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Conrad, Bettina

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Debatte / Debate

Bettina Conrad

Out of the 'memory hole': Alternative narratives of the Eritrean revolution in the diaspora

'Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past.' (George Orwell: '1984')

'Return to Hope', 'Winning the Peace', 'An African Switzerland', – headlines in the early and mid-1990s could have hardly been more optimistic. Resilience, single-mindedness, and courage; willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good, but also an almost overbearing pride, made Eritreans the perfect cast for the hero-role. Exiled Eritreans and a whole generation of Western researchers, journalists and Third-World-lobbyists had their share in perpetuating the image of the exceptional Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and a diverse people standing united in their 30 years struggle against Ethiopia, the first US- and later Soviet-backed regional 'superpower'.

When independence came in 1993 Eritreans put all their efforts into the service of reconstructing a war-torn country with scant resources. It was hard to resist that image of a just cause won 'against all odds', and the 'can-do' attitude of post-war Eritrean society. The unlikely success of the Eritrean nationalist revolution seemed to redeem not only the sufferings of the country's inhabitants and its refugee communities abroad. Among old as well as new foreign supporters it often evoked 'that unruly hope yet to discover paradise lost' (Jansen 2001: 11).

Then, in 1998, a 'border skirmish' between Eritrea and Ethiopia unexpectedly exploded into a full-blown war costing both countries tens of thousands of young lives, and displacing over a million people.¹ Dubbed a 'senseless' war by the international press it did away with the notion of an 'African

1 It would go beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the war here, yet it should be pointed out that the border issue while triggering the conflict was not the deeper reason behind it (see e.g. Trivelli 1998, Tronvoll & Tekeste 2000, Tronvoll 2000, Triulzi n.d., Matsuoka and Sorensen 2001, Reid 2003, Berdal & Plaut 2005).

Renaissance' under the guidance of the Eritrean and Ethiopian rebel-leaders-turned-presidents who had once appeared to be close friends. But this was not the only myth that was to be shattered. More specifically this war also did away with the admiration for the 'exceptional', incorruptible Eritrean leadership. In much of the – often uninformed – footage of the war, the heroes of yesteryear were now made out as the villains. Formerly sympathetic observers expressed deep disappointment in seeing the idealized Eritrean ex-freedom fighters acting like warmongers.

But the war did not only lead to an international image problem for the still unelected Eritrean government, but also to internal political turmoil. After the initial upsurge of patriotism, the aftermath of the conflict laid bare a smouldering, growing disaffection between some parts of the Eritrean population (in- and outside of the country) and the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and perhaps most importantly, also within the latter. When I arrived in Eritrea in the summer of 2001, half a year after a peace agreement had been signed, the country was already another place than the one I had heard and read about.² Apart from the loss of lives, resources and the general demoralizing effect, it seemed that this war had also brought back the demons of a never-dealt with – long gone and more recent – past. And with them came the ghosts (cf. Matsuoka and Sorensen 2001) of memories that had been suppressed, bottled up, streamlined, glossed over or erased in order to shape the image of Eritrea that had prevailed for most of the 1990s. What Richard Reid notes in regard to the Eritrean-Tigrayan relationship, also rings true for the internal situation:³

... the jubilation following the achievement of independence was more than enough ... to engender a selective amnesia concerning certain less pleasant aspects in the history of the Eritrean liberation war. ... [H]owever ... the events of 1998-2000 were a brutal awakening: their own history had returned to haunt them. (Reid 2003)

Over glasses of steaming spiced tea in an Asmara bar, a middle-aged man put it more positively: 'One good thing about this war, if there is any, is that we are finally talking openly about what is going wrong.'⁴ Indeed, during the

2 Part of this certainly has to do with personal expectations. But in numerous conversations with local and diaspora Eritreans as well as with expatriates it was widely commented that Eritrea had markedly (and not surprisingly) changed after the so-called 'border-war', notably in regard to the general optimism, the loyalty towards the government and the dedication and discipline with which Eritreans had sought to rebuild their country during the inter-war years.

3 And indeed for the relationship of some groups and individuals within the ruling party itself.

4 Field notes summer 2001 (BC).

first half of 2001, cafes and bars were buzzing with political discussion, most of it critical of the government.

Doubtlessly, the events of 2001 have neither been the start nor the end of the emergence and the repression of alternative histories and political dissent in general. Yet, it can be argued that the existence of both has since become more obvious, to foreign observers as well as to the wider Eritrean public in- and outside the country.⁵ While the government's intolerance towards dissenting views had before been masked first by a general 'selective amnesia' and self-censorship and later by a war-imposed need for 'unconditional solidarity', the post-border-war situation for the first time produced an audible and widespread discontent. Criticising the present situation inevitably led to questions touching upon the historically derived legitimacy of the Eritrean leadership, and opened a Pandora's box of interpretations of the past.

This process was much accelerated by the new medium that had helped the diaspora to campaign on behalf of Eritrea during the war: the Internet (Smidt 2001, Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b).⁶ After the country had finally 'gone online' in late 2000, Internet cafes mushroomed in Asmara. Additionally a rising number of largely amateurish private newspapers were springing up. In May 2001 prominent members of the ruling party made use of these new media outlets to utter their concerns about the political developments. In interviews, articles, and a joint open letter, the so-called 'G15'-reformers appealed to President Issayas Afeworki to embark on a process of democratic reforms. In late summer 2001, however, this brief period of hope for an Eritrean *glasnost* was ended by a series of arrests and other repressive measures such as the closure of the budding private press.⁷

5 To diverge from official narratives of the nationalist struggle and its resultant historical obligation to defend its achievements, i.e. independence, was widely viewed as an act of treason during the border war. Both the official Eritrea, but also the majority of the Eritrean population at home and abroad seemed to feel that way. Yet, even prior to the border war years, there had been repeated aberration from the rule of law in Eritrea. These included diverse arrests, abductions and disappearances (for instance of ELF leaders in Eritrea and neighbouring countries), the shooting of protesting war veterans at Mai Habar, the introduction of special courts (allegedly to fight corruption), the arbitrary arrest of a local AFP journalist etc. (see for instance Ai report on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAFR640082002>, downloaded 23/05/03).

6 But also the first serious criticism came from the diaspora. The 'Berlin Manifesto' by the so-called 'G13', a group comprised mostly of diaspora intellectuals, wrote a petition in late 2000 urging the President to revert to democratic procedures and revise his style of governing (see Hepner 2004, Conrad 2005, Dorman 2005).

7 In August 2001 almost the whole student body of Asmara University was rounded up and carted off to Wia - a military camp in the extremely hot eastern lowlands of Eritrea. This measure followed protests against the detention of student leader Semere Kesete who had publicly criticised the practice of compulsory summer work camps for students, and had

A lively public discourse about the past, however, has since been taking place in cyberspace and among Eritreans living abroad.

In this paper I will therefore focus on the diaspora as the main site of negotiating 'official' and 'unofficial' Eritrean national memory.⁸ Here it must be noted that memory in the Eritrean diaspora, as well as in any other diasporic society, has its own dynamics. On the one hand memory is even more important to the creation of individual and collective identity in exile compared to those who never left home. On the other hand, memory in exile tends to be even more 'incomplete', selective and dogmatic. In exile, to remember means to cross time *and* space, and thus connecting oneself not only to the past, but also to a far-away land and far-away people.

With new refugees arriving, the number of diaspora Eritreans in Germany and elsewhere has been climbing rapidly since the end of the war in 2000. Still, the majority of the sizable Eritrean diaspora are refugees from the war of independence (1961-1991) who are divided in their stance vis-à-vis the home regime. Parts of the diaspora have remained loyal government supporters. Others passionately oppose the regime. Along with the basic political polarisation of the once seemingly unified Eritreans went a fragmentation along ethnic, religious and – most importantly – regional fault-lines. This re-emergence of sub-national identities and their political instrumentalisation must be seen in the context of a changing discourse about the past.

Before the year 2001, the *Deutungshegemonie* (hegemony of interpretation) of past events (especially the history of the liberation struggle) has to the most part been with the EPLF/PFDJ.⁹ After a split in the first armed Eritrean resistance movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), two major rivalling organisations emerged: the remnant ELF, initially still the stronger movement, and what was to become the EPLF. After a long and violent conflict between the two movements, the ELF was eventually defeated and disintegrated in the early 1980s. The ELF still had branches in exile countries, but no

demanding reforms both at the University and regarding the general political situation (see for example Mussie/Semere 2004). Obscured by the 9/11 events, a crackdown on the 'G15' dissidents and various journalists followed on 18/19 September 2001. All private newspapers were banned. Fear spread as there were rumours about further arrests of alleged or actual supporters of the 'G15'. Imprisonments without trial, disappearances and arbitrary arrests have since become the order of the day.

8 However, it must be emphasized, that it is not and cannot be the aim of this paper to establish historical truths.

9 Justin Hill, who in the 1990s spent two years teaching at an Eritrean school as a volunteer, recounts a meeting with an *ex-tegadalai* (fighter) wanting to write about his experiences during the struggle. When Hill encourages him, he is told: '... how can you write? If I write then maybe I will write about some secret. No! the [sic!] people at the top should write first, then the rest of us will know about what we can write ... When the government tells us what we are allowed to say, only then we can write' (Justin Hill 2002: 162).

longer operated within Eritrea. As 'lame ducks' with no influence on events at home, the ELF's activities and powers of mobilising other exiles were also severely limited. Soon the remnants of the organisation began to split up into ever smaller units (Schröder 2005) fighting amongst themselves over the shares of a cake that was no longer theirs to share. The EPLF on the other hand had not only won the military struggle, but would also set about realizing their visions of future Eritrea and narrating a victor's version of history.

This 'official' history has recently been challenged by the marginalised and the disgruntled (in exile) who have their own tales to tell and found new local as well as transnational platforms for doing so. An important role is played by Eritrean cyberspace forums (cf. Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b). Websites, mailing lists and online discussion groups provide a new arena for contested memories seeking to de-legitimise or deconstruct the narratives of the current regime. My paper will focus on 'official' and 'alternative' narratives in the diaspora. The sources I draw upon include fieldwork materials collected between 1998 and 2006, published and unpublished academic writing, posting on Eritrean websites, pamphlets, leaflets and publications by Eritrean opposition and civic organisations, human rights reports and personal correspondence with representatives of 'official' and 'unofficial' Eritrea.¹⁰ Before looking at the conditions, the actors, and the means by which the EPLF's powerful narratives have been challenged in recent years, a brief background note is indispensable to outline how the EPLF/PFDJ came to dominate the political discourse both at home and in the diaspora.

Eritrean 'official history' and the exigencies of a nationalist mass movement

Though claims to uniqueness are one of the main tenets on which Eritrean identity and history-making rest, the process of Eritrean nation-building and the fight for statehood, share many features with other nationalist revolutions. There is the need to separate the (national) 'we' from the 'others'; the need for internal unity; the desire to re-form or revolutionise the society – both as a point of departure and a means to forge unity. The very qualities that Eritrean national narratives emphasize as exceptional characteristics, namely one-mindedness and a readiness for self-sacrifice, are in fact vital ingredients of virtually any mass movement (cf. Hoffer 1951). Tampering with the past,

¹⁰ The terms 'official'/'unofficial' Eritrea are used in a similar way by Okbazghi Yohannes in a review of Justin Hill's *Ciao Asmara*, http://news.asmarino.com/Comments/September2002/OkbazghiYohannes_5.asp (25/05/03), and by Sara Rich Dorman (2005) who also talks of an 'official Eritrean narrative' as opposed to 'alternative' ones.

holding out for a better future and in the process constructing one's own myth, is part and parcel of the revolutionary package.

Like any other aspiring national liberation movement, the EPLF sought to rise to this threefold challenge: Firstly to liberate Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation, which involved the need to divorce Eritrean and Ethiopian history (see for instance Reid 2003, Tronvoll 1999, Trivelli 1998, Tronvoll/Tekeste 2000, Triulzi n.d.). Secondly – following the socialist trend of the time – the movement also strove to revolutionize social structures, which again called for a certain interpretation of the country's pre-colonial and colonial past. Finally, both aims could not be fulfilled, so the EPLF's realization, without overcoming internal divisions. Therefore they sought to instill a strong sense of unity among the various Eritrean peoples¹¹ and also between 'the people' as a whole and the liberation front. This task was aided by a sense of isolation. The Lack of support from any international power put significant pressure on the Eritrean national movement and created a feeling of cohesiveness and 'we-ness'. Still, the movement's eventual success in rallying a large section of the population under the banners of Eritrean self-determination and social revolution was no mean feat given political, social, ethnic and religious cleavages.

Conceptualizing the nation as an 'imagined community', (Anderson 1983) and a social construct of colonial creation, made it imperative for the EPLF to create a new national myth that would bind all Eritreans together regardless of cultural differences and past animosities. The key themes of 'Eritrean official history' revolve around issues of unity, solidarity, self-reliance, and readiness to die for the nation. The EPLF as the driving force behind the nation-building project inevitably became an indistinguishable part of this history and as such also generated its own myth.¹² Indeed the history of the Eritrean revolution and the history of the EPLF were until recently not seen as separable: the inevitable collective 'we' in Eritrean (diaspora) narratives (cf. Nolting 2002) is as much an expression of this as is the *hade hizbi, hade libi* (one people, one heart) slogan that again reverberated during the 1998-2000 border war.

Eliding the difference between the 'front' and the people was a major goal (cf. Conrad 2005b), and the widespread popular support for the EPLF was thus taken as given and never scrutinized. It seemed some kind of an imperative for (sympathetic) foreign observers, scholars and journalists to comment on the EPLF's exceptionally good and close relationship with the *gebar* (peasants) and urbanized civilians, both during the struggle and imme-

11 In Eritrea nine ethnic groups are officially recognised as 'nationalities'.

12 For reasons of legitimacy, the EPLF had to both depict itself as a continuation of earlier (pre-)Eritrean nationalist resistance movements and set itself apart from them by emphasizing uniqueness and exceptionalism.

diately after independence. The image of the EPLF as a true 'people's movement', exceptional for its egalitarian treatment of 'the people', became a powerful national myth and eventually legitimized the EPLF's claims to governance after independence. Emphasising the symbiosis between ordinary people and EPLF fighters was also used to set the movement apart from its major rival, the ELF. The ELF is generally vilified as warlord-like 'exploiter' of the people. It is accused by the EPLF as putting the people in jeopardy by irresponsible military adventures which in turn led to Ethiopian revenge on Eritrean villagers. The ELF was further blamed for ethnic divisiveness and weakening the nationalist cause by exploiting religious and clan loyalties. Here it is important to note that the ELF accuses the EPLF of similar military excesses which victimized the civilian population.

To date, however, there are few systematic critical studies available that have looked at both fronts' relationship with the people. An exception is Kjetil Tronvoll's work, *Mai Weini*, which casts a shadow of doubt on the myth of an equal and purely voluntary interaction.¹³ While the EPLF may have had better relations with the non-combatant population than other liberation movements worldwide, it seems naive to suggest that a truly egalitarian relationship could develop between any armed group and civilians who are wedged between 'a rock and hard place'. Similar observations can be made in regard to the ELF-EPLF relationship. With the exception of John Markakis' work (1990) few sober analyses are available on the ELF-EPLF split and the violent conflict that ensued between the two movements. Here too, the official version of the 'goodies' triumphing over 'the baddies' seems a little too simplistic.

Like the people versus front and the ELF versus EPLF relationship, the relations between the rank and file fighters and the EPLF leadership have also been mystified in the 'official narrative'. Similarly life in the *mieda* has been romanticised (cf. Quehl 2002).¹⁴ In many of the official and unofficial accounts the *tegedelti* – freedom fighters – are glorified as tough, heroic, selfless, and completely committed patriots. They are idolized in Eritrean art and folklore as role models for a new Eritrea (Matzke 2002). Narratives by foreigners further helped to perpetuate the idealizing of the EPLF with selective writings and representational images. The EPLF subculture was often depicted as Spartan and yet democratic and egalitarian. Foreign writer's flowery book titles such as 'Against all Odds', 'Never Kneel Down', or 'Even the Stones are Burning' reinforced the EPLF's and its supporters' self-views and were inte-

13 *Mai Weini* (Tronvoll 1998a), an anthropological study on Eritrean highland villagers' lives during times of war and revolution, is the first of its kind that was carried out after the independence war.

14 *Mieda* ('field') refers to the ELF/EPLF controlled areas in Eritrea during the independence war. 'To go to the *mieda*' meant to become a fighter.

grated into the national narrative. Some of them are still used and reproduced, for instance, in essays on the Internet and official government websites and publications. Such writings served to underpin and give legitimacy to the national myth.¹⁵

The creation of an Eritrean exceptionalism clearly dovetailed with the EPLF's self-perception as a unique movement. Unity of the nation was preceded by unity in the field. In fact, the EPLF is on record as stating that the Eritrean field cannot accommodate more than one front or party. But the official national narrative of homogeneity seems unrealistic in the context of an armed struggle, and as we shall see is indeed one of the issues that is contested by the emerging alternative narratives. Here it must be pointed out that creating a nationalist myth is not specific to the EPLF.¹⁶ The EPLF did nothing that other mass movements have not already done. Neither is the shattering or the deconstruction of such myths limited to the Eritrean case. But how was its national myth created? How did it become powerful and sustainable – especially among the diaspora communities? And lastly, why and how and by whom is it being challenged today?

Diasporic nationalist narratives: Collective memory and collective amnesia

'Do you like our music?' With his gaunt looks and Afro-hairdo the man standing next to me almost looks like a *tegadalai* coming straight out of the historical photos mounted on huge boards behind us. We start talking over the sounds filling the festival hall. He is curious about my being here: 'You have an Eritrean boyfriend?' he asks. I explain about my research, but my lack of personal connections to Eritreans spurs him into giving me an ad hoc tutorial on Eritrean history: 'We were colonized by the Italians, the British, and then the Ethiopians. [...] We fought for our independence for 30 years, all alone. We were forgotten by the world, but we helped each other as good as we could. [...] It didn't matter if you were Muslim or Christian...' My Eri-

15 For the use of these phrases on Eritrean websites see for example: <http://www.shaebia.org/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=8&num=2475&printer=1> ('Once again, Against all odds: We will never kneel Down!'); <http://www.shaebia.org/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi?archive=4&num=638> ('Eritreans never kneel down'); or http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai_news_archive/jun-jul02/0128.html (all downloaded 11/05/06). In hindsight it is hard to tell where the titles/phrases originate. Were they coined by the foreign authors and adopted by the movement? Were they slogans, phrases or interview scraps the writers had picked up in 'the field'? Most likely it happened both ways.

16 More detailed analyses of the EPLF/PFDJ's national narrative can be found in Tronvoll 1998a/b, Garzetti 1999, Reid 2001/2005, Makki 2002, Quehl 2002, Dorman 2005, Woldemikael 2005, Ofuho n.d.

trean 'tutor' finally concludes by saying: 'You should get an Eritrean boy-friend so that he could tell you all about our country...'¹⁷

The above 'lecture' was given to me at the Eritrea Festival 2000 in Frankfurt. It was neither the first nor the last of its kind I heard on that day, or indeed during the entire research. And almost invariably, my attempts at signalling that I already have some idea about the liberation war from my reading of many books, were dismissed impatiently. At the Eritrea Festival 2000, official narratives emphasizing unity of the front (now government) and the people, the nation's uniqueness, and the lonely fight 'against all odds' were still echoed vigorously by the diasporic communities. The 'we'-perspective of the narrators, the remarkable uniformity of their accounts (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001, Nolting 2002), the value of 'told' history over 'written' history (cf. Conrad 2005), all hints at how the 'official' Eritrean memory of revolution was produced and reproduced.

I have argued elsewhere that, next to the fighters, the diaspora was probably most indoctrinated by the EPLF's nation-building ideology prior to independence (Conrad 2005). Many exiled Eritreans would have been quite unable to tell any coherent 'Eritrean history' when they arrived in Germany in the 1970s or 1980s. The EPLF's cadres abroad organised the – often uprooted and alienated – refugees and provided them with a role, a sense of identity, and a link to the EPLF's struggle at home. This was an opportunity for the exiles to overcome feelings of powerlessness and 'survivor's guilt', and to develop a sense of belonging to 'home away from home'. Political seminars, speeches by EPLF representatives from the *mieda*, books used for language and history classes (attended by both adults and children), films, slogans, banners and magazines, all repeated the official line over and over again (see Bakker 1999:6).¹⁸ That way personal and individual memories were gradually subordinated and overwritten by a collective memory that contributed to creating an even stronger sense of solidarity. Revolutionary songs and other forms of popular culture served as further sites for the creation of an imagined Eritrean identity.¹⁹ And even after independence, music, cultural

17 Field notes Eritrea Festival Frankfurt, July 2000.

18 The textbooks designed to teach diaspora children their mother tongue, Eritrean history and culture have been and remain means of inculcating Eritreans abroad with the EPLF/PFDJ's national narrative. Even during the struggle great pains were taken to ensure that for instance no ELF published language books were used for Tigrinya lessons organised by the EPLF affiliated organisations abroad – even when teaching materials were scarce (interview with former EPLF cadre, April 2003).

19 Bisrat and Senen write: 'Expressing nationalistic sentiments through dance and music was not new ... During the British administration and Ethiopian rule, revolutionary songs were effective ways of communicating politics and expressing nationalistic feelings ...

performances of all kinds, and festivals continued to be important sites of memory. This practise has not waned even with the second generation of Eritreans whose memory is only 'second hand' (see Conrad 2006a). A quote by the Eritrean youth group *Beles* commenting on a performance of Eritrean dances at a multicultural festival in Germany illustrates this point:

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

Even the names given to children born during the struggle served to keep these memories alive, but also expressed hope for a brighter future. Names like 'Sawra' (revolution), 'Tsinat' (endurance), 'Selam' (peace), 'Harnet' (liberation), or 'Awet' (victory) etc. are very common. Bars, shops, websites, and social organisations, musical bands in Eritrea as well as in the diaspora bear names referring to places and events that are of significance in Eritrean history providing a continuity and a reminder of the past and its legacy. Within the diaspora there is a sense of Eritrea that seems to be frozen in time. Having left home at various points during the struggle, large parts of the exile community remained oblivious to the changes in the homeland that occurred in their absence. They chose to hang on to the official memory as presented to them by the cadres of the EPLF. Of course this backfired later, when after independence the exiles began to visit Eritrea and learned that the official account was in many cases very different from postwar Eritrean reality (Conrad 2006a).

When I started my research during the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, exiled Eritreans were haunted by the memories of the independence struggle. They began to relive their own past as they worried about their family members at home and the risk to the achievements of the 30 years liberation war, including the maintenance of the country's independence itself. Once again, these fears galvanised the Eritrean public to rekindle the solidarity and the spirit of sacrifice that had characterized the exile communities prior to 1991. An almost nostalgic memory of the independence struggle reverberated once again and expressed itself in considerable financial contribution and lobbying activities (Bernal 2006, Conrad 2006b).

In general, however, 'memories' had become more institutionalized, formalised and ritualized after independence. On an official level, memories of the liberation war were used for post-war state- and nation-building (cf. Makki 1996). They materialized for example in flags, coats of arms, images on

(1996: 6). For an excellent account on Eritrea's art scene and the nexus between arts and the memory of revolution, see Matzke's 'Comrades in Arts and Arms' (2002).

stamps, a national anthem, the introduction of national holidays (commemorating landmark events of the revolution), and a new currency named *Nakfa* after the EPLF's base area that was never conquered by Ethiopia. Symbols for the struggle, like the *shidda* (plastic sandals worn by the EPLF fighters), were turned into public memorials and objects of decoration in Eritrean offices, cafes and private homes. The Tigrinya socialist slogan *awet n'hafash* (victory to the masses) is now an implicitly required chant expressing solidarity with the Eritrean government. After any official letter, it is customary to write it along with the signature. Habitually omitting this phrase may even be considered a political statement (field notes, summer 2005, BC). In the diaspora too, the slogan is used to state one's loyalty to the regime, as many Internet postings illustrate (see for instance contributions on Shaebia.org, Shabait.com, or Dehai.org). All these contribute to the invention or making of a new national tradition (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983; for Eritrea cf. Tekle 2005) that has become an ever-present reminder of the past in Eritrean public life at home and abroad. But a ritualisation (and even commercialization) of memory is also evident at a private and semi-official level.²⁰ As a second generation German-Eritrean recounted to me:

When saying grace before dinner, my mother would always add 'may we soon return home to Eritrea.' She kept saying this even after independence when it was clear that we wouldn't return any time soon. But then, it only seemed like an empty ritual to me (field notes 2002).

Similarly, every (semi-)official meeting is either commenced and/or concluded by a minute's silence for the 'martyrs'. The relevance of 'martyrdom' in Eritrean collective memory deserves a special mentioning. While some observers still claim that the EPLF/PFDJ has had no 'martyr' or leadership cult (e.g. Radtke 2005: 10), I would maintain the opposite. The absence of photographs of 'martyred' fighters and soldiers, or other overt forms of personalised 'cults' in Eritrea obscures the central meaning of 'martyrdom' in people's memory. The memory of the 'martyrs' and the 'ultimate sacrifice' they paid is skillfully used by the regime to lend it legitimacy and rationalize the maintenance of power. In fact, the very absence of celebrations or mourning individual heroes makes the Eritrean variation of a 'martyrs cult'

²⁰ Eritrean homes, community centres, bars and restaurants are usually decorated with a range of nationalist paraphernalia. Maps and flags of the country in all shapes and sizes, posters showing heroic images of Eritrean *tegedelti* are highly popular as are nationalist slogans on t-shirts, Eritrea screen savers and handy logos, Eritrea necklaces, rings and other knick-knacks. Eritrean music, literature and film productions (unless dealing with matters of the heart) are also still dominated by themes relating to the struggle (personal communication with C. Matzke). Hill writes: 'I'd seen a couple of books by Eritrean writers: they had garish covers and showed lovers or soldiers or both' (2002: 162).

very powerful.²¹ The Eritrean scholar, Tekle Woldemikael, writes on the invention of new national traditions in Eritrea:

The 1991 Martyrs' Day memorial celebration helped to bond the civilian population to the emerging nation by focusing on the loss of their loved ones. ... During the long war, many families never heard from family members and friends who joined the nationalist fronts ... [By not disclosing] causalities ... [t]he front was able to continue to fascinate the imagination of the public ... by the myth of its invincibility and the 'martyrdom' of its fighters, *who by remaining unidentified, thus belonged to the nation and not to their families* ... (Woldemikael 1999: 254, emphasis BC).

Martyrs Day, the 20th of June, is also celebrated in the diaspora. In Frankfurt (as in Eritrea) trees are planted and candles burned to commemorate the dead. Similar gatherings are held in virtually every German town with an Eritrean community. In a small park in Nuremberg there is even a memorial dedicated to the 'martyrs' of the Eritrean revolution. It consists of a plaque, mounted on a low brick pedestal, and a tree behind it. A stylized olive wreath is engraved on the plaque and below it an inscription in German and Tigrinya reads:

This tree was planted in memory of the people who gave their lives for Eritrea's independence. We will never forget them - The Eritreans living in Nuremberg (transl. BC).

Interestingly, the commemoration of the killed Eritrean fighters and soldiers as 'martyrs' is one of the few aspects that is rarely, if ever, challenged by any group, no matter where their political allegiances and loyalties lie.²² When an opposition website gained access to an Eritrean government database and published the names of Eritrean fighters/soldiers who died during the 1998-

21 One example is the concept of *warsay*, literally meaning 'my heritage' or 'heir'. It is also the term used for the post-independence recruits into the new Eritrean army. In diaspora it has been adopted by youth groups e.g. in the US, Germany, and Sweden. Calling a diaspora organisation *Warsay* signifies both, continuity with the past and integration into the Eritrean nation at present. Claiming your *warsa* or heritage also means to take on a twofold 'sacred' duty, first, towards the bestowers of this heritage (the EPLF, including the war dead or 'martyrs') and second, to the 'real' *warsot* (peers in Eritrea bearing the brunt of defending the nation). The legacy of the independence struggle, the solidarity with the *warsot* at home and the fight for a better future are thus inextricably interwoven with loyalty to the EPLF/present Eritrean government as the winner, guardian and embodiment of Eritrean independence (cf. Conrad 2005).

22 The former ELF(-RC) members, however, celebrate their Martyrs' Day on 1st December, claiming that the 20 June, the official Martyrs Day of the State of Eritrea, is not an occasion commemorating all martyrs (see http://www.nharnet.com/archives/arch_2004/Dec_2004/NharnetTeam_dec01.htm, last accessed: 14/04/2006).

2000 border war and thereafter, there was an almost unanimous uproar in all political camps.

Much of the above relates examples of how Eritrean collective memory has been produced and kept alive in the diaspora. But as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, national memory is part remembering and part forgetting. What is increasingly contested within different factions in the diaspora is therefore not only whether events are remembered and narrated correctly or not, but also what has been 'forgotten', erased, repressed or made taboo. Most of the contested issues ultimately challenge not only 'the past', but in doing so question either the national myth of unity or the legitimacy of those in power in Eritrea. Especially in the anonymous realm of the Internet, the EPLF's dealing with internal dissent, its coercive practices, its lack of internal democracy and transparency, or the integrity of leadership figures have become much debated issues. And even former taboo topics, including the question of religious, ethnic and regional identities and hostilities, which often overlap with political fault-lines, are now discussed.²³

The (re-)emergence of alternative diasporic narratives

'Hade hizbi – hade libi! – One people – one heart!' Red hearts flicker in between the English and Tigrinya versions of the slogan that runs endlessly through a digital display. At intervals there is a stop to flash the message at the crowd below. A few thousand Eritreans have gathered in Frankfurt's Eisssporthalle to celebrate the Festival Eritrea 2001, the annual highlight for the majority of Germany's diaspora Eritreans. This year, however, is even more special. It is the first festival after the end of the border-war and also commemorates the 10th anniversary of Eritrean liberation.²⁴

But 2001 counted not only the 10th anniversary of liberation, it also marked the 20th year of the EPLF's decisive military victory over the rival Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), making the former the sole movement for Eritrean independence within Eritrea. No official reference to that was made at the Festival. In official EPLF narrative the ELF rarely is mentioned. Yet the exiled remnants of the ELF would hold their own 'Jebha' festival only a few weeks later in the

23 In Eritrea proper one major attempt at erasing regional identities, i.e. loyalty to one's region (*awraja*) and the village (*adi*) has been the restructuring of administrative units. Regional boundaries were redrawn to form *zobas* which often cut across organisational units of old and have been designed to diffuse regional loyalties and identities that might compete with national ones. Ironically, this widely resented step seems to contribute to a growing disengagement from the national project and instead reinforces deep-seated local and regional affiliations (cf. Tronvoll 1998a,1998b).

24 Author's field notes, 7th July 2001.

nearby town of Kassel.²⁵ A consequence of the internecine violence and civil war in Eritrea is the existence of several mutually hostile Eritrean liberation movements. This 'unpleasant aspect of the past' is preferably buried and dealt with by not dealing with it at all, by dumping it into the 'memory hole'.

Most visitors of the 2001 Frankfurt Festival still clung faithfully to the 'official' sanitized version of the past. Not doing so would subject one to a revision of personal values, choice of friends, and life goals as individual and collective narrative are intimately linked. For others, however, 2001 marked the turning point that led from 'true believerdom' (Hoffer 1951) to doubt, and, sometimes, to outright criticism. Questions about the diplomatic as well as the military handling of the 1998-2001 border war had precipitated political dissent among some sections of Eritrean society at home and abroad. In the following, a cursory overview of the various alternative memories and historical revisions that have (re-)emerged is in order. Also, the closure of what spaces existed in the Eritrean public sphere by the regime has given rise to the creation of new spaces and platforms in diasporic and transnational settings. In this regard the Internet and radio have become preferred tools.

As outlined above, the increasing contestation over the interpretation of the past has its origin in the present deplorable state of affairs in Eritrea. In particular after the border war it was widely felt that the PFDJ government was not living up to its promises. Ten years after independence, there were still the same people in power, no national elections had been held, the constitution had not been implemented, the party was holding a tight grip on the ailing economy and the military was gaining influence in ever wider sections of society and administration. Non-fighters were feeling disadvantaged and marginalized *vis-à-vis* ex-fighters. Justifiably or unjustifiably the belief that Christian Tigrinya held the majority of powerful positions in the state is widespread among the Muslims of Eritrea. Amongst the Tigrinya themselves there were rumours that the real power is concentrated in the hands of people hailing from a particular highland region. Additionally, the increasingly open disregard for human rights has alienated even many of those that had only a few years ago been staunch supporters of the regime.

The widespread discontent has intensified in the last five years and brought latent and suppressed opposition to the regime to the fore. All the narratives of unity, egalitarianism, democracy and justice seem to be nothing

25 Other than Martyrs Day, Eritrea festivals are more contested events. The Frankfurt festival is not only seen and understood as a local continuation of the discontinued EPLF Bologna Festival, but is actually co-organised by the Eritrean Embassy/Consulate and the umbrella organisation of Eritrean communities loyal to the current regime. Typically a high-ranking member of the Eritrean government will be there to deliver a speech and to try to mobilize supporters. Accordingly the event is dubbed *Shaebia* (the people) or *Higedef* (acronym for PFDJ) Festival in contrast to the ELF or *Jebha* (arab.: front) Festival in Kassel.

but an empty *façade* erected to deceive the 'gullible masses'. With the old narrative losing its credibility, new interpretations of past events are sought, even if that means a painful re-evaluation of individual values and choices: 'A few years ago I would have told you a different story', a former EPLF member said to me after finishing his own revised version of the Eritrean revolution, in which the EPLF had lost most of its heroic attributes.²⁶ I have heard this line, and similar reinterpretations, many more times since. Others claim to have known it all along, notably the EPLF's old adversaries from the ELF. In the absence of 'home-grown' opposition parties, they were the only organised group with an alternative Eritrean collective memory that had always been in opposition to the EPLF's representation of Eritrean history. Long pushed aside by the EPLF and its supporters, ELF members who have been assigned the role of losers, traitors and villains, are beginning to see their chance for a comeback and the day of reckoning with the EPLF leadership.

However, the ELF members are not the only ones opposing the regime these days. In fact, dissenters from inside the former EPLF itself have begun to voice doubt, especially after the arrest of the 'G15': 'It was not that we all did not see what was happening', a former EPLF community cadre said, 'but we kept silent, because the EPLF was doing a good job in liberating the country, so we thought that's the price we have to pay ...' (Interview 2003, BC). What is alluded to here is a couple of rather ignoble events, such as the execution of dissenters within the front (e.g. the so-called *menka'a* crisis - after a clandestine group within the EPLF eliminated during the early to mid-1970s for accusing the leadership of undemocratic behaviour). Among the mushrooming opposition groups are former EPLF leaders organised around the EDP (Eritrean Democratic Party). One of the leaders of the EPD, Mesfin Hagos, is a founding member of the EPLF who had distinguished himself as a military strategist. A member of the 'G15', he escaped arrest only because he was abroad for medical treatment in September 2001. Like him, a number of formerly high-ranking officials have sought asylum abroad where some of them engage in exile opposition politics. They have been joined by disenchanted EPLF supporters in the diaspora, by hitherto unaffiliated exiles, and by a growing number of young Eritrean asylum seekers who for the larger part fled the *de facto* open-ended military service.

Apart from the numerous political opposition parties (Schröder 2004, Aklilu 2005), several human and civic rights groups have emerged within the last five years. Even though they are mainly focussed on rights abuses going on in Eritrea, many of them also formulate the aim of creating a new political civic culture critical of the EPLF/PFDJ's lack of participatory structures. In pointing out the lack of regards for human rights today they also attack the

26 Interview BC, April 2003.

EPLF's claim for moral superiority during the revolutionary years, and even the very notion of the liberation struggle as a 'just' war. In an e-mail communication in early 2006, an Eritrean human rights activist suggested that there is indeed a causal relationship between past and present rights abuses:

The history of the Eritrean struggle is replete with incidents of gross human rights violation. The experience and history of the two major liberation fronts – ELF and EPLF – as well as the rivalry between the two has contributed a lot to the current sad situation of human rights in Eritrea.

Newly formed civic organisations, political parties, and individuals use various media including virtual forums, such as the popular websites 'Asmarino.com' and 'Awate.com', which provide platforms to promote, discuss and substantiate their claims. In particular human rights oriented websites have made public eyewitness accounts and testimonials of present regime wrongs and violations (see emhdr.org). Here too, links are constructed for instance between events such as the assassination of the *menka'a* leaders in the 1970s, the shooting of protesting disabled ex-fighters in Mai Habar in the 1990s, and the more recent loss of lives in the military, both during the 1999-2000 border war and as a consequence of forcible recruitment and abuses within the Eritrean Defence Forces. Asmarino.com recently created an online memorial for the victims of a shooting that occurred when potential recruits who had been rounded up by the Eritrean military tried to break out of a prison in Adi Abieto near Asmara. The Awate.com 'martyrs'-database, which provides details about killed Eritrean soldiers since 1998, certainly serves a similar purpose.²⁷

Political websites of the ELF and its splinter parties (such as 'Nhar-net.com' or 'Meskerem.net') have also started to publicize their own counter-narratives to the official version of history. Online obituaries, essays, biographies, memoirs and educational pieces about events and dates bring back personal and collective memories that no one wanted to hear about until recently. Nhar-net's 'Dates in Eritrean History'-section devotes much space to historical topics that recount Eritrean history from the ELF's perspective: 'How Veterans Told the Story of the First 10 Years of the ELA [Eritrean Liberation Army; the armed wing of the ELF – B.C.]', 'From the Experiences of the ELA', or 'Recollections of a Prisoner'. As the webmasters of Nhar-net.com state:

'This Day in History' is a column that will present selected editorials about important dates and events in the Eritrean historical struggle for independ-

²⁷ <http://hawelti-adiabeyto.asmarino.com> and <http://www.awate.com/martyralbum>; last accessed 08/09/2006.

ence ... [It] will present any important ... date regardless [of] which organization is responsible for the event. However, we are bound to focus on events carried [out] by ELF since most of the heroic events have been banned from being told by the EPDJ [sic! - PFDJ]. We would like the Eritrean Youth to know about all the heroic sacrifices paid for by our martyrs. ... We want them to feel the sense of historical responsibility to be able to accept the handling of our future Eritrea. ... and invite them to the full participation in the current political affairs of our nation and start to shoulder the responsibility of shaping the political future of our nation.²⁸

Moreover, essays such as 'Remembering another Martyr' (on Nharnet.com), or lengthy obituaries – as could be found on many websites after the death of ELF-RC chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael – pay tribute to individuals, seek to restore the ELF-fighters' honour and question history as constructed by the victor. Publishing these counter-histories is not only aimed at 'setting the record straight,' but also at delegitimizing the current regime. Moreover, articles like 'The birth of despotism' published on Awate.com, or the discussion of the controversial *Nhnan Elamanan* – an EPLF manifesto allegedly authored by Issayas Afeworki – explicitly serve to trace the origins of present ills to past wrongs.²⁹

Self-declared cyber-representatives of ethnic minorities like the Kunama, the Jiberti and the Bilen also refuse to subordinate their particularist memories to the official narrative that emphasises the nation (e.g. Farajat.com – 'the voice of the denied' – a Jiberti website, or Eritrean-kunama.com). What has re-emerged in this context are 'ethnic' memories that construct or unearth a history of oppression of an ethnic group within the Eritrean context, or at least reclaim their rights to remember Eritrean history from a distinct Kunama, Jiberti, Bilen etc. perspective. The magazine of the Eritrean People's Party (EPP) – an off-shot of the EDP with a particular interest in the issue of 'nationalities' (Schröder 2005: 40) – celebrates the Internet for having 'greatly empowered ... otherwise helpless ethno-cultural minorities to dictate the pressing issues that government and opposition ... have to deal with.'³⁰

Looking at the above examples, one can argue that a history from below is in the making. Yet, as Sara Dorman writes (2005: 218) it is important to note that most of these counter-narratives that are re-emerging from obscurity are not strictly speaking stories of the oppressed, but can be seen as alternative 'elite' narratives. Regarding the 'ordinary' Eritreans in the diaspora it is

28 See <http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/TodayInHistory.htm>, last accessed: 14/06/2006.

29 See http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/printer_2844.shtml, and http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/printer_3002.shtml respectively; last accessed: 14/06/2006.

30 The People's Voice, No. 2, April 4, 2005: 5.

difficult to evaluate how many have reviewed their memories one way or the other. The majority are silent and choose not to make their opinions public for fear of incriminating relatives at home, missing out on the chances of buying property, or doing business in Eritrea. This state of affairs was even more accentuated during the years 1998-2000. Deviations from the official history were often interpreted as 'indirect commentaries on the present' (Makki 2002: 202), making the past a dangerous terrain indeed.

However, more subversive attempts at de-mystifying the independence struggle and its leadership-turned-Eritrean-government are on the increase. Jokes and other forms of ridicule, indicate that a general 'change of heart' has taken place.³¹ This suspicion also seems to be verified for instance by the dwindling numbers of festival-goers since 2001. And those who do come mainly do so to meet friends and enjoy the entertainment part, avoiding the inevitable speeches made by local cadres and flown-in Eritrean government officials.

Memories of individual Eritreans or history-writing by outsiders can also produce harsh reactions by the regime in Asmara and within some sections of the diaspora. Two recent examples are books written by a young German Eritrean woman (Mehari 2004) and a Financial Times reporter (Wrong 2005). Senait Mehari's autobiography, designed to appeal to the tastes of Western audiences with an appetite for 'tragic African women's fates', tells about her life as a child soldier with the ELF and about parental abuse and neglect. Surprisingly this not only outraged former ELF members and affiliates (some of which are now trying to sue her for slander), but also earned her the wrath of government supporters who interpreted her tale as an attempt to desecrate the memory of the 'martyrs' in general and depict Eritrea in a negative light. Michela Wrong's recent book has also been the subject of much criticism, not only from the Eritrean government supporters (who think that she narrated Eritrean history wrongly) but also from the ranks of the opposition (who felt she omitted their version of history) even as she earned glowing reviews from the international press. These incidents illustrate that in the recent cyber-war over the nation's memory the lines are maybe not as clear-cut as it seems. They also show that certain issues cannot be discussed soberly. This is especially so if they touch upon wrongs committed by the liberation fronts during

31 One rather more 'harmless example' of the deconstruction of Eritrean national myths by ridicule: While an Eritrean embassy employee states that (thanks to the Eritrean revolution) full gender equality has been achieved in Eritrea (http://www.aviva-berlin.de/aviva/content_Women%20+%20Work.php?id=3289/), an Eritrean cartoonist publishes a caricature (on http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_3142.shtml) showing female Eritrean recruits serving on a male military officer in celebration of Eritrean Women's Day. (For a scholarly discussion of the situation of Eritrean woman in post-independence Eritrea see for instance Bernal, 2000.) Websites last accessed on 28/06/06.

the war of independence. As an Eritrean colleague commented, it is possible to discuss the 1940s or 1950s without much dissent, but the period of the armed struggle from 1961-1991 still cannot be discussed without a great deal of emotion and controversy.

Reconciling memories, building the future: Some concluding remarks

At present the past remains a contested matter in the Eritrean diaspora and seeking to reconcile the various memories would require some more discussion between the various camps. Most of the parties involved use the Internet or other platforms mainly to monologize. The question is also whether diaspora forums, be they real-life or online, can really create a sort of transnational public space as maintained by some authors (Hepner 2004, Bernal 2006). This seems to be increasingly the case within the worldwide diaspora, but up to now most Eritreans at home are excluded. The government for the most part shows indifference and ignores the diaspora debates. It hardly engages with anyone having different views, be they Eritreans or foreigners. If the existence of critics is acknowledged at all, the official reactions are limited to denouncing them. There is no grey area in Eritrean political discourse: The government attitude is, if you are not with us, then you can only be against us.

Conversely, Eritrean human rights and civic groups (e.g. the Eritrean Antimilitarist Initiative in Germany, and the South Africa-based Eritrean Movement for Human and Democratic Rights) have begun to think about the value of establishing a Truth Commission or some other kind of closure mechanism. But again, the success of such an endeavour would need the participation of all, the government and those who challenge the government's views - a scenario that seems not likely in the near future. Parts of the opposition camp are unwilling to acknowledge the EPLF/PFDJ's share in the national project and see no room for any kind of reconciliation. And the PFDJ government is still in denial. It holds on to the past as its sole source of legitimacy, and further uses the still unresolved border issue to label any form of dissent as 'treason'. Even if some obvious ills are occasionally admitted, the Eritrean President always resorts to the memory of the armed struggle.³² All

32 In the face of thousands of educated young Eritreans fleeing the country and the harsh, open-ended military service, President Afeworki has repeatedly chided the present generation as a 'Coca-Cola-generation'. The implication is that this generation is unpatriotic and spoiled and untested by fire unlike the Yikealo (ex-fighter) generation.

problems, he maintains, could be resolved if the spirit of the revolution could be invoked and remembered.³³ The Eritrean historian Fouad Makki notes:

... the history on offer [in post-independence Eritrea] has generally been of the 'golden age' variety. The predominant tone, both of the so-called 'reformers' and the PFDJ Government, is to identify the earlier history of the EPLF as a 'golden age' of solidarity, sacrifice and participatory politics. ... [T]he only way to avoid attempts to nostalgically perpetuate this past is to understand it. *In this respect, the door to the future can only be unlocked by the past* (Makki 2002: 202; emphasis BC).

Since Makki's comment was written, diasporic and academic discourses on the past - both real and virtual - have begun to challenge the Eritrean regime's claim to be the owner of the nation's history. And by deconstructing official, and reconstructing alternative history these discourses might at some stage become instrumental to 'unlocking the door to the future', as Makki put it. At present, however, the passage leading to that door remains blocked and jealously guarded by the very real, physical power that continues to lie in the hands of the regime. At least in Eritrea proper the party-state's *de facto* military and political hegemony secures its claims to ownership not only of the past, but also of the foreseeable future, as if to verify the introductory Orwellian quote: 'Who controls the present, controls the past.' And: 'Who controls the past, controls the future.'

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³³ Much the same goes for the remnants of the old ELF.

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Bettina Conrad is currently completing a PhD thesis on the Eritrean Diaspora at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Hamburg. After graduating from Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham, she became interested in the Horn of Africa. Her research focuses on issues of (trans)nationalism, (cyber)diaspora, ethnicity, migration and human rights. In 2005 she co-edited a special 'diaspora' issue of the *Eritrean Studies Review*.