
The Eritrean Festival in the Time-Warp

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ABSTRACT

Written and oral narratives of the golden past of the exile Eritrean community and present political situation in Eritrea are so strongly built to allow an analysis of the process of nation-building during the liberation struggle and after. The political discourses have drastically changed in the last decades but nevertheless seek a thread of continuation from the past to the present. The fieldwork material was collected during the 2003 Festival in Milan and data were gathered about the former Festival of Bologna. The difference between the participatory sphere of the Festival during the liberation war and the commemoration event of its post-war editions casts light on the production of historical memory. In this case-study history is seen from today and it shows the developments and shifts in self-definitions which include redefinitions of who may become the enemies and allies depending on the temporal and spatial point of view.

INTRODUCTION

Former findings among the Eritrean communities around the world (see Arnone 2008, 2011a; Hepner 2009; Iyob 2000; Sorenson 1990, *etc.*), as well as Palestinian exiles (Bisharat 1997, Schulz 2003 *etc.*), Armenian (Tölölian 1996), Rwandan (Turner 2010), Jewish (Baumann 1995) and the Irish Diaspora (Kenny 2003) seem to contradict Clifford's (1994: 331) argument that diasporas 'may promote nationalist programmes but hardly actual nation-building projects'. According to Clifford, 'nationalism in the diaspora setting is, rather, to be seen as a strategy of resistance by the marginalized' (*Ibid.*: 309). So as Clifford argues, Eritrean migrants suffering from

marginalization have surely found relief from nationalism. Nevertheless, the important issue that stands out from research focusing on the period before liberation in 1991 is that the Eritrean diaspora persisted on nation-building programs in such an organized manner (Sorenson 1990; Tabacco 2001; Hepner 2009, *etc.*) that it became a fundamental agent of the final achievement of the Eritrean nation-state's independence. Making sense of exile, in the Eritrean case, was one of the reasons to commit to Eritrean nation-building from abroad. Vice versa, nation-building was the very reason to migrate for most Eritreans who arrived in Italy before their country's independence. Many researchers strongly argue Eritrean exiles were the pillars of the nation-state and its founders. It can be therefore stated that the exiles contributed to building not only the political culture of nationalism but also the entity of the Eritrean state with its structures and political ideologies.

[...] the diasporic state even reconfigures the architecture of its system of governance to ensure its survival. [...] The clearest African examples are Eritrea, Rwanda, and the late Somali state (Iyob 2000: 661–662).

The extent to which their engagement is recognized as fundamental to nation-building is found in Yiof's description of the Eritrean post-independence Government as a Diasporic State.

Clifford's argument is nevertheless relevant to understand to what extent the diaspora is still involved in the Eritrean state and how much space the Eritrean state is allocating to such a potential source of force.

Vertovec (1997) argued that the term diaspora holds at least three discernible meanings. The first one is the 'social form', the second is the 'type of consciousness', and the third meaning is that the concept of diaspora holds is actually related to the 'mode of cultural production'. All three are very relevant but in this article I will be concerned especially with the latter cultural production of meanings.

This article will therefore develop a longitudinal analysis about the Eritrean Festival to understand how the exiles participation and their importance in nation-building have changed. Not only does the Eritrean past participation in nation-building need to be analysed,

but more urgently the endurance of political support and social activities among the Eritrean diaspora should be understood in the aftermath of independence of the Eritrean nation. Diasporic participation in nation-building should be the subject of continuous examination, especially in such a young nation as Eritrea. This article thus analyses how the Eritrean exiles are contributing to the development of their national identity after having achieved independence.

I worked on the relation between the past and the present seen from a case study of the Eritrean Festival in Bologna during the liberation struggle until 1991 and in Milan in 2003. Among the Eritrean diaspora in Milan the 'Bologna Eritrean Festival' (1981–1991) was an important event that people still strongly recall up to now. First of all, people remember how it was an economic asset for the liberation movement that was sponsored by the diaspora in this and many other ways. Second, the Eritrean Festival in Bologna was the place for political debate where to find new strategies to build consent. The Bologna Festival was run to provide the European exiles' support to the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) development. It was such a formative collective experience that people often refer to it to exemplify what their migration experience was about and how fundamental it was for the Eritrean community in Italy and the diasporic networks. People recall how Eritrean people arrived to Bologna to attend the Festival from other parts of Italy, from European countries but also from other continents. So the Bologna Festival became a symbol of people's participation in the struggle to become an independent state. The Eritrean Festival endures in a different guise and this difference is the case study through which I understand political and social change among the Eritrean community in Milan as part of the wider diaspora. The 2003 Festival was particularly significant because a few days before the Eritrean Government had read the 'list of the martyrs' from the 1998–2000 war. With all the political tensions involved in narratives of war and nation-building the Eritrean identity construction positions the diaspora between moving and freezing. In the context of media images and messages of the diaspora, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1989: iii) argue that 'the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and

nostalgia'. This is exactly the dilemma today's Eritrean Festival faces since openly becoming a commemoration.

**THE HISTORY OF ERITREA:
A VIEW FROM FORMER EPLF SUPPORTERS**

The research was carried out in Milan where there had been a strong commitment for the EPLF before liberation. An ongoing support for the Eritrean Peoples for Democracy and Justice (EPDJ) leading Party continued, especially during the first years of their Government. Since the 1993 liberation, there has been an embassy in Rome and a consulate in Milan which has taken over most of the exiles participatory activities towards Eritrea. The diasporic activities have more or less become governmental, run by the EPDJ Government.

I depart by analysing an interview carried out in Italian (translated into English), with two key people in the Eritrean community in Milan: the author of an anthological book on the festival of Bologna (2001), Agostino Tabacco, and Abraham, a man in his seventies, one of the pillars of the former EPLF activists in Milan. Their words clearly show the way Eritrean history is perceived by those among the diaspora who supported the EPLF until liberation. Agostino and Abraham, like many others during my fieldwork in Milan between 2003 and 2004, described all the various stages of the constitution of the Eritrean identity.

In Africa the borders have been traced by colonialism. It is not like here in Europe where it was through internal contrasts. [...] We were separated from Ethiopia, we were occupied by Italy from then. For the first time we were formed as a nation: 124 thousand square kilometers, 3 million inhabitants, a central government, administered by Italians. After that we started to recognize each other, those who live down in the lowland and those who live in the highland. All this thanks to Italian colonialism.

Abraham refers to colonialism as the moment from which to begin recounting Eritrean identity. He describes the Italian presence in Eritrea as the starting point of a new identity. The importance given to Italian colonialism is not due to a positive and effective Italian rule, but linked to the fact that Italian colonialists drew

the borders of what is now Eritrea. Those are, moreover, the same borderlines that Eritreans referred to when separating from Ethiopia in 1991. The same that thereafter caused dispute during the 1998–2001 war with Ethiopia (Iyob 2000). However, the Italian government did not bring the colonial documents and maps to the peace table. The period from the Italian conquest of Eritrea up to liberation was significantly described as ‘an illegitimate pregnancy’. The nation is thus perceived to have been conceived without consent.

After the Second World War, there was a British protectorate until 1952. In 1961, when the federation with Ethiopia became an annexation (Resolution 350) the liberation movements started the armed struggle against the Ethiopian Empire. In the collective memories, Eritreans who arrived in Milan during the seventies and eighties and who form the first generation of Eritreans in Milan (Arnone 2008, 2011a) refer to themselves as the subjects of the liberation movement, as we can see from Abraham's words: ‘we’ is both the exiles and the EPLF. This self-perception of the exiles is built around a social movement of the past and it is part of the narrated course of their history as a continuum (see Arnone 2008). Their activism during the thirty years of liberation is the landmark that defined the exiles as part of the history of Eritrea and its diaspora.

Abraham: 1st of September 1961, after thirty years of fighting, we won militarily, we were elated, we got drunk and we said: ‘now, even if we have won over our enemies, we nevertheless have to let the Eritrean people decide for their own destiny. Let's have a referendum, for the sake of the sovereignty of a population!’

The other milestone in Eritrean history is thus the actual birth of the nation-state officially registered in 1993 when the UN officially announced Eritrea as an independent nation-state. Connerton (1989: 6) argues that ‘a wholly new start’ must be recollected when a group needs to shape a new identity. Eritreans did in many ways and the most vivid one is that they literally inaugurated a new calendar. They changed it from the Justinian one followed by the Ethiopians to the western Gregorian one (see also Arnone 2011b). The birth of an independent Eritrea had a popular identity, where

'*hafash*', the people, clustered themselves into a group (Eritrea) and out of another (Ethiopia). '*Hafash*' was a key concept during the EPLF liberation movement and continues to be so in the current EPDJ Government slogans.

Abraham: Then this war arrived [...]. It is not a war between two nations [...] It comes from a profound hatred. They expelled 75 thousand Eritreans,¹ they invaded us, they raped our women, destroyed our churches, the mosques; they destroyed the cemeteries of our martyrs²... hatred ...
 Agostino: [...] There was hatred also at the ethnic level, it became an ethnic issue.

The political discourse is now focused on an 'ethnic' problem which has become very strong. The last war was between two closely tied populations, the Tigrayans and Tigrinyans, who became enemies (Negash and Kjetil 2000). 'They' is the generic term used in this interview to describe the ethnic enemies; but during my fieldwork they were usually defined either as *Agame* or *Wayane*. *Agame* is a small poor region of Tigray where Tigrayans migrating to Eritrea mostly came from. It has become the derogative Tigrinya word to underline the Tigrayan peasants' lower social status, their connection to the soil, to dirt. *Wayane* instead describes those in power: the Tigrayan President Meles and his ministers, but also anybody who follows them, who has any type of connection to the Ethiopian Government. The *Wayane-Agame* are often referred to as traitors: they changed position from brothers (even though always of a lower status) united against the oppressor, to traitors thus arousing strong emotional feelings. "They" betrayed "us" after "we" helped "them" to get into power' are the words I have heard from many Eritreans in Milan. This strong ethnic category becomes national when put into international debates and those debates hinging on Eritreans as a whole. Since *Wayane* is a definition referring to the present Ethiopian government as a whole, Ethiopia has become the 'enemy', and it is imagined as a 'historical' enemy.

NATION-BUILDING FROM EXILE

The pronoun 'we' describes the subjects of the political history of Eritrea; it relates to the Foucauldian and Marxian debates on the

subjects of dominant linguistic formations and practices. 'Our' history today is often portrayed as unified and harmonious by the Milanese-Eritrean diaspora. Nevertheless, it is important to state that within the liberation movement there were two main conflicting groups, the EPLF or *Shaebia* and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) or *Jebha* (see Hepner 2009), both ideologically shaped and fomented by the economically, socially and culturally powerful elite of exiles. Eritrean people in Milan mostly supported the EPLF strategies of nation-building and they still make sense of their lives abroad through an exile identity filled with heroic notions making them feel their lives have a purpose. For instance, the author Agostino Tabacco told me that belonging to the Eritrean identity had saved him from depression. After feeling a foreigner everywhere he went, from Paris to Brighton and finally to Milan, he had found a real sense of belonging within the EPLF and the Eritrean community in Milan. He thus desired to remember the organization and its outcomes, and therefore entitled the book (Tabacco 2001) *Bologna: Testimonianze di lotta degli eritrei esuli in Europa: per non dimenticare* [Bologna: Testimonies of the Fight of the Exiles in Europe. Not to Forget].

In his book Tabacco describes the history of the Eritrean nation-building from exile in which he was involved. Eritreans scattered around the world during the seventies and eighties had a very large network of students', women's and workers' groups, each developing political ideas on which to base the liberation movement and strategies to achieve the means for military and economic power against the Ethiopian regime.

Although the armed fight initiated in 1961, Tabacco describes how the liberation movement abroad organised themselves into *c'entifier* [cells or sections of the EPLF] from the early 1970s with the first students enrolled in various universities in Europe and in the Middle East. The exiles in the Middle East were the first to coordinate congresses starting from the end of the 1960s and mainly supported the ELF. In Europe the organisation of the festival began from the first congress in Germany (1970) where young Eritrean intellectual exiles gathered for the first time. At the beginning the ELF and the EPLF organisations would meet together, but after 1974, there was a schism. From 1974 onwards the various EPLF cells met at the

Bologna Festival and the ELF in Germany. After liberation, in 1992, exiles of both fronts were present at the Festival in Asmara celebrating liberation in Eritrea.

The Eritrean exiles active in nation-building in the world wide diaspora used to organise political meetings between the sections. Even during the festivals there were meetings in which the cells would compare ideas and discuss strategies of resistance; in turn the EPLF fighters would list their victories and losses in Eritrea. Tabacco in the interview said that the various leaders of the cells would unify the various thoughts scattered across classes, genders, and nations. There were women's groups, youth groups, religious communities, and meetings in Bologna. They thus discussed socio-political matters regarding the struggle and the ideology behind it.

The festival also served as a means of sponsorship for the EPLF armed struggle. The exiles followed up the material and economic needs of the Front by creating fundraising events like the Festival itself but also many others. Eritrean shops in Milan, restaurants and, of course, the Eritrean Community, as a registered association, devoted most of their efforts to sustain the EPLF liberation movement and nation-building. Agostino Tabacco cited a woman referred to as 'Mamma Bologna', a symbol of the women's dedication to the cause. She regularly went to Eritrea with money and goods she collected in Italy among the exiles.

The Bologna festival contributed mostly in terms of economic help, but it also raised political awareness in support of the warriors in Eritrea and brought people together as an Eritrean multicultural entity. By all means, it was a project involving efforts to build the Eritrean nation. It involved many cultural and social activities such as *bahali*, celebrations, where people could enjoy Eritrean food, drama, different traditional music and dance from the various ethnic groups in Eritrea. In 1989, for the first time, the 'Cultural Troupe' (see Tabacco 2001: 259) came to the Bologna festival from Eritrea. Its actors, singers and dancers are said to have been warriors themselves, women and men, who through entertainment informed and involved the diaspora. Also in Eritrea this cultural activity was a strategy to strengthen the EPLF pan-Eritrean identity (Dore 2002).

Tabacco during the 2003 Eritrean Festival in Milan described his work to me with the following words:

The book 'Bologna' [Tabacco 2001] is a historical testimony [...] dedicated to the youth who have not personally experienced the history of their parents. I would like to give them the knowledge of what the exiles involvement was. [...] The message to the youngsters now is to start from the youngsters of that time, who departed to form a political, cultural and social conscience and strengthened the opinion of Eritreans abroad, and organized the struggle.

A remarkable point in the interview is the importance given to generational continuation of the EPLF liberation movement's history. The author argues that the members of the diaspora were extremely involved in the Festivals and that their involvement in the Festival was an important part of the general struggle for liberation and independence. He exalts the Festival of Bologna as a repetitive and ever-growing set of collective practices of nation-building. During the first festivals and conferences just over 300 Eritrean people were involved. Tabacco argues 10,000 people attended the last Bologna Festival. Tabacco's urge to remember, emphasized by the subtitle 'not to forget' inevitably reflects the social, political and economic plunge perceived by the diaspora in the aftermath of independence.

PAST-PRESENT COLLECTIVE LOYALTIES AND POLITICAL CULTURES

Every year since the 1991 independence, the Festival has been organized by the Eritrean government. In 1992, it was held in Asmara and most of the members of the diaspora were there to attend. The government wanted it to be completely transferred to Asmara (see also Galeazzo 1994; Andall 2002); nevertheless, it was impossible as the diaspora did not return to live in Eritrea. From 1992, there has been a festival in Eritrea and its organizers are called the 'Bologna committee'. From 1995, the Festival has toured the rest of the world with its musicians and actors, passing through most of the countries where there are Eritrean communities, and ending in Eritrea where the largest event completes the journey. It is organ-

ized by the Eritrean Government jointly with the consulates and embassies in various countries.

In 2002–2005, the Eritrean Festival in Italy was held in Milan. I went there every day during the 2003 Festival, which started on Friday, 20 June, Eritrea's Martyrs Day, and finished on Sunday 22. The organization was still based on a voluntary labor force run by the consulate and its affiliates. The women had set up a refreshments stall to raise money to send to an EPDJ governmental fund for the families in Eritrea who had suffered from 1998–2000 war casualties. They also organized running races and games. People were betting money on the women racing and even the loser would pay a sum towards the cause of national reconstruction. As discussed in the previous section, it was the women who had been especially successful in fundraising for the liberation movement. Great efforts had been made to gather funds for the EPLF but also goods such as clothes and food were brought to Eritrea by some members of the community. The fundraising activities noticed in 2003 resembled the old times when the Festival was a great means of funding the activities of the EPLF; nevertheless, the difference is that before liberation it had been directly organized and run by the exiles while in 2003 the organization was being held by the EPDJ central political apparatus.

Like Dawit, sitting with his friend at a table at the stand selling non-Eritrean food and drinks, many told me the Festival was then held 'in memory of Bologna', demonstrating its present significance as a commemorative event:

This festival is in memory of Bologna; [...] it was in general for all the Eritreans that lived in Italy, Germany, France, England, in the whole of Europe. Some even arrived from America, some also from Saudi Arabia, from the Middle East. [...] In memory of Bologna today we go to Asmara, every August [...]: the Bologna Festival of Eritrea. Then in Italy we go only to the Italian one, always in memory of Bologna. [...] [In Bologna] there was everybody's determination, we were not free, we were at war, we were not independent, so it was very different. We all arrived full of determination, from far away.

Many like him complained to me that people do not travel anymore to attend, not even the Eritreans living in the city of Milan, in the very city where the festival is held. When speaking about the present, people said: 'The spirit has changed: people are not involved anymore'. Instead everyone told me that during the Bologna Festival the sense of unity grew stronger as time went by; the Festival had such a charismatic impact that today it still acts as a reminder of the struggle of the diaspora and its unity. A woman went as far as to say that it was better before when there was a shared dream and unity among Eritreans (and war against the Ethiopian regime) and now it is sad to see the direction the community is going in. People who were active in official Eritrean events did not question the lack of attendance. They did not think of the lack of participation as a statement of political opposition by the absentees; on the contrary the Festival organisers simply blamed people's inactivity.

Eritreans in the diaspora, who participate in the commemoration of the Bologna Festival, do not follow the Festival around the world but they go to their national one and then if they can they also go to that in Asmara. This decrease in participation has promoted the transition of the Eritrean identity from pan-Eritrean based on fighting for the same cause to national (local) based on the idea of political stability and integration in the country of stay.

There was only one person who arrived from Naples by train because they had not organised a coach. He said that before, during the Bologna Festival, 100–150 people would arrive from Naples. There used to be between two and four coaches from Germany, that year there were only a few German cars. Others would also arrive from France but that year not even a person came from there. As a social event, people remember the festival especially because it was 'international'. They told me how incredible it was to meet Eritreans living in different places gathering together every year. The exiles who met at the Bologna Festival were in every sense trans-national. Now, as far as the Festival is no longer held just in one place as it was before 1991, new forms of definitions and practices of the self have developed.³

Every 'national' community has a Festival in the country of immigration and the strength of the affiliation to a localized com-

munity is demonstrated by specific symbols. For example, the poster of the global yearly event advertised on www.biddho.com, an Eritrean government-run website, showed all the dates of the Eritrean festivals around the world. It underlined the importance given to the Eritrean nation by paying allegiance to the Eritrean flag. The poster was in English because it is the lingua franca of the world, but it again insisted on the Eritrean identity through the writing in Tigrinya. At the 2003 festival small paper flags were distributed, with the Eritrean flag printed on one side and the Italian on the other, highlighting the location where the festival was held. Moreover, the Festival has always had sports competitions, especially football matches. During the Bologna Festival the football teams were based on the country their members came from; during the recent national festivals the football teams have been city-based. So, while before there were the 'Italian', 'German', and 'Swedish' teams; in 2003, 'Milan', 'Florence', 'Bologna' and so on were represented. The localized nature of the commemorative Festival is noticeable from the organisation of the football competitions where the teams are no longer formed in the name of the country of residence, nor are they touring around the world.

In the past, the Eritrean Festival in Bologna was multi-cultural in its performances because all the nine ethnic cultures of Eritrea would be performed, but only Eritrean cultures were in display. However, it was pluralistic in its attendance: people of African backgrounds, such as Somalis and Ethiopians were included in the audience and in participation. A Somali woman told me she always used to attend and how amazing it was; she felt it was important also as an 'African' event. A few Ethiopian people I met also used to go when they were young because their parents had Eritrean friends, and they too enjoyed this event. In general, Eritreans and Ethiopians attended each other's celebrations before the recent war (Ambroso 1987).

Thus, the Bologna Festival had widespread recognition and attendance from people who were not Eritrean. When the Festival was held in Bologna, even many Italians used to come and the Festival was linked with political organizations and movements who supported it. The social and political movements that took place from 1968 onwards had a great impact on the extended consent

and support towards struggles for self-determination such as the Eritrean one. At the Bologna Festival letters of sympathy used to arrive from socialist and anti-imperialist movements across the world and from other exile communities in Milan. Tabacco's book contains interesting quotes from these letters. This may be identified inside the far-flung political culture of internationalism.

Moreover, Eritrean political activists have often given me a list of Italian intellectuals who were 'friends of Eritrea'. This included people like: Massimo Alberizzi, correspondent on African affairs for the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*; Daniele Farina, former left-wing activist in the Centro Sociale Leoncavallo and MP in the Rifondazione Comunista political party at the time of the research; Dario Miedico, an activist in Medicina Democratica; the ANSA journalist Stefano Poscia who also wrote a book on the Eritrean situation at the time (Poscia 1989); the historian Giorgio Rochat who extensively wrote on Italian colonialism (1967, 1971, 1973), and sympathized with the Eritrean case during the seventies and eighties. The 1997 Nobel Prize winner, Dario Fo, for example, used to run a theatre in a Liberty-style building in a park in Milan and hosted Eritrean cultural and political activities; he also organized a concert in support of the Eritrean liberation fight. It was not the former central *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) party which supported the Eritrean cause, but the *Radicali* political party and some town councils, such as in Bologna and Pavia, the active squats (*centri sociali*) in Milan, the left wing intellectuals and activist groups (see, e.g., Sironi 1988).

The Eritrean attitude to internationalism that in some ways existed until 1991 has certainly changed face. As for many Eritrean events such as concerts, church and political celebrations, the Festival adverts in Milan were all in Tigrinya with no translation into Italian or any other languages. People who are not Eritrean do not even know the Eritrean Festival is still running because there is no information flow and the language closure of the fliers shows that 'others', Italians and non-Eritrean residents in Italy, are not invited. This emphasizes the closure of the ethnic-national bond. At the 2003 Festival there were only Eritrean people and just four Italians: the husband of an Eritrean woman, wearing a big silver Orthodox cross round his neck, a businessman working in Eritrea, my partner

and I. My closest young informant, Natzennat, saw me and told Gennet that I was there. I used to help Gennet study at an after-school club in the voluntary association Comitato Inquilini, which, among many other activities, helped pupils from council estates flats in doing their homework. Gennet answered, 'e che cavolo ci fa qui Anna?' ('What, on earth, is Anna doing here?'). She said Italians should not come to the Eritrean Festival. Gennet saw the Eritrean Festival as something that was only 'theirs' and where Italians were intruders. Surely, the global political culture has changed after the Cold War. International movements and associations developed around socialist and internationalist ideologies have decreased. This may be one reason why even the younger generation of Eritreans believe Italians and others' participation in their Festival is an interference in private Eritrean national affairs.

Hiwot, a woman in her fifties, told me that the Lombardy Region had granted the Eritrean Festival the large leisure centre out of charge. 'I thank them mostly because, after all these years without this possibility, at least now they are helping us'. She then went on to remember how great Bologna was, 'Bologna is our home, our second home.⁴ We will never forget the Bolognese! Now even [the council of] Milan [hosts and supports us], better late than never!'

Hiwot recalled the special affiliation there had been with the Bologna city council but she stressed the 'practical' support it had given the Eritrean community, and disregarded the political implications. However there is a great difference between the support provided to 'the Eritrean people and their cause' by the network of left-wing political activists and that of a right-wing Italian government supporting the Eritrean government's activity for very different liaisons. In 2003, it was the Lombardy Region, a politico-geographic subdivision of the Italian government, which provided the space for the Eritrean Festival without payment. The Eritrean and Italian governments were on very good terms at the time. Italy was increasing business with Eritrea and the right-wing Premier Berlusconi hosted the Eritrean president Isaias in his Sardinian villa. The former Lombardia vice-president Prosperini, *Lega Lombarda* party, who has been legally persecuted for bribery and is now under another trial for illegal trafficking of weaponry in Eritrea, was also

the Italian spokesman in Eritrea at the time. Prosperini was the person the Eritrean community contacted to receive the location for the festival. Tesfay, one of my informants involved in the organization of the Festival in Milan, told me how he was delegated to call Prosperini in person to deal with the venue. Tesfay supported the left side of the Italian political spectrum and thus told me how difficult it had been to 'swallow the bitter pill' (*è stato difficile madare giù il rospo*).

Until the 1990s, Eritrean EPLF activists were aware of the various freedom struggles in the world and many movements were linked with each other. It was the period of the Cold War. When it finally ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, all the world political divisions fell apart, and the superpowers no longer had any interest in supporting the Leninist military regime of the Derg, which was thus weakened by the lack of arms supply. It was then that the EPLF managed to win the war (1991). After liberation, the political support to Eritrea as a young nation-state slowly changed. Today, many of the names that feature in the description of the 'friends of Eritrea' are active in criticizing the present state of affairs in Eritrea. Even though former Italian political supporters are still focusing on the area, their interest in Eritrea collides with the dominant discourse. Some Italian 'friends of Eritrea' have made liaisons with Eritrean opposition groups and are organizing public speeches, seminars, and forums on Internet sites.

This latter shift in participation includes some of the Eritreans in Milan who were not present at the Festival. Even though some absentees said it was lack of time which prevented people from participating in the Eritrean community activities, there was definitely a silent (at least in my presence) detachment from the government political situation in Eritrea⁵ which was also linked to sorrow regarding the recent war and the losses of lives.

SHADOWS OF THE MARTYRS: A CLASH OF TWO COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

Not many people were at the festival; the reason given was that the Eritrean government had officially announced the numbers of casualties of the 1998–2000 war and many were mourning their family members and friends at home or in Eritrea. Many said peo-

ple should have come anyway because it was important to mourn together; others who did not attend criticized the consulate for allowing such an event a few days after martyrs' day.

The list of casualties and martyrs had a great impact. We received the news four or five days ago. Everyone has one or two martyrs [among his relatives and friends]. OK, also for this reason there are fewer people. I am mourning, not... [for someone in particular.] Everyone belongs to us, we make no distinction, your son or daughter is my son or daughter. This sorrow belongs to everyone. [...] But the celebration has to be made anyway. With high spirits, with courage we have to do it always, always.

From Faniel's words one can notice that the communitarian ideas of sorrow, brotherhood and blood relation felt with fellow Eritreans go beyond individual feelings of loss. People like him argued they were united as one and thus sorrow was to be shared by all. Similarly in the following interview Senait emphasizes the martyrdom of the dead, where the youth's 'sacrifice' was for everyone:

I'm also sad but we cannot miss out on this celebration. We need to be here, we need to be together. For all those who died, they didn't die only for some, but for everyone. Everyone has relatives and we all have sorrow for these youngsters who have died.

In Italy and Saudi Arabia the Festival started less than a week after Martyrs' Day; it then moved around the world. During the Festival people held a three-minute silence in remembrance of the dead. They told me the organizers in Italy wanted to delay or skip the Festival but then the Lombardy Region provided the free space they had applied for, so they said it was 'a pity' not to accept.

The Festival was a space where Eritreans saw themselves in relation to both their country and their being in Milan. With the issue of the martyrs this was stronger; one could notice the division between feeling the need to show cohesion in terms of Milanese/Italian diaspora and empathy with the sorrow of the war disasters at home. In some ways this created a split. On the one hand, there were those who followed the traditional mourning by staying

at home for forty days and having people come to visit everyday (Arnone 2011a), thus not celebrating the festival; on the other, those who felt that cohesion was more important: showing presence in collective spaces for the latter was an essential demonstration of Eritreanness even when united in mourning.

In 2003, I found an image on the independent internet site www.asmarino.com, showing the polemic arising around the issue of the martyrs. The 20th of June, Martyrs' Day: the image depicted people partying on the coffins of the dead awaiting to be buried. The anonymous author of this cartoon was criticising the Eritrean Government for allowing events during the mourning and the exiles for having *bahali* (celebration) while the traditional mourning still needed to be carried out. The mourning of the casualties of the 1998–2000 war brings tradition and politics face to face, creating tensions about how to be Eritrean in this particular historical contingency.

Martyrdom is tied to religious practices of identity but it also generally defines the acts of those who have perished to demonstrate their commitment to their culture or society. A person may become a martyr after having acted as a testimony (this is the original meaning from the ancient Greek word) of his or her beliefs, be they religious or social, often through death. It is thus a strong ideology to assume priority of a certain belief over individual physical survival, affirming the priority of culture over nature and self-interest. Frontline soldiers become martyrs when sacrificing their lives for a common cause. The positive impact of martyrdom on a minority community is due in part to its formulation as a sacrificial act in which the martyr is viewed as the 'pure' lamb sacrificed against an oppressor. A soldier becomes a martyr by taking part of the struggle carried out by the weaker and more truthful of the antagonists. This is the rhetoric beneath the establishment of 'martyrs' day' to commemorate the casualties of the soldiers who died or who were injured in war against the oppressor. During the latter war, conscription to become a soldier was not voluntary (Arnone 2008; Hepner 2009); nevertheless the martyr appellation was kept to increase the victimisation of Eritrea opposed to the Ethiopian oppressor.

The broad consent over the commemoration of the 20th of June shows that people do not question the definition of martyrdom of the soldiers who unwillingly died at war in the recent conflict or the participation of Eritrea in the war itself. Those who attended the Festival, and the other who did not, equally return to Eritrea for the summer to mourn with relatives. Eritreans generally picture themselves as the victims of external powers: constantly challenged to face new conflicts. Abraham argued that: ‘in the Horn of Africa, the logic of force reigns, the biggest swallows the smallest. Yemen, Southern Yemen, Sudan, and then Ethiopia tried to invade us; our enemies will not leave us in peace until they annex us. Is there any justice in this world? No, there is no justice’. The main history of Eritrea surviving the external threats to violate the country continues through the celebration of the martyrs.

CONCLUSION

During the course of my research into the construction of Eritrean identity the collected data spoke about numerous differences between generations, political ideologies, genders in time and space (Arnone 2008, 2011a, 2011b). Although Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argued for the dismissal of the concept of identity as a whole after discussing the impossibility of pinpointing it; I see its analysis as a great challenge important especially in cases where developments, fractures and incongruence demonstrate immense social changes. The subjects of this paper could be described as the supporters of the former Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front and present Eritrean Peoples for Justice and Democracy party currently in power. They compose the first generation of Eritreans in Milan and describe themselves as exiled by the political situation in Eritrea when under the Ethiopian Empire first and Military Regime later. In this article I tackle social change among the Eritrean community in Milan by analysing dynamic forms of social/political participation and cultural practices around nation-building. The reasons why I chose the 2003 Eritrean Festival as a case study is that it functioned as a bridge between past and present. It allowed an analysis of the way the Eritreans in Milan build their identity and their narratives around repetitive practices that nevertheless change in time and space. Commemorative events are spaces where the

community of Eritreans in Milan cyclically gathers. They are spaces functioning both as community and identity builders, but they also provide terrain for conflict and negotiation of practices of identity. The Eritrean Festival since 1992 was perceived as a symbol of identity and used to commemorate the exiles' past participation in the EPLF and the achieved independence. Today the Eritrean Festival tours around the world and it is run by the Eritrean EPDJ government and its consulates and embassies.

The strong re-construction of memory seems to be built to emphasize the continuity of a specific subject which shifts between the EPLF fighters and the exiles (see Arnone 2011b). Nevertheless, one cannot stop noticing the great difference from the past and the divisions inside the community. The Festival's time loop describes the development of political identities, where the past of the community is narrated in its unity, while the present is perceived in its divisions and lack of collective practices. Although this aspect of the diaspora's political engagement is not clearly spoken about, it does show a perceived fragmentation of the community in Milan.

In terms of an analysis of the constitution of the Eritrean identity, the two wars had two completely opposite outcomes in terms of nation-building. The first war was a socialist struggle, a fight of some segments of the population, such as the organized networks of exiles, against the power not only of the Ethiopian military dictatorship, and before that of Haile Selassie's empire, but also against the subjection of the superpowers playing in the Cold War among themselves, increasingly 'heating up' the wars in Africa. Although it is today spoken of as if it were a war 'against Ethiopia', the 'enemy' was not so much the Ethiopian, and certainly not the Tigrayan population, but the uneven and subjugating power of the dictatorship and imperialism (clearly seen in Sorenson 1990 on Eritreans in Canada). In fact, liberation was achieved together with the other liberation movements in Ethiopia, such as the Oromo and the Tigrayans, against the Derg; together they all marched on Addis Ababa and tore apart the military regime. The last war instead increased an ethnic and national hatred which had been less pronounced during the previous war. From this paper and Ambroso's thesis (1987), one can notice that in the past people attended each other's activities, in Italy in general and

Milan in particular, while they would never do so today. Nowadays people divorce because of ethnicity; families collapse following the rhetoric of hatred brought in by the recent war.

In today's nationalist discourse, the territorial imperative is the historical justification to the sacrifice of lives (Turton 1997); sovereignty is the political call. The present Eritrean nationalism may be distinguished from the past where 'shared rights' was the slogan which brought the people, '*hafash*', together. The distinction between yesterday and today is nevertheless deep. During the thirty years long liberation struggle, in Milan there were a form of international anti-colonial socialism on the one hand, and the Eritrean-style nationalism deeply rooted in an ideology of internationalist socialist solidarity, on the other hand. The more recent ethnic conflict brought a great shift and tensions between Eritrean Tigrinya and the Ethiopian Tigrayan ethnic identities and made this division central to the identity of the Eritrean nation itself. The result that is perceived among Eritreans in Milan is a language of hatred towards the Northern Ethiopian Tigrayan ethnic group, developing into a broad anti-Ethiopian feeling. The inter-ethnic tensions also developed a noticeable closure towards the rest of the world and towards the internationalism that was cherished before independence.

The case of the martyrs nevertheless shows how some of the discourses built around the existence and persistence of 'great subjects' (Connerton 1989) do not disappear even when in visible contrast with the practical reality of the present. Even if the 'great subjects' no longer exist in practice, they have nevertheless 'continuing unconscious effectiveness as ways of thinking about and acting in our contemporary situation: their persistence, in other words, as unconscious collective memories' (Connerton 1989: 1). The EPLF fighters of the liberation front and the exiled 'fighters' continue to exist through the memory of great events and their commemorations. The word *shaebia*, originally meaning 'popular', is the term used by my informants to describe those who supported the EPLF in the past and support the present political party in power. The term *shaebia* echoes the idea, forwarded by the Eritreans in Milan, of the EPLF and EPDJ as evergreen and widely supported political subjects.

Whereas governmental organizations and decisions may be criticized and negotiated through lack of participation in the festival, or in any other government-organized event, discourses that touch on the national identity and on the various discourses built on Eritrea as a victim state are never torn apart. The martyrs' appellative is an example which emphasizes the rightfulness and thus justifies the recent war. The young Eritreans forced to 'become cannon fodder', as an informant described the lives of the conscripts of the recent war (Arnone 2008: 336), are involuntary subjects of the rhetoric of nationalism.

The discourses arising during and after the recent war have also reinterpreted the liberation struggle as exclusively national and independentist. On the subject of nationalism, Pratt (2002) argues that the founders of nationalist movements choose a set of differences which did not shape neat dichotomies before; he reinforces this argument on Basque identity and political shifts by analysing how, in the course of the development of nationalism, the differences between 'us and them' have varied over time. The same can be said about the Eritrean nationalist political thoughts and activism. The reinforcement of memories that sustain an idealised continuity of political participation among the diaspora and the historical memory that remembers the past in the light of the present tensions contribute to a revision of past activism and great subjects as still alive. Hall (1990) would have enlisted this type of cultural production of memory in the process that he calls 'imaginary coherence'. In order to remember collective identity as coherent and long lasting the past activism is commemorated as being part of the present. Nevertheless, the exile participation in liberating Eritrea from Ethiopian imperialism and building the Eritrean nation-state has decreased. Eritrean participation today is left in the hands of the strong centralised EPDJ Government and its branches stretched around the world embracing the Diaspora and keeping it close to the Nation State.

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NOTES

¹ Before and during the recent war, the Ethiopian government expelled Eritreans living in Ethiopia. The response was a tit for tat where thereafter Eritreans expelled Ethiopians (see Abbink 1998 and Iyob 2000 on an analysis of the recent war).

² The term 'martyrs' refers to those who died in the wars (both wars) as fighters; those fighters who fought in the first liberation war are called Shaebia, a term which in turn denominates 'the people' of the EPLF liberation movement and the members of the present EPDJ government.

³ Between 1991 and 1995, the central 'Bologna Festival' was held in Frankfurt and many Italo-Eritreans went there.

⁴ The first is Eritrea.

⁵ Koser (2003) found outspoken criticism in his research among Eritreans in Germany (see also Ali *et al.* 2001).

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