

# Music and Identity: The Eritrean Diaspora in London<sup>1</sup>

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## SOMMARIO

L'Eritrea fu la prima colonia italiana in Africa orientale (1890-1941). In seguito alla caduta del fascismo passò sotto protettorato britannico finché, nel 1952, le Nazioni Unite decisero di federarla all'Etiopia. Dopo un periodo di relativa pace e stabilità, le tensioni tra i due paesi esplosero in un conflitto armato che culminò con l'indipendenza eritrea (1961-1993). Decenni di occupazione straniera, guerre e carestie hanno provocato ingenti flussi migratori dall'Eritrea sin dagli anni Settanta. Ancora oggi il regime dittatoriale, il servizio militare obbligatorio e la continua violazione dei diritti umani spingono molte persone a fuggire, seguendo rotte spesso illegali e pericolose. Le comunità eritree più numerose si trovano in Sudan, Arabia Saudita, Germania, Stati Uniti D'America, Canada e Regno Unito.

Il presente articolo trae spunto da una tesi specialistica riguardante il ruolo sociale e politico della musica all'interno delle comunità eritree di Londra. Attingendo all'esperienza di alcuni musicisti eritrei, l'articolo fornisce degli esempi di come la musica interagisca con i processi identitari delle diaspore, sia sul piano individuale sia su quello collettivo. Verrà discusso il concetto di identità nazionale eritrea e il rapporto con le identità regionali minoritarie (nello specifico, l'identità *Saho*). Esempi tratti dalla ricerca sul campo presso *music venues* e associazioni culturali forniranno il pretesto per esaminare il rapporto tra le comunità eritree ed etiopi presenti a Londra, in luce dei conflitti bellici e delle controversie politiche intercorse tra i due paesi, mentre l'analisi dei festival, e in particolare delle performance musicali e artistiche al loro interno, permetterà di esplorare il rapporto tra musica e nazionalismo eritreo.

Keywords: *Eritrea, diaspora, ethnomusicology, identity, nationalism*

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## Introduction

The term “diaspora” derives from an ancient Greek word meaning “dispersion” and originally referred to the forced dispersal of Jews. Later on, the term was used to cover a broader semantic domain which included many categories of migrants, whose dispersal was not necessarily forced and whose migrant experiences differed to a considerable degree from one another. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, diasporas were still believed to share some common traits which were outlined by William Safran in his seminal article “Diasporas in Modern Societies, Myths of Homeland and Return”<sup>2</sup>:

- The character of dispersion from an original centre to two or more peripheral foreign regions: whereas other ethnic minorities or immigrant groups preserve a

<sup>1</sup> Based on a Master's dissertation completed in 2014 at City University London, UK.

<sup>2</sup> SAFRAN, William (1991) “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”. In *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Pp. 83-99. University of Toronto Press.

“binary relation”<sup>3</sup> to their home country, diasporic formations have multiple sites of dispersion.

- The sharing of a collective memory among its members: in diasporic narratives the homeland often acquires a mythological status. It is the ideal “home” where diaspora members or their descendants shall eventually return when conditions are appropriate. Up to that time, they will continue to relate to their homeland and be committed to its maintenance or restoration.
- The feeling of “alienation” or “distinction” experienced by diaspora members in the host society.

According to this understanding of diaspora, what distinguishes diaspora members from other kinds of migrant people is the “consciousness of a separation, a gap, a disjuncture”<sup>4</sup> which moves the term beyond demographic issues and census data. While providing a valid theoretical framework for analysing diaspora in some respects, this definition tends to unify many and diverse experiences in one common story of displacement. The extent to which the homeland becomes highly significant within diasporic narratives, for example, depends on a number of factors including the historical, political and social context of the diaspora, the reasons of migration, and the relationship established between the diaspora population and the host country. According to Thomas Turino “home may retain an elevated symbolic status, but in terms of influencing actual cultural production, it is but one of the many diasporic sites, and not even the most important one”<sup>5</sup>. He believes that diasporic formations are extremely hybrid, especially those with a long history of dispersion, because they assimilate cultural models and style features from many different sites<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, not all diaspora communities tend to be culturally hybrid. Some tend to reject foreign elements, looking for pure and authentic expressive forms. For example, Malkki’s study about Hutu refugees in Tanzania reveals an emphasis on borders and boundaries in their narratives, and a rejection of cosmopolitanism as an “absence of order, and of categorical loyalties and rules”<sup>7</sup>. In both cases, since geographical location does not function as social boundary<sup>8</sup> within dispersed communities, studying expressive cultural forms is central to the understanding of diasporic social identities.

More recent studies emphasize the plurality of diasporic experiences, underlining differences both between diaspora communities and among diaspora members within each community. Even though it is widely acknowledged that diasporas share several contact points with nations, since both require “subjective recognition and acceptance”<sup>9</sup>, the authors of *Diaspora and Hybridity* (2005) suggest to consider diaspora as “a way of looking at the world which disrupts homogeneous ideas of nationality”<sup>10</sup>. The Eritrean case well exemplifies this conception of diaspora. The Eritrean diaspora is made up of culturally heterogeneous groups whose ethnic identities overlap, often in conflicting ways, with the national one. As shown later in this article, difficulties faced by Eritreans

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<sup>3</sup> TURINO, Thomas (2004) “Introduction: Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities”. In JAMES, Lea, and Thomas TURINO (eds.), *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*. P. 6. Harmonie Park Press.

<sup>4</sup> SLOBIN, Mark (2003) “The Destiny of Diaspora in Ethnomusicology”. In CLAYTON, Martin, HERBERT, Trevor, and Richard MIDDLETON (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. P. 288. Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> TURINO, Thomas (2004) *Op. Cit.* P. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> MALKKI, Liisa H. (1995) *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. P. 253. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> TURINO, Thomas (2004). *Op. Cit.* P. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* P. 5.

<sup>10</sup> KALRA, Virinder S., KAURA, Raminder, and John HUTNYK (2005) *Diaspora and Hybridity*. P. 28. Sage.

in finding a balance between their national and ethnic identities is in contrast with an idea of nations as homogeneous cultural wholes.

This article draws on fieldwork conducted in London at the beginning of 2014. In that period I was doing research for my Master's dissertation which investigated the role played by music in the construction of Eritrean diasporic identity. Fieldwork consisted primarily in interviews with musicians and venues' owners, observant participation to live performances, festivals and public ceremonies, as well as attendance of bars, restaurants, cultural associations and other meeting points. The role of music within diasporic contexts has been analysed from multiple and original perspectives in scholarly studies, especially since the 1990s [Stokes 1994, Baily 1999, Slobin 2003, Turino 2003, Ramnarine 2007, Landau 2011]. There are, indeed, many ways in which music interacts with diasporic identity formation, at both the individual and collective level. Ethnomusicological research has provided examples of the ways in which music mediates migration and adaptation processes, contributes to define, modify or delete ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries, and serves as a political means for mobilising masses. This article explores the multiple identities which are generated and contested among diasporic Eritreans in London, looking at how they are enacted through music. Drawing on Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a form of cultural production rather than an "accomplished fact"<sup>11</sup>, it will raise questions about the use of fixed, universal categories for the study of diasporas. It will also look at the rise of nationalism in Eritrea and the ways in which Eritrean festivals are used to promote political unity among diaspora members. In light of past conflicts between the two countries, it will finally analyse Eritrean-Ethiopian relations, focusing on the ways in which music reflects and contributes to reshape them in London.

#### *Historical and political background of Eritrea*

Firstly, it is worth providing a historical overview of Eritrea in order to highlight the historical periods and events which were central to the formation of the diaspora and of Eritrean national identity. Eritrea is situated in the eastern part of the African continent and, along with Somalia, Djibouti and Ethiopia, constitutes part of the so called "Horn of Africa". Eritrea borders with Sudan and Ethiopia to the west, and with Djibouti to the south. Its coastline extends 1.151 kilometres (excluding the islands)<sup>12</sup> facing the Red Sea which separates the country from the Arabian Peninsula.

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<sup>11</sup> HALL, Stuart (1996) "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". In PADMINI, Mongia (ed.) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. P.110. London: Arnold.

<sup>12</sup> The World Factbook, Eritrean Coastline: [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2060.html#er](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2060.html#er). Last accessed December 17, 2017.



Fig. 1: Eritrea Political Map  
Source: Nationsonline.org

During the first millennium most of present-day Eritrea was part of the Kingdom of Aksum which included also the Tigray Region in northern Ethiopia, western Yemen, southern Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Around the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire established its control over Eritrea. With the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 “the Red Sea emerged as a principal commerce route, making the adjoining lands potential markets and resource places”<sup>13</sup>. This attracted many foreign aggressors and colonizers into Eritrea. In 1865 Egyptians had replaced Turks as rulers of coastal Eritrea. In 1885 Italian troops defeated Egyptian forces in the port city of Massawa and, in 1889, they took control of Asmara. One year later the Italian government declared Eritrea its colony, naming it after the classical Greek name for the Red Sea. The boundaries of modern Eritrea were thus established by Italian colonizers and the modern history of the country is tied up, during the first half of the 20th century, with the history of Italian colonialism in East Africa.

During Italian colonialism Eritrea underwent a period of profound economic and social changes which were particularly relevant to the formation of a national identity and a nationalist consciousness. Not only Italians subsidized the Eritrean economy, contributing to the urban development of the country, they also interfered with the organization of Eritrean society, bringing different ethnic groups together within the same borders and “cementing the existence of Eritrea as a separate entity and the preservation and even promotion of its internal diversity”<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, Eritrea is inhabited

<sup>13</sup> TSEGGAI, Araia (1976) “The Case for Eritrean National Independence”. In *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 7, No. 9. P. 21. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> ERLICH, Haggai (1983) *The Struggle Over Eritrea 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*, P. 4. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

by nine recognized ethnic groups, each speaking its own language. According to a 2010 estimation by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)<sup>15</sup>, there is a large majority of Tigrinya speakers who represent the 55% of the total population. They live in the highlands around Asmara, the capital city. They are mostly Christian and their language is considered the national language, followed by Arabic, English, and other minority languages. Tigre people are mostly Muslim, they form the 30% of Eritrea's population and represent the second largest group of the nation. They live in the western part of Eritrea which borders with Ethiopia. Other main groups include: Saho (4%), Kunama (2%), Rashaida (2%) and Bilen (2%). Afar, Hedareb and Nara people together form the remaining 5% of Eritrea's population.

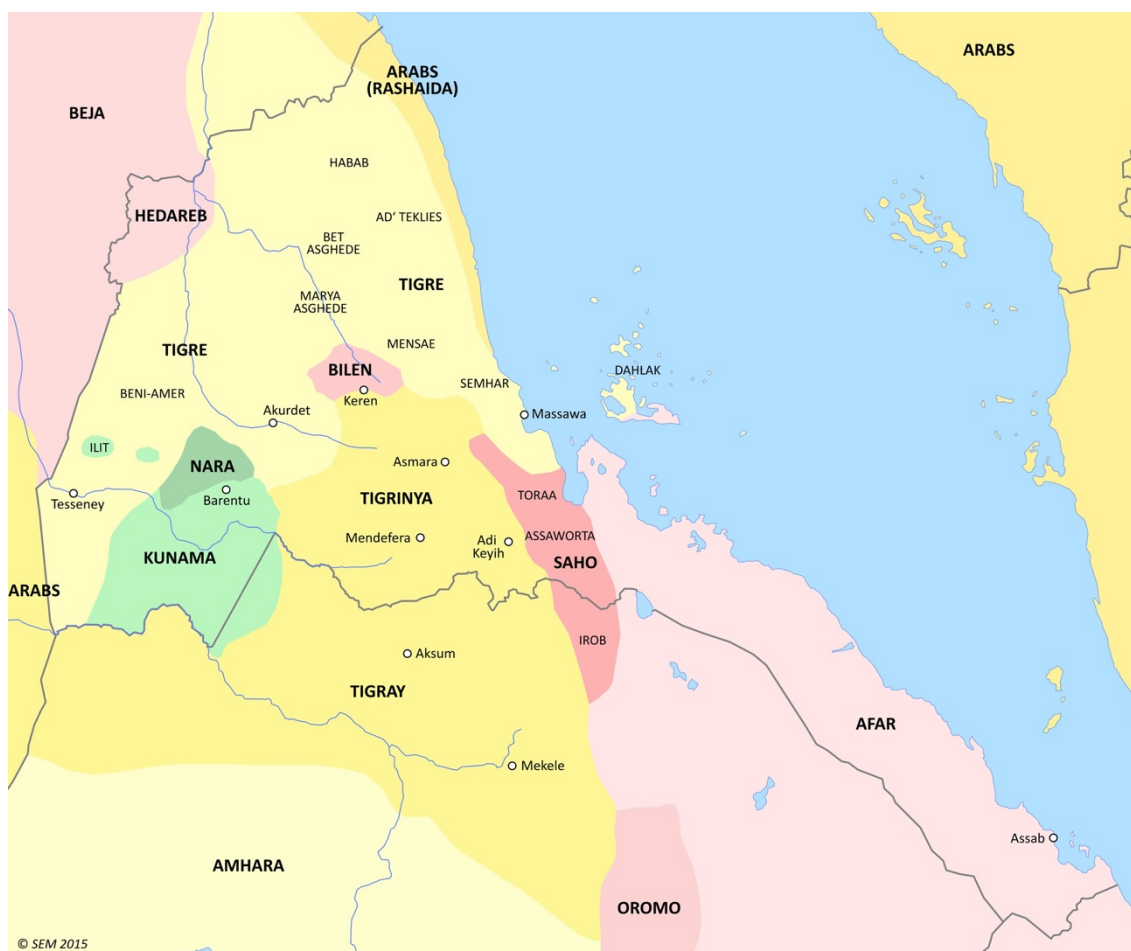


Fig. 2: Eritrean Ethnic Groups

Source: European Asylum Support Office *Country of Origin Information Report. Eritrea Country Focus*. P. 13. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2015.

At the end of the Second World War Italy lost its African colonies and Eritrea became a British protectorate. In 1952 the United Nations established Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia but, in 1961, the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie revoked Eritrea's autonomy, abolishing all national emblems as well as the use of the Tigrinya language in public places. This resulted in a thirty year war, initially led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The ELF was established in Cairo in 1961 and was mainly composed of Muslims

<sup>15</sup> The World Factbook, Eritrean ethnic groups (2010 estimate): [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#er](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#er). Last accessed December 17, 2017.

from the rural lowlands of Eritrea. In the 1970s it faced internal political disputes which led to its fragmentation and the foundation of another group with a strong nationalist connotation, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF gained considerable support among peasants, especially because of its marxist-leninist views which framed the Eritrean struggle for independence in the context of a wider anti-imperialist and class struggle. In the 1980s the EPLF joined forces with the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front)<sup>16</sup> against the pro-Soviet Derg regime which, in 1974, had overthrown the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. The war ended in 1991 with Eritrea's victory and the collapse of the Derg, but the referendum which officially recognized Eritrea as an independent nation was formalized by the United Nations in 1993. As the leader of the winning faction (the EPLF), Isaias Afewerki became Eritrea's President. Since then elections have never been held: the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ, former EPLF) has never allowed the Constitution to be implemented and concentrated all powers in the President's hands and those of a few collaborators. "Today, Eritrea competes with North Korea and Turkmenistan for the last place on most global assessment of human rights and democratic governance and it has become one of the largest producers of asylum seekers in the world"<sup>17</sup>. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported 474,296 Eritreans globally to be refugees and asylum seekers at the end of 2015, about 12 percent of Eritrea's official 3.6 million population estimate<sup>18</sup>.

During the struggle for independence there were three main waves of Eritrean immigration into Europe. The first wave started in 1974 when the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown by the Derg (military committee). In order to escape imprisonment and persecution many Eritreans fled to Sudan, from where resettlement programmes brought them to various countries in America and Europe. The second wave occurred after the so called "Red Star Campaign", the largest military operation carried out by the Derg during the war (1981-1982). The third wave occurred at the end of the 1980s, following a sustained series of attacks launched by the EPLF and culminated in 1991 with victory<sup>19</sup>. Following independence, out-migration from Eritrea did not cease. Between 1998 and 2000 the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea caused the death of over 100.000 on both sides<sup>20</sup>. The border war triggered an authoritarian shift in Eritrea: in September 2001 the PFDJ jailed a group of government officials (G15) who called for reform in an open letter to the President. Subsequently all private newspapers were shut down and religious minorities were also persecuted. The government's suspicion of foreign aid led to Eritrea being excluded from the international community and most NGOs were banned from operating in the country. All this gave rise to a huge mass-migration from Eritrea towards Europe.

There are no accurate data about the size of the Eritrean diaspora in Europe and America. The main reason is that Eritreans who arrived prior to independence were registered

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<sup>16</sup> Ethiopian political party which was founded in 1974 and played a major role in mobilizing the people of Tigray against the Derg.

<sup>17</sup> CONNELL, Dan (2012) "Escaping Eritrea: Why They Flee and What They Face". In *Middle East Report*, No. 264. P. 3. Washington: Middle East Research and Information Project.

<sup>18</sup> Reported by Human Rights Watch, Eritrea Country Summary (2017): [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/eritrea\\_2.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/eritrea_2.pdf). P. 4. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> KHALID, Koser (2003) "Mobilizing New African Diasporas: An Eritrean Case Study". In KOSER, Khalid (ed.), *New African Diasporas*. P. 113. Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> TESFAGHERGHIS, Petros (2005) *Refugees and the Development of Africa: The Case of Eritrean Refugees in the UK*: [www.ehrea.org/eritrean\\_refugees.pdf](http://www.ehrea.org/eritrean_refugees.pdf). P. 9. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

upon arrival as Ethiopians<sup>21</sup>. In 1993 the voting figures of the Referendum for independence suggested that the countries hosting the most significant numbers of Eritrean refugees at that time were Saudi Arabia (37.785), the USA and Canada (14.941) and Germany (6.994)<sup>22</sup>. In 2003, Eritrean community leaders suggested that the total number of Eritreans living in the UK was between 20.000 and 25.000<sup>23</sup>. These data were confirmed by a census carried out by the Office for National Statistics according to which, in 2011, there were 17.282 Eritreans in England and Wales, 16.921 of which residing in England and 10.198 residing in London<sup>24</sup> (Scotland and Northern Ireland carry out their own censuses).

### Festivals and the creation of Eritrean national identity

According to most scholarly studies, Italian colonialism and the independence war are at the origin of Eritrean national identity [Erlich 1983, Sorenson 1991, Iyob 1995, Negash 1997, Tronvoll 1999, Hoyle 2001, Hepner 2009, Schmidt 2010]. Following the end of the Cold War, there was a renewed interest in the study of nation-states and their role in the creation of nationalisms. There were attempts to define nations based either on objective criteria such as common culture and political values [Giddens 1994, Stalin 1994, Wright 1942] or subjective criteria such as community consciousness [Seton-Watson 1977, Connor 1978, Renan 1982, Anderson 1983]. Among the latter, Benedict Anderson's idea that the nation is an "imagined political community"<sup>25</sup> is particularly relevant to the study of the Eritrean diaspora: "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"<sup>26</sup>. Similarly, Ernst Gellner refers to nations as "inventions"<sup>27</sup> of the ruling classes which, drawing on Paul Brass and Anthony D. Smith, "select aspects of the groups' culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group"<sup>28</sup>. In Guibernau's words:

"A common historical past, which includes 'having suffered, enjoyed and hoped together', reinforces links among the members of a given community<sup>29</sup>. [...] Individuals who share the same culture, feel attached to a concrete land, have the experience of a common past [...] need to create occasions in which all that unites them is emphasized"<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> KHALID, Koser (2003) *Op. Cit.* P. 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* P. 113.

<sup>24</sup> NOMIS (Official Labour for Market Statistics) "Country of birth" census table for England and Wales (2011 estimate): [www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/QS213EW/view/2092957703?cols=measures](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/QS213EW/view/2092957703?cols=measures). Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> ANDERSON, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. P. 6. London/New York: Verso.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>27</sup> GELLNER, Ernst (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>28</sup> BRASS Paul (1994) "Élite Competition and Nation-Formation". In SMITH, Anthony D., and John HUTCHINSON, *Nationalism*. P. 87. Oxford University Press.

<sup>29</sup> GUIBERNAU, Montserrat (1996) *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. P. 76. Polity Press.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* P. 83.

According to Peggy Hoyle, these occasions are provided by rituals, which she defines as the “performance component”<sup>31</sup> of national identity. Rituals “can be as simple and personal as saluting the flag or reciting a pledge, or as involved as participating in presidential campaigns, taking part in parades, fairs, and festivals, or journeying to national shrines.”<sup>32</sup>

### *The Eritrean Independence Day*

Eritrean festivals provide powerful examples of the ways in which symbols are used to mobilise the diaspora, binding people to an imagined Eritrean nation without borders. Bettina Conrad witnessed the celebrations for the Eritrean Independence Day<sup>33</sup> held in Frankfurt in 2001. In this passage she describes how festivals have become sites of national identity formation:

“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. And even after independence, music, cultural performances of all kinds, and festivals, continued to be important sites of memory [...] 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”<sup>34</sup>.

In May 2014 Eritreans celebrated the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of independence organizing festivals in all major cities of the diaspora. According to Gedab News, there was exceptional political ferment in Eritrea and the diaspora on the eve of the 23<sup>rd</sup> independence anniversary. The ruling party conducted public seminars all over the country and the state-owned television station Eri-TV ran 24-hour coverage of the activities that were carried out in preparation for the festival<sup>35</sup>.

In London the Independence Day Festival took place at Troxy, in the borough of Tower Hamlets (East End). Helen Meles was one of the main performers. She was one of the many Eritrean women who joined the liberation struggle and fought, along with men, for Eritrea’s independence. At the age of 8 she became the lead singer of the “Red Flowers”, a band which was formed by the EPLF’s Education branch in Kassala (eastern Sudan). When she was only 13 she joined the EPLF as a fighter and she was brought up in the EPLF’s revolutionary school. Helen has been compared to Teberh Tesfahunegn, an Eritrean singer who was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s and “who instilled a strong patriotic feeling in many young Eritreans of the time [...] Their musical styles, although separated by decades of events and technological developments, are interestingly similar. [...] Both share a precious experience in the liberation struggle within the EPLF camp”<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> HOYLE, Peggy (1999) “The Eritrean National Identity: A Case Study”. In *North Carolina Journal of International Law and Commercial Regulation*. Vol. 24, No. 2. P. 394.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> The Independence Day is a national Eritrean festival which takes place every year on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May. It celebrates the arrival, in 1991, of EPLF’s forces into the capital city Asmara and the re-establishment of long-awaited independence.

<sup>34</sup> CONRAD, Bettina (2006) “Out of the Memory Hole. Alternative Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution in the Diaspora”. In *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 41, No. 2. Pp. 257-258. Memory Cultures.

<sup>35</sup> Gedab News (2014) *The Politics of Eritrea’s Independence Day*. <http://awate.com/the-politics-of-independence-day/>. Posted on May 22, 2014. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Meles Biography: [www.madote.com/2010/02/helen-meles-biography.html](http://www.madote.com/2010/02/helen-meles-biography.html). Last accessed December 17, 2017.





Fig. 3: Helen Meles, Independence Day 2014. Flyer

### *The Eritrean Martyrs' Day*

Another important Eritrean celebration is the Martyrs' Day<sup>37</sup>. In 2014 I attended the Martyrs' Day in Kennington Park (Lambeth, south London): the commemoration started with a procession leading to the park, and continued with the reading of poems, speeches and music. Candles burned all day to honour the dead. The celebration ended with a choir singing the national Anthem *Ertra, Ertra, Ertra* which was adopted in 1993<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> The Martyrs Day takes place every year on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June and commemorates the martyrs of the independence war. Their names were announced to the families once the war had officially ended, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1993.

<sup>38</sup> The Eritrean National Anthem was composed by Isaac Abraham Meharezghi and Aron Tekle Tesfatsion. The lyrics is by Solomon Tsehaye Beraki. For the lyrics in Tigrinya and English, and for listening: [www.nationalanthems.me/eritrea-ertra-ertra-ertra/](http://www.nationalanthems.me/eritrea-ertra-ertra-ertra/). Last accessed December 17, 2017.



Figures. 4, 5, 6, 7: Eritrean Martyrs Day, Kennington Park, London, June 2014  
Source: Raimoq.com.

In contrast with the Independence Day Festival, which has a strong political connotation, “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 their political allegiances lie”<sup>39</sup>. Music, poetry and speeches commemorate the fighters who lost their lives during the independence struggle, and whose names were never officially announced to the families until the end of the war, on the 20th of June 1993. Nevertheless, Bettina Conrad argues that the rhetoric beneath the establishment of the Martyrs’ Day is not free from political control:

“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 skilfully used by the regime to lend it legitimacy and rationalize the maintenance of power”<sup>40</sup>.

Anna Arnone also stresses the “relevance of ‘martyrdom’ in Eritrean collective memory”<sup>41</sup>, pointing out that: “during the latter war (1998-2000), conscription to become a soldier was not voluntary, nevertheless the martyr appellation was kept to increase the victimisation of Eritrea opposed to the Ethiopian oppressor”<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> CONRAD, Bettina (2006) *Op. Cit.* P. 260.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* P. 259.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>42</sup> ARNONE, Anna (2010) *Being Eritrean in Milan: The Constitution of Identity*. Dphil Thesis. P. 104. University of Sussex.





Fig 8: Eritrean Martyrs Day, Toronto 2013. Graves, Candles, Flags and Shidda (plastic sandals worn by the EPLF fighters)  
Source: Eritrea-chat.com.

### *The Bologna Festival*

Festival *Erətra*<sup>43</sup> is the oldest festival celebrated by Eritreans in diaspora. Indeed, unlike the Independence Day and the Martyrs' Day, it was established long before the end of the liberation struggle. It was started in 1974 by diasporic Eritreans in Bologna in order to collect funds for the struggle:

“Eritreans who were unable to join the liberation struggle for all kinds of reasons and who then and now resided in the Near East, Europe, North America, and Australia contributed to the struggle for independence by lobbying foreign governments, collecting and donating funds [...] or still by mobilising meetings, rallies, and campaigns in support of the nationalist struggle [...] Festival *Erətra* in Bologna was but an annual folk-fair where all these social, economic, and political resources were mobilised and negotiated and put together mainly in the form of live stage shows in the presence of liberation struggle representatives, exiles, refugees, and other categories of diasporic Eritreans”<sup>44</sup>.

During the liberation struggle, besides being a site for production and conservation of ethno-cultural traditions, Festival *Erətra* represented an occasion for Eritrean nationalists to come together and discuss the situation in the homeland. Cultural troupes from Eritrea were sent to the Bologna Festival not only to entertain its participants, but also to inform them about the progress of the armed struggle.

<sup>43</sup> Also known as the “Bologna Festival” because it was started by diasporic Eritreans in Bologna in 1974.

<sup>44</sup> KIFLEYESUS, Abbebe (2007) “Folk-fairs and Festivals: Cultural Conservation and National Identity Formation in Eritrea”. In *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 47, No. 186. P. 256.

“The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front introduced the idea of “cultural troupe” (*bahli*) in the mid 1970s as a form of entertainment for fighters and combatants and, more importantly, as a way of energizing nationalist feelings [...] Musical and dance shows with all the costume wearing and hair-dressing that goes with them, theatrical scenes (*tāwasə’o*), camel races, and soccer games consisted of some of the festival events. At these cultural shows the participation of military commanders, rank and file fighters, and local community members ascertained support for the national liberation movement through an environment of entertainment”<sup>45</sup>.

In the post-war period, between 1991 and 1995, the festival was moved from Bologna to Asmara where it gradually acquired new social functions, with cultural shows of diverse ethnic groups standing as “an interface between local political and economic demands and national policy matters”<sup>46</sup>.

Since 1995, in addition to re-establishing the festival in Bologna, the government has been organizing a festival tour for the rest of the world that passes through the main countries of the diaspora, ending in Eritrea. It is organized jointly with the Eritrean embassies in the various countries<sup>47</sup>. According to Anna Arnone, who attended the festival in Milan (Italy) in 2003, the decision to institutionalize the festival in all the major countries of the diaspora affected Eritreans’ participation in the Bologna Festival:

“In the past the Eritrean Festival in Bologna was not multi-cultural in its performances, but was plural in its attendance: people of African backgrounds, such as Somalis and Ethiopians, and Italians were included in the audience and in participation. Today this is no longer the case.”<sup>48</sup> [...] “[Nowadays] people do not follow the festival around but they go to their national one [...] This lack of participation has strengthened the exiled identity from a pan-Eritreanness fighting for the same cause to a nationally (locally) based one on stability and integration in the country of stay.”<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 9: Tigrinya Dance. Asmara, 2006.  
Source: Asmera.nl

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* P. 255.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* P. 250.

<sup>47</sup> ARNONE, Anna (2010) *Op. Cit.* P. 94.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* P. 98.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* P. 96.





Fig. 10: Tigre Women Dance. Asmara, 2006.  
Source: Asmera.nl

Between the 4th and the 6th of July 2014 Eritreans gathered in Bologna for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Festival *Erətra*. Four stages hosted performances of Eritrean artists travelling to Bologna from all over the world. One stage was reserved to the *MeQalh Bologna* (Bologna Memorial Concert), “a historic gathering of legend artists coming together from Eritrea”<sup>50</sup> such as Tesfay Mehari, Wedi Tekul, Elsa Kidane, Gual Ankere, and many others. Their songs inspired and narrated the revolution and fostered people’s unity during the struggle: “the government sends them over for us to refresh our memories”<sup>51</sup>. Two other stages called *EriArtista* and *Erispora Band* were reserved to Eritrean international artists, to “showcase the talents and diversity of Eritrean young artists born in diaspora”<sup>52</sup>. A final stage hosted performances of traditional *guayla*<sup>53</sup> dance music.

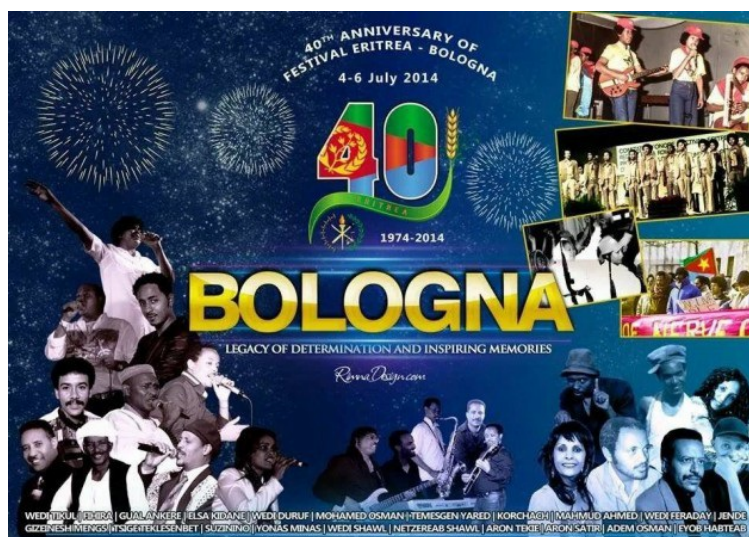


Fig. 11: Bologna Festival 2014. Flyer

<sup>50</sup> Bologna Festival 2014 Programme.

<sup>51</sup> Interview excerpt. In ARNONE, Anna (2010) *Op. Cit.* P. 96.

<sup>52</sup> Bologna Festival 2014 Programme.

<sup>53</sup> *Guayla* is a traditional Tygrinia dance.

Musically speaking, the major change occurred in the festival during the last decades is that

“traditional performances are interspersed with modern songs of professional artists accompanied by modern musical instruments. There is now more of commercial competition and concern for audience consumption satisfaction, through the sale of market produced goods and services within the festival *Expo* grounds, than there was ever before”<sup>54</sup>.

Besides music and dance performances, which involved a total of 82 artists, seminars, exhibitions, comedy and drama performances took place during the festival. Young people were encouraged to take place in the festival youth programme, involving artistic and sports competitions. According to Solomon, an Eritrean musician who stopped playing professionally in 2005, Festival *Erətra* aims to pass on younger generations Eritrean cultural values:

“They try to teach the young ones Eritrean culture, what Eritrea went through: the colonies, starting from Egyptians, Italians, English. [...] Young ones learn trough adults at festivals about their country”<sup>55</sup>.

Petros Tesfagherghis followed the activities surrounding the organization of the Bologna festival in 2014. He asserted that the Eritrean Embassy in Italy expected at least 10.000 people to join the festival, but probably only about 2.500 attended<sup>56</sup>. In his recent article *The Bologna Drama: The Voice for Democratic Change vs. The Sound of Oppression*<sup>57</sup>, he describes how the Bologna festival has changed over the years:

“I followed in detail the festival on ERI-TV and the demonstration on the Internet. I am best situated to compare the Bologna Festival now and during the struggle because I have attended Bologna 14 consecutive years in my capacity as EPLF member working full time for ERA-UK<sup>58</sup> and EPLF Public Relations man in the United Kingdom”.

In his opinion the Bologna Festival, once the “cultural pride of Eritreans in Europe”<sup>59</sup>, has turned into a “propaganda ploy”<sup>60</sup>: “The PFDJ is isolated internationally and is under pressure. The 40 years Bologna anniversary is meant to challenge that”<sup>61</sup>. According to Martin Plaut, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2014, there were about 200 people picketing the festival<sup>62</sup>. The flyer below invited people to participate in a demonstration organized by

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<sup>54</sup> KIFLEYESUS, Abbebe (2007) *Op. Cit.* P. 257.

<sup>55</sup> Solomon Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on May 30, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Petros Tesfagherghis. Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 17, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> TEFAGHERGHIS, Petros (2014) *The Bologna Drama: The Voice for Democratic Change vs. The Sound of Oppression*. Online at Asmarino.com: [www.asmarino.com/articles/2125-the-bologna-drama-the-voice-for-democratic-change-vs-the-sound-of-oppression](http://www.asmarino.com/articles/2125-the-bologna-drama-the-voice-for-democratic-change-vs-the-sound-of-oppression). Posted on July 25, 2014. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> During the independence war the EPLF created an NGO network, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), targeted on raising money in the host countries to contribute to the costs of the war and to provide relief and welfare services in liberated areas. In the United Kingdom a branch office was set up in 1976 (ERA-UK).

<sup>59</sup> TEFAGHERGHIS, Petros (2014) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> Petros Tesfagherghis. Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 17, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> PLAUT, Martin (2014), *Eritrea: Opposition Mobilises at Bologna Festival*. Online at Wordpress: <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/eritrea-opposition-mobilises-at-bologna-festival/>. Posted on July 5, 2014. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

*Coordinamento Eritrea Democratica*, taking place on the 5th of July in Piazza Maggiore (Bologna city centre).



Fig. 12: *Coordinamento Eritrea Democratica* Flyer: "An anti-fascist city should not play host to a fascist regime". Bologna, 2014.

Source: [Coordinamentomigranti.org](http://Coordinamentomigranti.org)

During the demonstration, marches and slogans were followed by the reading of poems and a drama performance which was filmed and uploaded online<sup>63</sup>. It contained explicit reference to the death, in October 2013, of 368 people (mostly Eritreans) who were travelling on a boat to Lampedusa (Italy). This event counteracted the celebration organized by the Eritrean embassy, showing how expressive cultural practices can construct alternative narratives which challenge the official ones.

In this paragraph we have seen how festivals foster "long-distance nationalism" among Eritrean diaspora members. The term "long-distance nationalism" was popularized by Benedict Anderson in the 1990s and refers to "a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home"<sup>64</sup>. It includes a series of transnational activities which are aimed at strengthening links between the homeland and the diasporic group, both in terms of political support and financial contribution. Live music and other cultural performances featured at Eritrean festivals are examples of transnational activities aimed at reinforcing national ties between the Eritrean diaspora and its homeland. However, links between the two had been established long before the creation of an Eritrean independent state. Indeed, during the liberation war, diasporic Eritreans were asked to campaign and increase public awareness in their host countries, raising money to finance

<sup>63</sup> *Bologna Witnessed*, video: <http://assenna.com/assenna-video-bologna-witnessed-italian-creative-artists-awakening-our-dead-while-eritrean-zombies-danced-on-their-grave-bologna-piazza-maggiore-saturday-july-5-2014/comment-page-3/>. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> GLICK-SCHILLER, Nina (2005) "Long-Distance Nationalism". In EMBER, Melvin, EMBER, Carol R., and Ian SKOGGARD (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*. P. 570. Boston: Springer.

the armed struggle and provide relief and welfare services in liberated areas. After the war, overseas nationals continued to be politically and economically involved in the development of the new Eritrean nation. They were declared eligible to vote on independence in the 1993 referendum, and were encouraged to participate in the drafting and ratification of Eritrea's constitution in 1997. Furthermore all adult Eritreans were asked to contribute 2 per cent of their annual incomes to the Eritrean state. This contribution is still paid by Eritreans in diaspora, including many who are in open opposition with the current government<sup>65</sup>.

Following Eritrea's defeat at the Badme border, a sense of disillusionment started to grow among diasporic Eritreans. This was exacerbated by the increased financial demands made on the diaspora as a consequence of the government's suspicion of foreign aid. Festivals, along with campaigns and visits of government officials to the host countries, are also intended to contrast this increasing resentment which emerged within Eritrean diaspora communities. Especially since the Internet has become accessible in Eritrea, the government has been attempting "to influence, if not control, criticism from within the diaspora which has the potential to influence people in Eritrea too"<sup>66</sup>. Finally, we have seen how festivals are used by political opposition groups to express their dissent towards the current regime. Opposition groups often organize rallies in conjunction with the festivals, creating an alternative space for reflecting upon current Eritrean politics and imagining different, unconventional ways for diasporic Eritreans to contribute to their homeland.

#### Eritrean music venues and cultural associations: two case studies

Another aspect of the Eritrean diaspora which this article investigates in connection with music is the relationship between Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in London. The case studies described in the following paragraphs focus on music venues and cultural associations as places where diasporic Eritreans occasionally gather, make music, share memories and exchange views. The first case study shows how music, along with other elements such as food and language, recreates a familiar environment which reconnects diasporic Eritreans with their past, their homeland and their cultural heritage. Through the hosting of live music events, music venues provide a social space for Eritreans to socialize and create networks within the community, while also encouraging relationships with other communities. The second case study questions power relations between the major Eritrean ethnic group (Tigrinya) and other minority groups, and examines the ways in which they are reproduced in diaspora.

##### *Eritrean music venues in Brixton (London)*

Brixton is a south London district situated in the London Borough of Lambeth. According to a survey conducted by Lambeth Council, between 1989 and 1993 most of the Eritrean population seeking refugee status in the UK was made up of families. After 1993 this trend changed, with mostly young people with no dependants immigrating to the UK in order to escape the national service which became compulsory in 1995. Most of them currently reside in London, with Brixton and Stockwell being the "main areas

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<sup>65</sup> KHALID, Koser (2003) *Op. Cit.* P. 114.

<sup>66</sup> KHALID, Koser (2003) *Op. Cit.* P. 117.



where people from Eritrea live and socialise”<sup>67</sup>. Eritreans from all over London attend community events and worship in Lambeth and Southwark and, as a result, a high number of Eritrean community centres, bars and restaurants flourished in these areas. There are mosques, churches, such as the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Camberwell (Southwark), and bars, such as the Union Café in Landor Road (Stockwell, Lambeth) where community members come together to watch Eritrean TV channels and discuss social and political issues. In Stockwell there is also the Adulis Music Shop selling Eritrean CDs, cassettes, DVDs, books and artifacts.

Brixton Road leads from Oval tube station, near Kennington Park, to Brixton, where it forms the high street. The area features late night bars and restaurants which I attended rather regularly during the fieldwork period. Among them, Dahlak<sup>68</sup> restaurant is where I started my research in 2014, attending live music performances, making contacts with musicians and entertaining informal conversations with them, the audience members and the club’s owner. Since its opening about fifteen years ago, Dahlak has hosted live music events and invited some of the most popular musicians residing in the city to perform. On Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, music started around midnight, and the band kept playing for about four hours, including breaks. Solomon defined the restaurant as a “little community”:

“If you are bored at home or if you haven’t got friends or if you don’t know anyone around you and stuff like that what you do is just go to Dahlak and meet up, meet Eritrean people and see if you know someone. I would say Dahlak is a little Eritrean community. Of course it’s a nightclub, you just go there and enjoy yourself. Younger people just jump from one [place] to the other. They just go out somewhere and then after sort of midnight one o’ clock go to Dahlak.”<sup>69</sup>

The Dahlak house band is made up of both Eritrean and Ethiopian musicians and their repertoire draws on both Eritrean and Ethiopian music. As well as the band’s repertoire, the instrumentation - keyboards, *krar* (a lyre with a bowl shaped resonator and six strings), bass-guitar and saxophone – mixes “tradition” and “modernity”. Two singers take turns according to whether the song lyrics are in the Tigrinya or Amharic language. According to the club manager, Dahlak was one of the first venues in London offering music events for both Eritreans and Ethiopians; this probably allowed the two communities to get closer together.

The relationships that Eritreans and Ethiopians interlace at Dahlak reflect the histories of two countries which, despite their rivalries, have long been closely entwined. Indeed, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia for about ten years between the end of the British protectorate and the beginning of the independence war. When independence was finally gained, many Ethiopians were expelled from Eritrea. The strained relationships between the two countries continued to deteriorate during the border war, after which many Eritreans were also deported from Ethiopia. The war and the successive border dispute exacerbated cultural differences which date back, according to Tekeste Negash, to Italian colonialism. He argues that the Italian colonial policy “drew a distinction between

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<sup>67</sup> Lambeth Council, *Understanding the Eritrean Community in Lambeth and Southwark. Findings of a Survey of Community Needs*: P. 13. Unpublished. This study has been carried out by the Labeth Council between June 2008 and May 2009.

<sup>68</sup> The Dahlak archipelago is situated near Massawa, on the Red Sea coast, and consists of two large and 124 small islands.

<sup>69</sup> Solomon. Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on May 30, 2014.

Eritreans, who were fortunate enough to be under the civilizing umbrella of Italy, and the inhabitants of the Ethiopian empire”<sup>70</sup>. Haggai Erlich, who supported the American-Soviet position against Eritrean nationhood, places more emphasis on the role of “anti-Ethiopianism” in the shaping of Eritrean identity, asserting that “Eritreanism was essentially the negation of Ethiopianism rather than a historically rooted supratribal, supralinguistic, and suprareligious sense of Eritrean affiliation”<sup>71</sup>. Thus, the creation of Eritrean identity can be considered as the result of Italian racist ideology first, and of a “long and bloody opposition to Ethiopian domination”<sup>72</sup> later.

Osvaldo Costantini has underlined that, in spite of past conflicts, the relationship between Eritreans and Ethiopians is one of both intimacy and conflict<sup>73</sup>. During his research about Eritrean and Ethiopian pentecostalism in Rome, he found that this dichotomy informs much demotic discourse surrounding presumed differences between the two national groups. It is important to remind that, in the pre-colonial period, Tigrinya people from Eritrea and from the Tigray region of Ethiopia, as well as Amharic people from the Ethiopian highlands, identified themselves as “*Habesha*”. This term refers to their common ancestral origins and is still used by Eritreans and Ethiopians who want to emphasize their common origins over national differences.

Historical links between the two countries affect Eritrean-Ethiopian relations in the diaspora. Most Eritreans I met at Dahlak, for example, could understand or even speak Amharic. As pointed out by Osvaldo Costantini in his PhD thesis, all Eritreans could speak Amharic before 1991<sup>74</sup>, it was the language used to teach in public schools. Even after the obtaining of independence, many Eritreans continued to reside in Ethiopia and speak Amharic. At the end of the Badme conflict, they were forcedly deported to Eritrea but Amharic remained their first language. Thus, it is not surprising that, nowadays, only a few Eritreans (those who resided and attended public schools in Eritrea after 1991) do not speak fluent Amharic, even though they can understand it. Besides language, music also represents a contact point between the two communities. Amharic songs have always been widely popular in Eritrea, partly because “songs in Amharic are often about love, while those in the Eritrean language of Tigrinya are more often about war and nationalism”<sup>75</sup>. In 2003, as reported by the BBC correspondent Alex Last, Ethiopian music was banned in the country. In his report he wrote that, although “there has been no official announcement of the ban ... the owners of bars and music shops say they have been told not to play the music in public”<sup>76</sup>. One way of bypassing the ban, at the same time expressing criticism about the government’s use of censorship, was adapting Tigrinya lyrics to the melody of Ethiopian songs.

Dahlak music performances foster positive relationships between Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in London, opposing the government’s nationalist view which conversely highlights historical and political divides between the two. Spending weekend nights at Dahlak shed light on why most Eritrean and Ethiopian people I met there perceive

<sup>70</sup> NEGASH, Tekeste (1997) *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*. P. 16. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.

<sup>71</sup> ERLICH, Haggai (1983) *The Struggle Over Eritrea: 1962-1978. War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*. Pp. 18-19. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

<sup>72</sup> SCHMIDT, Peter. R. (2010) “Postcolonial Silencing, Intellectuals, and the State. Views from Eritrea”. In *African Affairs* Vol. 109, No. 435. P. 297. Oxford University Press.

<sup>73</sup> COSTANTINI, Osvaldo (2014) *Byesus Sh'm. Il Pentecostalismo Eritreo ed Etiopico a Roma: Incertezza, Politica, Cittadinanza*. PhD Thesis. P. 267. Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza”.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.* P. 271.

<sup>75</sup> ALEX, Last (2003) *Eritrea bans Ethiopian songs. BBC News*: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2632399.stm>. Posted January 6, 2003. Last accessed December 17, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*.

themselves as being part of the same community or, using their own words, as being “the same”<sup>77</sup>. Further down Brixton Road, only a few hundred metres away from Dahlak, there is another restaurant and music venue; it is the basement of a take-away pizza restaurant and is mainly attended by Eritrean people. On weekends a well known local musician plays keyboards and sings. In both venues music has an entertaining function: while the musicians play music, the audience members are busy drinking, chatting or dancing. Nevertheless the acts of listening and dancing to the rhythm of familiar songs, along with speaking their own language, represents for Eritreans a way of keeping their culture alive in their London life<sup>78</sup>.

Although most Eritreans living in London are from the Tigrinya group, there are also representatives from other Eritrean ethnic groups. In London, where the community is relatively small, ethnic distinctions seem to become blurred and to be replaced by the feeling of belonging to a wider Eritrean community. Ali’s story, which will be discussed in more details in the next section, shows that this is not always the case. The sense of belonging to a “community” is not only dependant on objective criteria, such as nationality and language. On the contrary, it is individually shaped, through personal memories and experiences, and socially constructed, through others’ assumptions about one’s identity. Nevertheless, social constructions often tend to “homogenize” diverse ethnic groups’ experiences and “erase many distinctions, such as those of social class and gender, within them”<sup>79</sup>. Vijay Agnew, for example, finds that English language skills inform social constructions of Indian immigrant women in Toronto:

“The social construction of an ethnic group may emphasize a particular aspect of its identity, such as language or religion (e.g. the head scarf), which not only subsumes its other attributes, but also blames the victims for the difficulties they encounter in integrating themselves with the Canadian society”<sup>80</sup>

For this reason, in the following paragraph I will adopt a subject-centred approach to describe the experience of a Saho musician in London. According to Kiwan and Meinhof, “studying musicians as individual actors rather than representatives of a particular ethnic or spatial community within the host and home countries”<sup>81</sup> creates a more favourable context for appreciating their “multiple identities and allegiances”<sup>82</sup>, moving away from “discourses that essentialize ethnicity”<sup>83</sup>.

#### *Eritrean Saho Cultural Association (Stockwell, London)*

Saho people constitute only the 4% of Eritrea’s population<sup>84</sup> and occupy parts of the Southern Debub Region and parts of the Northern Red Sea Region, with some people also living in the adjacent territories of Ethiopia. The Saho language comes from the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family and it is spoken by more than

<sup>77</sup> Audience members. Personal communication. February-July 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Audience members. Personal communication. February-July 2014.

<sup>79</sup> AGNEW, Vijay (2005) *Diaspora, Memory and identity. A Search for Home*. P. 29. University of Toronto Press.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>81</sup> KIWAN, Nadia, and Ulrike Hanna MEINHOF (2011) “Music and Migration. A Transnational Approach”. In *Music and Arts in Action*. Vol. 3, No. 3. P. 5. SocArts Research Group, University of Exeter (UK).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>83</sup> *Id.* P. 4.

<sup>84</sup> The World Factbook, Eritrean ethnic groups (2010 estimate): [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#er](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#er). Last accessed December 17, 2017.

200.000 people, 25.000 of which residing in Ethiopia<sup>85</sup>. The Saho people are predominantly Muslim, with a few Christians living in the Debub Region and the Tigray Region of Ethiopia.

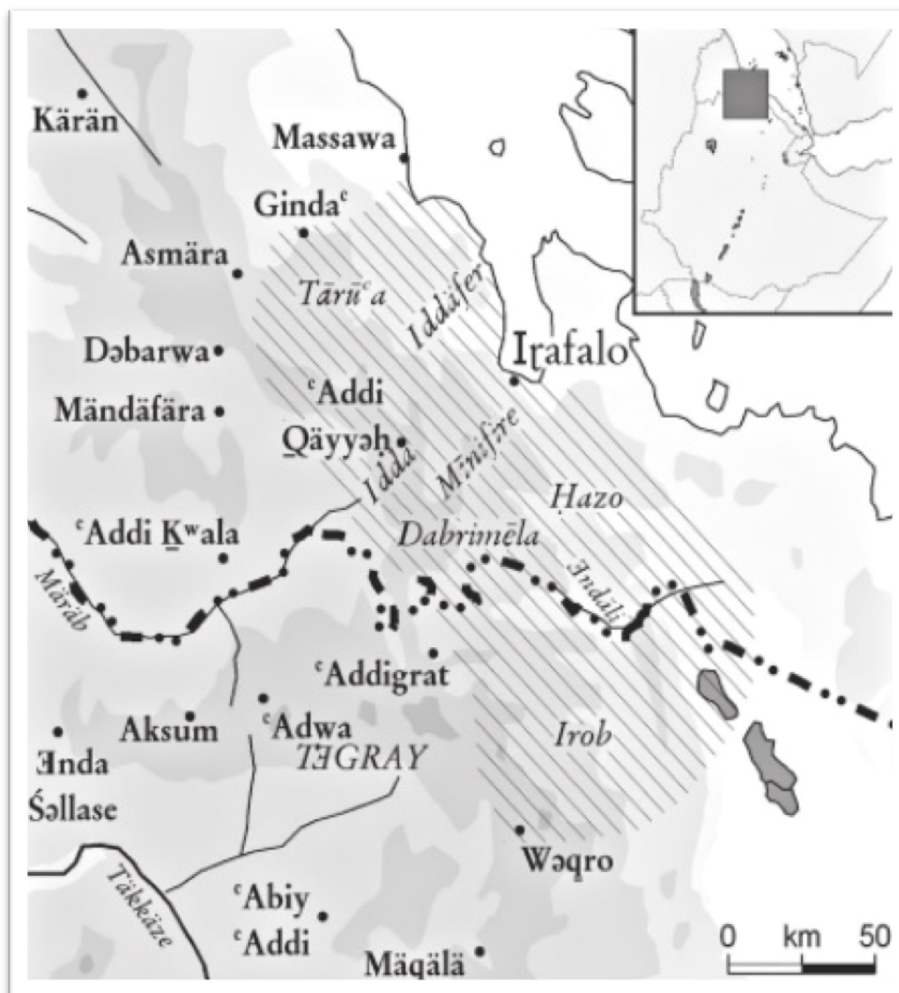


Fig. 13: Saho Settlement Areas, Eritrea

Source: Uhlig & Bausi (eds) (2010) *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. IV:469b

The Eritrean Saho Cultural Association (ESCA) is situated in Stockwell (Lambeth, south London). It was founded in 1992 in order to “provide advice, information and guidance for newly arrived asylum seekers [...] via the provision of supporting classes, training, cultural events and recreation activities”<sup>86</sup>. Music is part of the community’s development programme promoted by ESCA, and Ali Abdullah Ahmad is one of the musicians who organizes and takes part in its musical activities: “we play in the music room downstairs, in the basement [...] We don’t have a cultural band as such because people are busy doing their own things but whenever we got time we get together and play if there is an occasion coming up”<sup>87</sup>. Ali is a professional musician, he performed in England, Sweden, Belgium, France and Germany. He performs both at events organized by the Eritrean embassy and by opposition groups:

<sup>85</sup> BANTI, Giorgio, and Moreno VERGARI (2008) “Italianismi Lessicali in Saho”. In *Ethnorama*, Vol. 4. P. 67.

<sup>86</sup> ESCA: [www.sahouk.com/about-us.html](http://www.sahouk.com/about-us.html). The link is outdated.

<sup>87</sup> Ali Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 12, 2014.

“I don’t like to bring politics into music. I play music for music. When I’m in the political arena I play politics. I am a graduate in politics but I don’t like mixing the two [...] Whenever I get the opportunity to sing, to represent my culture, my music, I go, I don’t mind who’s organizing it”<sup>88</sup>.

Despite Ali’s tendency to depoliticize music, his account provides an interesting perspective about the relationship between politics and music in Eritrea and the diaspora.

“There hasn’t been a chance for Eritrean music to develop on a natural course because of politics [...] In old days reggae was very popular but with time, wars, famine, there is always turmoil around, so they [Eritreans] don’t have time to focus on things like this [music]”<sup>89</sup>.

Ali refers to the Eritrean concept of “self-reliance” to explain how home politics affect music-making in the diaspora: “don’t listen to foreign music, don’t eat foreign food, don’t dress foreign dress. That’s the ideology which I don’t agree with but that’s what’s happening”<sup>90</sup>. Hoyle identifies the ideology of self-reliance as one of the main component values of Eritrean national identity:

“After being subjected to decades of colonization by different states, the lesson drawn by Eritreans was that the only people they could rely on were themselves. While the Ethiopians received supplies, intelligence, and manpower from the Soviet Union, the Eritreans lacked any ‘superpower’ to assist them. Still, as Eritreans enjoy recounting, they were not deterred or intimidated but created an underground nation to sustain themselves. [...] Enshrined in the constitution as a ‘national value’, the notion of success through self-reliance serves as an inspiration to Eritreans during the slow process of reconstruction. Though funds and resources remain scarce, the government accepts relatively little financial aid from the West on the grounds that it wants to retain its autonomy.”<sup>91</sup>

Being part of a minority group (Saho) and, at the same time, of a wider diaspora community, Ali’s thoughts shed some light on power relations between the Saho group and the two major groups (Tigrinya and Tigre), and on ways in which these power relations are reflected and mediated through music. For example, he regrets the lack of visibility for musicians representing minority ethnic groups at Eritrean festivals. In Ali’s opinion, the music played at festivals does not represent the whole of the Eritrean community:

“I represent Saho music, when I go there and play I expect, when I’m on the stage, all the Saho to be down the stage and dance to my music, but I only see a few people, because they [Saho people] don’t attend these occasions”<sup>92</sup>.

Festivals reveal the divisiveness among Eritrean “communities” in London: despite the government’s efforts to promote an image of Eritrean worldwide communities as unified, some people feel alienated - as though “they are not wanted, not represented, not

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>91</sup> HOYLE, Peggy (1999) *Op. Cit*. Pp. 408-409.

<sup>92</sup> Ali Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 12, 2014.

important”<sup>93</sup>- and for this reason do not attend the festivals. Saho attending the festivals are sometimes described by other Saho as having become “tigrinised”<sup>94</sup>, having become part of the same system which caused their marginalisation. The homogenizing view of the Eritrean government is well exemplified by its “unity in diversity” policy: during the thirty year liberation war this strategy managed to bring all ethnic groups and all strata of Eritrean society together for a common goal. As Dan Connell points out, nationalist Eritrean guerrillas gained widespread respect not only because they won the independence war against successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian regimes, but also because of their:

“simultaneous commitment to social transformation, a rarity among such movements which typically postpone radical social change until political objectives are met. By the close of the war in 1991, more than one third of the Eritrean combatants were women, including several in leadership positions; members of ethnic minorities - Eritrea has at least nine - held key posts in the political and military command structure.”<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless the failure to build a democratic nation after the war, with a never implemented constitution and the Eritreans’ deprivation of their basic freedoms and political rights, followed by Eritrea’s defeat in the two-year border war with Ethiopia, led people to reject the “one people, one heart” rhetoric. This resulted in increased tensions between the different groups not only in Eritrea but also in diasporic contexts. The increasing marginalization of Eritrean minorities informs Ali’s approach to music as a means to create awareness about the importance of preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Saho community:

“There is a dominant culture in Eritrea now which is Tigrinya. Whether you like it or not you have to listen to Tigrinya music, tv, radio [...] If you listen to my latest album it’s exclusively in Saho, there is no other language in it. I can sing in Arabic, Tigrinya, Afar, Tigre, and Saho obviously, but I chose to sing in Saho only this time because there is an objective in it: the objective is to bring the Saho music’s level a little bit higher. Higher in terms of presence: it means, if you go to any music shop, if you look for Eritrean music, you will find a hundred CDs of Tigrinya music, but you will hardly find Saho music in the shelf”<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>95</sup> CONNELL, Dan (1993) *Against all Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*. P. 3. The Red Sea Press, Trenton.

<sup>96</sup> Ali Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 12, 2014.



Fig. 14: Ali Abdullah Ahmad - Saho Folk & Modern Music, London, 2008 (cd cover)

According to Giorgio Banti and Moreno Vergari, who researched the history of literacy in Saho, the Ethiopian occupation and the “growing impact of modernization”<sup>97</sup> are among the causes of a “considerable loss of the traditional culture in several areas of life”<sup>98</sup>.

“While wedding songs such as the *margaddiino*, *nazme* religious poetry, as well as work and children songs are still quite alive, the political *cadar* poetry of the great poets like Farhekoobe (died 1867 or 1868) and Xajji Saalix Xindago (died 1993), that was closely linked to the power structure of the *reezon* (‘clan chiefs’, sing. *reezanto*), declined during the Ethiopian occupation, and didn’t find a renewed place in the new political organization after independence. Today, the *cadar* poems of the great poets of the past are highly revered [...] but there are no new poets that equal their fame across Saho society”<sup>99</sup>.

<sup>97</sup> BANTI, Giorgio, and Moreno VERGARI (2010) “The Saho of Eritrea and the Documentation of their Language and Cultural Heritage”. In LUSINI, Gianfranco (ed.) *Annali: Current Trends in Eritrean Studies*, Vol. 70. Pp. 85-86. Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*.



“I started playing just for fun, for myself as a hobby, and then I got dragged into it. I started here at the community centre”<sup>100</sup>. Ali’s involvement in the community centre is central to the understanding of his role as a musician. He believes that “the Saho need more self-esteem”<sup>101</sup> and he regrets that they are gradually “forgetting their identity, their culture and their language”<sup>102</sup>. His music is aimed at countering this lack of self-esteem, as well as the community centre aims at favouring integration with the host society while, at the same time, acting to “protect and maintain Saho cultural values”<sup>103</sup>. Ali’s account challenges the existence of a unified Eritrean community, as described by dominant nationalist narratives promoted by the government, and shows how music can work as a marker of cultural distinctiveness among Eritrean ethnic groups in London.

### Conclusions

This article is based on the findings collected for a master’s research project in ethnomusicology. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of six months, which also included archival research and dissertation writing. Since the project had time-bound objectives the article does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the role of music-making within Eritrean communities in London. Nevertheless, it provides a few relevant examples of the ways in which music contributes to shape Eritrean diasporic identity. In the first paragraph festivals are questioned as sites of national identity formation, where Eritrean musical traditions are transformed into nationalist symbols and used to arouse nostalgic memories of the homeland and strengthen national ties between the diaspora and the state. In the second paragraph, music venues provide a shared social space for Eritrean and Ethiopian communities, whose relationship is often hindered by historical and political divides. It also raises questions about the actual existence of an Eritrean community which transcends ethnic boundaries, leading to a re-examination of the term community as one based upon nationality. Eritreans in London regard themselves as members of several communities at once. Ali, for example, describes himself as a member of the Saho community, but also of a wider Eritrean community when it comes to national policy matters, or as a Muslim, according to social circumstances. He recognizes both Eritrean and British values as part of his cultural heritage. Composing music and performing are described as ways to deal with one’s multiple identities which sometimes overlap while, at other times, are in contrast with each other. This article features only a few of the musicians who were involved in the research process. Most of them are second-generation Eritreans who were born in Eritrea and travelled to London at a young age. Given their different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, an interesting development of this research would be to analyse musical careers and life experiences of Eritrean diasporic musicians in relation to cross-cutting factors which have not been included here, such as age, gender and social class. Another possible development concerns the role of the host country in shaping diasporic identities. As a global city, London provides food for thought in this respect: how are diasporic musical practices preserved within diasporic communities on the one hand? How are they continually renewed by the encounter with different musical traditions on

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<sup>100</sup> Ali Interview excerpt. Recorded in London on July 12, 2014.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>103</sup> ESCA: [www.sahouk.com/about-us.html](http://www.sahouk.com/about-us.html). The link is outdated.



the other? Finally, this article does not include research about the role of the Internet in creating transnational networks which connect Eritrean communities worldwide. Internet has become a privileged means for diasporic Eritreans to communicate and express their political views without fearing censorship. As Victoria Bernal points out “most Eritreans within the country did not have access to the Internet until 2000, with the important exception of government officials. Thus Eritrean activities in cyberspace were largely confined to the diaspora in the early years”<sup>104</sup>. Investigating the role of new communication technologies from an arts-based perspective could further understandings of transnationalism applied to the Eritrean diaspora.

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<sup>104</sup> BERNAL, Victoria (2006) “Cyberspace and Political Imagination. The Eritrean Diaspora Online”. In *Global Networks*. Vol. 6, No. 2. P. 170.

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