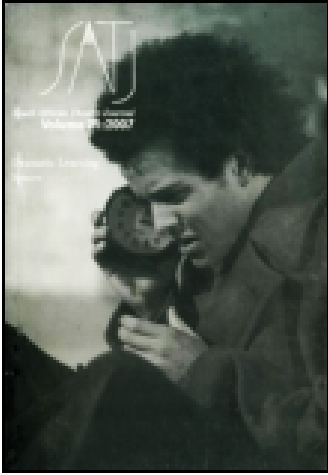


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TRYING TO FIND THE STEPPING-STONES: WRITING TIGRE AND BILEN DANCING IN ERITREA

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TRYING TO FIND THE STEPPING-STONES: WRITING TIGRE AND BILEN DANCING IN ERITREA.

An Impressionistic Choreography within a Theatre Context

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Khoreia in Greek means dance, *graphia* translates as writing. If 'choreography' is commonly used to denote "the sequence of steps and movements in dance",¹ then here it signifies my attempt at rendering the dancing of Bilen and Tigre people in Eritrea into textual form. Forcing into writerly structure a bricolage of notes, video clips, pictures, transcripts of articles originally written in Tigrinya (which, next to Arabic and English, is one of three public working-languages in Eritrea, but only one of nine spoken ones),² transcripts of interviews in Bilen or Tigre (two of the nine) and scraps of my own memory. There are also my secret attempts at recreating some of the movements on my kitchen floor with the tape recorder on full blast - Fatna Ebrahim and Zahra Ali - an inadequate but joyful resuscitation of that little embodied knowledge I acquired while joining the dances in Eritrea.

This text is not a seamless narrative or document. It is not 'authorial' or 'authoritative' in the sense of classical ethnographic writing, but borrows from recent critical texts which attempt to break through the fake omniscience of academic discourse. Above all, this text portrays a particular moment of dance ethnographic production within the larger frame of a theatre workshop. It is therefore contingent and anecdotal, and it refuses closure.³ The material was collated during the Eritrea Community Based Theatre Project (ECBTP) in 1997 in a collaborative research exercise by the research team - Mohamed Salih Ismail, then headmaster of a school in Sheeb, Tesfazghi Ukubazghi, a third-year law student from Keren, and myself, the research assistant - under the supervision of the director, Jane Plastow. We had set out with the ambitious task of researching into 'performative aspects of Tigre and Bilen culture' and happily ended up recording the dances: on video, in interviews, and through participation. There were some very skilled dancers among the workshop participants and interest in this topic was generally high. Our empirical study was backed up by relevant documents we found in the Research and Information Centre (RICE) in the Eritrean capital of Asmara.

This paper, then, comprises the polyphony of multiple voices and the dancing skills of numerous bodies: the people we interviewed or who performed, my Eritrean colleagues and their translations, the critical comments of the other members of the team, and, of course, the perceptions and interpretations of this author. A pastiche of dance pictures as they revealed themselves to us, of historical narrative and the story of the theatre process, it is an attempt at trying to find the stepping-stones to Tigre and Bilen dancing in Eritrea for others to dance on and continue the work where time and other factors cut in on us.

Preparing the Dance Floor: Eritrea and her Performing Arts

On May 24, 1993, Africa's newest nation-state, Eritrea, declared independence, following an internationally accredited referendum in which 99.8% of the population voted for independence from the one-time coloniser, Ethiopia. Eritrea's history, like that of many other African nations, has been marked by a succession of different colonial interventions over the last century. The country came into being as a discrete entity in the late 1880s when Italy established colonial rule, exercising an apartheid-like regime until the early forties, when defeat in the Second European War brought Eritrea under British administration. A tug-of-war resulted as to whom the country 'belonged' to. It was finally decided by a UN Commission which, in 1952, federated Eritrea with Ethiopia. From thereon the systematic violation of Eritrea's sovereignty under the regime of Haile Selassie, then Emperor of Ethiopia, continued until the country was annexed to Ethiopia as an ordinary province in 1962. Eritrean opposition became more and more organised which resulted in a ferocious thirty-year liberation struggle, with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF, itself spawned by an internal crisis of the ELF), as the two dominant liberation movements. They successfully battled against an Ethiopian army buttressed by US, and later Soviet, armoury after the monarchy's overthrow by the military Dergue in 1974. In the late seventies, they were also engaged in a civil war which was concluded in favour of the EPLF, while the ELF was driven across the Sudanese border and into Euro-American exile. The EPLF continued to operate in Eritrea, honing their military skills and launching a series of social reforms within their own ranks and in the liberated areas. They also fought against the eradication of Eritrean culture(s) by the Amharas (for centuries the ruling Ethiopian ethnic group), who sought to assert supremacy not only through the use of MIG fighter planes, snipers and napalm, but also by imposing Amhara language, culture and arts.⁴

The liberation struggle resulted in far-reaching environmental degradation, physical destruction of the land and the death of an estimated 165.000 people, civilians and fighters. Hundreds of thousands sought refuge in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, in Europe or the United States. Despite all that, it was a war largely unreported and ignored. On the Eritrean side it also remained without external aid, save for the assistance of the Eritrean exile community, which helped give birth to a unique posture of self-reliance in Eritrea. It was the EPLF, matured from a hit-and-run guerrilla movement to a progressive political organisation, which finally led the country to decisive victory in 1991. It formed the provisional government in the interim period until 1993 and, turned civilian as the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) after formal independence, has since then held power as the Eritrean government of today.⁵

I am watching Didier Martiny's "Eritrea": Thirty Years of Solitude on video.⁶ After the opening shot which lingers on fierce clouds gathering over the central highlands - a good omen promising long-awaited rain - the camera moves to the arid landscapes of the lowlands, a place called Begou, on the day of the referendum. In the background there is an orderly line of people, patiently waiting to have their turn at one of the 1000-odd polling stations in the country. Most of them are Bilen or Tigre. The air is charged with festive excitement. A young man

comes into sight. He is immaculately garbed in a white *jallabia*, a one-piece ankle-length gown, the *sruan*, baggy trousers, a beige waistcoat and a matching cloth, *samadid*, tied crosswise around his torso. In his right hand he holds an imposing sword about half the length of his body, tip and blade upright in the sky. The other hand carries the russet leather sheath. He dances a Beredg: knees slightly bent, back proudly upright, his body weight resting solidly on his thighs. His movement is directed forward, in a measured skip, with every alternate move accentuated by straightening the standing leg and pulling up the other calf. Then he pivots and simultaneously brandishes the sword with his right arm extended. The movement looks elegant and at the same time fierce. Like a war dance (which it is). Cut.

Another person enters the dancing space, dressed in a light blue shirt and matching shorts. He, too, moves gracefully in a similar manner, ostensibly ignoring the other dancer, yet subtly synchronising his movements to his counterpart. His skips are much smaller, which allows the first dancer to catch up with his positioning. Then they are face to face and make eye-contact. The dancing almost comes to a halt. Only almost, for the two dancers sustain their movement on low impact, this time sliding sideways and back again. Then one of them encircles the other. Were it not for the celebratory atmosphere and the palpable spirit of anticipation and good-will with which the performance is charged, they could two men measuring their courage in combat. This Beredg, however, is a cheerful if stately display of dancing skills and mutual strength, a corporeal expression of joy about the long-awaited referendum. Cut.

I have inserted this picture because it indicates, if crudely, the indisputable link between performing arts and politics in Eritrea. Without doubt, the above scene is an embodiment of (political) gratification. Yet, it seems no coincidence that the film opens with a dance which once evolved out of combat and bloodshed. As a (former) war dance, *Beredg* is a metonym for the liberation struggle. It also confirms a strong predilection I observed in Eritrea, that of a patriotic or nationalist element in her performing arts. In the film, the dance - unique to the Tigre and Bilen - closes the imaginary circle to the beginning of the war, for it was among the nomadic Beni-Amir in the western lowlands, one of the numerous Tigre groups, that the armed liberation struggle initially emerged in the sixties.

Before independence, and even today, the performing arts in Eritrea have been sharply divided into the so-called 'traditional' cultures of the country's nine nationalities⁷ - largely song-, music- and dance-based - and the urban, dialogue-grounded drama which bore the stamp of a succession of colonisers, including Ethiopia.⁸ At all stages both forms were utilised to express ethnic or political affiliations, overtly and covertly, or were blatantly (ab-)used for political propaganda, especially by the Amhara administration. They were also deployed to foster 'unity and identity in diversity' among the various ethnic groups, a particular concern of the EPLF, whose Cultural Troupes put on agitprop-cum-variety shows which represented all nationalities of Eritrea.⁹ Among others, they included the performance of traditional dances and songs, the latter altered, as with all 'traditional' forms of art, to suit the contemporary context. Even today, 'unity' and 'identity' are very pertinent aspects of the country's cultural politics, with the role and responsibility of the state for cultural development even documented in the National Constitution: "The State shall have the responsibility of creating and maintaining the necessary

conditions of enriching *national culture*, which is the expression of *national identity* and *unity* and progress of the Eritrean people”¹⁰

The Dancing Party: Tigre, Bilen and the ECBTP

Which leaves us with the aspect of diversity. It goes without saying the there exists no monolithic national culture, not even in Eritrea where the struggle bred an incredible sense of solidarity among the various peoples. When, at the invitation of the Eritrean government, the Eritrea Community Based Theatre Project (ECBTP) took up its work in 1995, aiming to help develop a democratic performance culture “which could work with indigenous and relevant foreign concepts of performance to make issue-based theatre within an [Eritrean] aesthetic”,¹¹ it was conscious of the fact that all nationalities would eventually have to be involved to fulfil the aim of the project. Whether this will ever be achieved depends on a multiplicity of factors - social, political and financial - with their possibilities and constraints, and is a different matter altogether. However, two major workshops have been held so far, one in 1995 with predominantly Tigrinya students, most of them based in the capital Asmara, the second in 1997 with the main party located in Keren, a town of some 50,000 inhabitants about 90 km north-west of Asmara. Here, most participants were of Tigre, a minority of Bilen origin. Despite their own languages and a religious shift towards Islam as against Christianity among the Tigre - Bilen are equally divided between the two - cultural expression in these groups is very similar, especially in and around Keren, the location of most Bilen people.¹²

The selection of the workshops reflected a major trend in Eritrean demographics and was a (politically) astute, if expected, move of the organisers to keep a ‘working balance’ between the two main ethnic groups. The Tigre are the second largest Eritrean people, but socio-political power is still predominantly held by the Tigrinya. Tigrinya and Tigre are the two principal linguistic communities, mutually unintelligible, though both Semitic languages derive from ancient Ge’ez. Whereas Tigrinya people live mainly in the central highlands, a more urbanised area with greater access to infrastructure and other socio-economic advantages, Tigre-speakers inhabit the western, northern and eastern lowlands as well as the Dahlak islands and were largely (agro-)pastoralists prior to the war. There also exists a recognisable religious divide, with the majority of Tigre people being Muslims, except for the two Protestant Mensa groups, while most Tigrinya are (Coptic Orthodox or Roman Catholic) Christians. Many Tigre lost their livestock during the liberation struggle and fled to the Sudan while, on the whole, Tigrinya peasants were able to remain in the highlands. To a certain extent this corresponded with the manoeuvre patterns of the two liberation movements, especially after the virtual disintegration of the ELF and its move into Sudanese border territory, while the EPLF, with its preponderance of Tigrinya highland fighters, prevailed in Eritrea.¹³ These factors have led to some dis-ease among Tigre and other communities who, though

generally appreciative of the government's nation-building and reconstruction efforts, often feel inadequately represented by the authorities.¹⁴

As a theoretically independent theatre project which is nonetheless closely affiliated to governmental institutions (a contradiction in terms but lived reality), our work was therefore also evaluated in the light of present and latter-day politics - and generally approved by the people we worked with. For it signified the appreciation of their culture and the importance of their cultural identity within the all-encompassing concept of 'national culture'. Mohamed Assanai, head of the national Tigre theatre group of the PFDJ, affirmed that when his group goes on tour "we [as Tigre people] become more self-confident. We can prove that the Tigre can produce good plays like the Tigrinya and other language groups, and this has a positive effect on our people".¹⁵

Obviously, I have portrayed an ethnic and political dichotomy which does not take into account the differentiations of Eritrean society. In daily interaction, this divide is hardly discernible, especially not in a melting-pot area like Keren. By way of qualification it should be said you can easily find former ELF members in higher government positions today - Tigre, Tigrinya and others alike, Muslims or Christians - as you can find many Christian Tigrinya with an ELF record in exile.¹⁶ Christian Tigre go to Muslim weddings - often to their relatives - or an Islamic sheikh will attend a reception for a Roman Catholic delegation. Last year, Alemseged Tesfai, multi-talented PFDJ representative and, as then Head of the Eritrean Division of Culture, co-initiator of the ECBPT, asserted that "ties of kinship that cut across ethnic and linguistic barriers" are prevalent and that it "is not uncommon to find in Eritrea, communities within an ethnic group feeling more akin to communities in other groups rather than their own".¹⁷ This is particularly characteristic for the Tigre, themselves divided into many sub-groups which include the above mentioned Beni-Amir, the two Mensas and the two Marias, the Ad-Timariam and Ad-Teckles, the Beit-Juk around Keren as well as clusters in Sahel (now part of the Northern Red Sea Region), Sheeb and Foro (Figure 1).¹⁸ In fact, this was one of the difficulties we as research team had to grapple with. The nomadic Beni-Amir, for example, have great cultural affinities with the Hedareb in Gash-Barka, the agriculturalist Beit-Juk are much closer to the Bilen around Keren. The further west you go, the less often certain dances are practised because of the influence of Islam, or others are substituted which you will never find in, say, Nakfa. In short, a great number of local dance variations exist which we heard about but never saw in their context. Our main source of information were the workshop participants, coming from all Tigre-speaking areas of Eritrea. On completing our initial survey in RICE, the national archive in Asmara, we presented the list of dances we had come across so far and asked the trainees for corrections and additions. Those dances familiar to them they performed for us, and later discussed our video documentation. We also had the opportunity to watch the rehearsal of the Bilen group for the Cultural Festival in Asmara, and later visited the Expo ground to film dance performances of other ethnic groups.¹⁹ Furthermore, we conducted interviews within a radius of about one hundred km in and around

Keren, intending to supplement our data with the knowledge of the older generation.

Many have voiced their difficulties in rendering corporeal, non-verbal action (the transient and seemingly 'authentic') into the printed word (that which represents but is always already a misrepresentation).²⁰ Few however talk openly about the incongruities, contradictions or very practical difficulties of field research. Is *Sisiit* a Tigre dance eventually copied by the Bilen or the exact opposite, as one of the elders claimed in Mensura? How do you organise transport to a place from which it took a student on foot two weeks to reach Keren? How do you account for subtleties which get lost in translation? (After all, we are working in six languages: Tigre, Bilen, Arabic, Tigrinya, English and German.) And finally, how do you verbally (re-)invent the dance material you have seen, heard or read about, or which you joined in?²¹

This as a preliminary warning. You are entering a slippery dance floor. You will encounter various dance pictures comprising *impressionistic descriptions in italics* (primarily based on our video narrative, but also on personal memories) as well as additional information regarding region, occasion and costume or other specificities. They were captured in interviews and utterances no less mutable than the depictions above. And while, in your mind, the body begins to make motion patterns in time and space,²² while the sound and rhythm of the instruments help you enter the dance, while you enjoy the singing and begin to imagine different odours - soil, perfumes, and body heat - you must be aware that with every step towards Tigre and Bilen dances you are also dancing omissions, apertures and disparities.

Dance Picture #1: *Sisiit* or *Keskes*

If there is a dance you are invited to join then it will certainly be *Sisiit*.²³ Except during mourning periods, it is the dance which opens any general dance event and which is equally popular during non-religious celebrations and wedding ceremonies.²⁴ This can be said of the Anseba and the Northern Red Sea Region from Sheeb to Nakfa, whereas in Gash-Barka it does not seem to be common. Elders in Hagaz and Mensura put this down to the stronger influence of Islam which prohibits the mixing of women and men in dance, even though this precept is frequently not observed. *Sisiit* is always accompanied by a song rendered by one or more vocalists, male or female, who as a rule are also the drummer(s). It is the lyrics of the song which indicate the purpose of the event, specifically composed for each occasion.²⁵ 16-year-old Fatna, the youngest but one of the most resourceful students of the group, tells us of code-switching in Anseba - the switching from one language into another within a speech- (here: song-)event. This is due to the mixing of many peoples and languages in this region.

Because of its relative simplicity, *Sisiit* accommodates even the most inexperienced dancer. I remember moving rather self-consciously in the circle of enthusiastic students, both women and men, at the beginning of our work, going

anti-clockwise in rhythm with the *kebero*, a medium-sized kettle-drum, and the handclapping of the dancers. I equally remember the very jolly party after the first theatre performance in Sala'a Daro,²⁶ by when the non-Eritrean members of the team had learned to thoroughly enjoy the communal, almost hypnotic energy of this dance. What makes *Sisiit* so unpretentious is that the emphasis of the basic movement is indeed on 'going' rather than intricate footwork. One foot is placed after the other, similar to an ordinary walk were it not for the exact rhythm which corresponds to the clapping of hands, the singing and the accompanying music. In Anseba, the location of our work, people are said to use a slower ground beat than in other Tigre regions.

The main formation of *Sisiit* is thus that of a circle, directed anti-clockwise, with the musicians located within. As main accompaniment the *kebero* is used, possibly the most common membranophone percussion instrument we have encountered in Eritrea. Its cylindrical body is made of wood or of tin (especially the smaller ones for children, thanks to the ubiquitous milk powder *Nido*) with animal-hides stretched over each end. The drum is slung over one's shoulder with a leather strap and played with both hands (Figure 2). Alternatively, it is stood on the floor with the drummer squatting behind it.²⁷ In most cases, the drummers are women, and this, unusual in Africa, goes for any dance. Male musicians can also be found in the circle, either playing the *fam fam* (a mouth-organ) or using their walking sticks as percussion devices.²⁸ These sticks, of about 1 m in length and slightly hooked on one side, serve multiple purposes. They are ordinary walking and herding sticks, weapons, musical instruments or pointers to name but a few. Some men carry them during *Sisiit*, the hooked end facing upwards, similar to the sword in the *Beredg*. With a slight shift of the arm the sticks are raised up and down, thus accentuating the pace of the circular walking movement. The more adroit dancers insert a small sliding step between the regular one, or make some other subtle yet eye-catching foot movement. Interestingly, it is only men I observe doing so, which is indicative of gendered body practices in Tigre dancing which I will comment on later.

Once the principal circuit is established, *Sisiit* can be danced for a long period of time, up to hours, such is the hypnotic quality of the dance. There are regular interludes in which the beat starts to accelerate and the formation is broken up until everyone resumes the slower movement. In these faster spells the dancers begin to shimmy their shoulders with the quickening rhythm of the drum, either remaining in standing position or squatting down gradually. They also pair up with the person next to them, no matter which sex, shimmying back to back and touching shoulders. These moments are the climax of the dance, supported by the women's ululating and the 'ts, ts, ts, ts' of the men, a vocal expression which I can only insufficiently render in onomatopoeia. Like the women's cries, they are an expression of elation and joy, but the sound has a sharpness to it which you do not find in the ululation. There is a Bilen couple during the rehearsal for the Cultural Festival whose pairing up during *Sisiit* catches my eye. The woman dressed in a long cotton shirt, the ever-present scarf tightly wrapped around her head and falling over her shoulder, encircles her male partner with very neat steps that give the impression as if she is indeed

gliding, not pacing over the concrete floor. Her back is firm, the arms close to her body, while her shoulders shimmy with a dynamic energy, yet very controlled, which lets a vertical quiver travel rhythmically through her torso. She does not take so much as one glance at her partner and looks very dignified. The shoulder shake of her male counterpart is much more pronounced and he has a habit of accentuating the last step before pivoting round and touching his partner's back with his shoulders.

Dance Picture #2: 'Golia is a School in itself' or Scenes from the Interviews

a) Mohamed Idris, Secretary of the Anseba Region and co-ordinator of the Bilen group representing Anseba at the Cultural Festival in Asmara, is dabbing his brow. We are sitting in a stuffy room of a small hotel - no windows - somewhere in Keren and are recollecting the dance rehearsal of the day before. Also present are the two workshop participants Mesmer and Bashir, the former acting as interpreter, the latter as additional informant.

“When the Bilen settled in this area”, Mohamed Idris explains, “they already practised the *Golia*. We know little about the time of its origin, but it is common knowledge that it was the first dance created by the Bilen. *Golia* can be danced any time by the whole village for recreation, by women and men, or it is performed during marriage celebrations. It is also danced on public holidays or on the holy days of both Christianity and Islam. During a wedding the bridesmaids and village boys might go to a nearby river-bed and dance *Golia* throughout the night. *Golia* can be performed for a very long time, for hours, an afternoon, a whole night. The only exceptions are the ploughing and harvesting seasons when everyone is busy in the fields. If a man decides to join a *Golia* in a distant place he has to ensure that there is enough firewood and water to last his household until his return to the village.”

My thoughts move back to the bare multi-purpose room of the Grand Hotel, the youth club in Keren. The Bilen dancers have formed a circle, facing inwards, with their arms interlocked or across their neighbour's shoulders. Some men hold sticks or swords, the women have tightened their headscarfs across the chest. The movements involved in *Golia* can be quite energetic and the women do not want to uncover their hair. A male voice begins to sing in a clear, repetitive melody. The tune is undulating and is accompanied by the drumming of a *kebero*. At first, the dancers begin to sway from side to side in rhythm with the song, some with their knees slightly bent in anticipation of the coming jumping. Then the chorus sets in - in call-response fashion to the soloist - and one half of the full circle begins to 'pogo'. In unison the dancers jump vigorously up and down until out of breath, when the second half-circle takes over. They too dance until the first signs of exhaustion, then the jumping is once again continued by the other half. This formation distinguishes the Bilen *Golia* from the Tigre version we saw performed by the students. Here, the whole circle of performers had jumped together. Mohamed Said from Nakfa, one of the workshop participants, explains that the half-circle is a relatively new occurrence and that it has no particular meaning except to give dancers a chance to rest. Lebani adds that it is not at all practised in Gash-Barka.

In the meantime singing and dancing continues in the Grand Hotel. Everyone joins in the singing until the air crackles with vibrant intensity. Then one of the men raises his stick in anticipation. He has just indicated that it is his turn to sing. Again and again we are told that songs are crucial to *Golia*.

“The lyrics you heard yesterday”, Mohamed Idris resumes, “recounted the history of hundred years: a history of suffering, a history of resistance, a history of longing to see Eritrea as a nation. We also use *Golia* to either praise or criticise an individual or an entire village. Sometimes a man composes a song for the girl he loves. There is no set song for *Golia*, but you can learn from any of them. I tell you, *Golia* is a school in itself’.

b) “It is true”, 68-year-old Ato Fazaga from Gheleb confirms after Mohamed Salih and I have joined his family for coffee and have made ourselves comfortable in his house.

“It is true that you can virtually sing about anything. It is only during *Golia* that you can openly praise, belittle or blame another person. When I was young there was a certain man renowned for composing particularly scathing and critical songs. His birth place was Beit Juk and the name of his clan was Ad Eloy. Once he came to the Mensa area to attend a marriage. When the villagers heard about his impending arrival and his wish to take part in the *Golia* everyone made up a verse to get his own back on him. When the dance eventually started his request to sing the opening lines was granted and he began:

‘Friends vanish when your own tongue lashes left and right.

I pray to God to grant us self-restraint tonight.’

He won the friendship of the whole village that night and saved himself from being the target of blame and insult. I also know of a story when a certain villager came to another place and warned the people of an attack planned for the early next morning. He warned them singing the *Golia* and they were prepared”.

c) We are in the middle of another noisy video session with the students. ‘Video session’ means we have just watched another recording of the dances and are now trying to collate data about local varieties, occasions and dress code, about instruments, songs and possible (hi)stories of each dance. Most of our informants are men which has undoubtedly led to an information gender imbalance. Whenever we put in a request to a local authority to speak to some elders or people knowledgeable about dance, we are being introduced to male members of the community, never to women. Rigid patriarchal structures have prevailed in Eritrea despite social reforms during the struggle and a few exceptional women in leading public positions today, such as Bachita, the female mayor of Hagaz. Our students Fatna, Arafat and Sadyia, all in their late teens or early twenties, as well as thirty -year-old Amna, a demobilised fighter, are therefore our sole female sources of information. It is again Fatna who has a word to add about women’s performance of *Golia*.

FATNA (to a fellow student): You mentioned that sticks are part of the dress code or the equipment for men to indicate when it is their turn to sing. Sometimes girls can carry sticks, too. They don’t carry them upright, though, but hold them in front of their chest.

MOHAMED ABIR: This is new to me. I know that girls play the *kebero*, but they are not allowed to sing.

FATNA: You are right in that it is usually the men who sing, but good female singers might sing *Golia* as well. When a man is in love with a woman but

marries another one instead the jilted girl can blame him in the *Golia* which is danced during the wedding celebration. It's an opportunity to voice her anger.

Who can doubt that *Golia* is a school in itself?

Dance Picture #3: *Serret* - an Example of a Gash-Barka Dance

a) We do not have the opportunity to travel to the Beni-Amir people in Gash-Barka, nor do we manage to speak to the co-ordinator of the Gash-Barka troupe during the Cultural Festival in Asmara. (The performers will not grant us an interview without his consent). They nonetheless allow us to film their show, and since some of our workshop participants come from Tessenei and Agordat, we are able to piece a dance picture together which provides us with some core features of the Tigre dances in Gash-Barka.

Characteristic of many dances among the Beni-Amir is that they were adopted and modified from other ethnic groups, most notably the Hedareb people. The Hedareb are Beja-speaking nomads along and across the Sudanese border, whose Hamitic language is also shared by some Beni-Amir groups. Tigre in Gash-Barka do not dance the *Sisiit* or the *Golia* common to other areas, but they practise the *Serret*, which by origin is a Hedareb dance.

A stage at the cultural festival in Asmara. The Gash-Barka group has just taken their position. It is after ten at night, but the performing area is bathed in the yellowish brightness of floodlights. The musicians are singing a song which tells us about the beauty of Asmara. It is accompanied by the ever-present *kebero* and an equally popular string instrument called *mesenko* or *krar*.²⁹ The *krar* is a 5- or 6-string lyre-like instrument with a sound-box that is held under the left arm-pit of the player while the right hand is free to pluck the strings. Four dancers, two women and two men, enter the stage. The men are clad in white *jallabias* and brown waist-coats, the women in T-shirts and silver-threaded cloths, the *luet*, which are draped around their bodies. Their hair is dressed in very small plaits and adorned with jewellery. Once again, the men carry portentous swords. Two horizontal lines are formed, men and women facing each other. With a little gliding side step the dancers begin to sway rhythmically to the music. Then, at a cue, they lean back and move towards each other with a very characteristic, snake-like movement. The neck is outstretched, the face towards the sky, and the chest heaves up and down as if there was no spine in the dancers' bodies (Figure 3). It is a stunning performance. When the dancers have passed each other - ideally the woman under the sword of the man, the man under the outstretched arm of the woman - they stand still and bend further backwards, one of the male dancers to an angle of almost 90° degrees. Then they straighten themselves up, turn round and resume the evidently relaxing swaying movement. Repeat.

We have come across three different designations for the characteristic movement which the non-Eritrean team members have dubbed 'the snake'. The first is *fens*, which translates as 'to bend backwards', the other *gelbet*, the equivalent of 'to turn upside down', the last *ragabat* which simply means

'neck'. Some students claim they are misnomers, but *ragabat* seems to be used quite frequently.

b) MOHAMED SAID and LEBANI:

Serret was originally a marriage dance, but it is also danced for general entertainment.

RAMADAN: I have also seen it performed during circumcision ceremonies of Eritreans in Sudan. The Sudanese celebrate a boy's circumcision for three, a girl's circumcision for two days.³⁰ This has influenced Eritrean refugees and they now also celebrate it with a party. On the day of the circumcision there is a big get-together with food and play during which the *Serret* is performed.

LEBANI: There are two different types of song for *Serret*. The first is for marriage celebrations, with a special song for both women and men, the second is a more general one for recreation. There also exist two different melodies which are interchangeable. Regarding dance practices, whipping is rather common among the Beni-Amir and the Hedareb in Gash-Barka. An additional person stands in the centre of the two lines and whips the male dancers. If you don't flinch, it is considered a sign of bravery.

AMNA: Yes, there are different songs for women and men during marriage ceremonies. If there is a wedding car, the girls will drum the beat on the roof. *Serret* is performed when the bride enters the bridegroom's house. The *Serret* song can also be sung on its own, for example when the bride is ritually abducted from her house.

LEBANI: No, no! The *Serret* has to be danced! The bridesmaids try to throw *teff* [a local grain used to make the traditional flat bread, *injeera*] on the bridegroom, but since it is a bad omen, his friends will dance the *Serret* to shield him.

AMNA: No, I totally disagree. When people have a car, they do not dance the *Serret*. How can you dance when you sit in a car? It is different when the bride is taken away on a camel.

Dancing Gender, Dancing Women and Men

The preceding dance picture closes the section on dances for both women and men. The longer I watch, record or make tentative attempts to join the dances, the more I am aware that they are not only about steps, rhythm and bodily movement, but also about social knowledge, power relations and sexuality. Having just acknowledged that my own perception is still unrefined and certainly mediated by my own Eurocentric background, it would be presumptuous to make sweeping claims. Yet, it would be similarly fallacious to perpetuate and fossilise notions of alterity, of 'Us' and 'Them', which would obfuscate social differentiations and values in Tigre and Bilen communities and which would also eclipse relations and ideas that bear similarities to those found in my own hometown near Frankfurt/Main, Germany. After all, there are ideological, political and economical ties which link the two continents and its peoples together, more palpable in Hesse perhaps because of its large Eritrean exile community.³¹

The construction of meaning - be it in an ethnographic account or on the dance floor - is ultimately linked with the distribution of power. Ideas, opinions, and body practices belong to individuals that are positioned in a frame of social interactions which, in turn, are ruled by conventions. Among others, these

conventions are gendered. It was, for example, possible for the non-Eritrean members of the team to briefly depart from the local frame as specified below - Gerri, one of the theatre workers, enjoyed practising the steps of the men-only dances because of their affinity with Irish dance patterns - but it would have been an impossibility for the female workshop students to do so as well. In dancing, individuals are not only "subjects of their own experience" - their bodies, their feelings, perceptions and spirituality - they are also "objects of representation".³² They stage themselves publicly, are observed and evaluated by others, are judged as 'women' and 'men'. The body becomes a corporeal sign which, literally, embodies multiple meanings. Gendered body practices in Tigre and Bilen dancing reveal themselves most notably in the segregated dances, although the more extrovert tendencies of male performances can also be seen in the general dance forms.

Extra-ordinary steps in an otherwise unpretentious dance like *Sisiit*, for example, are eye-catching and 'daring'. In men-only dances like the *Beredg*, which are very much linked to the construction of bravery, 'manliness' or strength (emphasised too by the phallic swords that are carried) the display of extraordinary skills or ingenuity is certainly appreciated and approved of. This is part of the prestige and power men can negotiate in dancing and in daily life.

Women's dances, however, are far less vigorous in their movements, as women generally show more physical - and social - restraint. Some written sources on Tigre dance culture mention the connection of dancing and sexuality quite explicitly. In a study published by the EPLF Research Branch in the early eighties we found an account which points out that women are not allowed to jump as energetically as the men for fear they might "dance away their virginity".³³ Others sources say that "[a]mong women, movements of the body from the waist to the knees is [*sic*] frowned upon",³⁴ which, as the prohibited area undoubtedly suggests, would draw attention to their sexual organs. This can be taken to produce an underlying dilemma for women who, though not forbidden to dance (except in those areas where men and women are not allowed to mix in dancing events or where, for religious reasons, these are tabooed completely) have to ensure that they stay strictly within the socially constructed frame of submissive female decorum. Extra-ordinary movements or exalted gestures, even subtle ones as those described in the *Sisiit*, would certainly reach the boundaries of the acceptable and would therefore be 'frowned upon'. They could reflect negatively on a woman's character much more than it could on a man's.³⁵ Yet, women too have the opportunity to perform their sexuality, even if they are more restrained. The *Shellil*, for example, is an opportunity for women to bare and display their hair - the taking off of the head-scarf can be staged quite dramatically - as the act which is commonly prohibited among the Bilen and Tigre. The *Serret*, too, allows for such expression, since the reclining back and the *ragabat* movement automatically draw the spectator's attention to the woman's breasts.³⁶ What is more, during the opening-night party at our house, we observed two of the female students gracefully undulating their hips to Arabic rhythms in mixed company. Both had lived in the Sudan, and although they did not incorporate these movements into the set Tigre dances, it was clear

that they had broadened their dancing knowledge with elements of a different culture and that they enjoyed what might be considered an 'unprecedented liberty'.³⁷

Dance Picture #4: *Shellil* or 'How can I describe your thick long hair'

The girl with the thick *Shellil* locks,
How can I describe your thick long hair?
Her thin eyebrows are like lightning,
Her thick hair covers her shoulders.
I will tell you where she lives:
She lives in the *Rora* [highlands],
And she lives in the *Anseba* [lowlands].
We will have a good time,
If I get her.

Shellil song sung by Mussa Salih (Asmara, 1997)

Men and women have gathered for a wedding celebration. The drumming and singing begins. Bystanders are clapping their hands. A young woman rises and walks slowly into the dancing space where she ceremoniously uncovers her hair. It is braided into a characteristic hairstyle for unmarried women called *Dhepokod*, fine thread-like strings, glossy and abundant. She has treated her hair with a concoction of butter and roasted flour to make it look jade black or, perhaps, she has simply used hair oil. The dancer begins to turn her head left and right in rhythm with the song. The braids swing around her face and so display their richness. The dancer might shield her face with her hand while she continues swinging her head from one side to the other. Gradually she walks round in a circle facing the centre, not the crowd of spectators which surrounds her. An onlooker approaches the dancer and ties a *Nakfa* note into her hair.³⁸ The other women ululate and clap loudly. There is festive excitement in the air. Encouraged, the dancer lets her braids fly more dynamically. Now the beat of the *kebero* starts to accelerate. The woman kneels down, still swinging her hair. Then the head movement subsides. Other women take over. Cut.

This is a *Shellil* we have seen performed in Anseba region, where the basic head movement is danced standing or with the dancer going round in a circle. The instrument played is *kebero*, but *mesenko* and *fam fam* are also increasingly used these days.

Many local varieties of *Shellil* exist, so discussions with students are passionate. Gradually, two basic dancing modes emerge from the colloquium: The version as described above; the second when the dancer swings her locks kneeling down and shimmying her shoulders. Amna is a true specialist in this respect. It is the style most popular in the Northern Red Sea region where, according to Ato Fazagah, the dance also has its roots. In contrast to the woman above, Amna has her hair braided with a parting lengthways and horizontally which allows the braids to nestle gracefully around her the back of her head (Figure 5). This hairstyle is called *Gren* and worn by married women only. One

EPLF source mentions that *Shellil* dancing is always called according to the hairstyle of the woman, that is either *Dhepokod* or *Gren*. Others claim that there exist further versions, *Ghinil*, *Swaku*, and *Habeshi*, yet without any specifications.³⁹ I have seen none of the latter but have been able to make out two other basic distinctions: the *Shellil* which is danced in a group of women and men, and the *Shellil* performed among women only. This is most commonly practised in Muslim areas, such as Mensura, where strong gender segregation is practised.

Dance Picture #5: *Wad Sommia* - For Men Only

Let us now open the dance floor exclusively for men. They have been patiently waiting in the back, stretching their legs, twiddling their sticks, holding their swords and readjusting their *samadid*, until it is time to call them into the centre of the arena. *Wad Sommia* is the first dance they will present, being the most popular men-only dance among the Bilen and Tigre. It is expressive of the life-circle and practised for recreation, with no religious aspect to the dance. Because of its popularity, *Wad Sommia* knows many local varieties. We got to know the Tigre versions of Anseba, the Mensa area and Nakfa as well as how the Bilen perform the dance. Common to all these varieties is that the dancers form a horizontal line, move towards the singing women and begin to jump in front of them. In Anseba, Mensa and part of the Northern Red Sea Region, they also dance round in a circle, whereas in Gash-Barka and Sheeb they do not.

Scene 1. An oppressively hot afternoon in Keren. No breeze. Everyone is longing for the rain which - Alhamdulillah - will be granted later in form of a roaring thunderstorm. Only the die-hards have gathered: Mohamed Abir, Mohamed Said and Idris from Sheeb. Amna will play the drum, Fatna joins the singing. There are merely a few onlookers because everyone has taken shelter in the shade. The men are dressed in spotlessly white *jallabias* and *sruans* - for the occasion of the dance - the women wear their ordinary clothes, skirts, blouses and headscarfes. Amna squats down in front of a flowerbed and starts drumming the kebero. The courtyard of the ministry where we film is an excellent dancing arena, and the bright yellow walls look cheerful. Now the men take their sticks and walk to the designated area. They form a circle and begin to dance anti-clockwise in rhythm with the drum. A three-unit step pattern becomes discernible: one - jump, two - step, three - step, the emphasis placed on the first. The arms swing loosely to the side, but in the right hand they hold their sticks with the hooked end pointing towards the sky. This formation is kept up for about three rounds, with a change of direction, then the men form a horizontal line and move towards the singing and drumming women. The beat changes, steps up and with it the foot pattern. The dancers are very close to the girls and begin to leap in unison, their body weight returning to both legs. The movement looks energetic and lithe, despite the obvious exertion behind it. You can also hear the men's 'ts, ts, ts' and the women's ululations. Then the circle reforms and the dance continues from the beginning. Cut.

Scene 2: At the Bilen rehearsal inside the multi-purpose room of the Grand Hotel. The women, about 12 of them, have just taken their position at one end, the spectators - the theatre team, people from the neighbourhood including two nuns - at the other. The women have two *keberos* and powerful voices which makes the room resonate when they begin to play. The men wear full traditional dress, some have substituted their sticks for awesome swords. Five men take their position opposite the chorus. The Bilen *Wad Sommia* does not know the circle, only the horizontal line, but it is far more dynamic than the Tigre version. The faster beat also asks for a different foot pattern. Each time they step forward, the men insert a small but energetic hop. Similar to the Tigre version, the rhythm counts to three, but this time it is the last step which is more pronounced not the first one. All is done in perfect unison. Then the dancers withdraw keeping the pattern while facing the women, and repeat. The third repetition links up with the final sequence of the dance, the leaping in front of the women. Again the beat quickens, the women ululate and the men brandish their swords towards the chorus. It is a very powerful, sexually charged and ultimately elegant performance (Figure 6).

“In Nakfa”, Mohamed Said explains, “we have a much slower beat and begin with the formation of a circle. Occasionally the dancers sit down on their heels and imitate different actions, for example the sharpening of a knife or the loading of a gun.⁴⁰ These interludes can also be used to convey secret messages for one’s *wareza*, one’s lover, when to meet next or whether to meet at all”.

“Certainly not”, one of the elders of Mensura denies the above, “we do not make any secret signs to the women because women and men are not allowed to mix. Anyone who comes too close to the women will be fined money or he has to sacrifice an animal which the youngsters of the village are allowed to eat. We dance *Wad Sommia* in groups as a kind of competition. In the past the young men were divided into age groups. The groups were called *Rabat* in Tigre which means ‘peer’. In each village there were three *Rabats*: *Abi Rabat*, ‘big peers’, *Megabait Rabat*, which means ‘middle peers’, and the *Niish*, the small ones. Each group had its own leader called *Ab*, ‘father’. They used to stage dance competitions amongst each other and help poor families during ploughing and harvesting seasons. Then they danced *Wad Sommia* and the *Beredg*.”

“As far as I know *Wad Sommia* is a war dance by origin. It was a bravery dance to motivate the fighters because there were many invasions and looting around that time. Some women accompanied the men to the battlefield to play the *kebero* and sing songs to encourage them. Today it is performed for entertainment and during wedding celebrations”.

“There are a variety of songs”, Mohamed Abir chimes in, “according to the occasion, but the melody is pretty much the same. Yes, people *can* pass on coded message to their beloved or they sing praise songs. When the girls praise one particular man he might lead the other dancers in the next *Wad Sommia*. Then you have marriage celebrations when the women sing songs about the bride, the bridegroom or their families. There are also patriotic songs, of course”

Dance Picture #6: Beredg - More Scenes from the Interviews

Let us once more return to the *Beredg*, and thereby close the circle of dances. If, in simple terms, *Wad Sommia* has something very jolly, prancing and playful about it, then *Beredg* might be characterised as belligerent, gallant and fierce. I have already shared one dance picture with you at the beginning of the

article, which will suffice as description. Yet that is only one among many versions we were told about or saw performed. So far, we have been able to distinguish three basic modes of rendition: one common to Gash-Barka, where swords and shields are used to stage mock fights and where people do *not* jump over the sword; the second among the Bilen who open the dance by jumping the sword back and forth (Figure 7) and then move forward with the characteristic hopping movement; thirdly the Tigre version from Anseba which, possibly influenced by the Bilen people, practises the jumping, whereas in the Northern Red Sea Region, especially around Nakfa, they do not.

Beredg is distinct from the other dances in that it is rendered only with music, not with singing. Different instruments seem to be used according to where the dance is performed. In Gash-Barka, it is commonly the *krar*; among the Bilen they dance to the droning humming of a male chorus with the women and the *kebero* eventually joining in; the workshop participants have used two very small drums, *tashet* or *negarit*, to accompany the dance. In contrast to the *kebero*, the *tashet* is played with a wooden stick, never with the hand.⁴¹ But let us now join the interviews to hear more stories about the *Beredg*.

a) Kahasai, thirty-seven-year-old artistic director of the National Cultural Troupe, is a man with little time but much knowledge. Mohamed Salih and I agree that he should actually write a book. We are sitting in my room in a small pension in Asmara, sip tea and listen with awe to his narrative.

“In general, all the dances of our various ethnic groups are performed in a ‘dramatic’, ‘theatrical’ way. They are naturally suitable for stage performance and we have had great success with our show all over the world. *Beredg* is known in the areas dominated by Tigre-speaking people. I will tell you the origins of the version performed in the Barka area. Some 150 years ago the *Beredg* was actually a hand-to-hand combat during strifes of all sorts. If two villages or two individuals had a serious quarrel, it had to be fought out, literally, in battle. Both parties decided for a time and a place where to meet for the showdown. When the day arrived, both factions gathered at the meeting place armed with shields and swords. A musical instrument called *rhebaba* [Arabic for *mesenko* or *krar*] was played to encourage the combatants. Each party had its own instrument and its own music. First, the two individuals who had started the quarrel went down to the river-bed and began to fight with shields and swords. The others who had accompanied them remained in the background. It was only when one of the combatants was killed that everyone got involved in the battle. Eventually, one group emerged victoriously. It was *their* music which was passed on to the next generations as living memory of the battle and of the men who had fought so valiantly.”

“Likewise, if one ethnic group started war with another, each party brought its own musician. He would play his *rhebaba* in such a manner that his fellow men would get frenzied with bloodlust. Now, the main art of the *Beredg* is to dodge the slashing sword, to avoid its impaling cut or thrust, to jump and find a secure balance with one’s feet. Then you also use your shield to ward off fatal blows. With the passing of time, these groups have found other means to resolve conflicts or inter-ethnic disputes. Now we have a government and a legal system, for example. This is how the *Beredg* grew into its present form: a dance which is held during marriage celebrations and public holidays. But if you look closely at the various postures of the dance, the accessories, the space pattern, the facial expression, the way the dancers encircle each other ready to pounce, you know that this movement was initially intended to kill the adversary.”

b) Back into Ato Fazaga's comfortable living room. We have just discussed that jumping the sword is considered to be a sign of bravery among the Tigre and Bilen in Anseba. Now we also want to know of possible other meanings.

ATO FAZAGA: Traditionally, the sword jumping is equivalent to taking an oath. A very solemn oath which cannot be taken back under any circumstances. My people [the Mensa] are not in favour of this custom, as we generally do not practise traditional dance.⁴² During marriage, for example, the male party of the bridegroom will go to the home of the bride and perform the *Beredg*. They jump over the sword in front of the bridal house. This is a vow. A vow that they will protect the bride with their life, that they will guard her from any harm and unfavourable circumstances. It is a kind of war sign that from this day on they are her guardians and protectors.⁴³

Comment: We were informed that in Gash-Barka and other areas, people do not jump the sword. It is only the Bilen and some Tigre communities in Anseba.

ATO FAZAGA: These people are new to the *Beredg*. They do not clearly understand its meaning or consequences. It is almost as if you were declaring war on the onlookers who might be potentially harmful to the bride. The people in Gash-Barka know the consequences. That is why they are reluctant to jump.

(Appendix comprising various voices in Mensura and Hagaz: "We do not jump the sword. Those who do are not brave." "The function of the sword is to fight, not to play around with it or jump over its blade." "The main purpose of the sword is to fight forward, not to jump backward. We might leap in the air in a fighting fashion, because the way we dance *Beredg* is in the mode of a mock fight, but it is no children's game.")

Dancing Theatre

Where does my father lie?

Did he fall in Decamhare, did he die in Nakfa?

Which of you can give me news of my father,
you who are the friends of the martyrs?

When I overcome the problems I have

I will keep all my father's promises.

Grandfather, leave your hard work, ploughing and keeping sheep,

I have begun my education to learn.

Let me learn to fulfil your son's place.

Which of you can give me news of my father?

Tell me, where does my father lie?

opening song by Mohamed Ali 'Lebani' in 'R'det' - 'Homecoming' (Keren, 1997)

We finally move from the dancing floor into the arena space of the theatre workshop. While writing this paper I have become aware of the various discourses between which this narrative ceaselessly moves. First, there are the discourses of dance practice and musicology, whose very physical and technical modes of enquiry none of the research team had been trained in. Secondly, there are the discourses of dance ethnography referred to above, a younger sibling of social anthropology with its roots in colonial contact, 'Othering' and 'Orientalisation'.⁴⁴ However, in recent years it has brought forth trenchant

discussions on representational strategies, drawing attention to the fact that ethnography “is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures”.⁴⁵ It is an aspect this writing too has to answer. Finally, there are the discourses relevant to (community-based) theatre. Incidentally, they too can be traced to colonial beginnings in Africa,⁴⁶ and it is not without irony that fifty years after the British administrators encouraged the first local amateur theatre groups in Asmara, a European theatre team flies in to introduce basic theatre techniques.⁴⁷ The history of this theatre form has however shown that to a great extent the outcome of a workshop depends on the sensitivity and experience of the facilitators, on their responsiveness to the “collaborating community”⁴⁸ and the given context, not necessarily on their nationality or their affiliation to a certain class, race, gender, or set of beliefs, even though this undoubtedly bears on what they do professionally.⁴⁹

Having said that, it is imperative to locate our dance research primarily in the discourses of theatre,⁵⁰ not in dance practise or in ethnography. The main aim of our research was to explore performative aspects of Tigre and Bilen culture which could facilitate the communication between theatre groups and communities and which would help get to the heart of the people. Many theatre practitioners have stressed the significance of indigenous performance forms for transferring the theatre and communication process into the hands of the communities or, as in our case, the participants of the workshop.⁵¹ It has to be made clear that the set-up of the Keren workshop was essentially intent on teaching basic theatre techniques to the participants: voice and body work, improvisations, developing a scenario and the running of a small theatre group to name but a few. It was not intended to work with an ‘organic’ collaborating community - that is people of all sexes and creeds who happen to live in one particular place - in what is usually understood as a ‘community-based’, ‘popular’ or ‘theatre-for-development project’ (locals being to a certain degree actors, directors and spectators at the same time).⁵² The research for themes, the devising of plays and the eventual performance all lay in the hands of the students and the two facilitators, Gerri Moriarty and Renny O’Shea, and did not allow for much participation of the audience in the theatre process. The workshop *participants*, as potential multipliers, constituted the collaborating community; the spectators were merely brought in to see a finished product and to, literally, ‘join the (final) dance’. However, since the students were a heterogenous group - young people still at school, some who had finished their education in Sudan, ex-fighters from rural background, ex-fighters from an urban background, self-employed craftsmen or those who were formally unemployed - this form of work facilitated a very intense exchange of information and experiences among the participants from all over Eritrea and resulted in the telling of the communities’ stories as a kind of paradigm.⁵³ The work manifested itself in a continuous process of mutual teaching and learning which encompassed reading and writing as much as it did dance practises. Local varieties were compared, tried out and heatedly discussed among the participants, with the facilitators and the research team moderating and recording the debate.

In general, dancing can be considered to be an integral part of the local communication system, a means through which social knowledge *and* individuality can be expressed, yet which is sufficiently flexible to be merged with theatre forms so far unprecedented in Eritrea. Moving into the performing space of community theatre does not, however, mean that we were primarily interested in the 'effectiveness' of dance as transmitter of ('progressive', 'developmental') information. We were also not interested in a fossilisation of existing forms nor in what Mda so wryly termed "the revival of the great African myths and long-forgotten rituals".⁵⁴

Dancing and singing was, first of all, an integral element of the preparatory sessions for the theatre work, as part of the warm-up which included yoga exercises as much as it contained songs from Ireland and other parts of Africa. Renny mentioned that dancing and singing were also used to bring the workshop sessions to a close, and that the participants took extra care to practise more of the local dances once the research had come into force. It was also intended to reverse roles and equalise power - the trainees becoming teachers of the facilitators - and helped ease off students' tension about constantly having to learn something new, though the research cut in on their recreation time which brought additional pressures.

With the two plays taking shape in the later period of the workshop, it was then discussed which dances could be incorporated into the plays. This was an unprecedented move for a number of the participants. Many had previous experience with theatre work in schools, Sudanese refugee camps or through the National Union of Eritrean Youths and Students (NUEYS), but most of them still drew a sharp demarcation between 'folklore' ensembles and 'drama' groups. For the plays, the workshop participants split into two separate teams, one working with Renny on a piece about a young woman, the other devising a play with Gerri centring around the homecoming of various returnees. The themes and scenes were largely based on improvisations from the earlier weeks, with actors now working on the characters they were to play. Striking also was the students' prolific composition of songs and poetry - to be understood as a unity in the given context - some of which were included in the performance. The shows were staged successively, beginning with the women's play, and were connected by both teams enacting a bus journey which signified not only the departure of the girl and her lover, but also the returnees' homecoming in the second play.

The women's play tells the story of a poor Tigre Girl who is trying to finish her education. She is secretly in love with a Tigrinya Boy. The Mother has discovered her love without her daughter's knowledge. When the Girl joins a circumcision celebration in the neighbourhood - thereby remembering the story of her own mutilation - she is noticed by a rich returnee who proposes to the Girl's Father. He happily agrees to the match. However, the Girl refuses to marry the man and seeks advice from her Friend who says that the Girl must follow her Father's wishes. This part is performed in the form of a *Sprechgesang*, a speech-song accompanied by *kebero*, with the girls walking across the performance space. The wedding day arrives and the celebration

begins, which enables the Girl to slip away secretly. Husband and Father are furious, the Mother goes and looks for the Girl. When she finds her, she is both relieved and angry. She tells her daughter to follow her heart and to pursue her education, but warns her of the dangers ahead. She blesses the Boy and Girl and they depart; there is no closure to the play and we are left not knowing what will happen to them after their leave-taking.

“The show was a hybrid of naturalistic scenes linked by narrators, and visual non-naturalistic imagery”, Renny O’Shea writes in her notes on the dances.

There were several moments in the show which I would class as dance, but very much from my tradition. I have a very broad definition of dance - maybe movement is a better word - some people were quite adamant that walking about was most definitely not dancing! I wanted to introduce people to the possibilities of choreography, to play with my ideas as well as the traditional set piece dances, to expand people’s ideas of what dance could be. The scene between the two friends for example - I wanted to use their movements, the physical space between them and around them to very simply mirror their poetry. Sadiya [who played the Girl] enjoyed this dynamic, grasped it immediately and invested it with the emotional truth it needed. [...] I guess both set dance pieces were used naturalistically and were part of the narrative structure. The Girl comes across her neighbour’s dancing the *Yewollela*, the Husband and guests dance the *Beredg* at her wedding.⁵³

Strictly speaking, *Yewollela* is not a dance but a song which is rendered during marriage ceremonies in praise of the couple and their parents. It is commonly sung on its own, but nowadays it can also accompanied by dancing. The expression ‘yewollela’ is a ubiquitous one, an exclamation of joy and happiness which you find in many lyrics and which is sometimes substituted for a more substantial text. In the play, *Yewollela* was a general celebratory dance in the form of a fast *Sisiit*, whose shape fitted the festive occasion. The Girl comes across her neighbours dancing during a circumcision ceremony. After the shoulder shimmy, the circling and skipping changes into all getting down low around the drummer while the beat accelerates. Then the dancers clear away to leave the Girl and the Narrator to tell her own circumcision story.

“We had some interesting discussions about regional differences in the dance”, Renny continues, “including whether people would dance it for a girl’s circumcision. Also whether it was possible to alter a traditional dance to fit a narrative or to express something abstract. Mohamed Abir [one of the most skilful dancers and the choreographer of the show] was particularly strict about not changing a microstep - then choreographed the changes very happily having decided it was a useful process after all.”⁵⁶

The *Beredg* performed during the wedding of the Girl emphasised the dramatic structure of the play and presented a perfect opportunity to contrast the competitors, Boy and Husband. The Husband is an older man, a returnee who dances clumsily because he probably has not danced for a long time. The Boy, on the other hand, is much younger and moves with grace. There is a moment when the two pair up in the dance, a challenge, a showing off with the inherent possibility to turn violent (clearer in some performances than in others). Finally, the Girl circles the dancers before leaving the place. For Renny this was part of the choreography, “but I don’t think the actors (apart from Sadyia) looked on it in the same way although they were happy with it”.

In contrast to the women's play, '*R'det*' - Homecoming - was devised along three narrative lines, each one centring on a character's return to the village: The Boy who was orphaned in the struggle and raised at a boarding school returns home to live with his elderly Grandfather; the Woman who lost her husband in the struggle and had fled to the Sudan; and the Fighter who suffered severe mental trauma as result of his war experience. The Boy desperately wants to continue his schooling, but the Grandfather insists on educating him in Islamic style at home (thus saving school fees). The Woman returns to find her house sold by the Neighbour in whose care it was left; and the Fighter has been turned into the village fool because people do not understand his invisible, non-physical disability. He keeps repeating the phrase 'Tell me your dreams', and it is this phrase which is the cue to letting the characters solve their dilemmas.⁵⁸

'*R'det*' was epic in style, with a quick change of scenes which reflected the complexity and diversity of human experience in the village. There was a lot of movement in the show, but only one of the traditional dance pieces. *Wad Sommia* was used as part of the narrative structure to welcome the orphaned Boy back home. The villagers have gathered in the grandfather's compound to celebrate his return and invite the Boy to join in the dance. Having been away for so long, the Boy does not know how to do it and at first gets it all wrong. It is a comic scene, with the Boy in the circle of the skilful dancers, still wearing a colourful school satchel on his back and awkwardly imitating the movement patterns. Gradually, however, he grasps the sequence and expertly masters the steps by the end of the dance. It is a physical sign of his initiation into the community.

Finally, there was a general participatory dance at the end of the play. The Boy is allowed to continue his schooling, the Woman has taken the greedy Neighbour to court, and the villagers have begun to understand the condition of the Fighter. Reason enough to celebrate. The audience was invited to partake in the dance, but this opening up of performance was not intended to enable genuine audience participation but to enter the joyful mood of the ending. For the students the final dance had two connotations: To bring the narrative to a close and to let off steam after the successful completion of the performance (later continued at the opening-night party at our house). The plays were well received during our stay - people crossing the performance space and pasting bank notes on the actors' foreheads as one among many indications - and later went on a two-month tour with equal success.

For all of us who were part of the dance, it was a most rewarding and exhausting experience. New ties have been forged, profound contacts were made which have survived time and distance and which are likely to be renewed as the work continues. The most important aspect to come out of the workshop, perhaps, was the opportunity for people to creatively reconsider their present and past in a manner which did not gloss over their contradictions, inequalities and discontinuities. On the contrary, they critically engaged with these aspects by recreating them and imagining the possibilities of other realities. Recovering, exercising and re-inventing dance practices were thus part of a performative re-writing of their culture and history, in which the participants themselves

selected, organised and presented the events.⁵⁹ Curtailed, denied or distorted under the various colonisers, this revision of local lives empowered the participants to represent and 'fiction' history from their own perspective, not from that of the colonisers, the theatre workers or even the current government. Michel Foucault once said that "the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist, that is, 'fictions' it".⁶⁰ His sentiment is echoed by Boal who insists that "perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely the rehearsal for the revolution".⁶¹ Inherent in the so-called 'fiction' - creative practices, such as theatre or dance - is the feasibility of changing 'reality', provided the process raises the level of consciousness of those engaged in it and does not impose preconceived ideas of 'how things should "really" be'.

For the workshop participants, making theatre and practising local dances was also part of an ongoing process of identity construction as Tigre- and Bilen-speaking Eritreans of different sexes, backgrounds, and beliefs. It linked up with the challenge of nation-building in which the country is currently engaged. By 1997 the external enemy Ethiopia, who had helped create internal unanimity during the struggle, had long turned into an ally.⁶² Since then it has been up to the government and people to find strategies with which to form Eritrean identities that enable 'unity in diversity', which embody consensus despite or, perhaps, 'because of' ethnic and socio-political polyphony. Not always an easy undertaking if we, for example, consider the disintegration of ancient customs through war, migration or reform, or the abolition of spatial identities through land reform or the new administrative regions.⁶³ However, the history of Eritrea's liberation struggle has sufficiently proved that cultural engagement can help facilitate transformations in the public and private spheres. Thus, the dances will continue to be performed, changed, re-invented and enjoyed according to the people's wishes and needs without someone jotting down notes on space distribution or movement patterns for her own version of Tigre and Bilen dance history. To close with Hamid, a forty-three-year-old Muslim ex-fighter from Mensura: "Religion has forbidden us to dance, but I have danced a lot in my life and I am sure that God will forgive me".

NOTES:

1. *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. by Judy Pearsall, and Bill Trumble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 259.

2. These languages are Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Beja, Afar, Kunama, Nara, Saho, and Arabic.

3. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford, and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 16. Sally Ann Ness, "Dancing in the Field: Notes from Memory", *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, ed. by Susan Leigh Forster (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 129.

4. or more details regarding theatre see: Jane Plastow, 'Theatre of Conflict in the Eritrean Independence Struggle', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13.50 (1997), 144-154. Paul Warwick,

- 'Theatre and the Eritrean Struggle for Freedom: The Cultural Troupes of the People's Liberation Front', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13.51 (1997), 226-227. Jane Plastow, "Uses and Abuses of Theatre for Development: Political Struggle and Development Theatre in the Ethiopia-Eritrea War", *African Theatre for Development: Art for Self-Determination*, ed. by Kamal Salhi (Exeter: Intellect, 1998), pp. 97-113.
5. Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 139-140. David Pool, *Eritrea: Towards Unity in Diversity*, Minority Rights Group Report 97/1 (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997), pp. 9-13.
6. Didier Martiny, dir., "Eritrea": *Thirty Years of Solitude* (Rome: Zeudi & Franco Cristaldi Film; France: Galatee Film, 1993).
7. These are Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Hedareb, Afar, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, and Saho. They correspond with the names of the nine languages mentioned in footnote 2 above, with the exception of the Hedareb who speak Beja and the Rashaida whose mother-tongue is Arabic.
8. Plastow, "Theatre of Conflict", p. 144. For a comprehensive account of Ethiopian drama and theatre history see Jane Plastow, "Ethiopia: The Creation of a Theatre Culture", MPhil thesis, University of Manchester 1989. Jane Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics: The Evolution of Theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. A Comparative Study* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996). See also: Tamirat Gebeyehu, and Aida Edemariam, "Ethiopia", *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, Vol. 3: Africa*, ed. by Don Rubin (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 113-129.
9. Warwick, p. 222. Plastow, "Uses and Abuses", p. 104. Solomon Tsehaye, "Eritrea: Culture and Nation Building", unpublished paper presented at the conference 'Identity and Conflict in Africa', University of Leeds, September 1997, p. 17.
10. Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, *Draft Constitution, July 1996, Asmara, Eritrea*, online, available at: <http://www.primenet.com/~ephrem/econst.html>, 14 November 1998, Article 11, Sub 1. Emphasis added. See also: Solomon Tsehaye, p. 18.
11. Jane Plastow, 'The Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13.53 (1997), 388. See also for details of the origins of the ECBTP and a full account of its work. It should be mentioned that every alternate year Theatre in Education workshops are offered to teachers, which are not referred to here.
12. Shack even classified Bilen as Tigre, Littmann observed strong affinities. William A. Shack, *The Central Ethiopians: Amhara, Tigrinya and Related Peoples*, Ethnographic Survey of Africa IV: North-Eastern Africa (London: International African Institute, 1974), p. 67. Enno Littmann, *Publications of the Princeton Expedition to Abyssinia Vol. II: Tales, Customs, Names and Dirges of the Tigre Tribes: English Translation* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1910), pp. 343-344.
13. Pool, pp. 9, 12. Shack, p. 67.
14. Stefanie Christmann, *Die Freiheit haben wir nicht von den Männern: Frauen in Eritrea* (Unkel: Horlemann, 1996), p. 83.
15. "Interview with Mohamed Assanai", Asmara, 18/07/1997. For examples of TFD (Theatre for Development) projects linked to governments institutions see David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre* (London: James Currey, etc., 1995), p. 159. Zakes Mda, *When People Play People: Development Communication through Theatre* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993), p. 187.
16. Pool, pp. 15-16, 25.
17. Alemseged Tesfai, "Diversity, Identity and Unity in Eritrea: A View from Inside", unpublished paper presented at the conference 'Identity and Conflict in Africa', University of Leeds, September 1997, p. 7.
18. This list is largely based on information by Mohamed Salih Ismail, as is the map. Various sources give equally various, at times highly intricate classifications, the differences between which are not my concern. Important for our work has been to acknowledge these group divisions, to identify the broader patterns and to understand that local varieties of cultural

expressions have emerged, often influenced by interaction with other peoples. See also: Pool, pp. 8-9. Shack, p. 67. Littmann, *Princeton Expedition Vol. II*, pp. 335-344.

19. The Cultural Festival in Asmara takes place in August every year. Now a mixture of cultural festival, expo and fun fair, it was born during the struggle when the Cultural Troupes toured the Euro-American diaspora, thus providing a lifeline between the Eritrean exile community and their home country. Then as today, dances and songs of all ethnic groups were presented as a powerful means of expressing unity in diversity. In the eighties annual festivals were organised in the Italian city of Bologna, some of which the Cultural Troupes were able to attend. Because of this link, the Asmara festival is also known under the nickname 'Bologna' today. See also Warwick, p. 227.

20. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 272-273. Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 4th ed., rev. by Lisa Ullmann (1950; Plymouth: Northcote House, 1988), pp. v-vi, 17. John Blacking, "Movement, Dance, Music, and the Venda Girls' Initiation Cycle", *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance*, ed. by Paul Spencer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 65.

21. Even more recent dance studies, like the articles collected in Kariamu Welsh Asante, ed., *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), are written with the air of ethnographic authority. The two most outstanding dance studies I have come across so far which take into consideration the above concerns are Ness, "Dancing in the Field", and Jane K. Cowan's *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

22. Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 3.

23. The names are used interchangeably, but *Sisiit* is certainly the more common one. *Keskes* seems to be more widely used in the Northern Red Sea Region. Ato Fazaga was the only informant to differentiate between the part of the dance which is performed standing - *Keskes* - and the part when people start squatting down - *Sisiit*. "Interview with Fazaga Abdulged", Keren, 18/08/97. Ato is the respectful address for an older man.

24. Weddings are the most well-liked occasions for dance events, and it is inexcusable that we were never managed to attend one. The closest we ever got was a memorable lunch invitation at Hagaz where our host, Awate, entertained us with music and pictures taped and taken during his own marriage celebration. I am therefore unable to give more details on the order of dances or at which point they are performed. For a more comprehensive survey see: EPLF, *Pilot Survey of Eritrean Culture V: Arts: Literature, Painting, Music and Dance, Theatre and Cinema, Sculpture and Architecture* (n.p.: Department of Politicization, Education and Culture, 1982).

25. György Martin, "Az etiópiai táncok sajátosságai és főbb típusai", *Ethnographia* (Budapest), 77.3 (1966), 448; and György Martin, "Dance Types in Ethiopia", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 19 (1967), 23.

26. Sala'a Daro was the location of the follow-up workshop of the Tigrinya group from 1995. The Keren students were invited to their performance and also presented scenes from their own work. Ali Campbell, Christine Matzke, Gerri Moriarty, Renny O'Shea, and Jane Plastow, "Telling the Lion's Tale: Making Theatre in Eritrea", *African Theatre* (forthcoming 1999).

27. For a detailed account see Michael Powne, *Ethiopian Music: An Introduction: A Survey of Ecclesiastical and Secular Ethiopian Music and Instruments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 15-18. See also EPLF, *Pilot Survey of Eritrean Culture V* (1982).

28. The *fam fam* is a relatively new instrument in Eritrea and is not produced locally. EPLF, *Accounts of a Pilot Survey of Eritrean Culture: No. 1: Study on Tigre Culture* (n.p.: Department of Politicization, Education and Culture, 1981).

29. I have encountered some difficulties distinguishing *mesenko* and *krar*. In everyday usage and in this article, the two terms are interchangeable. Kahasai, the artistic director of the National Cultural Troupe, said that they are distinct instruments, without specifying their differences, however. One EPLF source describes the *mesenko* as a 5-string instrument, the

krar as having 6 strings. For Powne, who uses Amharic denominations, the *mesenko* is a one-string fiddle, otherwise known as *chira-wata* in Eritrea. *Eritrean Culture: No. 1: Study on Tigre Culture* (1981). Powne, pp. 39-42.

30. Female 'circumcision' and infibulation are still widely practised among various communities in Eritrea.

31. Cf. Cowan, p. 230.

32. Albright, p. 13.

33. EPLF, *Pilot Study on Eritrean Culture I: Studies on Tigre Culture* (1981).

34. Ministry of Information, *Music, Dance and Drama in Ethiopia*, Patterns of Progress 9 (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 1968), p. 44.

35. Cf. Cowan, pp. 189-190.

36. The Hedareb, from who the *Serret* originates, seem to be less restrained in their dances. During the performances we attended at the Cultural Festival, for example, women did not cover their hair. We watched and filmed a Hedareb dance at the opening show in Asmara Stadium in which two women danced a *Serret*-like dance whose core feature was the *ragabad*-movement while balancing heavy swords on their forehead. I do not want to venture into a psychoanalytic analysis of this dance, having formed only a cursory impression, but it was certainly a striking performance and drew the complete attention of the audience as well as of all camera teams.

37. Renny O'Shea, private fax to the author, 9 June 1998.

38. In November 1997 the Nakfa was introduced as the national currency, replacing the Ethiopian Birr. Nakfa, a town in the Northern Red Sea Region, former Sahel, was the headquarters of the EPLF during the liberation struggle.

39. EPLF, *Pilot Survey of Eritrean Culture V* (1982). EPLF, *Introductory Study of Orota* (n.p.: Department of Politicization, Education and Culture, 1985).

40. One EPLF source mentions the introduction of a *Wad Sommia*, call *Kalashin* version, that became popular when all fighters had been armed with AK 47 rifles. EPLF, *Introductory Study of Orota* (1985).

41. Powne describes the *tashit* quite elaborately under the name of *negarit*. Powne, pp. 12-15, and plate 2. See also EPLF, *Pilot Survey of Eritrean Culture V* (1982).

42. Some Mensa Tigre are very strict Protestant Christians who, like the Muslims in the western areas, do not practise dancing for religious reasons.

43. Munzinger reports of a similar relationship between the bride and the bridegroom's companions among the Beni-Amir. Werner von Munzinger, *Ostafrikanische Studien*, new ed. (1864; Schaffhausen: F. Hurter, 1883), p. 325.

44. Randy Martin, "Dance Ethnography and the Limits of Representation", *Social Text*, 33 (1992), 104, 109. For a recent orientalist account on Eritrea par excellence see: Carol Beckwith, and Angela Fisher, *African Ark: People and Ancient Cultures of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa*, Text by Graham Hancock (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 77-81.

45. Clifford, p. 2.

46. Christopher Kamlongera, *Theatre for Development in Africa with Case Studies from Malawi and Zambia* (Bonn: German Foundation for International Development, 1989), p. 3ff. Penina Muhando Mlama, *Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1991), p. 57ff.

47. It should be mentioned that great efforts were made to include African theatre workers in the team, but that other commitments and unforeseeable circumstances did not allow them to join us. During our stay in Eritrea we also met performing arts practitioners from other continents who had been invited by the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, notably Chinese acrobats.

48. Masitha Hoeane, "New Directions in Theatre for Development in Lesotho", PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1995, p. 147. Hoeane prefers this term to the common 'target community', and so do I, since the latter implies the community more as receiver, not as active partner in the theatre process.

49. Said, p. 10.

50. 'Theatre', as opposed to 'drama' in Africa, typically embraces a wide range of performing arts, including music and dance, whereas 'drama' denotes script-based, dialogue-grounded performance characteristic of European theatre traditions but also prevalent in Ethiopia as the exclusivist cultural expression of the Amhara aristocracy. Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, pp. 1, 53.

51. For examples see: Mda, p. 72-73. Mlana, p. 85. Hoeane, pp. 148-149. Osita Okagbu[e], "Product or Process: Theatre for Development in Africa", *African Theatre for Development*, ed. by Kamal Salhi, p. 31.

52. Community-based theatre projects, popular theatre, people's theatre or TFD are not monolithic in practice, but share principal similarities, one of which being the empowerment of people to make theatre for themselves about issues of their concern. Hoeane, pp. 135-136. Plastow, 'Uses and Abuses', p. 113. The 1997 workshop of the Tigrinya group in Sala'a Daro under the supervision of Ali Campbell enabled the students to work intensively with one community near the capital Asmara, not only allowing them to become facilitators in their own right, but also enabling the villagers to actively participate in the process. A similar workshop is planned for the Tigre students in 1999. Campbell, et al., "Telling the Lion's Tale", (forthcoming).

53. Campbell, et al., "Telling the Lion's Tale".

54. Mda, p. 47. For productive and unsatisfactory examples of how dance has been used in TFD projects see Kamlongera, pp. 103-104. Mda, pp. 78-79. Mlana, pp. 82-84. Kerr, pp. 154-155. Eckhard Breiting, "The Groups and their Plays", *Theatre for Development*, ed. by Eckhard Breiting, Bayreuth African Studies 36 (Rossdorf: TZ-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1994), E23.

55. Renny O'Shea, 'Some notes on the dances', private letter to the author, 9 May 1998.

56. O'Shea, *ibid.*

57. O'Shea, *ibid.*

58. Gerri Moriarty and Renny O'Shea, "Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project: An Evaluation of Summer Project with Tigre and Bilen students, 1997", unpublished evaluation report, pp. 6-7. It should be pointed out that the portrayal of the Fighter as rather unheroic - as the against the common pictures of Liberator or Martyr - is quite uncommon in Eritrea.

59. Andrew Thacker, "Foucault and the Writing of History", *The Impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. by Moya Lloyd (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 39. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 106.

60. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p. 193.

61. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, transl. by Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (1979; London: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 122.

62. Since May 1998 both countries have again been engaged in a military conflict, following a land dispute along the border of Gash-Barka, south of Barentu. It escalated in June 1998 with the bombing of the airport in Asmara and has not yet been resolved. In how far the recent conflict will resuscitate the old Us-Them dichotomy, which helped establish the notion of an Eritrean national identity, is yet to be seen. Joyous street celebrations after the shooting-down of Ethiopian war planes in summer last year could be indicative of such a move, but personal conversations with Eritreans speak of a certain wariness about uncritically reviving the old binaries.

63. Kjetill Tronvoll, "The Process of Nation-Building in Post-War Eritrea: Created from Below or Directed from Above?", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36.3 (1998), pp. 462-463, 480.

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