-Eritrean youth festival in Sawa military camp in Eritrea.

## Chapter 5

### **We are the Prisoners of our Dreams:**

Exit, Voice and Loyalty in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany <sup>1</sup>

---

*Propaganda does not deceive people; it merely helps them to deceive themselves* -- Eric Hoffer

*See what Power is. Holding someone else's fear in your hand and showing it to them* -- Amy Tan

#### **Diasporas and homeland politics**

For the past decade or more, studies on diaspora and exile communities have increasingly focused on transnational networks and relations. The basic argument of scholars of transnationalism has been that, far from severing their roots with home and adopting a new identity, migrants and refugees tend to maintain close links with their country of origin - an exercise which is greatly facilitated by new and more affordable means of transportation and communication (see Basch, et al 1994). While these findings initially led to the conclusion that the emergence of such transnational social fields (e.g. Pries 1996) went hand in hand with a decline of the nation state, it has meanwhile become apparent that quite the opposite can be the case. Rather than being made redundant by transnational mechanisms, a state can use the latter to maximize its power and expand its sphere of influence beyond the

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revised version of an article by the author that was published in the *Eritrean Studies Review*, Volume 4, No. 2, 2005, pp: 211-261. Two earlier and shorter versions were presented at the workshop "Focus on Eritrea: Conference on Critical Eritrean Diaspora and Perspectives for a Democratic Change in Eritrea," September 18-19, 2004 in Cologne/Germany, and at the 47th ASA Meeting in New Orleans, November 11-14, 2004. I am very grateful for the inspiring feedback I got at both venues. Special thanks to Günter Schröder for sharing his insights and data, to Tom Dassel and "you-know-who" for their incisive remarks and encouragement, to Tricia Redeker Hepner for her comments and editing; and finally to Tilman Schiel (not least of all) for introducing me to A.O. Hirschman's work.

country's actual territory. For a diasporic citizen, this might mean being outside of the country and yet remaining firmly within the grasp of a trans/nation (Hepner 2004), emotionally and socially as well as economically and politically.

Moreover, as assimilation within (Western/Northern) host or settlement societies is made increasingly difficult, there is a trend for immigrants to both look both backward and forward to their home countries, even if return remains a myth. There is an immediate dialectic between chances for integration/incorporation of migrants into their host society and the migrants' commitment to "long-distance nationalism" (Anderson 1992). The same is true for homeland - diaspora relations: developments at home can provoke either alienation or incorporation of the diaspora, which in turn has repercussions at home (Cassanelli 2002). While most researchers agree on the above points, evaluating the impacts of this dialectic is more problematic.

On the one hand, global diasporas see themselves as "breeding grounds" for incipient transnational civil societies (Hepner 2003), or engines of economic development and democratic reform (see for instance Melchers 2003). On the other hand it has been pointed out that "As a rule of thumb, émigrés are nationalists," ("Diasporas ..." 2003) helping to stabilize the powers-that-be, or intensifying conflicts in their country of origin through financial assistance and political lobbying. (al-Ali 2001; Newland 2004) Paradoxically, both patterns appear true, whether on a comparative level between different diasporas, or regarding homeland - diaspora relations within one specific community.

We find diasporas which have indeed contributed positively to economic and political development in their home countries, as well as others whose involvement in homeland politics seems to have fostered prolonged conflicts. It is not incidental that the latter are often diasporas originating in exile communities that were established in the course of a nationalist (liberation) struggle: "There are today not only Jewish and Armenian diasporas, but also Palestinian, Kurdish or .... [Eritrean] ones that can be mobilized for nationalist causes and conflicts in 'home countries' where many of them they have never lived. Diasporic identities ... are primarily sustained by unfinished nation-building projects outside the host society" (Bauböck 2002:12). But also within one particular diaspora community, reactions towards home may vary. Being thrown into one boat, sometimes literally so, does not necessarily imply the sharing of common ideas, values and visions at all times. Especially when faced with a political crisis at home, there might be a variety of responses in the diaspora. Whether or not a diaspora's political involvement in home country

affairs prolongs or aggravates conflicts, or helps to further civic organizations and inspire democratic reforms, is the result of complex historical and dialectical processes that can hardly be answered in the abstract.

### **Dilemmas of exit, voice and loyalty**

Like Kurdish, Palestinian, Irish or Sri Lankan emigré communities, the Eritrean diaspora has lately been cited as a group that has financed and supported violent conflict at home, most recently the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1998 - 2000), and now helps to back a politically repressive government and an ailing economy (al-Ali, et al 2001, "Das andere..." 2001). Simultaneously, however, the diaspora also provides the only available room within the Eritrean transnational field for the development of civic movements or an opposition to the current leadership (cf. Hepner 2003).

This chapter examines these apparently contradictory findings for the case of the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany by employing Hirschman's (1970) paradigm of "Exit, Voice and Loyalty," a concept that models responses to deteriorating systems. I also use the related concepts of "incorporation" and "disengagement" vis-à-vis the nation state (Azarya 1988) that have been developed in the context of state decline in Africa proper, yet without taking African diasporas into consideration. Taken together, these concepts not only provide a clear-cut analytical tool. Based on the general theory of (open) systems, Hirschman's theory deals with compensatory and cumulative feedback mechanisms which stabilize or destabilize a firm, organization or state faced with decline (whether this decline is caused by inputs from the environment and/or with internal factors is irrelevant). Thus seeing the Eritrean trans/nation as such a "system in crisis" might also help mitigate against the polemical tendency that dominates most discussions of Eritrean politics which aim at emphasizing either internal or external factors to explain the present dilemmas.<sup>2</sup>

Using Hirschman's concepts as a framework I explore ethnographically the diaspora's reactions towards Eritrea's crisis, analyze the reasons for supporting, opposing or

---

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that the diaspora's involvement is determined not only by the situation within the Eritrea trans/nation, but also by a wider framework of international geopolitics that look adverse to Eritrean interests. However, it would go beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the impact of external causes on Eritrea's present crisis. This has been done elsewhere -- and far better than I could (see e.g. Fessehazion 2001) . Still, negative developments within the country cannot be seen as mere reactions to external threat (i.e. Ethiopian expansionism coupled with international indifference). I argue that such a view neither does justice to the remarkable spirit of self-determination that has become a hallmark of the Eritrean people, nor does it reflect the complexity of a situation in which external threat is as much a real danger as it is an excuse to delay the transition from a "provisional" to a constitutionally elected government.

avoiding the Eritrean state apparatus (conflated with the ruling party), and finally point out some of the consequences. Towards this end, I ask what sort of repercussions the involvement in homeland politics precipitate on a personal level, a community level, and a transnational level. I also examine how the effects of long-distance nationalism, together with a lack of integration in the host country and suppression in Eritrea proper, circumscribe and curtail the migrant's scope of action vis-à-vis Eritrea, as well as strangle community development in the diaspora itself.

\*

Since the crackdown on dissidents and the closure of newspapers in September 2001, it is now undeniable that the once hugely popular and internationally praised Eritrean government and ruling party under President Isayas Afeworki, has largely failed to keep its promises of “democracy and justice.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, it appears to have led the country on a declining path towards a military dictatorship (cf. Tetzlaff 2001:205). With no national elections held and independent media banned, there are little more than rumors to suggest the patterns of current political opinions among the local Eritrean population. However, an increased outmigration might well be seen as a “voting with the feet” (a popular term for the mass exodus of East Germans, especially towards the end of “socialist” rule), indicating that a considerable proportion of Eritreans feel disenchanted with the current social, political and economic situation and the government's handling of it.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of democratic channels and the growing repression of criticism, “inlanders” (or those who have remained at home) have expected Eritreans abroad to take up issues and concerns which are difficult or even dangerous to address in Eritrea. During my sojourn in Eritrea in summer 2001, many locals expressed disappointment in the diaspora for not using their greater liberties to speak out on behalf of their in-country compatriots. Most complaints ran along similar lines as the following:

---

<sup>3</sup> In 1994 the victorious *Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (EPLF) reconstituted itself as the *People's Front for Democracy and Justice* (PFDJ).

<sup>4</sup> Between 2001 and 2005 about 8,000 Eritreans, mostly young men and women, have sought asylum in European countries alone. Additionally, an estimated number of 15,000 Eritrean defectors and draft avoiders have crossed the border to Ethiopia or Sudan (Hughes 2004). Adam cautions that these numbers might be exaggerated by the local administration in Sudan and Ethiopia, however, in personal communications with some of these refugees in Ethiopia very similar estimates were given to me (Email correspondence, August and December 2004). Also diaspora Eritreans that had gone to Eritrea immediately after independence (often sponsored by a returnee-program supported by the German state) to participate in nation building have returned to Germany. Schröder (2005:16) estimates that about one fourth of the approximately 1000 returnees to Eritrea have again settled in Germany.

The diaspora could use their money and influence to press for reforms, but they just clap their hands, no matter what lies the government tells them. They send their money and we have to bear the consequences [an allusion to the 1998-2000 border war]. So far away you don't feel the heat of the fire. (Interview, Asmara, August 2001)

But there is also increasing self-criticism among members of the diaspora. On the Eritrean website Asmarino.com, political analyst Okbazghi Yohannes (2000) presents his fellow Eritreans abroad with a laundry list of negative developments in Eritrea, offering a clear example of what Hirschman would term a “proponent of voice”: He speaks out in the hope of raising an alarm that might yet change the course of events, and steer the country back on track towards development and democratization:

... when all this happened, we either kept quiet or became committed apologists and drummers for the leader ... some of us chose co-optation rather than confrontation ... in order to improve our standing with him, some of us sat on the fence to see which way the wind would blow ... . So directly or indirectly, we all have contributed to the present plight of our people ... . Relatively insulated from the constraints of domestic Eritrean politics by virtue of our geographic distance from the regime, we have had the opportunity and the means to ... speak our minds without fear of political persecution or imprisonment. Those of us in the Diaspora have remained silent too long. Now is the time that we must raise our voices loudly ... .

To briefly summarize Hirschman's main argument here, there are generally two ways in which members of declining social or economic organizations, political parties or states can show their discontent, thus making the leadership aware of its mistakes and ideally encouraging them to institute reforms. One is outspoken dissent -- or “voice” in Hirschman's term -- the other is “exit,” i.e. leaving the organization. Whether or not people employ exit and/or voice, either alternatively or consecutively, depends upon a number of conditions. These include the existence or lack of viable alternatives for potential “exiters,” the existence or lack of institutionalized channels for voice, and finally the imposition of punishments and /or negative sanctions on proponents of voice or exit. Most important however, according to Hirschman, is the degree of the members' loyalty.

Though the concept of loyalty is introduced in more detail below, it should be pointed out here that loyalty is a two-faced phenomenon. When allowed, voice can be a sign of loyalty: loyal members (e.g. of a party) will try to warn their leadership that things are going awry and should be amended, whereas less loyal members will simply exit (e.g. leave the party and/or vote for another one). Thus when the loyalist's voice is allowed and taken

seriously, it strengthens the bond between the member and the organization, and fosters the organization's success. But also when voice is suppressed, loyal members will not immediately resort to exit, as they still hope for improvement. In this case loyalty can prevent or delay the use of both warning mechanisms. Only if the situation continues to deteriorate beyond repair, loyal members will eventually leave the sinking ship and with their final exit make recovery impossible.

For Eritrea proper, an argument advanced by Claire Sutherland (1998) seems to ring true. Explicitly employing Hirschman's concept in a political context, Sutherland finds that there is a nexus between the tolerance towards voice and exit: “as far as states go, the [...] principle is that proponents of the exit option will not be tolerated when voice is not tolerated and *vice versa*” (Sutherland 1999: 8). Indeed, in Eritrea, “exit [flight or defection]... is considered as treason and voice [dissent] as mutiny” (Hirschman 1970:121). Both actions provoke punishment from the authorities, thus fatally blocking all channels for expressing dissatisfaction with the government and/or its actions. An example for this attitude is the case of Eritrean student leader Semere Kesete who organized a protest (or “mutiny”) among Asmara University students to demand better conditions for the obligatory summer work program. He was imprisoned without charge but one year later managed to flee to Ethiopia before seeking asylum in Sweden. His escape via Ethiopia was presented as a proof that he was a traitor who had collaborated with other political dissidents (“G 15”) in a joint effort to topple the present regime with the help of the Ethiopian government.

In the physically removed diaspora, however, no “direct” punishment (such as imprisonment) is possible. Still, we find only a minority using voice, for example writing petitions to release presumed prisoners of conscience, publishing critical articles, or organizing demonstrations and political seminars. Similarly, founding civic movements and cooperating with international human rights groups can be counted as voice. By far the most popular way of using voice has been the creation and use of discussion platforms on the internet. Perhaps not entirely incidentally, the first ever mailing list/website entirely devoted to Eritrean issues was called *dehai* (see Bernal, 2005). Though usually translated as “news (from home),” *dehai* can also mean “voice” in Tigrinya.

Whereas these voice options are only available to Eritreans living out of Eritrea, talking of “exit” in the context of diaspora sounds a bit like a tautology. Yet, if we assume that states are more than physical territories, and that transnational migrants are indeed “away, but not apart” from their home country, then everyone who is seen and sees

him/herself as a member of this trans/nation (Hepner 2004) might well choose exit as a form of protest.<sup>5</sup> As membership is asserted by taking part in political meetings and community functions, actions such as boycotting government-sponsored festivals and political campaigns, like the *hizbawi mekete* seminars,<sup>6</sup> can indeed be seen as forms of exit. Also the refusal to fulfill “duties” like paying the two percent income “tax” that is levied on the diaspora (see Fessehazion, 2005) or withholding other “voluntary” contributions unless absolutely necessary, is a version of the exit or part-exit option. The most rigorous form of exit is turning one's back on the mainstream Eritrean community -- both locally and transnationally -- which remains defined almost exclusively in political terms.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the rarely chosen option of a radical divorce from the Eritrean community, there is no clearly drawn line as to what constitutes exit in the diaspora and what does not. Principally, boycotting of payments and events, as well as leaving the community altogether, may in fact be either an active expression of dissatisfaction (and hence akin to voice), or a silent retreat from the “tentacles” of the regime, akin to what has been termed “disengagement” in postcolonial states (Azarya 1988). Also, as we shall see, using voice almost inevitably leads to a “forced exit” or “expulsion” from the Eritrean community in its broadest political sense.

As elsewhere, those who advocate or act on the voice option in the Eritrean diaspora are a highly heterogenous group. A directory of Eritrean opposition movements counts about sixty individual and ten umbrella organizations that have emerged (and partly disappeared) since the 1980s (Schröder 2005). Not only do they fail to “speak with one

---

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “away, but not apart” comes from a remote search on “diasporas.” While it was used as a heading to announce an article by Kathleen Newland (2004), it was not to be found within the text on the respective website (remote search on 3 January 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The so-called *hizbawi mekete* seminars took place throughout the diaspora in 2002-2003. The term translates as “People's Defense” (of the country), and can be seen as a reaction to the increasing criticism of government politics after the crackdown on dissidents a year earlier. Officially initiated by “Concerned Eritreans,” all information available suggests that the campaign was coordinated with Eritrean government representatives and directed from Asmara (field notes January 2004). In the meetings diaspora citizens were reminded of internal and external enemies perceived to threaten Eritrea's existence. In the face of these threats they were asked to re-commit themselves to supporting country and leadership, both morally and financially. A similar campaign dubbed *biddho* (challenge) followed in 2006/7 and yet a new round of *hizbawi mekete* set in after the European Union imposed sanctions against the Eritrean government in late 2009.

<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to differentiate between the wider Eritrean diaspora that includes everyone defining him/herself as an Eritrean and what is labeled the “Eritrean community.” While the term “diaspora” is not widely used among Eritreans in Germany, most Eritreans simply use the word “community” when referring to a particular *MahberKom*. But the term “community” is vague and stretchable and can also be applied in a wider sense. However, having its origin in the highly organized, nationalist exile community supporting the EPLF, “community” always entails a strong element of political identity and suggests a certain affiliation. Hence, when I talk about “mainstream Eritrean community” or just “the Eritrean community,” I refer to the majority of Eritreans in Germany who move within the circles that have developed out of the EPLF's exile organization.



voice,” but they also tend to direct their voices against one another. Frequent reshufflings of alliances, splits and re-constitutions are the order of the day. Also, when looking at the heated polemical debates on the various opposition websites, sharp cleavages and mutual distrust can be detected; in particular between the successor organizations of the former ELF and those that were founded by EPLF dissidents. By contrast, the outspoken government supporters constitute a more homogeneous group, at least to the outside.<sup>8</sup>

Both the proponents of voice and the government supporter's, however, represent only two relatively small, but very audible groups within Eritrean diasporic society. Between these two poles we find what I term “the silent majority.” While both regime supporters and those who use voice share at least a basic political agenda (respectively supporting or challenging the government), this “silent majority” includes a broader array of people with different attitudes. Among them we find passive government supporters and passive critics; those whose views overlap partially with the government and partially with the opposition, and finally those that have become “disengaged” or have “exited.” Their actions often seem incongruous or ambiguous: avoiding the “diaspora tax” and helping relatives to flee from Eritrea may go hand in hand with hostility towards other newly arrived exiles, especially those who criticize the situation at home openly.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, privately uttered disdain for the Eritrean government's policies need not mean that one refuses to pay voluntary contributions or shuns embassy organized seminars.<sup>10</sup>

In short: silence still says little about someone's approval or disapproval of the Eritrean leadership or about the degree of incorporation into, or disengagement from, the nation. Nor is the reluctance to use voice peculiar to the Eritrean diaspora. Being “political action par excellence,” voice is always a risky and uncertain option, requiring “calculated” decisions, and possibly leading to repercussions (Hirschman 1970: 16). What further complicates the decision to use voice or remain silent is that Eritrean migrants are part of several overlapping systems, all of which claim their loyalty and might impose punishments or negative sanctions as Rainer Bauböck finds:

---

<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to give any exact numbers of the activists in both camps. However, during almost five years of research, I kept meeting the same (pro- and anti-regime) activists over and over again.

<sup>9</sup> In quite a few diaspora families, for instance, only one brother or sister pays the “tax” in order to get the clearance needed for official transactions such as buying a house or inheriting property.

<sup>10</sup> Conversely, seemingly ardent regime supporters can also clandestinely help relatives out of Eritrea, which often involves using illegal channels.

The great majority of modern migrants are not nomads living in their own deterritorialized communities that are detached from the institutions of states and disconnected from territorial nation-building projects. For labour migrants and refugees multiple memberships often mean *multiple dependency*. Their precarious position as outsiders in two political communities makes them more vulnerable .... (Bauböck 2002: 24, emphasis added).

For Eritreans in Germany this dependency means being members of several overlapping spheres. First is membership in the Eritrean nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) that provides all Eritreans with an emotional home. Second is the host country as a place of residence and that offers citizen/denizenship, thus providing greater personal, economic, and legal security. I also count membership in the diaspora community itself as a “third space” that belongs as much to two national communities (home and host) as it constitutes a system of its own.

Although no passport or membership card formalizes one’s membership in the Eritrean diaspora, this physically and institutionally undefined entity is in some respects more important than the host and home societies. It is here that exiled Eritreans have reconstructed “a home away from home.” It is in diaspora where most people's social networks are densest, where belonging is negotiated and competing homeland politics play out. Constituting an exclusive, face-to-face community, based on a shared fate and characterized by a sometimes stifling intimacy, the diaspora is perhaps not the most cherished, but in many ways the most “real” place of belonging.

Thus if we want to understand what it is that either encourages or inhibits Eritreans in diaspora from using voice (or exit) vis-à-vis their homeland, it is not enough to focus on the consequences this has for their relationship with home. We also need to look at the reactions the use of these feedback mechanisms provokes within the two other systems diaspora Eritreans are dependent on, and moreover, analyze how the various reactions and possibilities interact. Hirschman himself - though in more detail than I can provide here - looks at favorable and unfavorable conditions for the use of voice and/or exit in different systems. His most important variable is, as outlined above, the existence of loyalty. Doubtlessly, membership in three overlapping systems means that loyalty, as well as the consequences of disloyalty, becomes a highly complex and contradictory affair. Other important variables that determine the use of voice and/or exit are the availability of “channels” for voice (e.g. multi-party elections), the existence or non-existence negative sanctions or even punishment (expulsion, imprisonment, ostracism etc.), and the question of

alternatives for those willing to exit. In the following four sections I try to unravel how those variables impact membership in the three different systems diaspora Eriteans inhabit, and how this determines the use of voice or exit.

### **The double face of loyalty**

Hirschman argues that loyalty is basically rational and amounts to a calculation of one's own "profit." People are loyal to an existing entity (like an organization or state) because they have invested considerable time, resources and emotions, and as a result, expect a long-term "profit" from it. Seen against this background, loyalty need not be an inhibiting factor to the use of voice *per se*. Rather, on the contrary. In situations of organizational decline, loyal members tend to opt for voice rather than exit as a reaction, thus influencing the viability and restoration of their organization positively. A necessary pre-condition to this positive effect of voice, however, is that the member's voice is both permitted and taken seriously. If not the case, loyalty might indeed delay or suppress voice in favor of exit. Yet, if exit is also negatively sanctioned, loyalists have little choice but to wait passively for an improvement "from above."

Hirschman finds that this situation is typical for organizations which afford a high price of "entry" and/or punish exit (e.g. parties in totalitarian regimes). In other words: the more one has invested to become a member, and the more one stands to lose if he or she leaves or risks expulsion, the less likely it is that one will consider leaving or uttering criticism loudly, as investments may be lost and punishments inflicted. Being thus inhibited from any means of reaction, the loyalists can do little but hope and trust that the situation will improve somehow without their intervention, hence minimizing or sparing themselves severe losses or punishments. To maintain this hope, loyalists need to deceive themselves about the state of their organization. That is precisely what we find in the Eritrean case.

For any Eritrean the costs of "entry" (into the Eritrean nation) clearly equal the price of independence. Needless to say, this "price" -- in homes, lives and livelihoods lost, in financial and other contributions, in time and support given, and also in emotional investment -- was tremendously high for everyone at home and abroad. Not surprisingly, most diaspora Eritreans therefore show a high degree of loyalty towards Eritrea.<sup>11</sup> Still, this

---

<sup>11</sup> In a wider sense, the overwhelming majority of Eritreans may therefore be rightfully described as loyalists (or patriots), but in the following we will see the janus-faced character of loyalty when it becomes linked not only to the nation, but to those who govern and/or represent it.

does not explain the near-impossibility for many people in diaspora to criticize the government without being viewed as traitors by themselves or others.

The major dilemma seems to lie in the lack of distinction between Eritrea as an idea (or national “imagined community”), Eritrea as an institution (the state whose structures have become closely intertwined with that of the ruling party), and Eritrea as enabled, embodied, symbolized, and represented first by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and then the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) under Isayas Afeworki.

This (con)fusion, while certainly not unique to Eritrea, has allowed the current political leadership to demand absolute loyalty on the basis of the assumption that nation (or people), state and government/party form an inseparable entity. Conceptualizing the relations between people and political leadership this way, doubtlessly has its roots in the liberation struggle and, more specifically, in the EPLF's nation building project. Unlike its predecessors and rivals, the EPLF went beyond the discourses of an anti-colonial struggle and developed a positive vision of an independent, unified, and politically as well as socially revolutionized Eritrea. After its final victory over the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the EPLF not only came to monopolize the Eritrean nationalist discourse and propaganda, but also formed and consolidated state-like structures in the liberated zones (see Pool 2001). Here, as well as within the community of the fighters itself, the EPLF's vision of post-war and post-revolutionary Eritrea was put into practice. In its approach, the EPLF always made a point of closely associating with “the people.” It propagated the idea that the nation could not be realized without the EPLF, and that the EPLF in turn could not accomplish the goal of nationhood without the people. In the more poetic words of Alemseged Tesfai (2002: 135):

... [the heart of the fighter is a] product of the people, it was nurtured by the people. In return it has shed tears of blood for them. It has fallen for their sake.

Indeed, the very name *Eritrean People's* Liberation Front embodied its program: eliding the distinction between the Front and the people.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, loyalty to the people or the

---

<sup>12</sup> The relationship between fighter and people was often conceptualized in terms of kinship: “The *tegadelti* were kin, but simultaneously they were a military force which used coercion to induce obedience and control of the villagers. The appeal to 'kinship' - from the villagers to the EPLF in terms of protection and from the EPLF to the villagers in terms of assistance - and the forceful ambivalence contained therein when the appeal was met, or came along with, threats and the possibility of physical coercion, created a context of political ambiguity ... which still prevails in defining the villager - Front ... relationship of today” (Tronvoll 1998: 181).

nation was equaled with loyalty to the front. Turned on its head, however, disloyalty to the front could easily be construed as a betrayal of the people. In the case of Eritrean refugees in Europe and North America, the sense of loyalty to both people and leadership was exacerbated by a twin sense of guilt and obligation that could easily be manipulated. Moreover, apart from the *tegadelti* (fighters), it was probably the exiles who most intensely absorbed the EPLF's political indoctrination. Like the *tegadelti*, they were physically removed and uprooted from their former social base (see Hadera 2004; Hepner 2004), making it comparatively easy to inculcate them with the ideas and visions of the EPLF.<sup>13</sup> And, of course, the refugees' accessibility (e.g. in asylum centers) and their emotional need for socializing with fellow countrymen facilitated mobilization efforts on part of the EPLF.

From the late 1970s onwards most Eritrean refugees in Germany had been organized in the EPLF's mass organizations where they began to build a provisional "fate community" (Quehl 2002: 133). Though coming from different backgrounds, their lives were invariably dominated and structured by the demands of the struggle and the organization. What Fouad Makki finds for the forging of the front into a community, is to a large extent also true for the building of an Eritrean exile community:

... no boundary separated political and personal life. .. The deliberate cultivation of fellowship, common socialising, and the interdependence on which one's survival depended; all had a strong integrative function. Music and the massed dance-along were held to symbolise the relationship between cultural emancipation, collective effort and the construction of the nation. Personal life became integrated into communal networks ... (Makki 2002: 218)

But for all such similarities, while the *tegadelti* risked their health and lives, the refugees "only" gave their time and meager resources, something perceived to this very day as inadequate by both diaspora Eritreans themselves and many compatriots in Eritrea. Though it is rarely said openly, many stayees, especially the ex-fighters, view the exiles as *hademti* (cowards who fled and avoided the armed struggle).<sup>14</sup> Loyalty seen from this angle is not only defined by the high costs of entry (emotionally and financially), but also by a sense of indebtedness. After independence, and particularly with the beginning of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, this feeling of continued indebtedness was enhanced by the

---

<sup>13</sup> During the struggle a number of activists living in exile in Europe and North America went as far as imitating the fighters' Spartan *mieda* (field) lifestyle in order to follow the ideals propagated by the EPLF and support them with whatever money they earned and saved (see also Hepner 2004: 16).

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Asmara, August 2001; also group interview with young Eritreans in Germany in fall 2001 (after their summer vacation in Eritrea).

PFDJ's concepts of martyrdom and the styling of the EPLF veteran fighters as *yek'alo*, i.e., "those who have made (independence) possible." The obligation to repay this debt became part of the Eritrean legacy, at least for those who had not been active members of the victorious EPLF, and particularly so for those living abroad. An excerpt from an open letter by a diaspora Eritrean forgiving a debt owed to her by the state illustrates this point. The letter entitled "An Eritrean Forgives a Debt to Repay a Greater Debt" was published on the PFDJ's website Shaebia.org and the German-based pro-regime website Biddho.com. The letter reads:

In the midst of a war imposed on Eritrea, my government appealed to me to help alleviate the burdens of war by purchasing National Peace and Security Bonds. Much honored and able to fulfill my responsibility, I bought \$15,000.00 worth of Eritrean Bonds .... My gratitude and recognition of the great sacrifice of our martyrs and the soldiers, whose bravery ensured the survival of our nation, compels me to want to help today. Like their predecessor heroes of the war of independence they once again taught me what dedication to ones country means, what patriotism means, what selflessness means. *I am forever indebted to those who have made it possible for me to hold my head proudly and proclaim, "I am an Eritrean...."*<sup>15</sup>

Thus, being loyal to Eritrea and accepting the Eritrean legacy became inextricably intertwined with accepting the idea that Eritrea exists only because of EPLF/PFDJ and its "gallant martyrs."<sup>16</sup> To most, it therefore seemed only natural and legitimate that the EPLF should take the leadership position within an independent Eritrean state. Hence loyalty towards the nation as an imagined community of all Eritreans was transferred to the current PFDJ government under President Isayas Afewerki. With the outbreak of war with Ethiopia

---

<sup>15</sup> During the Ethio-Eritrean border war the Eritrean government issued bonds to help cover the military expenses. Many diaspora Eritreans saw it as an obligation to buy them. The letter cited here, was published on <http://www.biddho.net/portal/article2899.html>, (emphasis added, downloaded 11 October 2002) about the time when the diaspora-wide *Hizbawi Mekete* seminars took place (see fn 7).

<sup>16</sup> The term "gallant martyrs" is also borrowed from "An Eritrean forgives...." It should be noted here that in Eritrea speaking of "war dead" instead of "martyrs" is widely considered heretical. In the past, journalists brought Eritrean wrath upon themselves by referring to those killed in the Ethio-Eritrean border war as "war dead." More recently when Awate.com published an hitherto unreleased government database of Eritrean soldiers killed since 1991, this led to a huge and highly emotional controversy. Doubtlessly, the loss suffered by almost every family in both wars becomes more bearable by looking at the dead as "martyrs." Yet, while the term that is applied to both heroes of the ELF and EPLF certainly has integrating and reconciliatory qualities, the emphasis on martyrdom nonetheless also serves to justify the EPLF's/PFDJ's dominant social and political position vis-à-vis the civilian population at home and abroad. In a way those who have made "the ultimate sacrifice" also legitimize the survivors' claim to supreme leadership. It would be very useful here to look further into the concept of "martyrdom" and its influence on the *ykealo/warsay* relationship in Eritrea as well as on the Eritrea/diaspora relationship.



**Figure 14** *A painting shown at the EXPO Art exhibition of the EDF in 2001 (left) and a mural by the famous Eritrean artist Michael Adonai illustrate well the religious aspect of Eritrean nationalism. The ghostlike figures in the background of each pictures stand for earlier generations of Eritreans fighting for independence. Their sacrifices both legitimize the present leadership (depicted as the guards of independence in the left picture – presumably showing the unity of the Ykealo and the young Warsay-recruits) and levy a duty on each Eritrean to honour their martyrdom by his/her loyalty to the country. (The right picture shows a man casting his vote for independence in the 1993 referendum while victims of the independence war, probably members of his own family, watch on).*

in 1998, this view was re-emphasized: the danger of losing the hard won liberty could only be averted, so the argument went, by those who had won it in the first place.

Seen from the perspective of the regime's supporters, criticism directed against the PFDJ, the government, or President Isayas Afeworki also affects the holistic (and almost “holy”) trinity of people, nation and leadership.<sup>17</sup> The administrator of a German-Eritrean mailing list once put this into the simple formula: “people + government = Eritrea,” indicating that the removal of one element collapses the entire equation.<sup>18</sup> This equation must be seen in context with the popular slogan “hade hizbi, hade libi” - “one people, one heart” - aimed at demonstrating that all Eritreans (including the leadership) share a common

<sup>17</sup> The terms “government supporters,” “*Shaebias*” (the popular Arabic short form for the EPLF) or “*Higedefs*” (a transliteration of the Tigrinya acronym for PFDJ) are commonly used as synonyms, indicating that neither EPLF and PFDJ, nor government and ruling party are clearly distinguished or, indeed, distinguishable from one another.

<sup>18</sup> Thank you to Tilman Schiel for bringing Duby’s work to my attention!

goal. More than the rather mathematical equation quoted above, this motto reveals an organological view that likens the functioning of a society/nation to that of a human body.

Far from being unique to Eritrea, there exists in fact a long tradition of such organologies: In Europe a very elaborate one was developed by John of Salisbury in his treatise "Policraticus" from 1159. Here the king is identified with the head, the Church with the heart (with the clergy as its soul), the nobility with the (right) sword-hand, etc., all the way down to peasantry and laborers who are identified with the feet (cf. Duby 1981:383-390). As with other organologies the aim was to show that society can only function as long as everyone accepts his or her place and task. To rebel against, or leave once place, i.e. to leave the body, would be pernicious: the society/body would become sick and the severed limb would die.

Even though the "hade hizbi, hade libi" metaphor is not quite as elaborate, it nonetheless implies the same: dissent and exit are unthinkable. When they happen, they can only be seen as rebellion against the "one heart" which endangers the survival of all Eritreans and thus makes the "rebel" a traitor. Accordingly, to criticize the government is also to criticize the state and thereby weaken the nation, which in turn endangers the people. Not surprisingly, the sender of this message then declared that in order to avert such dangers of utter collapse henceforth only "pro-Eritrean" postings would be allowed. The result, after some more or less reluctant use of voice, and some very direct and personal attacks against those who spoke out, precipitated the exit or silencing of most critical members. But in the eyes of the "pro-Eritreanist" the latter had really excluded themselves by being critical at all, or worse, they had exposed themselves as not being "true" Eritreans at all, but rather "enemies."

### **No channels for voice?**

Starting from the late 1960s, about a hundred Eritrean students and workers living in Germany were loosely organized in political groups. With the sharp increase of Eritreans arriving as refugees in the mid-1970s, ELF and EPLF both established exile branches. Some Eritrean communities in German cities, such as Kassel, Nuremberg or Stuttgart, were virtually split into an ELF and an EPLF community, yet in most places the EPLF became the dominant organization. Grassroots initiatives and independent thinking had never exactly been encouraged by either of the liberation fronts, and hitherto independent



associations were generally frowned upon, pre-empted, or co-opted (see Hepner, 2005; Woldemikael, 2005). The objective was full control over all activities.<sup>19</sup> In the context of nation building and mobilizing support for the liberation struggle, a strictly hierarchical, effective, and all-embracing organizational structure certainly seemed indispensable, both at home and abroad. The political mass organizations aimed at combining forces to support the liberation fighters and imbuing people with nationalist and socialist ideologies that would eventually mold Eritreans from all walks of life into a new society. While this aim was still far-off even within the liberated areas in Eritrea, the EPLF itself successfully implemented its ideology, and in the process was transformed into a society apart from the rest of a more “traditional” Eritrea.

In exile, too, the political organizations provided not only re-education for a utopian society, but also became the social backbone of the very real refugee community. In a strange and often unfriendly environment their importance for the survival of the individual cannot be overstated. In particular it was the mass organizations (and later the associated *MahberKoms* - community associations) that gave shape to the re-construction of home in the midst of what would become permanent sojourn. They provided space for socializing, networking and mutual support as well as facilities for recreation, and opportunities for maintaining customs and traditions, or simply celebrating together.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while the main aim was to mobilise the exiles and to integrate them into the Eritrean proto-nation (see Pool 2001), the organizational structures also helped creating a community apart (in some respects very much like the community of the *tegadelti*), that was largely isolated from its host society, but connected with home via a strong sense of long-distance nationalism.

---

<sup>19</sup> One example during the struggle is the incorporation of the Eritrean students association (Eritreans for Liberation) into the EPLF mass organizations (Hepner, 2005). In the late 1990s young Eritreans in Germany trying to establish their independent organizations and links with Eritrea were also subjected to continual pressure to affiliate themselves in one way or another with Eritrean government agencies. Having started my fieldwork by taking part in various Eritrean youth group meetings, I followed the developments between 1999 and today rather closely. Eritrean embassy or consulate officials were present at most larger meetings and encouraged the establishment of a nation-wide umbrella organization of Eritrean youth groups in Germany. They also supported events like an annual youth festival. According to some of the young activists, however, this was partly done in the hope of gradually integrating them into the NUEYS branch system and/or keeping an eye on their activities. Whether this policy reflects merely the ambition of a few German-based PFDJ cadres or the goals of NUEYS/Eritrea remains unclear. In an interview (August 2001) former NUEYS chairman Muhyedin Shengeb, expressed doubt whether an incorporation of diaspora youth groups could be achieved or, indeed, was desirable at all (cf. Conrad 2003, 2005 forthc.).

<sup>20</sup> As an internet comment on an opposition website pointed out in a satirical manner, the motto seemed to be "Recruit all Day, Dance All Night" (see Saleh AA Younis, 26 Jul 2004, <http://www.awate.com>). Also today, national holidays, secular and religious festivals, as well as concerts with renowned Eritrean singers and bands are often organized by or in cooperation with Eritrean government representatives. Such events constitute the highlights and landmarks in the diaspora calendar and serve to re-create solidarity within the community as well as helping to maintain close links with Eritrea.

While the EPLF inscribed “democracy” on its flag and political manifestos, and took great pains to establish peoples’ assemblies and other elected bodies, it is meanwhile known that important decisions were all taken by the Front's secret cadre party, known as Eritrean Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) that also had cells in the diaspora (see Connell 2005). Many former cadres and members of the mass organizations that I interviewed in hindsight criticize the top-down approach to organization and the way in which even things like the text on protests banners for demonstrations in Frankfurt or Berlin were dictated from the field. At the time, however, most of them -- even if grudgingly so -- consented for the sake of “the cause.”

The mass organizations, the EPLF chapters, and with them many of the cultural groups, were dissolved after independence. Nonetheless, conformist behavior, a feeling of “we-ness,” and a general top-down approach to organizational life remained. Some of the exile organizational structures (such as EPLF chapters) were from 1993 replaced by *de facto* state institutions (such as consulates, embassies, and PFDJ chapters), yet the social organization that had largely been a by-product of the mass organizations' activities was left in temporary limbo.

In the early years after independence, the newly installed Eritrean government simply did not have the capacity to rebuild links with the diaspora while concentrating all available forces on state-consolidation and reconstruction within the country. The Eritrean exiles seemed likewise unconcerned with the deterioration of their community structures as many of them anticipated repatriation to Eritrea as soon as possible. Others were pre-occupied with family life, careers and other individualistic aims. Gradually some independent organizations and networks, helped along by the popularization of the World Wide Web, began to emerge in the mid-1990s. Ultimately, most of these were crushed, incorporated or co-opted by interference of the Eritrean state, which for its part had re-discovered the potential importance (and problems) associated with its sizable diaspora (see also Woldemikael 2005). The aim to incorporate the diaspora within the state-controlled framework of organized bodies was easily reached, as most groups at first actively and enthusiastically sought cooperation with the homeland government.

In the process, the left-overs of exile structures in Germany were replaced by branches of the two remaining Eritrean (GO)NGOs: the National Union of Eritrean Women,

known as *Hamade* and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS).<sup>21</sup> The community associations were shaped into *MahberKoms* with the intention of absorbing hitherto alienated groups such as former ELF supporters. To speed up this development, consulate and embassy officials got involved, often doing more harm to the declared aim than good. Soon, independent groups were either incorporated, or else found their efforts impeded through the intervention of government representatives and political cadres. Together with the general bureaucratization of homeland-diaspora relations,<sup>22</sup> which had started with the registration for the referendum in 1991, it became possible to effectively control and incorporate Eritreans abroad into the Eritrean trans/nation. In 2000 an embassy employee proudly told me that via the community structures it would be possible for the embassy to contact virtually every Eritrean in Germany within 24 hours. This became apparent during the 1998 - 2000 war with Ethiopia when the diaspora's spontaneous moral and financial support (see Bernal 2004) was reinforced by coercive practices, leading some researchers to speak of "forced transnationalism" (al-Ali et al 2001: 593), not so much by the use of real "force" than by using and re-enforcing social pressures.

By publicly acknowledging Eritreans who contributed to the fundraising for the war, those who did not were simultaneously exposed (cf. al-Ali et al 2001). Similar effects were reached by sending a "shumagelle" committee to individual households to collect money or having people make pledges at official meetings. According to some interviewees people were incited to give more e.g. by scattered party members who would pledge ever higher sums to create a "competition." Such tactics work as giving generously earns high social status, both in the diaspora and at home.<sup>23</sup> It is also these developments that Okbazghi refers to in another section of his above quoted essay, in which he drastically outlines the

---

<sup>21</sup> Officially both *Hamade* and the NUEYS are NGOs - non-governmental organizations. However, their nexus to the Eritrean state apparatus makes them more akin to what is commonly referred to as GONGO - a government organized non-government organization created to implement governmental policy.

<sup>22</sup> For instance the transformation of the EPLF offices into diplomatic missions, the law on citizenship for Eritrean exiles (including the right to vote and to carry an Eritrean ID card - originally issued in the process of registration for the referendum in 1993), the introduction of a "diaspora tax", and the establishment of an official Diaspora commission in 2001. One of the latter's tasks is also the creation of a database on Eritrean exiles (Schröder 2004: 5). One interesting aside: while it is relatively easy to claim Eritrean citizenship, it is next to impossible to revoke it unless you are ousted as a "traitor". Eritreans applying for citizenship in Germany - where double citizenship is not permitted - face the problem that Eritrean authorities do not react when asked to release them from their citizenship.

<sup>23</sup> One interviewee told me that - especially during the struggle - people (particularly women) preferred working in several illicit jobs to avoid German income tax. This enabled them to donate larger sums and thus earn a higher standing in the community - no mean feat for anyone who in everyday life mainly encounters indifference or even contempt. On the other hand it cost them important benefits to be gained from a legal job and negatively affected their families as children were often left to look after themselves.

consequences that the general acquiescence with government policies had not only for Eritrea proper, but also for the diaspora itself at that time:

Even when the PFDJ spread its tentacle into the Diaspora community, we welcomed it. The regimes ambassadors became community cadres. The autonomy of the Diaspora was gutted, its individuality undermined and its existence reduced to the status of a mere cash-cow with only duties and without rights.<sup>24</sup>

The entanglement of politics and community affairs has indeed become a major grievance within parts of the wider community. Other than Okbazghi's comment suggests, however, these developments are not really new. Even during the independence struggle the EPLF used coercion to control exile communities, e.g. by using mechanisms of denunciation and ostracism. But this was and is not possible without local cadres implementing EPLF/PFDJ policies made in Eritrea. This situation has created a "symbiosis" between local cadres in the diaspora and the leadership in Eritrea, and gives local executors considerable latitude to bend and redefine regime policies in order to pursue their own interest and strengthen their personal power base.<sup>25</sup> The other way round the regime can just as easily exploit local rivalries and personal ambitions to tighten its grip on the diaspora or to blame failures in community management, for example, on the lower and intermediate cadres. In fact, diaspora Eritreans often complain openly about the embassy staff, the *MahberKom*, and local PFDJ cadres. They may also find fault with lower ranking officials they came to deal with on sojourns in Eritrea, but such experiences notwithstanding, still praise the political leadership, especially the President. In their eyes, the source of all the trouble at home and abroad is that the lower charges are corrupted, incompetent and power-hungry. While oblivious of the fact that it is always a fault within the larger system that enables such people to exploit their position, this notion seems understandable when taking a look at many a community's problems.

---

<sup>24</sup> Okbazghi Yohannes, "Lessons Still Unlearned," commentary from August 2000, on: <[http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/August/OgbazionY\\_8-28.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/August/OgbazionY_8-28.asp)>, accessed 13 Jan 2005.

<sup>25</sup> This, according to several of my interviewees, went as far as cadres meddling with family affairs, relationships and marriages (field notes spring 2003, winter 2004/5). In another interview in summer 2003 a former EPLF member recounted how an EPLF/PFDJ affiliated community leader used his political standing to get re-elected to the board of a local *MahberKom*. This happening at a time when attempts were made to integrate former ELF supporters and non-politically active Eritreans in the community associations, he was asked not to candidate again as his affiliation and his well-known intolerance vis-à-vis everyone who did not share his political views were likely to scare off new and more liberal minded members. His reply was short: "The community is for everyone, also for politically active people like me. Who doesn't like that can stay away. And in my eyes, those wanting to criticize the government are no Eritreans anyway." (paraphrased from field notes, B.C., autumn 2002)

Being chosen for political compliance rather than competence, cadres and community leaders often fail to cater for the communities' social needs. As semi-political organizations linked to the Eritrean state, the *MahberKoms* and their satellites demand full loyalty and commitment, but devote comparatively little time and effort to addressing their members' manifold social problems. Preoccupation with politics not only leaves little time and few resources for self-organized help on a community level, but may actually hamper it as (political) community leaders tend to see "independent" social work as competition for loyalty. The familiar question: "Who's behind it?" regularly crops up in this context, making it hard for any well-meaning activist to prove his charitable intentions and absence of political interests. This makes it even harder to organize badly needed social services or independent counseling. The few existing facilities are often organized along the EPLF/ELF divide, thus being acceptable and accessible only to a part of the overall Eritrean diaspora population. The losers are the rank and file members that remain alone with the many tribulations they face as Africans in Germany, and in some cases the strong dominance of politics in the diaspora has even led to the *de facto* demise or inactivity of a local *MahberKom*.<sup>26</sup>

But despite a widespread lack of enthusiasm for active participation in community life, the nature of the mostly small, close-knit communities makes it easy for the Embassy/PFDJ officials to maintain control - even without the much-rumored Eritrean National Security Service (NSS). Not only lower and intermediate cadres, but also "hobby spies" are known to report dissident behavior to the PFDJ office in the consulate.<sup>27</sup> And even though neither of them tends to deliver reliable intelligence (either because they fear being bearers of bad news or they conflate conditions for reasons of their own).<sup>28</sup> this has

---

<sup>26</sup> Hepner (2004) found nearly identical results in the United States. See also Conrad 2003.

<sup>27</sup> The NSS is still widely known as *Sab'an Kiliten*, the term used for one of the EPLF's now replaced security departments created during the liberation struggle and operating both in Eritrea and the diaspora. One of its tasks was (and purportedly is) to detect dissent among the EPLF's members and sympathizers. Over time, group interviews became increasingly difficult due to the however justified or unjustified fear of professional or amateur "spies." A couple of times I was told that "Where more than four (five) Eritreans are together, there is one 'spy' amongst them" (field notes summer 2002; spring 2003).

<sup>28</sup> An example is the participation of two government supporters in the aforementioned workshop in Cologne (see fn 1). A report they also posted to the organizers plays down the number of participants as well as the overall stimulating atmosphere, while simultaneously twisting the contents of the presentations in denouncing manner. The presentation of two papers on the diaspora was, for instance, linked to the presence of opposition politicians, claiming the researchers (including myself) were helping the former to identify groups of diaspora Eritreans that might be receptive to opposition politics. In a very similar manner, however, a report on an opposition website, overstated both the number of conference participants and a panelists estimate of the number of "German" Eritreans who left Eritrea a second time after having returned home in the 1990s.

led to a situation in the community where paranoia and general distrust are considerable. A certain cultural aptitude for secrecy and intrigue serves only to enhance this extremely contagious feeling. And not surprisingly, this atmosphere also fosters personal, inter- and intra-group power struggles. It has become a popular strategy to accuse one another of being anti-government and, for instance, send letters claiming this to the embassy, even if the root cause of the problem has little or nothing to do with politics.<sup>29</sup> The wider political frame often only serves as a backdrop against which to stage local drama. But in turn these local rivalries are also exploited for government interests.

Having thus shaped the exile community's organizational structure, EPLF also built a near-monopoly on information and could thus control the political discourse as a means of domination. Another legacy of the independence struggle and the EPLF's successful incorporation of the diaspora into their nation-building project, is the lack of independent sources of information, both about developments in Eritrea and in the diaspora itself. Based on my fieldwork experience, I venture to guess that government media, including for instance the *Haddas Ertra* newspaper, *Dimtsi Hafash* radio, video productions, and most recently satellite transmitted Eri-TV, still reach more people than the new and independent sources of information now almost exclusively relegated to the internet. Moreover, the latter's anonymity, uncontrollability and "unreliability" seems suspicious even to many of those who have the necessary know-how and language skills to make use of it (see Conrad 2005). But even in the internet arena, government media are gaining ground either by hosting their own websites or, indirectly, by sponsoring homepages created by regime supporters in the diaspora. Finally, for many the local *bado seleste* (rumor mill) is still the most important way of getting news from home or finding out what is happening in the exile community. In many ways, the spoken word appears much more powerful than anything written in a newspaper, let alone on the internet. This is especially true if the speakers are high-ranking cadres or government officials making their appearance on TV, radio, or in a seminar organized by the Eritrean embassy.

Paradoxically, this legacy of an oral culture which gives much credibility to the spoken word, at the same time seems to constitute an important inhibition to using voice as

---

<sup>29</sup> A recent example is the conflict between two Eritrean (youth) groups in Frankfurt, *eman-tv* (which has meanwhile split in at least two groups that have sued one another) and *Warsay e.V.*, in which the former accused the latter of being anti-government and send respective letters to the Eritrean Consulate General and the local *MahberKom*. Root causes of their rivalry, however, seem to lie less in political differences than in personal disagreements and the groups' competition for new members, resources and status (see Conrad 2005)

a means of dissent. In an open letter on the internet a young Eritrean recently analyzed the oral tradition of passing on historical knowledge, finding that this type of narration is necessarily stereotyped and simplified to enable the listeners to remember the main message. To achieve this aim the story must be as unambiguous as possible. Clear cut friend/foe dichotomies dominate in this popular way of narration, while there is little room for nuances and contestation:

This oral culture lacks the courage to dissent, to contradict. The listener's ego subordinates itself under the narrated we, as otherwise it would be left on its own. An Eritrean left on his own, in an individual-personal sense, does not exist; s/he would then stop being Eritrean. Without "we," there is no "I."<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, as such narrations are passed on from generation to generation, traditional hierarchies between young and old further impede critical approaches. As Günter Schröder aptly pointed out, Eritrean children are not encouraged to ask questions or utter criticism. The role of speaker and listener is well-defined, and contradicting elders earns social disapproval.<sup>31</sup> To some extent this is also true for Eritrean (or at least *Kebessa*) culture in general.<sup>32</sup> The often-cited village assemblies, or *baitos*, praised as radically democratic structures, had an underlying principle of "consensus democracy," (cf. Smidt 2008:238) whereas agreeing to disagree has few if any cultural precedents. Creating at least an impression of harmony and consent remains the ultimate aim, and is echoed in present day demands for national unity.

### **Of dreams and nightmares**

Above I have shown how the strong sense of loyalty vis-à-vis Eritrea (conflated with loyalty to the regime) and the lack of participatory mechanisms do not create a favorable climate for the use of voice or exit as feedback strategies in the diaspora. Moreover, when taken together, the demand for absolute loyalty as a prerequisite to Eritrean-ness and the socio-political structure of diaspora communities open avenues for the home regime to implement "counterexile strategies" (Shain 1998: 145) that allow for some "remote control" of political

---

<sup>30</sup> Salomon Gebrehiwet, undated open letter: "Offener Brief an Frau Nina von Nolting," forwarded by e-mail on 18 August 2003, translation B.C.).

<sup>31</sup> Contribution to a panel discussion in Cologne/Germany (see also fn 1).

<sup>32</sup> The Eritrean *Kebessa*, or highlands, are largely inhabited by Tigrinya (speaking) Christians, who also make up the majority of Eritreans in Germany and other western countries of exile.

opinion abroad. The most formidable means to keep potential critics in check are the threat of punishment (such as imprisonment on return to Eritrea), and more importantly, the actual implementation of negative sanctions (such as being denied services). Both might affect people's links to Eritrea, as well as their everyday lives in the diaspora, and thus exert considerable pressure to conform.

In terms of actual punishment, a government critic has little to fear as long as s/he refrains from going home. This, however, means that using voice *de facto* leads to a "forced exit," or even a kind of "excommunication" from the Eritrean transnational community. Thus the feedback mechanism of exit has effectively been turned into a way to suppress the feedback mechanism of voice. Occasionally this happened by de-naturalization of the critic (e.g. in the case of former defense secretary Mesfin Hagos), but usually the proponent of voice is left to choose between remaining in a (second) exile or risking persecution at home. In some cases traveling to Eritrea has indeed led to temporary or open-ended imprisonment of known members of the opposition or outspoken individual critics (Amnesty International 2004: 28-34). Asylum experts caution that even low-profile activities such as attending opposition meetings as an onlooker, or distributing internet articles e.g. from Awate.com, could lead to trouble on subsequent journeys to Eritrea.<sup>33</sup> Yet identifying the behaviors which prompt punishment at home, and those that do not, is almost impossible. Both the way in which such information travels, and the patterns of actual punishment inflicted, seem opaque and arbitrary. Not surprisingly this uncertainty sets rumors flying:

It is sad that you are put behind bars when you have a different opinion or idea [than the government] in Eritrea. People, consider that one day you may also have a diverging opinion. If you do not fit in, you will be made to fit. So be cautious when you enjoy your vacation in Eritrea...

---

<sup>33</sup> A summary of the current practices in granting asylum to Eritreans in Germany finds that: "... recent decisions in asylum decisions in Germany are based on assumptions that political activities in exile will lead to persecution on return to Eritrea if regarded as harmful to the state. This applies to any case of oppositional activity or membership in an organization regarded as oppositional (see rulings by the Administrative Courts in Magdeburg, 4. August 2004 - 5 A 196/04 MD - 5p., M5958; in Würzburg, ruling from vom 18 November 2004 - W 7 K 04.30314 - 15p., M5954)." The document further summarizes findings about Eritrean intelligence activities in Germany: "[since 2001] the Eritrean government has - via its diplomatic missions - further intensified its surveillance of Eritreans living in Germany. It must be assumed that informers are used to find out who sympathizers with the various opposition groups (Administrative Court Wiesbaden, 1 December 2004 - 5 E 639/03.A (V) - 10p., M5994). ... high-profile members are being systematically observed (Administrative Court Magdeburg, 26 August 2004 - 5 A 1293/03 MD - 6p., M5957). Moreover, it must be assumed that informers also report activities of rank and file members to the Eritrean authorities (Administrative Courts in Kassel, 2 August 2004 - 1 E 3233/01.A - 9p., M5401; in Wiesbaden, 1 December 2004 - 5 E 639/03.A (V) - 10p., M5994; ..." On: <http://www.asylmagazin.de/>; online-edition March 2005, downloaded 28 March 2005, translation from German, B.C.)



The writer of this guestbook entry is promptly reminded that "... you should also be careful here [in Germany], because there are spies who, as soon as you get there, ... [message end]." <sup>34</sup> Irrespective of their actual truth, such rumors seem to intimidate not only potential proponents of voice, but also more or less ardent government supporters. Some pro-regime and "neutral" interviewees who had for example helped relatives to escape from national service, told me that they felt nervous before traveling to Eritrea and - given the option - preferred to enter the country on their German passport and a paid-for visa, rather than use their Eritrean identity card that also serves as a 'visa waiver' for Eritreans with foreign citizenship. <sup>35</sup>

Yet, despite widespread anxieties and the fact that punishment/forced exile constitutes the ultimate threat, it seems that so far mostly organized critics are concerned with these issues. With negative sanctions by the state, however, things are different. These range more widely and might impact the everyday life and plans of ordinary diaspora Eritreans. For the majority of first generation Eritreans in Germany, retiring to Eritrea remains a vital dream. Others think of establishing a business back home, or at least keeping a holiday residence. The danger of being denied necessary state services to realize such plans (and the emotional and financial investment they entail) doubtlessly makes many Eritreans think twice before publicly criticizing the regime - even if they have severe qualms when looking at the political situation. As Michela Wrong (2005b) sums it up:

Many Eritreans abroad are anguished by the slide to one-man rule, and jib at contributions once made with patriotic pride. Most continue to make them none the less. ... because severing this relationship could mean waving goodbye to the yearly trips back home, the right to buy land and build a home for their retirement in Eritrea. No one relishes being stripped of his birthright. <sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Both quotes from: <http://www.warsay.com>, guestbook entries, 8 March 2005, translated from German B.C. Yet according to German court rulings, these rumors are not entirely off the mark. Verdicts by German courts on Eritrean asylum cases are based on findings that "Eritrea government intelligence networks currently survey any activity by oppositional groups abroad. The information gathered is passed on to the central office of the Eritrean National Security Service (NSS) in Asmara. (Administrative Court Würzburg, 9 May 2003 - W 7 K 03.30520 - 9p., M5541)." (On <http://www.asylmagazin.de>, online edition from March 2005, translated from German, B.Conrad).

<sup>35</sup> Field notes summer 2003; interviews spring and summer 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps "birthright" is not the most fitting term here. At least not if it is seen as a bundle of entitlements a citizen freely enjoys merely by virtue of being born as an Eritrean. Indeed, most of the elder generation were not born as Eritreans, but had to pay a high price - either at home or abroad - to ensure that there now exists an independent state to grant them rights long denied. In this sense they have actually earned their "birthrights."

But even without any concrete return plans, acting on voice or boycotting the “diaspora tax,” for instance, makes relations with family members and friends in Eritrea more difficult. In Germany especially, those who are not yet German citizens or have recently been joined by a family member from Eritrea are dependent on the services of the Eritrean embassy and consulate. Being denied a passport or other necessary papers can lead to serious problems with the German authorities. The same goes for family visits and business relations. Hence, individuals and families have to painfully weigh political principles against personal needs and relationships. As the aging father of a German-based government critic wrote from Eritrea: “Make your peace with the government so that you can come back here. This is your country, this is your land, your family, you cannot give all this up for politics.” The son replied, “We cannot only think about your own situation and our personal dreams - what about the dreams we had for Eritrea?”<sup>37</sup>

It is precisely these kinds of dilemmas that led one young Eritrean from Frankfurt to state: “We are the prisoners of our dreams.”<sup>38</sup> And, one might add, of nightmares. The most frightening of these nightmares certainly is that voice and exit, if successful, could weaken the current government and leave Eritrea vulnerable to enemy forces from within and without. These fears conjure up ghostly imaginings (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001) of renewed invasion and suppression by the Ethiopians, of further war, death and destruction. But the fear is also that dissent might cost unity and solidarity within Eritrea, or even culminate in a civil war that would render all past achievements and sacrifices in vain, endanger loved ones and forever destroy cherished illusions and dreams of return, and with them sweep away the sense of belonging. Hence the continued solidarity with the home regime is not only caused by “... the moral and material sufferings they would themselves have to go through [when using voice or exit]..., but by the anticipation that the *organization to which they belong would go from bad to worse if they left*” (Hirschman 1970:98, emphasis in original).

To ward off their nightmares and to protect their dreams and reconcile their own beliefs with diverging government policies, many diaspora Eritreans engage in elaborate self-deception based on strategies that pre-empt any criticism.<sup>39</sup> One of the most common

---

<sup>37</sup> Paraphrased from a personal conversation (field notes autumn 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Group interview, summer 2002

<sup>39</sup> Hirschman finds that “self-deception” is common among members of organizations who have paid a high price of entry and face “stiff penalties” for exit. Self-deception helps fight the awareness that the ship is

immunization methods is the *argumentum ad hominem* or character assassination: the critic is portrayed as untrustworthy because he is a *bonvivant*, a drinker, a womanizer or simply an egotist.<sup>40</sup> Another one is the authenticity argument which distinguishes “true” and “false” Eritreans. Critics are exposed as “fake” Eritreans, that is “weyanes” [Ethiopians], “jihadists,” “regionalists,” and “tribalists” in disguise. Or, equally bad, they are attributed with qualities like “westernized,” “individualist,” “libertarian,” and “urban bourgeois,” indicating their alienation from “authentic” Eritrean culture. A related tactic designed to pre-empt demands for reform is the invocation of irreconcilable differences between “traditional” and “western” concepts. In the latter view, the concept of democracy cannot be instituted in Eritrea (although the western idea of a “nation” produces no such dissonance), and social and political reform must always be secondary or tertiary to economic development, let alone to the defense of the country’s sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> The common phrase, “it is not the right time” often signals this perspective.<sup>42</sup>

The most powerful immunization against criticism of the Eritrean government, however, is the feeling that Eritrea “cannot permit itself the luxury of internal dissent” (Wrong 2005b) as long as the border issue with Ethiopia remains unresolved. Dissent, it is widely believed, will cause disintegration from within and thus expose Eritrea to its external enemies. In a discussion on the Eritrean-German website Warsay.com (see Conrad 2005), a government supporter comments on the still pending implementation of the Eritrean constitution:

I can tell you exactly what is going to happen when we implement the constitution now, namely, the EDF [Eritrean Defense Force] will not be able to

---

sinking. The respective “loyalty-promoting institutions” will support self-deceptive tendencies as they are instrumental to repressing or delaying voice and exit. (Hirschman 1970: 92-93).

<sup>40</sup> Very similar allegations were used in the so-called “three privileges” campaign that was initiated by Isayas Afeworki in the late 1980s. It appears that this campaign was aimed at isolating parts of the EPLF’s military and political leadership by discrediting them in front of the rank and file fighters as drunkards and womanizers who were leading a comparatively luxurious life (Connell 2005: 87).

<sup>41</sup> Indian Nobel Prize winner Amartya Kumar Sen shows that indeed the opposite is true and that there is e.g. an undeniable nexus between the existence of a free press and absence of severe famines. The simple logic behind his argument is that freedom of press will ensure that economic and other crises cannot be hushed up, as it was the case e.g. in Ethiopia under Haile Selassie where devastating famines only became publicly known when it was too late to engage in preventive measures. (Sen 1999: 7/8)

<sup>42</sup> Other strategies include what I term the “three step immunization,” wherein loyalists first argue that critiques of Eritrean society and/or the government are all lies; secondly, that if undeniable evidence supports the critiques, then the government or Eritrean society must have a good reason for its actions (e.g. those who suffer repression deserve it, or social problems result from the interference of outsiders); and/or third, that other countries and governments experience similar problems, and so attention directed specifically at Eritrea is unjustified.

keep the warsay [the recruits drafted into the Eritrean army after liberation] at the front any longer, because according to the constitution they have already completed their national service. This would trigger a long discussion within the Eritrean society which eventually would mean a weakening of the EDF and endangering our aim of protecting Eritrean sovereignty.<sup>43</sup>

For many diaspora Eritreans “protecting Eritrean sovereignty” is indeed the topmost priority, even if that means turning a blind eye towards negative developments within Eritrea. This attitude among parts of the diaspora can only be understood in its wider context as it reflects Eritrea's century-long history of subjugation, abuse and humiliation, as well as the dire experience of exile. The dominant feeling is one of “if we don't help ourselves, no one else will.” And with so many having perished for the idea of a free Eritrea, it would seem like a mockery of their deaths to risk losing independence yet again. From this point of view the misery and injustice inflicted on individuals by the Eritrean regime pales against the misery that is expected to befall the whole national community if the Ethiopians succeeded in occupying the country again.

Neither the historical memory of oppression, nor the actual threat of a new war with Ethiopia shall be dismissed as a chimera or paranoia here - nor can Eritreans be blamed for showing little faith in the intervention of the international community. Nonetheless I include the threat of Ethiopian invasion as a method of self-deception here, since it is as much a control mechanism and justification for dysfunctional and oppressive behavior within Eritrea as it is a real danger to the country's sovereignty. What is debatable, however, is whether more liberty within the country would actually lead to a weakening of the regime's position vis-a-vis the dreaded external dangers, as supporters contend.<sup>44</sup>

The very perception that opposition and dissent are harmful to national unity and freedom is again based on both historical and recent developments. Having experienced a “civil war” among the liberation fronts, many regard diverging political positions as

---

<sup>43</sup> On: <http://4941.multiguestbook.com>, entry from 3 March 2005, translated from German by B. Conrad. The writer's attitude seems to mirror what a recent refugee and former Warsay said to me after encountering hostile reactions from more settled exiles: "... they ... like to live in countries other than Eritrea but they don't want you to have the same chance. It is so sad. They work hard to bring their siblings from Eritrea, but they want others to suffer and keep the country for them. (E-mail correspondence, spring 2005)

<sup>44</sup> Conjuring up or instrumentalizing the threat of hostile forces to stabilize authoritarian regimes is certainly nothing peculiar to Eritrea. Fear of external enemies serves to produce what Hirschman called "unconscious loyalty" (1970: 91) and to justify suppression of voice. Yet, such measures only delay exit and voice. For example, keeping the Warsay for years in an open-ended military service may even be counterproductive to defending the country effectively, as the morale of many recruits is understandably waning. The EDF loses an estimated 500 troops through desertion every month, and a much higher number are caught while trying to escape (Hadera 2004: 43).

potentially destructive. Finally, organized opponents of the regime ironically provide ammunition for government supporters who argue against the utility of critiques. A multitude of ELF splinter groups and other newly formed opposition parties seem to indulge in highly personalized internal power struggles and, worse still, appear to collaborate with “anti-Eritrean” forces. Moreover, their style of discourse, their internal hierarchies, their lack of transparency and participatory practices hardly diverge from PFDJ behavior. The widespread suspicion of the opposition affects individual critics and civic organizations negatively, as they are often lumped together with the political parties. As one individual activist put it in regard to internet debates:

Almost everything that is written directly reflects a political influence in the narrow most literal sense. Often, the question asked is not whether what he or she is writing about is true or not, but who is this person speaking for? Who is behind it? To find a favorable forum anywhere, you have to be affiliated with a particular line or group or be a regime supporter. If one is independent or unorthodox, it is extremely hard to find a receptive platform ... (Email correspondence winter 2005)

Unaffiliated proponents of voice thus face the double challenge of finding a platform and facing the wraths of government representatives and supporters. In Germany, some outspoken critics report that they have been warned and sometimes intimidated directly by members of the Eritrean regime in Germany. It appears that young Eritreans who had begun to voice their concerns about the developments in Eritrea have been especially targeted in an attempt to “win them round” again. In more extreme cases, those using voice also face insult, threats, slander and ostracism by parts of the wider community <sup>45</sup> - and possibly also by some friends and family members (who fear that associating with a dissident will render them suspect, too). As many rely on the warmth, mutual support and social networks of the diaspora community which has become their second home (or arguably their first, as most social contacts take place here rather than in Eritrea) people think twice before endangering their social existence. The price for re-creating and maintaining this second home, however, is the re-creation of the very pressures, restrictions and limitations that dominate life in Eritrea:

---

<sup>45</sup> In a less polite manner, some have been warned and insulted by anonymous callers and letter writers. In some cases this went as far as threatening critics with physical coercion or "reminding" them that they still have relatives in Eritrea (field notes, autumn 2004). While it is not clear who is behind such actions, those targeted are always the openly critical; but clearly such incidents also act as deterrents for potential critics among the silent majority.

In a diaspora, there is no such thing as privacy. .... Each member knows his fellow's "back-story" and can recite chapter and verse on what so-and-so did in the war, whose father worked as a collaborator, which cousin was a guerrilla fighter, whose uncle committed adultery or is getting divorced, whose sister is on good terms with the government, whose brother has been blacklisted. Rather than setting it free, this knowledge keeps the diaspora trapped in the most stultifying of relationships. Lost in western societies, its members long to talk their native language ... But when they do meet, they can exchange only the most anodyne of banalities. A frank exchange of views might lead to friends not returning your calls, relatives cutting you in the street, or damaging rumours circulating back home. (Wrong 2005b)

### **Considering the alternatives: exit or disengagement**

So far I have mainly focused on the manifold obstacles to using voice as a mechanism of drawing attention to the deteriorating situation in Eritrea. The apparent analytical neglect of the exit option to this point is not an indicator of its lesser importance, however. Rather, it reflects Hirschman's findings that voice tends to be the preferred feedback mechanism within "basic social organizations" such as family, church or (transnational) state (Hirschman: 1970: 33, 98). In fact, the Eritrean trans/nations' "monopoly" position, together with its members' high degree of loyalty, make exit an undesirable, if not unthinkable option. The Eritrean state/regime is even capable of turning the exit option into a threat of expulsion from both the Eritrean trans/nation and a concrete local diaspora community. Seen against this background, choosing or risking (forced) exit would only be made "affordable" if alternative social circles existed. But is that the case?

While many diaspora Eritreans have formally become members of the German nation, "becoming German" or a part of German society remains problematic. As Clifford aptly remarks: "Peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be 'cured' by merging into a new national community" (1994: 307). Moreover, as Africans, Eritreans continue to be subject to the trials and tribulations of an (increasing) anti-immigrant and racist sentiment in Germany. Interestingly, many first generation Eritreans, who came with the notion of returning to Eritrea as soon as possible, see Germany by and large in a positive light (partly because they never wanted to be part of German society). In contrast, younger Eritreans are grappling with a hyphenated identity - expecting more from their country of residence a temporary safe haven, and thus more vulnerable in the face of discrimination. Having grown up with

German language, cultural peculiarities and mentalities, they feel the subtleties of rejection more acutely than their elders - a feeling that is further enhanced by the painful realization that they cannot live in Eritrea either.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the idea that Eritreans might become part of a larger organized African minority or “Black Culture” in Germany, is only slowly gaining some foothold. Many Eritreans - if they see themselves as Africans at all - consider themselves being very different from or even superior to other Africans (see Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2005).

Living in rather small communities with a long tradition of strict top-bottom organization and rigorous social and political control, Eritrean sub-groups or sub cultures also provide only a limited alternative. At best, these smaller groupings, including those based on political sensibility and sub-national identities, create a “company of outcasts” while not allowing for a full exit from the politically-defined mainstream communities (compare Hepner 2003). The latter have in many respects a “monopoly” position: not only do they represent Eritrean migrants vis-à-vis the host country and (via its close links with the embassy) the homeland, they also provide the framework for an array of services and networks, however troubled and imperfect they may be. The only alternative grouping with full-fledged community functions - albeit without providing an official link with home - is that of the ELF opposition. Yet, being another close knit political community with its own demands of loyalty, the ELF can hardly offer much of an alternative. Moreover, it would be naive to assume that any disgruntled EPLF supporter would consider joining “the other side,” or indeed be welcome there. New opposition groups, on the other hand, almost completely lack social structures, rendering them similarly weak.

Full exit, as conceptualized by Hirschman, thus seems almost impossible in the case of the Eritrean diaspora: alternatives are hard to come by, and even if they were available, the majority would still not be able to “leave” in the sense that the fate of Eritrea or the diaspora community would cease to matter to them. Hirschman would hardly be surprised: “exit has not often been used to provide an avenue of self defence for the voiceless,” he notes (Hirschman, quoted in Azarya 1988:13). This statement, however, allows only for the somber conclusion that besides using voice - and facing the consequences - silent submission is the only option left (see Azarya 1988:13). Yet, even though the majority of

---

<sup>46</sup>Also rejection is by no means one-sided. Amongst Eritreans in Germany it amounts to an insult to call someone “very German” - though this is debatably a reaction reflecting prior marginalization by the German environment.

diaspora Eritreans in Germany opt for neither voice nor exit, I argue that their silence does not so much signal acquiescence as a palpable alienation and distancing from the Eritrean state and its representatives in the diaspora.

A way out of this conceptional cul-de-sac is offered by Victor Azarya, who re-defines Hirschman's model of exit from the state to include less radical forms of withdrawal. His concept of disengagement is particularly interesting in a diaspora context where immediate physical withdrawal has already taken place anyway. As I have outlined at the beginning of this paper, exit must take different forms here (such as non-participation in official transnational channels etc.). In contrast to full exit, disengagement also need not take place in all sectors of state - society relations, i.e. it is possible to withdraw from the Eritrean state in some sectors, but to continue to hold certain stakes in others. Originally developed in the context of state decline in Africa in the 1980s, Azarya's description of disengagement strategies gives us an amazingly accurate picture of "silent majority behavior" in the Eritrean diaspora:

Disengagement ... is the tendency to withdraw from the state and keep at a distance from its channels as a hedge against its instability and dwindling resource base. As skepticism rises concerning the effectiveness and legitimacy of state actions, they are undermined by subtle means of popular evasion and dissimulation. Typical forms of disengagement include moving away from the state-cash nexus .... State enacted laws ... lose their credibility and non-compliance with laws become commonplace. Cynicism, satire, ridicule of both the state and the difficulties of everyday life ... provide an important psychological outlet .... Traditional structures and authority regain force as familiar bases in which people seek protection from the instability and arbitrariness of state channels. Narrower bases of communal solidarity (village, family, ethnic, religious or other) are reinforced and lead to greater fragmentation of subsectors. (Azarya 1988:7-8)

Non-compliance with laws, as we have already seen, is one expression of disengagement also to be found in the diaspora. Tax dodging, helping relatives to leave the country through illegal channels, and changing hard currency on the black market are perhaps the most common examples. That alone, however, does not necessarily show disengagement (tax dodging is certainly a universal phenomenon), although in the Eritrean case the shift from the "culture" of contributing to the State" (al-Ali 2001:587) to a less patriotic "charity begins at home" approach seems noteworthy. Likewise, there is what Azarya calls the "moving away from the state-cash nexus." As Fessehatzion (2005) shows, only a fraction of the overall remittances flowing into Eritrea are transferred via official channels. Informal



banking systems ("*hawala*") or sending money with a trusted friend seems more popular than involving government agencies (cf. Kifle 2009: 11).

Cynicism is unmistakably on the rise, and formerly revered figures are no longer exempted from various forms of ridicule. Eritreans, though not widely renowned for their sense of humor (in this regard resembling Germans), have developed a new taste for political humor and satire that is getting darker as the repression at home is growing (see also Wrong 2005a: 381). Pungent jokes on the political leadership, unpopular policies, the scarcity of certain staples, the round-ups ("*giffa*") of draft avoiders, the *warsay – yek'alo* relationship, but also on the diaspora itself, circulate both in real life and in Eritrean cyberspace.

Perhaps the most successful disengagement option in the diaspora is the formation of sub-national networks. Religious communities, in particular the Pentecostal variety, are eyed with suspicion by the wider diaspora, but seem to be very adept in terms of forging new communities that appeal especially to newcomers. Other such sub-national networks are those based on regional and/or ethnic identities. As certain regional groups are seen, or see themselves, as either close to, or marginalized by, the current government, they also indicate a challenge to the current regime's official nationalism that views sub-national markers as potentially dangerous to national unity (see Hepner 2003, 2004; Conrad 2005). *Awrajanet*, regionalism, that was a taboo-topic during the liberation war and long thereafter, has been made out as a new enemy of Eritrean national unity in recent years. And, indeed, there are unsettling attempts to mobilize certain groups for political ends. Together with informal family networks and friendship circles that may or may not be organized explicitly along the lines of these identities, sub-nationalist tendencies demonstrate growing disengagement from official state and community structures in the diaspora. Instead of flocking to government sponsored *guaylas* or *bahlis*, people fulfill their needs for socializing and celebrating together at church venues, huge wedding parties or (semi-) professionally organized concerts.<sup>47</sup>

But also on a very private level, people are increasingly skeptical of the government's project for Eritrea, and indeed, have started to re-interpret the narratives of war, suppression and the rhetoric of national liberation. More than once interviewees would

---

<sup>47</sup> Originally a *guayla* is a traditional Tigrinya dance. *bahli* means "cultural shows." Today both terms are used synonymously for "dance party." Yet, in contrast to *guayla*, a *bahli*, is a mostly "officially" organized event.

pause after a while, and say: “You know, X years ago, I was a hundred percent *Shaebia*; back then I would have told you a different story.” On the extreme end of opinion-shifts there is a growing number of people who have begun to ask themselves whether the mixed blessings of the post-independence period merited the loss of so many lives during the liberation and/or the more recent border war. It is important to note here that individuals asking such hitherto forbidden questions are by no means only supporters of the opposition. Moreover, rather than suggesting that Eritrea would be better off without independence, their questions reflect the increasing personal embitterment and frustration with the situation in Eritrea, coupled with the loss of their ideals, hopes and dreams.<sup>48</sup> Finding self-deception a non-workable strategy, they are literally and painfully disengaging themselves emotionally and ideologically from a cause they once ardently believed in and which they now seem to recognize as an delusion.

Not surprisingly, some find going to Eritrea (either for a holiday or for good) therefore psychologically impossible, even if they do not fear any personal political persecution. Quite a few people I met had even written off their inheritances. Others, relenting to the futility of their dreams, decided to buy property in Germany rather than “back home,” and to spend their vacations elsewhere in the world rather than in Eritrea. Many also indicated that their decision to stay in the diaspora made them feel less torn and pressured: “If you have given up these hopes [of return],” says one man who had come to Germany in the 1980s as an ardent teenage *Shaebia* supporter, “you are free. But you have to make a choice. They can't do anything to me as long as I want nothing from them. This is the price you have to pay....”<sup>49</sup>

High as the price may be, it seems that this personal disengagement could also be precondition to the emergence of new forms of voice that might be able to “... challenge the home regime's attempts to impose its own interpretation of national loyalty both at home and abroad,” (Shain 1989: 165). In fact many of such new, hopeful voices have already emerged and are also being heard by those Eritreans who have grown tired of the political hegemony of the ruling party and the established opposition. Looking at the developments of the past five years, it becomes obvious that the Eritrean regime's demand of unconditional

---

<sup>48</sup> Field notes (autumn 2003/ spring 2004). Interviewees asking these and similar questions included second generation university students, young professionals, and “new refugees” as well as members of the ELF(-RC) and non-affiliated but critical individuals. Quite a few, however, had once been fervent EPLF followers or even community cadres. The first time I heard someone doubting if the results of independence merited the losses, was - to my utter surprise - in Eritrea in 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Notes from an interview conducted in autumn 2004.

loyalty is today contested in ways that were unthinkable prior to the border war. In particular, individual critics as well as groups referring to themselves as “civic movements” have ventured beyond the politics of “radical nationalism” (Makki 2002: 201) in order to embrace and demand that universal human rights be recognized within narrowly defined national interests.<sup>50</sup>

### **By way of conclusion: some consequences for the diaspora and for Eritrea**

In this chapter I set out asking if and how a diaspora can exert any influence on its home country, especially at a time of crisis. I also asked what influence the homeland has in turn over the developments in the diaspora and in which ways these bi-directional “homeland politics” play out in a transnational field fraught with multiple dependencies, contradictions and dilemmas. As a guide through the complex web of Eritrean homeland - diaspora relations, I used Hirschman's theory of systems in crisis. Holding that decline may be reversed in systems where the feedback mechanisms of exit and voice alert the leadership to the need for reforms, Hirschman argues that organizations which “... make no explicit or implicit allowance for either mechanism... are likely to be less viable in the long run than ... others” (Hirschman 1970:121).<sup>51</sup> Applied to the current situation in Eritrea and its diaspora, this finding leads to a rather somber conclusion.

The consequences that arise from the fact that both exit and voice are largely blocked in the Eritrean context can merely be sketched out here. Eritreans at home - if at all - choose exit over voice as a punishable and risky – but more promising – alternative to facing the state's harsh reactions to any form of dissent. Used in particular by the young and educated, however, exit robs the country of those that might be able to inspire change from within. Moreover, by removing themselves as potential “troublemakers,” and sending remit-

---

<sup>50</sup> An interesting example is the Frankfurt-based Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative (EAI), founded by deserters from the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). Campaigning for the acknowledgment of desertion as a basis for asylum in Germany, the group also demands the introduction of an alternative to military service in Eritrea - a radical and almost heretical idea within Eritrean circles. While in the eyes of any staunch regime supporter, such people have forfeited the right to be called Eritrean, they are receiving a lot of private support and encouragement by diasporic Eritreans (Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative and Connection e.V. 2004 and 2006, as well as Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative 2006).

<sup>51</sup> I must be noted here that Hirschman's strictly systemic approach is stripped of normative evaluations as to whether voice or exit are *per se* “good” or “bad,” but he attests that there is a relationship between the suppression of voice/exit and the non-viability of a system.

tances back home, these new refugees unintentionally reduce the pressure on the regime to instigate reforms.

In the diaspora it is often the fear of external threats that keeps a majority quiet vis-à-vis the disquieting developments in Eritrea. Home-related dreams and nightmares render the diaspora's "factual, objective existential independence" (Melchers 2003) ineffective. They also put the Eritrean state/government in a powerful position to exploit its monopoly over defining, granting and withdrawing membership in the trans/nation (Hepner 2004) in order to control, pre-empt and suppress critique. By penalizing, defaming and ignoring the concerns of the proponents of voice in the diaspora, those in power have created a self-fulfilling prophecy that envisions opposition and dissent as *per se* destructive, divisive forces incapable of developing alternative or supplementary visions for Eritrea. Lacking official, sanctioned channels and platforms to convey their messages and engage in constructive dialogue, the often dissonant voices - especially of the political opposition parties - so far seem to have little if any positive influence on the situation at home. Rather to the contrary: since the days of the so-called "Berlin Manifesto," wherein a group of thirteen diaspora intellectuals criticized the government, the repression of voice in Eritrea has steadily grown (cf. Amnesty International 1999, 2003, 2004 and 2005). Looking to the diaspora for voice certainly has fostered a more receptive climate for open and critical debates, which might prove a valuable asset in the future. Presently, however, the negative interaction of oppositional voice and the regime's "counter-voice" strategies have turned the diaspora into a "battlefield" where increasing mutual distrust, polarization, and fragmentation are severely hampering community development.

All these dynamics have fostered an insidious process of disengagement and withdrawal from transnational Eritrean politics and the state nexus. The greatest danger sign is the withdrawal of those who have the potential to positively contribute to the development of the diaspora and its continued close relationship with home. The tendency towards disengagement is further reinforced by the maturation of a second generation in diaspora, one that is understandably less inclined to give unconditional support and loyalty to their parent's homeland. One does not have to be prophetic to predict that negative consequences will arise in terms of the diaspora's readiness and capacity to contribute to the economic, social and political development in Eritrea.

Yet, in spite (or rather because) of the government's recurrent emphasis on self-reliance, Eritrea -- today more than ever -- depends on its diaspora in order to survive in an

increasingly globalised world. This is true not only in financial terms, but also regarding “social remittances,” such as the diaspora's socio-political engagement, its technological skills, and input in terms of behaviors and ideas (Levitt 1999). Cassanelli argues similarly, when he says:

A dynamic and open homeland government can encourage members of the diaspora to invest ideas as well as financial means in their country of origin, and makes it easier for them to socialize their children that are mostly born and brought up abroad ... in the same spirit. ... there is a dialectical relationship between development in diaspora and development at home. The reconstruction and renewal of one, improves the possibilities for reconstruction and renewal of the other (Cassanelli 2001:26, translation B. Conrad).

But in order to create and maintain such a mutually fruitful relationship between Eritrea and its diaspora, it is of fundamental importance to give the latter voice and to also listen to it. Being suppressed, voice is bound to eventually unleash its destructive potential; taken seriously it will reinforce loyalty, as Hirschman has shown.<sup>52</sup> Appeals for pluralism, democratic reforms or more participation in general as they have also been brought forth by voices in Eritrea and in the diaspora are therefore neither “defeatist,” “idealistic,” nor “unfit” for the country. Rather, to hear and heed them constitutes a necessity if Eritrea is to defend and develop its remarkable achievements “against all odds.” As Amartya Kumar Sen put it:

In earlier [colonial] times, there were lengthy discussions on whether one country or another was yet “fit for democracy,”... [but] the question itself was wrong-headed: a country does not have to be judged to be fit for democracy, rather it has to become fit through democracy. (Sen 1999:6)

---

<sup>52</sup>“... exit and voice being illegal and severely penalized they will be engaged in only when deterioration has reached so advanced a stage that recovery is no longer possible or desirable. Moreover, at this stage voice and exit will be undertaken with such strength that their effect will be destructive rather than reformist” (Hirschman 1970: 121).

## Chapter 6

### From Revolution to Religion?

The Politics of Religion in the Eritrean Diaspora in German<sup>1</sup>

---

*The influence of the Coptic Church over the lives and behavior of the Eritrean Tigrinyans cannot be overstated.*

*-- Gerald K. Trevaskis*

In February 2003 I attended a workshop on “Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies“ in Bayreuth. The text on the invitation it read: “...*religion can be understood as a ‘motor’ of African’s diaspora-building.*“ In general this is certainly correct, yet the Eritrean case seems to prove an exception to this finding. This is not to say that religion is totally irrelevant to Eritrean diaspora-building, but until quite recently it has certainly not been its motor either.

The Eritrean diaspora constitutes one of the largest and oldest African communities in Germany. Yet, unlike most other African migrant congregations that tend to form the very core of diaspora identity, Eritrean religious groups have so far played a rather marginal role among the numerous secular Eritrean organisations in Germany.<sup>2</sup> One might be led to conclude that Eritreans are perhaps a particularly “unreligious“ folk in general, yet this is hardly the case: In Eritrea as well as in Ethiopia, Christianity dates back to the 4th century

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revised version of an article by the author that was published in the reader “Religion in the Context of African Migration,” edited by Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel (2005). I would like to thank the organizers of the workshop „Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies“ (February 2003), especially Afe Adogame, for inspiring me to look into religious aspects of life in the Eritrean community. I would also like to thank the participants of the workshop, especially Jim Spickard, and also the anonymous reviewer of book contribution for their helpful questions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> As the overwhelming majority of Eritreans in Germany belong to Christian denominations this article focuses solely on Christian communities. In Eritrea, however, around 52 per cent of population adhere to Islam, the rest are mostly Orthodox Christians, and a tiny minority practise traditional religions.

A.D. It was and is not only a religion, but also a way of life. As such it is closely interwoven with tradition, culture, identity, and with the state. Religious practice structures everyday life in the Eritrean highlands and practically all social events have religious aspects, too: be it *rite de passage* festivities, highlights in the agricultural cycle, meetings of rural self-help organisations or even political gatherings. Perhaps nothing will illustrate the religious penetration of daily life better than the obligation to observe up to 250 fasting days *per annum*. Given this great importance of Orthodox Christianity in Eritrea it might strike us as rather surprising that it took more than 20 years before Orthodox Eritrean refugees in Frankfurt (home to the largest Eritrean community in Germany) finally established their own parish. Asked about the dominance of secular associations, a young Eritrean living in Germany hinted somewhat darkly: "...religious activities have not exactly been encouraged here." (Ermias<sup>3</sup>, March 2001).

Following this hint, this chapter discusses why religion was not the first choice for community building in the Eritrean diaspora, and why indeed religious activities remained – until well after Eritrean independence – rather marginalized. It also traced the resurgence of religion in the Eritrean diaspora in Germany looking at two case studies from Frankfurt. While religion on the one hand has recently grown in importance and now constitutes one of the alternatives to the political communities, the aim of this chapter also is to show how much politics still permeates all social fields including the religious congregations.

\*

After a brief but indispensable excursion into the role religion has played in recent Eritrean history, the first part of this paper attempts to answer the questions raised above: Who discouraged religious activities in the diaspora and for what reason? The focus of analysis is on the inherent conflict between religion and national revolution in Eritrea, and the consequences this conflict had for Eritrean exiles in Germany prior to Eritrean independence. The second part then brings us closer to the present. After independence the secular Eritrean exile community virtually collapsed. Simultaneously a careful "re-vitalisation" of religious life could be observed. What are the reasons behind this development? In the third and final part of the paper I look at the complex and difficult relationship between religious and political institutions in the diaspora today, which is further complicated by intersecting religious and regional identities on the one, and interdenominational tensions on the other hand. As far as possible these developments are

---

<sup>3</sup> Names changed.

illustrated using the examples of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Pentecostal congregations in the diaspora.

### **Religion in Eritrea**

As outlined in the previous chapters, most members of the Eritrean diaspora fled their home country in the course of the 30-years-war of independence against Ethiopia (1962-1991). From the mid-1970s onwards this war was dominated by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The imperatives of the EPLF were not restricted to a military victory over the Ethiopian army. The EPLF's over-arching goals were both nation-building and, in the language of those days, a "social revolution." In this context the ideological background of the Marxist-Leninist oriented guerilla certainly has to be considered, yet it would be an oversimplification to explain the difficulties of establishing church communities in the diaspora by the antagonism between religious and political creeds alone. Rather, the problems arose from the complex overlapping and intersecting of identities within the refugees' home country.

Eritrea can be roughly divided into two geographical zones: the southern highlands bordering Ethiopia, and the western and eastern lowlands fringed by the Sudanese border and the Red Sea respectively. This geographical divide also roughly corresponds to ethno-religious fault-lines. The highlands are inhabited by the Tigrinya, Christian sedentary farmers and urbanites who also constitute the majority of Eritrean refugees in Germany. Most of them belong to the Orthodox Church. Small minorities follow other Christian denominations (mostly the Catholic or Protestant Church). The lowland dwellers consist of about eight ethno-linguistic groups, whose most dominant common feature is their adherence to Islam. They used to be nomads, and though this is no longer true for most of them, the stereotype prevails. Lines of conflict among parts of the highland and lowland population, but also within both regions, coincide with the boundaries of ethnic, economic, religious and kinship groups. And despite all national rhetoric the spectre of ethno-religious and regional separatism continues to haunt Eritrean politics even after independence and also casts its long shadow over the diaspora.

As mentioned before, pre-colonial Eritrea has neither been a political entity, nor did its peoples possess a common identity. Like elsewhere in Africa it was only the effect Italian colonial politics that fostered a first notion of an all-embracing Eritrean identity, but paradoxically also cemented or even created identities based on language, culture, religious



adherence, regional origin and economic activity (cf. Conrad 1997). When, after the end of Italian rule in 1941, Eritrea was put under British Military Administration (BMA), the British fostered political and civic organisations and vaguely promised independence. In the major towns, notably in Asmara, an Eritrean intelligentsia emerged, bringing forth an early Eritrean nationalism based mainly on anti-colonial sentiments (see chapter 1). Yet, this first taste of freedom and the hope of self-determination did not last long. In 1952 Eritrea became federated with Ethiopia and ten years later, after the steady erosion of Eritrean federal rights, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea as the 14th province of Ethiopia. At the same time the first armed resistance group, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), emerged from the Muslim lowlands, a region most fervently opposed to being incorporated into Christian-ruled Ethiopia. However, with Ethiopian oppression making itself increasingly felt all over Eritrea, the movement's ranks were soon joined by Christian Eritreans, too, who had initially, though not all of them entirely out of free will, supported the federation with "Mother Ethiopia" (cf. chapter 1).<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1960s the ELF's predominantly Muslim leadership came under attack from parts of its rank and file. Especially members of the Christian faction (many of them students that had left the university in Addis Ababa to join the rebels) accused the ELF of not only of discriminating against Christian recruits, but also of jeopardizing the struggle in general by sticking to an organisational pattern that reinforced ethnic and sectarian solidarities rather than promoting national unity. The movement split and, after a bloody "civil war", a new dominant force made up of both Christians and Muslims, emerged: the aforementioned EPLF that proclaimed a decidedly secular policy.

Apart from independence their prime aim was to "forge" an overarching Eritrean national identity submerging sectarian, ethnic, regional and kinship loyalties. One example for their nation-building efforts was the abolition of religious food taboos: Eritrean Christians and Muslims alike were not allowed to eat the meat of animals slaughtered or prepared by the other group. Christians disregarding this rule even risked excommunication. Still, the EPLF forced its fighters to share their food regardless of the butcher's religious affiliation. The "national" was made paramount over "parochialisms" such as religion or ethnicity. The EPLF also ousted the practice of female genital mutilation among the fighters, many of whom were women. A campaign was started to convince also both

---

<sup>4</sup> The question of whether one favoured independence or Union/Federation with Ethiopia can, of course, not be answered by pointing to the certainly important religious solidarities alone. It would, however, go far beyond the scope of this chapter to explore into the very complex alliances behind the pro- and contra Eritrean independence factions in the 1940s and 1950s (cf. Conrad 1997).

Christian and Muslim civilians to stop this tradition. Marriages between Muslim and Christian EPLF member also became rather common, though few of them lasted beyond independence.

### **From a religious to a revolutionary people**

As the above examples show, the EPLF did not only try to make the freedom fighters true Eritreans, but also extended its sphere of influence to the civilian population. This was feasible only in the (semi-) liberated areas, the Sudanese refugee camps and, perhaps most effectively so, in the overseas diaspora. In order to understand why the diaspora remained primarily secular until independence, we must therefore examine more closely why religion was something of an anathema to the EPLF and why this attitude was adopted, or at least not opposed, by the majority of originally ardent Christians in the diaspora. Let us first look at the reasons behind the EPLF's negative attitude towards religion. Basically, three closely interrelated points can be made out:

1. The Orthodox Church's tradition as a State Church and its role in averting early Eritrean independence
2. The danger of sectarianism splitting national unity (through internal fission as well as external fusion)
3. The EPLF's socialist ideology regarding religion as a "reactionary" or "counter-revolutionary" force

"Traditionally control has been exercised by a central government with the use of military force in combination with the persuasive power of the Church" Kjetil Tronvoll (1998: 191) sums up the relationship between church and State in Ethiopia. To the EPLF the Orthodox Church, or more precisely the *Ethiopian* Orthodox Church, therefore simply was a henchmen of the Ethiopian Crown: Particularly well-remembered was the Church's campaigning on behalf of the Eritrean Unionist movement in the 1940s and 1950s which aimed at the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia. The Eritrean highlanders, who share Orthodox faith, language and culture with the Tigrayans of Northern Ethiopia, were coerced and threatened into supporting the Unionist's cause. Financed by Ethiopia, the Unionists did not shy away from using terror as a means of persuasion (cf. Trevaskis 1960). And the Eritrean clergy, not least in the hope of being restored to church land formerly expropriated by the Italians, assisted them using the "formidable weapons of excommunication and refusal to celebrate mass" (Nadel 1944:33).

Other Christian denominations were just marginally less suspect. While Catholic and Protestant Churches could claim that their schools had brought forth a considerable percentage of Eritrea's educated, pro-independence elite,<sup>5</sup> they were still colonial products, and as such bore the stigma of being "un-Eritrean". Catholics and Protestants in Eritrea are either converts from Orthodox to Catholic or Protestant faith or Mission Christians whose ancestors were Muslims or animists (Aren 1978:370). Moreover, as foreign missions were more successful in some places than in others, there exists a nexus between Catholic and Protestant faith and certain ethnic identities. The Bilen Christians, for instance, are mostly Catholics, while the Mensa were converted by the Protestant Swedish Mission. Among the highlanders a particularly large number of converts to Catholic faith can be found in the Akele Guzai region. In all instances an element of sectarianism is added to ethnic or regional identities thus making them even more dangerous obstacles to national unity in the eyes of Eritrean nationalists.

Hostility towards evangelical Christians such as the members of the Mekane Yesus Church can also be dated back into pre-revolutionary times. Arens (1978: 442) finds: "Orthodox attitudes towards evangelical Christians expressed themselves either in open-minded dialogue or in violent opposition." EPLF opposition to Pentecostals and other Evangelical or Charismatic Churches, however, seems based less on negative historical experiences or their divisive potential as regards Eritrean unity, but on ideology and some degree of competition.<sup>6</sup> Article 7A of the EPLF's first national Democratic Programme from 1977, clearly states that the EPLF was generally willing to "safeguard every citizen's freedom of religion and belief", *but* would "strictly oppose all the imperialist-created new, counter-revolutionary movements such as Jehova's witnesses, Pentecostal, Bahai, etc." (as cited in Hepner 2003, see also EPLF 1980). Where does the aversion against these churches originate from?

In the late 1970s there were not that many evangelical Christians in Eritrea. There was, however, a kind of charismatic reform movement within some urban Orthodox congregations (Aren 1978). It attracted large numbers of young people and later provided a hotbed for proselytising by Pentecostal missionaries from Addis Ababa, some of which were Eritrean who had studied at Ethiopian universities. In Ethiopia proper, especially in Addis Ababa, there were a number of sizable and evangelical movements: "The early

---

<sup>5</sup> Including among many others Issayas Afewerki (Former EPLF-leader and Eritrean President since independence), who is a Protestant.

<sup>6</sup> Both the Liberation movements and Pentecostal churches attracted especially young people.

history of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia cannot be condensed to missionary activities. It is a story of multiple beginnings ... the most influential... was perhaps the prayer meeting begun by Addis Ababa university students in 1965.”(Haustein 2008). It is not unreasonable to assume that there were also Eritreans among these students, as they formed a relatively large part of the Addis Ababa student body. Many of the Eritrean students in Addis, including for example Issaias Afeworki, later joined the ELF or EPLF-fighters. Thus, Pentecostal and revolutionary movements were in a sense competing for the same group of potential members. As Pool writes of the EPLF recruitment strategy: “In line with EPLF policy of mobilization and recruiting core groups of support, a special emphasis was put on youth. They were not delineated on the basis of class and compromised both genders between the ages of 16 and 28“(Pool 2001: 125). The Pentecostals too, would find their followers rather among the young than the elder strata of society. Moreover both movements promised a vision for a better life, though their means were rather different.

Apart from this direct competition for members between the religious and revolutionary movements, there was also a competition of ideologies. It must not be forgotten that the EPLF maintained a lively exchange with exile groups that were in close contact with other leftist organizations that criticized the growing influence of evangelical churches on (socialist) Third World countries as cultural imperialism (cf. chapter one). An Eritrean in Germany whom I asked about the Pentecostal churches promptly cited an article he had read about a connection between the CIA and the global spread of Pentecostal churches. Judging also from today’s attitudes vis-à-vis the Pentecostal and other non-mainstream churches, it is not unreasonable to assume that the EPLF loathed the decidedly a-political attitude of Pentecostal Christians that made it difficult to mobilise them for the “national cause“ and dampened people’s willingness to put the independence struggle above everything else.

So far we have only looked at the relationship between the independence movement and Christian communities in Eritrea, almost omitting the other (Muslim) half of the Eritrean population. But even though Muslims are but a small minority in the diaspora, the Christians - Muslims divide and its consequences for the liberation struggle must be briefly outlined in this context. It was the continued threat of a sectarian split along this line that has perhaps influenced the EPLF’s negative attitude towards religion most profoundly. It all started in the 1940s. After growing religious animosities a plan was brought forth to divide Eritrea into two parts: the “Muslim half“ of the country was to be incorporated into (British) Sudan, the Christian highlands into Ethiopia. Even though the Eritrean population (Muslims

even more so than Christians) was unexpectedly fiercely opposed to this idea, the schism between adherents of Islam and Christianity (deepened by ethnic difference, economic rivalry and colonial identity politics) was never completely bridged. It re-emerged, this time intertwined with political ideology, in the late 1960s, culminating in internecine warfare between ELF and the dissident groups that later were to form the EPLF. This “civil strife“ lasted for about 10 years and ultimately cost Eritrea its second chance to become independent. The threat of split remained vivid in the minds of the EPLF and most Eritreans. It had to be avoided at all costs. It is on this background that religion was seen as a “contradiction“ to the national revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Marxism-Leninism finally provided the intellectual framework for these very real dangers. As socialist movements elsewhere on the globe the EPLF regarded religion as an “opiate for the masses“. Yet in my opinion, it was only in combination with the negative role of the Orthodox Church and the divisive potential of sectarianism (especially a renewed split along the Christian-Muslim divide) that the EPLF began to subjugate religion. Moreover, if Pentecostals and the like were seen as “counter-revolutionary“, “imperialist agents“, the Orthodox Church was the main “reactionary“ force within Eritrea.<sup>8</sup> It clearly represented and defended the political and social order that the EPLF intended to overcome by its social revolution. Not only had the Orthodox Church advocated union with Ethiopia, it was also the main authority controlling social life in the Eritrean highlands and helping to maintain the *status quo* of inequalities between nobility and peasantry, *restenya* (original settlers) and *makelai aliet* (late comers, immigrants), men and women, young and old (cf. Gebre-Medhin 1989). The EPLF’s social reforms, including innovative land distribution, female emancipation, and above all the democratisation of political structures, certainly did not go down well with the Orthodox clergy.

All these resentments against religion and more particularly against certain religious groups and institutions on the side of the EPLF cannot fully explain the initial irrelevance of religious groups in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany and other western countries of exile (with the possible exception of the USA).<sup>9</sup> After all, it seems that the influence of EPLF

---

<sup>7</sup> Among many Christians also in the diaspora there is still a discernible distrust against their Muslim compatriots, who on their side feel (yet again) marginalised and discriminated against by the EPLF-turned -government. And in spite of all claims that neither ELF nor EPLF were dominated by Muslims or Christians respectively, the notion of the ELF as a Muslim, and the EPLF as a Christian movement has never been wholly eradicated to this very day.

<sup>8</sup> Not that Islam had a better record in this regard, but as the focus of this paper is on Christian Churches I will not go further into detail here.

<sup>9</sup> As Jim Spickard pointed out at the workshop, the USA provide a favourable setting for establishing religious (especially Christian) congregations. Comparing our research results my colleague Tricia Hepner and I found

ideology in the liberated zones (cf. Tronvoll 1998) or the Sudanese refugee camps (cf. Sendker 1990) has had little apparent influence on the religiosity of people as such. Again three factors can be made out to explain the different development in the diaspora: first, demographic reasons; second, Practical difficulties to establish religious associations, and finally also psychological factors connected to the refugee situation.

Especially in the early years Eritrean exiles in Germany and other western countries did not represent a cross section of Eritrean society, but came predominantly from the urban middle class, were often highly politicised and rather less religious than most of their compatriots. It was them who build organisational structures in the mid- and late seventies which later served to absorb other less secularised refugee waves that otherwise might have had a stronger urge to join or build religious networks (see chapter 1). And for those wanting to set up a religious community, there were other problems waiting. Orthodox Eritrean refugees, constituting the majority of Eritreans in Germany, faced a special dilemma as the Church they belonged to had one major fault: it was Ethiopian. Understandably, most Eritreans were not ready to join the “enemy’s” congregation. Due to international regulations setting up their own national church was not possible either. As a nation-in-waiting, you cannot have a national church (Schröder 1992: 59). With Orthodox rite affording the presence of a priest for most religious acts this posed some considerable obstacles (AMKA 1997:100).

Many Orthodox Eritreans ended up joining some hospitable Protestant or Catholic congregation in their neighbourhood. As refugees they had often come in touch with representatives of these two main churches in Germany as they also provide social services and refugee counseling. Others decided to resort to the services of the Egyptian Coptic Church from which the Ethiopian Church had separated only in 1959.<sup>10</sup> They participated in Coptic services, got married or had their children christened by a Coptic priest. Though many Eritreans express gratitude for the Copts’ hospitality it was still seen as only a compromise. Contrary to popular believe the Coptic Church and the Ethiopian (and now also Eritrean) Orthodox Church are not identical: “... the Ethiopian Church ... is a distinct national Church in which the spirit of the nation has found intense expression“ (Trimingham 1950:18). The Coptic Church not only lacks certain distinctive features of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but also uses Arabic in Church, a language many Eritrean highland

---

that indeed Eritrean religious groups play a much more important role in the US than they do for instance in Germany.

<sup>10</sup> It should not be forgotten that Eritrean refugees were asylum seekers that for the length of their asylum procedure (which from the 1980s could take years) were not allowed to move freely within Germany. Hence the choice of a religious community was further curtailed by the impediments of German asylum laws.

Christians associate with Islam, the lowlands and the ELF. Simple prayer meetings in private were difficult, too. Quite apart from the facts that many refugees were illiterate and hardly any layman understood the ancient Church language Ge‘ez, reading the bible was (and is) an anathema for the Orthodox. As an evangelical Eritrean puts it: “...so many of my countrymen think themselves unworthy of reading the bible ...they are convinced that only a priest is allowed to interpret the gospel“ (Matewos 2002:4). As yet I know only little about “non-churched religious practices“ (cf. Spickard 2003), but it can be safely assumed that a considerable number of Eritrean refugees tried to fulfill their religious obligations in private. Women in particular observed fasting rules and prayer times, but in many cases even this was inhibited by time constraints (the preparation of fasting food is often a lengthy business), jobs and, of course, the participation in political activities. Until independence most Orthodox thus remained torn between religions and national demands, often neglecting religion to serve a this-worldly Messiah called Issayas Afeworki in his struggle for liberation.

But it was not merely the ghosts of the remote and recent past that made it difficult for religious groups to organise themselves. Perhaps most important was the psychological factor. It was not their religion, but their struggle for an independent nation that had forced Eritreans to flee, and in exile it continued to mark almost every aspect of their lives. They called their children *Sawra* (Revolution), *Harnet* (Liberty) or *Selam*. They left jobs or university to become “full-time lobbyists“ for Eritrea, and even social gatherings served as fundraising functions. Becoming politically engaged also helped mitigating the refugees‘ sense of guilt vis-à-vis those they had left behind, and gave them the feeling that they could do something to make return possible. None of the churches could offer such strong incentives. Also we must bear in mind that most refugees regarded life in exile as provisional and so it seemed justifiable to do without religion for a while, especially if becoming active involved so many difficulties.

Clearly the EPLF’s exile branches also more or less directly sought to discourage religious life as they did not wish to share the scarce financial and human resources available in the diaspora. Not unlike other socialist movements or states they introduced pseudo-religious vocabulary (e.g. “martyrs“ instead of war dead) and sought to replace religious traditions with worldly ones. One diaspora Eritrean told me that it was common to get married at the EPLF office. The ceremony was an imitation of a marriage among fighters in the field. Despite its attempts to minimise the influence of religious organisations

at home and abroad, however, the EPLF simultaneously tried to establish links with local (e.g. German) churches as a part of their lobbying activities:

... A parallel activity was the establishment of foreign sympathizers in the media, universities, churches and aid agencies. As the majority of Eritreans in Europe and the US were Christians, ... links to religious aid organisations ... were more easily facilitated. (Pool 2001:130)

Apart from supporting the Eritrean cause as such, local churches also provided services for Eritrean refugee families and let Eritrean organisations use their facilities. Occasionally, one informant told me, their hospitality was “abused“. One instance he referred to was a Christmas celebration organised for Eritrean refugees by a parish in Frankfurt. The EPLF cadres in charge turned it into a propaganda event, and without further ado replaced carols and religious hymns with revolutionary songs.

#### **“Back to the roots?“ – The revival of religion in the context of diaspora-building**

After these rather general considerations, I will now focus on the developments in Germany or, more particularly, in Frankfurt where I have been doing most of my fieldwork. Home to an estimated fifth of approximately 25.000 Eritreans in Germany, a great variety of Eritrean associations, both religious and secular, can be found here.

After the first noticeable wave of Eritrean refugees in the mid-1970s many more followed in the 1980s. At that time something quite astonishing happened. A group of Eritrean refugees in Frankfurt established a small ecumenical group including Orthodox Christians, two Protestant groups, as well as members of the Pentecostal Full Gospel and the Faith Mission Church. Only the Catholics kept themselves aloof, or had joined German parishes. The ecumenical group called themselves “Eritrean Evangelical Self-Help Association“. Apart from providing a space for religious activities, it helped members to organize funerals or weddings and offered religious education as well as Tigrinya language classes for Eritrean children.

Though loosely affiliated with a local Protestant Church, they did not become an integral part of it. This arrangement helped them to appeal not only to religious, but also to nationalist sentiments, while at the same time building useful ties with German society. Given the suspicion that traditionally existed between the various Christian denominations in Eritrea it becomes clear that the nation-building efforts and the experience of exile had led to quite drastic changes in interfaith relations, even if the ecumenical spirit resulted from



necessity rather than choice, as the following statement of an Orthodox priest in Sudan illustrates:

... At home Catholics and Protestants used to look down upon our old faith. They believed to be superior as their faith came from the Europeans. .. They ... do not circumcise their children. They do not know food taboos. This used to be a reason for avoiding contact with them, but here we have to help one another. Here, abroad, people do not feel these differences anymore. .. Only the community of all Christians can guarantee the survival of our faith. (Sendker 1990:198, translation B.C.)

With more and more Eritrean refugees arriving, the number of active Christians grew too. As a result some denominations left the ecumenical group or ran parallel meetings. The Pentecostals, or “Pente“ for instance started meeting in the flat of a preacher. Today, I was told more than once, his congregation is bigger than that of the Orthodox, though other sources strongly oppose this evaluation. Interestingly it was also the very “Pente“-Preacher who used to translate from Arabic into Tigrinya for Eritreans attending Coptic services. According to Schröder, a number of formally secular Orthodox groups were set up all over Germany, mostly with the help of German Protestant Churches in late 1980s and early 1990s (Schröder 1992:54). One of them was the “Association of Eritrean Orthodox Refugees“ in Frankfurt that later was to become the *Medhane Alem* Church (see below).

Despite the religious activities I have described, it must be made quite clear that active Christians constituted only a minority, and that religion always came second in line after politics. Not only was political life better organised, participation here was also an imperative unless one wanted to keep away from Eritrean circles. Furthermore, the meagre budget of most refugees did not allow for membership in too many other groups apart from the EPLF:

Meetings of EPLF organisations outside [in the diaspora] provided a considerable source of income: regular attendance, participation in political education classes and payments at meetings were a mark of EPLF membership. The price for not fulfilling these obligations was a form of social exclusion from the community. (Pool 2001:130)

It was only after independence that religious life in the diaspora experienced some cautious “re-vitalisation“. When I say “re-vitalisation“, I refer to the involvement of a larger proportion of the Eritrean refugees in the building of religious networks and the communal practice of religion beyond the private space. I will try and trace this new development, using two very different cases: namely that of the Orthodox and the Pentecostal Church.

Two factors can be singled out that contributed mainly to the religious revival after 1991. First of all the breakdown of the political structures that had been the backbone of the refugee community left an organizational and emotional void. In addition to that many refugees were uncertain whether to return to Eritrea or stay on in Germany, and were thus highly susceptible to any form of individual social and spiritual guidance. Secondly, the idea of imminent return as well as plans to stay in Germany for a while or even for good, created some urge to pass on traditions and values to the second generation of diaspora Eritreans.

Both factors served both denominations to widen their sphere of influence. With independence, the Orthodox Church also finally got rid of their most pressing problem: in 1994 it became independent of the Ethiopian Church and could now set up diaspora-branches. The Eritrean Orthodox *Medhane Alem* (Saviour of the World) Church in Frankfurt has existed since 1996. For a couple of years now the community has been using the Protestant Katharinenkirche in the City Centre which was officially consecrated by the Eritrean *Abuna* Filipos after the congregation had got its own priest in 1999. Curiously it was the founder of the ecumenical group, himself a protestant, who convinced a visiting Eritrean priest to stay in Frankfurt. *Abè Keshi*, as the priest is called, is a charismatic figure providing the moral and spiritual guidance many of his parishioners had sorely missed in the past.

Still, the first years were difficult. Only a few old women turned up for the 6.30 Sunday Morning Service. In 2005 the church had about 250 registered members. About 150 of them congregate each Sunday. On major holidays, however, the Katherinenkirche is crowded with Eritreans from all over Germany, and though elderly women in traditional white dresses are still in the majority, the number of younger people, especially families with kids, is growing. When you ask them why they join the church they will invariably explain that religion is part of their tradition and that they want their children to learn about it. Here, the initially mentioned close linkage between religion and culture is resurfacing: “For the Orthodox it’s mainly a back to the roots thing“ an informant explained the renewed interest. Religious traditions are finally coming out of the closet again. In 2002, the church even had an information desk at the annual Eritrea Festival in Frankfurt that is organised jointly by the Eritrean Consulate and the umbrella organisation of secular Eritrean communities (*MahbereKoms*) in Germany, and there are even plans to built an Eritrean Orthodox Church in Frankfurt.

The Pentecostals seem to have attracted even more followers<sup>11</sup> who, for all I know, tend to be younger than those of the Orthodox Church. The emphasis on spirituality, a highly participatory style and the use of modern hymns appeals to people who are less traditionally oriented and yet have not found a place in German society either. It seems the “Pente“ provide a haven for those who feel lost or have become marginalised by the wider Eritrean community. This is also true for those Eritreans that came to Germany *after* independence. Some of them already belonged to Pentecostal churches in Eritrea, but others joined here in search of emotional security, moral and perhaps also material support. Eritreans who came as refugees years ago often reject these newcomers who left their home “voluntarily“ as deserters.

The churches in general also offer help in everyday life. Both the clerics and the leaders of the religious communities tend to stress the importance of everyday problems in Germany and provide a forum for discussion, a network for mutual help and advice. For example, the Easter Conference organized by protestant Eritreans provides a unique opportunity to talk about family conflicts, problems with drug abuse, joblessness etc. It furthermore brings men and women, old and young into *one* discussion forum thus trying to heal rifts and create understanding between these groups. This shows another capacity of religious institutions: They can bring together a larger group of people than any political gathering, perhaps also because of a greater inclusiveness. Also, where political meetings are dominated by factionalism (e.g. between followers of the former EPLF and the ELF, if they bother to discuss political matters together at all) and outright enmity is always lurking behind the corner, in religious gatherings a more reconciliatory spirit prevails.

### **Precarious relations: religious and political networks in the diaspora**

In this final part the intricate and sensitive relations between politics, religion and ethnic or regional identities that I outlined at the beginning again become meaningful. Within the past decade Eritrea has rapidly transformed from a symbol of a new Africa into an authoritarian state. The outbreak of a devastating “border-war“ with Ethiopia in 1998 first led to an upsurge of nationalism in the diaspora. But support was soon accompanied by critical questions and a debate on democratisation. Since September 2001 critical voices in Eritrea

---

<sup>11</sup> It appears that there are at least three or four Eritrean Pentecostal churches in Frankfurt, though it has proved very difficult to find out something more definite. Generally it proved to be difficult to get statements by “Pente” about their situation. I got the impression that this is due to the primacy of politics. The few “Pente” who were ready to tell me at least a little bit underlined their good relations to the political *MahbereKom*. All eschewed to mention the conflict between the Eritrean government and the Pentecostal Churches in Eritrea.

are being silenced by openly repressive government measures (see chapter 5 for more detail).

What consequences has this situation had for relations between religious and political groups and also for interfaith relations? I will again use the Orthodox and Pentecostal denominations as examples. Relations between the Orthodox Church and the secular community (*MahbereKom*) are publicly described as amicable and there is, of course, double membership. Yet, a member of the church told me in private: “When we were still weak and asked them to cooperate, they refused. Now that we are getting stronger they have approached us, but now we are no longer interested“. Evidently, the church is strengthened by the lack of confidence in politics.<sup>12</sup> It also seems to have managed to build a functioning community that can mobilize solidarity, offer moral support and provide services to the people in the diaspora. In contrast, the *MahbereKom* is often depicted as a government agent that is mainly interested in people’s money without giving them anything in return.

Still, the Orthodox Church is not a space free of political in-fighting. In fact, by becoming an independent national church in 1994 it has followed its long tradition of maintaining close links with the ruling class. Replacing the traditional church language *Ge’ez* with Tigrinya not only was a step towards reform but also emphasised its readiness to sever links with the Ethiopian Mother Church. Not that the Orthodox Church was a great friend of the Eritrean government, or vice versa. Yet, both parties know that opposing the other might easily lead to their own downfall. Attending an Orthodox Christmas Service in Frankfurt I was therefore little surprised to hear a representative of the consulate make a speech. Like many of my informants one of the contributors to Eritrean news web site expresses dismay at the Orthodox Church’s readiness to serve political ends: .

The greatest church in Eritrea is the Orthodox church. They have flatly failed our youth. The Orthodox church in Eritrea waffled too many times by siding with every political leadership that emerges. We have slowly lost the truth ... They have sided with Haile Selassie, with Menghistu Haile Mariam, and now with our current government. Are your principles in your Bible or in the government? (Dr. Haben 2002)

In 2005 I was surprised to see official representatives of the Orthodox church at the government sponsored Festival Eritrea in Frankfurt. They had their own stand with

---

<sup>12</sup> This implies that by default the church is itself playing a bigger role than that of a spiritual community. It is seen by its members also both as a substitute for reliable secular political organizations to get access to material benefits as well as a political agency itself

information material on services and their plans to build a church of their own. In later pro-government rallies, e.g. in Berlin in 2005, Orthodox Church representatives marched in support of the government.

In other respects, too, the Church has not remained unaffected by identity politics. The growing political discontent has not only reinforced the religious, but also ethno-regional ties. This is not really surprising when we look at the traditional proximity of religion, culture and society in highland Eritrea. While village communities and parishes can only seldomly be re-constructed within the diaspora context, the next-best thing, the regional identities, can. The Christian highlanders are divided into three regional groups based on mythical kinship. Many Eritreans today reject regional identities as backward and opposed to national unity. Often it is claimed that notions of discrimination among highland Eritreans have been the result of British colonial policies propagating division as a means of strengthening their rule. While the British indeed relied on a “divide and rule“ style of governance, historians will not agree that regionalism in the Eritrean highlands was a British creation.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1940s, at the very beginning of the ten-year British administration of Eritrea, Siegfried Nadel finds:

To the people of Eritrea at large, the three plateau Divisions, Hamasien, Akkele Guzay and Serae, are different ‘countries‘ in the true sense of the word. With different history, different character, even different customs, and the people of the different divisions are conscious of these differences almost as one is conscious of different nationality. (Nadel 1944:67)

Discussing regional belonging in the diaspora clearly and for the obvious reasons had been a taboo during the times of the Eritrean revolution and the struggle for nationhood. Today, however, it is resurfacing again; partly it seems as a result of the failure to create functioning social communities for all Eritreans in exile, and partly because people are trying to connect to a past beyond the struggle for independence, to the very roots of their culture(s) which they want to pass on to the next generation. For some time, people from Hamasien have been rumoured to dominate politics. Eritreans from the other two highland regions were quick to establish clandestine groups. Today a growing number of diaspora Eritreans is said to associate themselves only with people from their own region. Marrying across these regional boundaries has even become a real problem. These segmentary tendencies do not stop at the church gates either. Orthodox Christians from one of the allegedly deprived regions felt discriminated against in the *Medhane Alem* Church and thus

---

<sup>13</sup> Wolbert Smidt; personal communication.

set up their own parish. Some dismiss them as sectarian separatists, other blame the Hamasien-born priest for this sad development.

Notwithstanding their earlier ecumenical cooperation the Pentecostal Church is not exactly well-liked among the Orthodox who regard it as a heretical rival organisation. But the “Pente“ generally polarise the Eritrean diaspora. Their existence tends to be kept a “secret“ vis-à-vis the unsuspecting outsider. I only learned about it a year after starting my research. A consulate representative even pretended to know nothing about such a group while a “Pente“ Pastor emphasised good relations with the Consulate. Of course, such reactions can be partly explained by the Eritrean government’s closure of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Eritrea last May. Like the Yehova’s Witnesses they have now been ousted as “not compatible“ with Eritrean culture. The remaining Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations at home and abroad have so far not objected. And even diaspora Eritreans who are otherwise critical of the government frequently show some understanding for the government’s ban of the Pentecostal Churches.

In absence of personal observations I thought it might be interesting to have a closer look at the evaluations that non-Pentecostal Eritreans have provided me with over time.<sup>14</sup> Those who were most critical said the “Pente” were hypocrites preaching water and drinking wine.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Pentecostals are said to have infiltrated Orthodox parishes in Eritrea and in the diaspora. The “Pente“ in Frankfurt are indeed proselytizing intensively. The Eritrean Full Gospel Church even has it’s own TV programme which is broadcast locally three times a week. A protestant Eritrean blamed the Pentecostal faith for making people passive and a-political, while another said it created political unrest. These contradictory statements only make sense when we recall the political nature of Eritrean exile identity. Being Eritrean means being a political person. The “Pente“, despite being a distinctly national community with Eritrean members only “...reject the narrow exclusionary face of nationalism.“ (Hepner 2003: forthcoming). Worse still, the Eritrean “Pente“ have close links with the Ethiopian Pentecostal Church (Yemane 2002: 16), a relation eyed with utmost suspicion by most non-Pentecostal Eritreans.

The most common accusation, however, is the Pentecostal’s “un-Eritreanness“, which reminds us strongly of the EPLF’s arguments back in the 1970s. One story I was told

---

<sup>14</sup> This was not caused by lack of interest on my behalf, although my focus was indeed on political questions. But the “Pente” were, as already stated above, very reluctant, even secretive, when questioned about their role, presumably just because of the political implications. I hope I can overcome these hurdles in future research focused more on the role of religion.

<sup>15</sup> A former member even accused some church leaders of sexually exploiting young female followers.

several times. A young man who had converted to “Pente“ one day approached his father who had a drinking problem. The son gave him a bible saying: “This is for you to help you find back to God!“ The narrators were shocked. To talk to your father in such a disrespectful manner, they stated unanimously, is absolutely against Eritrean culture. It becomes evident here that Pentecostalism is not only seen as a threat to Orthodox faith or national integrity, but also as a danger to Eritrean cultural identity and social values that are older than the nation itself (cf. Hepner 2003).

Apart from the above story, many Eritreans I spoke to also expressed dismay at the way the Pente-worshippers behave at their services. The parishioners are described as being “out of control“, or looking as if they were “drugged“:

As I entered the church the smiling faces, the dancing (chanting) for the Lord, and the music that was accompanied by a modern keyboard, drums and the like, soothed my heart, and changed my environment. It made me forget all the material things, and began to focus on my soul. ... The music intensified, the singers even sang louder and for the first time I began to open my mouth. Even though I did not know the words the congregation was singing, I had to join in. ... The prayer session was out of this world! I saw people confessing publicly, I saw people laying hands on other people, I witnessed people speak in a language I could not understand, and I saw demons being cast out ... . (Dr. Haben 2002)

Unlike with “Dr. Haben“, the seemingly uncontrolled singing and dancing, but especially the trances, the “speaking of tongues“ and the emotionally charged atmosphere provoked spontaneous repulsion among many Eritreans (be they secularised or members of a mainstream Church). Some, however, who had taken part in a service confessed how much they had liked it. After attending a “Pente“ wedding a young Orthodox woman was teased by friends: “We already thought that you will “go Pente,” too“. She denied any such intention laughingly, but said “I still find myself humming these songs to myself. Their music is really catchy“. This might also be the reason why the Orthodox have apparently reconsidered their general dislike of the “Pente“ and adopted some popular features of Pentecostal services such as communal singing in Tigrinya and playing electronic keyboards, most likely in the hope of appealing to youngsters who might otherwise become “Pente“. While most depicted the Pentecostals in a negative light, it seems that some of their merits could not be denied. A positive aspect mentioned was their success in “healing“ people who had been given up by other Eritreans. Says an Eritrean social worker: “I am not convinced about the “Pente“. However, when I have a truly hopeless case, I sent him there. I have seen them do miracles!“

Some would add that it would indeed take a miracle to “heal“ today’s fragmented Eritrean diaspora and bring back the sense of solidarity remembered from the earlier days of exile. But perhaps that too is only nostalgia. And it certainly seems doubtful if religion might be the motor behind such a miracle at the present stage: The primacy of politics since the beginnings of the struggle for an independent Eritrea has completely reversed the relationship between religion and state. Were, as stated above in the introduction, all activities, whether social or cultural or political, once structured by religion, today everything, including religious practice, is dominated by Eritrean politics and political events in Eritrea. And so far, the influx of new immigrants now claiming to have religious motifs (maybe also motivated by German legal provisions for granting asylum) does not seem to have induced a major change. As discussed in the previous chapter the growing church congregations may provide an alternative to the political communities, and that way rather contribute to the growing diversity and fragmentation of the community than to reconciliation.



## Chapter 7

### Out of the 'Memory Hole'

Alternative Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution in the Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

---

*Who controls the past, controls the future.  
Who controls the present, controls the past.*

-- "1984," George Orwell

*We have forgotten, because those in power have willed our  
oblivion by altering recorded history, by erasing traces.*

-- *The Amnesia Manifesto, 1984*

#### Ghosts in the closet

"The Victory of the Invincible" (Asgedom 1992), "Return to Hope" (Birnbaum 1994), "Winning the Peace" (Caputo 1996), "An African Switzerland" (Herrmann 1994) – headlines in the early and mid-1990s could have hardly been more optimistic. Resilience, single-mindedness, and courage; willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good, but also an almost overbearing pride, made Eritreans the perfect cast for the hero-role. Exiled Eritreans and a whole generation of western researchers, journalists and Third-World-lobbyists had their share in perpetuating the image of the exceptionalist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and a diverse people standing united in their 30 years struggle against the (first US- and later Soviet-backed) regional superpower Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup>

When independence came in 1993 Eritreans put all their efforts into the service of reconstructing a war-torn country with extremely scant resources. It was hard to resist that image of a just cause won "against all odds," and the can-do attitude of post-war Eritrean society. The unlikely success of the Eritrean nationalist revolution seemed to redeem not

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an updated version of an article by the same title published in: Afrika Spectrum, Volume 41, No. 2, 2006, pp: 249-271.

<sup>2</sup> The estrangement between the PFDJ and their foreign and domestic sympathizers grew further, with the clampdown on the press and the arrest of those within the party that had suggested reforms (see for instance Connell critique "Enough!" (2003).

only the sufferings of the country's inhabitants and its large scattered refugee communities abroad. Among old and new foreign supporters, too, it often evoked "that unruly hope yet to discover paradise lost" (Jansen 2001:11).<sup>3</sup> In the more laconic words of former volunteer teacher Justin Hill: "...I began to hear tales of Eritrea. An exciting new country defeating the stereotypes of Africa as corrupt, war-torn or hopeless. It was a country ... where people were united to help build their new society. ... I signed up" (Hill 2002:7).

Then, in 1998, a "border skirmish" between Eritrea and Ethiopia unexpectedly exploded into a full-blown war costing both countries tens of thousands of young lives, and displacing over a million people.<sup>4</sup> Almost unanimously dubbed a "senseless" war by the international press it did away with the notion of an "African Renaissance" under the guidance of the Eritrean and Ethiopian rebel-leaders-turned-presidents that had once appeared to be close friends. But this was not the only myth that was to be shattered. More specifically this war also did away with the admiration for the "exceptional," incorruptible Eritrean leadership. In much of the (often uninformed) footage of the war, the heroes of yesteryear were now made out as the villains. Formerly sympathetic observers expressed deep disappointment in seeing the idealized Eritrean ex-freedom fighters acting like warmongers.

But the war did not only lead to an international image problem for the still unelected Eritrean government, but also to internal political turmoil. After the initial upsurge of patriotism, the aftermath of the conflict laid bare a smouldering, growing disaffection between some parts of the Eritrean population (in- and outside of the country) and the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and perhaps most importantly, also within the latter. When I arrived in Eritrea in the summer of 2001, half a year after a peace agreement had been signed, the country was already another place than the one I had heard and read about.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the loss of lives, resources and the general

---

<sup>3</sup> Though Volker Jansen's quote refers to a stay in the Ukraine in the early 1990s, it reflects the sentiments of many Eritrea sympathisers. Like Hill, Jansen traces his enthusiasm to the prospect of contributing to making "a better world": "... I had gladly agreed when I was offered the teaching assignment in Kiev... I had been told that I was to work with people who were willing to make use of the unique chance that history offered them, that the winds of change were clearly perceptible, that things were moving." (2001:11; transl. B.C.).

<sup>4</sup> It would go beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the war here, yet it should be pointed out that the border issue while triggering the conflict was not the deeper reason behind it (see e.g. Trivelli 1998, Tronvoll & Tekeste 2000, Tronvoll 2000, Triulzi (n.d.), Matsuoka and Sorensen 2001, Reid 2003, Berdal and Plaut 2005, Mussie 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Part of this certainly has to do with personal expectations. But in numerous conversations with local and diaspora Eritreans as well as with expatriates it was widely commented that Eritrea had markedly (and not surprisingly) changed after the so-called "border-war," notably in regards to the general optimism, the loyalty

demoralizing effect, it seemed that this war had also brought back the demons of a never-dealt with – long gone and more recent – past. And with them came the ghost (cf. Matsuoka and Sorensen 2001) of memories that had been suppressed, bottled up, streamlined, glossed over or erased in order to shape the image of Eritrea that had prevailed for most of the 1990s. What Richard Reid notes in regard to the Eritrean-Tigrayan relationship, also rings true for the internal situation<sup>6</sup>:

... the jubilation following the achievement of independence was more than enough ... to engender a selective amnesia concerning certain less pleasant aspects in the history of the Eritrean liberation war. ... [H]owever... the events of 1998-2000 were a brutal awakening: their own history had returned to haunt them. (Reid 2003)

Over glasses of steaming spiced *sha'hi* in an Asmara bar, a middle-aged man put it more positively: “One good thing about this war, if there is any, is that we are finally talking openly about what is going wrong.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, during the first half of 2001, cafes and bars were buzzing with political discussion, most of it critical of the government.

Doubtlessly, the events of 2001 have neither been the start nor the end of the emergence and the repression of alternative histories and political dissent in general. Yet, it can be argued that the existence of both has since become more obvious, to foreign observers as well as to the wider Eritrean public in- and outside the country.<sup>8</sup> While the government’s intolerance towards dissenting views had before been masked first by a general “selective amnesia” and self-censorship and later by a war-imposed need for “unconditional solidarity,” the post-border-war situation for the first time produced an audible and widespread discontent. Criticising the present situation inevitably led to questions touching upon the historically derived legitimacy of the Eritrean leadership, and opened a Pandora’s box of new interpretations of the past.

---

towards the government and the dedication and discipline with which Eritreans had sought to rebuild their country during the inter-war years.

<sup>6</sup> And indeed for the relationship of some groups and individuals within the ruling party itself.

<sup>7</sup> Field notes summer 2001 (B.C.).

<sup>8</sup> To diverge from official narratives of the nationalist struggle and its resultant historical obligation to defend its achievements, i.e. independence, was widely viewed as an act of treason during the border war. Both the official Eritrea, but also the majority of the Eritrean population at home and abroad seemed to feel that way. Even prior to the border war years, there had been repeated aberration from the rule of law in Eritrea. These included diverse arrests, abductions and disappearances (for instance of ELF leaders in Eritrea and neighbouring countries), the shooting of protesting war veterans at Mai Habar, the introduction of special courts (allegedly to fight corruption), the arbitrary arrest of a local AFP journalist etc. (see for instance Ai report on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAFR640082002>. Downloaded: 23/05/03).

This process was much accelerated by the new medium that had helped the diaspora to campaign on behalf of Eritrea during the war: The Internet (Smidt 2001, Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b).<sup>9</sup> After the country had finally “gone online” in late 2000, Internet cafes mushroomed in Asmara. Additionally a rising number of largely amateurish private newspapers were springing up. In May 2001 prominent members of the ruling party made use of these new media outlets to utter their concerns about the political developments. In interviews, articles, and a joint open letter, the so-called “G15”-reformers appealed to President Issayas Afewerki to embark on a process of democratic reforms. In late summer 2001, however, this brief period of hope for an Eritrean *glasnost* was ended by a series of arrests and other repressive measures such as the closure of the budding private press<sup>10</sup>. A lively public discourse about the past, however, has since been taking place in cyberspace and among Eritreans living abroad.

In this chapter I will therefore focus on the diaspora as the main site of negotiating “official” and “unofficial” Eritrean national memory<sup>11</sup>. Here it must be noted that memory in the Eritrean diaspora, as well as in any other diasporic society, has its own dynamics. One the one hand memory is even more important to the creation of individual and collective identity in exile compared to those who never left home. On the other hand, memory in exile tends to be more incomplete, selective and dogmatic. In exile, to remember means to cross time *and* space, and thus connecting oneself not only to the past, but also to a far-away land and far-away people.

With new refugees arriving, the number of diaspora Eritreans in Germany and elsewhere has been climbing rapidly since the end of the war in 2000. Still, the majority of the sizable Eritrean diaspora are refugees from the war of independence (1961-1991) who are divided in their stance vis-à-vis the home regime. Parts of the diaspora have remained as most loyal government supporters. Others passionately oppose the regime. Along with the

---

<sup>9</sup> But also the first serious criticism came from the diaspora. The “Berlin Manifesto” by the so-called “G13,” a group comprised mostly of diaspora intellectuals, wrote a petition in late 2000 urging the President to revert to democratic procedures and revise his style of governing. (see Hepner 2004, Conrad 2005, Dorman 2005)

<sup>10</sup> In August 2001 almost the whole student body of Asmara University was rounded up and carted off to Wia – a military camp in the extremely hot eastern lowlands of Eritrea. This measure followed protests against the detention of student leader Semere Kesete who had publicly criticised the practice of compulsory summer work camps for student, and had demanded reforms both at the University and regarding the general political situation (see for example Mussie/Semere 2004). Obscured by the 9/11 events followed a crackdown on the G15 dissidents and various journalists on 18/19 September 2001. All private newspapers were banned. Fear spread as there were rumours about further arrests of alleged or actual supporters of the G15. Imprisonments without trial, disappearances and arbitrary arrests have since become the order of the day.

<sup>11</sup> However, it must be emphasized, that it is not and cannot be the aim of this paper to establish historical truths.

basic political polarisation of the once seemingly unified Eritreans, went a fragmentation along ethnic, religious and –most importantly – regional fault-lines. This re-emergence of sub-national identities and their political instrumentalisation must be seen in the context of a changing discourse about the past.

Before the year 2001, the “Deutungshegemonie” (hegemony of interpretation) of past events (especially the history of the liberation struggle) has to the most part been with the EPLF/PFDJ.<sup>12</sup> After a split in the first armed Eritrean resistance movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), two major rivalling organisations emerged: the remnant ELF, initially still the stronger movement and what was to become the EPLF. After a long and violent conflict between the two movements, the ELF was eventually defeated and disintegrated in the early 1980s. The ELF still had branches in exile countries, but no longer operated within Eritrea. As “lame ducks” with no influence on events at home, the ELF’s activities and powers of mobilising other exiles were also severely limited, especially as the remnants of the organisation began to split up into ever-smaller units (cf. Schröder 2005) fighting amongst themselves over the shares of a cake that was no longer theirs to share. The EPLF on the other hand had not only won the military struggle, but would also set about realizing their visions of future Eritrea and narrating a victor’s version of history.

Yet, this “official” history has recently been challenged by the marginalised and the disgruntled (in exile) that have their own tales to tell and found new local as well as transnational platforms for doing so. Eritrean cyberspace forums, in particular, played an important role in this context (cf. Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b). Websites, mailing lists and online discussions groups provide a new arena for contested memories seeking to delegitimise or deconstruct the narratives of the current regime. My paper will focus on “official” and “alternative” narratives in the diaspora. The sources I draw upon include fieldwork materials collected between 1998 and 2006, published and unpublished academic writing, posting on Eritrean websites, pamphlets, leaflets and publications by Eritrea opposition and civic organisations, human rights reports and personal correspondence with representatives of “official” and “unofficial” Eritrea.<sup>13</sup> Before looking at the conditions, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Justin Hill, who in the 1990s spent two years teaching at an Eritrean school as a volunteer, recounts a meeting with an ex-*tegadalai* (fighter) wanting to write about his experiences during the struggle. When Hill encourages him, he is told: “... how can you write? If I write then maybe I will write about some secret. No! the [sic!] people at the top should write first, then the rest of us will know about what we can write ... When the government tells us what we are allowed to say, only then we can write.” (Justin Hill 2002: 162)

<sup>13</sup> The terms “official”/“unofficial” Eritrea are used in a similar way by Okbazghi Yohannes in a review of Justin Hill’s *Ciao Asmara* <[http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/September2002/OkbazghiYohannes\\_5.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/September2002/OkbazghiYohannes_5.asp)>

actors, and the means by which the EPLF's powerful narratives have been challenged in recent years, a brief background note is indispensable to line out how the EPLF/PFDJ came to dominate the political discourse both at home and in the diaspora.

### **Eritrean “official history” and the exigencies of a nationalist mass movement**

Though claims to uniqueness are one of the main tenets on which Eritrean identity and history making rest, the process of Eritrean nation building and the fight for statehood, share many features with other nationalist revolutions. There is the need for separating the (national) “we” from the “others;” the need for internal unity; the desire to re-form or revolutionise the society – both as a point of departure and a means to forge unity. The very qualities that Eritrean national narratives emphasize as exceptional characteristics, namely one-mindedness and a readiness for self-sacrifice are in fact vital ingredients of virtually any mass movement as Eric Hoffer states in his work “the true Believer” (1951). Tampering with the past, holding out for a better future and in the process constructing one's own myth, is part and parcel of the revolutionary package:

At its inception a mass movement seems to champion the present against the past ... [Later] the present –the original objective – is shoved off the stage and its place taken by posterity – the future.... The battle line is ... drawn between things that are and have been and the things that are not yet. (Hoffer 1951:68-69)

Like any other aspiring national liberation movement, the EPLF sought to rise to this threefold challenge: Firstly to liberate Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation, which involved the need to divorce Eritrean and Ethiopian history (see for instance Reid 2003, Tronvoll 1999, Trivelli 1998, Tronvoll/Tekeste 2000, Triulzi n.d.). Secondly – following the socialist trend of the time – the movement also strove to revolutionize social structures, which again called for a certain interpretation of the country's pre-colonial and colonial past. Finally, both aims could not be fulfilled, so the EPLF's realization, without overcoming internal divisions and instilling a strong sense of unity both among the various Eritrean peoples<sup>14</sup> and the liberation movement. Moreover the sense of isolation due to lack of support from any international powers put significant pressure on the Eritrean national movement and created a sense of cohesiveness and “we-ness.” The movement's eventual success in

---

25 May 2003), and by Sara Rich Dorman (2005) who also talks of an “official’ Eritrean narrative” as opposed to “alternative” ones.

<sup>14</sup> There are nine ethnic groups in Eritrea.

rallying a large section of the population under the banners of Eritrean self-determination and social revolution was no mean feat given political, social, ethnic and religious cleavages.

Conceptionalising the nation as an “imagined community,” (Anderson 1983) and a social construct of colonial creation, made it imperative for the EPLF to create a new national myth that would bind all Eritreans together regardless of cultural differences and past animosities. The key themes of “Eritrean official history” revolve around issues of unity, solidarity, self-reliance, and readiness to die for the nation. The EPLF as the driving force behind the nation-building project inevitably became an indistinguishable part of this history and as such also generated its own myth.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the history of the Eritrean revolution and the history of the EPLF were until recently not seen as separable: the inevitable collective “we” in Eritrean (diaspora) narratives (cf. Nolting 2002) is as much an expression of this as is the *hade hizbi, hade libi* (One people, one heart) slogan that again reverberated during the 1998-2000 border war.

Eliding the difference between the “Front” and the people was a major goal (cf. Conrad 2005b), and the widespread popular support for the EPLF was thus taken as given and never scrutinized. It seemed some kind of an imperative for (sympathetic) foreign observers, scholars and journalists to comment on the EPLF’s exceptionally good and close relationship with the *gebar* (peasant, owner of land) and the urbanized civilian, both during the struggle and immediately after independence. The image of the EPLF as *hizbawi genbar*, literally meaning “people's front,” that was exceptional in its egalitarian treatment of “the people,” became a powerful national myth and eventually legitimized the EPLF’s claims to governance after independence. Emphasising the symbiosis between ordinary people and EPLF fighters also was used to set the movement apart from its major rival, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

Generally, the ELF has been vilified by the EPLF and by its supporters. One commonly heard accusation is that the ELF put village people in jeopardy by irresponsible military adventures, which in turn led to Ethiopian revenge on Eritrean villagers. Another one is that of the ELF as a band of ruthless warlords. In a 2005 interview with the Eritrean diaspora website [awate.com](http://awate.com), an ELF fighter recalls:

---

<sup>15</sup> For reasons of legitimacy, the EPLF had to both depict itself as a continuation of earlier (pre-)Eritrean nationalist resistance movements and itself apart from them by emphasizing uniqueness and exceptionalism.

When I was with the ELF, the EPLF used to say things like *Amma Haradit shewate Kara entezeykones shewate lama alewa* (If ELF the butcher does not have seven knives, it will at least have seven razor blades.) ... The slur was that the ELF killed people for no reason (the butcher claim) and that they were so self-indulgent, they had lotions, soaps, and toiletries. This, at a time, when all I knew was total deprivation, was very insulting to me.<sup>16</sup>

The ELF was further blamed for ethnic divisiveness and weakening the nationalist cause by exploiting religious and clan loyalties. Here it is important to note, however, that the ELF accuses the EPLF of the similar military excesses that victimized the civilian population.

To date, however, there are few systematic critical studies available that have looked at both fronts' relationship with "the people". An exception is Kjetil Tronvoll's work, *Mai Weini*, which casts a shadow of doubt on the myth of an equal and purely voluntary interaction.<sup>17</sup> While the EPLF may have had better relations with the non-combatant population than other liberation movements worldwide, it seems naive to suggest that a truly egalitarian relationship could develop between any armed group and civilians who are wedged between "a rock and hard place." Similar observations can be made in regards to the ELF-EPLF relationship. With the exception of John Markakis' work (1990) few sober analyses are available on the ELF-EPLF split and the violent conflict that ensued between the two movements. Here too, the official version of the "goodies" triumphing over "the baddies" seems a little too simplistic.

Like the people versus front and the ELF versus EPLF relationship, the relations between the rank and file fighters and the EPLF leadership have also been mystified in the "official narrative". Similarly life in *mieda* has been romanticised (cf. Quehl 2002).<sup>18</sup> In many of the official and unofficial accounts the ex-*Shaebia* fighters are glorified as tough, heroic, selfless, and completely committed patriots. They are idolized in Eritrean art and folklore as role models for a new Eritrea (Matzke 2002). Narratives by foreigners further helped to perpetuate the idealizing and romanticising of the EPLF with selective writings and representational images. Life in *mieda* was often depicted as Spartan and yet democratic and egalitarian. Foreign writer's flowery book titles such as "Against all Odds," "Never

---

<sup>16</sup> Awate.com interview with Berhane Yemane ("Hanjema")

<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/3830/11/> last accessed 29 December 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *Mai Weini* (Tronvoll 1998a), an anthropological study on Eritrean highland villager's lives during times of war and revolution, is the first of its kind that was carried out after the independence war.

<sup>18</sup> *Mieda* ("field") refers to the ELF/EPLF controlled areas in Eritrea during the independence war. "To go to the *mieda*," meant to become a fighter.



Kneel Down,“ or “Even the Stones are Burning” reinforced the EPLF’s and its supporters’ self-views and were integrated into the national narrative. Some of them are still used and reproduced, for instance, in essays on the Internet and official government websites and publications. Such writings served to reinforce and give legitimacy to the national myth.<sup>19</sup>

The creation of an Eritrean exceptionalism clearly dovetailed with the EPLF’s self-perception as a unique movement. Unity of the nation was preceded by unity in the field. In fact, the EPLF is on record as stating that the Eritrean field cannot accommodate more than one front or party. But the official national narrative of homogeneity seems unrealistic in the context of an armed struggle, and as we shall see is indeed one of the issues that is contested by the emerging alternative narratives. Here it must be pointed out that creating a nationalist myth is not specific to the EPLF.<sup>20</sup> The EPLF did nothing that other mass movements have not already done. Neither is the shattering or the deconstruction of such myths limited to the Eritrean case. But how this national myth was created? How did it become powerful and sustainable – especially among the diaspora communities? And lastly, why and how and by whom is it being challenged today?

### **Diasporic nationalist narratives: collective memory and collective amnesia**

*“Do you like our music?” With his gaunt looks and Afro-hairdo the man standing next to me almost looks like a tegadalai coming straight out of the historical photos mounted on huge boards behind us. We start talking over the sounds filling the Festival hall. He is curious about my being here: “You have an Eritrean boyfriend?” he asks. I explain about my research, but my lack of personal connections to Eritreans spurs him into giving me an ad hoc tutorial on Eritrean history: “We were colonized by the Italians, the British, and then the Ethiopians.[...] We fought for our independence for 30 years, all alone. We were forgotten by the world, but we helped each other as good as we could.[...] It didn’t matter if you were Muslim or Christian...” My Eritrean “tutor” finally concludes by saying: “You should get an Eritrean boyfriend so that he could tell you all about our country....”<sup>21</sup>*

---

<sup>19</sup> For the current use of these phrases on Eritrean websites see for example: (“Once again, Against all odds: We will never kneel Down!”) <<http://www.shaebia.org/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=8&num=2475>> (“Eritreans never kneel down”) <<http://www.shaebia.org/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=4&num=638>> or <[http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai\\_news\\_archive/jun-jul02/0128.html](http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai_news_archive/jun-jul02/0128.html)> (all accessed 12/05/06). In hindsight it is hard to tell where the titles/phrases originate from. Were they coined by the foreign authors and adopted by the movement or *vice versa*? Most likely it happened both ways.

<sup>20</sup> More detailed analyses of the EPLF/PFDJ’s national narrative can be found in Tronvoll 1998a/b; Garzetti 1999; Reid 2001,2005; Fouad 2002; Quehl 2002; Dorman 2005; Woldemikael 2005; Cirino n.d.

<sup>21</sup> Field notes Eritrea Festival Frankfurt, July 2000.

The above “lecture” was given to me at the Eritrea Festival 2000 in Frankfurt, and it was not the first kind I heard on that day. My attempts at signalling that I already have some idea about the liberation war from my reading of many books, were dismissed impatiently. I was treated to similar stories and received similar reactions throughout my research. At the 2000 Festival Eritrea in Frankfurt, official narratives emphasising unity of the Front (now government) and the people, the nation’s uniqueness, and the lonely fight “against all odds” were still echoed vigorously by the diasporic communities. The “we”-perspective of the narrators, the remarkable uniformity of their accounts (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001, Nolting 2002), the value of “told” history over “written” history (cf. Conrad 2005), all hints at how the “official” Eritrean memory of revolution was produced and reproduced.

I have argued elsewhere that, next to the fighters, the diaspora was probably most indoctrinated by the EPLF’s nation building ideology prior to independence (Conrad 2005). Many exiled Eritreans would have been quite unable to tell any coherent “Eritrean history” when they arrived in Germany in the 1970s or 1980s. Uprooted and alienated, the EPLF’s cadres abroad organised the exiles and provided them with a role, a sense of identity, and a link to the EPLF’s struggle at home. This was an opportunity for the exiles to overcome feelings of powerlessness and “survivor’s guilt”, and to develop a sense of belonging to a “home away from home”. Political seminars, speeches by EPLF representatives from the *mieda*, books used for language and history classes (attended by both adults and children), films, slogans, banners and magazines, all repeated the official line over and over again (see Bakker 1999:6).<sup>22</sup> That way personal and individual memories were gradually subordinated and overwritten by a collective memory that contributed to creating an even stronger sense of solidarity. Revolutionary songs and other forms of popular culture served as further sites for the creation of an imagined Eritrean identity.<sup>23</sup> For example the famed “Bologna Festival” was culmination and a demonstration of unity among the diaspora, and bore witness to the diaspora’s intimate connection with the struggle at home (cf. Tobacco 2001):

---

<sup>22</sup> The textbooks designed to teach diaspora children their mother tongue, Eritrean history and culture have been and remain means of inculcating Eritreans abroad with the EPLF/PFDJ’s national narrative. Even during the struggle great pains were taken to ensure that for instance no ELF published language books were used for Tigrinya lessons organised by the EPLF affiliated organisations abroad – even when teaching materials were scarce (Interview with former EPLF cadre, April 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Bisrat and Senen write: “Expressing nationalistic sentiments through dance and music was not new... During the British administration and Ethiopian rule, revolutionary songs were effective ways of communicating politics and expressing nationalistic feelings.... (1996:6). For an excellent account on Eritrea’s art scene and the nexus between arts and the memory of revolution, see Matzke’s “Comrades in Arts and Arms” (2002).

... in the Bologna Festival, EPLF cultural and musical troops presented the cultures and traditions of different Eritrean ethnicities. Eritreans were educated on the political and cultural constituents that make up Eritrea. EPLF delegates also informed Eritreans of the progress achieved in Eritrea and communicated issues concerning problems Eritreans face abroad. The Bologna festival, which was about a week long, was a symbolic event of cohesion throughout the struggle. (Bisrat 1996: 7)

Even after independence, music, cultural performances of all kinds, and festivals continued to be important sites of memory. This practise has not waned even with the second generation of Eritreans whose memory is only “second hand” (see Conrad 2006a). A quote by the Eritrean youth group *Beles* commenting on a performance of Eritrean dances at a multicultural festival in Germany illustrates this point:

Our knowledge about these dances comes mainly from the EPLF’s videos and festivals which helped to keep up a link with the liberation struggle. Most of us grew up with those videos, they are part of our own history (Beles 1998:36, translation B.C.).

Even the way parents called their children born during the struggle served to keep these memories alive, but also to express hope for a brighter future. Names like “Sawra” (revolution), “Tsinat” (endurance), “Selam” (peace), “Harnet” (liberation), or “Awet” (victory) etc. are very common. Bars, shops, websites, and social organisation, musical bands in Eritrea as well as in the diaspora bear names referring to places and events that are of significance in Eritrean history providing a continuity and a reminder of the past and its legacy. Within the diaspora there is a sense of Eritrea that seems to be frozen in time. Having left home at various points during the struggle, large parts of the exile community remained oblivious to the changes in the homeland that occurred in their absence. They chose to hang on to the official memory as presented to them by the cadres of the EPLF. Of course this backfired later, when after independence the exiles began to visit Eritrea and learned that the official account was in many cases very different to the reality of what the country had become (Conrad 2006a).

When I started my research during the 1998 - 2000 border war with Ethiopia, Eritreans were haunted by the memories of the independence struggle. Exiled Eritreans began to relive their own past as they worried about their family members at home and the risk to the achievements of the 30 years liberation war, including the maintenance of the country’s independence itself. Once again, these fears galvanised the Eritrean public to

rekindle the solidarity and the spirit of sacrifice that had characterized the exile communities prior to 1991. An almost nostalgic memory of the independence struggle reverberated once again and expressed itself in considerable financial contribution and lobbying activities (Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b).

In general, however, “memories” had become more institutionalized, formalised and ritualized after independence. On an official level, memories of the liberation war were used for post-war state- and nation-building (cf. Fouad 1996). They materialized for example in flags, coats of arms, images on stamps, a national anthem, the introduction of national holidays (commemorating landmark events of the revolution), and a new currency named *Nakfa* after the EPLF’s base area that was never conquered by the Ethiopia. Symbols for the struggle, like the *shidda* (plastic sandals worn by the EPLF fighters), were turned into public memorials and objects of decoration in Eritrean offices, cafés and private homes. The Tigrinya socialist slogan *Awet n’hafash* (“Victory to the Masses”) is now an implicitly required chanting expressing solidarity with the Eritrean government. After any official letter, it is customary to write it along with the signature. Habitually omitting this phrase may even be considered a political statement (field notes, summer 2005, B.C.). In the diaspora too, the slogan is used to state one’s loyalty to the regime, as many Internet postings illustrate (see for instance contributions on [shaebia.org](http://shaebia.org), [shabait.com](http://shabait.com), or [dehai.org](http://dehai.org)). All these contribute to the invention or making of a new national tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; for Eritrea cf. Tekle 2005) that has become an ever-present reminder of the past in Eritrean public life at home and abroad. But a ritualization (and even commercialization) of memory is also evident at a private and semi-official level.<sup>24</sup> As a second generation German-Eritrean recounted to me:

“When saying grace before dinner, my mother would always add ‘may we soon return home to Eritrea.’ She kept saying this even after independence when it was clear that we wouldn’t return any time soon. But then, it only seemed like an empty ritual to me” (field notes 2002).

---

<sup>24</sup> Eritrean homes, community centres, bars and restaurants are usually decorated with range of nationalist paraphernalia. Maps and flags of the country in all shapes and sizes, posters showing heroic images of Eritrean *tegadelti* (sl. *tegalalai*) are highly popular as are nationalist slogans on t-shirts, Eritrea screen savers and handy logos, Eritrea necklaces, rings and other knick-knacks. Eritrean music, literature and film productions (unless dealing with matters of the heart) are also still dominated by themes relating to the struggle (personal communication with C. Matzke). Hill writes: “I’d seen a couple of books by Eritrean writers: they had garish covers and showed lovers or soldiers or both” (2002: 162).

Similarly, every (semi-)official meeting is commenced and/or concluded by a minute's silence for the "martyrs." The relevance of "martyrdom" in Eritrean collective memory deserves a special mentioning. While some observers still claim that the EPLF/PFDJ has had no "martyr" or leadership cult, (e.g. Radtke 2005: 10) I would maintain the opposite. The absence of photographs of "martyred" fighters and soldiers, or other overt forms of personalised "cults" in Eritrea obscures the central meaning of "martyrdom" in people's memory. The memory of the "martyrs" and the "ultimate sacrifice" they paid is skillfully used by the regime to lend it legitimacy and rationalize the maintenance of power. In fact, the very absence of celebrating or mourning individual heroes makes the Eritrean variation of a "martyrs cult" very powerful.<sup>25</sup> The Eritrean scholar, Tekle Woldemikael, writes on the invention of new national traditions in Eritrea:

The 1991 Martyrs' Day memorial celebration helped to bond the civilian population to the emerging nation by focusing on the loss of their loved ones. ...During the long war, many families never heard from family members and friends who joined the nationalist fronts ...[By not disclosing] casualties ... [t]he front was able to continue to fascinate the imagination of the public ... by the myth of its invincibility and the "martyrdom" of its fighters, *who by remaining unidentified, thus belonged to the nation* and not to their families. ... (Woldemikael 1999: 254, emphasis B.C.)

*M'alti semaetat* – Martyrs Day, the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, is also celebrated in the diaspora. In Frankfurt (as in Eritrea) trees are planted and candles burned to commemorate the dead. Similar gatherings are held in virtually every German town with an Eritrean community. In a small park in Nuremberg there is even a memorial dedicated to the "martyrs" of the Eritrean revolution. It consists of a plaque, mounted on a low brick pedestal, and a tree behind it. A stylized olive wreath is engraved on the plaque and below it the inscription in German and Tigrinya reads:

This tree was planted in memory of the people who gave their lives for Eritrea's independence. We will never forget them – The Eritreans living in Nuremberg (Translation from German B.C.)

---

<sup>25</sup> One example is the concept of *warsay*, literally meaning "my heritage" or "heir." It is also the term used for the post-independence recruits into the new Eritrean army. In diaspora it has been adopted by youth groups e.g. in the US, Germany, and Sweden. Calling a diaspora organisation *Warsay* signifies both, continuity with the past and integration into the Eritrean nation at present. Claiming your *warsa* or heritage also means to take on a twofold "sacred" duty, first, towards the bestowers of this heritage (the EPLF, including the war dead or "martyrs") and second, to the "real" *warsot* (peers in Eritrea bearing the brunt of defending the nation). The legacy of the independence struggle, the solidarity with the *warsot* at home and the fight for better future are thus inextricably interwoven with loyalty to the EPLF/present Eritrean government as the winner, guardian and embodiment of Eritrean independence (cf. Conrad 2005).

Interestingly, the commemoration of the killed Eritrean fighters and soldiers as “martyrs” is one of the few aspects that is rarely, if ever, challenged by any group, no matter where political allegiances and loyalties.<sup>26</sup> When an opposition website gained access to an Eritrean government database and published the names of Eritrean fighters/soldiers who died during the 1998-2000 border war and thereafter, there first was an almost unanimous uproar in all political camps. The general tenor was that the names of those killed in the war should not be abused for political purposes.<sup>27</sup> A number of measures were taken even before publication to ensure that the data published would not inflict any additional grievance to family members of the martyrs, and would not reveal sensitive military information.

\*

Much of the above relates examples of how Eritrean collective memory has been produced and kept alive in the diaspora. But as Benedict Anderson (1983) has pointed out, national memory is part remembering and part forgetting. What is increasingly contested within different factions in the diaspora is therefore not only whether events are remembered and narrated correctly or not, but also what has been “forgotten”, erased, repressed or made taboo. Most of the contested issues ultimately challenge not only “the past”, but in doing so question either the national myth of unity or the legitimacy of those in power in Eritrea. Especially in the anonymous realm of the Internet, former taboo topics including the question of religion, ethnicity and regional identities, rivalries and hostilities that often overlap with political fault-lines, are now discussed.<sup>28</sup> Also the EPLF’s dealing with internal dissent, its coercive practices, its lack of internal democracy and transparency, or the integrity of leadership figures have become openly debated topics.

---

<sup>26</sup> The former ELF(-RC) members, however, celebrate their Martyrs’ Day on 1<sup>st</sup> December, claiming that the 20 June, the official Martyrs Day of the State of Eritrea, is not an occasion commemorating all martyrs (see. [http://www.nharnet.com/archives/arch\\_2004/Dec\\_2004/NharnetTeam\\_dec01.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/archives/arch_2004/Dec_2004/NharnetTeam_dec01.htm). Last accessed: 14/04/2006.

<sup>27</sup> See “martyrs’ database” on <<http://www.awate.com/>> Accessed 30/05/2006.

<sup>28</sup> In Eritrea proper one major attempt at erasing regional identities, i.e. loyalty to one’s region (*awraja*) and the village (*adi*) has been the restructuring of administrative units. Regional boundaries were redrawn to form *zobas* that often cut across organisational units of old and have been designed to diffuse regional loyalties and identities that might compete with national ones. Ironically, this widely resented step seems to contribute to a growing disengagement from the national project and instead reinforces deep-seated local and regional affiliations (cf. Tronvoll 1998a, 1998b).

## The (re-)emergence of alternative diasporic narratives

*“Hade hizbi – hade libi! – One people – one heart!” Red hearts flicker in between the English and Tigrinya versions of the slogan that runs endlessly through a digital display. At intervals there is a stop to flash the message at the crowd below. A few thousand Eritreans have gathered in Frankfurt’s Eissporthalle to celebrate the Festival Eritrea 2001, the annual highlight for the majority of Germany’s Diaspora. This year, however, is even more special. Not only is it the first Festival after the end of the border-war; it also officially commemorates the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Eritrean liberation.<sup>29</sup>*

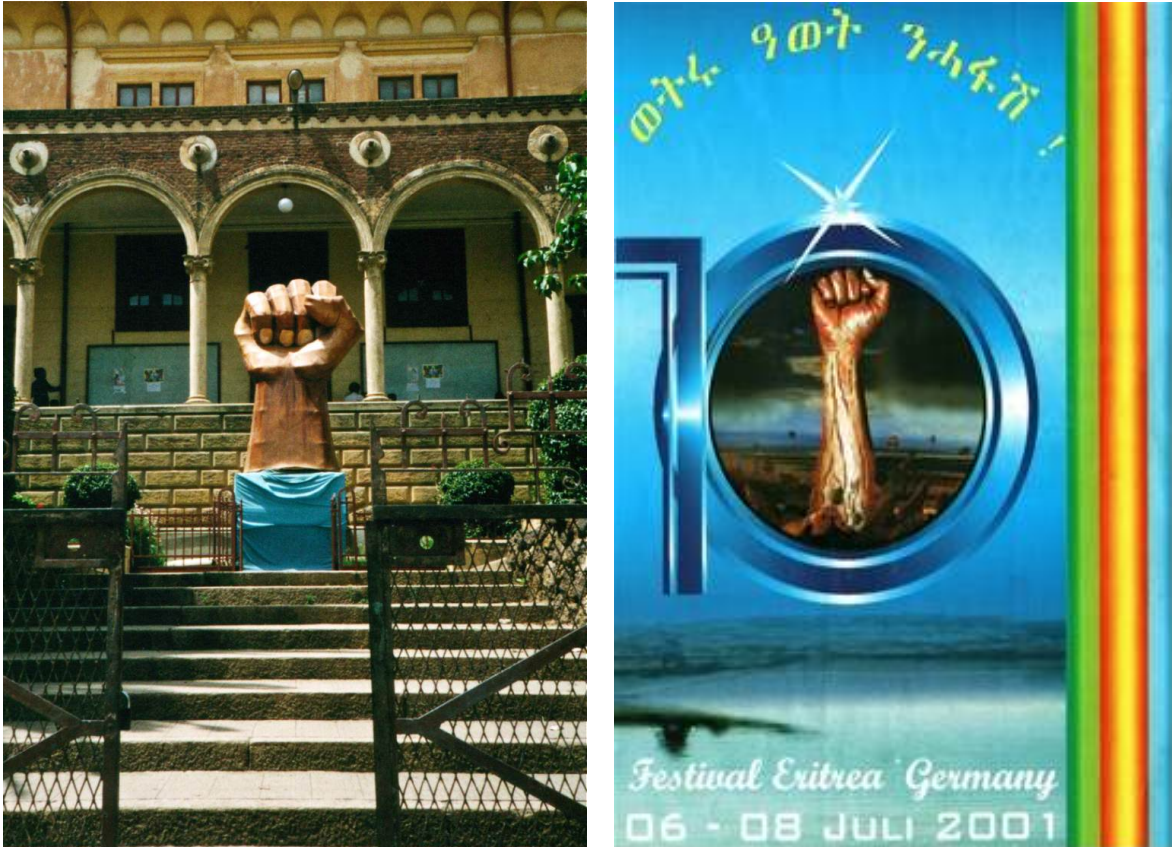
But 2001 counted not only the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation, it also marked the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the EPLF’s decisive military victory over the rival Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), making the former the sole movement for Eritrean independence within Eritrea. No official reference to that was made at the Festival. In official EPLF narrative the ELF rarely is mentioned. Yet the exiled remnants of the ELF would hold their own “Jebha” festival only a few weeks later in the nearby town of Kassel.<sup>30</sup> A consequence of the internecine violence and civil war in Eritrea is the existence of several mutually hostile Eritrean liberation movements. This “unpleasant aspect of the past” is preferably buried and dealt with by not dealing with it at all, by dumping it into the “memory hole.”

Most visitors of the 2001 Frankfurt Festival still clung faithfully to the “official” sanitized version of the past. Not doing so would subject one to a personal revision of one’s values, choice of friends, and life goals as individual and collective narrative are intimately linked. In other cases, 2001 marked the turning point that led from “true believerdom” (Hoffer 1951) to doubt, and, sometimes, to outright criticism. Questions about the diplomatic as well as the military handling of the 1998 - 2001 border war had precipitated political dissent among some sections of Eritrean society at home and abroad. In the following, a cursory overview of the various alternative memories and historical revisions that have (re-)emerged is in order. Also, the closure of existing spaces in the Eritrean public sphere by the regime has given rise to the creation new spaces and platforms in diasporic and transnational settings. In this regard the Internet and radio have become preferred tools.

---

<sup>29</sup> Author’s field notes, 7 July 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Other than Martyrs Day, Eritrea Festivals are more contested events. The Frankfurt Festival is not only seen and understood as a local continuation of the discontinued EPLF Bologna Festival, but is actually co-organised by the Eritrean Embassy /Consulate and the umbrella organisation of Eritrean communities loyal to the currently regime. Typically a high-ranking member of the Eritrean government will be there to deliver a speech and to try to mobilize supporters. Accordingly the event is dubbed “Shaebia” (“the people”) or “Higedef” (acronym for PFDJ) Festival in contrast to the ELF or “Jebha” (arab. “front”) Festival in Kassel.



**Figure 15** “Transnational symbolism.” The giant fist stands for the Eritrean Revolution. The fist statue was created for the Independence Day Parade 2001 in commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country’s liberation. Later it stood for a while in front of the National Theatre in Asmara. The same year, the official flyer for the Festival Eritrea in Frankfurt sported a similar fist – presented in a more dramatic style.

As outlined above, the increasing contestation over the interpretation of the past has its origin in the present deplorable state of affairs in Eritrea. In particular after the border war it was widely felt that the PFDJ government was not living up to its promises. 10 years after independence, it was still the same people in power, no national elections had been held, the constitution had not been implemented, the party was holding an increasingly iron grip on the ailing economy and the military was gaining influence in ever wider sections of society and administration. Non-fighters were feeling disadvantaged and marginalized vis-à-vis ex-fighters. Justifiably or unjustifiably the belief that the Christian Tigrinya held the majority of powerful positions in the state is widespread among the Muslims of Eritrea. Amongst the Tigrinya themselves there were rumours that the real power is concentrated in the hands of people hailing from a particular highland region. All these suspicions have rather intensified in the past five years and have started to undermine the regime’s rhetoric of equality and incorruptibility. Moreover, the increasingly open disregard for human rights has alienated



even many of those in the diaspora that had only a few years ago been staunch supporters of the regime.

The widespread discontent has brought latent and suppressed opposition to the regime to the fore. All the narratives of unity, egalitarianism, democracy and justice seem to be nothing but an empty façade erected to deceive the “gullible masses.” With the old narrative dubbed as a lie, new interpretations of past events are sought: “A few years ago I would have told you a different story,” a former EPLF community cadre, said to me after finishing his own revised version of the Eritrean revolution, in which the EPLF had lost most of its heroic attributes.<sup>31</sup> I have heard this line, and similar reinterpretations, many more times since. Others claim to have known it all along, notably the EPLF’s old adversaries from the ELF. In the absence of “home-grown” opposition parties, they were the only organised group with an alternative Eritrean collective memory that had always been in opposition to the EPLF’s representation of Eritrean history. Long pushed aside by the EPLF and its supporters, ELF members who have been assigned the role of losers, traitors and villains, are beginning to see their chance for a comeback and the day of reckoning with the EPLF leadership.<sup>32</sup>

However, the ELF members are not the only ones opposing the regime these days. In fact, dissenters from inside the former EPLF itself have begun to voice doubt, especially after the arrest of the “G15”: “It was not that we all did not see what was happening” a former EPLF member said, “but we kept silent, because the EPLF was doing a good job in liberating the country, so we thought that’s the price we have to pay...” (Interview 2003, B.C.) What is alluded to in this context is a couple of rather ignoble events, such as the execution of dissenters within the front (e.g. the so-called *menka*’ crisis – after a clandestine group within the EPLF eliminated during the early to mid-1970s, allegedly for criticizing the leadership of undemocratic behaviour). Among the mushrooming opposition groups are former EPLF leaders organised around the EDP (Eritrean Democratic Party). One of the leaders of the EPD, Mesfin Hagos, is a founding member of the EPLF who had distinguished himself as a military strategist. A member of the “G15”, he escaped arrest only because he was abroad for medical treatment in September 2001. Like him, a number of formerly high-ranking officials have sought asylum abroad where some of them engage in exile opposition politics. In the diaspora the dissidents have been joined by disenchanted

---

<sup>31</sup> Interview B.C., April 2003.

<sup>32</sup> One of my interviewees actually said: “To me the *Jebha* are no real Eritreans.” (Field notes, Dec. 2003)

EPLF supporters, hitherto unaffiliated exiles and a growing number of young Eritrean asylum seekers, most of who had fled the *de facto* open-ended military service in Eritrea.

Apart from the numerous political opposition parties (Schröder 2004, Aklilu 2005), more than twenty human and civic rights groups have emerged within the last five years. Even though they are mainly focussed on rights abuses going on in Eritrea, many of them also formulate the aim of creating a new political civic culture critical of the EPLF/PFDJ's lack of participatory structures. In pointing out the lack of regards for human rights today they also attack the EPLF's claim for moral superiority during the revolutionary years, and even the very notion of the liberation struggle as a "just" war. In an email communication with an Eritrean human rights organisation in spring 2006, an activist presents the relationship between past and present outlines as a linear narrative:

The history of the Eritrean struggle is replete with incidents of gross human rights violations. The experience and history of the two major liberation fronts -- ELF and EPLF as well as the rivalry between the two has contributed a lot to the current sad situation of human rights in Eritrea. (E-mail correspondence May 2006)

Newly formed civic organisations, political parties, and individuals use various media including virtual forums, such as the popular websites [asmarino.com](http://asmarino.com) and [awate.com](http://awate.com) which provide platforms to promote, discuss and substantiate their claims. In particular human rights oriented websites have made public eyewitness accounts and testimonials of present regime wrongs and violations (see [emhdr.org](http://emhdr.org)). The webmasters of [asmarino.com](http://asmarino.com) constructed an online memorial for the victims of a shooting that occurred when potential recruits who were rounded up by the Eritrean military tried to break out of a prison in Adi Abieto near Asmara. The [awate.com](http://awate.com) "martyrs"-database certainly serves a similar purpose. Political websites of the ELF and its splinter parties have also started to publicize and write their own versions of events providing counter-narratives to the official version of (hi)story. Online obituaries, essays, biographies, memoirs and educational pieces about events and dates bring back personal and collective memories that no one wanted to hear about until recently. As the webmasters of ELF-RC-affiliated [nharnet.com](http://nharnet.com) state:

"This Day in History" is a column that will present selected editorials about important dates and events in the Eritrean historical struggle for independence ..."[It] will present any important ... date regardless [of] which organization is responsible for the event. However, we are bound to focus on events carried [out] by ELF since most of the heroic events have been banned from being told

by the EPDJ [sic! – PFDJ]. We would like the Eritrean Youth to know about all the heroic sacrifices paid for by our martyrs. ... We want them to feel the sense of historical responsibility to be able to accept the handling of our future Eritrea. ... and invite them to the full participation in the current political affairs of our nation and start to shoulder the responsibility of shaping the political future of our nation.<sup>33</sup>

NHarnet's "Dates in Eritrean History" section devotes much space to historical topics: "How Veterans Told the Story of the First 10 Years of the ELA [Eritrean Liberation Army; the armed wing of the ELF - B.C.]," "From the Experiences of the ELA," or "Recollections of a Prisoner," recount Eritrean history from the ELF's perspective. Essays such as "Remembering another Martyr," (on nharnet.com) or lengthy obituaries as could be found on many websites after the death of ELF-RC chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael, pay tribute to individuals, and question history as constructed by the victor. But publishing counter-histories is not purely aimed at "setting the record straight." In many of these texts, the past is directly linked to the present. Articles like "The birth of despotism" published on *awate.com*, or the discussion of the controversial *Nhnan Elamanan* – an EPLF manifesto allegedly authored by Issayas Afeworki, thus also set out to prove that the present ills have their roots in past wrongs.<sup>34</sup>

Besides political groupings ethnic minorities like the Kunama, the Jiberti and the Bilen also refuse to subordinate their particularist memories to the official narrative that emphasises the nation (e.g. *farajat.com* – "the voice of the denied" – a Jiberti website, or *eritrean-kunama.com*). What has re-emerged in this context are "ethnic" memories that construct or unearth a history of oppression of an ethnic group within the Eritrean context, or at least reclaim their rights to remember Eritrean history from a distinct Kunama, Jiberti, Bilen etc. perspective. The magazine of the Eritrean People's Party (EPP) – an off-shot of the EDP with a particular interest in the issue of "nationalities" (Schröder 2005: 40) – lists among the benefits of the Internet that "[it] greatly empowered ... otherwise helpless ethno-cultural minorities to dictate the pressing issues that government and opposition ... have to deal with."<sup>35</sup>

Looking at the examples given above one can argue that a history from below is in the making. Yet, as Sara Dorman writes (2005: 218) it is important to note that most of

---

<sup>33</sup> See <<http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/TodayInHistory.htm/>> Accessed: 14/06/2006.

<sup>34</sup> See <[http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/printer\\_2844.shtml](http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/printer_2844.shtml)> Accessed: 14/06/2006.

<sup>35</sup> "The People's Voice", Issue No. 2, April 4, 2005:5.

these counter-narratives re-emerging from obscurity are not strictly speaking (hi)stories of the oppressed, but can be seen as alternative “elite” narratives. Regarding the “ordinary” Eritreans in the diaspora it is difficult to evaluate how many have reviewed their memories one way or the other. The majority is silent and chooses not to make their opinions public for fear of incriminating relatives at home, missing out on the chance to buy property in Eritrea and opportunities for business. This state of affairs was even more accentuated during the 1998 – 2000 war. Not only criticism of present events was seen as treason, but also any deviations from the official narrative that were interpreted as “indirect commentaries on the present” (Fouad 2002:202). This made the past a dangerous terrain indeed. And the regime has “a long arm,” as those in power darkly hint, threatening the diaspora.

However, more subversive attempts at de-mystifying the independence struggle and its leadership-turned-Eritrean government are on the increase. Jokes and other forms of ridicule, indicate that a general “change of heart” has taken place.<sup>36</sup> This suspicion also seems to be verified for instance by the dwindling numbers of festival visitors since 2001. And those who do come, mainly do so to meet friends and enjoy the entertainment part, avoiding the inevitable speeches made by local cadres and flown-in Eritrean government officials.

Memories of individual Eritreans or history writing by outsiders can also produce harsh reactions by the regime in Asmara and within some sections of the diaspora. Two recent examples are books written by a young German Eritrea woman, Senait Mehari, (2004) and Financial Times reporter Michaela Wrong (2005).<sup>37</sup> Senait’s autobiography – that was also made into a film shown at the 2009 Berlinale Film Festival – is clearly designed to appeal to the tastes of Western audiences with an appetite for “tragic African women’s fates.” It tells about her life as a child soldier with the ELF and about parental abuse and neglect. Surprisingly this not only outraged former ELF members and affiliates

---

<sup>36</sup> One rather more “harmless example” of the deconstruction of Eritrean national myths by ridicule: while an Eritrean Embassy Employee states that (thanks to the Eritrean revolution) full gender equality has been achieved in Eritrea <[http://www.aviva-berlin.de/aviva/content\\_Women%20+%20Work.php?id=3289/](http://www.aviva-berlin.de/aviva/content_Women%20+%20Work.php?id=3289/)> an Eritrean cartoonist publishes a caricature on <[http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article\\_3142.shtml](http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_3142.shtml)> showing female Eritrean recruits serving on a male military officer in celebration of Eritrean Women’s Day. For a scholarly discussion of the situation of Eritrean woman in post-independence Eritrea see for instance Bernal (2000), Volker-Saad (2004), Mehreteab (2004), or Müller (2005). Websites accessed 28/06/06.

<sup>37</sup> These two publications received much public attention beyond Eritrean circles. Other writings that are less exposed tend to be ignored rather than attacked. The story of a young Eritrean woman that fled her country after the turn of the millennium, and who – unlike Senait – writes about the present situation (including sexual abuse of women in the Eritrean military, torture and political indoctrination) never sparked a major debate.

(some of which are now trying to sue her for slander), but also earned her the wrath of government supporters who interpreted her tale as an attempt to desecrate the memory of the “martyrs” in general and depict Eritrea in a negative light. Michela Wrong’s recent book, too, has also been subject of much criticism, not only from the supporters from the Eritrean government (who think that she narrated Eritrean history wrongly) but also from the ranks of the opposition (who feel she omitted their version of history) even as she earned glowing reviews from the international press.

These incidents illustrate that in the recent cyber-war over the nation’s memory the lines are maybe not as clear-cut as it seems. It also shows that certain issues cannot be discussed in soberly. This is especially so if they touch upon wrongs committed by the liberation fronts during the war of independence. As an Eritrean colleague commented it is possible discuss the 1940s or 1950s without much controversy but it is not so when you begin to discuss the period of the armed struggle from 1961 - 1991. It is marred by a great deal of emotion and competition of various narratives.

### **Reconciling memories: some concluding remarks**

At present the past remains a contested site in the Eritrean diaspora and seeking to reconcile the various memories would require more of a debate between the various camps. Yet, so far of the parties involved use the Internet or other platforms mainly to monologize, rather than enter into a real dialogue. The parties competing for the truth, assuming there can only be one rendering all other version “fakes” and “lies.” Roman Loimeier, studying the case of Sansibar Revolution, has coined the term “Bürgerkrieg der Erinnerungen” (“civil war of memories”). What he cautions for Sansibar, is also true for Eritrea:

Only if a society is capable of reconciling opposing memories in its collective memory by solving disputes over diverging traditions of memory, a kind of consensus can be reached with regards to certain events. Otherwise the collective memory regarding these events remains maimed or blocked, and will be integrated into societies cultural memory in such a crippled or muted form, or will even remain a taboo. (Loimeier 2006: 192)

For the Eritrean case, too, the question is whether diaspora forums, be they real-life or online, can really create a sort of transnational public space as maintained by some authors (Hepner 2004, Bernal 2006) that can accommodate such disputes. In spite of its factionalism, there seems to be some hope to create such a space in worldwide diaspora, but

until now most Eritreans at home are excluded. The government for most parts demonstrates indifference and ignores the diaspora debates. It hardly engages with anyone having different views, be they Eritreans or foreigners. If the existence of critics or diverging histories is acknowledged at all the official reactions are limited to character assassination of the critics, and branding other versions of “the truth” as lies. There is hardly any grey area in Eritrean political discourse: Government attitude is, if you are not with us, then you can only be against us. This view became even more pronounced during and after the border-war. In 2003 a government supporter writes:

When the very existence of Eritrea is at stake, then the camp of “treason” are expected to be on the side of Shaebia defending their people. Therefore, the camp of “treason” are hereby challenged to tell Eritrea where they stand. A simple answer, “yes we are with our people” or “no we are still in a mission to destroy Eritrea by the help of Weyane” will suffice. There is no gray area. ... “Silence” is tantamount to supporting or being on the side of Weyane 100%.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, Eritrean human rights and civic groups (e.g. the Eritrean Antimilitarist Initiative in Germany EAI, and the South Africa-based Eritrean Movement for Human and Democratic Rights, EMHDR) have begun to think about the value of establishing a Truth Commission or some other kind of closure mechanism. But again, the success of such an endeavour would need the participation of all, the government and those who challenge the government’s views. The government, however, is still in denial holding on to the past as its sole source of legitimacy, and further using the still unresolved border issue to label any form of dissent as “treason”. And even if all too obvious ills are occasionally officially admitted, the Eritrean President always resorts to the memory of the armed struggle and chides the present generation as a “Coca-Cola- generation”. The implication is that this generation is unpatriotic and spoiled and untested by fire unlike the *Ykealo* generation, and that all problems could be resolved if the spirit of the revolution could only be invoked and remembered. Fouad Makki, an Eritrean academic writes:

“...the history on offer [in post-independence Eritrea] has generally been of the ‘golden age’ variety. The predominant tone, both of the so-called “reformers” and the PFDJ Government, is to identify the earlier history of the EPLF as a ‘golden age’ of solidarity, sacrifice and participatory politics. ...[T]he only way to avoid attempts to nostalgically perpetuate this past is to understand it. *In this respect, the door to the future can only be unlocked by the past.*” (Fouad, 2002: 202; emphasis B.C.)

---

<sup>38</sup> See: [http://www.alenalki.com/ne/eritrea\\_challenges\\_bdr\\_fessehaie.htm](http://www.alenalki.com/ne/eritrea_challenges_bdr_fessehaie.htm). Accessed 23/06/06.

As Makki puts it, it is imperative to understand and to deconstruct the past in order to deprive the regime of its claim to be the owner of the past. All Eritreans have competing memories of the past, and the government's official narrative is only one of them. While alternative narratives have – as shown above – developed in the diaspora, it remains extremely difficult to reach the Eritrean people at home because of the government's firm grip over the population.

## CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

---

During the first stages of my research, I soon realized that only very few authors had looked at migrants and refugees groups in Germany from a transnational angle.<sup>1</sup> Hardly any up-to-date work could be found when it came to the Eritrean community in particular, let alone with a focus on the relationship between home country and Eritreans abroad. Within the past decade, however, both the general topic of transnational ethnic communities and the specific focus on the Eritrean diaspora have gained increasing attention also in Germany. Transnationalism seems to have become one of the leading paradigms of social sciences, and diasporas in turns have been described as the “emblems” of this transnationalism.” (Tölölyan as quoted in Mayer 2005: 12) Though one might be critical about such generalisations the continued popularity of studying “diasporas” and their transnational activities has ensured that the long time “absent” Eritrean diaspora has at least caught some attention as well. In Germany too, there now is a growing body of studies looking at the “old” Eritrean diaspora as well as at new Eritrean refugees or the Eritrean diaspora’s economic and political engagement with home.<sup>2</sup> In this context I had the pleasure of seeing my own work contributing to opening an exciting new field of research.

Though I set out to study the Eritrean diaspora in Germany and its relationship with “home” with a fairly holistic approach, it is, of course, impossible to capture the richness, vitality, and variability of such a community in a single book. Important aspects that are covered in this study include the ambiguous role of new, faster and more affordable means of communication and travel that have certainly changed Eritrea-diaspora relations, but not only in the immediately obvious ways. While both, travel and communication; are key tools of transnational activities, they do not only always bring people closer together.

---

<sup>1</sup> The situation was different for the USA, the UK and a number of other countries of immigration that also have a different culture of dealing with immigrant communities. Needless to say, the following decade brought forth a plethora of studies that looked explicitly at the transnational aspects of migration.

<sup>2</sup> (cf. for example DIASPEACE 2009, Abdulkader, Hirt and Smidt 2008).



As I have shown in chapters two to three, encounters between “diasporites” and “stayees” might also serve to create a new consciousness of “we” – the diaspora, versus “them” – the locals (and vice versa). With the differentiation between “us” and “them” conflicts have emerged as well as the need to re-negotiate identities on either side: this is especially, but not exclusively, the case for the second generation. Whether or not the latter will remain caught in the older generations’ long-distance nationalism or will find new ways of relating to Eritrea, will eventually be determined by individual decisions, and also by the situation in both, country of “origin” and country of settlement.

Like travel, the availability of Internet media and other up-to-date communication technology, has clearly facilitated contacts between the diaspora and home, and also between people and groups within the scattered diaspora itself. It has speeded up the flow of news in either direction and has challenged the Eritrean government’s monopoly on information. Yet at the same time, it has also allowed the powers-that-be to expand their own “transnational” realm beyond the country’s physical boundaries and to further control (or at least influence) public discourses on politics (and history) even in the diaspora.

Many other interesting aspects of the Eritrean diaspora, however, such as the role of Eritrean women, the relatively new religious communities, the old and new opposition groups, the particularly fascinating new rights-based movements and many others, could only be hinted at, or dealt with in a less in-depth fashion than they deserve. Thus, rather than painting a fully detailed portrait of present “German-Eritrean” diaspora, this work represents a first draft, a starting point, contributing to a number of current debates in transnational / diaspora research as well as in regional studies of the Horn of Africa. Two of them I would like to briefly sum up here.

First of all, this study is a contribution to fill a research gap in Eritreanist scholarship, namely that of the role and relevance of the diaspora in Eritrea’s unfinished nation-building project. I have tried to illustrate how deeply the roots of Eritrean nationalism reach back into the history of Eritrean exile, and how a sense of Eritrean-ness has been able to emerge not least through the countless connections and communications between Eritreans “within and without the country.”

Second, this work contributes to a less emphasized aspect in the study of diasporas and transnational relations. As pointed out at the beginning of this work, my focus has primarily been on Eritrean long-distance nationalism. Or, more precisely, on how the influences of the homeland – both direct and indirect – shape the diaspora and in turn circumscribe its potential

for contributing to the (social, cultural, economical or political) development of their country of origin. Thus, looking perhaps more intensely at the limits, rather than the chances of transnational practices, I take a rather sombre stand with respect to the potential of diaspora engagement “at home” to date.

The beneficial activities of diasporas have recently been hailed as a new and politically correct means of promoting economic (and even democratic) development. What has often been overlooked is that, among other factors, diaspora engagement also depends on the country of origin’s willingness to allow members of the diaspora to participate in social, economic and political life at home. Where basic freedom is missing, as is sadly the case in present-day Eritrea, the diaspora has next to no means of invoking a change for the better. It is therefore not the question whether diasporas are either *per se* “good” or “bad” with regards to their influence on the homeland, but whether they have any influence at all (see Conrad 2009). And unless we fully understand the complex and intricate mechanisms of homeland diaspora (power)relations, any attempt to foster diaspora engagement in the field of economic, political or social development, seems doomed to be futile.

In the future it might therefore be necessary to look more closely at what Lee Cassanelli once shortly and aptly called “the dialectics of diaspora – homeland relations” (Cassanelli 2001). In other words, we need to observe which developments “here” have repercussions “there,” and *vice versa*. A final lesson to be learned from the Eritrean case, finally, is that even though some diasporas (sometimes even called “new” diasporas) seem to be relatively recent phenomena, most of them have a history both with their country of origin and the country of settlement.

\*

Some time has elapsed since the completion of the field research for this work, and developments in Eritrea as well as in the diaspora itself continue to reshape the conflicts and challenges described in this study. The perhaps most profound challenge for “transnational Eritrea” is the “exit”, that is the continued out-migration, of thousands of young men and women every year, and their absorption and integration into the existing diaspora communities. The political and socio-economic effects of the border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000) have soured the relationship between the initially popular government and the population at home and abroad. President Issayas Afeworki reacted to criticism by cracking down on high-ranking political dissidents (‘G15’) and journalists, closing independent newspapers, and restricting the activities of NGOs and religious communities in 2001 and

2002. Today, an increasing number of Eritreans perceive the current economic and political development as deeply unsatisfying and repressive. As a result of this crisis Eritrea has once again become one of the world's 'top-refugee producing' countries: In 2007, the number of new asylum claims filed by Eritrean individuals worldwide was 36,000; ranging third in place after Iraqi and Somali asylum seekers (UNHCR 2008).

This large influx of new refugees also plays an important role in changing the fabric of Eritrean diaspora society. One result is the growing fragmentation and polarization of the Eritrean diaspora, including the re-emergence of the former ELF and its splinter parties, the establishment of a new opposition (including EPLF dissidents) operating at a transnational level, and the founding of 'civic movements' advocating democracy and human rights in Eritrea as well as the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers. The latter, however, seem to have the potential to write a new chapter of Eritrea-diaspora relations, or at least, to change the discourse within the diaspora, even if their voices fall on deaf ears in Asmara. In the diaspora they have already succeeded in drawing attention to diverse Eritrean issues that used to be taboo topics, and which are now openly debated: foremost human rights abuses in Eritrea and the massive out-migration. But the civic movements are also committed to highlighting the plight of the new Eritrean asylum seekers in the countries where they hoped to start a new life. Remarkably these groups have also sought new alliances beyond the narrow, and sometimes stifling, Eritrean communities. All of this is hopeful, even though the situation in Eritrea continues to be in a stalemate.

\*

Not very long ago, an Eritrean rights activist and friend – himself one of the new exiles – asked if I had seen a certain video on *asmarino.com*. The video shows an interview with a youngish Eritrean man who has recently escaped to Ethiopia. For all that is known, he was a team leader of the prison guard, first at Embatkala and then at Era'eRo – the two places where the G15 dissents and journalists had been incarcerated to be forgotten. He reports that within the nine years of their imprisonment fifteen of thirty-five detainees have died; among them General Ogbe Abraha, Mahmoud Sherifo, and journalist Johannes Fessehaye (Joshua). Some of the prisoners apparently died due to untreated medical conditions and/or the harsh desert climate in the respective location. Others committed suicide. Shortly before he succeeded in killing himself, one of the prisoners said to his guard: "Today you are here to watch us, tomorrow you will be there to give witness." It became a winged word to be whispered among the guards, who also began to fear for their lives, says the escapee.

These days Eritrea is a land of imprisoned dreams and nightmares. And those who leave carry their dreams and nightmares with them. But even though my analysis of the diaspora’s power or impotence to change the present situation may seem pessimistic, I do believe that time will come when the diaspora’s engagement, creativity and resources will be needed and hopefully will find a more fertile ground.



**Figure 16** *“We are the prisoners of our dreams:” Young diaspora Eritreans visiting a former Italian colonial prison situated on the remote Dahlak Islands. According to reports by Eritrean asylum seekers, present-time prisoners are detained at a nearby place under similarly inhumane conditions.*

## References

---

- Abdulkader Saleh, Nicole Hirt, Worlbert Smidt, eds. 2008. *Friedensräume in Eritrea und Tigray unter Druck. Identitätskonstruktion, soziale Kohäsion und politische Stabilität*. Münster: Lit Verlag.
- Abeba Tesfagiorgis. 1991. *A Painful Season and A Stubborn Hope. The Odysee of an Eritrean Mother*. Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press.
- Abraham Tekle. 2000. "The Role of Parents in (Professional) Education for their Children" (Transl. from Tigrinya). *Selam Eritrea* No 14/15: 38-39.
- Acton, John Dahlberg. 1967. *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel eds. 2006. *Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies*. Bayreuth: Bayreuther African Studies Series: 217-241.
- Aida Kidane, ed. 2004. "General Congress of Eritrean Student's Union in Europe." Available at <[http://www.eri24.com/Article\\_440.htm](http://www.eri24.com/Article_440.htm)> (accessed 8 December 2007).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. Interview with Haile Menkerios, Available <[http://eri24.com/Article\\_10014.htm](http://eri24.com/Article_10014.htm)> (accessed January 2008).
- Aklilu Ghirmai. 2005. *Zwischen Einparteienstaat und Demokratie. Die Bedeutung der Opposition im Demokratisierungsprozess*, Marburg: Tectum.
- Al-Ali, Nadje, Richard Black, and Khalid Koser. 2001a. "The Limits to 'Transnationalism': Bosnian and Eritrean Refugees in Europe as Emerging Transnational Communities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24(4): 578 –600.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Khalid Koser. 2001b. "Refugees and Transnationalism: the Experience of Bosnians and Eritreans in Europe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27: 615-634.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Khalid Koser, eds. 2002. *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Allen, Tim, ed. 1996. *In Search of Cool Ground. War, flight & Homecoming in Northeast Africa*. James Currey, London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Hubert Morsink, eds. 1994. *When Refugees go home. African Experiences*. London, Trenton.
- Amaniel Bereket. 1998. "Beles - junge europäische Eritreer." *Selam Eritrea* No. 12, pp. 36-37.
- Amanuel Mehreteab. 2004. *Wake up Hannah. Reintegration and Reconstruction Challenges for Post-War Eritrea*. Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press.
- Amanuel Melles. 2000. "The Diaspora Youth. Hostage of the Past or Hope for the Future?" <<http://news.asmarino.com/TheEritreanDiaspora/Articles/3.AS>> (accessed 2 March 2003).
- Amanuel Sahle. 2001a. "An Eritrean in Germany." *Eritrea Profile*, 28 July 2001: 7.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001b. "The long Shadow of Tradition." *Eritrea Profile*, 4 August 2001: 7.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001c. "Is There Life after Europe?" *Eritrea Profile*, 11 August 2001: 7.
- Ambassador Haile (2000). *Workshop DEJD vom 3 – 5 November 2000 in Bielefeld*. (Unpublished Handout).
- AMKA (Amt für multikulturelle Angelegenheiten der Stadt Frankfurt am Main), ed. 1997. *Religionen der Welt. Gemeinden und Aktivitäten in der Stadt Frankfurt am Main*. Frankfurt am Main: Fachhochschulverlag.
- Amnesty International. 1999. *Ethiopia and Eritrea. Human rights issues in a year of armed conflict*. AI Index: AFR 04/03/88.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. Eritrea: *Willkürliche Verhaftung von Regierungskritikern und Journalisten*. AI Index AFR 64/008/2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. *Eritrea: 'You Have No Right to Ask' – Government Resists Scrutiny on Human Rights*. AI Index: AFR 64/003/2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *Eritrea: Religious persecution*. Available at <<http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/Eritrea/document.do?id=ENGAFR640132005>> (accessed 3 January 2006).
- Andall, Jacqueline. 2002. "Second Generation Attitude? African-Italians in Milan." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (3): 389-408.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1992. *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics*. Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies (CASA).
- Angoustures, Aline and Valérie Pascal. 1999. "Diaspora und Konfliktfinanzierung." In François Jean and Jean-Christophe Rufin, eds. *Ökonomie der Bürgerkriege*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appenheimer, Peter F., Clementine Klemp, Kerstin Kude-Osman. 1996. *Workcamp Eritrea 1995. Junge Menschen pflanzen Bäume. Eine Dokumentation*. Berlin.
- Araya Debessay. 1996. "Role of Eritreans in the Diaspora within the Context of the Macro-Economic Policy." *Eritrea Profile* 24 February 1996: 5.
- Arén, Gustav. 1978. *Evangelical pioneers in Ethiopia, Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*. Stockholm.
- Arens, Christoph. 2009. "Eritrea weltweit am stärksten militarisiert" *domradio* 15 May 2009. Available at <[http://www.domradio.de/aktuell/artikel\\_53270.html](http://www.domradio.de/aktuell/artikel_53270.html)> (accessed 10 December 2009).
- Arnone, Anna. 2008. "Journeys to Exile: the Constitution of Eritrean Identity Through Narratives and Experiences." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34 (2): 325-340.
- Asgede Hagos. 1998. "Mass Communications and Nation Building: Policy Implications for Eritrea" *Eritrean Studies Review* Vol. 2 No. 2, Red Sea Press: Lawrenceville, New Jersey: 65-87.
- Asgodom, Sabine. 1992. "Sieg der Unbeugsamen. Eritrea im Aufbruch." *Cosmopolitan* 5/1992: 104-112.
- Asmeret Tesfamariam. 2001. "Season of languages." In *Eritrea Profile* 18 August: 8.
- Azarya, Victor. 1988. "Reordering State-Society Relations: Incorporation and Disengagement." In Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, eds. *The Precarious Balance. State and Society in Africa*. Boulder and London: Westview Press.

- Bakker, Piet. 1999. "Reinventing Roots; New Media and National Identity". Paper presented at the 2nd Conference on Media and Open Societies, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) and the Faculty of Journalism of Moscow State University, Amsterdam 21-23 Oct. 1999. <<http://users.fmg.uva.nl/pbakker/roots.html>> Last accessed 1 March 2010.
- Bartelt, Dawid. 1994. "Existenzgründer. Das Fachkräfteprogramm Eritrea kann sich schon sehen lassen." *edp-Entwicklungspolitik* No. 4:27-29.
- Basch, Linda, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc. 1994. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states*. London: Routledge Press.
- Bauböck, Rainer. 2002. "How Migration Transforms Citizenship: International, Multinational and Transnational Perspectives." Working Papers IWE - Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, <http://www.iwe.oeaw.ac.at/workingpapers/Bauboeck-WP24.pdf>, 5 Jan 2005.
- Bauer, Heike. 1991. Eritreer in Frankfurt. Ethnizität unter den Bedingungen des Exils. Hamburg (MA FB Klassische Philologie und Kulturwissenschaften der Johann-Wolfgang Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. "Flüchtlingsalltag in Frankfurt am Main." In Ina-Maria Greverus, Johannes Moser, Kirsten Salein, eds. *STADTgedanken aus und über Frankfurt am Main*. Frankfurt a.M.: 269-286.
- Beles. 1999. "Eritrea - das ist menschliche Wärme. Umfrage unter der eritreischen Jugend," *Selam Eritrea* No. 13/14: 33-35.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Beles." *Selam Eritrea* No.12: 36-37.
- Bereket Habte Selassie. 1980. "From British Rule to Federation and Annexation". In Basil Davidson et al.. *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham, Spokesman: 32-47.
- Berhane Tewelde. 1995. "Taxing the Diaspora". *Eritrea Profile* 18 February 1995: 4.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Migration in Eritrea: a brief account". *Journal of Middle Eastern Geopolitics* 1 (1).<<http://padis2.uniroma1.it:81/ojs/index.php/JMEG/article/view/215>> (accessed 30 December 2009).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006a. "Remittances as a tool for development and reconstruction in Eritrea. An economic analysis". *Journal of Middle Eastern Geopolitics* [Online] 1(2). Available: <http://padis2.uniroma1.it:81/ojs/index.php/JMEG/article/view/228> (accessed 30 December 2009).
- Berhe, Jonas. 1999. "Selbständige Jugendliche - ein Problem," *Selam Eritrea* No. 13/14: 41-42.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. "Eritrea: Nach der Befreiung ins Exil. Das postrevolutionäre Eritrea hat sich selbst isoliert. *iz3w* 277: 12.
- "Berlin Manifesto." 2000. Resolution of Eritrean Academics and Professionals Meetings Held In Berlin, Germany, 3 October 2000.
- Bernal, Victoria. 2000b. "Equality to Die For? Women Guerrilla Fighters and Eritrea's Cultural Revolution." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (PoLAR), 23: 61-76.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Nationalisierung des Transnationalismus. Transnationalism, Diaspora, and the World Wide Web of Eritrean Nationalism". *edp-Entwicklungspolitik* 23/24, 2001: 26-29.
- Bernal, Victoria. 2004. "Eritrea Goes Global: Reflections on Nationalism in Transnational Era." *Cultural Anthropology* 19 (1): 3-25.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Digital Diaspora: Conflict, Community and, Celebrity in Virtual Eritrea." In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 185-209.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005b. "Eritrea On-line: Diaspora, Cyberspace and the Public Sphere." *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 32(4): 660-675.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: The Eritrean Diaspora Online," *Global Networks* 6 (2): 161-179.
- Beyan Negash. 2007. "Tribute to A Fallen Hero that No One Wishes to Remember." Available online. Part 1 <<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4556/5>> and Part 2 <<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4565/5>> (both accessed 28 December 2009).
- Birnbaum, Michael. 1994. "Galas Heimkehr in die Hoffnung." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, (no exact date).
- Bisrat Dessalegn S. Obamichael. 1996. "Eritrea: The struggle for self-determination and maintaining an 'identity' in Diaspora." <<http://www-mcnair.berkeley.edu/96journal/obamichael.html>> (accessed 16 May 2006).
- Boemcken, Marc von. 2009. "The BICC Global Militarization Index (GMI)." Susanne Heinke, ed. *Annual Report 2008/2009*. Bonn: BICC.
- Bräuchler, Birgit. 2005. *Cyberidentities at War. Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Brixius, Elke and Helga Tewes. 1992. *Zwischen den Kulturen? Eritreische Flüchtlingskinder- und Jugendliche in Kassel*. Unpublished graduation paper. Gesamthochschule Kassel.
- Bruchhaus, Eva-Maria. 2003. "Hotspot Horn of Africa: Between Integration and Disintegration." Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Burgess, Doris .1980. "Women and War in Eritrea", *ROAPE*, No.45/46: 126-132.
- Cappai, Gabriele. 2005. "The Distinction Insider/Outsider in the Analysis of Culture and Religion. An Interdisciplinary Approach." In Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel, ed. *Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies*. Bayreuth: Bayreuther African Studies Series: 133-154.
- Caputo, Robert. 1996. "Eritrea Wins the Peace." *National Geographic* Vol. 189, No. 6: 82-105.
- Cassanelli, Lee. 2001. "Diaspora und Entwicklung". *epd-Entwicklungspolitik* 23/44, 2001: 20-26.
- Chintando, Ezra. 2005. "The Insider/Outsider Problem in Research on Religion and Migration." In Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel, ed. *Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies*. Bayreuth: Bayreuther African Studies Series: 79-94.
- Cirino Hiteng Ofuho n.d. "Discourses on Liberation and Democracy - Eritrean Self-Views." Available at <[http://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/research/erwp/ciri\\_cv.htm](http://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/research/erwp/ciri_cv.htm)> (accessed 30 March 2006).
- Clapham, Christopher. 1988. *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. African Studies Series 61. Cambridge: University Press.
- Clayton, Dimitria and Heike Pörksen .1994. *Die Rückkehr eritreischer Flüchtlinge als Fachkräfte aus Deutschland*. ASA Projekt, Unpublished Research Report.
- Cliffe, Lionel. 1987. "Congress in Eritrea." *ROAPE*, No. 39: 81-83.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. "Forging a Nation: The Eritrean Experience." *Third World Quarterly* 11(4): 131-147.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Davidson, Basil eds. 1988. *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*. Nottingham: Spokesman.
- Clifford, James. 1994. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3): 302-338.
- Cohen, Robin (1997): *Global Diasporas*. London: UCL.
- Connell, Dan. 1997. *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*. Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press.



- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Enough! A Critique of Eritrea's Post-Liberation Politics." Available at <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200311060876.html?page=5>> (accessed 8 November 2003)
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.
- Conrad, Bettina. 1997. *A Question of Identities. Ethnicity, Regionalism, Sectarianism and Nationalism in Eritrea*. Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Centre of West African Studies, The University of Birmingham/ UK.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. Eritreans in Germany: Heading from Exile to Diaspora?. In Eva-Maria Bruchhaus, ed. *Hot Spot Horn of Africa. Between Integration and Disintegration*. Münster: LIT-Verlag, 175-184.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "We are the Prisoners of our Dreams: Exit, Voice and Loyalty in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany." In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 211-261.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005a. "From Revolution to Religion: The Politics of Religion in the Eritrean Diaspora in Germany". In Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel, ed. *Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies*. Bayreuth: Bayreuther African Studies Series: 217-241.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "When a Culture of War Meets a Culture of Exile: 2nd Generation Diaspora Eritreans & their Relations to Eritrea," *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 22(1): 59-85.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006a. "When Neverland Meets Otherland: Virtual Communities and Real-Life Divisions in the Eritrean Diaspora," *Proceedings of the XV<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Hamburg*. Wiesbaden. Harrassowitz Verlag: 58-65.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006b. "'We are the Warsay of Eritrea in Diaspora': Contested Images of Eritrean-ness in Cyberspace and in Real Life." In Munzoul Assal and Leif Manger, eds. *Diasporas Within and Without Africa. Dynamism, Heterogeneity, Variation*. Uppsala. The Nordic Africa Institute: 88-104.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006c. "Out of the 'Memory Hole: The Re-Emergence of Competing Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution," *Afrika Spectrum* 41 (2), 2006: 249-271.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. "Die Rolle der Diasporas." *Informationen zur politischen Bildung* 303, *Afrika-Schwerpunktthemen*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 30-32.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Clara Fischer, Mohamed Husein Gaas et al. 2009. "Diaspora Networks in Europe. Summary report of initial data collection on Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean Diaspora Organisations in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom". Bonn: BICC.
- Constitutional Commission of Eritrea. 1996. *Draft Constitution*. Asmara.
- Daffa, Paulos (1995). "Die äthiopische und eriteische Minderheit". In Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen und Georg Hansen (eds) (1995). *Ethnische Minderheiten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ein Lexikon*. Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 15-27.
- "Das andere Land im Hinterkopf". 2001. *Der Überblick* 2/2001: 11-13.
- Davidson, Basil (1992). *The Black Man's Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*. London: James Currey.
- \_\_\_\_\_; Lionel Cliffe; Bereket Habte Selassie, eds. 1980. *Behind the War in Eritrea*, Nottingham: Spokesman.
- "Diasporas: A World of Exiles." 2003. *The Economist*, 2 January 2003, online edition: <[http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=1511765](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=1511765)> (accessed 21 Aug. 2003).
- Die Grünen. 1987: *Den Krieg in Eritrea beenden. Dokumentation der öffentlichen Anhörung zum Eritrea-Äthiopien-Konflikt, 27.- 29. April 1986*. Bonn.

- Dines, Mary. 1980. "The Ethiopian 'Red Terror'." Davidson, Basil; Cliffe, Lionel; Bereket Habte Selassie (eds). *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham, Spokesman: 60-62.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980a. "The Land, the People and the Revolution." In Davidson, Basil; Cliffe, Lionel; Bereket Habte Selassie (eds). *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham: Spokesman: 125-140.
- Doornbos, Martin et al. eds. 1992. *Beyond conflict in the Horn. Prospects for recovery and development in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan*. London: James Currey.
- Dorman Rich, Sara. 2005. "Narratives of Nationalism in Eritrea: Research and Revisionism: Dedicated to the Memory of Alex Naty (1957–2003)". *Nations and Nationalism*, 11 (2): 203-222.
- Duby, Georges .1981. *Die Drei Ordnungen. Das Weltbild des Feudalismus*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp
- Durkheim, Emile. 1999. *Der Selbstmord*. Frankfurt.
- EDYU (Eritrean Democratic Youth Union). 1977. *Present Tasks and Future Prospects*. Beirut: The ELF Foreign Information Centre.
- EHD (Eritrea Hilfswerk in Deutschland e.V.). 1986. "10 Jahre Solidarische Hilfe." Die Grünen. *Den Krieg in Eritrea beenden. Dokumentation der öffentlichen Anhörung zum Eritrea-Äthiopien-Konflikt*, 27.- 29. April 1986. Bonn: 71-72.
- ELF Foreign Information Centre (1976). *The Eritrean Revolution. 15 Years of Armed Struggle*. Beirut.
- ELFE (Eritreans for Liberation in Europe) 1975. *Der Freiheitskampf des Volkes von Eritrea* Vol. 1, No. 1. Hamburg.
- EMDHR (Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights) n.d.: *What actually happened in South Africa*. Unpublished paper.
- EPLF. 1983. *Selected Articles from EPLF Publications (1973-1980)*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. "The National Democratic Programme of the EPLF", in Davidson, Basil; Cliffe, Lionel; Bereket Habte Selassie (eds.) (1980). *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham: Spokesman, 143-150.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland 1993. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London and Boulder: Pluto Press.
- Eritrea Profile*. 20 November 1999. "Appeal from Cologne: The bloodiest war of our time."
- Eritrea Profile*. 4 March 2000. "Eritreans Worldwide make a Clarion Call for Peace."
- Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative and Connection e.V. 2004. *Dokumentation Eritrea: Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Desertion*. Offenbach.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. *Gegen Krieg und Diktatur in Eritrea*. Offenbach.
- Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative. 2006. *EAI-Newsletter Conscience – Gewissen* No 1.
- Erlich, Haggai. 1983. *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978*. Stanford/California.
- Ethiopian Orthodox Church. 1970. *The Church of Ethiopia. A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*. Addis Ababa.
- EWGU / EGWU (Eritrean Women's General Union). 1977. *Resolutions and Recommendations and Final Statement of the First Congress of the Eritrean Women's General Union held between 22 and 29 May 1977 in the Liberated Areas*. Beirut: The ELF Foreign Information Centre.
- Faist, Thomas. 2000. "Transnationalization in International Migration: Implications for the Study of Citizenship and Culture." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23: 2.
- Festival Planungsgruppe - Federation of Eritrean Youth Organisations (FEYO). 2000. *Abschlußbericht zum Jugendfestival 2000 in Gießen*. Unpublished document.

- Feven Abreha Tekle. 2007. *Ich wollte nicht töten! Die dramatische Flucht einer Soldatin durch Afrika*. München: Blanvalet.
- Fessehazion, Tekie. 2004. *Shattered Illusion, Broken Promises*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Eritrea's Remittance-Based Economy: Conjectures and Musings". In: Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 165-183.
- Firebrace, James and Holland, Stuart. 1984. *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*. Spokesman for War on Want: Nottingham.
- Fouron, Georges E. and Nina Glick-Schiller (2002) *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Freunde des Eritreanischen Volkes e.V., eds. no date. *Generalunion der eritreanischen Frauen. Die Rolle der eritreanischen Frauen in der jüngsten Entwicklung Eritreas*, Nr. 1: Gründungskongress der Generalunion der eritreanischen Frauen. Berlin.
- Fuglerud, Oivind. 1999. *Life on the Outside. The Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. 1996. "The Minefield of Land Reform: Comments on the Eritrean Land Proclamation", *African Affairs*, 95: 269-285.
- Gärtner, Kathrin. 2001. *Verborgene Dynamiken – sozioökonomische Netzwerke von Eritreern in Deutschland*. Unveröffentlichte Magisterarbeit, FU Berlin, Ethnologie.
- Garcetti, Eric 1999. "Civic and Ethnic Allegiances: Competing Visions of Nationalist Discourse in the Horn of Africa". Paper presented at the 40th Convention of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., February 16–20, 1999.
- Gebre-Medhin, Jordan. 1989. *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea. A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*. Trenton/New Jersey: Red Sea Press.
- Gebreyesus, A., Ghebre, G., Schröder, G., Zerai, F. 1991. *Eritrea: Personelle Zusammenarbeit . Studie zum eritreischen Fachkräftepotential in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Auftrage der Zentralstelle für Arbeitsvermittlung – ZAV*. World University Service, Deutsches Komitee. Wiesbaden.
- Ghezae Hagos Berhe. 2009. "The cruellest Decade: In Ten." Available at: <<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/5429/18/>> (accessed 30 December 2009).
- Girtler, Roland. 1988. *Methoden der qualitativen Sozialforschung. Anleitung zur Feldarbeit*. Wien, Köln, Graz: Böhlau Verlag.
- Glick-Schiller, Nina. 1999. "Transmigrants and Nation-States: Something Old and Something New in the U.S. Immigrant Experience." In DeWind and Kasinitz, eds. *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Graf, Oskar Maria. 1985. *Die Flucht ins Mittelmäßige. Ein New Yorker Roman*. Büchergilde Gutenberg, Frankfurt/Main
- Greenfield, Richard. 1980. "Precolonial and Colonial History." In Basil Davidson et al. (eds.). *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham: 16-32.
- Grünhagen, Freya and Thorsten Meier .1998. *Freiwillige Repatriierung nach Eritrea und Mosambik*. Felsberg.
- The Guardian International. 2009. "Eritrea: The World's Largest Prison." Published online at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/17/eritrea-human-rights>> (accessed 28 December 2009).
- Haben, Dr. (pseudonym). 2002. "Dr. Haben converts to 'Pente'". Available at: <<http://news.asmarino.com/DrHaben>> (accessed February 2003).

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "My daughter deserves a respectful young man and a bright future!(Dr. Haben meddling on family matters)". Available at:  
<<http://news.asmarino.com/DrHaben/Articles/032502.asp>> (accessed February 2003).
- Habib, Naila. 1996. "The Search for Home." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9 (1): 96-102.
- Habte-Selassie, Elias. 1992. "Eritrean Refugees in the Sudan: A Preliminary Analysis of Voluntary Repatriation." In DOORNBOS, Martin et al. (eds). *Beyond Conflict in the Horn. Prospects for Recovery and Development in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan*. London. James Currey: 23-31.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. "Homecoming in Eritrea: Challenges and Constraints." In T. Allen, ed. *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight, and Homecoming in Northeast Africa*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In J. Rutherford, ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Haller, Ingrid Hg. 1987. *Eritreische Frauen. GhK. Migrationssoziologie - interkulturelles Lernen. Projekt: Politische Flüchtlinge*. Verlag: Gesamthochschule Kassel.
- Hannken, Helga. 2004. *Internationale Migration von und nach Afrika. Der weite Weg zurück nach Eritrea. Immigration - Emigration - Remigration*. Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1998. "Transnational Research." In Bernard Russel H., ed. *Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. London 235-255.
- Hartmann, Rainer (1998) *Eritrea: Neubeginn mit Tourismus. Ein integratives Planungs- und Entwicklungskonzept*. Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde.
- Haustein, Jörg. 2008. "Brief history of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia." Available at  
<<http://www.glopent.net/Members/jhaustein/ethiopia/brief-history-of-pentecostalism-in-ethiopia>> (accessed 5 December 2008).
- Hepner, Tricia Redeker, 2003. Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Civil Society in the Eritrean Diaspora. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. 10 (3): 269-29.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. *Eritrea and Exile: Trans/Nationalism in the Horn of Africa and the United States*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Bettina Conrad eds. 2005. "Eritrea Abroad: An Introduction," Tricia R. Hepner / Bettina Conrad (eds.) (2005): v-vxii.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Bettina Conrad eds. 2005a. *Eritrea Abroad: Critical Perspectives on the Global Diaspora. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review*, 4 (2), Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Transnational Tegadelti: Eritreans for Liberation in North America and the EPFL." In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 37-84.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. "Transnational Political and Legal Dimensions of Emergent Eritrean Human Rights Movements." *Migration Studies Working Paper Series* No 36, Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, available on-line  
<<http://migration.org.za>> (accessed 15 January 2008).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Transnational governance and the centralization of state power in Eritrea and exile." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3: 476-502.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors and Exile. Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Herrmann, Broka. 1994. "Eine afrikanische Schweiz? Eritrea nach dem Ende des dreißigjährigen Krieges." *Frankfurter Rundschau* 5. Feb. 1994.

- Hettlage, Robert. 1993. "Diapora: Umriss zu einer soziologischen Theorie". In Mihran Dabag und Kristin Platt Hg. *Identität in der Fremde*. Bochum: 75-105.
- Hill, Justin. 2002. *Ciao Asmara. A Classic Account of Contemporary Africa*. London: Abacus.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.
- Hirt, Nicole. 2001. *Eritrea zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Die Entwicklung seit der Unabhängigkeit*. Hamburger Beiträge zur Afrika-Kunde 62. Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.) "Young Returnees from the Diaspora to Eritrea - Problems and Prospects." Unpublished Paper.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (n.d.). "From Timerti Sawra to Timerti Sawa – The transformation of the Eritrean Educational System." Research proposal.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. and Ranger, Terence, eds. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Hoffer, E. 1951 [2002]. *The True Believer. Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. New York: Perennial.
- Horst, Cindy. 2002. "Transnational Dialogues: Developing Ways to do Research in a Diasporic Community." Available at <<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/horst1.pdf>> (accessed 16 July 2007).
- Houtart, Francois. 1979. *Revolution in Eritrea: Eyewitness Reports*. Bruxelles: Comité belge de secours à l'Erythrée.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. "The Social Revolution in Eritrea." In Basil Davidson et al. eds. *Behind the War in Eritrea*. Nottingham. Spokesman: 83-110.
- Hughes, Howard. 2004. "Eine Volksarmee der besonderen Art - Informationen zum eritreischen Militärkomplex." Unpublished paper. Available at <<http://www.connection-ev.de/z.php?ID=442>> (accessed 12 December 2007).
- Iyob, Ruth. 1995. *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence. Domination, Resistance and Nationalism 1941-1993*. Cambridge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "The Ethiopia-Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs. Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 38: 659-682.
- Jacquin-Berdal, Dominique and Plaut, Martin, eds. 2005. *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.
- Jansen, Volker. 2001. *Kornblumen und Salo. Begegnungen mit der Ukraine*. Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder.
- Kassahun Checole. 2006. "An open letter to Mr. Thomas Mountain of the Eritrean-American Friendship Society." Available at: <[http://www.ephrem.org/dehai\\_archive/2006/mar-apr06/0269.html](http://www.ephrem.org/dehai_archive/2006/mar-apr06/0269.html)> (accessed 2 April 2010).
- Kemink, Friederike. 1991. *Die Tegrañña-Frauen in Eritrea. Eine Untersuchung des Kodizes des Gewohnheitsrechts 1890-1941*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Kibreab, Gaim. 1987. *Refugees and Development in Africa: The Case of Eritrea*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. "Stranded 'Birds of Passage'? Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees in Khartoum." *Refuge* 10 (4): 6-12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *Ready and Willing....but still Waiting. The Dilemma of Eritrean Refugees in the Sudan*. Uppsala: Life & Peace Institute.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. "Left in a Limbo. Prospects for Repatriation of Eritrean Refugees from Sudan & Responses of the International Donor Community". In Tim Allen ed. *In Search of Cool Ground. War, Flight & Homecoming in Northeast Africa*. James Currey: London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Urban Eritrean Refugees in Sudan: Yearning to Join the Diaspora or Waiting to Go Home?" In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 115-142.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. "The Eritrean Diaspora, the War of Independence, Post-Conflict (Re)-construction and Democratisation." In Ulf Johansson Dahre, ed. *In Social Anthropology, The Role of Diasporas in Peace, Democracy and Development in the Horn of Africa. Research Report. No. 1/2007*. Lund: Media-Tryck Sociologen: 97-115.
- Kifle, Temesgen. 2009. "Motivation of Remittance Senders: Evidence from Eritrean Immigrants in Germany." In Andreas Knorr, Alfons Lemper, Axel Sell, Karl Wohlmuth, eds. *Berichte aus dem Weltwirtschaftlichen Colloquium der Universität Bremen* Nr. 116.
- Killion, Tom. 1997. "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958." *Eritrean Studies Review* 2 (1): 1-58.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Koch, Jan Sören. 2002. *Die Integration junger Eritreer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland – eine empirische Untersuchung*. Unpublished diploma thesis, Ruhr-Universität Bochum: Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaft.
- Köbler, Reinhart and Schiel, Tilman. 1996. "Verstaatlichung nationaler Befreiungsbewegungen." In R. Köbler/T.Schiel. *Auf dem Weg zu einer kritischen Theorie der Modernisierung*. Frankfurt Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation.
- Kunz, Egon F. 1973. "The Refugee in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement." *International Migration Review* VII (2): 125-146.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1981. "Exile and Resettlement: Refugee Theory." *International Migration Review* XV (1): 42-51.
- Legum, Colin. 1983. *Eritrea & Tigray*. London: Minority Rights Group.
- Lehrerkooperative Bildung und Kommunikation e.V. 1994. *Späte Heimatkunde. Eine Gruppenreise nach Eritrea*. Frankfurt: Lehrerkooperative Bildung und Kommunikation e.V.
- Levine, Donald N. 2003. "Reconfiguring the Ethiopian Nation in a Global Era". Available at: <[http://www.ethiomeia.com/press/reconfiguring\\_ethiopia.html](http://www.ethiomeia.com/press/reconfiguring_ethiopia.html)> (accessed 16 October 2007).
- Levitt, Peggy. 1999. "Social Remittances: A Local Level, Migration-Driven Form of Cultural Diffusion." *International Migration Review* 32 (124): 926-49.
- Lewis, I.M. ed. 1983. *Nationalism and Self Determination in the Horn of Africa*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Link, Nikolai. 2004. 'Gemeinsam in den Abgrund'? *Eskalationsdynamik und Konfliktmanagement im äthiopisch-eritreischen Grenzstreit*. Diplomarbeit am Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften der Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt/Main.
- Loimeier, Roman. 2006. "Memories of Revolution. Zur Deutungsgeschichte einer Revolution. (Sansibar 1964)." *Afrika Spectrum* 41 (2): 175 -197.
- Lyons, Terence. 2006. "Diasporas and Conflict." *Global Studies Review*, 2, 3: 1-2.
- Makki, Fouad. 2002. "The Aporias of Radical Nationalism: Political Culture, Ideology and Democracy in Eritrea." In H. Quehl, ed. *Living in Wartimes - Living in Post-Wartimes, Proceedings of an International Workshop on the Horn of Africa, held in Melsungen/Germany, January 29 - 31, 1999*. Felsberg. Edition eins: 201-226.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. "Nationalism, State Formation and the Public Sphere: Eritrea 1991-96" of the *Review of African Political Economy* 23 (70): 465-497.

- Marcus, George. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System. The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.
- Markakis, John. 1988. "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26(1): 51-70.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. London: Zed Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. "Eritrea's National Charter." *Review of African Political Economy* 22 (63): 126-129.
- Matewos Hagos. 2002. "Im Gespräch über die Liebe Gottes." *Deutsche Missionsgesellschaft Info* 3/02.
- Matsuoka, Atsuko and John Sorenson. 2001. *Ghosts and Shadows. Construction of Identity and Community in an African Diaspora*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Ideas of North: The Eritrean Diaspora in Canada." In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 85-114.
- Matthies, Volker. 1981. *Der Eritrea-Konflikt. Ein vergessener Krieg am Horn von Afrika*. Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Afrika-Kunde 34: Hamburg.
- Matzke, Christine. 2002. "Comrades in Arts and Arms. Stories of Wars and Watercolours from Eritrea." *Matatu* 25-26, Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *En-gendering Theatre in Eritrea: The Roles and Representations of Women in the Performing Arts*. PhD Thesis: University of Leeds.
- Mayer, Ruth. 2005. *Diaspora. Eine kritische Begriffsbestimmung*. Transcript-Verlag.
- McSpadden, Lucia Ann. 1987. "Ethiopian Refugee Resettlement in the Western United States: Social Context and Psychological Well-Being". In: *International Migration Review*, Vol XXI, No. 3, 796-819.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Helene Moussa. 1994. "'I Have a Name': The Gender Dynamics in Asylum and in Resettlement of Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees in North America." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6 (3), 203-225.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Helene Moussa. 1996. "'Returning 'Home'?: The Decision-Making Process of Eritrean Women and Men", in W. Giles, H. Moussa et al. *Development & Diaspora. Gender and the refugee experience*. Ontario: Artemis Enterprises, 216-237.
- Mehretab Mehari. 2007. "Eritreans For Liberation In North America (EFLNA)," Available at: <<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4566/5/>> (accessed 28 December 2009).
- Mekonnen, Daniel R. and Samuel B. Abraha. 2004. "The Plight of Eritrean Students in South Africa." Available at: <[http://emdhr.civiblog.org/blog/\\_archives/2004/4/2/1020940.html](http://emdhr.civiblog.org/blog/_archives/2004/4/2/1020940.html)> (accessed 2 April 2010).
- Melchers, Konrad. 2000. "Berliner Manifest wirbelt eritreische Politik auf." *epd-Entwicklungspolitik* 21/2000: 8.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Königsweg der Entwicklungspolitik. Diaspora als Ressourcen von Entwicklung und Globalisierung." *epd-Entwicklungspolitik* online-edition: <[http://www.edp.de/entwicklungspolitik/entwicklungspolitik\\_index\\_16172.htm4](http://www.edp.de/entwicklungspolitik/entwicklungspolitik_index_16172.htm4)> (accessed 25 Januar 2004).
- Mezzetti, Petra. 2008. "Migrants' Political and Social Participation: Associative Networks and Dynamics of Mobilisation in a Local Context." Universita' Degli Studi Di Milano-Biocca (Doctoral Thesis).
- Miller, Daniel und Don Slater. 2000. *The Internet. An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

- Mindt, Elke. 1986. "Politische Flüchtlinge. Herkunft., Fluchthintergründe und Situation eritreischer Flüchtlingsfamilien". Kassel, FB Sozialwesen der Gesamthochschule Kassel, Hausarbeit zur Prüfung für Diplom-Sozialarbeit/Sozialpädagogik.
- Moussa, Helene. 1993. *Storm and Sanctuary: The Journey of Ethiopian and Women Refugees*. Dunhas, Ontario: Artemis Enterprises.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2005. *The Making of Elite Women Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea*. Brill.
- Mussie Ephrem and Semere Kesete. 2004. *The Ruling*. Stockholm: African Triangle.
- Mussie Habte. 2007. *Der äthiopisch-eritreische Krieg 1998 - 2000. Ursachen, Konfliktstrukturen und internationale Lösungsversuche*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag.
- Nadel, Siegfried. 1944. *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*. Asmara: British Military Administration.
- National Union of Eritrean Students/ Workers/Women – BRD. *Sawrana Report* Vol. 2 No 3.
- National Union of Eritrean Students/ Workers/Women – BRD. 1985. *Sawrana Report* Vol. 2 No. 4.
- Negash, Tekeste. 1987. *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941*. Uppsala.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. "Resistance and Collaboration in Eritrea 1882-1914", *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Lund, 26-29 April 1982*. Uppsala, Addis Abeba, East Lansing, 315-330.
- Neußner, Olaf. 1987. „Anerkennungspraxis bei eritreischen Asylsuchenden.“ *Zeitschrift für Ausländerrecht und Ausländerpolitik (ZAR)*, 4, 161-171.
- Newland, Kathleen. 2004. "Beyond Remittances: The Role of Diaspora in Poverty Reduction in their Countries of Origin." A Scoping Study by the Migration Policy Institute for the Department of International Development. On: [http://www.livelihoods.org/hot\\_topics/docs/MPIDiaspora.doc](http://www.livelihoods.org/hot_topics/docs/MPIDiaspora.doc), 20 January 2005.
- Nigisti Awalom and Yosief Tecele. 1997. "Performance Report 1994-1997 and Activity Plan 1998, Fachkräfte Programm Eritrea." Unpublished report. Asmara: FKP-Office.
- Nolting, Nina von. 2002. *Gemeinschaft im Exil: Eritreische Flüchtlinge in Frankfurt am Main, Department of Anthropology and African Studies*. Working Papers No. 11. Available at <<http://www.Uni-Mainz.DE/~ifeas/workingpapers/Arbeitspapiere.html>> (accessed 2 May 2004).
- Ogbamichael, Huria. 2002. *Protokoll der FEJU Vollversammlung 6 April 2002, Frankfurt am Main*. Unpublished document.
- Okbazghi Yohannes. 1987. "The Eritrean Question: a Colonial Case?" *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25 (4): 643-668.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*. University Press of Florida.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Lessons Still Unlearned." A Commentary. Available at <[http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/August/OgbazionY\\_8-28.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/August/OgbazionY_8-28.asp)> (last accessed 13 January 2005).
- Pateman, Roy. 1990a. "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité - Aspects of the Eritrean Revolution." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28 (3), 457-472.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990b. *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*. Trenton/N.J.: Red Sea Press.
- Pezaro, A. 1987. "Refugee Women Research in Khartoum—Preliminary Report," Socio-Psychological Research Centre on Development Planning, University of Saar, Saarbruecken (mimeo).
- Pirkkalainen, Päivi and Mahdi Abdile. 2009. "The Diaspora – Conflict – Peace – Nexus. A Literature Review." *DIASPEACE Working Paper* No. 1. Available at <[http://www.diaspeace.org/D-Working\\_paper\\_1\\_Final.pdf](http://www.diaspeace.org/D-Working_paper_1_Final.pdf)> (accessed 2 February 2010).



- Plaut, Martin. 2002. "Briefing: The Birth of the Eritrean Reform Movement." *Review of African Political Economy* 29: 119-124.
- Pool, David. 1980. "Revolutionary Crisis and Revolutionary Vanguard: The Emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front." *Review of African Political Economy* No. 19, 33-47.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. "Eritrean Nationalism." In I.M. Lewis. *Nationalism and Self Determination in the Horn of Africa*. London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front." In Cristopher Clapham, ed. *African Guerrillas*. Oxford: James Currey.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. Oxford and Athens, OH: James Currey; Ohio University Press.
- Pries, Ludger. 1996. "Transnationale Soziale Räume. Theoretisch-empirische Skizze am Beispiel der Arbeiterwanderungen Mexico – USA". *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 25(6): 456-472.
- Prouty, Chris and Rosenfield, Eugene (1994). *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia and Eritrea*. (2nd edition).
- Quehl, Hartmut. 2002. "Everyday Life of a Tagadelti During the Eritrean War for Liberation 1961-1991." In H. Quehl, ed. *Living in Wartimes - Living in Post-Wartimes*. Proceedings of an International Workshop on the Horn of Africa, held in Melsungen/Germany, January 29 - 31, 1999. Felsberg: edition eins.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *Kämpferinnen und Kämpfer im eritreischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg 1961 – 1991 – Faktoren der Diversität und der Kohärenz. Eine historische Untersuchung zur Alltags- und Sozialgeschichte des Krieges*. Band 1 und 2. Felsberg: edition 1.
- Radtke, Kathrin. 2005. "From Gifts to taxes: The Mobilization of Tamil and Eritrean Diaspora in Intrastate Warfare." Working Papers Micropolitics No.2. Available at <<http://www2.hu-berlin.de/mikropolitik/workingpapers>> (accessed 25 March 2006).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. *Mobilisierung der Diaspora. Die moralische Ökonomie der Bürgerkriege in Sri Lanka und Eritrea*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag.
- Reesom Haile. Undated. "Desta." Charles Cantalupo and Karl Young *Light and Dust Mobile Anthology of Poetry*. Available at <<http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/haile/rht-eng.htm>> (accessed 27 December 2009).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Dehai – Voice." In Reesom Haile, Charles Cantalupo (translation). *We Have Our Voice. Selected Poems of Reesom Haile*. Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press. Available at <<http://www.drunkenboat.com/db3/haile/voice.html>> (accessed 28 December 2009).
- RICE (Research and Information Centre on Eritrea). 1987. *Eritrea Information. Back Issues of Volumes I, II & III 1979-1981*. Rome.
- Reid, Richard. 2001. "The Challenge of the Past: the Struggle for Historical Legitimacy in Independent Eritrea". *History in Africa* 28: 239-72.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Old Problems in New Conflicts: Some Observations on Eritrea and its Relations with Tigray, from Liberation Struggle to Interstate War." *Africa* 73: 369-401.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Caught in the headlights of history: Eritrea, the EPLF, and the post-war nation-state." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43 (3): 467-488.
- Rettig, Uwe. 1998. "Eritreische Flüchtlinge in Deutschland. Plädoyer für eine andere Jugendpolitik." *Selam Eritrea* No. 11: 23.
- Rude, John C. 1996. "Birth of a Nation in Cyberspace." *Humanist* Vol. 56(2):17-22.
- Safran, William. 1991. "Diasporas in Modern Societies. Myths of Homeland and Return". *Diaspora* 1,1: 83-89.

- Saleh Gadi. 2002. "An Interview With Dr. Habte Tesfamariam (Spokesman, ELF-RC)". Available at <<http://www.awate.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi/1/73>> (accessed 16 January 2008).
- Said, Edward W. 1984. "The mind of winter." *Harper's Magazine* 269, September 1984: 29-55.
- Sang-Ho Becker, Rolf. 1998. "12 Jahre - ein Stück Eritrea in Frankfurt". *Selam Eritrea* No. 12: 38/39.
- Schmitz, Stefan. 2007. "Die 68er, Teil 2: Vietnam ist überall." *Der Spiegel*, No. 48/2007: 88-104.
- Schiel, Tilman. 1985. "Ethnie, Stamm, Nation - was ist Fiktion, was ist Realität?" *Peripherie*, 18/19: 163-72.
- Schönmeier, H. 1988. "Eritrean Refugees in Sudan. Waiting to Return or Start a New Life?" Research Paper. Socio-Psychological Research Centre on Development Planning, University of Saar, Saarbruecken.
- Schröder, Günter. 1988. "A Historical Account from a German Journalist's Interviews with Eritrean Figures Part I+II: Interview with Saleh Eyay." [Edited by Woldeyesus Ammar]. Available at <[http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch\\_2004/Dec\\_2004/WoldeyesusAmmar\\_Dec10.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch_2004/Dec_2004/WoldeyesusAmmar_Dec10.htm)> (accessed 16 January 2008).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *Eritreer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Materialien zur Soziographie*. Arbeitsheft. Berliner Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung. Berlin: Edition Parabolis
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. "The Eritrean Community in Germany. Materials for a Quantitative Analysis." Unpublished paper presented at the workshop "Focus on Eritrea," Cologne/ Germany, September 18-19, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005: *Directory of Eritrean Political Organisations in Opposition to EPLF/PFDJ*. Unpublished paper.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Directory of Eritrean Political Organisations in Opposition to EPLF/PFDJ*. (Update) Unpublished paper.
- Selam Eritrea. Nachrichten und Kulturmagazin zu Eritrea*. Back issues from 1995 – 2001.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1999. "The Value of Democracy." *Development Outreach* 1(1): 5-9.
- Senait G. Mehari. 2004. *Feuerherz*. München: Droemer.
- Sendker, Lisa. 1990. *Eritreische Flüchtlinge im Sudan. Zwischen Assimilation und Segregation*. Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde.
- Shain, Yossi. 1989. *Frontiers of Loyalty. Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation State*. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Sheffer, Gabriel. 1986. *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. New York.
- Sheffer, Gabriel, 2008. "Reexamining Diaspora and Transnationalism. Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges." Paper presented at a joint conference of the IMISCOE network of excellence and the European University Institute, Florence. 10-11 April 2008.
- Sifaf Adem (1999). "Der neugegründete Dachverband der eritreischen Jugend in Deutschland." *Selam Eritrea* 1999, No.13/14: 32.
- Simmel, Georg. 1968. "Exkurs über den Fremden." G. Simmel *Soziologie*. Berlin.
- Smidt, Wolbert G. C. Undated. "Eritrea: Geburt einer neuen Verfassung. Breite Diskussion auch unter Eritreern im Exil". In: *Neues Deutschland*, no date.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. „Äthiopisch-eritreische Kriegsführung in den Medien“. *S+F Viertel-jahresschrift für Sicherheit und Frieden*, 2/2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Kriegsführung und Demokratisierung im Internet. Wie sich die Diaspora am Äthiopien-Eritrea-Krieg beteiligt hat." *epd-Entwicklungspolitik*, 23/24/2001: 30-33.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Before Eritrea, before the Diaspora: Habesha in Exile and on Missions Abroad in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 1-36.
- Sökefeld, Martin. 2002. „Feld ohne Ferne. Reflexionen über ethnologische Forschung 'zu Hause' – in Hamburg, zum Beispiel“ In *Ethnoscripts* 4 (1): 82-96.
- Sorenson, J. 1991: "Discourse on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 2:301-317.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. "Opposition, Exile and Identity: The Eritrean Case." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 3 (4): 298-319.
- Spickard, James V. 2006. "Networks, Homes or Congregations? Exploring the Locus of Immigrant Religiosity." Afe Adogame und Cordula Weissköppel, ed. *Religion in the Context of African Migration Studies*. Bayreuth: Bayreuther African Studies Series: 217-241.
- Sutherland, Claire. 1999. "Regional Nationalism in a Global Context; Exit, Voice and Loyalty from a National Perspective." Paper presented at the 27th ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, University of Mannheim, Germany.
- Tekeste Negash / Tronvoll, Kjetil. 2000. *Brothers at War. Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Tesfai, Alemseged. 2002. *Two Weeks in the Trenches. Reminiscences of Childhood and War in Eritrea*. Lawrenceville/NJ and Asmara: The Red Sea Press.
- Tesfatsion Medhanie. 1994. *Eritrea and Neighbours in the New World Order. Geopolitics, Democracy*. Bremen.
- Tetzlaff Rainer. 2001. "Ist der postkoloniale Leviathan in Afrika entbehrlich? Fragmentierte Gesellschaften zwischen Staatszerfall und sozialer Anomie, Kreigsherrentum und privater Organisation von Überlebessicherheit". Laurence Marfaign und Brigitte Reinwald (eds) *Afrikanische Beziehungen, Netzwerke und Räume*, Lit-Verlag: Münster:
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Affirmative Integration of Immigrants – Developing a New Approach Towards Multiculturalism." <<http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/TetzlaffRainer.pdf>> (accessed 23 August 2006).
- Tobacco, Agostino and Nicoletta Poidimani. 2001. *Bologna. Testimonianze di lotta degli eritrei esuli in europa*. Edizioni Punto Rosso.
- Tölölyan, Kachig. 1991. "The Nation-State and its Others. In Lieu of a Pre- face", *Diaspora* 1(1): 6.
- Treiber, Magnus. 2003. "Looking for good life and the problem of adolescence in Asmara." In Eva-Maria Bruchhaus, ed. *Hot Spot Horn of Africa. Between Integration and Disintegration*, Münster. LIT Verlag: 165-174.
- Treiber, Magnus. 2005. *Der Traum vom guten Leben. Die eritreische Warsay-Generation im Asmara der zweiten Nachkriegszeit*. Münster: Lit-Verlag.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Lea Tesfaye. 2008. "Step by Step. Migration from Eritrea." In Bruchhaus, Eva-Maria and Sommer, Monika, eds. *Hot Spot Horn of Africa revisited. Approaches to make sense of conflict*. Berlin: 280-295.
- Trevaskis, Gerald K. 1960. *Eritrea, a Colony in Transition 1941-1952*. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Trimingham, J. Spencer. 1950. *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia (Including Eritrea and the Somalilands)*. London: World Dominion Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1965. *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Frank Cass

- Triulzi, Alessandro. n.d. "Colonial Violence and the Transfer of Memories in the Ethio-Eritrean War (1998-2000)" [Draft]. Alessandro Triulzi, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples, <<http://www.feltrinelli.it/Fondazione/donwload/Triulzirel.pdf>> Accessed 30 March 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. n.d. "The Past as a Contested Territory: Commemorating New Sites of Memory in Ethiopia." At <<http://www.celat.ulaval.ca/histoire.memoire/histoire/cape1/truilzi.htm>> (accessed 30 June 2006).
- Trivelli, R. M. 1998. "Divided Histories, Opportunistic Alliances: Background Notes on the Ethiopian-Eritrean War". *Afrika Spectrum* 33 (3): 257-289.
- Tronvoll, Kjetil. 1998a. *Mai Weini. A Highland Village in Eritrea*. Trenton: Red Sea Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998b. "The process of nation-building in post-war Eritrea: Created from below or directed from above?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36, 3: 461-482.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. "Borders of Violence – Boundaries of Identity: Demarcating the Eritrean Nation-state." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (6): 1037-1060.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea. Human Rights and Political Development, 1991-2009*. Oslo: The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights.
- "Tyranny in Eritrea. A Once-Admired Ruler Turns Tyrant." *The Economist* 21 Nov 2002. Available at <[http://news.asmarino.com/Information2002/11/TheEconomist\\_21.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Information2002/11/TheEconomist_21.asp)> (accessed 5 January 2004).
- UNHCR. 2008. "Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons." Available at <<http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html>> (accessed 24 August 2009).
- Van Hear, Nicholas. 1998. *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal, and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Vertovec, Steven and Robin Cohen, eds. 1999. *Migration, Diasporas, and Transnationalism*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Vertovec Steven. 1999. 'Conceiving and researching transnationalism,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (2): 447-6.
- Kerstin Volker-Saad. 2004. *Zivilistinnen und Kämpferinnen in Eritrea*. Berlin: Weißensee Verlag.
- Vollmer, Bernd. 1987. „Eritreische Flüchtlinge in der BRD (=Redebeitrag zur Arbeitsgruppe 5)“. In Die GRÜNEN. *Den Krieg in Eritrea beenden. Dokumentation der öffentlichen Anhörung zum Eritrea-Äthiopien-Konflikt, 27.-29. April 1986*. Bonn.
- Waldmann, Peter. 1999. "Societies in civil war." *Sociologus*, Beiheft 1: Dynamics of Violence, Georg Elwert u.a. (hgs), Berlin 1999: 61-84
- Waters and Levitt. 2002. *The Changing Face of Home. The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Weissinger, Irmtraut. 1991. "Stadtteilarbeit mit eritreischen Flüchtlingsfrauen in Frankfurt". In Helga Jöckelhövel-Schiecke (ed.) *Flüchtlingsfrauen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Frankfurt a. M.: Internationaler Sozialdienst.
- Welge, Ines. 2006. *Untersuchung zur Entscheidungspraxis des Bundesamtes für Migration und Flüchtlinge in Fällen eritreischer Asylangestellter*. In Kooperation vom ProAsyl und Flüchtlingsrat Wiesbaden. Frankfurt: Förderverein ProAsyl.
- Wilson, Amrit. 1991. *The Challenge Road. Women and the Eritrean Revolution*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- Wimmer, Helga. 1989. *Möglichkeit der Zusammenarbeit zwischen deutschen Lehrern und eritreischen Eltern während der Eingangsstufe*. Unveröffentl. Hausarbeit zur ersten Staatsprüfung für das Lehramt an Grundschulen der Universität Nürnberg.

- Wittenberg, Ute. 1990. *Lebensbedingungen, Bewältigungsformen und Perspektiven eritreischer Flüchtlinge, die als unbegleitete Minderjährige in die Bundesrepublik kamen*. Diplomarbeit im Studiengang Sozialpädagogik/Sozialarbeit an der Universität Hildesheim.
- Woldemikael, Tekle M. 1991. "Political Mobilization and Nationalist Movements: The Case of Eritrean People's Liberation Front", *Africa Today*, 2nd Quarter: 31-42.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. "The Cultural Construction of Eritrean Nationalist Movements." In Crawford Young (ed.). *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*. Wisconsin.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees in the United States" *Eritrean Studies Review* Volume 2 (2): 98-111.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Bridging the Divide: Muslim and Christian Eritreans in Orange County, California." In Tricia Redeker Hepner and Bettina Conrad eds. *Eritrea Abroad. Special Issue of the Eritrean Studies Review* 4 (2): 143-164.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005a. "The Invention of New National Traditions in Eritrea." In Gebremedhin, T. G. / Tesfagiorgis G. H. (eds.) *Tradition of Eritrea: Linking the Past to the Future*. Africa Research & Publications.
- Wolde-Yesus Ammar. 1997. "The Role of Asmara Students in the Nationalist Movement: 1958-1998." *Eritrean Studies Review* 2: 59-84.
- Wong, Diana et al. 1993. *Von Exil zur Diaspora: Asyl in einer deutschen Stadt. Endbericht des Forschungsprojektes „Asyl als Fremdheitsverhältnis“. Eine soziologisch-kultur-anthropologische Untersuchung zur Lage der Asylberechtigten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Unpublished research report.
- Wrong, Michela. 2005a. *I Didn't Do It for You. How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation*. London and New York: Fourth Estate.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005b. "World View - Michela Wrong Overhears Diaspora Gossip," *New Statesman*, online edition: <http://www.newstatesman.com/200502140018>, 14 Feb. 2005.
- Yemane Mosely. 2002. „Eritreans and Ethiopians in Germany pray for peace and reconciliation“. *The African Courier* October/November 2002.
- Yodit Ghebray. 1998. *Migrations- und Integrationsprobleme ausländischer Jugendlicher in der BRD unter Einbeziehung persönlicher Erfahrungen (türkische und eritreische Jugendliche im Vergleich)*. Diplomarbeit.
- Zebiba Teklai. 2002. *Migration als biographischer Lernprozess, rekonstruiert anhand ausgewählter Narrationen von Migrantinnen und Migranten*. Graduation Paper. Universität Gießen: Fachbereich 3.
- Zurawski, Nils. 2000. Virtuelle Ethnizität. Identität und Informationstechnologie. In: Günther Best und Reinhart Kößler (eds). *Subjekte und Systeme. Soziologische und anthropologische Annäherungen. Festschrift für Christian Sigrüst zum 65. Geburtstag*. Frankfurt: IKO: 222-231.

## LEBENS LAUF

---

Lebenslauf entfällt aus datenschutzrechtlichen Gründen