Running on Hope - Life as an Eritrean Refugee:
An Ethnographic Study of Eritrean Refugees in Mekelle

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I dedicate this thesis to a hope – a hope, in which we may all engage, that we transcend our fears and share this world.

“Why don’t the boats that are saving the people in the water pick them up in Libya instead; instead of waiting until they are in the water. They know they are planning to go on the boats”- An Eritrean refugee.
Abstract

This thesis gives an account of some Eritrean refugees’ lives in Mekelle and their engagement with the future. My informants belonged to the Tigrinya-speaking group that straddle the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. They were temporarily stuck in Ethiopia but most envisioned migrating further, to a place where they could picture a future. As a result, this thesis is both local and global in scope. I investigate how Eritrean refugees navigate the complex two-sided ambivalence in the relationship between themselves and the locals in Mekelle, through theoretical frameworks of borders, boundaries, reconciliation and social networks. I argue that the way my informants navigate the ambiguous relationship between themselves and the locals is best explained within a “dividual” and processual understanding of identity and the self. I interpret the contradictions as resulting from the contextual nature of identity and self. I also put the Eritrean refugees’ search for a more fulfilling relationship with the world into a global context through an investigation of the politics of hope, migratory aspirations, and faith in God. I argue that the conflation of “culture”, “people” and “place”, on which the international migration policies are based, is highly problematic. It influences the politics of hope and excludes individuals, who hope and aspire for a meaningful future and relationship to the world, from being part of “the wider world”.

Keywords: Borders, Boundaries, Migration, Social networks, Reconciliation, Hope, Resistance, Future
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Any shortcomings in my thesis are, however, my responsibility alone.
Note on transliteration

In this thesis I follow The Stephen Wright System for transliteration of the Ga’ǝz Script. This system “has become the basis for any future discussions on the transliteration of Ethio-Semitic languages” (Pankhurst, 2012, p. 133).
**Glossary and Abbreviations:**

ARRA: Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs

EPLF: Eritrean People’s Liberation Front

TPLF: Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front

OCP: Out-of-Camp Policy

Ferenji: White European foreigner

Tigray: Region in Ethiopia

Tigayans: Ethnic group in Ethiopia

Tigrinya: Language spoken by ethnic group in Ethiopia and Eritrea

Tigrinyans: Ethnic group that speak Tigrinya in Eritrea

Habesha: Orthodox Christian Highlander people and culture
Figure 1: Map of Ethiopia (Nations Online Project)
Figure 2: The city of Mekelle I

Figure 3: The city of Mekelle II
Prologue: Eritrean refugees’ pursuit for a more fulfilling relationship with the world

On a sunny spring day in 2017, I gazed across the crowd of people enjoying a party for the refugees at an asylum center in Norway, organized by Save the Children. Suddenly, a known face appeared in the crowd…

Why this fieldwork?

The year before I embarked on my fieldwork, I volunteered at an asylum center in Oslo. As a volunteer of Save the Children, the work consisted of playing with the children who were temporarily living at this center. This experience awoke in me an anthropological and personal interest in refugees and their lives. Mulu, my Ethiopian boyfriend, was writing his master’s thesis in Oslo at the time, and afterwards had resumed his position as a lecturer at the University of Mekelle. Therefore, at the time of choosing where to do my fieldwork, I had on the one hand an interest in studying the life experiences of refugees and, on the other, a personal interest in living with Mulu again. These two interests came together, and formed a field, when I came across a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council about Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopian cities, one of which was Mekelle.

Eritrean Refugees in Mekelle and in the World

The storyline of this dissertation is about some Eritrean refugees’ pursuit for “a more fulfilling relationship with the world” (Jackson, 2013, p. 3), and how they navigate the challenges on that journey, trying to avoid “social death” (Jackson 2013, p. 6). By bringing to life the individual experiences of my informants, I argue that they are more than numbers, or simply “refugees”. Each individual has an intriguing “story” (Arendt, 1958, p. 97), worthy of a meaningful life. In chapter 2 to 5, I discuss some challenges encountered, and strategies employed by the refugees, in Mekelle. I analyze the two-sided relational ambivalence the Eritrean refugees need to navigate while living in Mekelle, through the theoretical lenses of borders, boundaries, reconciliation and social networks. Historical links, cultural similarities, familiar bonds and friendships on the one hand, characterize the relationship between the refugees and the host community. On the other hand, historical and recent conflicts and war have resulted in enemy images and mistrust. While the first chapters deal with the local context of Mekelle, chapter 6 and 7, are global in scope. They deal with migratory aspirations and enactment of further migration; in the sense of: “hope as engagement with the future” (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 373) in a global context characterized by unequal distribution of mobility and hope.
My argument is, like the structure of the thesis, twofold. Firstly, I argue that the way my informants navigate the ambiguous relationship between themselves and the locals is best explained within a “dividual” (Marionett, 1976, Strathern, 1988) and processual understanding of identity and the self. I interpret the contradictions as resulting from the contextual nature of identity and self. Second, in line with scholars such as Gupta & Ferguson (1992) and Malkki (1995), I argue that the conflation of “culture”, “people” and “place”, on which the international migration policies are based, is highly problematic. It influences the politics of hope and excludes individuals, who hope and aspire for a meaningful future and relationship to the world, from being part of “the wider world”.

_Eritreans and Ethiopians_

There exist numerous groups, who speak different languages and have different cultural characteristics, in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. In this thesis, I focus on Tigrinya speakers, the largest number and community in power in Eritrea. I explore their relationship with, in particular, the Tigrayans, a political dominant group in Ethiopia, but not that large in number. Students did, however, come from all over Ethiopia. Having said that, the Eritreans termed themselves as Eritreans, and they, along with the Tigrayans themselves, interchangeably termed the locals Tigrayans and Ethiopians. Hence, the terms Ethiopian and Tigrayan appear as such in this thesis. Further, when I say Eritrean, I mean highlander Eritreans, as my informants were such. At times, some would call themselves *habesha*, meaning Christian Orthodox highland people and culture, which includes the Amharic speaking ethnic group called Amhara.

_Forced migration, refugees and migrants in academia and policies_

Liisa H Malkki sees the refugee category as a result of the “national order of things”. That is, the status of nations functions as a “categorical order”, which influences “the essentialization, aestheticization, policing, and historical transformation of our social and political identities” (Malkki, 1995, pp. 5-6). Hence, refugees become liminal, problematic and excluded from the “categorical order”. Nevertheless, they are created and further made meaningful by it (pp. 6-8). She suggests that the processes studied by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* correspond quite neatly to the danger or pollution that “refugeeness” poses to the categorical order of nation-states. The threat of the refugee to weaken national boundaries and to “national security” is recurrently asserted in the discourse of refugee policy (1995, p. 7). Drawing on inspiration from Hanah Arendt’s work, Malkki points out “[…] the sedentarist bias in dominant modes of imagining homes and homelands, identities and nationalities” (Malkki, 1995, pp. 15-16). Both
territorializing metaphors of identity such as trees, roots, seeds, and liquid metaphors for the uprooted express such “modes of imagining” (pp. 15-16).

Some have noted, in the context of contemporary Eritrean refugees, that the conceptual distinction between migrants and refugees is highly blurred (Bariagaber, 2013, Belloni, 2015, pp. 1-11). Absence of war-related violence to flee from, and better access to information (the modern means of communication as a result of globalization), give the refugees more time and information to think through the various pro and cons of exile (Bariagaber, 2013, p. 15). The complex bundle of structural settings, social expectations and personal motivation, that dissolve conventional dichotomies, does not mean that Eritreans are not forced migrants (Belloni 2015, p. 9). Rather,

holding on to the system of international asylum and its crystallised categories is not enough to make sense of the root causes of forced migration – nor does it provide long-term solutions for millions of refugees who have been encamped and displaced for decades. (Belloni, 2015, p. 7).

International and asylum law has generally given legal protection to all Eritreans, but some European governments have recently challenged it (AFP, 2017, Lyons, 2016, Samuelsen, 2015). Rosberg & Tronvoll (2017) have attempted to nuance the stark dichotomy of narratives depicting Eritreans as either economic migrants or refugees escaping human rights violations and forced conscription. In keeping with the broader meaning given to a “refugee” under the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, which includes as a reason for fleeing one’s country “events seriously disturbing public order” (Article I (2)) (UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCRa], n.d), Eritreans have been considered as refugees in Ethiopia since the influx begun. With this as a legal basis, a senior ARRA official informed me that Eritreans have been given a blanket/group refugee status without the need to examine individual cases. ARRA, thus, would normally receive basic information at the receiving stations located in the border areas, establish the nationality of applicants and, in the absence of a serious indicator suggesting otherwise, they are given the status and therefore led to the camps.

While acknowledging the blurredness between dichotomies classifying people that move between borders, I use the term “Eritrean refugees” in this thesis. This is because they are generally categorized as such by the international system of asylum and the Ethiopian state, and the Eritreans I met generally called themselves Eritrean refugees. While the Tigrinya word sedetanya means someone who migrates, it does not differentiate between migrant and refugee. My informants who spoke English used the English term “refugee”.

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Chapter outline

In the first chapter, I discuss my methodology and provide some historical and regional context to the whole thesis. Chapter two and chapter six both begin with a short introduction that further provide theoretical and historical context for the analysis in the following chapters. The second chapter investigates the creation of the crystallized national categories “Eritrean” and “Ethiopian”. It shows how these legal categories affect migration policies, which decide on the possibilities and obstacles within which the refugees navigate their lives in Mekelle. The third chapter deals with Eritrean refugees’ reflections on their “culture,” and how it differs from the culture of Ethiopians (Tigrayans). The fourth chapter explores the ways in which networks between Ethiopians and Eritreans support the temporary socio-economic integration of the latter into the society, enhance general wellbeing, and influence livelihood opportunities. The fifth chapter focuses primarily on the students. It looks into how they navigate the complexities of the relationship between the two nationalities; while they sleep next to Ethiopians at night, and study with them in the daytime. Chapter six looks at migration strategies and touches upon how the identity ambiguity, possessed by some of my informants, can become a potential asset for further migration. In chapter seven, the conclusion, I bring to life my informants’ individual hopes, dreams, aspirations, resistance and faith in God. I discuss the politics of hope, in a global political context, characterized by inequality.
Notes

1. For ease, I only mention Mekelle, the main field site, in the title. See methodology for details.
Chapter 1: Entering the field

Ethiopia has an open border policy towards refugees. As of February 2017, 811,555 refugees and Asylum seekers have been registered in Ethiopia, out of which 167,619 are Eritrean (UNHCR, 2017). An official of The Administration for Refugee and returnee Affairs (ARRA) stated that the actual number of Eritrean refugees is likely to be between 40 to 50 thousands as many leave unnoticed. There are eight refugee camps hosting Eritrean refugees, located in Northern Ethiopia. A number of 4160 Eritrean refugees live in Addis Ababa, and 421 in Tigray through the Out-Of-Camp Policy (UNHCR, 2016).

Methodology

During seven months of fieldwork, I lived in the city of Mekelle and made three short trips to Adigrat, a smaller city that was nearby. I spent two weeks in Addis Ababa to get a visa. Further, I returned to Mekelle for two weeks in December 2016 and caught up with some informants. I lived with my Ethiopian boyfriend, Mulu, and his family throughout the whole fieldwork. Mulu translated for me during the first months and helped me obtain informed consent when I had language challenges. He also accompanied me as a translator when I interviewed an ARRA official in Shire and performed an interview with an ARRA official for me in Addis Ababa.

I was warned before embarking on my fieldwork, that having an Ethiopian boyfriend could affect what my informants said about Ethiopians. However, my key informant Sara was very friendly with Mulu, though when she was alone with me she did not hold back on her claims that Eritrea was much better than Ethiopia. She said that Asmara did not have bed bugs, it was more beautiful, and the hairdressers did a better job. She told me a few times that she hated Mekelle. As will become apparent in the thesis, the relationships between Eritreans and Ethiopians are rather complex and ambivalent, and I believe the friendliness towards my boyfriend, among many of my informants, was a reflection of this complexity and ambivalence, rather than them hiding their real sentiments.

My encounters were mostly characterized by mutual respect and often bordering (and at times crossing the border) to friendship, especially with my key informants. Indeed, to me, the people I met were in many ways similar to my boyfriend and his family. To many informants, I was not just a ferenji because I was part of a habesha family, which often took them by surprise in a way I interpreted as positive. However, my informants and I are, in many ways, positioned unequally
within the larger global structures, evident in my ease to travel legally and cheaply – a privilege they badly needed.

The people I met offered their time, thoughts and dreams to me, so that I could write this thesis. I kept in mind, and still do, that through knowledge and understanding, “[the] anthropologist can reciprocate in both the short and long term” (Okely, 2012, p. 149). One of my informants arrived in Norway. It was now my turn to open up and share my life in Norway. In other words, our roads might cross again, giving me opportunities to reciprocate in ways that become appropriate.

**Why I did not go to the refugee camps**

Given the geographical distance, I did not plan to visit the refugee camps regularly, because I had chosen to focus on the refugees living in the city. I did, however, plan to make one visit to the camp. Unfortunately, given the “highly political” sensitivity of the topic of the thesis, obtaining a research permit for my project turned into a frustrating, confusing and time-consuming bureaucratic process. I still attempted to get in touch with the people I perceived to be in the power-making positions, to request a permission to visit the camps. I failed. Massa, a PhD anthropology researcher in 2013, also had difficulties getting approval to do research in the camp and chose to do research in Mekelle instead (Massa, 2016, p. 265). I felt discouraged by the bureaucracy and decided to do my fieldwork only in the city. My informants did, however, paint an overall negative picture of the camps for me, through their narratives. Many of the Eritreans I met got sick in the camps, with malaria and typhoid, and found the heat challenging. A young male student from Asmara told me it was extremely difficult to live in the camp where he was given a bag of flour and had to engage in activities such as fetching firewood and water. The camp was basically “bereka (wilderness)”; a stark difference to Asmara.

**Not all “snow-balls” resulted in informants**

When I arrived in Mekelle, in early January of 2016, I thought it would be quite easy to find informants. My contacts in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Mekelle, who had facilitated my invitation letter required to obtain a research visa, had promised me they would connect me with an Eritrean student. Furthermore, a relative of Mulu’s co-worker, Alexander, knew many Eritrean refugees with whom he could get me in touch. Through their networks, I envisioned, I would find enough Eritrean refugees. However, Alexander was not able to get me in touch with Eritreans as planned. His friends had moved on; some of them to Addis Ababa.
I therefore ended up recruiting the rest of my informants through the “snowball” method. I had expected to enlarge my number of informants through the networks of the refugees I met through this “snowball method”. However, it surprised me that the Eritrean refugees I met did not reside in, or socially occupy, a particular neighborhood or area, as is common in other cities (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 285). Karen Jacobsen suggests that “snow-ball” sampling can often create biased samples, as refugees would likely name others within their cluster, group or network (2006, p. 285). I argue that because I met most of my informants independently from one another, the representativeness of my data is strengthened.

Three months into the fieldwork, the logistics of organizing to meet all the people, who had their own schedules and who all lived in different parts of a city (without an efficient and reliable transport system), was tiresome. In the beginning, feeling worried and slightly desperate, I had walked around in the city ready to mingle, in hope that those I mingled with would either be Eritrean refugees or someone who knew one. This resulted in me meeting, among others, Esther. I sat in a taxi - a big van with seats for 13 people, but which often filled with 20 people. As usual, speaking Tigrinya made people turn towards me with shocked faces and many questions. Esther, who sat next to me, upon learning I was doing research about Eritrean refugees, smiled at me and quickly pulled a card out of her pocket and said: “I am an Eritrean refugee!” The card she showed me was an ID given from the UNHCR. I accepted her invitation to visit her home. This coincidental way of meeting informants, either directly or through people with whom I was randomly acquainted, became more or less the norm.

Esther thought this encounter could help speed up her moving process. She had been waiting and hoping for the past eight years. She enthusiastically showed me a paper from the hospital stating she was diagnosed with diabetes. She added she was a Jehovah’s Witness and a refugee. She thought it would be helpful if I, as a ferenji, talked with the UNHCR. I tried my best to explain to my informants that I was not able to influence their mobility opportunities. Sara and her boyfriend would sometimes joke, but with a grain of truth I think, that when I was done with my studies and had a job, I could bring them to Norway. I explained I would not even be able to bring my mother-in-law to Norway. The fact that some informants saw me as someone who could potentially influence their opportunities, did at times, I think, affect their answers to my questions. This is of course understandable. Although this did not characterize all my relations, I did observe that the information I got from some informants, about support networks, changed over time.
My key informants in the city were Sara, Esther and Samson. Sara and Samson were in their twenties, and Esther was a married woman and mother, in her thirties. I met another eight Eritrean refugees, half of whom were female, some just once or twice. Robel, Daniel, Eldana and Tewelde were key informants at the universities. However, I talked with another 22 Eritrean students over the course of the fieldwork, some just once. The vast majority of my informants at the universities were male.

However, not all “snowballs” resulted in informants. Some young Eritrean men who worked in the informal economy in Mekelle were scared to meet me. While I made repeated attempts to meet the remaining students at Mekelle University, it somehow never happened, and it took some months to get in touch with those I eventually met. One of the students told me that many Eritreans were scared to talk with ferenjiis (white foreigners) because it was known as something that could get you in trouble in Eritrea. Further, an Eritrean refugee, involved in journalism, never showed up for our scheduled meetings after the first one. These were all incidents experienced by Aurora Massa when she did research in Mekelle among Eritrean refugees, in 2013. Suspicion, mistrust and silence, was prevalent though it did not totally shape the lived experience of the Eritreans she met (2016, pp. 275-276).

Eritrean refugees at University

There were less refugees studying at Mekelle University than I expected. Further, the student my contacts at the university introduced me to did not know well the other Eritrean students who were dispersed across four campuses in different locations of the city. He had completed an undergraduate degree and had returned to the university about five months prior to my arrival. He was now self-financing his master’s studies with the help of remittances sent by his brothers living in Europe. Hence, he interacted mostly with his dorm and classmates, while his interaction with the other Eritrean students did increase throughout the span of my fieldwork. He connected me with one student who then gave me the phone numbers for two other Eritrean students, studying in two other campuses. While the Eritrean students within the same campus seemed to have a strong cohesion, the interaction between the groups studying at different campuses did not seem frequent, at the time I was there. One Eritrean student explained they wished to visit the others, but studies kept them busy. The travel time between the universities could take between 30 minutes and an hour.

Further, while volunteering in the refugee center in Oslo, I had met an Eritrean girl who gave me her cousin’s phone number. He studied in Adigrat. I met him three times throughout the
fieldwork and also communicated with him through phone and Facebook. Due to my recurrent illness, mostly parasite infections, I did not manage to go as regularly as planned. However, when I went, I met other students through him. Adigrat University hosted more Eritrean refugees than Mekelle University. It was a loss that I did not manage to spend more time there. In the thesis, I do not always indicate at which university the students study and I do not indicate the exact number of female informants at the university, as I believe it will contribute to keeping my informants more anonymous. All names are of course fictive.

**Methodological choices**

I was always open about my intention to write a master’s thesis on Eritrean refugees. However, nearly all relations were informal. I collected data through conversations, which had a natural flow but also marked by the “‘instrumentality’ embedded in the ethnographic endeavour” (Madden, 2010, p. 65), and observations. The conversations were highly marked by reciprocity. I was always willing to go as far in revealing my personal life as I was hoping to access theirs.

I met Sara, on average, once a week, beginning with our first meeting in March. We spent most of our time at the internet café where she worked. I helped her with the work, at times. “Participation as shared labor […] brings trust and insights […]” (Okely, 2012, p. 88). It also allowed me to observe the relationship between Sara and her employer. Sara visited my family and me once, and I visited her and her boyfriend three times. Once, with our boyfriends, we went dancing after eating dinner together at their place. One morning, Sara and I went to church together, before we went back to their place and ate lunch. This resembles the kind of methodology used with the other non-student informants, although the interactions were less frequent. I could not access the students “home”, meaning their dorm, due to institutionalized gender segregation. The girls were an exception, as well as three students who rented housing outside campus. The students had a tight schedule with classes and exams. I visited students in the university, and seven students came to my house, for lunch during holidays, on different days. I met with my key informants for tea and had long conversations. Robel, I met with, on average, every second week throughout the fieldwork. The other key informants, I met with three to four times in the second half of my fieldwork. One male informant expressed that he worried that me, a woman, spending a lot of time with him, might influence negatively my reputation. This had led him to spend less time with me than what he wanted. It might be that other male informants felt likewise.
Through being emotionally engaged, and taking an interest in the whole person and what they said, I valued empathy as the foundation in my encounters with the Eritrean refugees. I never used any audio devices or took notes when with people, but would, when possible, write notes on my phone or when I went to the bathroom. I tried to find space and time to take notes quickly, after meeting with informants, and then writing it out fully on the computer in the evening, although it was not always feasible. This might have resulted in me forgetting some details, although I believe that being present with people did result in more interesting data. Further, recording devices and notebooks might have triggered fear among the Eritreans, as Massa noted (2016, p. 268). I have data from two structured interviews with ARRA officials, as well an informal spontaneous interview with a woman working in the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC).

**Language challenges**

I began learning Tigrinya a year before coming to Mekelle, but had difficulties understanding what people said in the beginning. I improved a lot during my stay. The last few months, I mostly spoke with informants alone and was able to express and understand a lot of information. Fortunately, the students were all able to speak English. The rest of the informants preferred speaking Tigrinya, but they all had some level of English that, together with my increasing level of Tigrinya, allowed us to share a lot of information. I often repeated things back several times to make sure I had gotten the right information. There could, of course, have been misunderstandings I was not aware of, as well as a lack of depth and breadth as we often simplified the language in order to get the meaning across. The nature of the communication left me with few direct quotes. Hence, when I quote my informants’ expressions in this thesis, it is a summary and is sometimes a translated version from Tigrinya to English.

**The changing/lying person**

The people I met are, like all of us, in constant change, as they gain new life experiences that might influence the way they see things. Massa experienced that cultural and social frames, that are historically rooted, along with effects of governmental institutions, had its expression as mistrust, silence and lies in her fieldwork encounter with Eritrean refugees in Mekelle (2016, p. 276). I asked an informant if there were a lot of mobility restrictions in Eritrea, as I had been told so by others. “No, we are not North Korea!” she answered. However, eight months later, she explained that Eritrea was a socialist state, lacking freedom, and compared it with North Korea. The time spent away from Eritrea, might have influenced her reflections. Further, there might be conflicting opinions within her that surface at different times due to various factors. Sarah told
me that she was the one pushing her family, who had backed out after seeing the horrors one can encounter on the Sudan-Libya-Italy route, to let her continue the journey through Libya towards Europe. When she had left to Sudan, her employer told me that Sarah’s family had wanted Sarah to continue, while Sarah herself would have preferred to stay in Ethiopia and open a business. They were only willing to pay for her journey, which overall would cost 300 000 Birr, but would not pay for her to open a business in Ethiopia. It is difficult to know if Sarah felt that the same information did not fit for both of us, or if her position had radically changed over the four months I had spent in Norway.

**Contextualizing Ethiopia and Eritrea in relation to each other**

I provide an historical and political backdrop, including what I believe is important in order to contextualize the analysis in this thesis. In no way does it describe, in depth, the very complex history of the region and its many voices. As Trouillot puts it, “facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 29). Virtually everyone who has written on Eritrea-Ethiopia relations, Reid suggests, express their dissatisfaction with the lack of objectivity in the field. However, they are usually accused of either being a “great Ethiopianist” or an “Eritrean nationalist” (2003, p. 369).

**Ethiopia**

Richard J. Reid, a scholar of history and politics, uses the term “frontiers of violence”, in talking about the history of Ethiopia and its neighbors over the two past centuries. He describes the region as “a mosaic of fault lines and frontier zones, shifting borderlands which are not ‘peripheries’ but which have defined the very nature of the states and societies themselves” (Reid, 2011, p. 20). The frontiers of violence at times served to forge communities, while at other times, the already existing communities’ expanded politics formed the frontier (p. 20-21). Alemseged Abbay notes that the minority ethnic group, Amhara, brought into existence an enlarged empire state at the turn of the nineteen century, giving Ethiopia most of its current shape. Their language, Amharic, became the national language and their religion, shared with the Tigrayans, Coptic Orthodox Christianity, became the state religion (1995, pp. 11-12). Ethiopian nationalism emphasizes continuity and deep historical roots (Sorensen 1992, p. 231) reflected in the “Greater Ethiopia” narrative, which argues that the Ethiopian state is an historical entity that originates in the Axum kingdom before Christ (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 25), and views military conquest and expansion during the mid-nineteenth century as a reunification of the empire (Sorensen, 1992, p. 229). Haile Selassie (until 1974) was the last divine king in a line which stretches back to King Solomon and Queen Sheba and their son Menelik I, who was a descendant of the single royal
survivor of Axum (Sorensen, 1992, p. 229). Such narrative lays way for an interpretation of history that claims that the Italian colonization of Eritrea was a violation of Ethiopian sovereignty in which Italy wrongfully stole Eritrea (Riggan, 2011, p. 137). An opposing interpretation of history, views the modern Ethiopian state as a recent construction. In a race of colonialism against Britain, Italy and France, Emperor Menelik II conquered the western, southern and eastern peoples of current-day Ethiopia (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 25). This interpretation of the history suggests Ethiopia, an imperial power itself, attempted to incorporate Eritrea into its own empire (Riggan, 2011, p. 137).

The historical narrative of “Greater Ethiopia” was known as Abyssinia until the late nineteenth century (Sorensen, 1992, p. 228). The Abyssinian Empire included areas from both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Referring to Solomon Inquai, Sorensen notes how Tigrayan nationalism, by emphasizing other historical events than those emphasized by the Ethiopian nationalists, likewise uses pre-colonial history to support their narrative; that the history of Axum does not belong to the history of Ethiopia, but rather to the history of Tigray and the southern part of Eritrea (1992, p. 237). Inquai argues that the Shoan monarch Menelik II, who attempted to “amharize” non-Amhara groups, deliberately impoverished Tigray, fearing they would claim their legitimate rights (1983, p. 28).

The Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was formed in 1975, and subsequently gained control over Tigray. There was disagreement whether the goal should be an independent Tigrayan state, or a reorganized democratic Ethiopia. They opted for the latter (Sorensen, 1992, p. 238). The umbrella organization allying TPLF with other anti-Dergue movements, which was called The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), became the basis for the new coalition government in Addis Ababa (Reid, 2003, p. 397), in 1991. While the previous political state-building projects attempted to subordinate all sources of identity to the national identity, with Amharic as the language of the Ethiopian state the new Ethiopian constitution of 1994 established the country as an ethnic federal state (Dias, 2012, pp. 16-17). This implies cultural autonomy, ethnically based representation in state affairs, and rights of all ethnic groups to establish a separate state under the Ethiopian federation and to secede (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 26). Today the federal state consists of nine regional states, of which Tigray is one, with Mekelle as the capital of the state and Tigrinya the working language. Tigray is further divided into seven administrative zones, the capital being the fifth zone. Adigrat is the Eastern Zone’s capital. However, ethnic distribution is not consolidated homogenously or geographically in each region.
Tigrayans are the majority ethnic group in Tigray, a region that is also inhabited by other minority groups.

_Eritrea_

![Map of Eritrea](image)

Eritrea has nine recognized ethnic groups adherent to Christian and Moslem religions: Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Kunama 2%, Rashaida 2%, Bilen 2%, other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera) 5%. The population was estimated to be 5,869,869 people in July 2016 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). Tekeste Negash (1987) notes that Eritrea, as a single political entity, came into being in 1890. Italy had in 1869 purchased the bay of Assab and with diplomatic and technical assistance from Britain, it expanded its colonial possession to include Massawa in 1885. Menelik II signed the Italo-Ethiopian treaty of Wichale in 1889 agreeing to Italy’s colonial expansion (pp. 1-2). Famine, disease, and previous hostile attacks made it difficult for the population to resist the Italians (p. 121). Resistance towards Italian colonialism was not widespread but the Bhata uprising, a minor incident, carried out by mostly Tigrinyans identifying themselves with Ethiopia, was a constant reminder of the embarrassing Italian defeat at Adwa, 1896 (p. 136). Italy’s attempt to expand its colonial rule into Ethiopia, had been crushed at Adwa (p. 125). However, Italy
occupied Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941, and lost its African Empire to the Allies in 1941, which resulted in Britain assuming the political power in Eritrea until 1952.

United Nations Resolution 390 A (V) of 1952 established the status of Eritrea as an autonomous region federated with Ethiopia (Dias, 2012, p. 20). Abbay argues that this choice was dictated by U.S. strategic interests along with Ethiopia’s effective political maneuvering (1995, pp. 6-7). The United States wanted to control a strategic communications base in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, and Ethiopia wished to have access to the sea (Sorensen, 1992, p. 233). Haile Selassie campaigned for what he understood to be a reunification of territory, divided by Italian colonialism. He argued that Eritrea had no authentic identity of its own, and was, in terms of culture and language, akin to Ethiopia (Sorensen, 1992, p. 229). As I showed above, there are numerous different groups with different languages and cultural elements in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrean nationalists on the other hand, argued that they were no different from all the other African contemporary states created by imperialism (Sorensen, 1992, p. 230).

Negash (1987) argues that in 1948, Tigrinyans, mostly Christians who constituted the majority of the educated elite and working class, expressed desire for union with Ethiopia (p. 148). The Moslems, for whom the Italian system had been more favorable than the Ethiopian system (p. 22), favored independence (Sorensen, 1992, p. 232). However, Sorensen warns against strictly conflating political opinion and religious belonging. Many prominent leaders in the independence movement were Christian highlanders (1992, p. 232). Moreover, Eritrean nationalists claim that the Ethiopian government created the Unionist Party and used strategies such as terrorism, threat of excommunication from the Orthodox Church, and bribery, to reach its goal for expansion. These claims are partly supported by scholars (p. 233).

Sorensen (1992) notes that Eritrean nationalists had attempted to appeal to the OAU resolution on observance on the colonial border, but received no open support. The steady erosion of the rights, guaranteed from the federation arrangement, lead to armed revolt against Ethiopia in 1961, by Eritrean nationalists. This was, by the Ethiopian nationalist narrative, interpreted as an attempt for secessionism encouraged by Arab states. Hence, Eritrean independence was now termed as a threat on ancient Christianity, and needed to be crushed. Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea in 1962. While Ethiopian nationalists state that the Eritrean Assembly voted for full integration with Ethiopia, Eritreans argue that Ethiopian authorities forced people to vote. Others challenge the narrative by stating that there was no election; representatives of the
Ethiopian Crown simply read out the declaration (p. 230). Protests to the UN had been ignored (p. 234).

**Independent Eritrea and the making of Eritreans**

Eritrea declared independence on May 24, 1993; the first successful secession in post-colonial Africa, Ruth Iyob notes. The guerrilla fighters struggled for 30 years against Ethiopia. The Ethiopian state was both sanctioned, and supported, by both superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union), at different historical periods (Iyob, 1995, pp. 1-2, Sorensen 1992, pp. 230-231). There were several influxes of Eritrean refugees fleeing the country throughout the 30-year-long war. The Dergue, who had overthrown the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, escalated the violence which forced hundreds of thousands Eritreans, both urban and rural, to flee (Kibreab, 1987, pp. 15-23). The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), Moslem driven, began the struggle with a vision for Eritrea’s future alignment with the Arab world (Hepner & O’Kane, 2009, p. xix). However, ethnic, regional, and ideological contradictions resulted in civil war, and the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) superseded ELF in 1971. EPLF had a socialist orientation and the goal was to arrange a referendum so that all Eritreans could vote on independence, federation, or regional autonomy; a goal in which they succeeded (Sorensen, 1992, p. 234). The civil war was a source of some of the largest refugee flows out of the region, and left a lasting impact on the Eritrean society and consciousness, such as the government’s current intolerance of dissidence (Hepner & O’Kane, 2009, pp. xix-xx).

Abbey points out that, having secured independence, the Eritrean elite had to “make Eritreans”. An important part of this was to create Tigrayans as the relevant other. Abbey borrows Barth’s concept of “border guards” to explain how the elite went about this task. One such “border guard” was the split of the Eritrean Orthodox Church from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, securing the consecration of its own bishops from the Coptic Church in Egypt. This split took place after 1600 years of union (1995, pp. 225-227). Bernal notes that Eritrea is divided quite evenly between Christians and Moslems, though the former has historically, and in present time, dominated the political economy. The EPLF, and the government it became - People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) - attempted to depoliticize diversity and incorporate it into the Eritrean national identity (2004, p. 8). My informants were Christian, though not all were Orthodox. Some were Catholic, Evangelic and Jehovah Witnesses. The latter two are illegal in Eritrea.
The 1998-2000 war

Scholars emphasize different reasons for the outbreak of the border war. Dias and others argue that territory was the central cause of disagreement. With Eritrea’s independence, Ethiopia lost access to the Eritrean port of Assab, which remained central to all imports and export to and from Ethiopia (2012, p. 22). Tronvoll and Negash emphasize the importance of complex patterns of cultural, historical, economical, and political processes. These complexities further coincided with Eritrea establishing its own currency in 1997, followed by Ethiopia demanding all cross-border trade to be conducted in international currency. This raised the question of where the border should be demarcated on the ground (2000).

Tronvoll (2009) notes that several hundred thousand people were internally displaced and perhaps as many as 200 000 women and men lost their lives in the combat. Further, 75 000 Eritreans and Ethiopians, of Eritrean origin who resided in Ethiopia, were deported to Eritrea. More than 70 000 Ethiopians living and working in Eritrea were likewise expelled during, and in the time after, the war (p. 5). Approximately 350 000 men and women were mobilized on the Eritrean side and around 400 000 men on the Ethiopian side; war-experienced and combat-toughened soldiers who had toppled the Dergue in 1991 (p. 4).

Forced migration

The new Eritrean government did not want to be a passive “beneficiary” of the west. They came to meetings with their own terms of references, wanting things to be done on an “equal footing” (Bernal 2004, p. 14). Valuing and practicing “self-reliant development”, they have rejected most neoliberal strategies as imperialist, a threat to the values forged in the revolutionary nationalist struggle (Hepner & O’Kane, 2009, p. xiv). However, Bernal (2004) notes that to achieve its own nationalist ends, it uses mechanisms and trends associated with globalization and are indeed largely dependent on the Eritrean Diaspora in its nationalist project (p. 4). Huge amounts of money were sent from Eritreans, living around the world, to bolster Eritrea’s capacity to wage the war in 1998 to 2000. The war had generated an outpouring of nationalist sentiment (p. 3) among the Eritrean Diaspora for whom the nation’s survival had a deep and emotional personal meaning (p. 12). The Diaspora had also been important financial supporters during the independence struggle, during which the EPLF had to survive largely without foreign support (p. 11).

Hopes for a democratic government, development, and a bright future were high when Eritrea achieved independence (Hepner & O’Kane, 2009, p. xi). Seemingly attempting to pursue a model
of development that runs contrary to that seen as legitimate by the powerful North/West, the regime regularly broadcasts reports on successful state-run development projects over the internet (p. xvi). However, the authoritarian and militaristic methods the Eritrean nationalist movement had used to liberate the country continued in the years after independence (p. x), turning the government into a totalitarian and human rights abusing regime (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014, p. 184, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2015). Tanja R. Müller explains that formal education was militarized in the aftermath of the interstate war. All students in the last grade of secondary school were sent to Sawa, a remote area, for military training, which is part of the national service. The University of Asmara was dismantled and replaced by The Eritrean Institute of Technology at Mai Nephi, which resembled a military camp, and was likewise located in a remote area (2009, pp. 65-66).

Eritrea has become, compared to its population size, one of the largest refugee and asylum seeker producing countries in the world (Rosberg & Tronvoll 2017, p. 6). “In the forging of a new society amidst the prolonged destruction of warfare, mass mobilization for both development and defense formed crucial, interrelated components of nationalist ideology and political praxis” (Hepner & O’Kane, 2009, p. x). The Eritrean people’s lives are therefore, to a great extent, defined by unending military and national service, forced conscription, political crisis, and economic impoverishment (p. x). These elements, in interplay with pervasive inequalities characterizing the global North-South divide in living standards and dense transnational network, which interconnects Eritreans globally, Kibreab (2014) suggests, are drivers of forced migration among Eritreans. However, he asserts, the single most important driver of forced migration among Eritreans since 2002, has been the open-ended Eritrean national service and the devastating social and economic consequences that resulted from it and which has undermined the long-standing tenuous livelihood systems in the country (pp. 15-16/18). The real or perceived threat of war, given “no war no peace”, permeates Eritrea’s relationship with Ethiopia and was a pretext for extending the national service indefinitely. Although both countries signed a peace agreement in 2000, The Algiers Agreement, Ethiopia refused to be bound by the Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Commission and Eritrea has never demobilized its army as it promised (pp. 6-8/18). Those who do not complete their national service are stripped of citizenship rights; such as the right to work, to be self-employed, to own or cultivate land, and to gain access to travel documents and exit visas. Punishment for deserters and draft evaders is extremely severe (pp. 12-13/18).
Chapter 2: Borders, Boundaries and Citizenship

I begin this chapter with a theoretical and regional contextualization, which is an important foundation for the following four chapters. Next, I describe the crystallization of the two national categories: “Eritrean” and “Ethiopian”. Then, I demonstrate the absence of a total overlap between the legal categories and the way people categorize. Lastly, I discuss the structural obstacles Eritrean refugees face when trying to create a livelihood in Mekelle.

Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (1998) say that borders are established by states to secure territories that are important to them, in the form of human and natural resources, and because of strategic or symbolic importance. The borders are markers and reminders of the relations it has with its neighbors (p. 9). In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, this is a hostile relationship. Citizenship marks legal citizens of the state (p. 13). The legal borderline separates and joins states, and physical state structures demarcate and protect the border, but the borderline also includes metaphorical frontiers of identity. Frontiers are territorial zones within which people negotiate different meanings, and behavior, regarding their membership in states and nations (p. 9). Therefore, borders are faced with cultural frontiers; that is, regimes that may compete with the borders of the state (pp. 10-11). Identities that are shifting and multiple tend to characterize the experience of people living in border-areas, due to the liminal and contested nature of the border itself (p. 13).

Reid explains that the Tigrinya speaking population of Tigray and highland Eritrea and the Amhara of Ethiopia represent the central Semitic bloc. While they keep some livestock, they are primarily plough farmers (2011, p. 13). Principles of kinship and descent guided habitation and access to land among the well-organized local communities (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 23). As happened to other borderland groups in Africa, when Italy colonized Eritrea, the border introduced divided the Tigrinya speaking population, as well as others who straddled the border. The porous border that had existed between the two countries transformed into a wall in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war, hence, it hampered the established movements of people and goods across the border (Dias, 2012, p. 21). Reid (2003) suggests that the border war, although it took many, including him, by surprise, rather appears to be part of a long and complex sequence of relationships and events (pp. 374-375).
The success of EPLF and TPLF, resulted in the institutionalization of:

- a set of disagreements and contradictions which had plagued relations between the movements since the liberation war [reflecting] the historical relationship between Eritrea and Tigray more broadly, and incorporated such issues as land, identity and, ultimately, destiny, as well as mutual misconceptions and misunderstandings as to the other’s mental outlook. (Reid, 2003, p. 371).

Reid noticed that, on the one hand, among his Eritrean informants, there was an idea that “good relations” had always existed between the highland communities across the border. This took the shape of commercial dependency and social involvement in terms of religious feast-days, funerals and weddings (pp. 376-377). Eritreans and Tigrayans on opposite sides of the river were tied by kinship and they would commonly intermarry (Abbay, 1995, p. 6). People migrated to find work across the border. Eritreans from rural areas, for example, migrated to Addis Ababa (Riggan, 2011, p. 140-141), while Tigrayan peasants travelled to Eritrea when in need for supplementary income (Young, 1997, p. 72). On the other hand, Reid adds, there existed a view that “we knew all along that something like this would happen”, as Tigrayans, or “Agame”¹, cannot, and never could, be trusted. This, Reid suggests, reflects the very complex relationship between the two (p. 377). Hence, an ambivalent relationship marked the context in which my fieldwork took place, among Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. On the one hand, similarities and familial relationships characterize the relationship. On the other hand, conflict and enemy images leave the boundary between friends and enemies blurred (Massa, 2016, p. 259, Tronvoll, 2009).

Barth (2000) uses the concept “boundary” to describe both how territories are divided on the ground and how social groups are marked off from each other (p. 17). Boundaries are constructed by a cognitive premise. However, it does not determine all social forms that eventuate around the boundary. The sociology of people living and acting around the boundary likewise determines cognitive models and people reconceptualize boundaries (pp. 30-31). Tronvoll (2009) has shown in the Ethio-Eritrean context, using Barth’s insight, that boundaries create affordances, to which people respond actively and pragmatically (p. 126). Tronvoll also shows how the social processes, influencing cognitive operations regarding boundaries and the significant “others” during times of war, are contradictory and complex and therefore best understood on the ground rather than from a macro-perspective (2005, p. 251, Tronvoll 2009). This complexity becomes apparent in the following chapters. I will draw on Marionett’s concept of “dividuality” in exploring the current ambivalence I observed in the relationship between the Eritrean refugees and the Ethiopian hosts.
Citizenship, deportations and ambiguous identities

The 1998-2000 war harnessed both the physical border between the countries, as well as the boundary between the Eritreans and Ethiopians, by forcefully removing those who did not belong and stripping them of their Ethiopian citizenship, “[…] with the desire to categorize and purify along ethno-national lines” (Riggan, 2011, p. 45). It was not only an attempt to delineate a physical border between the two countries, it was also a symbolic process aimed at definitively differentiating Eritreans from Ethiopians (Riggan, 2011). The governments left the matter of dual citizenship intentionally vague after Eritrean independence. They set aside that problem to be dealt with later. The Eritrean government gave identity cards to Eritreans, anyone who had an Eritrean parent, in 1992. While a national identity category was created, the people placed in it were not required to choose a citizenship. Although Ethiopian law does not allow dual citizenship, they did not make provisions for Eritrean-Ethiopian citizens living in Ethiopia to officially choose their citizenship (p. 144).

Tronvoll (2009) notes that when the war broke out, top Ethiopian politicians assured that Eritreans still had legitimate rights in the Ethiopian state and belonged within the Ethiopian nation. The notion of Eritreans as political and cultural brothers was invoked. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, Eritreans living in Ethiopia were rounded up (p. 177). Throughout centuries, the rulers of the Ethiopian polity defined any individual that lived within its territory as subjects of the Ethiopian crown. They were not distinguished according to criteria of ethnicity or descent. Hence, the stigmatization of Eritreans, as an enemy on the inside, broke with that long tradition (p. 176). The first targets were Eritrean citizens with military and/or political background, followed by other groups of Eritreans including students (pp. 177-179). Ethiopians of Eritrean origin or descent, which means those who had an Eritrean parent or grandparent, were also targeted for removal. Children were parted from their parents. Ethiopian citizens with Eritrean origin, who voted in the Eritrean referendum in 1993, had their citizenship revoked. The Ethiopian government, who had encouraged them to vote, interpreted the voting as an expression of nationality. Tronvoll suggests the politics of the deportations was a matter of the government’s identity politics (p. 178). The Eritreans, however, were not easily distinguishable from the Tigrayans. This resulted in situations where Eritreans passed as Tigrayans and hence were not deported. Further, there were incidents of Tigrayans who were accused of being Eritrean. Both the regimes of Haile Selassie and the Dergue treated the Tigrinya-speaking population of northern Ethiopia as more or less one ethnic group. According to the context, they were generally categorized as “Tigrayans” or “Eritreans”. At that time, these terms did not
connote individuals living in either geographical area, but rather Tigrinya speakers (pp. 179-180). The deportations then, were an effort to draw a rigid border between the Tigrinya speaking population in Ethiopia; the Tigrayans and the Eritreans (Riggan, 2011, p. 145).

Moreover, Tronvoll (2009) notes that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia between 1962 and 1991 hence, people classified as Eritreans, because they were born in that geographical area during that time, were in fact born in Ethiopia (p. 196n). In addition, the ambiguity and blurred boundaries were reflected among the ministries themselves. People asked why the mother of the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was not expelled. She was of Eritrean origin and had voted “yes” in the referendum (p. 183). Yemane ‘Jamaica’ Kidane, at the Ethiopian foreign ministry likewise embodied the ambiguity of identity. His father was Eritrean and mother Ethiopian, with most of his family living in Eritrea (pp. 184-185). During the struggle, it was a matter of subscribing to the political ideas of the revolution. Therefore, the participants in the two resistance movements, straddling the Mereb River, TPLF and EPLF, had origins on both sides of the river (p. 182). I have heard rumors among friends that the Eritrean Prime Minister, Issaias Afeworki, was born in Tigray. Riggan suggests that the deportation of Eritreans can be understood as an attempt, on the behalf of the Tigrayan-led government, to show Ethiopia its loyalties. Ethnic loyalties and historical sympathies to Eritrea had caused many Ethiopians to question the loyalties of the government (2011, p. 145)

**Legal categories today**

Having provided an historical backdrop to the national categories and issues of citizenship, I shall now move on to the context of my own fieldwork. Ethiopian law says that any person shall be an Ethiopian national, by descent, where both or either of his parents is Ethiopian (Proclamation no. 378/2003, Article 3(1)). An ARRA official told me that Eritreans, who have an Ethiopian parent, but have participated in the national service or in higher official positions in Eritrea, would find it extremely difficult to obtain Ethiopian citizenship. Further, an International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) worker told me that Ethiopians who repatriate from Eritrea do not get a citizenship if they served in the national service while in Eritrea. They are, together with those lacking necessary documents to prove they are Ethiopians, sent to the refugee camps. Article 22 of the above stated law, states that one can be re-admitted to Ethiopian nationality. However, this seems not to be applicable for those who participated in Eritrean National service. The thought behind the introduction of Sawa, Kibreab (2014) explains, was to foster a common national Eritrean identity that rejects ethnic, religious and region-based allegiances. Further, to
foster a commitment to the project of national unity and nation building; (re)-constructing the country’s war torn physical, economic and social infrastructure. More, it was about building a strong defense and fighting capability (pp. 2-3/18). It is clear that the possibility to get citizenship is, for the Ethiopian state, tied closely to political loyalty. In that sense, the national service is seen as the institution that creates Eritreans. Hence, having or not having participated in the national service dictates who can be, or become, an Ethiopian.

A confusing boundary

Amiche

Some of my informants were born in Ethiopia and had been deported to Eritrea, a country, some emphasized to me, they did not know at that time. One student, Daniel, whose parents had been civil servants in Ethiopia prior to the deportations, told me that he could not picture himself living in Ethiopia again. He pointed to the conflict between the states, and suggested that the state might repeat such an event in the future. Therefore, he concluded, he would never feel secure living in Ethiopia. These people, who have Eritrean parents, but were born and partly raised in Ethiopia, are called Amiche. Riggan (2011) argues that Amiches developed hybrid forms of national identity, imagining themselves to be spatially linked to places located in both nations (p. 134). Hence, they threatened the sacred notion of Ethiopia and Eritrea as nations that were separate and distinct from one another (p. 135).

Riggan, who conducted fieldwork in Assab, Eritrea at the time of deportations, notes that there were two rituals happening simultaneously when the deported Amiches arrived on busses in Assab. On the one hand, the state produced political rituals of nationalism, in the form of a parade, which welcomed the newcomers, marking them as Eritreans. On the other hand, Assab’s residents, many of whom grew up in Ethiopia but moved to Eritrea after independence in 1991, checked lists of the names of the deportees. They looked for the names of family members and friends and neighbors from the time they had lived in Ethiopia. When they found someone, they would invite them for coffee, a meal, and sometimes a place to stay (p. 132). This informal ritual of welcoming the deportees “[...] celebrated the hybridity of a community that had straddled the border for decades” (Riggan, 2011, p. 132). While official processes produced boundaries around the identities of being Eritrean and Ethiopian, informal processes blurred the same boundaries (p. 133).
None of my Amiche informants presented themselves to me as Amiches, but as Eritreans, although some told me they were born and partly raised in Ethiopia. In some cases, Mulu commented he could hear that Amharic was their mother tongue. They then told us that they were born in Addis Ababa. However, when I asked Eldana if she was familiar with the Amiche identity her face shone as she exclaimed, “I am Amiche”. She expressed her surprise that I was familiar with this category, before telling me the meaning of the word, which resembled Riggan’s (2011) explanation. Amiche is the name of an Automotive Manufacturing Company of Ethiopia (AMCE). The company’s vehicle parts were manufactured in Italy. Likewise, Amiches had parts, that is parents, from the Italian colony of Italy, while they were assembled in another country, Ethiopia. The cars, likewise, were assembled in Ethiopia (p. 140).

Sarah, another Amiche, was born in Addis Ababa, where she lived until 4th grade. When I asked, she said she was both Amiche and Eritrean, but not Ethiopian. Riggan likewise found with her informants that being Amiche was synonymous with being Eritrean, but with strong linkages to Ethiopia (2011, p. 140). Still, Sara was herself an expression of the blurred relationship between the two countries. Sara’s mother though, as with some of the other Amiches I met, was Amharic. The family had continued speaking Amharic at home in Eritrea. Riggan (2011) explains that prior to independence, the Ethiopian regimes imposed Amharic, the state language of Ethiopia, on the people living in Eritrea. Amharic, therefore, evoked bad memories of domination in Eritrea in general. Among the Amiches on the other hand, Amharic symbolized the language of their cosmopolitan Addis Ababa. Amiches’ sense of community largely revolved around the Amharic language, which had been Assab’s lingua franca prior to the border war. Assab was a town largely inhabited by Amiches and Ethiopians. The town was marginalized by both Ethiopia and Eritrea, but still symbolically significant to both. It was a town in limbo, under Eritrean political and administrative jurisdiction, but culturally, influenced by Ethiopia (pp. 142-143).

In the midst of creating rigid borders during the war, government policies also attempted to limit cultural influences, which led to officially banning Amharic music in bars (Riggan, p. 146). The attributes of Amiche identities, which many Eritreans identified as “Ethiopian”, were not welcomed in the midst of totalizing forms of state-produced nationalism in Eritrea. This entailed a pressure on the Amiches to change language, taste, styles and beliefs, in order to act Eritrean, not Ethiopian (p. 133). Sara told me that it was still not permitted to play Amharic music in the bars in Asmara. Riggan further notes that Amiches were used as scapegoats for different social ills; they were seen to be a polluting influence, associated with immorality in Ethiopia. Further,
speaking Amharic in public was met with disapproving looks, and, by some, believed to be illegal (p. 147).

Riggan argues, however, that Amiches, through performances, practices and narratives, demonstrate some resilience, and perhaps resistance, to the demands for absolute loyalty to the totalizing state of Eritrea (p. 150). While Sara was Amiche and spoke Amharic, she was clear in her opinion that Eritrea was much better than Ethiopia. Although she was not willing to do her duty to participate in the national service, which was the reason she fled, she proudly identified herself as an Eritrean.

_Ethiopians born in Eritrea_

I went into the internet café to pick up a book Mulu and I had delivered the day before for photocopying. The girl, Delina, who worked there spoke “pure Eritrean” Tigrinya, Mulu had told me the day before. “Kab Mekelle diki?” (are you from Mekelle) I asked her after we had talked a bit. “Ewe” (yes) she answered hesitantly, adding “medjemaria, kab Eritrea (first, from Eritrea), daharay kab Mekelle (later on, from Mekelle).

A regular customer, and friend of Delina’s, suggested to me that I could interview Delina for my master’s thesis. I told him that she was not an Eritrean refugee, to which he further argued she was. She interjected explaining to him that I interviewed those who had been to the refugee camps, and she had not. “She is also an Ethiopian citizen,” I added. She explained to him that her father was Ethiopian. On several occasions, people introduced me to people they thought were Eritrean refugees, but who turned out to be Ethiopian citizens who had grown up in Eritrea, had an Ethiopian parent, and thereby Ethiopian citizenship. The Tigrinya spoken in Eritrea is distinguishable from the Tigrinya spoken in Tigray, which also has its regional variants. Therefore, Ethiopians that grew up in Eritrea can easily be mistaken for Eritreans. In other words, legally recognized identity, expressed in citizenship, does not always go hand in hand with how people categorize each other.

Moreover, one of my Ethiopian friends had taken me to meet her hairdresser, whom she thought was an Eritrean refugee. It turned out she had Ethiopian citizenship. Her husband and father were Ethiopians. She had lived most of her life in Eritrea and was now in her mid thirties. On our way home, I pointed out to my friend that it seemed like the woman identified as an Eritrean, although she was Ethiopian. My friend looked at me and said “I think she is Eritrean”. It is clear that what counted to my friend in regards to being Eritrean or Ethiopian, was not about possessing, or not possessing, citizenship.
Shewith, an Ethiopian I met, tried to put me in touch with Eritreans. He grew up in the border area. He told me that people had mingled a lot before the war, and many had a parent from each side. Had it not been for the war, it would not have been an issue to know “who is who”. Similarly, a senior scholar told me “politics make the countries two, but anthropology I think, makes it one”. The opinion by the scholar is perhaps better understood in the context of politics and a wish for union between the two countries. On the other hand, Shewith speaks from the perspective of someone from a border community who remembered that “who was who” had been irrelevant in their daily lives before the war.

I met many people who were born in Eritrea and had lived the first 5 to 20 years of their life there, or had migrated there in their youth, and now presented themselves to me as Ethiopians. Likewise, the Eritreans who had lived in Ethiopia while they were children identified as Eritreans. They felt Eritrean, talked about themselves as Eritreans, and were categorized as such by the Ethiopians. However, I observed cases in which Ethiopians had lived large parts of their lives in Eritrea, and had a parent from each country, like Delina. Her identity, I showed, became blurred and confused for herself and her friend.

Identity gendered

As pointed out above, any person who has one or two Ethiopian parents has the right to become an Ethiopian citizen. However, most Ethiopians with mixed parents whom I met had an Ethiopian father. An Eritrean anthropology student explained this in terms of culture. “In our culture wives are expected to move to their husband’s place, children are expected to take nationality after their father. People are not expected to take their mother’s nationality”. He argued that Ethiopian men were deported to Ethiopia during the war, but Ethiopian wives could stay. Therefore, Ethiopian men were separated from their wives, who would later come to Ethiopia with the children. While aware of the legal right, the cultural practice does not really encourage it, he suggested, adding that he knows many Eritreans in the refugee camp who have Ethiopian mothers. “They are like us. They have to ask for a mobility permit.” Although he had not asked why they had not applied for citizenship, he assumes that the bureaucratic process reflects the cultural practice and makes it a hassle and time consuming to obtain citizenship through an Ethiopian mother. The experience, or the rumors about the hassle, result in people not seeing the point, he believes.

Further, Delina’s father was Ethiopian and she herself has Ethiopian citizenship. Her niece is Eritrean, like the father. I asked Delina if citizenship always goes through the father. She
confirmed. I asked if it was possible to choose citizenship from the mother, if one wanted. She looked puzzled and became quiet for a moment before she broke the silence saying “I don’t know.” Then she continued, with an assertive voice, claiming that taking citizenship after the father is “lemud” (common, the norm). “That is what people do”, she said. Children likewise take their names after their father.

On the other hand, an ARRA official suggested it would be easier to establish motherhood than fatherhood, and that it should, therefore, be easier to get citizenship through the mother. He added it is not ARRA that makes those decisions. Moreover, I did meet others who told me their children could choose citizenship themselves when turning eighteen. However, the anthropology student’s, and Delina’s, reflections show that the cultural practices and understanding of the relation between gender and the construction of national identity does not always overlap with the laws of the state.

**Law, policies and practice**

I have shown how the national identity categories were crystallized by the government’s identity politics during the interstate border war. Further, I showed that people like Delina inhabit an ambiguous position between the strict categories. Indeed, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) have noted, differences are political and are constructed historically (p. 46). They show how the idea of pre-given “cultures” and “peoples”, naturally tied to place, create significant problems. The politics of space link up with the politics of otherness in the areas of immigration and immigration law (p. 46). Law and policies of host governments, and the way they are implemented, determine what Jacobsen (2006) calls the “vulnerability context”. That is, processes, institutions and policies that can both constrain and enable access to assets and strategies among urban refugees (p. 279). In Ethiopia, ARRA, which works closely with UNHCR, is the contact point between the Ethiopian state and the refugees. The next section analyzes the relation between law and policies and actual practices, with a focus on mobility and employment. Ethiopia, which generally maintains open borders to refugees, acceded to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its 1967 Protocol on November 10, 1969, but reserves itself from some of its articles (UNHCR, 2015, p. 2).

**ARRA Offices**

I spent a day outside the ARRA office in Addis Ababa, chatting with people waiting for their turn, or waiting for friends or relatives. We all sat on rocks, or leant against a tree, squatting and escaping the sun. There were no formal places to sit. Most of the people sitting around were Eritreans; dressed decently and looking like middle-class Ethiopians. Those who had a “process”
to continue their migration legally, dealt with it here. In addition to this office, ARRA has an office in Shire, Tigray, close to the refugee camps. A trip to Shire is necessary to extend one’s mobility permit, for the refugees who live in Tigray. I learned from informants that, from Mekelle, it entailed a two day trip – an eight hour long bus trip each way – and about 600 birr in expenses for the ticket, a night in a hotel, and food. However, during my fieldwork, the bureaucratic process of extending mobility permits became available at an ARRA office in Mekelle. While my informants told me that they would now be able to perform this process in Mekelle, I never heard of someone actually doing it. Further, my attempt to do an interview with the officer in that office failed as he was out of office the two last months of my stay in Ethiopia, as well as the two weeks I spent there in December, 2016. During those two weeks, one of my informants had to go to Shire to extend her permit and caught a typhoid infection on the journey.

**Mobility and the Out-of-Camp Policy**

In 2006, when security issues were perceived as minimal, ARRA began exploring out of camp possibilities for Eritrean refugees. They were mostly young, urban and without family, and the authorities found it difficult to keep them encamped. The out-of-camp-policy (OPC) (which needs to be renewed after 2 years) has evolved through time. Initially, an Ethiopian family member needed to be a guarantor for the refugee. However, many Ethiopians and Eritreans were worried what the consequences would be if they openly exposed their link with the other nationality. This triggered a change in the policy allowing anyone with a permanent residency in Ethiopia to function as a guarantor. I have likewise come across incidents where such connections were silenced, in times that could appear natural to mention it. It was, however, not a characteristic of all such connections. Further, any refugee can apply for up to a three-month mobility permit, which is renewable. Most informants told me they had not paid for it, but I also met a refugee that had paid. Some informants told me that informal financial transactions could quicken the process to obtain a mobility permit.

The OCP led to misunderstandings between ARRA and UNHCR. The latter began considering the out-of-camp scheme as an integration program. Hence, third countries began giving priorities for relocation to the refugees in the camps. ARRA does not see integration as a viable option, due to the big numbers of refugees. One of the officials suggested that the OCP is effective in terms of changing attitudes of the Eritreans, who now feel very safe. It creates “people to people relations”, adding that when the refugees began coming to Ethiopia, the relatives in the Diaspora
were angry and cut relations with them. Now, many Diaspora relatives are paying for them to escape to Ethiopia. The official believes the out-of-camp scheme has contributed to this change.

The ARRA official I interviewed in Shire stated that mobility permits, such as the OCP, only allow one to move freely in the given city indicated on the permit. The current domestic refugee law, Proclamation No. 409/2004, under Article 21 (2) holds that:

The Head of the Authority may designate places and areas in Ethiopia within which recognized refugees, persons who have applied for recognition as refugees, and family members thereof shall live, provided that the areas designated shall be located at a reasonable distance from the border of their country of origin or of former habitual residence.

However, I never heard complaints from my informants regarding the freedom of movement. Quite the opposite, some informants commented on the relief of not having to reach for their mobility permit every time they bumped into a police officer; as they had grown used to doing, and were tired from, in Eritrea. Further, many of the students I met visited family members in other parts of Tigray, as well as Addis Ababa. One student had gone to Bahir Dar (Amhara region) for the holiday to visit his two Ethiopian brothers. Another student told me he could travel wherever he wanted, but could not work without a local ID. However, he did mention, in another setting, that he was not able to visit Ethiopian family members who live close to the border.

Moreover, nationality is not indicated on the student ID cards which has the Eritrean student’s photo and name. Along with all other students and teachers, they have to show the card every time they enter the university. Further, during my first weeks in the field, I met five young Eritrean refugees outside the ARRA office in Addis Ababa. They had, due to what they experienced as unbearable conditions in the refugee camp, made their way into the capital city without going through the formal bureaucratic procedure and therefore possessed no mobility permits. They stressed how easy it had been to travel without papers, although they, upon arrival, faced a slow bureaucratic process to become legal refugees in the city. As graduated medical students from Eritrea, they were offered residencies in a teaching hospital, Tikur Anbesa (Black Lion Hospital). However, after some months, ARRA decided to reevaluate their refugee papers. At the end of my fieldwork, they were still waiting.

To sum up, the formal legal structure suggests there are mobility restrictions, limiting Eritrean refugees to move only within the respective cities in which they are permitted to live. However, I
noted this was not a characteristic of my informants’ everyday life. Rather, my informants seemed to find it easy to travel. I will now look at employment possibilities.

**Employment**

Article 17(2) of the UN Convention on Refugees (1951) (UNHCRb, n.d), of which Ethiopia has been a party since 1969, dictates less restrictions on refugees compared to other aliens when it comes to employment. But Ethiopia has registered a reservation on the provision and thus it is not bound by it (UNHCRc, n.d, pp. 7-8). In line with this, Article 21(3) of the Ethiopian Refugee Proclamation says:

> every recognized refugee and family members thereof shall, in respect to wage earning employment and education, be entitled to the same rights and be subjected to the same restrictions as are conferred or imposed generally by the relevant laws on persons who are not citizens of Ethiopia.

The relevant labor law in this regard is Proclamation No. 377/2003, which under Article 174(1) states, “any foreigner may only be employed in any type of work in Ethiopia where he possesses a work permit given to him by the Ministry (of Labor and Social Affairs)”. Thus, every foreigner needs a work permit from the ministry. The understanding is that such a permit is given only to those with special expertise that is not sufficiently available among Ethiopians.

This being the law, an ARRA official I interviewed stated that Eritrean refugees can legally work in any sector, including the private, but not the governmental one; these jobs, he explained when I enquired, are reserved for citizens. This sector is perhaps extremely vulnerable to the perceived danger and threat to “national security” posed by refugees from an enemy state. However, despite the statement of the official, “refugees are not allowed to work” was a common utterance among the students I met, whose common understanding was that there were no work possibilities for them in Ethiopia. Some mentioned that they could take jobs in the informal sector, such as woodwork or metalwork; nevertheless, these types of jobs are not a future goal for the students graduating in disciplines such as biology, psychology, anthropology, nursing, engineering, chemistry, and accounting, amongst others.

The ARRA official told me that many refugees acquired work positions in NGOs, especially those related to refugees, and especially those located in the refugee camps. However, one of my informants, who had worked for different NGOs in a refugee camp upon graduation, did not find it very rewarding. ARRA, he said, does not allow the NGOs to hire refugees, hence, the
NGOs can only reimburse the refugees. He saw the monthly reimbursement of 900 birr as very low and not much of an incentive. These opportunities are perhaps short-term, rather than long-term, solutions. In addition, a student who applied for a job in a German NGO in Addis Ababa experienced his nationality as being an obstacle. The manager explained to him that they give priority for Ethiopians.

“It’s easier to live in Addis, because people cannot differentiate you. They think you are a Tigrayan. Here though, people can hear when you talk that you are Eritrean.” Daniel, a young student who had lived some time in Addis Ababa prior to beginning his studies in Mekelle, told me this. In his statement, both the blurriness of the national categories and the potential danger of the exposure of them, are apparent. “Did you have some negative experiences with that?” I asked Daniel. He shared the story of his friend, who had studied in Addis Ababa. The friend finished his degree in electrical engineering and got excellent grades. He further competed in a competition for a scholarship to work in India, which he won. “Then another student said ‘this guy is Eritrean’ so he lost his possibility”, Daniel explained to me. He then got a job with a business in Addis Ababa and he had told the employer he was Ethiopian. Two weeks later, they found out he was Eritrean, and he lost the job. Daniel concluded that it is “people” who do not want to hire Eritreans and that unless you “know someone” it is difficult to get work. Another female student likewise pointed out that “knowing someone” can make it easier to pursue a job, and she suggested that if one has contacts that are willing to help, it is even possible to get a government job. Her Eritrean friend had found a position in a pharmacy.

When in Addis Ababa, Daniel had gone to a training, organized by an organization for Eritrean refugees, in which he learnt basic computer skills and got a diploma. He did not find a job, and wanted to go back to do another training. However, half way through, they did not let him continue. Then it was just back to “koff mebal” (being idle, sitting around), he explained. Further, he had heard there was an NGO in Addis Ababa, that helped Eritreans open their own businesses, as well as teaching them skills. However, when the money came from the donor, they said that the Ethiopian authorities did not allow them to open their own businesses. “So the NGO just gave them two thousand birr each, to keep them quiet”, he explained.

I did, however, meet one student whose brother, a medical student from Eritrea, had the possibility to work and specialize in a hospital in Addis Ababa. If he passed the entrance exam, he would get a license for four years, he said. He explained that there was an Eritrean doctor, who had also come as a refugee, who worked in the hospital, and was now helping other Eritreans to get similar opportunities.
The information people have is mostly based on their own experiences, and those of friends, and friends of friends. They are mostly stories of failing to get jobs and being forced to sit and wait. The information the ARRA official gave me - that the Eritrean graduates can work in anything but governmental jobs - seem not to have reached my informants, as information or practical experience.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I described the politics of difference that created the crystallized national categories “Ethiopian” and “Eritrean”. I showed the lack of a total overlap between national legal categories linked with citizenship, on the one hand, and how people categorize each other. I further demonstrated the gap between laws and policies, and actual practice, regarding mobility and employment. The next chapter deals with the culture, sameness and difference from the perspective of my informants.
Notes

1. Agame is a district in Tigray with traditionally close links to Eritrea; historically heavily involved in Tigrayan infighting. It is further a negative label implying inferiority; an insult implying backward, dirty and primitive in culture and habits, that Eritreans at times call Tigrayans (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 68)

2. Note: the Tigrinya word sedetanya means both refugee and migrant. Hence, some might have thought I meant any sedetanya (migrant) from Eritrea, including those with Ethiopian citizenship, in which case my argument might weaken.

3. The information here about OCP, mobility permits and the possibility to study at universities is based on interviews with two ARRA officials, one in Shire and one in Addis Ababa.

4. Refugees with special health issues or families with many children can be allowed to live in cities/towns, with financial support from ARRA and other organizations such as UNHCR. The refugees participating in the OCP or simply have a mobility permit are not entitled to financial support from the UNHCR or free primer health care. However, one Eritrean refugee I met, who participated in the OCP, was not asked to show ID when visiting the clinic. As Ethiopians, she paid nothing for treatment of her child under 5 years, and a small fee for the older child. Further, her children could go to state school without paying.

5. The European Investment Bank (2016) has endorsed an USD 500 investment to build two industrial parks in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was required to grant employments rights and possibilities to refugees as part of the deal.
Chapter 3: “Eritrean culture” and how it differs from “Ethiopian (Tigrayan) culture”

In this chapter, I explore how my informants reflected on similarities and differences between “Eritrean culture” and “Ethiopian (Tigrayan) culture”. My Eritrean informants spoke Tigrinya and belonged to the ethnic group denoted “Tigrinya” by the Eritrean government. They now lived temporarily in Tigray. The majority of the population in Tigray is made up of the ethnic group “Tigrayan”. Both ethnic groups are politically dominating the government in their respective countries at the time of writing. Eriksen (2002) notes that nationalism is similar to ethnic ideology in that it stresses cultural similarity, inside the nation, and draws boundaries between themselves and others, who become the outsiders. The ethnic movement becomes a nationalist one when the political leaders of an ethnic group demand that the political boundaries should mirror cultural boundaries (p. 7). As I have already mentioned, the Eritrean state has attempted to downplay differences within Eritrea. My informants referred to themselves as Eritreans. They referred to the host population as Tigrayans and Ethiopians, interchangeably. Therefore, comments such as “we are the same” actually referred to the commonalities between the ethnic groups, though they used the national categories Eritrean and Ethiopian to describe who “we” were. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to treat, in detail, the relation between ethnic and national ideology, as it is not the main theme of the thesis. Harrison (2006) reflects that, as Schwartz calls it, ethnicity belongs to the “self-reflexive” component of culture; an expression of people’s folk theories regarding their own cultural differences and commonalities. Harrison also notes Eriksen’s insight that it is people’s representations, perceptions and theories about similarities and differences, that is significant, rather than objective similarities and differences themselves. Particularly in times of conflict, communities that are very similar culturally may exaggerate their similarities while they, in interests of good relations, may downplay the differences (p. 9). Some Eritrean refugees would at times refer to themselves as habesha, a term used to describe the highland Orthodox Christian peoples and culture. However, despite acknowledging similarities, I also observed them reflecting upon cultural differences between themselves and the Ethiopians (Tigrayans). Drawing on the writings of Freud, Simmel, Girard, Blok and Bateson; Harrison shows that not just difference, but felt resemblance, can play an important role in situations of conflict (p. 150), as I will likewise demonstrate in this chapter.

First, I contextualize the Eritrean identity, by shortly describing how it came into being, and how it is further, argued by some, contested by ethnic affiliation across the national boundaries. Then I explore the downplaying of cultural differences, before I look at the impact of colonialism in
creating differences still felt today. Drawing on Bateson, I explore patterns of “Schismogenesis” apparent in interactions between individuals. Using various accounts of Marionett’s concept of “dividual”, I discuss the ambivalent relationship between the two groups. Lastly, I speak briefly about the role of religious identities.

**Contextualizing Eritrean identity**

In 1960, Trevaskis wrote that the Eritrean people were not a single people but “a conglomerate of different communities […]” (Trevaskis, 1960, p. 11). These communities, he suggested were, in terms of culture and blood, more similar to their neighbors in Sudan, French Somaliland and Ethiopia. The largest of these communities, he suggested, was an offshoot of the Abyssinian people who inhabited Tigray, the “Tigrinyans”.

However, Iyob argued in 1995, that throughout the 30 years long independence struggle an Eritrean nationalism grew. In Ruth Iyob’s words: “Eritrea is more than a land mass or territory. On a figurative level, it is an entity constructed from the encounters with Italian colonialism, Ethiopian hegemony, and the post-1945 international state system” (Iyob, 1995, p. 3). Therefore, she concludes:

> for those who claim Eritrean identity, it is a space of their own – shared by different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups – but distinguishable nevertheless from the Ethiopian identity imposed upon them by a powerful neighbor and an indifferent world. For them, Eritrea signifies that bounded domain, to which they can lay claim and within which they can validate their right of occupancy. (Iyob, 1995, p. 3)

Nevertheless, Abbay, while speaking of a Trans-Mereb-Identity, stated in his PhD dissertation that Tigrayans living in Ethiopia, and the highland Eritreans living on the other side of the Mereb River in Eritrea, “are ethnically one people, tied by common history, political economy, myth, language and religion” (Abbay, 1998, p. 1). He shows that many of his informants felt this, and argues that the Eritrean political elites’ attempt to transform Tigrayans into the relevant other was not successful (pp. 225-227).

Moreover, a popular movement attempted to rekindle relations between Tigrayans and Tigrinya Eritreans during the height of the protests (in Ethiopia) in 2016. Facebook was awash with some Eritreans and Tigrayans discussing issues of unity and common destiny. Of course, there were also those staunchly opposed to the idea. There was (still available in the moment of writing) a Facebook group called “Deqi Aga’Azian” that gathered a few thousand members who actively
advance the agenda. The group emphasizes common heritage, language, and religion. The argument is anchored in the claim that both the TPLF and EPLF have failed the Tigrinya speaking people. It also warns that there is a looming threat from the lowlands (in Eritrea) and the south in Ethiopia against them. It, therefore, calls for discussion and unity. It tries to show that forging a single force is only a necessity for survival.

**Exaggerating and downplaying differences and similarities**

I met Dawit in Addis Ababa. Upon hearing the theme of my project, he asked me curiously, “what is your assessment?” “I don’t know. I haven’t started yet” I responded. “But do you think there will be any difference?” he asked impatiently, before he continued saying: “We have the same culture, same language, if the government just let them integrate, they will integrate!” In the interest of good relations, Dawit downplayed any difference between Eritreans and Ethiopians. Later on, Dawit reflected that while he, before coming, had thought that they and the Ethiopians had the same “culture”, his current stay had convinced him otherwise. He had observed young people pushing elders to get a seat in a taxi. “They don’t respect their elders”, he concluded. Therefore, they were culturally different from Eritreans, who do respect elders. In this case, Dawit exaggerated a difference. The reason I see this difference as exaggerated, is that “respecting elders” is indeed a cultural virtue in Ethiopia as well, and the incidents he observed must have been against the norm. Dawit left the refugee camp with some other Eritreans, without permits, as life had become unbearable. Locals had screamed “Shabya” at them, a nickname of the Eritrean government, functioning as an insult. Further, the locals had tried to rob them at night. The Tigray region had suffered the most, on the Ethiopian side, during the war; consequently Tigrayans had “something like hatred” towards the Eritreans, Dawit’s friend said. Tigray was indeed the most war-affected region in Ethiopia (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 2). Perhaps the experiences they had in the camp reminded them of the unresolved conflict between the countries, and the hatred felt by some of the locals, and made them look for differences, perhaps unconsciously.

Dawit’s contradictory statements illustrate the ambivalence in the relationship between the Eritreans and Tigrayans, which will be theoretically dealt with promptly. While Dawit’s encounter with locals was negative and created perceived cultural distance, in chapter four, which mainly focuses on the students, we shall see that physical closeness also has the potential to create social closeness and trust.
Safe, Beautiful and Clean

Dawit and his friends compared Eritrea with the view of the old polluting cars and poverty in Ethiopia. Moreover, as I would hear many more times, Eritrea was “safer”. This easily appears as an odd contradiction, since Eritreans fled Eritrea to find safety elsewhere. However, I believe it better fits in the context of the local term *tseruy* or *tsefuf*, which, literally, means “clean” but which Treiber notes also connotes: “safety in comparison to other African capitals, peace after devastating wars and development towards European standards […]” (Treiber, 2010, p. 131).

Some informants saw Mekelle and Addis Ababa as unsafe cities, where one could be robbed at night, as opposed to Eritrea, which was safe. In this context, an informant said, “our culture is very different”. However, others mentioned the freedom of movement they experienced in Ethiopia, in contrast to Eritrea. Still, Dawit and his friends contrasted the high securitization in Eritrea, with the lack of security in the Ethiopian refugee camp they had stayed. The locals had tried to rob them at night. “In Eritrea, you can hardly walk ten meters before there is some security”, one of them explained.

Don Handelman and Lea Shamgar – Handelman (1993) have shown how national symbols can depend on other media than the discursive (p. 432), and that aesthetics, ideology and ontology may inform one another in different ways (p. 445). Asmara was often mentioned as a clean city, by my Eritrean informants and by Ethiopians, some of whom had lived there. Some Eritreans told me how clean the water in Asmara was. The image of Asmara and its inhabitants as “clean” has, I suggest, become a national symbol that both exists in people’s minds and in the senses; the city of Asmara is a visual design that people see and live in. Treiber (2010) noticed in his interviews of Eritreans in Eritrea in 2001, that the English word “clean” became the word that summed up both the Tigrinya word *tseruy*/*tsefuf*, meaning “tidy” or “neat”, as well as “Tsa’eda (white)”. The latter is both reminiscent of colonial rule and education; standing for moral cleanliness, hope and virtue. It also stands for “European”, as it refers to post-independence development in the phrase “etra tsa’eda (white Eritrea)”. “Clean” further represents:

> the streets of Asmara’s city centre that are cleaned daily, the renovation works undertaken there, the new and representative buildings in the centre and in the newly constructed outskirts and the dressed-up urban dwellers, strolling up and down godena barnet, the main boulevard, in the evening. (Treiber, 2010, p. 131).

“Clean”, to the urban dwellers, Treiber suggests, generally meant “civilized”; an integrative urban lifestyle. Its antonym is not only *zeytsefuf* (not clean), but also *Hmaqh* (bad) which, Treiber
explains, referring to Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*. Here it refers to poverty, despair, dirt, desperation, as well as crime and war (p. 131-132). Therefore, we can say that the colonial, and the government’s, urban development policies and practice had aesthetic effects that informed ideology. It is further amplified by discursive practices of describing Eritrea as “clean” and Ethiopians as “dirty” with “bad habits” (Treiber, 2010, p. 128).

One Eritrean and I were discussing the difficulties of, on the one hand, finding a toilet in Mekelle and on the other, finding a toilet that was clean enough to use. He told me that Ethiopians “do not really care about keeping themselves clean.” I suggested the water shortages in Mekelle was the reason why it was difficult to keep oneself clean, as I myself found it to be a challenge at times. He held on to his claim, explaining he had observed it in Addis Ababa as well. Similarly, “clean” seemed to transfer as a stereotype to people who were from Eritrea. An Ethiopian young man told me to watch how the elderly woman, who we had bought some beans from on the street, washed the bowl after we had eaten. “Eritreans are very clean”, he told me. Bateson’s term “complementary schismogenesis” (1958, p. 176) can shed light on how some Eritreans and Ethiopians relate to this stereotype. While an assertiveness is observed on the Eritrean side, when describing themselves as more “clean”, a submissiveness can be seen on the Ethiopian side. The Ethiopian in my example embraces the claim, that Eritreans are cleaner, as reality, rather than challenging and competing against it.

Further, I took Sara to an Ethiopian friend who needed a worker. The Ethiopian commented that, as Sara was “qwal Asmara” (daughter of Asmara), she knew how to keep things clean. The Eritrean identity, as explained in the previous chapter, can be an obstacle to employment possibilities. However, this example shows that a stereotype of Eritreans benefitted Sara. Moreover, an Eritrean friend of mine, who lives in Norway, stayed some months in an Ethiopian refugee camp. He worked for an Ethiopian employer, in a nearby village, doing woodwork. He told me that the employer paid him, and the other Eritreans, more than the Ethiopian workers because they “were better workers” and the Ethiopians are “lazy”. I discovered, during fieldwork, there is a widely held notion, among both Eritreans and Ethiopians, that Eritreans are very skilled in woodwork.

Moreover, I heard of one man in his thirties who, as a child, was sent with his siblings to his aunt in Asmara for some time, to learn about cleanliness and tidiness. Treiber likewise notes the possibility for an Ethiopian to attain this attribute by living in Asmara (p. 132n). This conflation between attributes of place and people and the transferability of the attribute “clean”, points to
the already mentioned ambiguity and blurred boundary between who is Eritrean and who is Ethiopian.

Furthermore, two female Amiche informants reflected that, as opposed to in Ethiopia, there were few beggars in Eritrea. One of them said, “people mostly try to work”. She commented on this as a difference in the context of mentioning the ways in which they are similar; “beginning from the color”, along with terms such as same “race” and “language”. On reflection, she attempted to make it clear for herself and me how Eritreans/Eritrea are different from Ethiopians/Ethiopia. Treiber notes that prostitutes and beggars who lived in the former native quarters were, from time to time, transferred by government forces, to the countryside or the military training camp in Sawa, which was founded in 1994. In fact, the local police explicitly warned the Eritrean youth, who had grown up in the Ethiopian capital and had moved to Asmara for educational and work opportunities, not to bring in “bad habits”, such as loitering, from Addis Ababa. The latter city was perceived as ugly, anonymous, dirty and criminal. One of Treiber’s informants stated in an interview in 2001, “this is not Addis Ababa, we work here” (p. 128). Though there are likely less beggars in Asmara, due to physical removal, Treiber also notes the following, from fieldwork between 2001 and 2005: Outside at the entrance door of “The Mask Place”, a bar seen as “clean”, a guard chases away beggars and other undesirables (p. 134).

**Difference and competition**

Sara would often make comparisons between Eritrea/Asmara and Ethiopia/Tigray, in a competitive way. Things were better in Eritrea: the hairdressers, the “buna (coffee) ceremony”, and the absence of bed bugs in Asmara. At times, she stated that she hated Mekelle. The incident below, I believe, can be interpreted as competition between “Eritreans” and “Ethiopians”.

“Do you have computers in Eritrea?” the customer asked Sarah, who had told him she had learned to work with the computer in Eritrea. His face seemed genuinely curious and the voice did not express irony. “What do you mean if we have computers in Eritrea. Of course we do.” Sarah answered with a slightly tense voice. He explained that the development, that had come with the Italian colonization, had stopped during the current regime and now there were not even schools in Eritrea. “Sawa is a school” Sarah argued. “They don’t know Eritrea, they just hear other people talking about it” she told me furiously after he had left. “Are you feeling very angry,” I asked her. “Yes” she answered, adding that Asmara was “Theum” (good, sweet), more than Tigray. She told me that I should come and see what it is like there myself; we could go together sometime in the future.
Sara had already described Sawa to me as an undesirable place, and she had fled to Ethiopia to avoid going there. Nevertheless, she uses Sawa as a weapon in her mission to defend the national pride of her country, which, by the comment of the customer, was in danger of deterioration. Harrison’s (2006) argument sheds light on this relationship; not only difference, but felt resemblance and claims to symbols of identity, can contribute to conflict. Many antagonistic groups share historical and cultural commonalities, although it is often denied and contested (p. 150). “Development” is, in this encounter, a symbol of identity, which creates conflict. The Ethiopian suggests Eritrea is no longer “developing”, and therefore he guesses they do not have computers, like Ethiopia.

Reid suggests that the Eritrean superiority complex, perceived and resented by Tigrayans, most likely has its origin from Eritrea’s colonial experience (2003, p. 371). This superiority complex was pointed out to me by a Tigrayan who said, “people from Eritrea are gurenja (someone who boosts).” Negash (1987) explains that the Italians had, prior to the occupation beginning in the 1930s, begun to describe Ethiopia as the Eritrean hinterland, which was falling behind the standard achieved in Eritrea. The growing gap between the socio-economic realities of Ethiopian and Eritrean life was visible. With its urban centers, a considerable wage earning population and an increased purchasing power, Eritrea was considered more developed and more civilized than the rest of Ethiopia. Further, the Italians put the Eritreans at the top of the hierarchy within the colonial hierarchy by granting them a number of privileges, in recognition of their contribution to the colonization of Ethiopia. Eritreans were now to be called Eritreans and Ethiopians, like Eritreans prior to 1937, were called “subjects” or simply “natives”. These factors, Negash suggests, strengthened the growth of a separate Eritrean identity (p. 155-156).

Tronvoll notes that Italian colonialism was perceived by Tigrayans, the Eritrean political elite, and the people, to be the “difference that made a difference”; bringing modernization and development to Eritrea. This created a gap between Eritrea and a “backward and stagnant” Tigray (2009, p. 73). Belloni noted, amongst her Eritrean refugee informants in Addis Ababa, that Ethiopians, while considered similar to Eritreans “[...] still represent the historical enemy, envious of Eritrean intelligence, success and honesty [...] Italians were typically represented as similar to Eritreans, because of their colonial past experience” (Belloni, 2015, p. 96). I met an Ethiopian man who had lived many years in Norway. He grew up in Asmara, but had Ethiopian citizenship. However, he “felt like” an Eritrean and favored its “culture”, which he believed was positively influenced by “foreign rule”. Over the past three years, I have talked with Ethiopians, mostly Tigrayans or people from the Amharic ethnic group that are intermarried with Tigrayans,
both in Norway and in Ethiopia. I have heard the accusation that “Eritreans, despite being the “same” see themselves as better than the Ethiopians”; sometimes with an additional, “they don’t want to be our brothers” component.

Sara reacted fiercely to the customer’s comment which suggested that Eritrea, which had once been in the lead, was deteriorating. Hence, she came across as someone with a superior complex, who needed to place herself and her country above Tigray. Hierarchy characterizes social and political organization and relations among the highlanders (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 29-32). A classic reason for war in Abyssinia was that one part wanted to position itself above the other, in the “internal power-play for political hegemony”; also relevant in the border war along with struggle over land (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 67). Moreover, the border war of 1998 to 2000 is an example of what Bateson (1958) calls “symmetrical schismogenesis”. A group boasts and the other group replies by boasting and it turns into a competitive situation (p. 177). The example of Sara and the following example of Delina likewise demonstrate such patterns between individuals, though it does not escalate to the extent I have observed in some comment fields following news (Prandi, 2016). A teenager who used to hang around at Delina’s workplace, with whom we were both friendly, told me in front of Delina that Obama had come to visit Ethiopia while he did not go to Eritrea because there was not “Selam” (peace) there. She was annoyed and asked him what he meant. He mentioned Shhiya (the Eritrean government). Delina fired up: “And here there is? What peace do you speak of?” She then went on to make some comments about the Oromo ethnic group.

However, other interactions I observed demonstrated other aspects of Sara. First, she would always speak very dearly about the couple in whose internet café she worked. Further, Sara and her boyfriend spent time with my boyfriend and me, on several occasions, and they would sometimes speak openly about hardships in Eritrea, without it transforming into comparison or competition. One could argue that Sara would not be likely to criticize my boyfriend in front of me, but it is likely she would feel comfortable speaking honestly about her employers. I will now provide a theoretical framework, which makes sense of these contradictions, and which I will further explore in chapter five.

McKim Mariott (1976) noted that South Asians do not see the “person” as an indivisible bounded unit, as the term “individual” connotes. He introduced the term “dividual” (p. 111). Marilyn Strathern likewise found this term relevant in Melanesia where “[the] singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm” (Strathern, 1988, p. 13). Persons were often “constructed as
the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them” (Strathern, 1988, p. 13). James Weiner (1999) notes that social theorists and philosophers, such as George H. Mead, had already articulated a “Strathernian” theory of the self in the early part of the twentieth century. Referring to Elliot, Weiner further shows that theories of psychoanalysis suggest that the human subject’s inner world is constituted through social relationships (p. 237). Authors such as Helle-Valle (2004, 2007, 2010) have recently worked with the concept of “dividual”, in different contexts. In the context of uses of media, he notes that the same person reacts to media content in radically different ways. This implies, he suggests, that we are in fact more radically different in different contexts then what the western ideology of “individualism” allows us to believe (2007, p. 15). Such ways of understanding self and identity make sense when analyzing the complex, ambivalent and at times contradictory relationships between Eritreans and Tigrayans (Ethiopians). Debbora Battaglia, by drawing on the work of Anthony Gidden, Foucault and Bourdieu, talks about the discourse of contingency, in which “persons, their subjectivities and identities (selves) are shaped by and shape relations to others, under the press of historical and cultural contingency” (Battaglia, 1999, p. 115). Indeed, the Eritreans and Ethiopians have been historically involved with each other, in ways that have shaped their subjectivities and selves in different ways. The blurred boundary between friends and enemies for instance, expresses this.

“Modernized and developed”

The feeling of being more “modernized” and more “developed”, due to their colonial experience, was entertained in the context of the amharanization and oppression following the federation with Ethiopia in 1952 and later annexation, which had created a source of competition between the Eritreans and the Amharic elite (Abbay, 1998, p. 222). Some of the differences, pointed out by the Eritreans I met, can be understood within this context. First, a student expressed his frustration with his advisor: “It is different, I don’t know how to explain but, like here, you cannot ask questions to the adviser, they take it personally”. While he had wanted to make use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for his thesis, the advisor suggested he only used qualitative. The advisor had asked him “is it you or me who is the advisor”, when he persisted with his suggestion. The student suggested that “they” were “collective” and preferred doing things as a group, while in Eritrea “we like to do things ourselves, individually”. Second, several people pointed out to me that Asmara/Eritrea was safer than Mekelle/Ethiopia, to the extent that women can safely walk alone in the nighttime. Robel, a 30 year old student, explained that in Mekelle men monitor their women through control, hence guarding them. In Asmara, trust lies at the heart of the relationship between men and women, who are more liberated.
Further, Delina, my Ethiopian informant, who had lived in Eritrea all her life up until two years before I met her, showed pictures of herself wearing short skirts. She explained that while it was common and accepted to dress like that in Asmara, people would look judgmentally at you if you did in Mekelle. The Eritrean state says that it works on the empowerment of women (Eritrea Ministry of Information, 2017). Sara further explained to me that they have Maernett (equality) between men and women in Eritrea, though criticizing the fact that this in practice meant that women should, like men, spend time in bareka (wilderness), for military training.

**Religious affiliations beyond national identities**

As I mentioned in the introduction, Orthodox Christian Eritreans and Ethiopians share the common identity “habesha”, though some Eritreans would see it as only Ethiopian. Some Ethiopians told me that the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christian churches in Norway are, to a great degree, divided along both national lines (Eritrean and Ethiopian) and ethnic lines (within the Ethiopian community). Hence, it is evident that the common identification as Orthodox Christian does not necessarily trump the national identification in every context. Most of my Orthodox Christian Eritrean informants regularly went to church and I would, at times, go with them. Some of my informants seemed more preoccupied with the importance of Orthodox Christianity than others. One informant, on the other hand, told me that religious differences were not important to Eritreans. The importance was that they were all Eritreans, he suggested. I mentioned, in the introduction, that the Eritrean state has strived to downplay internal differences, such as religious identification. When I invited Eritreans to visit me at home, my mother-in-law would ask me in advance if they were Orthodox Christians. She explicitly expressed it was good that they were, and the fact that they were Eritreans was clearly not an issue. She and Sara connected on themes such as which church they went to and tsom (fasting), an Orthodox Christian food practice. Sara likewise had a strong adherence to Orthodox Christian religion and liked my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law was extremely skeptical about my Jehovah’s Witness informants, a common attitude towards new Christian religions among many Orthodox Christians. I heard an incident of an Ethiopian Jehovah’s Witness who was hit in the face, while she attempted to spread the word of the bible to people on the street.

Such skepticism was not always the case. Esther, a Jehovah’s Witness, had friendly relations with Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, such as her neighbors who would often visit her. Esther and her friends, when I asked if the friend was Ethiopian, explained that man, not God, creates boundaries. Eritreans and Ethiopians are brothers beyond the hostilities between the two countries. My Jehovah’s Witness and Evangelic informants all stressed the fact that the members
in their respective congregations were all sisters and brothers; family. The cognitive activities, among its adherents, in terms of downplaying ethnic/national lines in favor of a focus on the sameness of humans in the eyes of God, and the creation of a boundary between them as a “family” versus “others”, was prominent. Esther referred to me as *haftey* (my sister) in many contexts. However, once we met a Jehovah’s Witness, who assuming I was a Jehovah’s Witness working on spreading God’s word in Mekelle, asked me how my service was going. “Ohh, she is not *haftena* (our sister)” Esther quickly clarified. On a different day, we met another Eritrean refugee who worked at the market. She asked Esther who I was. “*Haftey*” she answered. The woman laughed commenting I was white. “*Hebri gedefiyo*” (leave the colour)” Esther answered her. In the context of meeting two Eritrean women, I was a sister, but not in the context of meeting two Jehovah’s Witnesses.

**Concluding remarks**

I have shown that the ethnic “self-reflexive” processes, in which my informants negotiate similarities and differences between Eritreans and Ethiopians, reflect the ambivalence in the relationship between the two. It also became evident that much of the “difference” has roots in colonialism. I lastly spoke to one alternative way to identify, which seems to cross the national boundaries in the name of God. The next chapter looks at social ties and networks.
Notes

1. Note that many people from Kunama and Afar groups saw the EPLF “liberators” as oppressors, and do not feel part of the new “Eritrean identity” (Tronvoll, 1999, p. 1044).
Chapter 4: Ties and Social networks

This chapter is about urban Eritrean refugees’ ties and social networks in Mekelle. I focus on familiar and identity links that exist in the complex relationship between the two nationalities: Eritrean and Ethiopian. Miranda. J Lubbers, José Luis Molina and Christopher McCarty (2007) apply Bourdieu’s framework of structural interactionism in their research on personal networks among migrants. Within this framework, personal network can be considered as a result of; on the one hand, micro-individual processes such as personal characteristics, and on the other, macro structural forces such as history, economy, social structure and institutions (p. 722).

Previous chapters dealt with such structural processes. I now explore in what ways networks with Ethiopians support the temporary socio-economic integration into the society, enhance general wellbeing, and influence livelihood opportunities. I show that despite the harnessing of the physical border and the crystallization of social boundaries, these connections still provide social capital for the urban refugees. Karen Jacobsen describes social capital as including material and emotional support as well as advice and connections with financial and employment networks. It is often provided by co-nationals already living in the city (2006, p. 282). This resembles Bourdieu’s way of seeing social capital as resources based on connections and group membership (1987, p. 4). I further use Mark. S Granovetter’s concepts of ties of different strengths, when I analyze their networks and I draw on Janet Carsten’s theoretical insights regarding the “making” of kinship in the end of the chapter. By urban refugee, I refer to Jacobsen’s definition of the term: “refugees of rural or urban background who are resident in an area designated as urban by the government” (Jacobsen 2006, p. 274). My informants were however, overall, from urban areas. I will provide some contextualization before I begin the analysis

Networking in Mekelle

Remittances sent from Eritrean family abroad were, for many, a major form of support. Moreover, religious networks and networks among Eritrean refugees themselves proved important. However, I focus on the networks that cross the national boundary, as this thesis in its whole explores the ambivalent relationship between the two national groups and its implications for the Eritrean refugees who are navigating their life in Mekelle.

Jacobsen, although mentioning that social vulnerability among urban refugees vary, categorizes urban refugees as a subset of the national urban poor (2006, p. 275-276). However, my informants benefit from social networks among people in varying positions of the economical
hierarchy within Ethiopia and the larger world. Hence, some could be categorized as much a subset of the middle class Ethiopians as of the poor.

First, the degree to which their family abroad were able to send remittances varied. I observed one Eritrean student wearing plastic shoes at times, while other students could afford to rent housing. They each paid 100 birr every month, instead of sleeping in the dorms with other students free of charge. Two of the students were financially able to go swimming at a hotel, used by middle income, and upwards, Ethiopians. Further, graduation meant for some they had to go back to the refugee camp while others had lived a few years in Addis Ababa on remittances before they began studies. Ethiopian networks likewise mirror such differences. Salem lived in a house owned by her husband’s family. It was a comfortable size house with a big open space inside their gate, in an expensive area of the city. They had two children, one of them still an infant. Their three year old girl was sleeping in a bed next to their bed to which there was attached an extended bed for the baby. Her husband’s father, who was Ethiopian, had paid for his education in a private university. Later on, he got a job and is currently working in a private university. In contrast, Tewedaj lived with her two daughters in her sister’s house. The sister had married an Ethiopian years before, and was now Ethiopian. They had two children. They all, except the sister’s husband, lived in one small house in a slum area and shared one bed. Their mother was Ethiopian, but lived, together with their Eritrean father, in Eritrea. Tewedaj’s sister worked in relatively low-paid, heavy-labor making food for students. Tewedaj worked in the informal sector, likewise in low-paid, heavy-labor job, washing clothes for students and others.

An ARRA official I interviewed in Shire, told me that Eritrean refugees living in Tigray differ from those who live in Addis Ababa, whose occupations are more diverse; they work and often start their own businesses. Further, the numbers of refugees are less in Tigray. He estimated that 150 and 50 refugees, having benefitted from the Out Of Camp Policy live, respectively in Mekelle and Adigrat, mostly dependent and supported by Ethiopian relatives, often leaving them “idle”.

As previous chapters illustrated, the boundary between the national groups are blurred. I suggest that some Ethiopians who have grown up in Eritrea at times appear as co-nationals. That is, they share some of the sentiment connected with belonging with each other and obligation to help Eritreans in the way a co-national would do. Some would call Eritreans their brothers and sisters. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Carsten notes that kinship can become powerful political symbols that appeal to the emotions of ordinary citizens. She suggests that the boundaries between kinship, nation and religion are blurred (2004, pp. 154-155). Loyalty among co-nationals
and particularly people considered *beteseb* (family) is, in my impression, strong in the context of my fieldwork. When I say “considered” family, it is because it need not be based on biological ties. A key informant went to visit an Eritrean woman in the hospital. He did not know her, but an Eritrean living in America had asked him to go. He explained to me that this was their culture; they take care of each other. Another cultural trait is the obligation to “offer everything you have” when a guest comes. As was pointed out in chapter two, the refugees, unless they have a special medical case, have no right to humanitarian aid. Although hospitality is a traditional trait, it is important to keep in mind that poor livelihoods among host communities challenges the effect of such hospitality (Kibreab, 1985, p. 69).

Granovetter (1973) explains that the strength or the weakness of ties depend on a few intercorrelated factors: time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie (p. 1361). The latter three factors are of more relevance in this context, as many did not meet for years due to the war and current state of “no peace-no-war”. The following examples depict instances of varying strengths of ties resulting in social capital to the refugees.

**Family ties**

First, an Eritrean woman, and her two daughters, lived with her Ethiopian sister and her children. Another Eritrean middle-aged man I met lived with his sister, who had Ethiopian citizenship, as she was married to an Ethiopian banker. Further, an Ethiopian friend had an Eritrean mother who had come as a refugee to Ethiopia. The mother largely relied on her children who lived in Mekelle for social capital - all of whom had Ethiopian citizenship through their Ethiopian fathers. She also relied on the daughter who lived in Europe and sent remittances. These are instances of already existing strong ties resulting in social capital.

Among the students, all my key informants had Ethiopian family. In addition, other students I met had Ethiopian family members, whom they would stay with during holidays. Still, not all had familiar ties with Ethiopians. Robel did not have close contact with his family who lived close to the border-areas due to mobility limits. However, he enjoyed his friendship with an Ethiopian cousin he had studied with while an undergraduate. While the cousin was poor and could therefore not provide Robel with material support, his description of their interaction made me interpret it as emotional support. Further, Daniel had Ethiopian family he had lived with for some months in Addis Ababa before he moved into a shared housing with other Eritrean friends. His Eritrean friend had likewise lived with his Ethiopian family for some months, before they
found it too challenging to host him. He then found a job and rented a room in the city. Alexander befriended, and expressed he enjoyed visiting, an Ethiopian cousin he knew when in Ethiopia. Tewelde’s father was Ethiopian. One student, Zelalem, had a brother abroad. The brother had connected him with their Ethiopian brothers, with whom they shared a common Eritrean father, when Zelalem arrived in Ethiopia. Zelalem visited the brothers and their mother in the school holiday, and framed that encounter positively to me. These examples are mostly instances of a weak or non-existent tie, as many had never met their family member or only had as a child, between the refugee and the Ethiopian citizen, while they both have a stronger or weaker tie to a third person.

For example, Eldana met her Ethiopian cousin in Mekelle. She spoke nicely about her, spent holidays with her, and visited at other times as well. She told me the cousin had become family to her. The fact that she had family who owned a car became very useful when she got sick with typhoid and needed to go to the hospital at night. Eldana’s father had returned to Ethiopia, some years prior to me meeting Eldana, to gather the property he had left behind when the family had been deported. He introduced Eldana to the cousin and told her to take care of Eldana when he left. Eldana has a strong tie to her father, and the father has a strong tie to the cousin, to the extent that he can tell her to take care of Eldana. Granovetter argues that such triad never occurs - there will always exist a tie between B and C, if A is closely tied to both (p. 1363). However, Eldana and the other student’s young age (twenties) and the closed border, allows such a scenario. Having looked at familial ties, I now move to look at ties between Eritreans and Ethiopians that are not related.

**Ties across the national boundary**

When we came to the entrance, Yonas had some trouble reaching what seemed to be the key, which lay between the door and the rock wall. Two men, seeming to be in their 50s or 60s, sitting next to the entrance, smiled and helped him open. When we came in, there was a long thin path stretching about 10 meters inside. On both sides there were small houses, and at the end, I later learned, was a common toilet - a hole in the ground. We entered their house (a room) of about 10 square meters. It had a very thin mattress on the floor. Some soap, shampoo and nail-polish were standing next to the mattress in one corner. A small stove for two pans, and some other kitchen utensils were located in another corner. Some bags filled with clothes hung on the wall. In the middle of the room, a young lady friend, Melat, prepared “Buna” (a coffee ceremony). Sara had cooked “bellet”, a traditional cream like soup, which she served with “Selsi” a spicy tomato sauce and some vegetables. We all ate from one big plate, a common way of eating in Eritrea.
Sarah and Yonas, both in their twenties, were in a relationship. They lived together in a decent neighborhood in Mekelle. After spending about five months in the camp, they came into Mekelle. This was seven months prior to me meeting them. Sara had long black hair, and often, a smile on her face, which would sometimes break out in joyful laughter. She wore either of her three black tights, colored t-shirts, and sometimes pink nail polish. Their friend Melat, was an Ethiopian. However, she had lived most of her life in Asmara in the same neighborhood as Yonas but had come back to Ethiopia a year earlier. They had met her by chance on the street in Mekelle. Likewise, an Ethiopian young man I met in a taxi on my way to Adigrat had bumped into friends from his time growing up in Asmara on the street. They were now refugees studying at the university in Adigrat. I further heard another similar story.

Melat had assisted Sara in getting her first job as a waitress in a pizza house, earning 500 birr per month for 10 hour long shifts. While Yonas and Sara have a strong tie, Yonas further had a weak tie to Melat. This weak tie functioned as a network bridge for Sara, into a useful tie (Granovetter, p. 1365). In her workplace, Sara befriended another Ethiopian woman, who had grown up in Asmara, who months later led me to Sarah. Further, when they had left the refugee camp for Mekelle, they spent the first night in a hotel. The next day they called another Ethiopian woman, whom Yonas knew from his neighborhood, and she helped them find the room they were now renting. She had spent her childhood in Asmara and they had stayed connected on Facebook.

The next job Sara got was in an internet café. Yonas had gotten in touch with the owners, a couple in their late twenties, through an Ethiopian man working in a video store close to where they lived. The weak tie between Yonas and a person in the neighborhood functioned again as a bridge for Sara. The parents of the female owner had lived in Eritrea for 30 years before she was born. Many of her aunts and uncles were still living there. However, they had lost touch due to the practical difficulties of communication, which is a result of the hostile relationship between the two countries. She expressed her unhappiness with the closed borders suggesting that Eritreans want to come to Ethiopia and Ethiopians likewise would like to go to Eritrea.

When Sara met with the owner’s husband, to sign the work contract, she showed him her permit to stay in Mekelle from ARRA. Sara told me he had looked at it and then said “Ab, gwal Asmara, gobez” (ah, daughter of Asmara, good), before he made a copy. While she had first been informed
her monthly payment would be 700 birr, she was surprised to see that the man wrote 1000 birr on the contract. She told me that she had not understood why he had changed the payment. While we cannot know for sure that her being Eritrean was the reason he raised the payment, it is safe to say that her Eritrean identity did not make him discriminate against her. Further, when she got sick, they took her to their friend who was a medical practitioner. He did not charge her for the treatment, leaving her only to pay for the medication she needed.

When I returned to Mekelle four months after ending my fieldwork, I went by Sara’s workplace. I was excited to meet again one of the informants whom I had gotten closest with, only to have my heart sink in sadness. The owner shared with me that Sara had left to Sudan the day before. She would wait in Sudan, before continuing on her journey to Europe, until the change in seasons meant the rough seas would be more tame. The employer showed me pictures of her daughter’s birthday party. Sara and Yonas were in one of them. Further, Yonas had tapestried the daughter’s habesha dress, she explained me, while smiling. Yonas worked in a shop where they make habesha dresses. It was an insecure income, as they only called him when they needed him to work, and paid accordingly. It is clear that the network Yonas and Sara had with Sara’s employers, can be seen to provide material as well as emotional support for the couple. While they are not co-nationals, the owner’s familiar links blur the strict boundary between the national categories. The next examples further explore this.

A student told me that some people working in the administration on his campus, on hearing his accent, told him they had lived in Asmara. They let him skip the line as well as providing him with some free study materials. Some had told him that they considered Ethiopia a prison, and that if the borders were open, they would not stay in Ethiopia for another day. They would go directly to Asmara. Moreover, they told him they are so sad to see what is happening with Eritrea and want to help the Eritreans. This incident, accompanied by following examples, show how there is a potential sense of affinity between the Ethiopian citizens and Eritrean refugees based on the former having lived in Asmara (Eritrea). The Ethiopians in this case expressed directly that they felt a strong connection with Asmara, mourned the current situation, and felt the need to “help”, or support, the Eritreans that come here. Next, I asked an Eritrean refugee if he had Ethiopian family. He answered he had a lot of “betseb” (family), explaining they were close Ethiopian friends that he had known growing up in Asmara. The historical mobility between the countries creates scenarios where people have close ties that were cut off, but then are reconfirmed and become strong again when they reconnect. However, such potential does not
always manifest, as a sense of affinity. One Ethiopian man, who had lived many years in Eritrea, clearly expressed his dislike and distrusts toward Eritreans. He said he “knows them”.

**Ethiopian spouses**

Degef, an Eritrean refugee in his early forties, lived with his Ethiopian wife, who had lived most of her life in Eritrea, and their four children. The mother of his Ethiopian wife was an important support to the family. For instance, she had come from Gondar, where she lived, to visit them for two weeks. She had brought food: “*chans*” and “*berbere*” which would last for six months. “It is very big help”, he told me. Still, when I asked why they moved from Gondar, where they had lived the first years, he said that he had more networks that could help him in Mekelle, that was, his Ethiopian friends that had lived in Eritrea. They did, for example, support him financially so that he was able to send one of his daughters to private school, and had further paid their rent before they got help from an Evangelic church he serves. This, like the example above, shows a reconnection between people with former strong ties. It was one of these friends who introduced me to Degef. The friend clearly stated that they, the Eritreans and themselves, were one people. They had similar skin color, culture and language, divided by politics. “They are our brothers, so their problems are our problems and our problems are their problems”, he explained. Moreover, this man was born in Asmara. He missed his friends that still lived there, and felt sad about the current situation characterized by conflict. It is clear that this man sees his Eritrean friends as co-nationals or co-ethnic, and recognizes his duty in supporting them.

Likewise, Esther had an Ethiopian husband who had lived in Eritrea. The couple knew each other in Eritrea but he had left before her. When she arrived, she lived the first weeks with his mother, before they got married, as their faith does not allow for unmarried couples to co-habit. She has stayed in Ethiopia for eight years and today they have a four year old child together. This woman, who was very social became one of the informants I spent more time with and I was welcomed into her social network. While other Jehovah Witnesses seemed to be at the top of her social network hierarchy, regardless of nationality and ethnicity, she also had several friends who were Ethiopians but who grew up in Eritrea. She also knew other Eritrean refugees, among them some from her church. Moreover, she had also befriended Orthodox Christian Ethiopians, without connections to Eritrea, from her neighborhood, and as her uncle was Ethiopian, she had an Ethiopian cousin living close by. I once went with her to the market. We went from one woman to another for small chats, until we ended up buying tomatoes from a young woman. All the women, except the one we bought from who like herself was an Eritrean refugee, were Ethiopians that had lived in Eritrea, she told me.
Making family

I have shown a few examples of ties, old and new, between Eritrean refugees and Ethiopians that lived in Eritrea. Another such example, although slightly different, is inspired by Markus Bell who analyzed the appearance of pseudo-kinship among North Korean refugees in South Korea, as “the fabric of their lives – kinship - has been torn in the process of relocation” (Bell, 2013, p 246). I see this next example in the light of kinship as social and emotional work.

After spending a year in a refugee camp, Eyob had stayed two years with his Ethiopian father, in the father’s hometown close to Mekelle. He had not known his father prior to coming to Ethiopia. Eyob forged a close bond with Teklehaymanot and Hela, an Ethiopian couple that owned a café in the city. He had regularly frequented the café and had developed a good relationship with Teklehaymanot. Hela lived her first 15 years in Eritrea until the family, due to the outbreak of war, moved back to Ethiopia. Eyob moved into their home and began working in the café six months prior to me meeting him in March. Hela explained to me that while all the workers had one day of work, Eyob had told her “I am your brother, I will help you”, and insisted he would work every day. Eyob was arrested and risked years of imprisonment a few weeks before I met him. This was due to an attempt to get an Ethiopian passport, through his Ethiopian father, by which he had been accused of faking his identity. Hela and her husband helped him get in touch with a free legal help organization, which won the case. Hela also wanted to help him start up his own business using her license. However, the aspirations to get to Norway where his sister was, and the hassle with the state/police, and the fact that his sister could help him with the financial challenges to cross the Mediterranean Sea, resulted in Eyob leaving Ethiopia. When we talked about Eyob’s plans to leave, Hela’s face reminded me of a worried mother. “Ohh, he is my brother!”, she exclaimed one day in frustration while we were sitting in her café. Note that it is not uncommon for Ethiopian/Eritrean mothers to use the term hawey (my brother) for their sons. Eyob had left with his father to the camp in hope of changing his citizenship to Ethiopian. However, ARRA claimed he had overstayed his one month permit to stay out of the camp and, as a result, he was not permitted to go back into the city, nor did he get an Ethiopian citizenship. He left the camp with other Eritreans and a smuggler shortly after. Hela and her husband stayed in touch with him and received a call from him when he arrived in Italy.

Carsten argues that kinship can be seen as determined by birth, and therefore unchangeable, but it can also be seen as shaped by ordinary, everyday activities; in other words, by human engagement (2004, p. 6). It is a realm of the “made”, not just the “given”, in which people invest
their creative energy and emotions (p. 9). While it is common, in this cultural context of my field, to frequently use the terms brothers and sisters, the strength of the bond at hand and the obligations that come with it, vary from relation to relation. The relation between Eyob and the couple, I rate as one with high emotional intensity and depth, in addition to being described in kinship idioms by the actors themselves. Similarly, Eldana, who had known her cousin for about six months, had to “make” the relation, which resulted in her telling me that the cousin had “become family” to her. In other words, although they were biologically related, they still had to “make” the family relation, the emotional bond. Iyob created such a bond with someone he was not related to biologically.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, most of my informants’ lives reflected the historical interconnectedness and blurred boundaries between the two nationalities. They benefitted from pre-existing and new relationships with Ethiopians who had lived in Eritrea, and from relationships with family members who were Ethiopians.
Notes

1. Both notions of enemy images and distrust as result of the war and notions of brotherhood due to multiple links and shared history were apparent in discourses on Eritreans during the Ethio-Eritrean war, in Ethiopia (Tronvoll, 2009).
Chapter 5: Sharing dormitories - navigating student life and enemy images

**Border clash**

Towards the end of my fieldwork, on June 12, 2016, there was a short border clash. Hundreds were reported dead and the governments blamed each other (Campbell & Birhanu, 2016). I heard about the incident through a twitter post. Friends from the border area called their family and had it confirmed. Rumors, among some women in the neighborhood I resided in, claimed that Eritrean soldiers had attacked Ethiopian soldiers while the latter were playing football. A few days later, I asked Sara and her Ethiopian employer if they had heard about the incident. They had, through Facebook. I expressed feeling sad about the fighting. They agreed. The employer quickly told me that it was the governments, not the people, who were fighting. People on both sides wished for mobility between the countries, she explained. Neither Sara nor her employer raised any controversial aspect of the incident, such as suggesting which country triggered it. They kept silent on those issues. Also, the Ethiopian employer was quick to distance herself and her employee from the conflict by assigning it to the governments, recasting their relationship by removing the enmity outside it, as something that belongs to the governments, not the people. Although the border clash is outside the scope of this thesis, I use it as an entry point to reflect on the tense relationship between the countries. It is further an entry into the main analysis in this chapter, of mechanisms and strategies employed to allow co-existence in everyday life, in a post-war-like context.

In this chapter, I analyze these strategies/mechanisms, arguing that they contribute to allowing people to co-exist, and to create relationships in a contentious context. First, I give a short historical backdrop to the theme warfare in the region, before I contextualize student life. In the analysis I draw on Marita Eastmond and Johanna Mannegren Selimovic’s *Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life* for comparison and theoretical insight. I further use Karen Jacobsen’s term “emotional support”, which I introduced in the previous chapter, parallel to exploring the strategy of silencing and the relation between the two. Next, I analyze the strategy of allocating responsibility upwards, drawing on Kjetil Tronvoll’s insights. I end the chapter with a discussion where I explore the extent to which these strategies actually contribute to foster “real” relationships and whether they function as reconciliation processes. In this context, I make comparisons between my own findings and those of Millena Belloni as an entry point for the discussion. I argue that such questions should be seen in the light of the self and identity as dividable and processual.
History of warfare

Reid notes that in the 1760s and 1770s the habesha polity experienced a crystallization of evolving crises that dated back to the mid-sixteenth century. The patterns of and reasons behind the violence during this epoch, the zemene mesafint, exist to the present day (2011, p. 39). Repeated shifts in alliances during continuous historical conflicts related to land and socio-political hierarchy in the region throughout the last few centuries, created contradictory and overlapping enemy images (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 36-37). Tronvoll shows how a song composed by a disabled veteran TPLF fighter, when the Eritrean-Ethiopian war erupted in 1998, referred to old conflicts. One sentence goes as follows: “He has provoked me today, wanting enmity and feud as in the old days.” Tronvoll suggests it makes a parallel between the Eritrean invasion in Badme and layers of conflict that spanned the Mereb River for centuries. The ruler of the component part of the Abyssinian Empire in Tigray and the ruler of Medir Babir, the Eritrean component, were in constant power struggles during the feudal times. This, at times, escalated into small combats and feuds between the nobility of two Abyssinian provinces. Further, the Eritrean colonial group’s participation in Italy’s two attempts to conquer Tigray, was perceived as traitorous by the Ethiopian people. Moreover, during 1985 to 1988, there was a breach of relations between TPLF and EPLF. In this time, EPLF did not allow relief aid to cross through the territory it held, into Tigray. These events likewise refer to the “enmity and feud as in the old day” (p. 64).

Contextualizing student-life

Eritrean refugees who pass an entrance exam have the possibility to pursue an undergraduate degree, funded by the Ethiopian government. Students told me they had been encouraged, when they arrived in the camp, to continue their education. The students live on campus, in dormitories, and eat meals in a student cantina. One of my informants, in Mekelle, told me that there was one representative from each campus who would receive a monthly call from ARRA. They would then gather the rest of the students to go and pick up their 300 birr (350 for the female students), which is a UNHCR support to the students. Several of the students I met, but not all, told me they were receiving additional financial support from family abroad. They had their own bank accounts in the Ethiopian bank to which their relatives transferred money. I met one young man who worked as a woodworker in his spare time to earn extra money. I also met students who, upon graduation, had no other option than to go back to the refugee camp.

Though my impression was that most informants ate in the school cantina most of the time, two of my informants told me they did not. They usually ate in a private cantina at the campus and, the time I had lunch with them, they took me to an ordinary café. They were quick to pay the bill.
I suggested we could have eaten in the cantina where they usually eat, as the ordinary one was more expensive. They answered that the food in the other cantina was not tasty; I might not have liked it. It is obvious that the ability to eat out of the regular school cantina reflects their access to remittances. However, those students that choose to eat out receive 450 birr from the university, to compensate for the food they do not eat in the school cantina. Three students rented a room, about 10 square meters in size, paying 300 birr monthly. Mattresses occupied around one third of the floor and they had one chair, which they invited me to sit on. There was a PC they used for their studies and for listening to music. These observations show that the Eritrean refugees are not overall, as a group, poorer than the Ethiopian students with whom they studied. As one Eritrean student pointed out to me, “most Ethiopian students come from rural areas and are poor”.

An informant at Adigrat University told me that there was not a strong cohesion, or solidarity, among the Eritrean students. Rather, there are many small groups. They mostly hang out with other students in their class; Eritreans and Ethiopians. Many of them, he only knows by face, and he would say “hi” if passing them. While some students are involved in an opposition against the Eritrean government, and try to convince the others to join, most of them do not want to get involved with politics, he explained. During my last visit, however, I was surprised to realize there was a café that a large number of Eritrean (and Ethiopian) students frequented, and one of the students agreed to my suggestion that it could be called an “Eritrean café”.

The number of Eritrean refugees studying at Adigrat University was much higher than at Mekelle University. The Eritrean students at Mekelle University are further spread out on four campuses across the city. I visited three of the campuses. Hence, as the numbers are already quite low, the groups of Eritrean refugees at the different university campuses were low; four to seven in each of the three campuses. My impression was that there was not much contact between the students on the different campuses. One of my informants pointed out that while he and his friends would have enjoyed meeting up with the others, the studies filled up their schedules making it challenging timewise.

Moving forward

An ARRA official in Shire stated that, in the 2014-2015 school year, only 80 out of the 147 Eritrean students completed the year. I heard of one young woman and two other young men who had withdrawn from the University of Mekelle before I arrived. Both of the men were unhappy about the discipline they were assigned. One of them went to Addis Ababa, while the
other migrated further, through Sudan towards Europe. The woman’s reason for leaving will be explored in detail below.

While students appreciated the possibility to study, pointing out to me that it gave them a break from stressful thoughts, it occasionally entailed a sense of wasting time. Many had partly, or fully, completed education in Eritrea. The Eritrean government does not issue educational certificates to citizens before they are demobilized from the national service. The lack of demobilization is, for many, part of the reason they left in the first place. One man was educated in a private college and was frustrated that it was not acknowledged by the Ethiopian government. Further, the graduate students told me that when they had chosen their discipline, three years back, many did not get their choice. They suggested this had since improved. Hence, the feeling of repeating education, wasting time, and sometimes studying something they had not chosen, was for many challenging, and might have been contributing to the low numbers of students actually finishing a degree.

The language of instruction in the Ethiopian universities is English. However, one of my informants complained about the hardship resulting from the fact that many of the lecturers nonetheless did often lecture in Amharic. Upon asking why, the lecturer told him that “English is not ours; Amharic is our language”. As my boyfriend is a lecturer at the university, I am aware that Amharic is at times used. There are two reasons for that. At times, it is due to the inability of many of the students to follow discussions in English. Further, some lecturers struggle to teach in English. This does of course become a challenge for the Eritrean students, many of whom do not master Amharic.

One of the students I talked with in Adigrat told me, after the other Eritrean students had left, that he hated being there. He, like all the others, although they had not admitted it, wanted to migrate further, he explained. The only reason they were stuck was the lack of sufficient Genzeb (money). The next chapter analyses the engagement with the future and secondary migration.

Dormitories and emotional capital

I was told by Eritrean students, in Mekelle and Adigrat, that they are allocated beds in the same dormitory the first year of studies. The next year, however, there is no guarantee they will stay in the same dormitory. One Eritrean expressed appreciation of the feeling of safety it created to live with other Eritreans the first year, before one knows anyone and becomes part of the class. This was a common sentiment among the students I met. Feven told me that in the beginning, they,
the four Eritreans, spent time only with each other. After some time, however, they began interacting with the Ethiopians too. Sharing a dormitory with other Eritreans, therefore, is experienced as emotional support (Jacobsen 2006) for the Eritrean students and seems to facilitate the integration into the university environment.

As the dormitories house between four and eight beds, and given the fact that the Eritrean students were relatively low in numbers in some of the campuses, they shared rooms with Ethiopians. The occurrence of respectful and friendly interactions between Eritrean and Ethiopian students, especially those who had been there for a while, was something several of my informants described to me. I further observed this among three of my key informants. Robel often borrowed a PC from his Ethiopian roommate. Another example illustrates the point:

Feven had just come from class. We walked to their dorm. Another Eritrean girl, and an Ethiopian girl they share dormitory with, were there. The Eritrean girl was helping the Ethiopian girl to wash her hair; slowly pouring water over her head so that it rinsed her long black hair and dripped down into a bucket on the floor. They were laughing and chatting. Feven and I were lying on the bed resting. We complained about the heat and the pressure from the studies.

**Silencing**

Having contextualized the student life, I will now embark on the analysis of silencing. Eritreans use silence as a strategy to protect themselves from a suppressive state and its spies, in a context where “the boundary between what can be said and what cannot is uncertain […]” (Massa, 2016, p. 263). This was reflected in my encounters with some of the students, whose eyes kept an overview over the café while we talked in hushed tones about issues of political nature. Likewise, silence is a common practice in the process of arranging the border-crossing (p. 263). The way I am about to analyze the use of silence now is slightly different; with a focus on the relationship between Eritreans and Ethiopians. I shall present the definition of silencing as used by Eastmond and M. Selimovic, but first, I compare the context of my fieldwork with the context in which they did their research. They did research in Bosnia Herzegovina, a context that has similarities to the one where I did my research. There are however some differences between my informants and theirs, which, along with the similarities, I will now point out.

First, their informants have returned to what used to be their home, and have therefore lived among former neighbors who were on the other side of the conflict. On the other hand, my informants have arrived as refugees in a neighboring country. However, as pointed out earlier, several of my informants have in some sense returned, as they were born in Ethiopia and lived
some years there. Moreover, some would meet old neighbors; Ethiopians that lived in Eritrea, or, from their time living in Ethiopia. Further, while the people in Bosnia Herzegovina are one nationality, but divided ethnically and in terms of religion, the Eritreans and Ethiopians in my research have different nationalities, but are ethnically similar and share religion. Second, while people permanently returned to Bosnia Herzegovina, most Eritrean refugees’ stay in Ethiopia is temporary. However, “temporary” at times, meant several years. In fact, one of my informants left Eritrea nearly 10 years earlier. Third, the situation in Bosnia Herzegovina, in the time of the research, was considered stable in terms of refugee return, physical security and property restitution. However, the political situation was fraught; hence, it undermined the anticipation of a shared future between those who had been divided (Eastmond and M. Selimovic, 2012, p. 508).

A “no peace no war” state characterized the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia when I conducted the research. Hence, while there are differences, there is a common context of having to coexist in everyday life in a postwar situation, where the hostilities that characterized the war have not been properly dealt with politically.

While Eastmond and M. Selimovic identify two main categories of silence used in the everyday social interaction of their informants, only one of them is applicable to my data. This is due to the differences pointed out above. The applicable category of silencing “has to do with enabling or protecting social relations and affirming a sense of normal life. [Silence] is investigated as a means for bridging boundaries and producing possibilities for maintaining old relations and making new ones.” (Eastmond & M. Selimovic, 2012, p. 507).

A choice between speech and silence

I have contextualized the circumstances in which the students lead their everyday life; a context that is post-war-like. Taking a conversation between Eldana and I as a starting point, I will now analyze the use of silence.

I was having tea with Eldana, a female second-year student, about six months after I had been introduced to her. When I asked her how studies were, she told me there was a conflict among the boys regarding issues related to the studies. She had been elected as a class representative, a mediator, between the students and the lecturers to deal with these issues. I asked if the conflict was between Eritreans and Ethiopians. It was not, and the girls were not involved. “They treat you like an equal,” she told me, appreciating that the other students trusted her and chose her as a class representative. She further described the other (Ethiopian) students: “They are really
welcoming people” and “you wouldn’t expect” that. She further explained that people “talk with each other” and “they don’t want to fight. They don’t bother talking about politics”.

First, “you wouldn’t expect,” points to how she sees the relationship between the Eritreans and Ethiopians as potentially conflictual, and that both sides are aware of that potential. Another student told me that because of the war, there exist stereotypes that Eritreans and particularly Tigrayans hate each other. Therefore, he, and many other Eritrean refugees (Massa, 2016, p. 265), had arrived in Ethiopia expecting this. However, he did not have any uncomfortable experiences; he felt welcomed. During his studies, he got an Ethiopian girlfriend and other Ethiopian friends. I later learned that his father, whom he had not met prior to coming to Ethiopia, was an Ethiopian citizen. Second, the fact that people “talk with each other” depicts normal everyday interactions between the Ethiopians and Eritreans, which I also illustrated when contextualizing student life. The fact that the classmates elected her to be the class representative reflects trust. Further, she adds that “they don’t want to fight. They don’t bother talking about politics”. This last point brings us to the issue of silencing.

Eastmond and M. Selimovicy note that people pragmatically chose when to use speech and when to use silence in negotiating their everyday interactions (p. 511). When they chose silence, the informants perceived it as a strategy to build peace. Further, the informants experienced silence as a way to respect those who had lost loved ones (p. 514). Silence is not erasure; it “rests upon the understanding that everyone knows what happened” and is therefore necessary, as what happened in the war is too “raw”, too “fresh” (p. 512). Silence, therefore, they argue, might allow a sense of “normality” and facilitates encounters between people that were on different sides of a conflict. It is “[…] both a pragmatic choice and an instrument that fosters relationships and opens up common ground […]” (Eastmond & M. Selimovicy, 2012, p. 515). Eldana and her friends likewise made pragmatic choices concerning when to use speech and when to use silence in their every day interactions. She clearly states that people talk, but they chose to keep silent on some issues because they do not want to fight. Hence, the way she views and presents it to me, silencing is a strategy for coexistence, to create a sense of normality, and foster relationships and friendships. However, as she was the only one who directly spoke to me about the silencing, I cannot say for sure that silencing is a strategy for reconciliation in all situations. We have to understand silence in its context and cannot easily generalize the experience of some students.
As Eastmond and Selimovicy note:

> As part of human interaction, silence conveys a broad range of social meanings that, like speech, is always situated [...]. [It] can be used to mark affirmation, disapproval or denial, or it may signal the impotence of shame, fear or ignorance. It can communicate respect, empathy or admiration, as well as mockery or suspicion. It can also be effective in communicating ambiguity [...], particularly useful in contentious or uncertain situations. (Eastmond & M. Selimovicy, 2012, p. 506).

Silence, therefore, can reflect fear, as the refugees inhabit a rather marginalized position at the university. However, the Ethiopians Eldana interacts with are not in the vulnerable situation that the Eritreans are, given that they are nationals and the majority. The Ethiopians, likewise, she said, do not bother talking about politics. Further, they elected her as a class representative. One of my Eritrean informants told me, though, that they were not “free” to talk about their experience in Ethiopia to UNHCR as national law trumps international law. This has of course to do with his fear of criticizing the government, as he worried what the consequences might be. Such a scenario, however, of fear being the reason to keep silent, can be relevant in everyday encounters as well, which I will illustrate soon. A few more examples are worth mentioning first. When I asked an Ethiopian friend why he does not talk about controversial political issues with Eritreans, he said that he would not raise such issues with Eritreans in Ethiopia. He explained that the refugees in Ethiopia were not on equal ground, so it would not feel fair. In this situation, silencing is an expression of respect and a value of fairness.

During a conversation with two young Eritrean refugees I met in Addis Ababa, one of them told me he had lived in Addis Ababa until he was ten years old, before he and the family were deported. I shared with him that I had read about the governments’ deportation of Eritreans and Ethiopians, from their respective countries, at the outbreak of the war. The other young man quickly responded with a firm and annoyed voice, explaining that Ethiopians had not been deported, only Eritreans. The one who was born in Addis Ababa seemed uncomfortable and quickly tried to avoid further exploration of the issue by denouncing it as “politics”. I added that I had read about those disagreements, and the topic quickly faded. While I, and one of the young men, were on our way into a rather controversial political discussion, the other young man had a prompt response which averted it from continuing further. While the controversial theme we raised was about the relation between the two countries, there were no Ethiopians in this encounter, but two Eritreans with different relations to Ethiopia. As the reaction was quick, it is less likely he reflected on it first. Rather, the reaction seemed to be an embodied strategy of avoiding conflict from escalating. Hence, this might suggest that silencing is, in some situations, a
reflected pragmatic choice made by people who do not want to fight, but it can likewise be a practice that is embodied; a “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 72-73).

This is not to claim that politics is never spoken about between Eritreans and Ethiopians. One student, at our house for lunch, spoke about politics with my boyfriend. These were however “safe” themes. He criticized the Eritrean government, claiming that Ethiopia is not, as the government claims, the enemy. Mulu, on the other hand, criticized the Ethiopian government for not including the Eritrean refugees in the work market more liberally. Further, an Eritrean refugee that worked as a journalist, and Mulu, quite openly talked about politics. They agreed on a theme: that there should be peaceful relations between the countries, and economical integration, but not political. Hence, the conversations were safe and future oriented. When Eldana said they don’t want to fight, and therefore don’t bother talking about politics, she likely meant political themes that would create fights, such as, whether Ethiopians were really deported or not, or as to who begun the war.

**Being “alone”**

The blurred boundary between the two nationalities, and familiar links, make it possible to conceal one’s Eritrean identity, and many Eritreans take advantage of it, Massa suggests (2016 p. 270). On this note, I will explore silence as an expression of fear.

Zafu, a female Eritrean refugee, had already left for Addis Ababa, to live with her Eritrean aunt, when I arrived in Ethiopia. She had quitted her studies after one semester; I never managed to meet her in person. I did, however, speak with her a few times on the phone. Quickly and energetically, she explained how uncomfortable she had felt in Mekelle. “The culture is very different. In Asmara, people help each other”. Although she enjoyed the freedom, she had felt scared to expose her Eritrean identity while at the university. She lied and told people she was Ethiopian, hence silencing her Eritrean identity. She was scared that if people knew she was Eritrean, they would not want to help her or be with her. It was difficult, she explained, to be alone without friends and family. She did not have any Ethiopian family. She was the only Eritrean girl at her campus. Due to gender segregation, she did not share a dormitory with any other Eritreans. This is an important difference between her and the other students. Another male student at her campus told me she had not been happy. She had unsuccessfully attempted to change disciplines, and to change to a different campus where her friends, other Eritrean girls, were studying. Therefore, this girl did not enjoy the emotional capital enjoyed by the other students, a point I bring up in the discussion if this chapter.
I heard of one other incident of a first-year male student living as the only Eritrean student with Ethiopians. I think this was because two of the students had left during the first semester. However, as they were all male, he was able to spend time in the dormitory of the other Eritreans, hence still partly enjoying the emotional support. My informant depicts this: “He comes to us all the time, he just goes to the other dorm to sleep.” I asked if he preferred living with them, to which he answered, “yes”. “But are they nice, the people he lives with?” I asked him. “Yes they are” he assured me.

Allocating responsibility upwards

Having discussed the use of silencing as a strategy to co-exist in everyday life and foster relationships in a postwar-like context, I now move to the recurrent tendency to assign the conflict to the governments. As I noted in the introduction, the Eritrean highlanders and Ethiopian highlanders have a history of changing enemies and friends. Tronvoll notes that when people needed to reconcile quickly, as former foes became friends, allocating the responsibility to the political elite was an effective strategy (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 61-96).

Four male Eritrean students from Adigrat University and I were sitting together and were chatting informally, for about an hour, or so on varying issues. I asked them what they thought about the relation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Gere was quick to answer. Without seeming reluctant, he explained that the conflict was between the governments; hence, it was up to them to choose what to do about it. A bit earlier, when I asked if they had Ethiopian friends, the same person had likewise stated that it was the governments that were fighting, not the people “so we create connections and relations with the Ethiopians here, and we also have Eritrean friends”.

The next time we met, I suggested, in the context of one of them planning to travel the Libya route to Italy, that if he tried to get some family to fund a master degree for him, perhaps after two years or so, there would be some changes creating new opportunities. One of the others fired up stating, “There will not be changes after two years. We have been here for three years. It would take at least 10 years for the governments to make peace”. He explained that while he had, in the beginning, hoped for change, as the years passed, it faded. Gere then suggested that for any change to come about there would need to be a political shift of power in one of the countries. “They know each other, they won’t make peace,” he explained. “Both governments need to change” the other young man suggested. As I wrote in the introduction, the justification for the mobilization and lack of demobilization in Eritrea, through the national service, is the conflictual relationship with Ethiopia. The national service is also a major factor in making young people flee Eritrea.
Daniel, who said it was easier to live in Addis Ababa as one could conceal one’s Eritrean identity there (chapter two), told me that the governments were “just playing”. I suggested they were both concerned with winning. “No, not winning. One cannot win a war. One can only lose. Even if you occupy an area, you have not won, because you lose lives, and even one human life counts.” He continued: “they (the governments) are just playing to keep their power. It’s not really between the people. We are the same, same religion, same physical appearance. We look the same. You cannot see the difference between us.” Daniel was Amiche (chapter two), and like his Amiche identity, his statements reflect the ambivalence of the relationship between the Eritreans and Ethiopians.

The next example elaborates on the emphasis on ethnic similarities, along with allocating the conflict upwards. I told Robel, an anthropology student, that I had read about Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa seeing Ethiopia as an enemy (Belloni, 2015). I, on the other hand, was not left with that impression. He argued that the conflict is a political one between the governments, and not shared by the people on the ground who rather wish for good relations. He further suggested that while the controlled media in Eritrea attempted to convince people that Ethiopia was an enemy wanting to take their land, if one observed the people, one would see that they were highly intermarried. Reid notes that an outpouring of opinions about the Ethiopian state followed the eruption of the war and the large deportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia. The opinions depicted the Ethiopian state in a close to ahistorical way (2003, p. 376). Indeed, Tigrayans were, as the Eritreans, suppressed by Ethiopian rulers (Inquai, 1983). In fact, the Tigrayan guerilla group, which was at the heart of the new government, had fought a common enemy, the Dergue, as the Eritrean guerilla group. Robel likewise pointed out the ahistorical nature of the depiction of the Ethiopian state as the enemy. If someone simply asked him if Ethiopia was the enemy when he first came, he might have said yes, he explained. He explained this contradiction in terms of methodology, explaining that interviews and observations can result in different information.

Robel’s reflections can be treated similarly to how Tronvoll analyzed his informants’ shifting positions along the collective boundaries, projecting several different identities and enemies corresponding to them. Tronvoll uses Barth’s point that “boundaries create affordances which are selectively and pragmatically explored” (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 126). Robel “selectively and pragmatically” positions himself. He calls himself Eritrean. He suggested he might have accused Ethiopia of being the enemy in a different context. However, Robel also highlights the interconnectedness between Eritreans and Ethiopians through kinship, passing the conflict upwards. He himself has familiar links to Ethiopia. Hence, although he does not explicitly name a
distinct identity, he implicitly suggests they are in some sense the same group. In other situations, he talked about the cultural differences between Eritreans and the Ethiopians. I will further explore this issue of pragmatically drawing on different identities in the next chapter, in relation to mobility, that is, crossing borders.

**The making and unmaking of enemy images**

To elaborate on Robel's comment regarding methodology, Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic note, in the context of their research on silence in Bosnia Herzegovina,

>[An] interview can act as a normative platform for educating the researcher about an ethnonationalist narrative […]. Prolonged observation can provide a somewhat different picture, for example, of informants engaged in repeated respectful interactions with the ethnic other as part of their daily lives. (Eastmond & Mannergren Selimovic, 2012, p. 510).

To further illustrate the relevance of this insight, I make some comparisons with Milena Belloni's work from Addis Ababa. She carried out multi-cited research among Eritrean Refugees. Her location, a migration corridor that links Eritrea with Europe, included Eritrea, Addis Ababa, Khartoum (Sudan) and cities in Italy. Her work, *Cosmologies of Destinations*, published as a PhD dissertation in 2015, examines the mobility trajectories of Eritreans and the key symbolic structures and social mechanisms that encourage and sustain it.

Nearly all the Eritreans I met, that lived and worked in Mekelle, told me they did not know other Eritrean refugees there. They were, however, part of Eritrean refugee network stretching across the globe, including Addis Ababa. The Eritrean refugees Belloni met in Addis Ababa, on the other hand, were mostly concentrated in the same neighborhoods. They shared accommodations, in areas that, both because they were not particularly deprived and because they had local neighbors (often Tigrinyans), were not anything like ghettos and were at times middle class areas (2015. p. 122). Eritrean refugees inhabited the neighborhood she lived in and they usually owned internet cafes while Tigrayans usually owned other shops (p. 316). Several of her informants had opened small businesses like internet cafés and places to play billiard. Others were daily laborers, drivers or mechanics. Those who managed to find jobs were usually those who had relatives or other contacts in Addis Ababa and who spoke Amharic.

Belloni interprets the choice of accommodation arrangements as an expression of their common experience of being in transit in the city; the need to capitalize already scarce social capital while
also experiencing a deep mistrust between the Eritrean refugees and the local populations (pp. 123-124). She found that, although her informants recognized the similarities they share with Ethiopian highlanders, the social distance between the national groups seemed wide. Her informants described Ethiopians as lazy, cowards, uneducated, and not to be trusted. They were usually seen as historical enemies (pp. 125-126). This seems to mirror the national narrative forged by the Eritrean state as Robel described it: Ethiopians as enemies. Belloni does not give many examples of observed interaction between the two national groups. It was not the main focus of her research, and she says herself that she only partly touches upon the interactions and relations between Eritrean refugees and the local population (p. 124). She does, however, provide labels and opinions that form the common way for her informants to describe the local population, and concludes that the social distance between the two groups seem wide and is characterized by a lack of trust.

Moreover, it was rare that people told Belloni they used to have Ethiopian friends back in Asmara (p. 126), which, as is apparent from the previous chapter, was usual among many of my informants. Is the fact that my informants had Ethiopian friends from Asmara a reason for them choosing to come to Mekelle? Or is it rather that the same people, in a different context, when moving on to Addis Ababa or Khartoum for example, consciously or unconsciously downplay the connection? Daniel, who actively emphasized the ethnic similarities and sent the conflict upwards, had lived two years in Addis Ababa before coming to Mekelle to study. After living some months with Ethiopian family members, he moved into a shared housing arrangement with other Eritrean refugees. In fact, there were several cases among my informants of such movements between the two cities. It is worth asking what our conversation would have been like, if I had interviewed him in that context. On the other hand, it might rather illustrate that not all the refugees living in Addis Ababa had such a wide distance and lack of trust towards the locals.

Another possibility is that people, who by initiative or by chance, re-unite with former friends, and have a positive experience doing so, might mention these people as friends, while, if they had not met them again, they might not see them as worthwhile to mention. Sara was born in Addis Ababa and lived there until she was about 10 years old. I asked if she had friends there, and she answered that it was such a long time ago that people would not remember her. If she did go back, and by chance met with former friendly neighbors, the friendly relation could potentially be re-born, and she might have presented them to me as friends from the time she lived in Addis Ababa. While this is speculative, I met people who by chance met childhood friends from
Asmara from years back, in Tigray. It is worth asking whether they would have referred to them as friends from Asmara if they had not re-affirmed the friendship in the present. Hence, re-affirmation of former friendships and friendly relations can perhaps be seen as a peacemaking mechanism. It can weaken the social distance created by the conflicts and enemy images that is part of the ambivalent relationship between the two national groups.

One the one hand, we might wonder if prolonged observation, focusing on interaction between Eritreans and Ethiopians in particular, might have shown more respectful interactions as part of their daily lives. However, the absence of such examples in Belloni’s work might also reflect that there were indeed less interaction between the two groups in Addis Ababa than there were in Mekelle. After all, she did spend seven months in Addis Ababa, living with Eritrean refugees, which would make it likely that she would have observed interaction between the two groups. Yet, her conclusion is that the social distance seems wide, though not as wide as between the Eritrean refugees and the Sudanese in Khartoum (p. 127). The Eritreans in Addis Ababa were greater in numbers, and shared housing in groups, in the same areas. Hence, one alternative explanation might be that due to the large numbers of Eritrean refugees and such housing arrangements, there was less need for the kind of interaction I observed in my fieldwork; perhaps resulting in the national narrative of enmity being less challenged by respective friendly interaction, and thus still strongly felt.

If we see the act of migration among the many Eritrean refugees as a ritual, we can apply Randall Collins’ (2014) concept of “interaction ritual” and “collective – effervescence”. In the latter concept he builds on Durkheim’s work. The ritual interaction creates solidarity while the participants who are focusing on the same thing get caught up in each other’s emotions. Emotions and activities have their own micro-rhythm. Therefore, a certain emotional mood, whatever the emotion might be, becomes dominant among the group, due to the process of rhythmic entrainment physiologically (p. 108). Belloni has shown how collective effervescence existed among the Eritrean refugees, who constructed themselves as belonging to a group in transit, and influenced decisions to continue secondary migration (2015, p. 137). We can therefore ask if perhaps emotional moods of fear, distrust and hate, in relation to the locals, became dominant through such process of collective effervescence, accompanying already existing cognitive images. Further, stereotypes of Ethiopians and Eritreans appeared among my informants too, as I showed in chapter two. Bo Petersson distinguishes between stereotypes: a frozen image “[conveying] simplified beliefs about individual characteristics on the basis of ascribed group belonging”, and enemy images, in which the latter develops from the former, to
varying degrees (2009, p. 461). In other words, it might be that the two different contexts (places) could foster the flourishing of different aspects of the very ambivalent relationships between the two national groups. The stereotypes can change in degree and, in some contexts, turn into harsh enemy images.

To elaborate on this discussion, let us move back to Zafu who, along with other students, navigated a context where enemy images and stereotypes of hatred potentially existed. The importance of the emotional support, in the form of sharing a dormitory with other Eritreans, became evident. It seemed to work as a mechanism creating safety, that could facilitate interaction and integration with the locals, which resulted in respectful, friendly interaction between them and the Ethiopians. Zafu, on the other hand, felt alone and was scared to tell people she was Eritrean. In other words, acting as “not Eritrean”, there was no way she could have been part of any friendly interaction between Eritreans and Ethiopians, as her fear made her silence her Eritrean identity. Aurora Massa wrote her PhD on Eritrean refugees in Mekelle in 2013. She found that to hide one’s Eritrean identity was common among Eritrean refugees with Ethiopian family members in Mekelle, who could easily come across as repatriated Ethiopians (2016, p. 270). Further, students avoided her because it put them in the spotlight to interact with her, and they did not want their Eritrean identity revealed in an enemy country (p. 266). In contrast to her experience, none of the informants I met ever told me to not reveal to anyone that they were Eritreans, though I intuitively did not see it as my task to do so. In fact, one of my informants told me that Eritrean students, unlike Ethiopian Tigrayans, freely and proudly express their identity. He assumes this is because they feel superior. Another student similarly said “We are open to our classmates at any circumstances”.

In comparison with Belloni’s findings, it might seem like being both “too alone” and “too many”, might work as obstacles to facilitation of encounters between Eritreans and Ethiopians. Both cases can work as mechanisms to keep existing stereotypes and enemy images intact, and hence keep the social distance wide. Perhaps Eritrean girls who sleep next to Ethiopian girls their own age, share daily joys and challenges, to a greater degree questions such enemy images? Of course, this would not be a static condition. I assume people alternate between the feelings of enmity and friendship, in different contexts. More, when we look at Massa’s findings in 2013, we might ask if the passing of time and individual differences might also play a role. Further, the students I never managed to meet might perhaps have given a different image. Worth mentioning, though, is that there were many more Eritrean students at Mekelle University in 2013, than in 2016.
Concluding remarks: Reconciliation or downplaying opinions?

To sum up, Eritrean students came to Ethiopia expecting there would be hatred between the two groups. However, the experience most of my informants expressed having had, during their time of studying and living with Ethiopians, was different from what they had expected. Hence, the potential social distance turned into social closeness. Are the strategies of allocating responsibility to the governments and silencing political talk, processes of reconciliation? Alternatively, are the “true” feelings hidden in these situations? The theoretical perspective of the “dividual” and processual self and identity, introduced in chapter three, is helpful to answer these questions. I already showed that the relation between the two national groups, particularly the Tigrayans and highlander Eritreans, is extremely ambivalent and complex. There would be a multitude of experiences, which developed the different aspects of the self in relation to this ambivalence, in different ways in different persons. On the one hand, a person might hold memories of friendly experiences with an Ethiopian relative prior to the war. A different aspect of the self, on the other hand, might have developed through traumatic experiences and hurt emotions, from the time of the war, along with enemy images presented by the state and the people by whom one is surrounded. These aspects of the self can further be strengthened and flourish in different contexts. Likewise, the different experiences can be contradictory; hence, the same person can have various “real” expressions in different contexts. As Barth puts it:

Yes, boundaries and mistrust are cognitive models that facilitate stereotyping, large-scale collective action, and counterposed positions and judgments; but this does not mean that the same people do not also harbour other cognitive resources that may open other paths for reason, action and relationships. (Barth, 2000, p. 33).
Chapter 6: Engaging with the future, enacting secondary migration

“Are you happy in Ethiopia?” An Eritrean refugee asked me. “Yes” I answered, partly lying, as, although I love being in Ethiopia very much, I also find some challenges I face overwhelming. “Are you?” I asked him. “No, I won’t be happy before I am out of this country”, he said with his face hanging.

I begin this chapter with some theoretical context for this and the following chapter. Then, I describe the different ways Eritrean refugees attempt to further their migration towards their desired goal. In the end, I show how the ambiguity of the identities is reflected in mobility opportunities. The first part of this chapter works as a backdrop for the more theoretical discussion in the conclusion.

Micheal Jackson, inspired by Sigurd Bergman, suggests that mobility is not only a means to access life giving resources. It also needs to be understood existentially, in that it is also a metaphor for freedom (2013, p. 229). Migrants’ stories, he argues “[b]roach critical questions concerning the political, moral, and legal orders we customarily invoke in laying down the conditions under which our pursuit of life, liberty and happiness is best guaranteed” (Jackson, 2013, p. 229). He reminds us, on the one hand, that none of us choose where we are born (P. 7), and the migrant brings into light the inconsistency felt by most humans between their belonging to a specific society, and to a single species (p. 8). Taking his cue from Levinas, he explains that ethics begin in our face-to-face encounters (p. 9), and referring to Ricoeur, that life is at the most basic of ethics, the wish to live well, which goes before the morality of norms (p.6). Still, as I have already noted, “refugeeness” is widely believed to pose a threat to the order of nation-states (Malkki, 1995, p. 7), in a world where pre- given “cultures” and “people” are believed to be naturally tied to place (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 46).

The fact that most Eritrean refugees do not intend to stay in Ethiopia or Sudan is well documented (Belloni, 2015, Kibreab, 2014), and reflected among my informants. I met many people who took the Libya route, or who had planned to, and/or knew someone who had taken that route. The refugee camps in Ethiopia, some of them told me, were full of Ethiopian and Eritrean smugglers, ready to take refugees to the first step on that route, Sudan. Some of the Eritreans I met, though, found Tigray to be a good working environment for their opposition work against the Eritrean government, projecting their future into a changed Eritrea. The majority, however, wanted to go to a place where they could upgrade their education and/or get a job. Likewise, inability to create a fruitful livelihood in Ethiopia, and stay in touch with their
family in Eritrea from Ethiopia, were factors pushing them to migrate further. “We only sleep and eat here” Sara said one day, pointing to the room, and pulling her face as if making a distance to the room. “It is not our home”.

Cathrine Brun suggests that “being stuck” is a spatio-temporal notion implying that the future aspired to cannot be reached, that an undesirable situation or location cannot be escaped. It indicates temporal, social and geographical stillness.” (Brun, 2016, p. 393). However, she adds that while being stuck, and a feeling of being stuck, often characterize the lives of people in protracted displacement and has consequences, there is always some kind of movement in peoples’ lives. Being stuck, therefore, is entangled with processes of movement and volatility. There might be geographical or social movement; movement to a better as well as worse condition. Physical movement or not, there are changes in their lives. It is, indeed, important to respect the fact that people themselves feel stuck when they cannot develop their lives and control their future (p. 393). This chapter and the conclusion are about navigating the future and engagement with mobility. They reflect this entanglement of processes of being stuck, and processes of movement.

**Global networks and pathways to further migration**

A man, who had been looking towards us for some time, and whose wife joined him as she came out of the ARRA Office, smiled to me while he said goodbye in Swedish. The girl sitting next to me looked over to us curiously with a smile on her mouth. I grabbed the opportunity and began talking with her. She was 18 years old and her sister, sitting next to her, 16 years old. The youngest had picked up some Swedish words from relatives spending their holidays in Eritrea. Her English was incredible and, had I not known otherwise, I would have guessed she was American. She also spoke Italian, as she had gone to an Italian school in Eritrea. Their father had lived six years in the US and had now begun a family reunification process for them and their mom.

A dense transnational network interconnects Eritreans globally (Kibreab, 2014, p 15/18). Family members and spouses, having made it abroad, could increase the refugees’ mobility opportunities through family reunification or other sponsor systems, a much-desired opportunity (see also Belloni, 2015, p. 141). As many told me, they do of course want to get out in safe ways; dangerous ways are only an option when there are no other options.

Firstly, Robel’s siblings are all spread across the world: in Denmark, Israel, a refugee camp in Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea. His wife lived in America. They got married in a church in the
refugee camp eight months prior to me meeting him. His wife registered him for a family reunification. The process was slow and challenging. There were some errors in his details in the ARRA/UNHCR profile of him, which cost him time and work. He further had to pay 100 US dollars to translate the marriage certificate.

Next, I met an Eritrean man in his late twenties who lived in the United States, where he had been relocated after spending five years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. His cousin was Ethiopian but her mother was Eritrean. She lived in Mekelle, but had come to Addis Ababa to participate in her cousin’s wedding, a wedding which would allow him to bring his beloved Eritrean wife back with him to the US – one of the very few legal ways for Eritrean refugees to leave Ethiopia. The brother of the bride also lived in the US. In fact, he had befriended the groom, and connected the two.

Further, one Eritrean girl had a brother who had gone to Canada through the group of five (Government of Canada, 2017) sponsoring system. He was now planning to organize the same for his sister. However, having family abroad does not necessarily equate to such opportunities. Daniel had some cousins in Canada. “I really don’t understand her” (his aunt on the mother’s side), he said several times. They had lived together in Asmara, and they were very close. Now, she does not want to see him, and even though she is in Addis Ababa, they have never met. He said he did not mean to insult her, to talk badly about her, but he really did not understand her.

He said some people, when they get money, like she did as her children are in Canada, don’t want to share. She had changed behavior; she was not like that when they lived together in Asmara.

Degef explained that churches in other countries can sponsor refugees through hiring them to work as, for example, pastors or singers. The church itself needs to make a request to ARRA for workers. ARRA then checks the applications against the information the applicants provided when they arrived in Ethiopia, to make sure they have the qualifications needed for the job. ARRA further pays for all costs related to leaving the country. Two years ago, a church in Canada had requested ten workers. Fourteen refugees applied. “I did not have any luck,” he said. ARRA had not given any explanation about how they chose and why, but he is thinking he might have been left out because he has a big family. During the six months ARRA spent making the decision, he had travelled to Shire five times to check how it was going with the process. “I did not sleep at night”, he said, explaining he had so many thoughts and was imagining so many different scenarios.
Commonly, resettlement through UNHCR was not seen as a realistic opportunity among my informants, except for special cases, such as one refugee I met who was kidnapped and tortured on his migration through the Libya route. “The criteria used by developed countries to process resettlement applications are mostly based on geo-political reasons concerning the country of origin of refugees and public opinion emotions about the last most broadcasted humanitarian crisis” (Belloni, 2015, p. 104). About 1% of the refugees are resettled to a third country (Samuel Hall Consulting, 2014, p. 10). Some informants pointed out the issue of corruption in ARRA and UNHCR.

To sum up, while embarking on the Libya route is a common choice, there are other opportunities for those who can afford it and for those who have the right networks. Marriage/family reunification can be arranged as a financial transaction or it can be based on a loving relationship. One of my informants applied for a diversity visa to the United States. UNHCR replacement is less common, as explained above. Among the students, getting a scholarship abroad was something they desired and hoped for and they often asked me if I had information about such possibilities. I did not hear of anyone succeeding in getting a scholarship. Indeed, to get a student visa (or any visa) proves difficult for someone from a poor country with a politically repressive government (Neumayer, 2006).

Identity and mobility strategies

As described above, the ways available for Eritrean refugees to legally continue their migration onward are few and, through illegal means, costly and dangerous. The mobility routes available for the refugees rank from the cheapest and most dangerous, to the most expensive and safe (Belloni, 2015, p. 205). Through two informants, I learned how the ambivalence that characterizes the national lines between the two nationalities, due to the historical interconnectedness, potentially becomes an opportunity to some of my Eritrean informants. As I already mentioned (chapter five), people explore the affordances created along the collective boundaries.

Osvaldo Costantini and Aurora Massa show “[…] how the symbolic boundaries and the geopolitical borders between Tigray and Eritrea can become capital for the overcrossing of other borders, particularly those that are raised by European immigration policy” (Constantini & Massa, 2016, pp. 42-43). The fact that there is not a total overlap between geopolitical/institutional borders and social networks/boundaries makes this feasible (pp. 53-54). I have explored these gaps of overlap, of the social boundaries and the institutional borders, in earlier chapters.
Massa and Costantini have analyzed how the possibility and practice of the Ethiopian-Tigrayan people of playing out their Eritrean-ness by means of investing their social and cultural capital allows those who want to migrate to move along the networks of the Eritrean Diaspora and to adapt their cases to existing humanitarian criteria. (Costantini & Massa, 2016, p. 43).

This phenomenon was something I became familiar with too, during my fieldwork. My examples are similar to the ones presented by Costantini and Massa. One of my informants who was Ethiopian, but who grew up in Eritrea, told me about her sister who had migrated “as Eritrean”. I, likewise, met a woman in a shop, whose daughter had migrated to Norway. “She told them she was Eritrean,” she explained. Further, one of my informants, who was Ethiopian, but whose mother was Eritrean, and who had grown up in Eritrea, used her Eritrean network abroad to meet a man she was going to marry. Her Eritrean friend living in England had introduced them to each other.

Playing out ones Ethiopian-ness (and Eritrean-ness)

I now wish to move the focus to the possibility for, and attempts by, Eritreans to play out their Ethiopian-ness, as capital for the crossing of borders. I have three examples, that reflect two different opportunities, of taking advantage of the lack of overlap between the social boundaries and the institutional borders. As I only discovered these three examples, I am guessing that these are less usual than the other way around. Further, while one attempt was unsuccessful, the other is still on hold. However, they do show that there are possible strategies, at least in these three incidents, that were explored.

First, the Ethiopian friend of an Eritrean informant told me that the Eritrean friend was going to buy a fake Ethiopian passport. I was curious as to why the Eritrean refugee, who had informed me he wished to migrate further, would want the Ethiopian passport. His friend had left a few days earlier, with smugglers, to Sudan. The Ethiopian explained to me that as he did not have the funding to pay the smugglers, he was going to get a fake Ethiopian passport, which was cheaper. This was the first and only time I heard of this. The common way was, to my knowledge, to leave for Sudan with smugglers. This was indeed an expensive trip; 1600 US dollars one informant told me. The two next examples show how two Eritrean refugees used the opportunity of the familial links to their Ethiopian fathers, which is an expression of the ambiguity of their identities, to better their mobility opportunities. Like Costantini and Massa, I suggest we should see this behavior in the light of cultural, historical and familial ties of a society that transcends the national edges, rather than from the logic of the nation state (2016, p. 53).
Iyob was determined to reach Norway, where his sister lived. As described in chapter three, his attempt to obtain an Ethiopian passport through his Ethiopian father had failed. It even led to a great deal of hassle including jail, and being stuck in the camp. In the end, he left to Sudan with smugglers and, shortly after, he continued all the way to Italy, paying a high price. I asked Hela (his employer) why he so badly wanted an Ethiopian passport. “For example, that way he can easily go to Norway,” she answered. I suppose she referred to the fact that he could cross international borders more simply if he held an Ethiopian passport. “But if he is an Ethiopian citizen, he cannot apply for asylum.” I reflected. “Ohh, yeah that’s true,” she said, and then fell silent for some seconds. “But he can say that he is Eritrean,” she suggested, and added that she had heard of someone who did that.

This example shows the complexity of the identity twice. First, the fact that his father is Ethiopian gives him a legal right to apply for Ethiopian citizenship. If he had succeeded, the Ethiopian passport would have made it easier for him to cross some international borders. Second, Hela suggests that he can simply present himself as an Eritrean, which he in fact is (and still is, as he never succeeded obtaining an Ethiopian citizenship). This would again allow him mobility within the European border regime, and right for asylum, which an Ethiopian passport would not.

Mengsteab, a male student in his early twenties, finished his undergraduate degree while I was in field. He was eager to go to a developed country through a scholarship and to continue his higher education, but he did not want to go through illegal ways. Mengsteab’s father is an Ethiopian citizen. Mengsteab applied to get Ethiopian citizenship through his father, with a plan to search for scholarships if he succeeded. While his first application was rejected due to him having participated in the national service, the response to his appeal is yet to come.
Notes

1. See Belloni 2015 for a comprehensive work and in depth analysis of the key symbolic structures and social mechanisms encouraging and sustaining mobility trajectories of Eritreans.
Chapter 7: Conclusion: Being a human, hoping and resisting by acting

“Why don’t the boats that are saving the people in the water pick them up in Libya instead; instead of waiting until they are in the water. They know they are planning to go on the boats?” An Eritrean refugee asked me, sincerely confused.

Conducting this fieldwork was, at times, an extremely emotionally difficult thing to do. The realities I sometimes stood face to face with, were painful. The question the young Eritrean refugee asked me makes so much sense. I feel a deep grief to see the way many parts of the world have chosen to react to the migrants and refugees who strive to move. His question sheds light on Hans Lucht’s observation that “rather than assuming that European nation-states cannot stop people from moving, one should perhaps be asking how far they are prepared to go” (Lucht, 2012, p. 260). He notes that the implications of the current course of action, such as the “friendship pact” between Libya and Italy, “appear irreconcilable with the legal, political, and humanitarian values that many European countries are not only proud of but also seek to promote in the rest of the world” (Lucht, 2012, p. 260). Dawn Chatty suggests that the most important anthropological contribution to the field of forced migration is:

the perspective and voice of the forced migrant, the phenomenological encounter that permits the uprooted, the displaced, and the refugee to break out from the category of ‘object of study’ and to bring to life the individual experience of dispossession. (Chatty, 2014, p. 83).

I will, in this conclusion, “bring to life the individual experience of dispossession”, with a focus on engagement with the future, and hope. As a starting point, I wish to bring in Jackson’s application of Spinoza’s concept of life and death, as a matter of being more or less alive, rather than two opposite poles of being and nothingness. Jackson argues, that:

Spinoza’s concept of the struggle for being is directly relevant to understanding the human impulse to move and migrate, as well as what it means to have a life or the hope of a better life, or to be so destitute of the wherewithal for life that one experiences oneself as socially dead. (Jackson, 2013, p. 6)

Similarly, Cathrine Brun, in There is no Future in Humanitarianism: Emergency, Temporality and Protracted Displacement, demonstrates the absence of a “future” in the humanitarian system’s mission to save biological lives. She develops a dialogue between Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of “biological” and “biographical” life and Simone De Beauvoir’s work on “immanence” and “transcendence” (2016, pp, 398-400), which both resemble Jackson’s and Spinoza’s concept of
life. Arendt notes: “The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 96-97). She further explains that the human life is “[…] always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story […]” (Arendt, 1958, p. 97).

**Hope**

“You have a natural obstacle…like the car might have problems, needing to be fixed. Waiting in line for the boats in Libya, it might be thousands of people waiting”, Robel, who had himself been there, explained. “Then, you have man-made obstacles”, he added. “The smuggler might sell you, without you knowing, to another smuggler, and then the new one might demand you add money.” “Wow”, I said, feeling shocked and scared by the idea the last thing might happen to my friend, who had begun the journey.

I asked Robel if he, with all his knowledge of the dangers involved in this migratory route, would stay in Ethiopia if there were no other options for leaving. He answered that he would look into any other possibility, even if small, but to stay in Ethiopia was not an option. There is a 50 percent chance of dying if going, and a 50 percent chance of making it, but it is better than being in prison, he explained. He had on an earlier occasion explained that people know about the chances of dying when trying to cross the sea, but they take that chance because there is no hope in their situation. Students are sent back to the refugee camps when finishing their degrees, so they wonder: “what is really the point of taking that education.”

“You know…”, his face lit up in a serious way as if he was to share with me an enlightening insight, “it is also possible to die from losing hope”. He pointed out that he is in his productive age now (30 years old), and that if he does not do anything now, what can he do when he is 40 years old? He added he was trying to do something here; having an education. I asked if he felt like it was now time to begin his future: having children, working, and creating his life. “Yeah, it is even past my time” he said laughing.

Another student raised a similar issue to me. His friends had died in a boat wreck recently, trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. He told me very clearly that he would immediately go the same route if he had money. I reminded him we had just talked about his friends who had died from such attempt, and asked why he felt it was worth taking that risk, when he knew there were big chances of dying. He seemed puzzled at first, but suddenly looked at me with a clear gaze and present eyes and said “I understand your question”. The atmosphere was rich and it seemed it was satisfying for him to express himself. He explained that being here in Ethiopia was “like
hell”, the way he sees it, and staying here also entails death in the end. Belloni was told by her informants that staying in the camps was a “slow death” compared to the quick death they risked crossing the sea (2015, p. 114). As mine did, her informants told her “we have no choice” in terms of continuing their journey (p. 130). One other student told me “I run on hope now”, when she expressed that her life felt extremely difficult. Another student said that a person had come to his class to inform the students about job positions in NASA. He, whom others had told me was an excellent physics student, felt hopeful, when exposed to these possibilities.

To sum up, from these examples it seems hope is something you can hang on to, as a last resort. Hope is also something that can be invoked when presented with potential opportunities that imply mobility. Last, when you act, and resist, it can give you hope. Of relevance here, Frances Pine points to the fact that “[migration] can be both a symbol and an enactment of hope and of faith in the future and an act of or a reaction to hopelessness [and] despair […]” (Pine, 2014, p. 96). We clearly see that the refugees experience life and death as social rather than poles of absolutes.

The politics of hope

Ghassan Hage approaches hope as a social category. Collective visions of “meaningful life and dignified social life” (Hage as cited in Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 382) within a society constitutes “societal hope”, which is a form of social hope. He emphasizes how the state produces and distributes “societal” hope unequally, as some groups receive little or no societal hope (Hage as cited in Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 382).

If we apply this insight to my informants, we can conclude that they are a group who are recipients of less such “societal” hope. First, absence of hope for “a meaningful and dignified life” triggered their migration in the first place. Second, the government currently hosting them distributes some hope by, for example, funding their university educations. One of my informants once compared his own situation, as a student in the city, with that of the refugees in the refugee camps. He said he did not consider himself a refugee in comparison. The lives of the people in the camp, he explained, were so difficult and marked by hopelessness. However, as the refugees are, to a great degree, excluded from the work market which provides the kind of jobs that are imagined to bring about “a meaningful and dignified life”, they still remain, as a group, recipients of very little “societal” hope. Last, seen in a global context, the governments in Europe, The United States, Canada and Australia, are also producers and distributors of
“societal” hope, as they create opportunities and obstacles for mobility among the Eritrean Refugees.

My informants see mobility as a way to achieve a “meaningful life and dignified social life”. I pointed out, in the previous chapter, that the distribution of “social” hope, in the form of mobility opportunities, is rather little. As pointed out by Kleist and Jansen, an increasing militarization of the Mediterranean Sea along with the EU deal with Turkey, of returning “irregular migrants”, can be seen as an attempt to deter hope for refugees and migrants who wish to enter Europe. The many politicians who take part in these decisions send the message “[...] that they are reserving beliefs in a possible future in the specific nation-states to the nation rather than to newcomers” (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 383). However, the distribution of societal hope differs from country to country. For instance, Canada distributes more “social” hope to refugees, in that they offer a sponsoring scheme.

Moreover, the criteria of social networks further distribute these “societal” hopes/ mobility opportunities, within the broader group of Eritrean refugees. Having family members, or close friends, already living in the third country, enhances the possibility of getting a share of the “societal” hope in the form of mobility. Eritrean refugees who have become citizens, or who have obtained residence permits, in a third country have some agency in distributing hope. They can, for example, sponsor other Eritrean refugees, or apply for family reunification, or get married. This way, they become a bridge for the Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia in accessing “societal” hope.

**Aspirations**

Ghassan’s approach to hope, as a social category unequally distributed by the state, is similar to Appadurai’s concept of “capacity to aspire”. The capacity to aspire, he asserts, is unevenly distributed among rich and poor neighborhoods (2013, p. 289). The capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity. That is, the idea of good life differs in different societies. People’s aspirations are formed within local systems of meaning, communication, value, and dissent. However, due to globalized flows of communication, there has been a growth in shared images of the good life (p. 290).

This holds true for the people I met. As has become apparent, Eritreans are well connected to the larger world through the Eritrean diaspora. One young student told me he, at the age of 25, was lagging behind; he should have had “a job and a car by now.” His family members in the US had told him how common it was to have a car there. Sara showed me pictures of friends that
had made it to Europe and looked healthy and happy. I met a 16 year old girl who had learned some Swedish, as her relative had visited her in Eritrea every summer. In other words, the local systems of meaning, value, communication and dissent within which the Eritrean refugees' aspirations take its force, are highly global.

Once during our conversations, Robel told me “you might reach your goals, but I did not, so it is not so easy for me to talk about the future” and ”when you are done here, you can go to Norway and make plans, do things. That is the difference”. Our conversation illustrates the unequal distribution of the ability to aspire, and the ability for societal hope. Robel told me he really wanted to finish his research so that he could continue his education, on a PhD level, in the USA. I asked him if he wanted to have children when he was reunited with his wife. He said he had not thought about that, but when they reunite they will talk and decide what to do. He said he is mostly focusing on his studies; his life here. The mind is of course “borderless”, he added, but to go too much beyond what he is physically able to do, due to being “restricted”, “like a prison”, would “not be comfortable to me”. “Do you mean, thinking about it just creates pain?” I asked. “Yes” he answered. This shows how the future can present itself as a shrinking possibility, with fear and pain threatening hope (Appadurai, 2013, p. 299).

Appadurai, in conversation with other scholars, sees the capacity to aspire as a navigational capacity, that is, those with less of it “can effectively change the “terms of recognition” within which they are generally trapped […].” (Appadurai, 2013, pp. 289-290). While Appadurai talks about poor people in Mumbai, I believe the concept easily transfers to the context of my informants. Both their migration to Ethiopia, and their attempts and enactments of further migration towards their aspired places of destination, can be understood as attempts to effectively change the terms that limit their capacity to influence the conditions within which they are confined (p. 290). This takes me to the discussion of hope and resistance.

**Resistance**

Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen link the work anthropologists (such as James C. Scott, Sherry B. Ortner, Carol J. Greenhouse, and Matthew C. Guttman) have done on “resistance”, that focuses on people that experience extreme hardship and that nonetheless resist, to the concept of hope. Although the word “hope” is not explicitly used, their works are concerned “with uncovering hopefulness in the face of pessimistic diagnoses of hopelessness” (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 378). There is further a focus, implicit or explicit, about agency, in that “hope is detected in the very fact that people do not succumb to oppression and that their lives and dreams are not as
determined by “structural” factors as certain other conceptual frameworks might lead us to think” (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 378). Synnøve Bendixen (2015) writes about how irregular migrants react to having to wait. “Future projections” are, she argues, at the root of their actions, as they resist the government’s power over time, trying to regain control over their future, through different means. It is likewise possible to see the choice among many Eritrean refugees for secondary migration, whether this is through dangerous or more safe but “illegal” ways, as an act of resistance (Belloni 2015, p. 133). Two conversations I had with a student on two different days show this.

Daniel told me that some relatives of his had lost their daughter. She had drowned when crossing the river, close to Humera, from Ethiopia to Sudan. Their son had been on a boat that disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea. The loss of the son was worse, because while they knew the daughter was dead, the son was never found. A friend of Daniel’s, with whom he had lived, had made it to Europe through the same route.

“So, what did you feel when your friend told you he was going that way?” I asked him. “Eh”. He was thinking a bit before answering that it is difficult when you don’t know if you will see the person again or not. “Does it make you feel like not going, when you hear these stories?” I asked. “Well, it makes you scared” he paused “But then, as I told you, I cannot work here. How long am I going to ask for support from family? Even though it is family, it’s still hard. It does not feel good to need to depend on money from others, not even being able to support yourself.”

He had told me earlier that he felt bad receiving money from his sister in the US, who had a child and probably needed money herself. On a different day, we sat at a café and talked. I brought up something he had told me earlier; that he felt like for every step he made, he became more determined to continue.

“You said that you would continue until…what is the end, where is the destination, what do you picture?” I asked him. He laughed a bit; “well we are humans so we never have a destination you know we always want more and more. I won’t say I am wanting adventure, because it’s killing me.” He explained that what he wanted was a place where there is peace, where he can work, study, and have freedom to create his life. “What about you?” he asked. I said “it’s the same with me. I want to live in a peaceful place where I can work and choose myself how to live, and create my own life.”

The act of resistance is towards the national and international policies that keep them from long-term solutions (Belloni, 2015, p. 133) in which they can, as Daniel pointed out, “create” their own meaningful life in a safe and peaceful environment. It is resistance against “social death”
(Jackson). Such resistance is fueled by images of a good life, and projections about a future, that exists somewhere else. Hope therefore can be seen as “[...] engagement with the future in contexts characterized by crisis [and] uncertainty and immobility” (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 373).

**Being part of the world**

I suggested to an Eritrean student, who had been trying eagerly to find a way to do a master’s degree in the US, without luck, that he could do a self-paid master’s degree in Ethiopia. He said he did not really want to do a master’s in Ethiopia. He preferred to continue trying to get a scholarship in the US, explaining that the quality of the education in Ethiopia is not so good and likewise not very recognized elsewhere in the world. Likewise, others have noted the aspirations among refugees and migrants to connect with the world (Lucht, 2012, Ferguson 2006, Belloni, 2015). Lucht recognizes migrants desire to belong to, and participate in, the global modernity and circulation of symbolic and material goods. He notes the economic, social and existential consequences of exclusion and disconnectedness of large parts of people, from the so called global world (Lucht, 2012, p. xii). Belloni suggests that for the Eritrean refugees:

> The objects of Western modernity, whether related to basic or lavish consumption, are seen not only for their inherent material value. They also stand for unmet desires of freedom, of connecting with the world and of fulfilling socially established values in new ways. (Belloni, 2015, p. 79).

The next example further illustrates the desire to be part of the world. The future, projected into other places, fuels a resistance towards the obstacles keeping one from reaching it, by engaging in secondary migration. Sara is, in the time of writing, in Sudan, planning to continue on the Libya route to Europe.

Yonas, Sarah and I were sitting in their house. Sarah asked me about the possibilities of travelling between countries in Europe. I explained to her how it works. They told me he likes Sweden and she likes England most. I asked why. “*Dej yebileni*” (I like it), he said. “*Agathami*” (by chance), she said, adding she had seen photos. “But now, I want to go to Norway, with you in your suitcase”, he said jokingly. “One day she will call you from England”, Yonas said. The whole atmosphere became a bit dreamy as we made plans about the future. “He will come from Sweden, I from England, and you from Norway, then we will meet, and go together to Massawa (Eritrea), and then we will swim,” she continued. She shared some memories from her childhood in Asmara; of having eaten
lots of chocolate from the family’s shop, telling her parents that people had bought it. We laughed a bit. Her joy was contagious.

The desire to be part of the world is explicit. Moreover, Sara had told me on an earlier occasion that she would want to go back to Asmara if the conditions changed. Still, she would want to go to Europe at some point, not necessarily to live, but she wanted to see it. She wanted to visit me in Norway and take me to see Eritrea; an act of sharing with each other the places that are meaningful to us.

**Feqad Amlak**

A man passed the internet house pushing a small wheeled cart carrying merinda. “Twelve people died from drinking merinda” she told me with serious face. “Really?”, I asked surprised. She said she read it on Facebook. “So, did you get scared and will you stop drinking merinda?”, I asked her a bit jokingly. “I drink coca, she said. It can happen to that too. If my day has come, I can even die here”, she said, leaning her head to the wall while closing her eyes. I was already familiar with her strong faith in God, as she often referred to “things being up to him.” “Do you mean that you trust Amlak, and you will die whenever he decides it is your day?,” I asked to be sure. “Yes”, she confirmed.

For most of my informants, *Amlak* (God), was important and “feqad Amlak” (God willing) or “Amlak yefelet” (God knows), were common phrases to hear in times where leaving it to “him” was perhaps the only option. I am inspired by Jackson’s way of understanding his informant’s relationship to God. He draws on insights from Paul Ricoeur’s account of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. “Conatus”, Ricoeur explains, is an active power; it is life. Spinoza calls this primordial power “God”, and “God” is life, an acting energy, an infinite power (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 315-316). “[There] is a close connection between the internal dynamism worthy of the name of life and the power of the intelligence, which governs the passage from inadequate to adequate ideas.” (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 316). Jackson explains that life is not just an impulse to endure being, but a search for “adequate ideas”. An idea is adequate if it supports us in realizing our capacity to live, to sustain our sense of presence and purpose, to be truly active. God, can be such idea (2013, p. 136). Drawing on William James’s concept of “the more”, Jackson points out that the ideas and practices constituting religion are used to get in touch with that “more”, beyond the horizons of one’s immediate life, particularly in times of despair (pp. 136-137). “This process of othering, which places one’s own agency in abeyance, is a precondition for clearing one’s head of confusing subjective preoccupations and returning to oneself as someone capable of taking a hand in determining one’s own fate” (Jackson, 2013, p. 137).
The following example further sheds light on how God is an adequate idea for Eritrean refugees I met, and it sustains a sense of purpose as life unfolds. I was talking with four young Eritrean students about what their plans were when graduating. Three of them were attempting various forms of safe processes.

Then I turned to Teklit who was sitting next to me and asked, “what about you?” His eyes looked down while answering that his brother was in Italy, and he would follow his path there. I asked how he was planning to do that. He said he would go through Libya. My heart sunk and I sensed a change in the atmosphere, or perhaps mostly inside me. “And then”, I asked, “over the sea?” “Yeah” he answered. I was speechless. This was the first time I met someone who told me they planned to embark on that route and it was a bit of an emotional shock. He noticed my reaction and while smiling, at the edge of laughing, he said “it’s okay, really it’s okay.”

The day after, I resumed the same theme. I asked Teklit if staying in Ethiopia was perhaps a choice he could consider. “No” he firmly answered. He further explained that would entail being dependent without having anything to do. “That’s not a life,” he concluded. “But it’s really dangerous, you might die,” I said with some urgency in my voice. “Feqad Amlak (God willing)” he answered. I was not able to hide my reaction to his answer, which appeared as a shocked face, which again made him laugh. “Really…so you talked it over with him?” I asked, noticing myself somewhere between quite emotionally sad but with a humorous tone to my voice. “Yes, I did,” he said laughing. “Kid eluka do? (did he tell you to go on)” I asked. His laughter continued while answering me “Ewe, kid eluni (yes, he said go on)”. I suggested Ethiopia must be a better place to be than being dead. If he died, he explained, he would go to heaven, to Amlak.

Rather than surrendering his agency when submitting to the higher power, he recovered it through the relationship with something beyond himself: Amlak (Jackson, 2013, p. 136). His faith in God gave him the hope, determination, trust, and courage to embark on a dangerous migration path, out of a condition he experienced as a form of social death, toward what he envisioned as a meaningful future.

On a sunny spring day in 2017, I gazed across the crowd of people enjoying a party organized by Save the Children, for the refugees at an asylum center in Oslo, Norway. Suddenly, a known face appeared in the crowd. A few seconds later, my brain made the connection and I recognized him. It was Samson. One year earlier, he had embarked on the Sudan-Libya-Italy route, with Norway as his final destination. One year earlier, he had explained to me the meaning of the expression Feqad Amlak, using his arrival in Norway as an example. “Feqad Amlak I will make it to
Norway”. Now, he was here. I moved over to him, overwhelmed by the joy of seeing him alive and safe at his final destination. I said his name and he said mine. We greeted and exchanged phone numbers and attempted to call our common friends in Ethiopia. He had now changed his name on Facebook to Temesgen Fetari (thanks, the creator) as an expression of his gratitude to God. When he attempted adding himself to my Facebook, he failed. There were so many who used that name, he could not find himself among them.

**Concluding remarks: A meaningful relationship to the world**

To sum up, the people I met were trying to avoid death, in both the physical and social sense. This is indeed a logical thing to do, as Michael Jackson puts it:

> Although movement, metamorphosis, and mutation are in the nature of things, change does not merely befall us like a bolt from the blue; it is often chosen and embraced, in the hope that we may be carried into a more fulfilling relationship with the world. Whether we construe “the wherewithal of life” as a matter of having wealth or health, fresh water or self-worth, love or Lebensraum, food, family, or a future - it tends to be characterized by scarcity. As a limited good, it must be actively sought, struggled for, salvaged, and safeguarded. Critical to these processes of capturing or commanding life is a capacity to move to where life appears to be most abundant and accessible, or to orient oneself so as to see what other possibilities may exist where one is. (Jackson, 2013, p. 3).

I argue in line with other scholars (Malkki, 1995, Gupta & Ferguson, 1992) that the conflation of “culture”, “people” and “place” is problematic. As I have shown, it has devastating results for people who, for different reasons, need to move between these naturalized borders. It conceals the power in the politics of hope and excludes individuals, with an intriguing story, hopes and aspirations for a meaningful future and relationship to the world, from being part of “the wider world”. I end this thesis with an account of what Eldana and Salem see as a meaningful relationship with the world. They were both 20 years old and currently students.

I asked the girls: “In the long run, what are the things important to have in your life?” Eldana was thinking for a while. The atmosphere changed a bit; more dense, like if talking about something important. She responded: “I want a really good career. I don’t want to rely on, or be dependent on others. And I want to be able to pay my own taxes, creating my own life. And I want to create a family built on love.” Salem answered: “To live with my family, *mälet* (that means), my family in Eritrea. Family is important, not a lot of money. Not just my own family that I create, but the family I have in Eritrea. It's
important to have, to support each other. I miss them.” She wanted to live in Eritrea when things got better there.
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