

**En-gendering Theatre in Eritrea:
The Roles and Representations of Women in the Performing Arts**

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**The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that
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To my parents, Elisabeth and Helmut Matzke,

*and in memory of my grandparents,
Katharina and Peter Fay, and Elfriede and Erich Matzke.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a first attempt at writing a modern theatre historiography of Eritrea, with emphasis on the roles and representations of women. It covers a period of some fifty years, from the late 1930s to 1991, the year of the country's *de facto* independence. The study is divided into three major sections; Part One providing the context of theatre in Eritrea, Part Two dealing with the emergence of modern Eritrean theatre arts, and Part Three covering the rise of the fighter performing arts during the thirty-year liberation struggle against Ethiopia.

After an introduction to Eritrean history and theatre arts as well as the theoretical framework of the study, Chapter 1 examines women's roles and representations in Eritrean societies and selected traditional performing arts as the matrix onto which modern performance practices are built.

Chapter 2 starts with a portrayal of early urban women performers in the late 1930s and early 1940s as singers and *krar*-players in local drinking houses, followed by the gradual expansion of Eritrean theatre arts under the British Military Administration. Thereafter the establishment of three well-known Eritrean theatre associations is examined, with Chapter 3 focusing on the Asmara Theatre Association, *Mahber Theatre Asmara*, whose work was eventually brought to a halt by the rise of the Ethiopian Derg regime. An investigation into the cultural troupes of the two liberation movements, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) is dealt with in Part Three.

Chapter 4 outlines theatre work in the ELF, while Chapters 5-7 present details of EPLF performing arts. Chapter 5 begins with early performance activities until the strategic retreat in 1978/79, followed by Chapter 6 with an analysis of drama work after the reorganisation of the Division of Culture. Chapter 7 covers theatre activities in mass organisations and supporting departments and outlines cultural developments during the final years of the liberation war. In conclusion, major trends and directions in post-independence Eritrean theatre arts are summarised as they continue to negotiate recent socio-political problems and developments.

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

Certain technical aspects of this thesis require explanation, as do a number of issues particular to the Eritrean context.

It is important to understand that Eritreans are usually addressed by their forenames, the second name being the forename of the father rather than a surname as in European usage. During the liberation struggle, fighters often used 'nicknames' or *noms de guerre* rather than their given names. *Noms de guerre* were part of the reinvention of people's identity in the liberation movement, but also a means to avoid easy identification by the enemy forces. Fighters of the liberation war tend to prefer them to their civilian names which are sometimes not even known to the public. First names and *noms de guerre* are also used in this thesis.

References to Eritrean (or Ethiopian) sources in the main body of the text will be given by the first letter of the authors' first name, followed by their father's name and the year of publication. In the bibliography authors are listed by their father's name ('surname') first to comply with international citation systems. Since there is no uniform transliteration for languages using Ethiopic script, I have used the spellings most widely used or preferred by the person in question, which might differ from those given in secondary sources.

Sources published according to the Ethiopian calendar are given with their original date of publication where possible, indicated with EC, and followed by the approximate Gregorian year(s) in brackets. The Ethiopian New Year begins in September of the Western calendar, the years being seven or eight years earlier than in the Gregorian system.

Unpublished anonymous sources from the time of the British Military Administration (BMA) will be quoted in full in the main body of the text to avoid bibliographical confusion.

Eritrean-language sources translated by the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project (ECBTP) or by Eritrean colleagues during my field research will not be quoted by page numbers as they are available only as handwritten manuscripts.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AESNA	Association of Eritrean Students in North America
AES	Association of Eritrean Students
ANC	African National Congress
BMA	British Military Administration
CT	Cultural Troupe
CCT	Central Cultural Troupe
ECBTP	Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front (also: Eritrean Liberation Forces, splinter group of the Eritrean Liberation Front)
ELF-PLF	Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Front
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLF)
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association (EPFL)
EWGU	Eritrean Women's General Union (ELF)
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FN	Field note (the number following FN refers to a catalogue number within my collection of field material)
GUES	General Union of Eritrean Students (ELF)
HQ	Headquarters
Ma.M.Ha.L.	<i>Mahber Memhiyash Hagherwawi Limdi</i> (Association for the Improvement of National Customs)
Ma.Mu.Te.De.	<i>Mahber Musica Tewasew Dekabat</i> (Indigenous Musical Theatre Association)
Ma.Te.A.	<i>Mahber Theatre Asmara</i> (Asmara Theatre Association)
Ma.Te.De.	<i>Mahber Tewasew Dekabat</i> (Indigenous Theatre Association)
MC	Master of Ceremonies
MFHE	<i>Mahber Fikri Hager Eritrea</i> (Love of the Country Association)
NCEW	National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (PFDJ)

MFST	<i>Mahber Fikri Sine-Tibeb</i> (Arts Lovers' Association)
NDP	National Democratic Programme (EPLF)
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NUEP	National Union of Eritrean Peasants
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women (EPLF) (until 1995 also: National Union of Eritrean Workers)
NUEY	National Union of Eritrean Youth
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (since 1994)
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLF	Popular Liberation Forces (Sabbe Group)
RDC	Research and Documentation Centre, Asmara
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
TFD	Theatre-for-Development
TIE	Theatre in Education
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

GLOSSARY OF SELECTED TERMS

<i>Abo</i>	father; also: affectionate form of address for an older man
<i>Abbot</i>	Tigre: development; post-independence national theatre group for Tigre-language drama
<i>Ade</i>	mother, also: affectionate form of address for an older woman
<i>Amhara</i>	for centuries the dominant, though not the largest, ethnic group in Ethiopia
<i>Amharinya</i>	language of the Amhara
<i>Arag</i>	codename for the location of the EPLF Literature and Drama Section during the liberation struggle; post-independence national theatre group for Tigrinya-language drama
<i>ascaris</i>	Eritrean soldiers serving in the Italian colonial army
<i>Ato</i>	Mr., polite form of address
<i>Awet Nehafash</i>	'Victory to the Masses'
<i>azmari</i>	travelling singer in Ethiopia, often derogatory
<i>Bahli Wdb</i>	Cultural Troupe
<i>barista</i>	barmaid
<i>berbere</i>	customary red spice in Eritrea, very hot
<i>bet shahi</i>	tea house
<i>cuda</i>	basic, anti-clockwise dance in Eritrea, known as <i>sisiit</i> in Tigre
<i>Derg</i>	military committee, colloquial expression for the Ethiopian military government (1974-1991) under Mengistu Haile Mariam
<i>Dimitsi Hafash</i>	'Voice of the Masses', EPLF radio station
<i>eid</i>	Islamic religious holy days
<i>embalta</i>	local wind instrument
<i>enda suwa</i>	local drinking house where <i>suwa</i> is served
<i>famfam</i>	mouth organ
<i>field, the</i>	the areas in which the liberation movements operated
<i>forniello</i>	portable coal stove

<i>golia</i>	dance event, also specific dance among Tigre- and Bilen-speakers
<i>Grazmach</i>	Ethiopian title of honour
<i>Gual</i>	daughter of
<i>Habesha</i>	highlanders
<i>Hade Lebbi</i>	‘One Heart’, slogan during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia
<i>hamien</i>	(travelling) singer in Eritrea, often derogatory
<i>Hayot</i>	‘renaissance’, one of the CCTs after the Second Congress of the EPLF
Hedareb	an ethno-linguistic group, also known as Beja
<i>hidmo</i>	traditional house of the Tigrinya
<i>injeera</i>	sourdough pancakes made mostly from local sorghum, staple food for highland Eritreans, also known as <i>taita</i>
<i>jebenna</i>	traditional coffee pot
<i>kebero</i>	ubiquitous local drum
<i>kechi</i>	priest
<i>krar</i>	lyre-like local instrument
<i>lebbi</i>	heart
<i>Maekelay Bahli Wdb</i>	Central Cultural Troupe
<i>maetot</i>	communal work
martyrs	fighters who died in the line of duty during the liberation struggle
<i>memher</i>	teacher
<i>netsela</i>	a plain white cotton cloth used by men and women as protection against the cold, as headscarf or ‘cardigan’; <i>netselas</i> for women are often embroidered
<i>qene</i>	highest form of Amhara poetry, characterised by two semantic layers, the literal and the metaphorical, known as ‘wax’ and ‘gold’
sacrifice, to	to be killed in the line of duty during the liberation struggle
<i>Sbrit</i>	post-independence National Cultural Folklore Troupe
<i>sebetay</i>	‘womanish’

<i>serret</i>	dance known among the Hedareb and certain Tigre-speakers, characterised by an acrobatic movement of the chest
<i>shellil</i>	dance for women among Tigre- and Bilen-speakers
<i>shira-wata</i>	local one-string violin
<i>sisiit</i>	basic, anti-clockwise dance in Eritrea, known as <i>cuda</i> in Tigrinya
<i>sistrum</i>	religious rattle, also known as <i>tsenatsil</i>
<i>sowra</i>	revolution
struggle, the	the Eritrean war for independence (1961-1991)
<i>suria</i>	white, embroidered cotton dress commonly worn by highland women
<i>suwa</i>	local beer made from sorghum
<i>taita</i>	same as <i>injeera</i>
<i>tegadelti</i>	pl., fighters in the Eritrean liberation struggle
Tigray	Northern Ethiopian province
Tigre	language, and second largest ethno-linguistic group in Eritrea
<i>tigre</i>	serf
Tigrinya	language, and largest ethno-linguistic group in Eritrea
<i>tsenatsil</i>	religious rattle, also known as <i>sistrum</i>
<i>Wadi</i>	son of
<i>Warsa</i>	'heir', 'heritage', one of the CCTs after the Second Congress of the EPLF
<i>Warsay</i>	'heirs', 'inheritance', young soldiers who fought in the 1998-2000 war against Ethiopia
<i>wat'a</i>	musician, often derogatory
<i>wenni</i>	roughly: 'feeling for music'
<i>Yikealo</i>	'all-powerful', generation of the fighters in the thirty-year liberation struggle
<i>zar</i>	healing and exorcism cult, trance dance
<i>Zoba Makel</i>	Central Zone in contemporary Eritrea
<i>zoba</i>	zone

PART ONE: THE CONTEXT OF THEATRE IN ERITREA

INTRODUCTION

Curtain-Raiser: Gender Drama in Eritrea: Of Theatre and Theatricals

It is Saturday evening, 16 August 1997, in Keren, Eritrea. Twenty-two students of Tigre- and Bilen-speaking backgrounds are taking part in this year's Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project (ECBTP), and this is the fifth week. The workshop is the second of its kind, co-organised by the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, a department in the Ministry of Education, and the University of Leeds. The training programme is intended to introduce community theatre skills from around the world to the participants so that they might become potential multipliers of this form of theatre.¹ Lately, the two theatre workers who run the course, Gerri Moriarty and Renny O'Shea, have been noticing grave tensions between the male and female workshop participants. There are only four women on the course, ranging in age from sixteen to thirty-six, and it was hard to recruit them. With the exception of the Christian Mensa clan, Tigre-speaking communities are largely Muslim and generally do not allow women to pursue work outside the house. The Bilen, though equally divided between Christianity and Islam, are culturally very similar to Tigre-speakers, especially in and around Keren where the majority live.

We are now sitting on the roof garden of Keren Hotel, a popular place with everyone because of the stunning view; Amna (X), a thirty-six-year-old demobilised fighter and the oldest woman trainee, Sadyia (X), about twenty-three, Arafat (X), an eighteen-year-old Bilen-speaker, and sixteen-year-old Fatma (X).² The women are from Keren, Nakfa, Halhal and Afabet. Also present are Mesmer Andu, a male fellow student and 'honorary girl' of the evening who will act as translator, Gerri Moriarty and myself, the project's research assistant. We intend to conduct a group interview with the women and then go for a meal, to have a 'girls' night out'. This week Moriarty and O'Shea had to call a trouble-shooting session. After the first weeks relations between male and female participants have been strained up to the point that one of the men hit a female fellow student. Group dynamics have deteriorated, which, in turn, has affected the theatre

¹ Community theatre in this context should be understood as drama based on material generated and enacted by the community, not as long-established community celebrations which have always existed in Eritrea. Cf. Harding (1999: 112).

² Whenever a father's name is unknown to me or withheld, it is substituted by an (X).

process. For the men, it transpires, the women have apparently overstepped the mark of what is considered 'proper' for their gender. The younger ones have begun to speak their mind – Amna has always been rather outspoken, having been a fighter – to contradict the men, put forward their own suggestions. In the eyes of the male participants, such manners are pointless theatricals which go against deeply ingrained social structures and are hence unacceptable.

I must admit I am somewhat surprised. After all, I was under the impression that by taking part in the course the workshop participants represented the more progressive and liberal section of society, having acknowledged the value and positive impact of culture on social processes. (Most, however, were selected by government officials for artistic talent, not because of their beliefs.) What about the social reforms introduced in the thirty-year liberation struggle against the one-time coloniser, Ethiopia? Women had fought on the frontline, driven tanks, repaired cars, done all sorts of things usually considered 'masculine' in Eritrea – as in many countries all over the world. Surely, this must have left an impression on these men, the majority of who were born during the war or had fought in it?

It dawned on me that we had hit on a sore point in Eritrean society that was reflected in the microcosm of this theatre group. On the one hand there were these images of determined-looking women in shorts and faded khaki shirts, hair cropped short, holding a gun,



Fig. 1 *Elsa Yacob, Woman Hero (1984), oil painting, reproduction.*

or very confident women administrators like Bachita (X), the mayor of Hagaz in 1997 – different manifestations of women fighters in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), the main liberation movement in Eritrea. On the other hand, many women in Eritrea are confined to the house, are subservient, shy and demure, the passive receptacles of a life laid out for them. These seem to be the opposite poles of a larger continuum which contains multiple definitions of ‘woman’. It embraces numerous, at times conflicting, discourses which every Eritrean female has to negotiate and which has created manifold problems in Eritrean society – and in theatre arts – today.

There and then in Keren, however, we began to wonder how the women trainees saw themselves as women and as artists, and how they saw themselves perceived by their environment. What had been their previous experience in the performing arts? What made them join the theatre training, and how did they principally see the role of theatre in Eritrea? A women-only meeting was called for.



Fig. 2 *Women participants of the ECBTP 1997, Keren.*

An Interview with Eritrean Women Performers

Q: Why did you decide to take part in this theatre training?

A1: We are all here because the government selected us. But I am also here because I wanted to use the opportunity to get involved in the performing arts, to use it as a gateway for me and my sisters who might not have the courage because of the inherent oppression of women. They have to stay in the house and remain there. I want to act as a pioneer for my sisters in this field.

A2: In the old days it was taboo for a woman to claim equality with men. Even today this attitude persists. People think it is shameful. I am here to declare that this is not true. During the armed struggle women made it clear that they are not inferior to men in any respect. But at present, men are not willing to remember this fact which was established in the mountains of Sahel. We are conscious that the struggle of women for equality is not over. I am here to continue and to be an example to other women.

A3: What [they] have said is true and important. We are not the first women to get involved in the performing arts. There were other women before us. We are here to follow their footsteps and to make other women follow us.

Q: What was the reaction of your families when you told them that you are going to come for this course? Did they permit you without much ado or did you have to persuade them?

A3: Because this training is taking place under the auspices of the government, they did not mind my taking part. However, they wanted some explanation of what it is we are going to do. I think it is because they are concerned for our safety.

A4: My parents were also OK about it. They don't mind my taking part in a play, but they do not allow me to roam the streets claiming I am involved in theatre activities. They want to know where I am going, for how long, and what I will do there.

Q: What is the attitude of society towards a woman on stage? Penina Mlama, a Tanzanian theatre practitioner and professor of theatre arts, once said that in her community, when a woman goes on stage, she becomes cheap [A. James 1991: 86]. Women performers are immediately stigmatised as commercial sex workers. What is the general attitude in Eritrea?

A4: It's true even here. Any time a woman wants to get out and try her hand at jobs that do not include child-rearing or house-keeping, it is immediately assumed that she is out for other reasons, that she is a harlot. The male members of the community do not allow her to get involved in activities which could lead to interaction with other men. If she does so against their wishes, she becomes the talk of the community for years to come.

Q: How do women conduct themselves in theatre groups and how do other women react to their fellow women who are involved in the performing arts?

A2: To this day there are women who consider and treat men as gods. Because of this there are only a few women who really care about women's rights. The rest are almost blind to the issue. If a woman wants to join a theatre group, other women discourage her saying: 'If you are planning because Miss (X) has done so, you are wrong. She is

there because she does not have any man to claim her own and is out to hunt one'. Women who are members of a theatre group are often criticised by their fellow women.

Q: When we started the training I happened to observe that it was only the men of the group who were doing the talking, but with time this has changed. Now we are hearing the women's voices no less than those of their male counterparts. Is this observation correct?

A3: It is true that we were silent during the first days. This was because we were new to each other. We were self-conscious and did not want to make any mistakes. But our silence was not because we were intimidated by the men. This is not the first time that we have worked with men.

A2: Except for the years I spent in the Revolutionary School, I have always lived in the company of both men and women. But I have never been treated as badly as this. This was because people were more liberated and experienced. The reason why we were more conservative and quiet in the first days of the training was to signal to the men that we wanted respect from them. I am afraid nobody heard this signal. We are members of one group, but we don't treat each other accordingly. However, these people mistreat us not because they are spiteful. It is the social fabric that makes them behave in this way. They cannot stomach the fact that we too can excel if we are provided with the necessary tools and the necessary training.

A4: In the early days of the workshop, the men did not behave in the way they are doing now. They were respectful, but not to us, they were respectful to our silence. Now that we have started to voice our opinions, they have woken up to reality. Now we are not supposed to be their equals. Now they are trying to make things rough for us.

A2: But to answer your question whether we are going to pursue theatre work, yes, I will do it. We will try to work jointly with our fathers and brothers. I am not saying this because I was a fighter. There are a lot of fighters who have succumbed to general prejudices against women after the struggle. But I will do my best to continue the work.

A3: The female ex-fighters, I think, are in a better position to do what they believe is good for themselves. It might be because of the respect they earned fighting the enemy or because they are more confident to the point of being arrogant. The community makes concessions to them. At present, I do not expect to be treated as equal to men. I am aware that this problem is not unique to us. But I do hope that things will improve with time.

A2: In most parts of Africa, the oppression of women is institutionalised behaviour. To fight this we need more education and effective training. At this point, I wish the women's associations of every country would provide their members with education and vital training. (ECBTP 97/26).³

³ For more details on the interviews see List of Interviews at the back of this study.

As expected, there were considerable gaps – ideological, cultural and behavioural – between the (ex-)fighter and the ‘civilian’ women.⁴ However, the interview left no doubt that for all women striving for an equitable participation in society was at the top of their agenda and that theatre was seen as a means of expressing and disseminating their ideas. It also indicated that, as a microcosm of Eritrean society, the struggle for gender equality had already started within the ECBTP.

Theatre in Eritrea – and by theatre I mean both scripted drama and the wider range of performing arts, including music and dance – appeared to be tightly linked with the country’s history, with the workings of its society, its politics and social policies. Material available on Eritrean theatre was relatively patchy in 1997. Yet it was undeniable that, to a greater or lesser extent, theatre arts had always responded to current (often national) events and had always been more or less didactic. Considering the data collected so far, certain transformations also seemed to be discernible with regard to the representation of women and their role in theatre. The research team had recently unearthed examples of older Tigre-language songs which portrayed women either as mothers or the objects of the hero’s desire. Examples of early urban drama showed that female characters were often allegories of the motherland. Then there were the women fighters – singers, musicians and actresses – some of whom were still practising performing artists, and the gender-sensitising plays staged by the EPLF cultural troupes in ‘the field’.⁵ Of the post-independence theatre scene, I was familiar only with the work of the ECBTP, but here too gender issues, such as land distribution, had been theatrical subject matter. Over the years, gender and women’s issues had been more consciously included in the performing arts, but there were huge gaps in terms of the changes in women’s participation and their representation. With the return to a post-liberation war ‘normality’ it also seemed

⁴ The line between fighters and civilians has not always been clear-cut in Eritrea. Kerstin Volker-Saad, in her 2003 PhD thesis on ‘Zivilistinnen and Kämpferinnen in Eritrea’ [Female Fighters and Civilians in Eritrea] defines civilians exclusively as pastoralist Beni-Amir women of Muslim background who did not actively take part in the liberation struggle, are exempted from post-independence military service and are not members of the mass organisations; fighters are women of various ethnic backgrounds who have been members of the army. Volker-Saad (2003: 10-11). In a footnote Volker-Saad contends that Eritreans note a difference between fighters and demobilised fighters (ex-fighters), the former still working for the state, the latter having been released from their duties. Even now, the status of (ex-)fighter carries eminence and certain privileges. While I would subscribe to her concept of fighters and ex-fighters, I would define civilians somewhat differently: women who were never active members of the liberation movements (though they might have supported them at home and abroad); women who never went to post-independence military training, or those who did but were eventually demobilised after having completed their national service.

⁵ Fighters of both ELF and EPLF refer to those areas in which the liberation movements operated as ‘the field’. It was both a geographical and a social space. R. Bereketeab (2000: 232).

that age-old gender patterns had started to re-emerge, which made it problematic for many women to engage in theatre activities, with the exception perhaps of fighters. Judging from the time of the interview, it was likely that whatever measures had been taken during the struggle regarding women's liberation and the gender awareness of men had either been overestimated in their long-term effects, or that a post-independence backlash was being experienced. The women's answers in 1997 left no doubt about that.

After the interview we left for a small restaurant near the big roundabout in Keren, like so many constructions an inheritance of Italian colonisation. It forms the centre of the town, from where larger and smaller dwellings spread in a wider circle to the foot of the mountains. It was there and then, in the informal atmosphere of the restaurant, that the idea for an in-depth inquiry into women in the performing arts began to germinate.



Fig. 3 *Members of the ECBTP 1997, Keren.*

History, Methodology and Scope of Study

A Brief Introduction to Eritrea and Her Performing Arts

In order to write about culture in Eritrea it is essential to be aware of the ethnic, religious, and regional make-up of the country as well as its history. Theatre arts have always related to national events and have shown regional characteristics. In the following sections I give a brief overview of the country and its peoples as well as outlines of Eritrean history and the performing arts, followed by the theoretical framework of this study. The situation of women in traditional Eritrean societies is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, and then linked to selected aspects of local performance forms.

The Country and Its Peoples

Eritrea is a small country of some 122,000 square kilometres in the Horn of Africa, bordering Ethiopia, Djibouti, the Red Sea and Sudan. In comparison to neighbouring countries, it boasts a varied topography and climate, the most significant contrast being between highlands and lowlands. The latter can be roughly divided into the eastern and western lowlands, the western plains being in part fairly suitable for arable agriculture, the eastern lowlands embracing the coastal areas with exceptionally high temperatures and humidity. Massawa, the main seaport of Eritrea, is surrounded by sandy and saline desert, as is the smaller harbour of Assab in the country's south-east. Barentu and Tessenei are major settlements in the western lowlands, while the market town of Keren, a true ethnic and religious melting pot, forms the heart of the north-western semi-lowland bridge.

The central highlands, where most of the urbanised areas are located, are home to nearly half of Eritrea's population. The capital, Asmara, is seat of the government and accommodates most of the nation's industry; smaller towns in the south are Mendefera and Decamhare. The northern highlands, on the other hand, are a stony mountain area with occasional medium-sized settlements, such as Nakfa and Afabet. Nakfa was the headquarters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) during the liberation struggle, and was immortalised as the country's currency, the Nakfa, at the end of 1997. In November 1994, in an attempt to counteract old regional and ethnic alliances, the government introduced six new administrative provinces replacing the former nine: Central, Dubub (south), Gash-Barka, Anseba, Northern and Southern Red Sea Region, as opposed

to the earlier Hamassien, Serae and Akele Guzai, Senhit, Barka, Sahel, Semhar and Danakil. However, the old designations are still widely used among Eritreans and can also be found on maps and in critical literature (see Figures 4a and 4b).⁶

Today, the government of Eritrea acknowledges nine different 'nationalities', based on ethno-linguistic differences and characteristics. They are the Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Kunama, and Nara, the Hedareb, Saho, Afar and Rasheida. Most members of these groups are subsistence farmers, nomads or agro-pastoralists. All nationalities are patrilineal societies except for the Kunama who trace their descent through the female line; all but the Kunama are traditionally oppressive to women. In religious terms, the population is fairly evenly divided between Christianity (mostly Eritrean Orthodox) and Islam, with some small pockets of ancestral beliefs, again among the Kunama. In 1993 the Eritrean Orthodox Church separated from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and now has its own patriarch. Generally, Christians and Muslims live amicably next to each other, with villages often sporting a church and a mosque as the twin centres of their communities.⁷

The languages of the Eritrean peoples are normally eponymous except for the Hedareb who speak Beja, and the Rasheida whose mother-tongue is Arabic. Characteristic of all nationalities is that kinship ties often cut across linguistic borders 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' (A. Tesfai 1997: 7). No dependable statistics on the proportions of these ethnic groups exist, but it can be safely claimed that the Tigrinya- and Tigre-speaking communities form the majority of peoples in Eritrea. They will be introduced in more detail below. Of the approximately 3.5 million inhabitants of the country, the Tigrinya comprise an estimated 45% of the entire population, closely followed by Tigre-speakers with approximately 30-40%. Tigrinya and Tigre are Semitic languages, mutually unintelligible, though both derive from ancient Ge'ez. Tigrinya-speakers in Eritrea also share their language with the inhabitants of Tigray, the northern province of Ethiopia which neighbours Eritrea.⁸

⁶ Pool (1997: 6, 8), Christmann (1996: 22), Trevaskis (1960: 1-3), Fegley (1995: xv-xvi), *Eritrea: National Map* (1995).

⁷ Pool (1997: 8-9), Christmann (1996: 182-185), Killion (1998: 333).

⁸ The relationship of Ge'ez to Tigrinya and Tigre can be compared with that of Latin to the Romance languages. Ge'ez is no longer spoken except in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Pool (1997: 7, 31). Alemseged Abbay claims a sense of trans-Mereb identity among the Eritrean

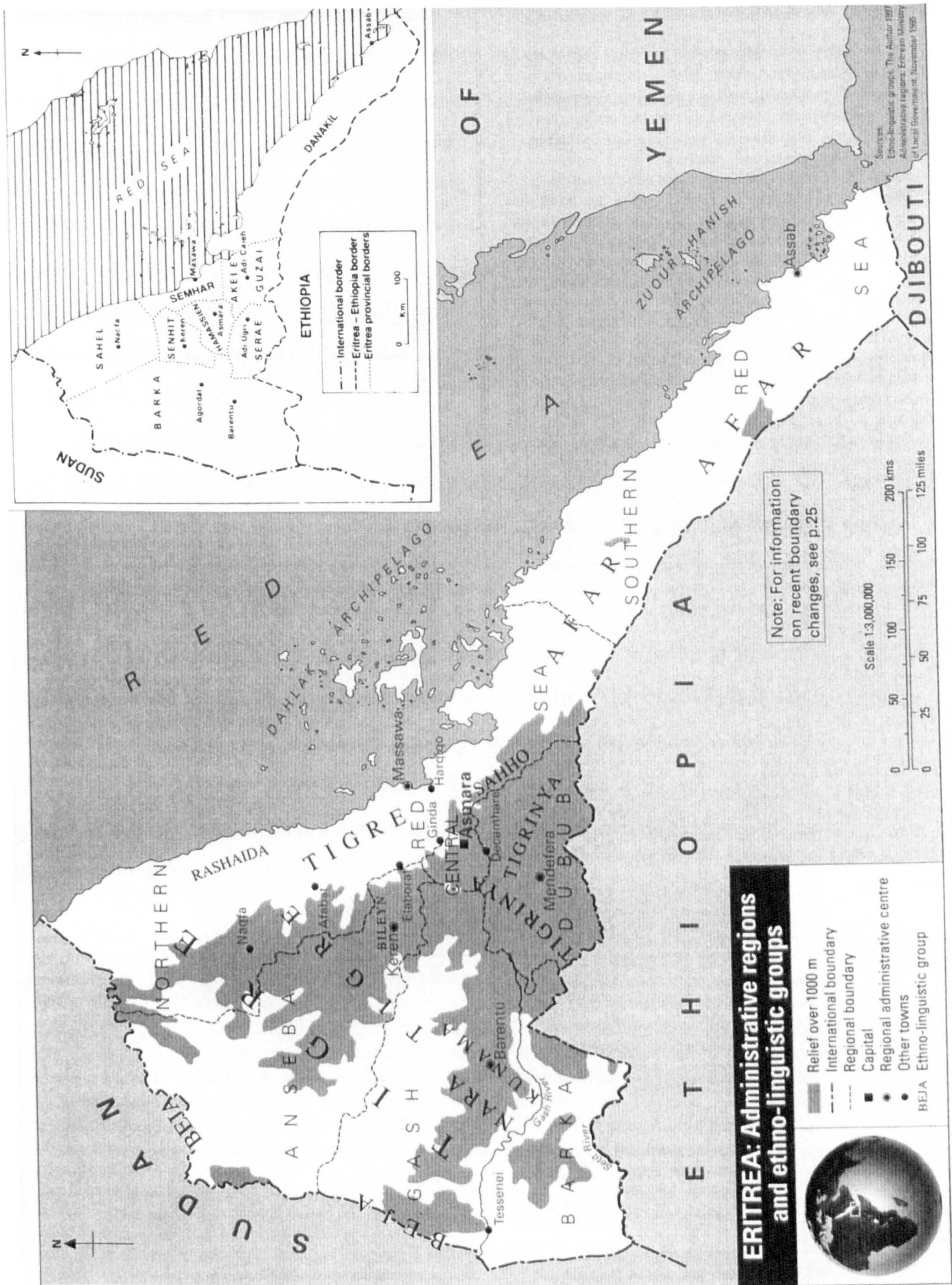


Fig. 4a New administrative regions and ethno-linguistic groups (large map).

Fig. 4b Old provinces (small map).

Most Eritrean Tigrinya are subsistence farmers in the central highlands, though many have had to move to other areas of Eritrea because of land shortage and population pressure. Since most urban centres are located in the highlands, the Tigrinya have always had relatively good access to infrastructure and education. Most Tigrinya are Eritrean Orthodox Christians, with a smaller number of Catholics and Protestants. There is also a minority of Muslim Tigrinya, the Jiberti, a tightly-knit community culturally indistinct from other Tigrinya except for their religious beliefs. Only in marriage and inheritance matters do they follow the Sharia, the Islamic law, though polygamy is not common. The Tigrinya constituted a large percentage of the EPLF fighters during the struggle, especially among the female combatants.⁹

Tigre-speakers inhabit the western, northern, and eastern lowlands as well as the Dahlak islands, and were largely pastoralists and agro-pastoralists prior to the war. Many Tigre lost their livestock during the liberation struggle and fled to refugee camps in Sudan. Unlike the Tigrinya, Tigre-speakers do not constitute a coherent ethnic group. They consist of a number of smaller peoples whose cultural and kinship ties often cross ethnic, linguistic and even national borders, particularly to the Sudan. Among these groups are the Beni-Amir in Gash-Barka, assumed to originate from the Beja and probably the largest Tigre-speaking group; the two Marias, Maria *Tselam* ('black') and Maria *Keyah* ('red') in Anseba; the two Mensas, Beit ('house of') Abrehe and Beit Ashahqan; and the Beit-Juk around Keren (see Figure 5).¹⁰

Tigrinya and the Ethiopian Tigrayans – the river Mereb being the natural border between the two countries – based on 'economic interdependence, common language, religion, culture and history' (A. Abbay 1998: 2). This bond, however, though possibly still existent among the older generation and intermarried families, was renounced during the struggle as part of Eritrea's effort to construct a separate national identity. It probably breathed its last with the post-independence military conflict between Eritrea and the now Tigrayan-led government of Ethiopia (1998-2000). Interviews verifying claims of a trans-Mereb identity, which included the playwright and EPLF intellectual Alemseged Tesfai, were conducted before the outbreak of the latest war. A. Abbay (1998: 151-153, 225).

⁹ Christman (1996: 185), Pool (1997: 8), Kemink (1991: 10), Trimmingham (1952: 150-153).

¹⁰ These were some of the Tigre-speakers the ECBTP research team identified in 1997, as were the Ad-Timariam and Ad-Teckles, the former in the Northern Red Sea Region, the latter in Anseba. Other clusters can be found around Nakfa (mostly Habab people), and in Sheeb and Foro. Various sources give equally diverse, at times highly intricate classifications; I make no claims to a comprehensive inventory. Many Tigre-speakers were previously divided into a class system of ruling class (*shmagille*), vassals, and slaves. The term *tigre* actually means 'serf' and is still used locally to designate what anthropologists have called the 'serf' or lower class among Tigre-speakers as opposed to the higher class or 'aristocracy'. I have talked to people belonging to the latter who found 'Tigre' offensive as a classification for their ethno-linguistic group. Instead they prefer the designations of their smaller group, i.e. Mensa, Beit-Juk, etc.. M. Muhamad Omar (2002: 117-139), Shack (1974: 67), Littmann (1910: 335-343).

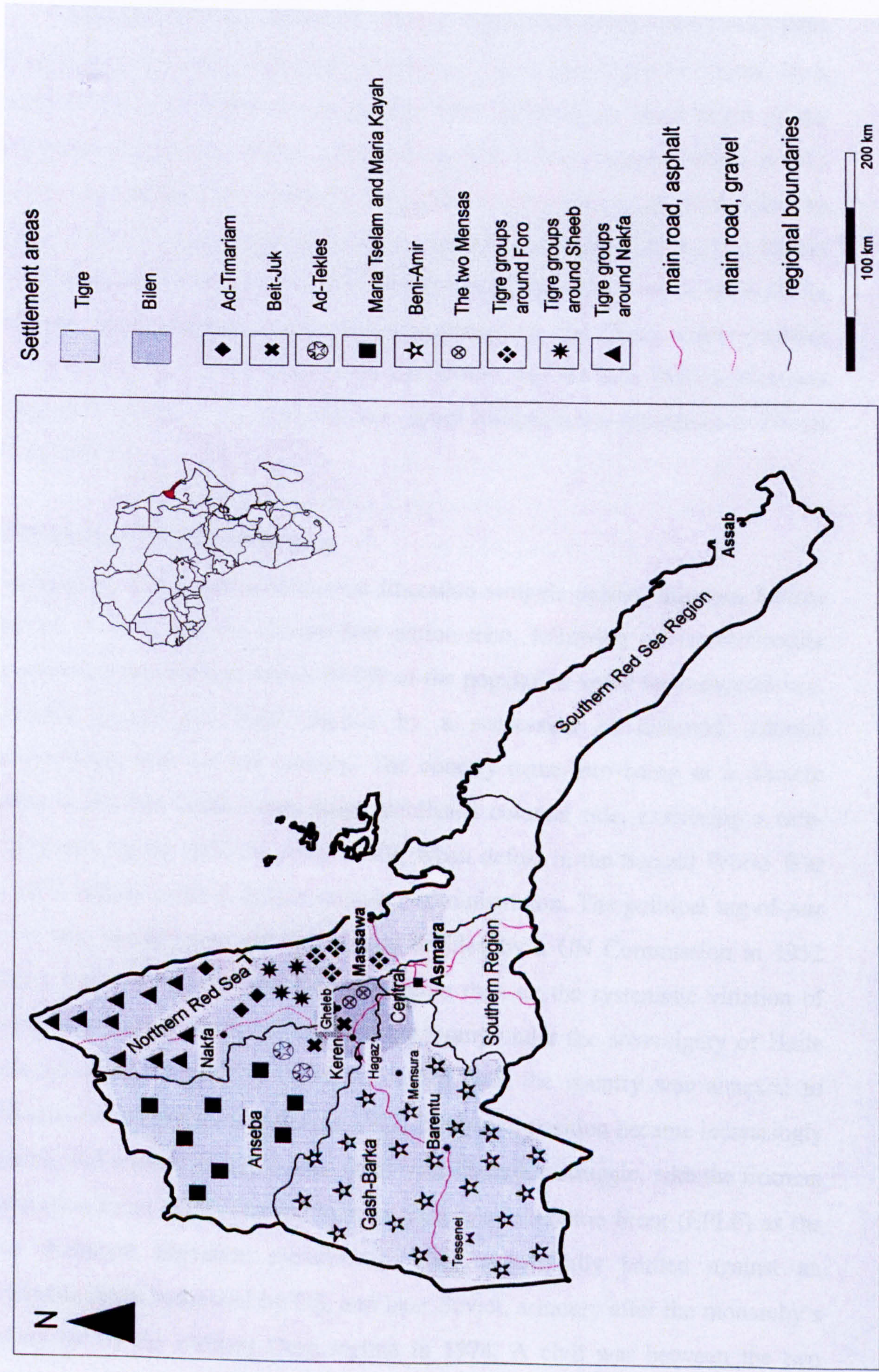


Fig. 5 Tigre-speakers and Bilen in Eritrea.

This has led to a variety of cultural expressions being shared with their neighbours rather than with other members of their own linguistic group. As a result of this cross-cultural environment, Tigre-speakers are often fluent in the languages of adjacent peoples. Apart from their mother tongue, Arabic is also widely used among Tigre-speaking communities, especially among those close to Sudan. Most Tigre-speakers are Muslims, with the exception of the two Mensa groups who are Protestant Christians. It was among the Beni-Amir of Gash-Barka that the armed struggle against Ethiopia started in the 1960s. Tigre-speaking communities, notably the Beni-Amir, the Mensa and the two Marias, provided many early fighters to the ELF, the first armed independence movement in Eritrea (Pool 1997: 8).

A Thumbnail History of Eritrea

On May 24, 1993, after a thirty-year liberation struggle against Ethiopia, Eritrea became Africa's newest independent nation-state, following an internationally accredited referendum in which 99.8% of the population voted for independence. Eritrea's history 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 a race-segregated regime until the early 1940s, when defeat in the Second World War brought Eritrea under a British caretaker administration. The political tug-of-war as to who should now rule was finally decided by a UN Commission in 1952 which federated Eritrea with Ethiopia. From then on the systematic violation of Eritrea's (constitutionally guaranteed) autonomy under the sovereignty of Haile Selassie, then Emperor of Ethiopia, ensued until the country was annexed to Ethiopia as an ordinary province in 1962. Eritrean opposition became increasingly radical, and resulted in a ferocious thirty-year liberation struggle, with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as the two dominant liberation movements. They successfully battled against an Ethiopian army buttressed by US, and later Soviet, armoured forces after the monarchy's overthrow by the military Derg regime in 1974. A civil war between the two liberation movements in the late 1970s was concluded in favour of the EPLF, which continued to operate in Eritrea, honing its military skills and launching a series of social reforms within its own ranks and in the liberated areas, including women's rights, health care and land reform. The EPLF also fought against the

eradication of Eritrean culture(s) by the Amhara (for centuries the ruling Ethiopian ethnic group), who sought to assert their supremacy not only through superior weaponry but also by imposing their language and culture, and by encouraging the 'Amharisation' of other ethnic groups.

The liberation struggle resulted in far-reaching environmental degradation 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 this, it was a war largely unreported and ignored. The Eritrean side 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. It was the EPLF, matured from a hit-and-run guerrilla movement to an efficient political organisation, which finally led the country to decisive victory in 1991. It formed the provisional government in the interim period until 1993, the year of formal independence, and, having re-launched itself as the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) in 1994, has since then held power as the government of Eritrea. Between 1998 and 2000 Eritrea and the Ethiopian government under the Tigrayan Meles Zenawi, a former ally in the liberation struggle, were engaged in a so-called 'border-war' in which tens of thousands lost their lives. Since then Eritrea has been undergoing a second phase of reconstruction and nation-building, with increasing internal and external opposition against the PFDJ government.¹¹

A Précis of Theatre Arts in Eritrea

Earlier on I mentioned that theatre and drama are part of the broader societal patterns in Eritrea, repeatedly referring to matters of socio-political concern, and often inherently nationalistic. 'Theatre', as opposed to 'drama' in Africa, typically embraces a wide range of performing arts, including dance, music, story-telling and performance poetry; it also includes religious and secular rituals which encompass theatrical experiences. 'Theatre' and 'performing arts' will hence be used synonymously in this study. 'Drama', on the other hand, denotes script-based, dialogue-grounded performances characteristic of European theatre traditions.¹²

¹¹ R. Iyob (1995: 1-5, 138-140), Pool (1997: 10-13); for preliminary studies on the latest war see T. Negash & Tronvoll (2000), Entner (2001).

¹² Plastow (1996: 1), cf. Balme (2001: 171). It should be noted that 'drama', as used in 1980s EPLF publications, when the first attempts were made to critically appraise the Eritrean performing arts, denoted both long-established cultural forms and European-style theatre. A. Tesfai ([1983a]).

There is a vital, dynamic connection between art and lived experience in Eritrea which is the driving force behind local creative expression. Theatre arts, together with literature, (video) films, photography, and the fine arts are all elements of the cultural landscape, and all 'participate in a performative exchange' (Phelan 1996: 27). This means they influence and respond to each other as much as they reflect, filter, and recreate matters of national concern. The performing arts thus belong to a system of cultural representation which creates and, to use Anderson's term, 'imagines' the nation to give people a sense of identity.¹³ Arts thus speak to the wider community and are not just the extravagant expressions of cultural elites; though there are obviously differences in the accessing and appreciation of the various forms, modern manifestations of which are still concentrated in the urban areas.

Theatre arts in Eritrea come under two major categories which, for a long time, were thought to be separate by local practitioners: first, the long-established, so-called 'traditional' performing arts which encompass the dance, music, songs, and poetry of the nine Eritrean nationalities; second, the modern urban theatre, largely influenced by European traditions but also by the metropolitan theatre practices of the Ethiopian Amhara. At this point another clarification is in order. 'Traditions' have often connoted customs believed to belong to the past – 'unadulterated' and static cultural expressions which may have survived in rural pockets, but are without meaning for the challenges of modern life; in Eritrea they have also been associated with physically 'harmful' and 'backward' practices.¹⁴ 'Traditional' performing arts are therefore often seen as diametrically opposed to 'modern' theatre arts, at best serving as exotic tourist attractions or showy 'airport culture' (Plastow 1996: 17-18). This, however, is not how I wish to employ the term. Traditional cultures in Eritrea, as in most parts of Africa, are expressions which evolved out of specific historical and material circumstances, and which continue to accommodate conflict and change. Traditional performing arts are dynamic and very much alive in Eritrea. They constitute an integral part of social life and as such complement modern urban theatre practices.

Yet, as a 1997 survey by Efriem Kahasai suggests, there is still a large cleft between these two categories, with a markedly negative attitude towards modern urban drama in rural areas. This can be partly attributed to the influence

¹³ Anderson (1991: 6-7), Hall (1992: 291-295).

¹⁴ Female genital mutilation (FGM) is one such example, as is the healing and exorcism cult, *zar*, discussed in Chapter 1.

of both Christianity and Islam, in whose view modern urban theatre is often seen as 'sinful' and 'pagan' (E. Kahasai Ghezey 1999: 46). It should be noted, however, that religious authorities have likewise curbed traditional performance forms, such as mixed-sex communal dance events in certain Muslim areas, or dances among the Protestant Mensa.

Though both branches of theatre arts co-exist in the same socio-political environment, there have been relatively few cross-influences and crossovers. While fighter performing arts (by which I mean the cultural activities in the liberation movements which developed somewhat separately) were rooted in both of these categories, cultural troupes tended to separate them on stage. Even today few theatre practitioners endeavour to merge stage drama with traditional performing elements. During the liberation struggle, the EPLF had already made concerted efforts to create a feeling of 'unity in diversity' among its various peoples by touring variety shows which, apart from anti-Ethiopian and socially sensitising agitprop, portrayed the cultural practices of all ethnic groups. This type of performance has been continued by *Sbrit*, the National Cultural Folklore Troupe, until the present day and can be read as an attempt to invent and 'perform' the nation as part of the ongoing process of nation-building. One interesting factor is the emphasis on cultural pluralism in the performance space which, according to Solomon Tsehaye, 'fostered greater unity because it allowed ethnic groups to appreciate each other's culture'.¹⁵ The annual Eritrea Festival on the Expo grounds in Asmara is a further example.¹⁶ An idiosyncratic mixture of fun fair and trade show, it is also a venue of cultural competition among the six administrative *zoba* or zones, where local songs and dances are performed, and new choreographies and plays are mounted. Though there are still considerable differences between the various nationalities in terms of access to infrastructure, education and, ultimately, political power, culture has played an important role in their mutual recognition and appreciation, and continues to do so. Since

¹⁵ S. Tsehaye (1997: 17). In the political sphere, however, there is no place for ethnic or regional identities as they would interfere with the creation of an all-embracing 'Eritrean' identity. T. Negash & Tronvoll (2000: 16). It should also be noted that 'Unity in Diversity' is a government slogan and not necessarily subscribed to by individual ethnic groups. On the importance and difficulties of nation-building in Eritrea see also Tronvoll (1998: 461-482) and Tronvoll (1999: 1037-1060).

¹⁶ The Eritrea Festival takes place in Asmara every year, with parallel festivals held in Riad, Frankfurt/Main, Toronto, Sydney and Washington, DC, since the late 1990s. Originating in 1970 during the liberation struggle, the festival provided a vital lifeline between Eritrean diaspora communities and their home country. While early venues had been Munich, Nuremberg and Pavia, the festival was mounted in the Italian city of Bologna from 1974 – 1991. It is still known under the nickname 'Bologna' today. For more information see Tabacco (2001).

independence, arts and culture are also acknowledged constituents of the state, with the latter's role and responsibility for cultural development laid down in the National Constitution: 'The State shall be responsible for creating and promoting conditions conducive for developing a *national culture* capable of expressing *national identity, unity* and progress of the Eritrean people' (*The Constitution of Eritrea*, Art. 9, Sub. 1, emphasis added).

Context of the Study:

Theoretical Framework, Current Research and Source Materials

Theoretical Framework

As far as the information at hand is concerned, there is a clear link between the changing historical, material and social conditions in Eritrea and women's participation and their representation in the performing arts. As Eritrea has entered the stage of world politics, women have become more visible in public spaces, be it in theatre arts or state affairs. The analogy between country and woman is no coincidence here. As in much of Africa and all over the world, it has a long history of representation in Eritrea which has not always proved beneficial to or empowering for the actual situation of women. Representational prominence, as we will see, does not necessarily entail greater access to political power. As Peggy Phelan, in her study on performance politics, maintains: 'Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda' (Phelan 1996: 26).

The general methodology of this thesis is guided by materialist-feminist theatre theory which has been widely adopted by both critics and practitioners since the 1980s. For Jill Dolan, one of its first advocates, materialist feminism 'deconstructs the mythic subject of Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations' (Dolan 1988: 10). Women are seen not as transcendent, universal beings, but as 'historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class, and sexual identification' (10). Rather than considering women as the sole victims of gender polarisation, materialist feminism views gender as a 'social construct [which is] oppressive to both women and men' (10). Yet women continue to be greatly disadvantaged in Eritrea. As they have also been assigned a special, often emblematic, role in cultural representations, women will hence constitute the focus of my enquiry. While ultimately preferring a 'selective pluralism' (Austin

1990: 2), rather than choosing too rigid an approach, my reading is underpinned by materialist-feminist tenets in that I not only examine the roles and representations of women in the performing arts and their changes over a period of some fifty years, but also investigate culture within the larger field of social, economic, and political conditions. Moreover, I want to raise the question of who represents whom and which power configurations – and potential (mis-) representations – these images entail.¹⁷

The focus of my thesis is hence twofold. First and foremost I try to recover a ‘lost’, or rather, neglected tradition of women’s participation in modern Eritrean theatre arts as performers, writers, directors, administrators and costume-designers. Emphasis is placed on a reading of both theatre ‘process’ and theatre ‘product’, that is details of working and production conditions for female artists as well the close reading of theatre texts encompassing written scripts, songs, film material and live performances which feature and/or represent women. The various colonial and post-colonial periods help frame the research without, however, providing a rigid grid. Traditional structures, fighter culture, and post-independence developments do not occur in a neat, successive order, but overlap and co-exist with considerable cross-influences.

The pivot of my investigation is a reading of the various discourses on women in Eritrea, their manifestations and transgressions in the performing arts, and how these relate to the narrative of the Eritrean nation. Nationalism bears a clear mark of gender in Eritrea which seems also to be reflected in theatre. Despite the gender-sensitising reforms of the liberation struggle, men are still the author-subjects of nationalism and can negotiate great prestige, power and space in the performing arts. Women, on the other hand, rarely inhabit similarly authoritative positions in either of these areas. They seem cherished but often powerless icons in an essentially ‘male drama’ (Boehmer 1992: 233). On a metaphorical level, women serve as untouchable symbols in plays, orature and other representational forms – as *ade* (mother), motherland, national territory, the Virgin Mary, and of course Eritrea. In social and political life, however, they are often still subordinate. Negative images seem to counteract the above glorification; women as prostitutes, she-devils, and seductive temptresses are representations often

¹⁷ Dolan (1988: 10-11), Austin (1990: 2, 6), Aston (1995: 9, 73), Goodman (1998: 5).

perpetuated by the two major religions.¹⁸ Female fighters inhabit a rather liminal position in this spectacle.¹⁹ While iconically ranked with their nationalist brothers in performative and other representations (see Figure 1), their status has also entailed a denial of what is customarily feminine. Female fighters abandoned typical feminine postures and codes of conduct, donned male military clothes, wore the same short hairstyle as men, and were committed to celibacy until the introduction of EPLF marriage laws in the late 1970s, thus moving towards an 'androgynous' ideal in representation. Intriguingly, they corresponded to the archetypal 'traditional' woman figure to a certain extent, in their devotion to the motherland (as opposed to exclusively family and children) and their willingness to make sacrifices. After independence, back in ordinary women's clothes with long, intricately braided hair, women ex-combatants often found themselves marginalised because they were unwilling to return to their conventional role. They have also had to cope with demobilisation (and remobilisation in 1998), with divorce and single parenthood, and an often much lower status than they used to enjoy in the liberation movement.²⁰

Women's subordinate position was taken up in EPLF plays during the 1980s and still features strongly in present-day community theatre. Yet female participation in modern theatre forms and other aspects of social life is still lagging behind that of men. While this may be partly attributed to negative attitudes towards theatre arts, it can also be credited to the tension between the domestic space usually accorded to women and the much more 'dangerous', because potentially liberating, space of performance (Chitauro et al. 1994: 111).

Representations in theatre as in other areas of socio-political life enforce certain meanings which, as John Sorenson points out, 'create the realities of which they speak through the construction of consensus about the nature and the existence of groups' (Sorenson 1993: 4). In this thesis, I investigate how cultural

¹⁸ See, for example, 'How the Daughter of Pharaoh Seduced Solomon', (*Kebra Nagast* 1996: 87-88). The co-existence of the mother and prostitute trope in post-colonial African representation is nothing new and has been thoroughly analysed in African literary studies. Both are part of a Manichean allegory of gender, which places male above female, subject above object, domination above subordination. Florence Stratton writes that these tropes elaborate 'a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts. Instead, woman herself is produced or constructed by the male writer as an embodiment of his literary/political vision' (Stratton 1994: 51).

¹⁹ Scholars of various academic backgrounds have used the terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' in order to describe states and conditions that are on the threshold, or 'in-between', in which cultural change can occur. From the standpoints of 'normative' discourses, these spaces have often been considered as 'dangerous'. Turner, referring to Mary Douglas, also calls them "'polluting" [...] because they transgress classificatory boundaries' (Turner 1977: 37). See also Bhabha (1995: 3-4).

²⁰ Schamanek (1998: 58), Christmann (1996: 40-47), Boehmer (1992: 233).

conventions concerning women in Eritrea have been embodied or enacted in theatre arts, and whether women and men have theatrically interrogated these customs, possibly creating performative counter-discourses to prevalent conceptions. In other words, how have women as real historical beings corresponded to the idea of Woman as produced by the hegemonic discourses in Eritrea (de Lauretis 1994: 5-6), and how has this been reflected and/or transmuted in the national performing arts? Gender questions are always related to the distribution of power, and wider social transformation can only occur if gender relations are taken into account. As the connection between theatre and development becomes more and more apparent in Africa, a documentation of women's various roles and their representation in the performing arts might help us understand the changing gender dynamics in Eritrea and contribute to creating the conditions for a more equitable participation of women in the arts and other social areas.²¹

The Current State of Research

Material on Eritrean theatre arts is still scarce, though scholarly research is gradually becoming available. Since the late 19th century, historical, ethnographic and socio-political studies on Eritrea have occasionally featured descriptions of performative events, mostly pertaining to religious or secular community celebrations. Plodding through vast amounts of ethnographic and historical works in the attempt to trace the odd sentence, perhaps even paragraph, felt like searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack. During the 1980s, the Research Branch of the EPLF Department of Politicisation, Education, and Culture conducted ethnographic research in the liberated areas which occasionally dealt with the long-established performing arts; some of these studies were later serialised in the post-independence weekly newspaper, *Eritrea Profile*.²² While useful as way in to older local theatre forms, they have also been criticised as being discriminatory against certain nationalities, especially lowland people said

²¹ As experience in various other African countries has shown, theatre – especially TFD (Theatre-for-development) and community-based theatre forms – are a viable mode not only for popular entertainment, but also for creating awareness of issues in the community and to help instigate change. For examples see Mlama (1991), Mda (1993), and Kerr (1995: 149-171).

²² Most material was originally published by the EPLF as Tigrinya mimeographs. They are accessible at the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) in Asmara. The serialisation of EPLF research started in 1995 as 'Eritrean Customs and Traditions' in the Tigrinya-language paper, *Haddas Eritrea*, and the English-language *Eritrea Profile*. For the sake of clarity, articles in newspapers and magazines will be given with the full date of publication.

to be seen as ‘tribal’ and ‘primitive’ to justify social reforms (Volker-Saad 2003: 13). Older sources dating from the mid-19th century up to the 1940s, are often culturally prejudiced travel accounts written by Europeans in the heyday of western colonialism.²³ These sources habitually contradict each other to a greater or lesser extent, which can only be partly put down to changes in social and cultural patterns. Considering that this is a women-focused project, it is also regrettable that most anthropological and historical material is both male-authored and male-centred. Friederike Kemink has rightly pointed out that the majority of researchers worked predominantly with male informants who in turn had only limited access to female spheres, due to widely practised gender segregation and division of labour. Untenable claims or erroneous generalisations were therefore common (Kemink 1991: 1-2). Recent years have also seen trenchant, self-reflexive discussions on representational strategies in anthropological works, drawing attention to the fact that ethnography ‘is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures’ (Clifford 1986: 2). These interventions have started to question the ethnographic authority propounded in earlier works. Once sensitised to the underlying *Weltanschauung* of the authors – often Eurocentric and ‘orientalising’ – descriptions of cultural practices can no longer be taken at face value.²⁴

Modern performance forms, on the other hand, have only been investigated in recent years. In the mid-1990s Jane Plastow of the University of Leeds and her team which I was fortunate to belong in 1997 were the first to conduct research into local theatre associations and theatre work in the liberation struggle. A number of articles have come out of their work, most of them historical in nature; others trying to analyse theatre arts as performance or documenting the work of the ECBTP. Their findings constitute important stepping-stones for further in-depth studies on Eritrean theatre. Cynthia Tse Kimberlin, an Asian-American ethnomusicologist, has written on gendered attitudes in Eritrean and Ethiopian music practice, while the French musicologist Francis Falceto has published a pictorial history of modern Ethiopian music which includes a chapter with unique visual material on Eritrea. Falceto also re-released Tigrinya music from the 1960s and ’70s on CD. Finally, Ghirmai Negash’s

²³ For examples see Ruppel (1838: 197-198, 203-205), Harris (1844: 280-281, 350-351), Parkyns (1868: 161-164, 265), Rohlf (1883: 104-106), Schoeller (1895: 119), Vivian (1901: 230-233), Kleydorff (1910: 118), Rein (1920: 334-336), Littmann (1935: 84), Doody (1955: 80-83), Winstanley (1969, I: 72-73, 86; II: 279-283).

²⁴ Cf. Said (1991: 1-28). For a recent example of orientalism see Beckwith & Fisher (1990: 77-81).

ground-breaking *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea* (1999) must be mentioned here, as the first ever full-length study to discuss Tigrinya literature, including works of drama, in the context of the nation's political annals. Useful in providing a comprehensive survey of published plays until *de facto* independence, the study clearly does not examine the more practical aspects of theatre.²⁵

Unpublished sources have been available in somewhat smaller quantities. In the mid-1980s, Alemseged Tesfai, key-intellectual of the EPLF and once Head of Drama in the Division of Culture, wrote two studies pertinent to Eritrean theatre: *Literature, Its Development, and Its Role in Revolution* (1982), a work of Marxist-socialist literary criticism which immensely influenced the literary production in the field; and the first-ever study on modern Eritrean theatre, entitled *Drama* ([1983a]). *Drama* combines a historical overview with a critical analysis of EPLF theatre practice which gives invaluable insight into practical drama work in the field. Since the mid-1990s a number of senior papers and Master's dissertations have also been written on the subject. In 1996, Yonathan Estefanos, one of the first ECBTP translators and research trainees, submitted a senior paper on the 'History of Eritrean Drama' for the Department of Language Studies at the University of Asmara which is largely a digest of the 1995 ECBTP research. In 1999, two Master's dissertations were undertaken at the University of Leeds; the first a comparative study of theatre in development in Tanzania and Eritrea by Mesmer Andu focusing on the work of the ECBTP (of which he had been a participant in 1997), the second a historical analysis of Eritrean theatre which included original research on the post-independence theatre projects of the author, Efriem Kahasai. Since then two further dissertations have been written at Leeds: Mesgun Zerai's historical overview, 'The Theatre Experience in Eritrea' (2001), and Isayas Tseggai's 'Theatre During the Long Struggle for Eritrean Independence' (2002). Both authors are well-known EPLF/PFDJ cultural activists with long-standing theatre experience which is partly reflected in their academic writing. A third MA study by a prominent EPLF veteran, Solomon Dirar, is currently being completed at Leeds. While theatre in the liberation struggle and beyond often draws on the writers' personal experiences, pre-liberation war

²⁵ ECBTP articles comprise: Plastow (1997a: 144-154; 1997b: 386-395; 1998: 97-113; 1999: 54-60), Warwick (1997: 221-230), (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 36-54), (Moriarty & Plastow 1999: 153-162), (Campbell et al.: 1999: 38-53), (Matzke 2000: 73-101). Other sources mentioned are G. Negash (1999), Kimberlin (2000: 239-265), Falceto (2001), Falceto (CD Ref. 82965-2 DK 016). Andreas Wetter, in an overview of Ethiopian music, also refers to modern music in the EPLF. Wetter (2000: 323-324).

overviews were mostly culled from earlier works and tend to be fragmentary and generalising.²⁶

Women's and gender studies on Eritrea have been comparatively abundant in the past two decades. Publications from the 1980s to early 1990s, especially Amrit Wilson's classic, *The Challenge Road* (1991), tended to over-stress certain aspects of women's oppression prior to the liberation struggle in an attempt to emphasise the social progress made by the liberation fronts; others were over-optimistic regarding the Eritrean women's movement. Only the mid- to late 1990s have witnessed the emergence of some full-length works which attempted to set enthusiastic distortions right and call attention to the post-independence gender backlash. All works however deal with socio-political issues and touch only marginally on culture, except for a recently completed doctoral thesis by Kerstin Volker-Saad. Volker-Saad's anthropological study of 'Zivilistinnen und Kämpferinnen in Eritrea [Female Civilians and Fighters in Eritrea]' concentrates on food as a social phenomenon and includes discussions of performative events, such as religious holidays, weddings and special leisure periods in the EPLF.²⁷

Given that this study is to a large extent a theatre historiography with focus on the roles and representations of women, a note needs to be added on the historical accounts and chronicles which form the backdrop of this work. There is hardly a historical period which has *not* been contested by the political protagonists of the liberation struggle (and other political factions), with versions considerably differing even among writers of the same ideological stance. This has made an analysis of theatre arts set against political events at times rather challenging. A crucial disagreement, for example, is linked to the Ethiopian claim that, beginning with the Axumite empire, Eritrea has always been an integral part of Ethiopia as both a territorial and cultural unit – an argument linked to the idea of Pan-Ethiopianism or 'Greater Ethiopia'.²⁸ This contention has been categorically denied by Eritrean authorities. Instead, they assert a more fluid historical situation involving the rise and fall of various empires, including non-

²⁶ A. Tesfai (1982; [1983a]), Y. Estefanos (1996), M. Andu (1999), E. Kahasai (1999), M. Zerai (2001), I. Tsegai (2002).

²⁷ For early accounts see National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) ([1980a]; 1980b; 1980c; 1999a), Cowan (1983: 143-152), Dines (1984: 276-279), Haller (1987), Burgess (1989: 126-132), Wilson (1991), W. Selassie (1992: 67-71). Recent critical studies are Christmann (1996), Zimprich (1996), Hodgkin (1997: 85-110), Schamanek (1998), Connell (1998: 189-206), T. Gebredhin (2002), Volker-Saad (2003). See also Anon. (25 June 1994: 64).

²⁸ The discourse of 'Greater Ethiopia' is named after the selfsame study of Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia* (1974), one of the major representatives of Pan-Ethiopianism. For a representative publication see Ministry of Information (1988). Pool (1984: 33).

Ethiopian invasions (Sorenson 1991: 301). John Sorenson notes that the Horn of Africa has been:

the site for a clash of nationalist struggles that offer competing narratives of the past and of contemporary forms of identity, imagining Ethiopia [and Eritrea] in sharply contrasting ways. Whereas Greater Ethiopian nationalism has created for itself a genealogy that stretches into the biblical past and suggests a virtually primordial and essential identity [...], other forms of national identity exist in opposition to this and insist that this Greater Ethiopian identity is in reality an expression of Amhara chauvinism. (Sorenson 1993: 5).

This is not the place to elaborate on the politics of political representation in Eritrea and neighbouring Ethiopia. It is, however, important to bear in mind that accounts of the region's history have always also served someone's political agenda (cf. Sorenson 1993: 122). Though for the main part I follow the official Eritrean narrative, it would be unwise to neglect that fact that this too has served to legitimise the interests of a particular group, namely the EPLF and its supporters who successfully fought for independence and a separate Eritrean identity. On occasions these accounts have tended to gloss over internal contradictions within the EPLF or in-house opposition; others have omitted or downgraded the contribution of the ELF or overstated the achievement of women's liberation.²⁹

Methods and Source Materials

Research for this study has been carried out over a period of five years, from my first contacts with Eritrean theatre arts in 1997 as research assistant to the ECBTP to my last short visit in early 2003 when I asked senior cultural officers to comment on draft chapters of my thesis. Most of the data, however, was generated during my field research from late 1999 to autumn 2000, even if the war with Ethiopia (1998-2000) caused a number of problems.³⁰ On the whole I have adopted a transdisciplinary approach, culling methods and source materials from disciplines as varied as sociology, anthropology and history as well as literature

²⁹ (Sorenson 1992: 188). See, for example, *Eritrea: National Map* (1995) which does not mention the ELF in its brief historical overview.

³⁰ Several of my Eritrean colleagues got called up and left overnight; occasionally some of the collated material disappeared with them. At other times I was unable to interview certain artists because they had been sent to the front line. In late October 1999 I lost my research grant which forced me to return to Europe for two months, as the funding body deemed fieldwork in Eritrea too dangerous; in mid-May 2000 I left briefly on my own account after the military situation had become critical. All in all, the critical military situation was not particularly conducive to doing theatre research, to say nothing of worries about friends and their safety.

and theatre studies. Wherever possible I have triangulated my sources using a combination of methods, such as interviews and surveys of both published and unpublished materials, to corroborate findings and compensate for potential weaknesses of individual techniques. Triangulation also helped me 'make sense' out of multiple, often contradictory, perspectives. Draft versions of Chapters 3 to 7 have been read and commented upon by key informants, while parts of Chapter 2 were presented at an international conference on Eritrean Studies held in Asmara in 2001, where they were publicly discussed (Matzke 2002a: 29-46). Needless to say the final narrative is a product of my own selection and interpretation in the attempt to engender critical debate and further research into Eritrean theatre arts.³¹

In terms of theatre historiography, most materials have been 'indirect' rather than 'direct' sources linked to the immediate process of staging a show. Christopher Balme, drawing on Dietrich Steinbeck, moreover differentiates between 'direct' sources in 'object-language' – such as theatre buildings, props and costumes – and 'direct' sources in 'meta-language', such as pictures and video films, which already contain a reading of the work. Given the war-torn history of Eritrea, however, I had better access to 'indirect' materials in the meta-language of interpretation, such as contemporaneous reviews and personal anecdotes (Balme 2001: 29).

My key means of generating data in Eritrea has been semi-structured, qualitative interviews, the majority of which were recorded. I have also had access to the interview transcripts of the Eritrea Community Theatre Projects of 1995 and 1997. All interviewees were informed about the nature of my research and agreed that the material be used for publication; one person wished to remain anonymous. In some instances I decided not to name interviewees in order to protect their privacy, especially in the case of very young or amateur performers. Of late, researchers have voiced their fears of political repression in Eritrea and of possible consequences for the informants should their identities become known. In the light of recent events, such as the imprisonment of government critics and the closing down of private newspapers, these worries need to be taken very seriously. I cannot, however, attempt to write a woman-centred Eritrean theatre history without mentioning names and identifying sources. Indeed, some of my informants were offended when passed over in earlier publications. In the

³¹ Jayaratne & Stewart (1991: 91), Mason (1998: 25), Flick (1999: 50-51).

majority of cases, artists are public personae and wish to be written about. Whenever in doubt, I double-checked with the person in question or withheld the source on my own account.³²

When recordings were not permitted I took notes during or after the conversation; in the case of multiple sessions I often discussed the protocol with the informant. Recorded interviews were later transcribed. Whenever the interview could not be conducted in English or German, one of my Eritrean colleagues served as interpreter and later transcribed the interview.³³ As time, funding and human resources were limited, interviews in Eritrean languages were directly translated into English. Using amateur or professional translators obviously raises the issue of how well the translation is done, both during the interview and in the transcript, and how much the text has been edited and changed during the process.³⁴ Twice the translation was unsatisfactory in my opinion and had to be done again by a more experienced colleague; yet I am well aware that subtleties may have been lost even in first-class renditions. Triangulation can only partly recover such nuances; and it will now be up to native speakers to conduct more in-depth studies into Eritrean theatre arts.

Though most of my male colleagues proved very sensitive in the interview situation, I often wished for a woman translator, especially when delicate work or family matters were discussed. Women are still disadvantaged when it comes to schooling in Eritrea, and those who spoke English well were busy with jobs or other responsibilities and were thus unavailable as research assistants. On the whole, younger women and female fighters appeared less affected by the presence of a male translator than older informants. The question remains how far my own presence as an outsider to the Eritrean context affected the interviews. In some cases initial responses seemed repetitions of 'what has developed as a collective consensus' (Quehl 2003: 139), especially among (ex-)members of the liberation

³² For further information on recent political developments in Eritrea see Amnesty International (18 September 2002) and Conclusion. Volker-Saad (2003: 44), Quehl (2003: 146).

³³ I am most grateful to the following Eritrean colleagues who helped me during my field research, as facilitators, interpreters and translators: Samson Gebreghzier, Yakem Tesfai, Ghirmai Woldegeorgis, Tesfazghi Ukubazghi, Temesgen Gebreyesus, Mesmer Andu and Yohannes Zerai. Special thanks to the three colleagues who bore the brunt of the work: Mohamed Salih Ismail, Mussie Tesfagiorgis, and Tekeste Yonas. Thanks also to those who helped me out on short notice, when none of the above translators was present: the writer Beneam (X), *memher* (teacher) Daniel (X), Miriam Meharena, Mulugeta Yirga and Weyni Fesseha.

³⁴ A number of times I noticed translators withholding information during an interview situation because they deemed it unworthy of my attention or wanted to 'protect' me from certain knowledge; at other times the transcript made clear that my questions had been too complex for an *ad hoc* translation or had simply been misunderstood. Cf. Wengraf (2001: 48) and Quehl (2003: 146-147).

movements. With the gradual building up of trust and mutual confidence, however, people started to freely express their own views and experiences.

As much as possible I have tried to include interviewees actively in the research process. Sometimes I asked them to facilitate talks with former colleagues; on one occasion, they even did the interviewing themselves. People were often happy to share their private collections of contemporaneous material: newspaper clippings, reviews and pictures, provided these things had survived the struggle for independence. Key informants were also asked to give feedback on my writing. The more people got interested in the documentation of Eritrean theatre arts, the more often we met; the better we got to know each other, the more they were willing to share their experiences. Involvement of the researcher as a person has often been seen as ‘violat[ing] the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and “value neutral”’ (Reinharz 1992: 261). In recent years, however, feminist scholars have refuted these concepts by providing evidence that ideas of ‘neutrality’ have often disguised dominant discourses or positions of social privilege (Reinharz 1992: 261-262). ‘The very nature of fieldwork’, Amanda Coffey writes, is interactional and ‘implies a personal dimension’ (Coffey 1999: 89).

I have already provided a survey of published and unpublished material on Eritrean theatre arts and related subjects in the section above; equally important – and much larger in quantity – were miscellanies and collections of historical sources found in the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) in Asmara, at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, at the African Music Archive at Johann Gutenberg University, Mainz, and in the Frobenius Library, Frankfurt/Main. These include correspondence and administrative papers from the British Military Administration (BMA) as well as newspaper clippings from ELF and EPLF magazines and the local press from the 1940s to the present. I have also tried to obtain published and unpublished play scripts from the early 1950s until today. Apart from two plays by Alemseged Tesfai, which are available in an authorised English translation, all other texts were in Tigrinya and had to be rendered into English by my Eritrean colleagues.³⁵

³⁵ Two of Alemseged Tesfai’s plays, *Le’ul* and *The Other War*, were recently published in a collection of the author’s works, *Two Weeks in the Trenches*, A. Tesfai (2002: 139-165, 167-210); *The Other War* came out originally in a translation in Banham & Plastow (1999: 261-301). The earliest excerpt of a play – or rather prose poem – I was able to trace was *Abba* (father, priest) Ghebreyesus Hailu, ‘From the Tragedy of Tewodros’, in G. Hailu (1942_{EC} [1949/50]). My thanks go to Ghirmai Negash for providing me with a copy of the play.

Earlier on I mentioned the use of pictures and videos as a qualitative resource. Scholars using film and picture material of diverse kinds to document and analyse theatre arts have drawn attention to the genres' benefits, but also to their limitations.³⁶ Uwe Flick, for example, observes that 'compared with interviews, they provide the non-verbal component of events and practices' (Flick 1999: 158). They also enable the researcher to view performative situations that are irreversibly gone and which often help trigger the memories of an informant. Pictures and videos have also been useful in identifying performers. Yet pictorial recordings are never events; and films and pictures are as much interpretations as are writings, even if they suggest greater 'authenticity'. Richard Schechner, with reference to ethnographic filmmaking, notes that 'camera angles, methods of shooting, focus, and editing all reflect the world of the film maker' (Schechner 1985: 109). Similar claims can be made for pictorial records, especially video documentation in the field. Members of the EPLF Cine-Section translated performances into motion pictures that would project a positive image of the EPLF and would provide diaspora audiences with a sense of home. (Hence the interspersing of nature and village scenes in many theatre videos produced for overseas distribution). Shortcomings notwithstanding, Martin Rohmer rightly points out that films 'can capture both acoustic and visual sign systems and therefore allow a much more detailed analysis than other means of documentation' (Rohmer 1999: 26-27). If we keep in mind that theatre in Eritrea has been transient and contingent on place, performers and politics, pictures can give us ideas about contemporaneous staging practices, while video footage can provide leads as to how bodies and voices in motion helped create a particular performance tradition, such as the fighter culture in the field.

Although my final product has turned out to be a historiography rather than an analysis of contemporary theatre, I have also resorted to participant observation and immersed myself in whatever was left of the contemporary theatre scene at a time of war. To mention a few examples: I attended various drama classes run by the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) in Asmara (and even conducted two sessions myself); I watched virtually every show mounted during my field research, and some of the rehearsals; and once I joined a theatre company on tour. My plan to accompany a group of artists to their frontline assignment in May 2000 had to be aborted as

³⁶ See, for example, Hiß (1993: 126-127), Rohmer (1999: 26), Balme (2001: 84-88).

fierce fighting was renewed. Though not the centre of this study, these experiences have given me useful insights for my analysis of Eritrean theatre arts in previous periods. My observations, impressions and reflections were documented in 177 field notes (FN), covering a three-year phase from September 1999 to January 2003. Stanley and Wise note that 'all research analyses and theories are inevitably grounded in the material experiences of researchers/theorists' (Stanley & Wise 1991: 23). There is no doubt that my position was very privileged in Eritrea, being fortunate to study for a degree as yet unattainable locally and endowed with a scholarship sufficient for both my personal needs and the remuneration of local assistants. My background as a white European middle-class woman surely has bearing on how I have made meaning out of the collated data and how I have rendered it meaningful to the reader (Colley 1999: 144). However, I have attempted a balance by being open to informants of all political camps and creeds and have tried to work analytically with the information generated, letting the data, not my own norms and assumptions, guide my final reading.

Outline of Study

This thesis is a first attempt at writing a modern theatre historiography of Eritrea, with emphasis on the roles and representations of women. It covers a period of some fifty years, from the late 1930s to 1991, the year of the country's *de facto* independence. The study is divided into three major sections; Part One providing the context of theatre in Eritrea, Part Two dealing with the emergence of modern Eritrean theatre arts, and Part Three covering the rise of the fighter performing arts during the thirty-year liberation struggle.

After an introduction to Eritrean history and theatre arts as well as the theoretical framework of the study, Chapter 1 examines women's roles and representations in Eritrean societies and selected traditional performing arts as the matrix onto which modern performance practices are built.

Chapter 2 starts with a portrayal of early urban women performers in the late 1930s and early 1940s as singers and *krar*-players in local drinking houses, followed by the gradual expansion of Eritrean theatre arts under the British Military Administration. Thereafter the establishment of three well-known Eritrean theatre associations is examined, with Chapter 3 focusing on the Asmara Theatre Association, *Mahber Theatre Asmara*, whose work was eventually

brought to a halt by the rise of the Ethiopian Derg regime. An investigation into the cultural troupes of the two liberation movements is dealt with in Part Three.

Chapter 4 outlines theatre work in the ELF, while Chapters 5-7 present details of EPLF performing arts. Chapter 5 begins with early performance activities until the strategic retreat in 1978/79, followed by Chapter 6 with an analysis of drama work after the reorganisation of the Division of Culture. Chapter 7 covers theatre activities in mass organisations and supporting departments and outlines cultural developments during the final years of the liberation war. In conclusion, major trends and directions in post-independence Eritrean theatre arts are summarised as they continue to negotiate recent socio-political problems and developments.



Fig. 6 *Announcement for The Last Minute, a play by Michael Berhe, September 1999.*

CHAPTER 1: ASPECTS OF TRADITIONS IN ERITREA:

WOMEN'S POSITION AND THE LONG-ESTABLISHED PERFORMING ARTS

Women's Position in Traditional Eritrean Societies

To bear a girl is to bear a problem. (Tigrinya proverb).

In the first part of this chapter I look at women's position in traditional Eritrean societies, particularly Tigrinya and Tigre-speaking cultures as the two dominant ethno-linguistic nationalities. Reference is also made to the Kunama as the only matrilineal group. Although the following sections primarily deal with social issues, I look at them loosely in terms of theatricality. Voice, body, and space are important constituents of theatre arts. They are theatre stripped to its bare essentials, shaping, marking, and giving meaning to performance. Voice, body, and space are also elements with which individuals 'perform' their various social roles, circumscribed and conditioned by historical and cultural conventions. Though it would be erroneous to equate theatrical and social roles with each other completely (theatricality, after all, implies an 'extra-ordinary' performance which follows a different set of rules) a comparison in the context of traditional social structures in Eritrea seems to be useful.³⁷ 'The social body', the anthropologist Mary Douglas explains,

constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (Douglas 1970: 65).

If, as I would argue, social, class and gender structures in Eritrea condition how the voice, body and space of women are customarily 'performed', and if traditional performing arts essentially reflect, explore, and possibly transgress these structures, then it is imperative to engage with and comprehend them as the basis of discourses of women in Eritrea.

At the beginning of this section, another word of caution is in order. When dealing with Christian and Muslim, highland and lowland, urban and rural cultures, it is easy to fall prey to a Manichean binary which valorises the first, while downgrading the second term in regard to women's positioning. Though it is undeniable that women's rights are most severely curtailed among pastoralist

³⁷ Butler (1990: 272, 278), Geertz (1993: 22).

and agro-pastoralist Islamic cultures in the rural lowlands, it needs to be pointed out that the actual manifestations of the above dichotomies are much more complex than a simplistic dualist evaluation suggests. Both religions are repressive to women, as are most 'traditional' structures in Eritrea, be they highland or lowland cultures. Granted that urban environments have more easily accommodated women who no longer fit into conventional frames – such as single mothers, divorcees, and demobilised fighters – rural Kunama culture has endowed women with far greater rights than have conditions in the city.

Generally 'female territory' is the domestic sphere, and for most, especially rural, women there is little beyond that.³⁸ It is worth studying the spatial formation of the *hidmo*, the traditional Tigrinya house, as a microcosm and 'metaphor of social structure and organization' (see Figure 7).³⁹ Divided into two rooms, the bigger *mideribet* ('open room') and the smaller *wushate* ('closed' or 'secret room') at the back, the *hidmo* mirrors the public/domestic, male/female dichotomy that characterises the social order among the Tigrinya peasantry and other nationalities in Eritrea. While the *mideribet* is open to all and, among other functions, serves to entertain visitors in its prestigious centre, the dark and smoky *wushate* is a strictly female sphere where birth takes place and the daily cooking is done (see Figure 8). 'As the public sphere and political discourse are a predominant male arena', Kjetil Tronvoll observes,

which is reflected in the "open room" (*midribet* [sic]), the "closed room" (*wushate*) mirrors the solely female influence in the domestic sphere and chores of everyday life. [...] In this way the house embodies the hierarchical relationship between men and women in Tigrinya society and represents an ideology of inequality. (Tronvoll 1998: 94).

³⁸ A Tigrinya custom celebrating a baby's birth already indicates that domestic life is associated with a low social status. To announce the arrival of a new-born boy, women ululate seven times, then put him into a winnowing basket, a symbol of harvest and wealth. Girl children, on the other hand, are only greeted with three ululations. Thereafter they are placed on a flour sieve, a token of domesticity which indicates their future place. Similar rituals have been recorded among the Tigre. Among the Mensa, for example, the arrival of a boy child was honoured by the father presenting the gift of a cow to his wife, whereas the birth of a girl was ignored. Haller (1987: 7), *Das Feteh Mahari* (1951: 36). (Note that the *Feteh Mahari* has two types of pagination. I follow the one in parentheses). See also Wilson (1991: 6) and various articles authored by the EPLF Research Branch on 'Eritrean Traditions and Customs' in *Eritrea Profile*, esp. (2 November 1996; 30 November 1996; 21 December 1996).

³⁹ Tronvoll (1998: 89). Spatial symbolism is quite common in Eritrean and Ethiopian highland cultures and is often gendered. For the spatial formation of Beni-Amir houses see Volker-Saad (2003: 203-205). For an example of traditional Amhara military camps in relation to church structures see Lagopoulos & Stylianoudi (2001: 55-95).



Fig. 7 *A typical hidmo in the Eritrean highlands.*



Fig. 8 *Women gathering in a wushate during a wedding celebration.*

It is noteworthy, however, that the *wushate* can also serve as a safe haven for women in the event that her husband wants to punish her. If she escapes into the *wushate*, an unwritten rule prohibits him following her. This is an indication of female-only spaces in Eritrea which are relevant for theatre arts, as it is in these 'no-man's-land[s]' (Tronvoll 1998: 92) where women's creativity and performance is customarily condoned and most freely expressed.

As the spatial formation of the *hidmo* suggests, women of all Eritrean nationalities are usually responsible for common household duties, such as cooking, collecting water and firewood, and of course childcare. Tigre women are entirely confined to the house, with mat and basket weaving as their only means of contributing to the family's income. Though this releases them from strenuous physical labour, it dramatically increases their economic dependence on men and substantially contributes to their marginalisation. They are entitled neither to partake in any decision-making processes nor, under customary law, to bear witness in a legal disagreement. Similar claims can be made for the Bilen, the Saho, and the Rasheida.⁴⁰ War, displacement, and the need for economic survival have certainly facilitated greater self-sufficiency among many women (cf. G. Kibreab 1996: 64); yet age-old gender patterns are still deeply ingrained. Schooling is still difficult to obtain for girls, especially in Muslim communities, despite primary education being compulsory since independence. Though education is more easily available for Tigrinya women in the highlands than for any other ethnic group, boy children are still given priority. This applies particularly to education beyond primary level, or when families suffer financial problems. After all, it is a general belief that 'Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with brains' (NUEW 1980b: 12).

Among the Tigrinya, women help work the land, but ploughing and seeding is a prerogative of men. All other activities – weeding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and the troublesome manual grinding – are female

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Tigre women seemed to have enjoyed much greater measures of freedom some hundred years ago. Munzinger, writing about the Beni-Amir people in the mid- 19th century, states that, though legally disadvantaged in comparison to their husbands, married women were by no means subservient. On the contrary, they kept their spouses under their thumb, often extracting large presents, such as jewellery or cows, for appeasement. Women often slaughtered cattle to feast with their female friends, and insulted men with impunity. They also did not cover their hair, which today is the custom among many Muslim peoples, Rasheida women being fully veiled. Whether this power shift can be attributed to the increasing influence of Islam or relates to the experience of colonisation – men, deprived of their political authority, keeping a tighter rein on women – cannot be answered here, though it is likely to be a combination of both. Munzinger (1883: 324-326), Rentmeester (1993: 73), I. Tseggai (8 April 1995: 7).

occupations. Given the available infrastructure in present-day Eritrea, most of these tasks are strenuous and very time-consuming – more so for women who live in the hinterland, less so in urban areas with better access to water, transport and electricity. (As another proverb says: '[A]sking a woman to rest is like making a donkey your guest' (Wilson 1991: 6)). Interestingly, *adi abo* – which designates land for agricultural use in Tigrinya, but literally translates as 'father's land' – is gendered female, as is the country, 'Eritrea'. There certainly exists a conceptual analogy between woman and land, motherhood and (agricultural) fertility, both of which are controlled and regulated by men (hence the right to plough and sow). Boehmer, with reference to prevalent tropes in Anglophone African literature, speaks of the "natural" identification of the mother with the beloved earth, the national territory' (Boehmer 1992: 232), while 'real' women remain external to socio-political concerns. In Eritrea, this is certainly the case. Judging from my own observations there is a link between women's participation in non-domestic activities, and their legal and economic status, as well as their rights regarding land distribution and inheritance law. The more women are confined to the house, the less they have access to land and economic power, the less they are legal *persona grata*. Kunama women, for example, pursue any work outside the domestic sphere, and are authorised to plough and sow. Kunama following customary beliefs also acknowledge Andinas, women in spiritual contact with the ancestors and thus imbued with curative powers.⁴¹ These activities effect an extraordinarily high economic status for women and lead to equal participation in decision-making processes, further strengthened by matrilineal inheritance laws. (It does, however, also increase their daily workload which is far higher than for women of other ethnic groups. Kunama women also work much longer hours than Kunama men, and engage in heavy physical labour even during pregnancy – the price to pay for authority, it seems (Christmann 1996: 31)). Tigrinya women, then, inhabit a position in-between the powerful Kunama and the more disenfranchised Tigre. Fortunately, there is extensive research in the area of Tigrinya customary law which proves that, contrary to widespread claims, women have always been entitled to a certain, if limited, amount of legal and social security. Women could be plaintiffs and witnesses in a traditional court of law, and had special

⁴¹ Customary Kunama cosmology centres on the creator god, Ana, which encompasses both male and female genders and an intricate system of spirits, rainmakers, and ritual healers. Frank-Wissmann (1998: 8-10), Baumann (1986: 206), Munzinger (1883: 457), EPLF (Research Branch) (30 December 1995).

prerogatives in paternity lawsuits. Though generally forbidden to own land, they could under certain conditions become heirs to their father's holdings. This meant at least some control of the means of production and a safeguard against economic powerlessness. Provisions were also made for widows and divorcees in the modified codices of the 1940s, when women became entitled to land on their return to their home villages. Should a widow however decide to remain in the compound of her late husband, she was obliged to remain celibate. Again, this reflects the intricate connection between the control of land and women's sexuality.⁴²

Rules and regulations for most women in Eritrea focus on their body and sexuality. This is of particular interest in the context of the performing arts, which is such a physical form of cultural expression and which makes women much more visible than is the norm in Eritrea. Placing their bodies in theatrical spaces – be it through writing, performance or even in inconspicuous background work – is also a claim for more space in other social arenas, contesting customary prescriptions of how women are supposed to act and behave. The interview at the beginning of this paper already indicated some of the resultant controversies, with women being labelled 'loose' if they want to go on stage. Some ten years ago, *Ade* (Mother) Zeinab, an elderly, self-taught Tigre-language poet and national icon for her passionate patriotic verse, spoke of the progress women had made during the war, the empowering move from silence into speech which was a broadening of space and mental horizon.

We have finally come out of the kitchen! We now know that our eyes, ears and tongues are normal. Before we sat veiled and silent and we knew nothing! Now we know. We are different people. It is ten times different from then! We were oppressed by the Ethiopians but we were also oppressed by our own traditions.⁴³

However, sources like the 1997 interview with the female workshop participants suggest that women are once more respected for their conventional roles, their silence, servitude and self-restraint. There is growing concern among many women today that they are about to lose the ground partially gained in the

⁴² The former provinces Hamassien, Akele Guzai and Seraye all had slightly variant customary laws. In terms of the overall homogeneity among the Tigrinya, these differences are however negligible. Most codices were modified with time, especially in the 1940s, and it is to those that I refer regarding the right to own land. Kemink (1991: 16, 133-140), Schamanek (1998: 101-102). Celibacy was also required from Mensa women should they decide to remain in their late husband's compound. *Das Feteh Mahari* (1951: 47).

⁴³ Papstein (1991: 118). Cf. with the song by Solomon Tsehaye, 'A Woman's Plight' or 'Goodbye Kitchen' in Chapter 7, and hooks (1989: 9).

liberation struggle, and it is not surprising that recruiting women for theatre work has become very difficult indeed.

Generally, restrictions for women start with their appearance and demeanour. Tigre and Tigrinya have to be coy and subservient in their behaviour and, above all, obedient. Rural Muslim women assume a particularly deferential role, which forbids them to look men in the eye or speak to non-related men except in unusual circumstances. Slim women are generally preferred throughout Eritrea; thus, girls learn to control their appetite at an early age. Traditionally, Tigre women eat only after men and children, which sometimes translates as receiving the leftovers.⁴⁴ Considering that most female occupations are connected with the idea of 'nurture', it is ironic that those who feed others are often the most malnourished in Eritrea. There are also rigid taboos related to female biological functions. Milking cattle, for example, is forbidden for both Tigre and Tigrinya women as their ability to menstruate and give birth are seen as 'unclean' propensities believed to have detrimental effects on the livestock. Slaughtering animals is another taboo, for women are considered life-givers, not life-takers. If we read this in the context of the liberation struggle, where women were deployed as frontline combatants, we can get a sense of the dilemmas arising for women both during and after the war.

One of the most contentious issues in all Eritrean communities is women's sexuality. As virtually everywhere in Eritrea, a woman's aspiration is first and foremost to become a wife and mother, or rather, this is what is expected of her. Pressure to conform is enormous, with older women often the most rigid perpetrators of the status quo. Procreation, however, is not to be confused with sexual pleasure. Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam perpetuate the view of women as evil temptresses whose sexual desires have to be kept under tight control. Patriarchal peasant societies have their own interests at stake, namely the smooth continuation of the patrilineal line which ensures male inheritance claims. Any free sexual activity by women which could lead to 'illegitimate' children must therefore be strictly curbed. A whole system of customs, sayings, and practices has therefore been introduced in order to reinforce this view and make women feel that their sexual needs are something inappropriate, if not innately

⁴⁴ In her recently completed PhD thesis, Volker-Saad criticises this argument as a stereotype perpetuated by the EPLF to promote women's emancipation according to their own ideas. In her experience, Tigre-speaking Beni Amir women, for example, have considerable autonomy in household matters. Volker-Saad (2003: 155).

evil.⁴⁵ It thus comes as no surprise that among the Tigre, Tigrinya, and most other ethnic groups there is nothing as important as a girl's virginity. It is a symbol of a woman's honour and that of her family. Virginity is ensured by keeping control over the movement of girls and, more radically, by the practices of clitoridectomy among the Tigrinya, and infibulation amongst Tigre-speaking peoples. Calling a Tigrinya girl 'sexy' or 'uncircumcised' means she is wild and unrestrained, which comes close to being a curse. Among Muslim nomads, there is a proverb which claims that a 'vagina without infibulation is ugly, it is like a house without a door' (Wilson 1991: 128). Genital mutilation among the Tigre usually takes place at the age of four or five years; and for the majority of women, it remains a life-long mental and physical trauma. (In 1997, one of the ECBTP participants told the harrowing story of her own infibulation during a workshop sessions; a story so powerful that it was later incorporated into one of the plays.) Consummation of the marriage is very painful and can take days, if not weeks. Sometimes the infibulator is called in to 'unstitch' the bride because intercourse proves impossible. Health hazards before, during, and after pregnancy are manifold and lead to the untimely death of many women. Reinfibulation after childbirth is the norm. Munzinger, in the 19th century, wrote that 'der Mann kann sich nur durch ein neues Geschenk das Haus öffnen [the husband can only re-open the house through a present]' (Munzinger 1883: 324) – house again being a euphemism for the vagina, a commodity like land and real estate. Despite efforts of the EPLF to eradicate the custom of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the liberated areas during the struggle, it is still widely practised today.⁴⁶

In all ethnic groups marriages are usually arranged, with the bride having no say in the matter. Among the Tigrinya, dowry gifts to the family of the prospective husband are common, while the Tigre have the custom of the 'neckprice' which is paid by the often considerably older bridegroom. Polygamy is officially forbidden among the Tigrinya and Christian Tigre, but extra-marital affairs are quietly tolerated for men. Concubines and courtesans have a long tradition in highland cultures and are well documented in popular stories and songs. Since Italian colonisation, professional prostitution had also existed, which

⁴⁵ Wilson, quoting Trish Silkin who has extensively searched into EPLF marriage law, relates a story in which Allah tempts a priestess three days with a naked man/devil on her doorstep. When she eventually succumbs to him, the whole of womankind falls in disgrace, is banned from the mosque, has to be veiled, and be subordinate to their husbands. Wilson (1991: 127-128, 202). The same story is quoted in Haller (1987: 5). Compare also with the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

⁴⁶ I. Tseggai (18 June 1994: 3, 8), K. Abel (18 March 1995: 5), EPFL (Research Branch) (2 March 1996: 7), Kemink (1991: 153), Dorkenoo & Elworthy (1992: 7-10).

is now under strict government control.⁴⁷ For women, however, extramarital affairs would bring utmost shame, especially should they result in pregnancy.⁴⁸ Once the marriage celebrations are over, wife-beating is not an unusual occurrence, having been provided for in Tigre and Tigrinya customary laws as well as in sayings. As a Tigrinya proverb succinctly prescribes: 'If you really love your wife, you have to beat her' (Schipper 1991: 60). I have not been able to find statistics on domestic violence, but evidence from the theatre workshop suggests that it is still a widely used means of exerting power over females. Scenes of domestic violence proved, in my view, disturbingly popular in the Tigrinya plays of the ECBTP, causing outbreaks of hilarity and laughter.⁴⁹

Unlike the Tigre and the Tigrinya, Kunama women have sexual rights unthinkable for other ethnic groups, possibly linked to their higher economic status. Whereas unmarried sons continue to live in their mothers' compounds, girls are given their own hut after puberty. Pre-marital relationships are less stigmatised than in other ethnic groups, as are children born out of wedlock. Adultery is fined, but is not a major offence. One source reports that virginity fetches a higher bride price during marriage negotiations, but that it does not affect a woman's marriageability. The influence of Christianity and Islam however gradually dilutes these practices. Offspring always remain with the mother, the legal guardian being the maternal uncle, not the progenitor, of the child. Monogamy is the rule, even among those who follow Islam. However,

⁴⁷ A. Sahle (13 April 1996: 7), Conti Rossini (1904/5: 361-369). Urban prostitution saw its height during the Ethiopian occupation. Today, the authorities have introduced registration and compulsory monthly health checks for sex workers. Prostitution in Eritrea is a social taboo. Christmann writes that during a post-independence AIDS-prevention campaign it was difficult for some of the officials to acknowledge that not only Ethiopians, but also Eritreans have been using the services of commercial sex workers. Christmann (1996: 27), Killion (1998: 348-349).

⁴⁸ Christmann cites the case study of a woman who, at the age of nineteen, lost her husband in the war, never remarried, but became pregnant at the age of thirty-five, as a result of which her family wanted to poison her. Christmann (1996: 33). ECBTP participants in 1997 related that among Tigre-speakers it is still common to block the birth canal of unmarried women during delivery in order to extract the name of the baby's father.

⁴⁹ However, given that laughter, like crying, is a form of stress release, the spectators' reaction was not necessarily a sign of approval. Haller (1987: 24), *Das Feteḥ Mahari* (1951: 96). Women were not always victims of domestic violence, if we follow the written law. Some Tigrinya codices specify the amount of money a woman was fined if she beat her husband. Kemink (1991: 128). First attempts to research domestic violence in Eritrea have been made by Belainesh Araya, University of Asmara, who presented a paper on 'Domestic Violence Needs Assessment: The Central Zone, Eritrea' at the First International Eritrean Studies Conference, 'Independent Eritrea: Lessons and Prospects', 22-26 July 2001, in Asmara.

some Kunama Muslims have now adopted the practise of female genital mutilation.⁵⁰

Aspects of Long-Established Performing Arts among the Tigrinya and Tigre-speakers, with reference to the Bilen

In the following sections I look at selected aspects of long-established theatre forms, again among Tigrinya- and Tigre-speakers, with reference to the Bilen as close neighbours of Tigre-speakers in Keren and its vicinity. Most data was collated during my work as research assistant to the ECBTP 1997 which focused on Tigre and Bilen performance forms, particularly the local dances. Later research into traditional performance forms in, for example, the Kunama area was rendered impossible by the ongoing war. I also draw upon some of the small-scale anthropological studies of the EPLF mentioned earlier on which convey a fair sense of community celebrations as practised and described in the 1980s, even if contested by recent anthropological research (Volker-Saad 2003: 9). Thirdly, there are a small number of useful ethnomusicological studies on Ethiopia and Eritrea, and three larger nineteenth-century ethnographies on the Tigre-speaking Mensa, the Kunama, and the Bilen people. None of these works has investigated women or theatre arts as a priority, though some contain extensive collections of orature from that period.⁵¹

While trying to convey a sense of the over-all significance of indigenous performance forms – dance, dance theatre, songs, music and oral lore – I mainly focus on women’s position and representation in selected aspects of the traditional performing arts, again using voice, body and space in their relation to social power structures as parameters for my reading. Though at times drawing on sources prior to the Italian colonisation, I do not wish to give the impression that the cultural forms discussed below belong to a previous era. ‘Pre-colonial’ is a very deceptive term, both in the general context of African performing arts and in the context of Eritrea. ‘Pre-colonial theatre arts’ has become a rather common, but inaccurate, term to designate traditional performance practices in studies on African theatre, implying theatre arts in an era before the European colonisation.

⁵⁰ Christmann (1996: 30-32), Munzinger (1883: 477, 502, 524-525), D. Mebrahtu (1 April 1995: 7), EPLF (Research Branch) (16 November 1996); I 26, I 28, I 35.

⁵¹ Main reference sources of this section are Littmann (1910-1915), Munzinger (1859, 1883), Powne (1968), T. Lemma (1975), A. Kebede (1971, 1976, 1979-1980), as well as a number of articles from the *Eritrea Profile* and EPLF mimeographs.

Mostly, however, it denotes performance forms as practised after the first trade contacts with Europeans, sometimes even as practised today.⁵²

'Pre-colonial' in relation to Eritrean history usually indicates the periods prior to the Italian occupation. However, since the heyday of the Christian empire of Axum from 300-600 AD (a renowned civilisation based on control of the Red Sea maritime trade), the territory of what is now Eritrea was subjected to a number of Abyssinian and non-Abyssinian invasions. All of them left their marks on the performing arts, and it would be deluded to assume the existence of pure or organic 'pre-colonial' Eritrean theatre arts before the Italian or any other foreign intrusion. Though it is undeniable that various colonisers tried to impose their own cultural agenda in the attempt to eradicate nationalistic sentiments in Eritrea; though the advent of Europeans created a massive split between the 'indigenous' and the 'modern/urban' performing arts; and though there is no doubt that much local cultural knowledge got lost, buried, or displaced during the recent liberation struggle, the traditional performing arts have survived and continue to do so. The cultural forms we can study today have adapted to the specific historical and material conditions in Eritrea and form part of a continuum which is fragmented and non-linear. Some cultural traditions were reinvented in or after the war; others were adopted from neighbouring countries during long periods of exile; entirely new forms were devised in response to war, flight or social reform in the liberated areas, all of which demonstrate the dynamic quality of culture.

Religious Influences

Before introducing individual songs, dances and community celebrations, I would like to draw attention to two historical influences which have had a major impact on the traditional performing arts, transcending ethnic and linguistic boundaries in Eritrea. The first was the rise of Islam; the second was the influence of Christianity, particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which originated in Axum and whose power was later strengthened by the Ethiopian Amhara. Catholicism arrived in the sixteenth century with the Portuguese missionaries, Protestant Christianity as late as 1864. Neither of them, however, have had as formative an impact as the Orthodox Church.

By 700 AD, the rise of Islam put an end to the power of Axum, and continued to have political repercussions in the lowlands of Eritrea until the

⁵² Kerr (1995: 2, 9), cf. Plastow (1996: 9-41).

nineteenth century. Culturally, its influence remains strong, especially in the western lowlands. This has found expression in the prohibition of mixed-gender dance events and has led to women veiling their hair (cf. Rentmeesters 1993: 73). Islam principally disavows three-dimensional representational performances, such as dance and mime, while encouraging poetry and other spoken or written art forms. This seems to have enhanced the status of already widely practised orature in Eritrea. Tigre-speakers, for example, are well-known for their eloquence, *Ade Zeinab* being merely one of the more recent examples. Surprisingly, three-dimensional performing arts forms such as dance seem far less affected by Islamic tradition than one would have expected them to be. While theoretically dances are discouraged and while gender-segregation is indeed practised in rural areas, in practice people still participate in these art forms. In fact, Tigre-speakers know a greater variety of dances than the Christian Tigrinya. It suggests that most of these customs already existed before the conversion of the various Tigre peoples to Islam, and that they have withstood the restricting influence of religious tradition. As a middle-aged Muslim ex-fighter from Mensura succinctly summarised: 'Religion has forbidden us to dance, but I have danced a lot in my life and I am sure that God will forgive me'.⁵³

The rise of Islam, initiated by various Beja kingdoms and continued by Muslim Ottoman Turks in the mid-sixteenth century, effectively cut the highlands off from the remainder of Eritrea and posed a threat to the Christian Ethiopian, then Abyssinian, Amhara dynasty. Except for the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when their reign gave way to multiple independent kingdoms, the Semitic Amhara controlled Ethiopia for hundreds of years, their rule ending only with the overthrow of the military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. Their governance brought two further, interconnected cultural influences to Eritrea's highlands, where they had extorted tribute since the thirteenth century. These were the Orthodox Church and the religious legends of the Amhara. The Amhara not only claimed descent from the ancient Axumites but, more specifically, from the biblical King Solomon and his Abyssinian lover, the Queen of Sheba. This mythical origin, laid down in the national epic, *The Glory of Kings* or *Kebrä Nagast*, gave a primeval touch to their 'Solomonic' dynasty and produced an air of cultural superiority. Amhara saw themselves as people chosen by God, and thus

⁵³ ECBTP 97/27; Hutchison & Omotoso (1995: x), Al-Haggagi (1980: 72), Krondorfer (1999: 240). For early collections of Tigre-language orature see Littmann (1910-15, 1949, 1958).

as divine leaders.⁵⁴ The idea of supremacy was utilised to legitimise their authority and imperial expansions, 'often accompanied by a diffusion of Amhara cultural influence in language, religion, moral values, and political style' (S. Haile 1988: 13). Though the Amhara 'plundered but never governed' (Trevaskis 1960: 6) the highlands of Eritrea, their centuries-long presence undoubtedly left its mark, even if this is disputed in some nationalist Eritrean historiography (or reduced to the final years of open colonial rule since the 1950s). One of the most influential cultural factors has been the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the monophysite Eastern Churches, which together with the Amhara elite constituted the ruling class in Abyssinia. A rigid and hierarchical organisation, it indirectly supported the leadership by keeping people in submission and awe of the status quo, utterly intolerant towards antagonists or competitors. Sergew Hable Selassie writes that already during the acme of Axum, repressive laws curbed secular cultural activities, stipulating that 'public singers, harp-players, actors and dancers were all suppressed, and anyone found practising these arts was punished by whipping and a year's hard labour' (quoted in Plastow 1989: 14).

Cut off from other Christians by Islamic neighbours for many centuries, Ethiopian Christianity developed unique worship practices including a distinct church music and music notation, a chanted liturgy and religious dancing for the priests. Education in church arts took years, beginning with the School of Music and Song (*zema*), to Dancing (*aquaquam*), and, of the highest order, the School of Poetry (*gene*). These performance forms were elitist and exclusionary, meant to enhance the clergy's spirituality which was viewed as superior to that of the common worshippers. Religious performances bespeak the distance between church and believers, and underline ecclesiastic authority. Dancing for priests hence contrasts starkly with the more integrative community dances, examples of

⁵⁴ The basic story-line of the *Kebrā Nagast* (of which many versions exist) is that the Virgin-Queen Sheba of Ethiopia, also known as Makeda, travelled to Israel to visit the famous King Solomon. On meeting Solomon, the Queen was so impressed that she converted from animism to Judaism. Solomon, smitten by her beauty, asked Sheba to marry him, but she declined. The King then tricked her into sleeping with him by extracting a pledge not to take anything from the palace without his consent, in return for which he would not touch her. When Sheba, after a spicy meal, got up at night to have a drink of water, Solomon accused her of having broken her vow. She thus had to become his lover. The union resulted in a son, Menelik, who was raised by his mother in Ethiopia. As a grown-up man, Menelik eventually returned to his father, but like his mother he could not be persuaded to stay. However, through a ruse Menelik took the genuine Arch of Covenant and brought it to Axum. He thus became the first king of the divinely ordained 'Solomonic' dynasty while his subjects became the 'new chosen' people. The *Kebrā Nagast* is a conflation of old legends and myths and was only written down in the fourteenth century – most likely as an attempt of Amhara emperors to legitimate their authority. *Kebrā Nagast* (1905 & 1996), Plastow (1989: 9-11, 46).

which I will give below. Performed by two or more lines of priests facing each other, it is characterised by very stately and measured swaying movements. Dancers wear full clerical regalia and carry long prayer sticks. The dance is accompanied by kettledrums much larger than those used for secular dancing events (see Figures 10 and 11), and the sound of religious rattles, *tseñatsil* or *sistrum* (Powne 1968: 15-18). Three consecutive stages are passed: *wereb* which opens the dance with a longer song; *asteregach* denoting the sequence of steps which results in the swaying movement; and *shibsheba* which concludes the sequence with a faster song. As the dance proceeds, the movements become swift and more rapturous:

The drum beats, the jingling of the *tseñatsil* and the sound of the song grow stronger and faster in unison, as does the dancing. Then it reaches the highest level with the priests thrown into a state of ecstasy which helps them communicate with God. When the priests achieve this ecstatic moment, they raise their prayer sticks with their hand turned upward and look up to the sky. Then the dancing stops suddenly and is concluded. (EPLF (Research Branch) 1982b).

This form of worship derives from a literal interpretation of II Samuel 6.5 in the Old Testament, where David and the Israelites are described as ‘dancing and singing with all their might to honour the Lord. They were playing harps, lyres, drums, rattles and cymbals’ (cf. Buxton 1970: 32). God can only be approached through the intercession of the church, much as the royalty could only be reached through the mediation of those higher in rank in the feudal order. Though officially separated from the Ethiopian Church in 1993, the Eritrean Orthodox Church has continued to subscribe to these worship forms, and still sends priests and *debteras* (musicians and teachers) to Gondar in northern Ethiopia for training. It thus constitutes a most formidable and formative power in the highlands of Eritrea. Given the inherent theatricality of the Orthodox Church, it is not surprising that a great deal of early modern educational theatre has emerged from a Christian context, primarily in the form of morality plays. Unlike the innovative agit-prop of the liberation fronts, however, church drama has always reinforced the existing order and rarely had innovative potential. There is something intriguingly paradoxical about the lavishness of Orthodox Christian display. Pageants featuring regal costumes, multicoloured umbrellas, and large icons, contrast starkly with the pious and frugal life expected of its followers. The



Fig. 10 *A kettle drum for religious music and dancing.*



Fig. 11 *The priests are getting ready to dance, 1999.*

outward grandeur does not correspond to grandness in spirit; rather, it is a pantomime of affluence, power, and pomp.⁵⁵



Fig. 12 *Orthodox priests during a major religious celebration, 1999. Note the Eritrean flag in the background.*

Today, the clergy are still a formidable force to reckon with in the community. EPLF documents suggest that they also control the expressive range of village performances and have power over the performance space. *Aba Ezray*, a common celebration for young people in the southern highlands, usually around April or mid-November, is one such example. Though there is no apparent religious aspect to the event, the church nonetheless plays a major part in its presentation. A few days before *Aba Ezray* takes place, girls start singing and dancing in the village in order to collect food and money from the community. Then they circumambulate the church three times, continuing their dancing and singing. Afterwards they leave the village for a whole day of merrymaking in the fields, with the boys partaking in the evening. When darkness falls they too circle the church shouting ‘Hoye’ three times, a joyful expression for men. Finally, they join the girls for a joint dancing party, after which the festivities end.⁵⁶ Space, it appears, is important in this celebration. There is the authoritative space of the church, which has to be circled in what is clearly an attitude of reverence, if not a plea for approval. The actual *Aba Ezray*, then, is held outside the village

⁵⁵ Plastow (1989: 14-15), Powne (1968: 84-87, 113-114), Killion (1998: 330-333), Arnold (1971: 142-143).

⁵⁶ EPLF (Research Branch) (14 October 1995), M. Zerai (2001: 12).

boundaries, away from the domain of social control, yet anchored there by the previous circling of the church arena.

On the subject of space, it is important to note that worship areas of the Orthodox Church are intricately gradated according to a gender and power hierarchy which accords women of reproductive age the lowest place in the pecking order. In the centre of the church, which is traditionally round, is the cube-shaped sanctuary with the altar. The sanctuary is enclosed by two circular concentric walls (Lagopoulos & Stylianoudi 2001: 83) and is only accessible to the clergy. Very young and old women are allowed into the outer parts of the building, as are men regardless of age, provided they have not engaged in sex the night before or are otherwise 'impure'. Women of birth-giving age often attend mass in the church compound, while menstruating women have to gather outside the compound gates, together with anyone who had sexual intercourse the night before or is otherwise considered 'unclean'.⁵⁷ This marks and makes visible affairs which are usually very private in Eritrea. With regard to menstruation, it also reinforces negative feelings concerning women's reproductive abilities. (Another paradox if we consider the importance of children but the taboo surrounding the sexual act.) In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas speaks of 'pollution beliefs' which are 'used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order'.⁵⁸ She suggests that notions of sexual dangers should be read 'as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system' (Douglas 1970: 4). If we apply this idea to the context of Eritrea, we are back to the powerful space of the church and to women's low social standing, inscribed onto their bodies and additionally marked in space.

Unsurprisingly, then, when an attempt was made to mount a Forum theatre on family planning (of all issues) outside the church walls in Sala'a Daro, the highland village where an ECBTP workshop in 1997 took place, it was immediately 'aborted' by the local clergy. No 'spect-actor' from the audience dared to come forward to enact his or her own ideas. Ali Campbell, the Scottish facilitator, writes that the following day

⁵⁷ Personal conversation with Jane Plastow. Pankhurst, writing about the Middle Ages, notes that this prohibition even included female animals. Richard Pankhurst (1992: 71).

⁵⁸ Douglas (1970: 3). Cf. with the pollution ideas mentioned earlier under the 'Traditional Position of Women', such as the belief that menstruating women are detrimental to the livestock.

[t]he priestly wisdom [was] out that there was no rain last night because the theatre workshop took place too close to the walls of the church. Again: we should have known! People even kiss the walls and gate when they walk past, and the whole place feels different to anywhere else in the spacious, gregarious village. (Campbell 1997).

Later, the priests interfered in the community promenade play featuring children who – courtesy of bin-liners, toothpaste, and twigs – impersonated the past and present ‘d/evils’ of Sala’a Daro. (Thanks to the intervention of the government appointed village headman, the show came to a halt only briefly and was allowed to continue after it had been pointed out that this was an officially approved performance.) However, there was also a moment when spatial (and general) power configurations were reversed. The priests, who had been invited to open the play, missed their cue and only emerged when the performance was already on its way. They thus inadvertently staged a counter-promenade in the opposite direction to the play. There was a moment of great confusion in the audience and among the priests as to whom to follow, actors or clergy, which was finally decided in favour of the village theatre when everyone followed the play.



Fig. 13 *The community promenade play in Sala'a Daro, August 1997:
The priests and the audience moving in opposite directions.*

Considering that women and priests are usually found on the opposite ends of the social power scale, it was significant that the next scene featured the women's performance. As Campbell recalls:

I vaguely recall telling one very earnest woman that what we had just seen was an unwitting subversion of patriarchal dominance by inclusive, womanly, non-violent means, but who am I to say, really? [...] All I know is that, then as now, I was more concerned that they [the women] wouldn't be punished after we had left. I doubt very much that they were, as all they actually did or said or sang was absolutely appropriate to September, to the rainy season and to harvest. These are traditional womanly things, and nowhere in their content was a line altered, a gesture exaggerated or a meaning appropriated (the other use of That Word) to an agenda other than the traditional. It was the form which the performance took and the fact that people voted with their feet and saw something unforgettable in an unofficial, even invisible place – rather than the segregated, prejudiced arena by the Church – that was radical. (Campbell 1997).

Earlier on, Campbell described alternative women's spaces, such as the chapel on one of the hills, to which women from all over Eritrea go on pilgrimage in order to pray for children. Only here, entirely segregated from men, did they lose their shyness and inhibitions and came out with an amazing plethora of women's stories and women's songs. One extremely influential factor in the community play was the fact that women and men also dropped their customarily measured walk and actually *ran* between the scenes to catch the best view of the following. Not only did this demonstrate their enthusiasm, it also told of a widening of performance space and of the broadening of people's, especially women's, physical range, which is customarily restrained.

Still, in the public arena of the village domain women would only participate in the community theatre by singing church hymns praising the Virgin Mary, not by any secular performative means, as seen, for example, in the case of the group of young men from the village. (Interestingly, the women's tale of Sala'a Daro's origin – the various versions of which formed the plot of the play – was about the appearance of an angel, while the men's story spoke of shady oaks and the good water supply which led to human settlement in this area.) The figure of the Virgin Mary is deeply revered by Orthodox (as well as Roman Catholic) Christians and serves as one of the few traditional role models for women. However, she also reinforces a discourse on Woman akin to traditional structures outlined above: an unblemished, asexual mother who is nurturing and obedient.

Orature

Orature is arguably the most prevalent performance form in Eritrea. The experience of the ECBTP in Sala'a Daro and Keren has revealed that it is an intrinsic part of people's lives, and that it comes in many guises, from proverb to prose narrative to praise song. Most genres are 'used as a means of upholding traditions [...], to narrate heroic achievements and to describe the genealogy of a certain family. They are also employed to teach and propagate Islamic [and other religious] beliefs' (EPLF (Research Branch) 1981a).

While orature is usually understood as the spoken (and possibly recorded) word, I would rather look at it in terms of the interconnection between language, written literature and performance. Some religious poetry, such as hymns for example, was set down in Ge'ez, Tigre or Tigrinya; due to widespread illiteracy, however, these texts have remained largely oral in character, meant to be sung, recited and heard. Recorded orature is valuable for content analysis and critical reading; however, it 'fixes' an oral text which is intrinsically improvisational in nature. Emphasis on performance skills reviews orature more holistically in its ephemeral context – the declamation, storytelling, or singing moment – and considers the audience-artist relationship. It also allows for an investigation into the position, including the gender dimension, of the performer. Voice, body, and space can be read in their literal dimension, not only figuratively. As Wanjiku Kabira has pointed out: 'We have emphasized collections, the traditional role of oral literature, and the need to preserve materials rather than the promotion and nurturing [and, I would add, the study] of the artists themselves' (Kabira 1992: 52).

Ruth Finnegan, in an early survey of oral African literature, lists over a dozen categories of orature, some of which have already been documented in Eritrea: proverbs, riddles (in Tigre, wonderfully, *kemshmatena*), and narrative prose, praise-songs, dirges, lullabies, religious and political poetry, including war songs (Finnegan 1977: xii-xv). In the following, I will investigate selected examples of these forms with reference to the representation of women. How far do they correspond to the social discourses mapped out above, and how far do they envision alternatives? Have they been appropriated for other, perhaps national, issues or contexts? I will also examine the role and status of the (female) performer.

Proverbs

In the late 1950s, following the success of his now classic novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe immortalised the Igbo saying ‘proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ (Achebe 1986: 5) for an international reading audience. The Afar of Eritrea have a similar adage which states that ‘proverbs are the cream of language’.⁵⁹ Proverbs are part of the daily idiom in Eritrea, and are widely used for public rhetoric; they have also achieved new poignancy among diaspora Eritreans as part of their on-going identity construction (Arbeiterwohlfahrt 1989: 9). Though the quoting of proverbs is not a discrete theatrical activity, such as singing or storytelling, it is nonetheless superior to ordinary speech and gives prestige to the speaker’s utterance by underlining their message. Proverbs tersely express what are considered to be communal truths, either literally or metaphorically. ‘[I]t’s easier to get a new wife than to replace a goat’, or ‘Die Frau ist eine Hyäne [Woman is a hyena]’ are two such examples.⁶⁰ In the framework of this paper, they are significant for their image-building capacity, feeding customary, and mostly repressive, discourses on women. Wherever possible, I have tried to interweave sayings which underline regulations or attitudes towards women in the sections above. Most proverbs are expressive of their low social standing, such as the Afar saying ‘A woman knows her own husband but not his master’ (Schipper 1991: 86). I have yet to find a proverb which confers a positive outlook on women, if only to praise the revered position of a mother. It is noteworthy that many sayings invoke the animal world as tropes – such as donkeys, goats, or hyenas – either to compare women unfavourably with harmful creatures, or to indicate that their place is below the livestock necessary for man’s livelihood. Proverbs on FGM often refer to issues of land or human habitation, which are customarily under male ownership. The comparison leaves no doubt about who owns and controls female sexuality. Recent research carried out in Kenya and Ethiopia has proved that ancient sexist myths and sayings have often remained in force and that they continue to shape men’s opinions of women – as, I would argue, women’s perceptions of women

⁵⁹ Schipper (1991: 1). Similar sayings exist among the Ethiopian Amhara: ‘A speech without a proverb is food without salt’ (Schipper 1991: 1). ‘[T]äg bä-berle, näger bä-messale’ means honey wine is drunk from the *berle* (a round vessel with an elongated neck), and proverbs are part of the speech; ‘mäzmur bä-hale, näger bä-messale’, translates as ‘much as a hallelujah accompanies the psalm, so does a proverb accompany speech’ (Desmarets 1973: 45). For Achebe see Lindfors (1972: 3).

⁶⁰ N. Cowan (1983: 147), Munzinger (1859: 60). For a general introduction to proverbs see Finnegan (1977: 389ff).

themselves.⁶¹ Yet there is always the prospect of transformation. In a 1988 interview with a female section leader of a heavy artillery squad of the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA), the military wing of the EPLF, the Austrian researcher Claudia Schamanek was told: 'There is a traditional saying that a girl cannot lead, but in our organization women are leading and I am proud to see such a change' (Schamanek 1998: 175). An investigation into the modifications of proverbs since the liberation struggle or their modified use would certainly make an interesting reading.

Prose Narratives

In 1997 the ECBTP research team discovered that many Tigre proverbs derive their content from folktales, and that 'their meaning depends on a knowledge of these' (Finnegan 1977: 423). We were quite bewildered at first that the majority of informants were only able to recount a story on quoting a proverb. An EPLF study from the 1980s however confirms that Tigre stories 'always end with a proverb' (EPLF (Research Branch) 1984a). Comparable observations have been made for Tigrinya lore. Most narratives were anthropomorphic animal tales (called *hakakito* in Tigre); second in number were stories about human beings (called *digm*). None of the stories we heard in 1997 contained supernatural elements, though there are some examples from around the turn of the century. (Significantly, they were parables about she-demons.) Other tales were creation myths, about either a family's genealogy or the origin of a place. All of them were more or less didactic in nature.⁶²

Without a larger body of stories, it is not feasible to undertake a typology of prose narratives, nor does it seem desirable for my purpose, as it would overly emphasise the textual, not the performative element of orature. What, then, is the relationship between teller and listeners, between audience and performer? Where and when is the story-telling 'staged' and how does the setting contribute to the overall performance? Most informants said they were told stories as children, though this does not seem to have been common among the Mensa Tigre. One EPLF source declares that Protestant Tigre (all of them Mensa) do not tell their children stories as they are only interested in pious songs and other religious activities. Neither does story-telling seem common among Muslims in this area.

⁶¹ Kabira (1994: 78), Presbey (1999: 174).

⁶² EPLF (Research Branch) (1981a), Littmann (1910: 318-320). For other collections see Arbeiterwohlfahrt (1989), Griffiths (1995), and Beaton (1947: 146-150).

Other informants mentioned story-telling sessions during the meeting of elders, which again indicates the educative character of most tales. One striking feature is an apparent gender divide, for various interviewees referred to stories related only by women. As our informants were exclusively male, none was able to recount their narratives.⁶³ The theatre project in Sala'a Daro however confirmed this schism, with the women telling a different legend of the village's origin than the men. They also told stories in different spaces. Campbell writes of quiet, nightly meetings of the village women, which only the female theatre trainees were allowed to attend, where tale after tale was told in an outpouring of the imagination. Around the fertility chapel on top of the hill, he was finally allowed to join in, amazed by the uncommonly carefree and unrestrained behaviour of the women.

A great crowd in fluttering white robes, laughing in the breezy sunshine, calling to us to join them as they listen to a favourite storyteller singing and miming and dancing her way through a crowded epic with as many character changes as Joyce Grenfell on a good day. No shyness or vanishing tricks here! (Campbell 1997).

I now look at two stories which suggest a deviation from normative notions of woman and nationhood, in stark contrast the proverbs discussed above. These texts suggest early narrative counter-discourses to common gender conceptions; the first example moreover refutes notions of Amhara supremacy. Both stories are based on a semiotics of corporeal representations, with meaning mapped onto the bodies of female characters. It is noteworthy that they write/tell/perform themselves out of the dominant narrative, alluding to a subversion of the established order long before the onset of the liberation struggle.

The Sheba Legend Retold

In a paper presented at a 1997 African Studies Conference in Leeds the EPLF intellectual and playwright, Alemseged Tesfai, claimed that with the beginning of clandestine EPLF radio stations and printed media in the late 1970s, Eritreans were 'liberated from such tales as "Solomon and Sheba" and the "Solomonic Dynasty" that [they] had been forced to swallow since the 1940s' (A. Tesfai 1997: 16). Historical evidence however suggests that Solomon and Sheba had long before been incorporated into Eritrean lore, and that it was done in a rather critical

⁶³ Due to the nature of our research in 1997, we had to approach informants mostly through local authorities which arranged the interviews. Not once were we given the opportunity to talk to women. EPLF (Research Branch) (1984a). ECBTP 97/1.

manner. There is a Tigre version from around the turn of the century by the Tigre-speaking Muslim Beit-Juk which appropriates the Christian Amhara tale to articulate its own social and cultural identity.⁶⁴ Several new features can be found in the text. Firstly, the tale is distinctly Tigre, for the Sheba/Makeda character has been supplanted by a 'Tigre girl named Etiye-Azeb' (Littmann 1904: 3). Secondly, it is suffused with magical elements reminiscent of the clandestine healing and exorcism cult, the *zar* – to be discussed later in the chapter – which suggests that older Tigre lore has been incorporated into the story. Other elements of (Muslim) Tigre cultural practices are female cross-dressing and an allusion to polygamy.⁶⁵

Etiye-Azeb is to be sacrificed to the dragon her people worship, but is miraculously saved by seven saints. When they kill the beast, a drop of blood falls on her foot which turns into an 'ass's heel' (Littmann 1904: 5). Seeing that the dragon has been slain, the people make Etiye-Azeb into their chief, whereupon she appoints 'a girl like herself [her] [*sic*] minister' (5). To find cure for her donkey's hoof, the two women visit King Solomon of Israel, as he is believed to have great healing powers. Both don male clothes and hairstyles for camouflage, but are discovered by the king by their modesty in eating and drinking. On detection, he impregnates them both. The women return to their home, raise their fatherless children – usually a great stigma among Tigre-speakers – and rule the land. The rest of the story follows a similar pattern to that the *Kebra Nagast*, with the two sons returning to Solomon, and the 'true' son, offspring of Etiye-Azeb, eventually taking away the 'ark of Mary' (11).

The story is an intricate palimpsest of previous narratives which incorporates multi-tiered inscriptions of power relations. While Littmann elaborates on elements of other traditional lore, I would like to look briefly at aspects of women's representation and nationhood. By changing the ethnic identity of the female protagonist, the narrator resists earlier cultural claims of Amhara supremacy and appropriates their discourse to interpolate – and modify – his own cultural experience. Women never had such high standing in Tigre-

⁶⁴ Littmann received the story in 1902 from the Swedish missionary Sundström and published it two years later in a bilingual Tigre/English edition. No information is given about when it was recorded, though it is known that the story was told by a male informant who had originally heard it in Axum. Littmann (1904: x-xi). Further references to this source are given after quotations in the text.

⁶⁵ Plastow, recounting an English version of the *Kebra Nagast*, also mentions the impregnation of Sheba's handmaid by Solomon. It is featured neither in the German, nor in the English translation I have consulted. As with all oral literature, there is no truly 'original' story. Plastow (1989: 10).

speaking societies (whereas the aristocratic Amhara are recognised for their female leaders), nor were there democratic elections of chiefs. Etiye-Azeb as embodiment of (Tigre) nation/ality is seen as authoritative, as woman and sexual being she is not. In the *Kebrā Nagast*, Sheba renounces female leadership for Ethiopia, passing it on to Solomon's patrilineal line and thereby creating the Amhara dynasty.⁶⁶ Etiye-Azeb – in her dimension as national trope – does not relinquish her power as woman leader. Like Sheba, however, she and her minister are tricked into sleeping with Solomon in their function as ordinary women. As Boehmer has pithily pointed out, 'the woman – and usually the mother – figure stands for the national territory and for national values: symbolically she is ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below them' (Boehmer 1992: 233).

In this drama the element of female-to-male cross-dressing is interesting. Despite Etiye-Azeb's political power, she and her minister choose male disguise, evidently because it signifies higher authority and social standing. Yet their modesty – the failure to cross-act rather than cross-dress⁶⁷ – eventually betrays them as mere females. Later on, we will see that the idea of 'dressing up' to a superior (here: the masculine) rather than 'dressing down' to the inferior (feminine) position emerges quite regularly in the Eritrean performing arts.⁶⁸ Female-to-male cross-dressing or cross-impersonation seems to have a long history in Eritrea, at least among Tigre and Tigrinya nationalities. There are a number of dances and community celebrations in which it is an inherent feature. (Notably, male cross-dressing has no part in Eritrean cultural practises. It was only resorted to in extraordinary circumstances, such as camouflage for retreating fighters.) Not chronicled in the *Kebrā Nagast*, female cross-dressing can be read as an expression of Tigre cultural identity and as an act of symbolic resistance to the Christian Amhara epic. With its strong Jewish/Hebraic roots, the Ethiopian Church reveres the Old Testament which in Deuteronomy 22.5 categorically

⁶⁶ 'At the time there was a law in the country of Ethiopia that only a woman should reign, and that she must be a virgin who has never known a man, but the Queen had said unto Solomon: "Henceforward a man who is of thy seed shall reign, and a woman shall nevermore reign in Ethiopia [...]"' (*Kebrā Nagast* 1996: 35); see also *Kebrā Nagast* (1996: 121).

⁶⁷ I wish to thank Chris Hurst for pointing out this difference to me.

⁶⁸ I have borrowed the idea of dressing up/dressing down from Tompkins (1998: 185-194). It should be noted that Tompkins and others have pointed out that cross-dressing as a phenomenon cannot, and should not, be reduced to a reading of gender. Tompkins, for example, sees cross-dressing as a strategy 'to undermine imperialist assumptions about political and social location associated with the wearing of particular kinds of clothing' (Tompkins 1998: 186). In the context of this thesis, however, gender remains the main focus of analysis. Cf. Cole (2001: 129), Garber (1997: 16-17).

states: 'Women are not to wear men's clothing, and men are not to wear women's clothing; the Lord your God hates people who do such things'.⁶⁹

What, however, does cross-dressing signify for the woman who dons male clothes? Does garbing oneself in the cloak of authority translate into similar powers? Jean E. Howard, writing about cross-dressing in early modern English drama, points out that

female cross-dressing on the stage is not a strong site of resistance to the period's patriarchal sex-gender system. Ironically, rather than blurring gender difference or challenging male domination and exploitation of women, female cross-dressing often strengthens notions of difference by stressing what the disguised woman *cannot* do, or by stressing those feelings held to constitute a 'true' female subjectivity. (Howard 1993: 41).

The material collated for this thesis certainly suggests similarities with Eritrean context, both in orature and in performance. Etiye-Azeb might rule and wear male garments; yet she cannot match Solomon's cunning and powers. Only her son is a match for his father, as proved by his taking the Ark of Mary. (Interestingly, the Ark of Mary is a symbol of female authority as opposed to the Ark of Covenant in the *Kebra Nagast*.) Equivalent observations can be made in some Tigre dances to be discussed below where women carry symbols of male authority – such as cloaks, staffs or swords – without being imbued with manly powers. During the Christian Orthodox holy day of *Maryam Gunbot* Tigrinya women stage a procession in honour of the Virgin Mary, carrying male sticks and imitating male occupations, such as ploughing and sowing seeds, only to revert to their traditional gender roles.⁷⁰ Examples of male-to-female cross-dressing are less frequent and have often carried negative ('dressing down') implications. When in the 1940s, men took over female roles in modern urban drama for lack of acting women, some contemporaries snidely viewed them as '*sebetay*' (womanish) and

⁶⁹ Littmann (1904: 33), Isichei (1995: 49).

⁷⁰ Kemink (1991: 161), I 94. Mesgun Zerai writes that Maryam Gunbot 'is celebrated on the first of May to commemorate the birth of the Virgin and to herald the ploughing season. On this holiday neighbourhood women prepare salt-free boiled legume and mixing some herbal seeds in it they go about scattering the mixture. On this occasion an elderly women [*sic*] wearing a hat and holding a whip simulates ploughing with oxen and the rest of the women follow her supplicating the Virgin. Passers-by, especially men and children, are fascinated by the way their wives and mothers take the male role once in their time annually. Women, excited by their own act and responses of the audience, seem to enjoy the more [*sic*] than the other people do' (M. Zerai 2001: 12).

effeminate.⁷¹ While female performers are apparently not affected by masculine roles, it seems that feminine attributes will rub off on the men.

All these examples indicate that dress codes are a semiotic system in Eritrea whose significations need further investigation. We can already see how the status of EPFL women started to change once they had cast off female garments and jewellery for male military clothes and cropped their hair. It certainly furthered women's emancipation, but did not translate into total equality. Developments during the liberation struggle, however, are discussed in a later chapter.

A Hedareb Tale

The second narrative is not of an overt political nature, but is quite surprising when looked at in terms of gender hierarchies. For it tells of a woman who defies the norm and chooses her own husband. The story also forms a link to other performance forms, especially music and mime. Boundaries between story-telling, music, song, dance, and theatrical enactment are very fluid in Eritrea and performative genres frequently blur. Poetry is sung, songs are danced, and dances can tell a story. Different performance modes are therefore best seen as related elements of a larger body, rather than as separate forms of art. The following story was told to me in 1997 by the Artistic Director of *Sbrit*, Kahasai Gebrehiwot, while interviewing him about traditional performance forms of Tigre-speakers. It is known among the Hedareb and the Beni-Amir in Gash-Barka, having originated among the Hedareb who call this narrative form *k'lmowas*. The tale has long been part of *Sbrit's* repertoire in the form of a 'musical drama', i.e. it is mimed to the sound of the local lyre, known as *krar*.⁷² A number of stories exist in relation to the *krar*, telling of its ability to transmit messages non-verbally through three major types of tones, *shenber*, *bessay* and *bebarway*. These tones correspond to set experiences, such as animal movements, or to abstract notions, such as love (I. Tseggai 8 April 1995: 7). This has been utilised by *Sbrit*, which tells the story through *krar* play, but enacts it to give a more theatrical dimension.

⁷¹ See Chapter 2.

⁷² The *krar* is a 5- or 6-string lyre-like instrument with a sound box that is held under one armpit of the player while the opposite hand is free to pluck the strings. Among Tigre-speakers, it is also known as *mesenko* or under its Arabic name, *rhebaba*; Hedareb people call it *wenrob* in Beja. Isayas Tseggai also recounts the following story, though I will follow Kahasai's version. I. Tseggai (8 April 1995: 7). For a picture of the *krar* see Figure 23.

A young woman sees her lover in an assembly of elders. Because she wants to meet him that night, but is unable to talk to him in the presence of others, she brings out her [*krar*] and begins to play. In her tune she asks him to meet her by the termite hill later that evening. The lover, however, is unable to decipher the meaning. Instead, a young boy hears the message and goes to the stipulated place, where he falls asleep. When the woman arrives she is surprised to find a sleeping boy instead of her lover. She wakes him up and asks what he is doing here at this ungodly hour. The boy tells her that he has understood her message and that he has come to meet her. Impressed by his sharpness, the girl informs her father that she will marry no one but this child. The father, obviously astonished, points out that this boy is much younger than her and that by the time he will have come of age she will be past her prime. The daughter remains undeterred and replies that she will marry the person who understands her and this person is obviously the child. True to her word, she waits for the boy, and gets married to him when he reaches adulthood. (ECBTP 97/6).

What is striking about the narrative is the female protagonist who behaves so unlike customary expectations. Not only does she try to convey secret messages to her lover – which is certainly done, but rarely admitted in public – she also defies her father's advice and marries the person she considers most suitable for herself. She thus demonstrates a high degree of self-determination and agency. This goes well with the image of the 'new' woman proposed by the EPLF – hence the story's popularity with the National Cultural Folklore Troupe, *Sbrit* – but clashes starkly with traditional gender patterns. Also overturned are notions of accepted age gaps between women and men. While it is perfectly legitimate for an elder to marry a girl of the age of his granddaughter, a woman cannot be older than her husband-to-be. Not only can this be attributed to the temporal limits of women's childbearing capacities, but also to the fact that age embodies authority. Since I do not know when the story was created and whether it was predominately told by female or male performers, the reversal of gender and power hierarchies cannot be read entirely as a female 'rewriting/retelling' of accepted norms. It does however point to the fact that even in traditional lore, women did not necessarily have to be less powerful than men. Here we have a story which offers a positive role-model to women from a context other than that of fighter culture and the liberation war.

Songs

The final area of orature I wish to look at is the wider body of songs and performance poetry. Songs and music have by far been the most influential

performing art forms in Eritrea, not only as a main component of long-established cultural expressions, but also as a core element of the modern urban and the fighter performing arts. Here, I would like to look at two broad categories: firstly, genres which are determined by their content, such as praise-songs and dirges; and, secondly, those which are less determined by subject matter, but by performative patterns, on the threshold of song and dance. I first investigate the role of the performer, before looking at selected song texts and performance genres.

Performers and their Roles

Mensa customary law and other studies confirm that there has always been a class of secular professional artists, similar to the Amhara *azmari*, which in Tigrinya are known as *hamien* (for singers) or *wat'a* (for musicians) (cf. Kimberlin 2000: 244). *Azmaris* and *wat'as* lauded their clients for remuneration, commonly – as their name suggests – to the sound of the *shira-wata*, a local one-string violin, the women using the *krar*.



Fig. 14 *A group of musicians with their shira-watas, Asmara, 1999.*

The profession was non-hereditary, but often ran in families. While most were initially itinerants, patronage became more established with the strengthening of feudalism and the aristocracy. Mensa customary law, for example, stipulated exactly how much of what a travelling singer should be given for which service, and how to acquire patronage. In Ethiopian and Eritrean highland societies, in which entertainment was either seen as sinful or as part of the worship practices of the church, *azmaris* and *wat'as* were generally looked down upon as a caste, even

if admired for their artistry. Their mastery of language was especially appreciated, which was often more important than their musical talent. Most *wat'as* had the ability to improvise pungent, critical verse, often with intricate double meanings similar to the religious *qene*,⁷³ which was a highly appreciated form of entertainment. The public's rather ambivalent stance towards the artists, which vacillated between condemnation and admiration, is noteworthy: 'The bards were despised because they moved from village to village as if on a serious mission. But, in some Tigre communities, the above mentioned professions were and are still respected'.⁷⁴

Richard Pankhurst, writing about the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands, states that among the travelling minstrels there were 'a fair number of women, some of whom acquired considerable reputation for their versification and their wit' (1992: 261). These *hamien* had discovered their talent mostly during village celebrations; none of them had any formal training.⁷⁵ Pankhurst notes a celebrated Ethiopian singer of Tigrayan parentage who 'attended all mourning ceremonies at Adwa "for no other purpose than to distinguish herself". Many "great men" were said to have asked for her hand in marriage, but she could never be persuaded to accept any of their proposals' (262). Except for the modern day *Ade* (Mother) Zeinab, who played a significant role as national symbol during the struggle, I have yet to find a traditional Eritrean woman singer or performance poet of equal fame.⁷⁶ Most women never became celebrities but were considered licentious and 'cheap', their profession equated with low-class prostitution. It is by no means surprising that similar attitudes to female performers have prevailed, even if some contemporary women singers enjoy considerable fame. This might be partly attributed to the social developments of the liberation struggle, but also to an increasing 'globalisation' of urban areas, including the cult of pop stars.

⁷³ *Qene* is the highest form of Amhara poetry, characterised by two semantic layers: the literal definition of a word, 'wax', as opposed to 'gold', its covert, metaphorical signification. Levine (1965: 5).

⁷⁴ EPFL (Research Branch) (9 January 1999: 7). On patronage see *Das Feteḥ Mahari* (1951: 64-65). Ashenafi Kebede writes that *azmaris* had often trained in church schools, before dropping out, which made most of them anti-clerical. A. Kebede (1971: 172), cf. Plastow (1989: 33-37).

⁷⁵ Wilson (1991: 202), A. Kebede (1971: 172). Note also the literary treatment of a female *azmari* in Tsegaye Gabre Medhin's play, *Azmari*. T. Gabre Medhin (1965: 229-239).

⁷⁶ While working in the RDC in 2000, various local researchers referred to a song by Mamet, a historical woman figure who was said to have been a famous singer. Checking the references, it turned out that the song was about, not by, Mamet whose beauty and seductiveness was praised in the highest tones, similar to the figure of Wuba discussed below. Mamet was a famous courtesan, born in Calai Baaltet, a village in the south-west of the district of Egghela Hatzin (Akele Guzai), who had followed King Tewodros' military camps like a soldier. Conti Rossini notes that he omitted the most 'explicit' and 'shameless' passages of the poem. Conti Rossini (1904/5: 367), cf. G. Negash (1999: 98).

It is important to look at the spaces these women singers have occupied, both in the past and in present-day Eritrea. Chitauro et al., writing about the Zimbabwean context, note that female singers are seen as 'loose', because they move in an 'unmarked territory' (Chitauro et al. 1994: 111) which is beyond the boundaries of male control contained by labels such as 'wife' and 'daughter'. They are also 'perceived as "dangerous" in that they might influence other women to follow their lifestyle, as they [are] often single or divorced' (118). Performance space can be potentially liberating from traditional gender roles, as was the space of fighter territory, when the women joined the liberation movements.⁷⁷ The notion of 'danger' is also linked to the artists' ability to 're-vision' (118) culture and social reality. '[T]hrough their expressive art they could both reshape and control in a way that was otherwise not possible' (118). I have little evidence that a particularly 'female' re-imagining has taken place in Eritrea. With a few remarkable exceptions, song- and play-writing, directing and choreography have been held conspicuously in male hands, even if consciously drawing attention to women's rights. Though texts by men can no doubt be potentially liberating for women, it seems indicative of women's self-articulation whether they compose their own texts, including performance texts, or not, and to what extent they 're-vision' their social spaces, retain, reject or reform customary patterns, including the party line. (It should be noted that I am thinking of women's multi-vocality, not a singular hegemonic point of view.) In early 1999, the former EPLF singer Alganesh Yemane, better known under her fighter name 'Industry', mentioned to me that none of the songs she ever performed had been written by her, or any other woman for that matter. She sang whatever the (male) artistic directors of the various cultural troupes gave to her. Several informants put this down to the fact that women have always had less access to formal education. The figure of *Ade Zeinab*, however, an illiterate rural nomad who received basic education in the liberation movement, contradicts this argument and betrays it as patronising. Women (and men) have always composed songs or poetry for various occasions without being able to read and write. (Indeed, in early 2000 *Ade Zeinab* insisted that girls going to school should attend to their education, not their poetic

⁷⁷ There is, for example, evidence that many women joined the EPFL to escape unwanted arranged marriages. Yet, women's liberation should not be equated with the complete rejection of motherhood and matrimony. After years of obligatory celibacy the EPLF introduced modified marriage laws in the late 1970s based on the equality of both partners. Given the rigid set-up of traditional family structures, however, it is not surprising that the Tigrayan singer above rejected all marriage proposals.

inspiration, for ‘they cannot do both, poetry and schooling’ (I 24)). The reason why women singers are few in number is more likely a matter of repressive social structures and lack of self-confidence rather than lack of schooling.⁷⁸ Most artists have also kept to established genre patterns, some examples of which I will give below. *Ade Zeinab*, for instance, did not go beyond ideological mobilisation during the struggle – in the tradition of the war song – to envision alternative spaces for women outside the confines of revolutionary tenets, as will be discussed in a later chapter. A UK-based Eritrean artist indicated in 1999 that, with the new military crisis on everybody’s mind, people were no longer interested in former heroines or women’s rights (I 98/6).

Selected Song Texts and their Readings

The majority of women have always sung as amateur performers. Most women (and men) start very young, as a kind of game with their friends, having been exposed to their mother’s songs from their early infant stage. Whenever I returned to Eritrea, and wherever I stayed, I always came across groups of singing and drumming children, usually gender-segregated, who made up songs about passers-by in the hope of extracting a few coins. (Walking back home with one of the local researchers, Tesfazghi Ukubazghi, one afternoon in Keren in 1997, he drew my attention to girls singing in the nearby compound. They were apparently praising my dress – a simple, bright-red cotton print with large, daisy-like flowers – in the highest tones. Upon which it was jokingly nicknamed ‘queen of heaven’ dress by my colleagues.)

One of the few recorded genres of song in Eritrea are Tigrinya lullabies in which mothers sing praise of their children. It is to this singing during breast-feeding time that the well-known writer and musician, *memher* (teacher) Asres Tessema, has attributed the seed of creativity to women (I 127). Many songs are expressive of the life cycle in Eritrea, rejoicing at birth and marriage, or mourning death. In line with social expectations, lullabies for girls focus on their beauty and

⁷⁸ Schamanek writes: ‘Das Argument der mangelnden Bildung der Frauen wird oftmals als Rechtfertigung und Erklärung angeführt, warum gerade in den entscheidenden Führungspositionen der Frauenanteil ein marginaler ist. Ich halte das Argument der mangelnden beruflichen Ausbildung von Frauen für eine Verschleierung der (*gender-*)machtpolitischen Verhältnisse und für eine Hinhaltenaktik, um das Ungleichgewicht der Geschlechterverhältnisse aufrecht zu erhalten bzw. zu zementieren [Often you hear the argument that women are less educated than men when confronted with a merely marginal representation of women in decision-making positions. I consider this argument as an attempt to obscure (gendered) power hierarchies and as stalling tactics to uphold or cement the imbalance between the genders]’ (Schamanek 1998: 180).

prospective marriage, while boys are praised for braveness and strength. If a girl is praised then it is in the sense that her beauty and appropriate female behaviour will be likely to find her a desirable marriage partner – probably in advance of her female age mates.

Even if others make up their eyes with kohl,
will they be as beautiful as you? [...]
While the chickpeas had to be hulled
and the lemons had to turn sour
you got married instantly without an engagement.⁷⁹

You, pillar of our house
And light of our home [...]
Your skin is like velvet
That can be folded into a ball
They will adorn you with gold and silver
Before they take you to wife [*sic*].
(A. Sahle, forthcoming).

Boys, on the other hand, are imagined as strong-willed and powerful, or the joy of their mother in her old age:

When you are brought up and become a man,
I will be lucky.
You will milk the cows for me,
And I will be lucky
To have you look after the cows.
(Tigre song sung by Mussa Salih, August 1997, transl. Mohamed Salih Ismael).

Your herd with horns pointing backward
Drink water facing roaring lions
For they trust you and love you [...]
What can happen to them
When you are around?
(A. Sahle, forthcoming).

Mourning songs are less about than actually sung by women – as is *difn*, the mourning dance, to be discussed later on – bar the death of a bride, a childless woman of birth-giving age, or an exceptionally wealthy woman. Littmann, writing about Tigre-speakers in the late 1940s, has distinguished four different mourning songs: the general wailing, mourning songs during the burial and those in the days to follow, as well as praise-songs by professional bards. Mourning songs after the

⁷⁹ ‘Wenn sie sich [ihre Augen] mit *k'ehli* schminken / werden sie deshalb [so schön] wie Du? / [...] / Während die Kichererbsen erst noch enthülst werden mussten / und die Zitronen noch sauer werden mußten, hat man Dich auf der Stelle ohne Verlobung geheiratet’ (Kemink 1991: 152), translation mine.

funeral were entirely in the hands of female relatives, whereas others could also be sung by professional female mourners. While I cannot verify whether these song patterns still exist – considering that communal mourning of war casualties was conceived as seditious, and thus punishable, under the Ethiopian occupation – funerals are still one of the few occasions when women are allowed ‘to make a spectacle’ of themselves (Littmann 1949: 10-11).

There is a large body of Tigre orature from around the turn of the century, which reveals certain conventions regarding the representation of women in song, many of which are still common. So far, I have been able to identify three major modes. Apart from the ubiquitous greetings to the singer’s beloved which are common to almost any song, the most prevalent theme is the exaltation of female beauty in love songs. Less frequent are praise of the mother, or topics related to death. None of the texts considers the daily work sphere of women or other female realms, let alone presents matters from a woman’s perspective. The female figure, it seems, is entirely subjected to the male imagination, as a receptacle for values which might not be her own. At best, she is a desirable object, at worst a target of critique. The ideal conjured up in song, however, does not mimetically translate into reality. (As Phelan puts it for the Euro-American context: ‘If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture’ (Phelan 1996: 10).) While women’s loveliness is complimented in the highest tones, women as human beings receive far less admiration. Text and contextual sub-text are therefore at loggerheads, denoting the contradictory discourses women have to negotiate. Those who actively use their charms to gain wealth and power, such as Wuba, the courtesan, are generally held in contempt.⁸⁰

O Wuba Wuba, you are a heavenly maid
Who can dare at your face to gaze?
Your long strands of hair indeed
Can be made into a rope to hobble a steed
And the rest to wrap around a blade.
Since the good Lord has come down to see you
I have to veil your face, what else can I do?
But if he quarrels with me and does insist. [*sic*]
I have to oblige him, I cannot persist.
O Wuba, you are slender of body and full of grace
Let me sing my heart out in your praise
I love your light skin and your dark eyes

⁸⁰ For further examples see Arbeiterwohlfahrt (1989: 85), Littmann (1913: 92-93, 111-112, 147, 200), A. Sahle (1981: 104).

Your smile uncovers a set of teeth as white as ice
Your plaited hair looks as if covered with bees.
Like a field of durah [a form of millet] threatened by birds
I will guard your beauty with my slingshot and my fists.
(A. Sahle 13 April 1996: 7).

Wuba is adored for her beauty to the extent that the singer is jealously guarding her lest God (or other men) might also find her pleasing. This speaks of men's possessiveness and women's objectification, which are part of the power configurations between the genders. While Wuba utilises her body to enlarge her wealth, influence and social movement, there is a clear attempt at control by the male voice: 'I have to veil your face, what else can I do?'. (Interestingly, this is done by appropriating Islamic means to a Christian context.) Wuba's looks are heavenly enough to attract the deities; yet her social reality can be assumed to be less glamorous. Amanuel Sahle writes that 'faitots [travelling courtesan] never revealed their true identity to anyone for fear of disgracing their families' names' (A. Sahle 13 April 1996: 7). While trying to elude patriarchal authority – in analogy to the 'loose' and 'dangerous' women singers above – by virtue of her profession a courtesan was always under male patronage, and hence trapped in a system she partly managed to challenge.

Love songs in Eritrea seem to contain numerous layers of meanings. While on the one hand they allude to gender power struggles as mentioned above, they also tell about thwarted relationships which, due to forced marriage arrangements, seem all too frequent in Eritrea. One of the highlights of the 1997 field research was the discovery of a story which matched a song we had found earlier on. It told about the tragic love of Omar Wad Bashakir. Omar had become a camelherd in order to be close to the woman he loved, but was refused permission to marry because he was poor. A story, as I soon realised, not too far off from reality for some people. Yet, in all these songs women have remained essentially commodified, the objects of male desire, even if out of reach. Not one tells of women's own wishes and aspirations. These silences need to be read and further examined. In the late 1970s and early '80s, for example, marriage matters started to be openly discussed in the EPLF. This not only resulted in sexual relations and marriages between fighters, which had been prohibited until then, but also in an unprecedentedly egalitarian marriage law which tried to amend women's inferior position in society and take into account aspects of ethnicity, religion, and class. How far were these changes reflected in songs sung and perhaps even composed

by women? There is no doubt that women's issues were pushed forward during the struggle, furthering women's social and artistic participation. Initially, however, this did not so much concern the way women composed or were represented in song, as the way in which old texts were given a new reading.

By the mid-1950s, another layer of meaning was added to the semantics of love songs, or rather, an issue was revived mentioned earlier under prose narratives. The topic of 'romance' began not only to embrace women of flesh and blood, but also the idea of an independent nation. The female beloved turned into a national allegory. Veteran singer Alamin Abdulatif, of Tigre origin, but performing in both Tigre and Tigrinya, notes that

it was not unusual to see songs about romance interpreted as political messages. [...] A musician sings about his beloved, and express[es] his strong desire and describe[s] how he ended up living in suspense. Eritreans clearly knew that by 'beloved' the singer was referring to their country.⁸¹

Popular for his four 'Fatma Zahra' love songs, Alamin admits that the public gave 'Fatma Zahra #2' a political interpretation which had not been his original intent. However, it raised his awareness of the political potential of seemingly innocuous songs as a means of covert cultural resistance.

Fatma Zahra #2

I beg you children of my country,
If you meet her in your way
Give her my greetings
Children of Keren and Asmera
If you meet her at Mayzra
Greet her for me, Fatma Zahra
Greet her for me and greet her again
Beg her and plead with her
Tell her if she listens to you
Tell her he lost his heart and mind
He even tried medicine from home and beyond
She has my medicine and she is my remedy.
Tell her Al'amin is indisposed
And no one knows his sickness and his secret
Witness to that is my longing heart
And witness are my wet eyes
This I what your love has done, Fatma Zahra
If you want to know her looks,
My love is beautiful, in the skin light [sic]
Her forehead glows with light

⁸¹ Anon., *Interview with Alamin Abduletiff*, n.d. The following song text, 'Fatma Zahra #2', is taken from the same interview.

Big round and glowing eyes
 And no make up needs her eyebrows.
 Her neck is long, and white is her [teeth?] [*sic*]
 The hefty hair is a burden on her delicate neck
 And round breasts sit on her chest
 A thin waist that fits into a single hand-grip
 Her legs captivated my heart
 This is Fatma Zahra
 This is how she looks like
 If you see her in your way
 Give her my greetings
 Children of Keren and Asmara
 If you meet her at Mayzara
 Greet her, Fatma Zahra
 Children of Seraye and Mendefera
 If you meet her at Mayzara
 Greet her, Fatma Zahra
 Children of Akele and Ambasoyera
 If you meet her at Mayzara
 Greet her, Fatma Zahra.

For the incipient liberation struggle, songs like 'Fatma Zahra' were a great asset. They kindled nationalistic feelings and mobilised the civilian population in a way not easily decoded by the Ethiopians. Fatma turned into a national trope but, as Alamin points out, she also stood for the liberation fighters: 'I beg you children of my country, / If you meet her in you way / Give her my greetings'. While on the surface the power configurations remained the same – man desiring beautiful woman whose own wishes are not accounted for – a gendered address to the fighters was potentially empowering for women, acknowledging their participation in the struggle for independence. I have not been able to date 'Fatma Zahra #2' exactly, except that it was performed between 1964 ('Fatma Zahra #1') and 1974 ('Fatma Zahra #4'). Most likely it was in the later 1960s before the first female frontline combatants were admitted to both liberation fronts in 1973. Until then, women had worked in the clandestine cells of the ELM, the non-military Eritrean Liberation Movement, and in support units of the armed liberation fronts. There were also a great number of civilian supporters. Boehmer writes that meanings of national tropes are usually organised according to power relations. In the above song women are still 'portrayed as the objects and men the subjects of national aspiration' (Boehmer 1992: 234), thus circumscribing the participation of women in the liberation war. In the social context of Eritrea, however, these readings were a small step forward towards more gender-sensitive attitudes in the national performing arts.

Songs Between Music and Dance

Earlier on I mentioned that songs are fixed not only by their meaning, but also their performative patterns, thus blurring performative genres and highlighting the essential connection between song, music and dance. *Chefera*, for example is an integral part of any Tigre or Bilen dancing event, rendered by a male vocalist at the end of a gathering when the dancers' feet are pleading for mercy. It is like a melodious story-telling session, with the audience replying in call-response. *Kimbob* used to be a song-duel between two male contestants in Gash-Barka, an opportunity to demonstrate their verbal skills. All these forms have been accessible only to men, presumably due to the prominence they give to the performer. A recent description of *golia*, however, evinces a change in gendered performance patterns. As a song-cum-dance, *golia* also forms the link to the final section of this chapter which discusses traditional dances and dance celebrations in the frame of gender.⁸²

Golia originated among the Bilen, but is now widely practised by the Tigre as well. It can be sung and danced any time by the whole village for recreation or during wedding ceremonies, and on public and religious holidays. *Golia* is performed in a circle, facing inwards, with arms and shoulders of the dancers interlocked. Men often carry sticks of about one metre in length and slightly hooked on one side, the hooked end facing upwards. These sticks serve multiple purposes, are walking and herding sticks, weapons, percussion instruments or pointers to name but a few. They are part of the dress code for men, which signifies their authority. Most important elements of *golia* are the songs which can convey any message, from folklore to criticism or the history of Eritrea. The majority of our informants agreed that they are an education in itself. Sung always by a soloist, the lyrics are then taken up by the other dancers in call-response, accompanied by the sound of a *kebero*, the local drum (see Figure 15). Once the chorus answers the vocalist, the dancers begin to jump in unison until out of breath – Bilen characteristically jump in semi-, Tigre in full circles – after which another lead singer takes over. Singers are usually men, but on special occasions gifted women have also been reported as singing.

⁸² Cf. Deborah James who discusses similar appropriations of once exclusively male dance genres in South Africa. D. James (1994: 81-109).



Fig. 15 *Women participants of the ECBTP 1997 playing the kebero.*

The following conversation is an excerpt from one of the workshop sessions in August 1997 which reveals certain changes in gendered dance patterns. This can be partly attributed to the urban/rural divide, which is rather considerable in Eritrea, despite efforts at nation-wide social reforms. The female informant (F) came from the urbanised melting-pot Keren, whereas the male participant (M) lived in the rural areas of Sheeb where traditional gender patterns have remained prevalent.

F: 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.

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

F: 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 is an opportunity to voice her anger.* (Emphasis added; notes Christine Matzke, August 1997).

Golia hence constitutes a performative space where matters, which would otherwise be unacceptable, can be brought to light.

Dances and Dance Celebrations among Tigre- and Bilen-speakers

The construction of meaning – be it in a song, a story or on the dance floor – is ultimately linked with the distribution of power and authority. Ideas, images, and

body practices belong to individuals who 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 ECBTP to depart from the local frame – Gerri Moriarty, 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 impossible for the female workshop participants to join her. In dancing, as in other performing arts, individuals are not only ‘subjects of their own experience’ – their bodies, their feelings, perceptions and spirituality – they are also ‘objects of [...] representation’ (Albright 1997: 13). They stage themselves publicly, are observed and evaluated by others, are judged as ‘women’ and ‘men’ – the female artist too often too negatively as we have already seen. The body becomes a sign which, literally, embodies multiple meanings, expressing social knowledge, power relations, and sexuality. Mapped against social criteria in Eritrea, dances reveal analogous patterns regarding men’s and women’s collective position within an asymmetrical societal hierarchy. Men have a wider range of corporeal articulation at their disposal, though dances also allow women a wider expressiveness than is the norm. Gendered body practices 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.

Three major categories of Tigre and Bilen dances can be distinguished. First, there are the communal dances for both women and men, such as *sisiit*, *golia*, and *serret*, the latter of which is only practised in Gash-Barka, being a Hedareb dance in origin. Second, there are the gender-segregated dances: *wad sommia* and *beredg* for men; and, as a third category, *shellil*, the only set dance piece for women. There are many local varieties of Tigre and Bilen dances which can be partly attributed to the differences among Tigre-speaking groups who are widely dispersed over large parts of Eritrea. Displacement, exile and return also have to be taken into account, on the one hand causing large cleavages in cultural knowledge, on the other adding new elements in terms of theatricality or the context of celebration. *Wad sommia*, for example, has witnessed the emergence of small theatrical interludes in which the loading of a gun or the sharpening of a knife are imitated. (Interestingly, this version was only reported in and around Nakfa, the former headquarters of the EPLF, probably having emerged in the last phases of the liberation struggle.) Tigre-speakers in Sudanese refugee camps, on

the other hand, began to celebrate female circumcision ceremonies on a much larger scale than used to be common, due to the influence of their new neighbours.

Elsewhere, I have described the contexts and choreographies of the various Tigre dances more extensively (Matzke 2000: 73-101); here I will only outline broader patterns while concentrating on gendered body practices in dance. *Sisiit* and *golia* can accommodate large numbers of inexperienced dancers, while *serret* incorporates an acrobatic element – a sinuous movement of the neck and torso – usually demanding four proficient performers. The dancers lean back, face towards the sky, and undulate their chests up and down, in the attempt to imitate the swaying motions of camels.



Fig. 16 *Dancers performing the serret at the Eritrea Festival 1997.*

In comparison, *sisiit* and *golia* are rather unpretentious in their movements. The main formation of *sisiit* is that of an anti-clockwise circle in which the dancers proceed in rhythm with the drum.⁸³ Commonly performed for hours, such is the hypnotic quality of the dance, it emphasizes the collective experience of the community in the dancing. 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. Some men carry sticks during the dance, the hooked end facing upwards, similar to the *golia* described above. With a slight shift of the arm the sticks are raised up and down, thus accentuating the pace of the circular walking movement. The

⁸³ The main musical instrument is the *kebero*, with mainly female drummers in the centre of the dancing circle. Male musicians can also be found, either playing the *fam fam* (a mouth-organ) or using their walking sticks as percussion devices. The *fam fam* is a relatively new instrument in Eritrea and is not produced locally. EPLF (Research Branch) (1981a)

more adroit dancers insert a small sliding step between the regular one, or make some other subtle yet noteworthy foot movement. Interestingly, it is only men I observed doing so, which is indicative of gendered body practices in communal dancing.

Extra-ordinary steps in an otherwise unpretentious dance like *sisiit* are eye-catching and 'daring', as are the markedly phallic accessories of sticks or swords. The display of power symbols and ingenuity is certainly appreciated and encouraged in men's performance, being linked to the construction of bravery, 'manliness' and strength. *Beredg*, for example, is a (former) war dance which evolved and still imitates man-to-man combat with shields, sticks, and swords. Kahasai Gebrehiwot explained that 'the main art of the *beredg* is to dodge the slashing sword, to avoid its impaling thrust, to jump and find a secure balance with one's feet. Then you also use your shield to ward off fatal blows' (ECBTP 97/6). *Beredg* is a very athletic dance and as such embodies a rhetoric of combative masculinity which contrasts starkly with the more delicate movements of the women's dances (see Figure 17).

Wad sommia, though much more prancing and joyful than the *beredg* in character, displays similar characteristics, underlined too by the new theatrical interludes incorporating imaginary weapons. In all the *wad sommia* versions we recorded in Eritrea, we found the horizontal line in which the men move towards the singing and drumming women and leap in unison. It is a formation that mirrors the phallic sticks and swords, further emphasised by the jumping movement. It is a very powerful, sexually charged and ultimately elegant performance where the men are intent on impressing the women. After all, dance events are opportunities where women and men in gender-segregated communities can meet, where potential partners are introduced, and where matches are made (see Figure 18).⁸⁴

Women's dances and dance styles are far less vigorous in their movements, as women generally show more physical, social and sexual restraint. Some written sources on Tigre dance culture mention the connection of dancing and female sexuality quite explicitly. One EPLF study specifies that women are

⁸⁴ How far gender segregation can go is recorded in Wilson. Maharite, a Bilen woman, describes a funeral where female relatives come to dance the mourning dance, *difn* or *hebo*. 'The men come and watch. They make comments: "She's pretty" or "She's ugly!" Once a man in our village saw a woman whom he thought was very beautiful. He said to a friend: "Please introduce me to that woman." Actually she was his wife and he did not know. Later he went home and said to her: "Why don't you ever join the dance?"' (Wilson 1991: 129).



Fig. 17 *A Bilen dancer in Keren jumping the sword during the beredg.*

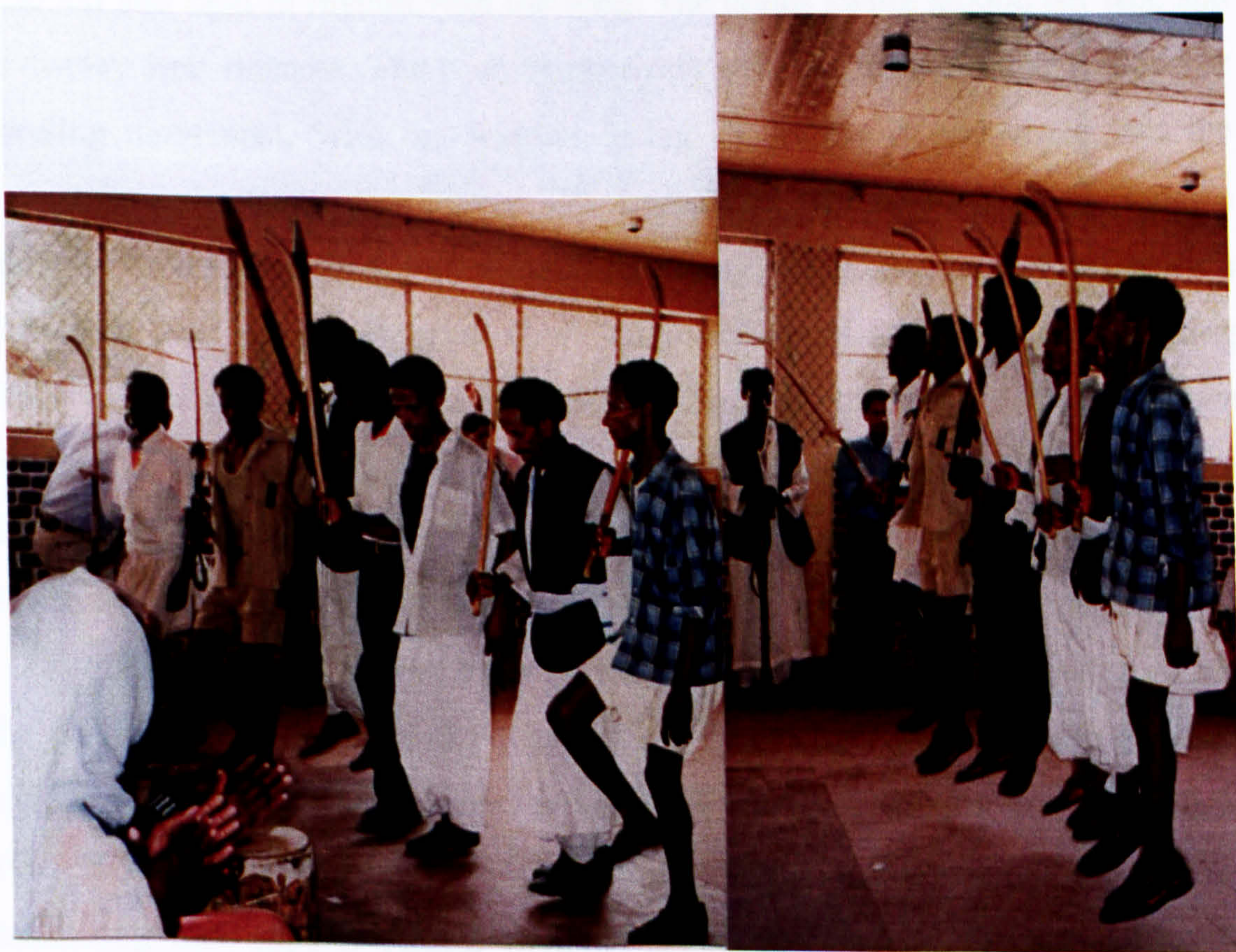


Fig. 18 *Bilen men dancing wad sommia in front of the women.*

not allowed to jump as energetically as the men for fear they might ‘dance away their virginity’ (EPLF (Research Branch) (1981a)). Other sources say that ‘[a]mong women, movements of the body from the waist to the knees is [*sic*] frowned upon’ (Ministry of Information 1968: 44), suggesting that such dances could 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, they are completely forbidden) have to ensure that they stay strictly within the socially constructed frame of submissive female decorum. Extra-ordinary movements or large gestures 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 on a man’s. (J. Cowan: 1990: 189-190). 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 an act which is commonly prohibited among Muslim people. Once the scarf has been removed, 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 body is relatively still, but for a circular walking or kneeling movement, with the woman facing the centre of the circle, not the surrounding spectators (see Figure 19). Unmarried women traditionally wear a hairstyle called *dhepokod*, fine thread-like glossy strings, while married women have their hair braided in *gren*. *Gren* has a horizontal and lengthways parting which allows the braids to nestle gracefully around the back of the head (see Figure 20). It is a visible marker of a woman’s marital status which you do not find for men.⁸⁵ Men, as we have already seen, only carry generic markers of power, such as shields, sticks, or swords.

The *serret*, too, allows for more sexually explicit female expressions, since the reclining back and the chest movement automatically draw the spectator’s attention to the woman’s breasts. What is more, during a party at our house in 1997 in Keren, we observed two of the female workshop participants gracefully undulating their hips to Arabic rhythms in mixed company. Both had lived in Sudan, and although they did not incorporate these movements into the set Tigre

⁸⁵ Compare with the linguistic markers in the English language: Miss and Mrs for women – Ms not being widely used – as opposed to the neutral Mr for men.



Fig. 19 *Young Bilen women practising shellil in Keren. Note the walking sticks used as percussion instruments.*



Fig. 20 *Amna dancing shellil in a performance of Walad Edo during the ECBTP 1997. She wears the traditional hairstyle for married Tigre women, gren.*

dances, it was clear that they had broadened their dancing knowledge with elements of a different culture and that they enjoyed an unprecedented corporeal liberty (O'Shea 9 June 1998). Moreover, the example of *golia* has shown that when hegemonic social relations begin to change, set dance (or song) patterns can begin to accommodate these transformations. In the case of *golia* as described above, it made room for women's voices and their critical point of view.

I would like to conclude this chapter with three Tigre dance-celebrations in which women are the central agents. All combine conservative and releasing tendencies, socially and artistically, as described for many cultural expressions throughout in this section. All the dances are also characterised by a wider, less rigidly choreographed, use of performance space, by special costumes and by role-play – useful sources to be tapped for more integrative modern performance forms such as community theatre. However, while claiming wider than average theatrical spaces, not all of these ceremonies imply more space in the social arenas. *Walad Edo*, for example, enables a temporary exchange of (male) power symbols; as does *difn*, the mourning dance. Yet, both celebrations ultimately confirm the marginal standing of the protagonist, when she returns to the status quo. Performances such as the healing and exorcism cult *zar*, on the other hand, appear to help cross into liminal areas: participants enter an interstitial space 'in-between' normative categories which can be read as means of critique and as potentially unsettling to the prevalent social order.

Walad Edo is, technically speaking, very similar to *shellil* except that it encompasses a one-day community celebration. *Walad Edo* literally means 'daughter of the goatskin' and refers to the hide on which the chosen girl is to sit, usually made from the goat that has been slaughtered for the festivities. During *eid* times, Islamic religious holy days, the most beautiful girl of the village is selected to perform the dance, adorned with jewellery, rich cloth, and the stick of the chief. (When the workshop participants staged *Walad Edo* in 1997, they used a stick lavishly decorated with tin foil for this purpose. Amna was bedecked with necklaces, bangles, and rings and draped in a long colourful cloth. Initially the students refused to perform this dance because they feared they would not be able to organise the extravagant outfit.) Men and women gather around the village beauty who dances *shellil* in the centre of the other village women. One of the trainees noted that it is a committee of young men which organises the whole event, but that a committee of women decides who is the comeliest girl among

them. 'Good girls', he said, 'rarely go out of the house, so nobody but the women themselves is able to make proper judgement' (workshop session, August 1997). (There was silence among the women present). If this is the case, then *Walad Edo* is deeply complicit with a system which admires women for their beauty, but keeps them under tight social control. Carrying the stick of the chief is not equivalent to having authority, nor does it criticise women's objectification. On the contrary, it again confirms that in many forms of textual or theatrical representation 'symbolically [the woman] is ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below them' (Boehmer 1992: 233).

Walad Edo was discontinued during the struggle until its revival in 1994 by *Sbrit*, the National Dance and Folklore Troupe of the PFDJ. Today, it is staged in the form of a dance drama as part of their repertoire. In 1997 Mohamed Assanai of *Abbot*, the national Tigre-language group, did not know anything about a *Walad Edo* renaissance outside professional performing art circles, but one of the workshop participants claimed that some villages had taken up the celebration again. If this is so, further research is needed to determine whether the celebration is seen as a reclamation and re-invention of culture as part of the process of nation-building, or whether, from a woman's perspective, it indicates regressive tendencies. For this beauty pageant not only considers *Walad Edo's* features but also her conduct in line with traditional rules. As one of our informants confirmed: only 'good girls' can become the coveted 'daughter of the goatskin'.

I have variously mentioned mourning songs and ceremonies, of which *difn*, the mourning dance, is an essential feature. *Difn* is usually danced for a male person of higher standing, occasionally also for a childless woman of childbearing age, and commonly lasts for days. *Difn* is a very personal dance, an expression of deepest grief, generally performed by close female relatives of the departed. (One of the 1997 workshop trainees reported male dancers in, again, Nakfa, which the other participants could not confirm. If this were the case then men would be allowed to express an emotional range customarily unthinkable for them. This would imply another, liberating, breach of gendered spaces, artistic and social.) The widow and other female relatives dress up in the dead man's clothes, wildly shake their heads to the sound of a *kebero*, throw sand into their hair, and brandish his sword, for once casting aside notions of female demeanour and beauty. Munzinger, in 1883, describes that the head of the widow was shaved, while the hair of his sisters was dressed in a style commonly worn by men. I have not been

able to confirm this practice, nor have I been able to witness a burial celebration, only a re-enacted, albeit moving, *difn* performance by the participants of the ECBTP. Another interesting fact is that women don male clothes during the performance to express their grief, only to inevitably return to their conventional feminine roles. Still, it is a spectacle which serves as an enormous stress release.⁸⁶

Finally, a word needs to be said about the healing and exorcism cult, *zar*. *Zar* seems to be practised predominantly in the western areas of Eritrea, but is widely known in the Horn of Africa. Descriptions of *zar* performances vary considerably, but common to all is a great level of theatricality. This involves performative genres such as singing, drumming, and dancing and, most importantly, dramatic role-play, particularly the enactment of – or possession by – spirits. A special performance space is set aside, and usually there are actors – those going into trance – and an audience. Yet boundaries between actors and audience tend to blur, with eventually everyone participating in the performance. There is also a ‘director’, usually an Islamic *sheikh*, a religious leader, or a knowledgeable woman, who guides the participants through the different stages of the ‘play’.

Throughout my research in Eritrea, *zar* has remained shrouded in secrecy. In 1997, three main objectives emerged for its performance: a) *zar* as a serious form of mental health treatment, possibly one of the very few available in Eritrea; b) *zar* as a means for women to wheedle new clothes or jewellery out of their husbands, the possessed being granted virtually any request; c) or *zar* as *wenni*, as the unquenchable desire to dance until the dancer collapses from physical exhaustion. Except for a male student from Agordat, who claimed to have gone into *wenni*, none of our sources seemed to know much about the performance. The workshop participants nonetheless enjoyed mounting a mock ceremony – the pleasure of the forbidden, perhaps. Two of the women covered themselves in their head scarves, knelt down, and started to screech while maniacally shaking their head. *Zar* is a general taboo in Eritrean society and for many, Muslims and Christians, it amounts to Satan worship. Some informants dismissed it as superstition, but more than once we were warned not to engage with it at all. It is interesting, however, that *zar* obviously affects more women than men. Sources which have examined *zar* cults in Egypt and the Sudan have drawn attention to the connection between women’s liminal position in society and the exalted spirit

⁸⁶ Munzinger (1883: 327), Littmann (1910: 257).

of a *zar* performance. *Zar* has been read as an inversion of accepted social norms, as a counter-hegemonic process, a carnevalesque celebration of the female body customarily constructed as submissive and mute. Others have construed it as an instance of female empowerment through the exploitation of feminine hysteria. If we read *zar* through literary appropriations of Freudian theories on the hysteric, then the body of a woman in *zar* 'becomes her text' (Jacobus 1987: 197) which deconstructs the image of the contained (and contented) woman of traditional society. *Zar*, like hysteria, is related to female sexuality, as possessed women are believed to have intercourse with an incubus.⁸⁷

How far this accords with the practices in Eritrea is not possible for me to tell, whether it functions either subversively or more as a safety valve that eventually restores the existing order. Undeniably, however, it indicates another, metaphysical, aspect of the performing arts, a dimension which transgresses the performative aspects discussed so far as well as the spiritual realm of the two major religions. It also raises further questions regarding the performative construction of gender and identity which certainly needs further investigation.

In this chapter, I have looked at traditional performance genres in Eritrea, in their past and present forms, and discussed the role of the artist with special reference to women performers. I have also considered the influence of religion and politics on the performing arts. It is the latter which is of utmost significance in the following chapters. While meanings and messages of older genres had always been attuned to current political climes, unprecedented performance forms were introduced with the advent of European colonialism. The coming of the Italians not only marked the inception of Eritrea as a national entity, it also began to transform her cultural landscape. Changes were particularly noticeable in the urban areas. Initially, Italian theatre forms – such as drama, opera, ballet or music hall – were totally inaccessible to Eritreans. Gradually, however, a cultural cross-over began to take place, which eventually led to a succession of local theatre associations. The beginnings of this change and its impact on Eritrean, especially women, performers, is the topic of the following chapter.

⁸⁷ Hurreiz (1991: 149-150), Sellers (1991: 156-157, 162), Slyomovics (1990: 57-58), Shack (1974: 46), Anon. ([1987]): 7-10).

PART TWO: THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN ERITREAN THEATRE

CHAPTER 2: OF *SUWA* HOUSES, SINGING CONTEXTS AND THEATRE ASSOCIATIONS: EARLY URBAN WOMEN PERFORMERS IN ASMARA, 1930s-1960s

This chapter commences the historical analysis of modern Eritrean theatre arts, covering a period of approximately forty years, from the final years of Italian rule to the rise of the Ethiopian Derg regime. Unprecedented theatre forms emerged during this time and were cultivated in the urban areas of Eritrea. Initially there was little connection between the long-established and the modern urban performing arts, the latter being influenced by Western and modern Ethiopian theatre practices. However, urban theatre arts became a central expression of Eritrean modernity, and they were linked to the rise of Eritrean nationalism and the process of decolonisation.

Women in *Suwa* Houses

The advent of Italian rule in the late 1880s brought dramatic social and political changes to a region now named Eritrea, after the Roman Erythraeum Mare (the 'Red Sea'). Italy had planned to transform Eritrea into a settler colony – expropriating farmland, establishing an infrastructure and a sizeable manufacturing industry – yet it was not until the rise of Italian fascism and Mussolini's war preparations against Ethiopia in the mid-1930s that the influx of Italian settlers grew to substantial proportions. Many Eritreans were driven from their land and forced to sell their labour, thus precipitating the growth of a local working class. These developments led to rapid urbanisation, with Asmara, Decamhare and other towns expanding so massively that by 1940 one fifth of the Eritrean population had moved to the urban areas. In 1941, G.K.N. Trevaskis notes, Asmara had 'changed from a comparatively small administrative centre into a large modern town, which was housing some 50,000 Europeans and 120,000 Eritreans' (Trevaskis 1960: 46), the majority of the latter being Christian Tigrinya. The impact of these developments was more strongly felt among the settled highland communities than the pastoral or semi-pastoral lowlanders, and palpably influenced the rise of indigenous urban performing arts.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Pool (1997: 10), B. Habte Selassie (1980: 53), Firebrace (1985: 17).

Urban migration also affected the lives of women. Educational prospects for girls had been virtually zero, and the fact that under Italian rule some male children were ‘granted’ a limited primary schooling to inculcate Italian cultural values and prepare them for low-grade clerical jobs or the colonial army, did not enhance women’s educational and professional prospects (B. Teklehaimanot 1996: 5). Ideas of ‘gradual cultural assimilation’ and ‘Italianisation’ (though never successfully achieved in the eyes of the colonisers) applied mostly to Eritrean men. Women began to join the menial work force or the informal labour market for want of schooling opportunities. Factory and domestic work were the main options, as was employment in bars; but often they opened their own *suwa* houses – *enda suwa* in Tigrinya – which became a growing trend with the ever-expanding influx from the rural areas. *Suwa* houses were modest drinking places in the Eritrean quarters of Asmara,⁸⁹ which also served as accommodation for the owner’s family. Here home-brewed sorghum beer, *suwa*,



Fig. 21 *Suwa, the home-brewed sorghum beer popular in Eritrea.*

was served to the sound of the *krar* (see Figure 23).⁹⁰ Songs and *krar*-playing constituted a vital part of the amusement and played an enormous role in attracting and keeping customers. In fact, for a long time it was the only non-

⁸⁹ Starting in 1908, town-planning became more professional in Asmara, which began to take a more definite shape. Francesca Locatelli writes: ‘Asmara was divided into four areas: the first for Europeans, the second (a mixed area) for Europeans, “assimilated” (Greeks, Arabs, Indians and other communities, mainly involved in commercial activities) and “natives” who shared the same space, also called the “promiscuous area”, the third for “natives” (this zone developed in the area of the original village of Arbahate Asmera); the fourth zone was a suburban area in which the industrial sector later developed’ (Locatelli 2001: 5).

⁹⁰ I have been unable to find documents about government control of *suwa* houses under the Italian colonisation. Given that by the late 1930s Italian citizens were liable to imprisonment when caught in ‘native public places’, it is feasible that little attention was paid to their running as long as Eritreans kept to themselves. During the British Military Administration (BMA), however, *suwa*

domestic live entertainment available to Eritreans. Public performances of Eritrean song and dance were unthinkable, given that the colonial power deprecated anything that could have instilled pride in the identities of the colonised. The publication of Tigrinya literature and orature, for example, which had seen a small, but promising beginning with the advent of colonial rule, had come to a virtual standstill with the tightening-up of socio-political control after World War I and Mussolini's rise to power (G. Negash 1999: 110). Italian operas, concerts and film shows were barely accessible to Eritreans, due to rigid race segregation; and Cinema Hamassien, the sole 'native' cinema which had opened in 1937, only screened Italian propaganda films. The few exceptional Eritreans who managed to gain access to Italian theatre companies, such as the founding father of modern Eritrean theatre, Alemayo Kahasai, were merely employed as stagehands and strictly prohibited from performing with Italians in public.⁹¹

There is no doubt that growing urbanisation generated unprecedented problems and dynamics in Eritrea. Women as part of the emerging working class were exploited even more than the men, earning less than their male colleagues in the manufacturing industry and being sexually abused as domestic workers or *baristas* (waitresses) in bars. Commercial sex was certainly on the rise during this period (see Locatelli 2001); but claiming that prostitution was only introduced with Italian colonisation means turning a blind eye to the fact that there were long traditions of concubines and courtesans in the highland cultures of Ethiopia and Eritrea, which was well documented in popular stories and songs. Again, there is a striking similarity to the conflicting discourses on travelling singers and courtesans from the earlier periods and entertainers in *suwa* houses emerging in the 1930s and '40s, a conflict that is applicable to female performers until the present day. On the one hand they were looked down upon for their purported

houses became part of government-regulated 'amenities', such as nightclubs, cabarets, and bars. In 1946 *suwa* houses and *tej* shops (Amharinya for *mes*, honey wine) were given the following hours for the sale of alcoholic drinks: 12.00 – 14.00, and 17.00 – 21.00 hrs, at which point the premises had to close. In comparison, European cabarets were allowed to sell alcohol until 23.30, 'Mixed' cabarets until 22.30, half an hour before their respective closing times. In 1953 the Commissioner of the Eritrea Police, D.D.P. Bracknell, suggested bringing the sale of alcoholic drinks in *suwa* houses into line with other public bars, which resulted in an extension of sales hours up to 11 p.m.. Bracknell also ordered a redrafting of the existing General Notice 'in order to eliminate the discrimination [*sic*] between "Races" by substituting "Classes", where necessary'. BMA, 'To: Chief Secretary, HQ BMA Eritrea, Subject: Extension of Licensing and Closing Hours, Public Places of Entertainment', Asmara, 9 March 1946. BMA, 'General Notice 376', Asmara, 25 November 1946. Bracknell (9 March 1953), T. Negash (1987: 109).

⁹¹ I 30. Before 1937, some cinemas had 'separate parts set aside for natives (e.g. the Cinema Teatro [...])'. When Cinema Hamassien was opened 'the natives were therefore excluded from all other Cinemas by order of the Governor' (Setton 13 October 1941); B. Abebaw ([1982_{EC} ?]), Plastow (1997a: 146).

though not necessarily actual licentiousness,⁹² on the other they were highly revered for their artistic and social skills. While serving as objects for male gratification – from the admiration of beauty to the possible rendering of sexual services – they did not conform to societal ideals of a ‘proper’ woman. They too moved in the ‘unmarked’ and therefore potentially threatening, because uncontrollable, ‘territory’ discussed earlier on. The majority of entertainers in *suwa* houses were single parents, widowed or divorced – some had been orphaned in early childhood – and most were unusually independent.⁹³ Those who eventually married immediately left their jobs. Despite a certain social stigma, *suwa* sellers were nonetheless appreciated, their lifestyle condoned for the benefit of their work. *Suwa* houses were not only places of entertainment, but also ‘information headquarters for the broad masses’ (A. Sahle 31 July 1999: 7), where the seeds of Eritrean nationalism were nourished and grew. What is more, *suwa* houses were people’s *homes*, where only local drinks and *taita* (*injeera*) (see Figure 22), sourdough pancakes, were served, not hard European liquor.



Fig. 22 *Woman baking injeera.*

⁹² The nature of my research did not allow me to probe too intimately into people’s private lives. It had never been my intention in the first place, though I tried to find out whether sexual harassment of performers had been an issue. Answers were not sufficient to come to definite conclusions, however, and were often based on information by third parties, ‘common knowledge’ and ‘reading between the lines’. Matters regarding sexuality are off-limits in Eritrean society, more so to an outsider to the community. One of the interviewees openly declined to talk about these things, while the majority politely navigated around the question or declared there had never been any problems. Giulia Barrera also notes that during the period of Italian colonisation, women who ran *suwa* houses were sometimes identified as ‘prostitutes’, even though this was not necessarily the case. She thus cautions that ‘when reading sources from the earliest period of Italian colonialism, it is essential to realize that a dynamic tension arose between the renaming by the colonizer and the preexisting social realities’ (Barrera 1996: 25).

⁹³ It is striking that many older performers, both male and female, came from single-parent families. In most cases it was the mother who raised the children, the fathers having either died, divorced their wives or left their lovers before the baby was born. Among them were Amleset Abbai, Tsehaitu Beraki, Alamin Abdulatiff and Teberah Tesfahunei.

Compared to bars, cabarets and other public houses, many of which were initially out of bounds for Eritreans, *suwa* houses still operated in line with ‘tradition’: the drinks, the food, and the music. Even the layout resembled that of a Tigrinya *hidmo*: a room or two where customers were entertained, depending on the size of the houses, a back room for the publican and her family. A female support network, however, now replaced the old family structures, with female-headed households being the norm. Older singers often influenced newcomers to the field, sometimes getting to know (and copying) each other’s repertoire, sometimes influencing each other’s style, all of which is indicative of an artistic female genealogy.⁹⁴

When asked about people’s attitudes towards women performers in the 1940s and ’50s Ghidey Rustom (see Figure 23), a striking lady with an impressive life history (divorced in her early teens, she never re-married; she is a mother of twelve children, a *krar* player and has been a *suwa* publican for some forty years) explained that *suwa* entertainers did not experience any problems. After all, ‘we were playing in our houses, under our mothers, not in theatres or bars’ (I 82) – ‘mothers’ not necessarily being the biological parent, but an older female chaperone. ‘We were not singing in public’, another performer claimed in a similar vein. ‘In my sister’s place clients were coming to drink, but we did not charge them any money for the music. They were dignitaries and the sons of the then elite’ (I 63). Though well-remembered for her skills in the ’40s, the speaker wished to remain anonymous and on the whole did not want to be ‘disturbed’ by her memories. Though these were carefree and independent days for some, it should also be pointed out that countless other women were forced to sell *suwa* because of financial necessity, and not out of choice (I 65). Many stories will remain untold and eventually die with their owners, or be moulded into a ‘presentable’ form. It is certainly important to note the insistence on singing in ‘private’, as opposed to ‘public’ spaces such as theatres and bars, which reveals the diversity of discourses on women performers even among the artists. While *suwa* entertainers resorted to notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘domesticity’ to construct an artistic identity, hence depreciating the ‘public’ (and by implication, indecent) display of women on stage, members of the first Eritrean theatre associations emerging during the British Military Administration (BMA) argued in an opposite vein. For them, as I will show below, Tigrinya stage performance was equivalent

⁹⁴ Falceto ([booklet] Ref 82965-2 DK 016: 24), I 82.

to a new African modernity characterised by an emergent Eritrean nationalism and an incipient process of decolonisation. Having generally had higher standards of education than the *krar* players in *suwa* houses, and thus being members of a different social class, they disdained *suwa* publicans for their purportedly ‘indecorous’ entertainment as much as they themselves were cold-shouldered by ‘traditional’ *krar* players. The fact that some of the latter eventually switched camps to become extraordinarily successful stage performers is a process I discuss later in the chapter.

Despite their ambivalent social status, most *suwa* entertainers I spoke to were not ashamed of their work and saw entertaining customers not only as an economic inevitability but also as the logical conclusion of an artistic urge. ‘If I had stopped singing’, veteran singer Amleset Abbai, whose artistic roots were in the *enda suwa* and *secreto* of Asmara (see Figure 24),⁹⁵ told me three months before her death, ‘I would have died. I do not exist without music’ (I 8). Ghidey, who had listened to Amleset and Tsehaitu Beraki, the grand old lady of Tigrinya songs, as a child recounted a similar scenario: ‘When we were young we just loved playing *krar*. We never bothered about social or economic problems. We gathered in someone’s house, one was pouring *suwa*, the other was making music or dancing or kicking out a drunkard’ (I 82). ‘My mother entirely focused on her music’, son Ghirmai Woldegeorgis confirmed. ‘We were raised by our grandmother who lived with us. To this day we call our mother “*hafte*” – “sister”. She would sit in a corner near the entrance and play *krar*. People would hear the music and enter to drink and dance’ (I 82).

Evidence suggests that women who willingly embraced this unconventional lifestyle experienced an opening up of space, artistically, economically and also politically. Ghidey’s venture, for example, became successful. Though never known among Eritrean diaspora communities and lovers of ‘world music’ like her predecessors Amleset Abbai and Tsehaitu Beraki, or able to amass wealth, she continued to make music until the early 1990s, later employing other singers, including men, in her growing business. As such she represents the majority of *suwa*-selling women who did not want or get the chance to perform on stage. With the benefit of hindsight, however, their work had an

⁹⁵ *Secreto* were unlicensed *suwa* houses, often in the better Eritrean quarters of Asmara, which also sold beer. Because of their illegal status, people called them *secreto* – secret. In the social hierarchy they ranked above *enda suwa*. Telephone conversation with Negusse Haile, 20 January 2001.



Fig. 23 *Ghidey Rustom with her krar in summer 2000.*



Fig. 24 *Amleset Abbai (right), with Ghirmai Woldegeorgis 'Menkenino', son of Ghidey Rustom, EPLF fighter, journalist, film and theatre director, September 1999.*

indelible effect on the urban performing arts. '[Modern] music in Eritrea', veteran performer Tekabo Woldemariam insisted, 'was started by women'.

We, the men, came after them. For example, Tsehaitu Berhe [Zenar], Fana Itel, Yolanda and Rosina Conti (the daughters of Halima from Keren), Fantaya Gebreselassie, Meriem Ibrahim, Abeba Woldesellassie, Aberash Shifera and others, Tsehaitu Beraki and Amleset Abbai. When people say music was first played by men, it is completely wrong. Now with Amleset dead they say that she was the first woman to play *krar*. But it is not true, they were all playing *krar* before Amleset, a lot of them playing in their homes. [...] In our culture [Tekabo is Tigrinya], there is *goila* [a dance event]. There is no *goila*, no entertainment, without the ululating, the clapping and the songs of women. So even traditionally women were the beginners. (I 57, I 58).

Of the above-mentioned singers and their contemporaries, only two – Yolanda Conti and Tsehaitu Beraki – are known to be still alive. As the available audio records have been insufficient to draw general conclusions,⁹⁶ knowledge of their music relies mostly on information provided by some of the artists and other people of their generation. Tsehaitu Beraki, for example, based her songs on 'our ancestral [that is Tigrinya] rhythm' (I 2) with its characteristic pentatonic musical scale, and was also influenced by the repertoire of older singers, such as Abeba Woldesellassie, Fana Itel and *Gual* ('daughter of') Zenar. Amleset too gave preference to long-established genres, with a penchant for love songs, and it can be surmised that most Tigrinya performers followed similar patterns. After folk poetry and song forms in Tigrinya and occasionally Tigre, radio seemed to have been the second most important influence. Even after the first Eritrean theatre associations had been established in the 1940s and '50s, and Cinema Hamassien re-opened under the British in 1942, women were unlikely to frequent the shows. 'It was impossible to go out', Amleset recalled her teenage years while living with her mother, who was also a *suwa* house owner. 'No family allowed their daughters to go to the cinema. We were strictly controlled. So I didn't have the

⁹⁶ Tsehaitu mentioned her first recording at the age of sixteen, possibly in 1953. I was only able to find one record produced during the early 1970s, when Tsehaitu was already a professional stage singer with *Bazay* (Amha Records 470-A) and *Aminei* [My Husband] (Amha Records 470-B). These two songs as well as *Mejemeria Fikreij* [My First Love] and *Hadarey* [My Family] were digitalised and re-released by Falceto. Several sources refer to so-called 'traditional songs', such as *Negusse*, *Negusse*, which were recorded during the Italian colonisation. They possibly belonged to the 248 songs recorded in 1939 by Cap. Dott. Giovanni Silletti, an Italian researcher, with the assistance of a wealthy Eritrean businessman, Salih Ahmed Kekya, who lived in Addis Ababa at the time. The African Music Archive at Mainz University, Germany, under its director Wolfgang Bender, holds a number of shellac records possibly belonging to the series. Two songs in Wollo and Bati dealt with Eritrean women (*Lode alle donne e ai Notabili Eritrei* (AOI 237) and *Lode alle donne Eritree* (AI 545) respectively. EPLF (Research Branch) (1982b), Falceto (2001: 44).

opportunity. The only thing we listened to was the radio. The radio often transmitted Sudanese music, even Amharinya was broadcasted late. There was no television at the time' (I 8). Sudanese songs in Arabic accompanied by the *oud*, a mandolin-like instrument common in the Arab world, were also prevalent in the late 1930s and early '40s, some singers, such as the Conti Sisters, acquiring local fame for their renderings. Others are said to have mixed Arabic with the Tigrinya language, or translated Amharinya songs into their mother tongue. With the emergence of pop stars in the 1950s and early '60s, modern Western music was also to become popular. These songs, however, were usually not part of the *suwa* house repertoire, but were performed by members of theatre associations.⁹⁷

While I have traced the lyrics of only a few early songs,⁹⁸ there was general agreement among the informants that with the beginning of the British Military Administration politicisation among performers and customers increased. Overt political songs seemed to have had their heyday during the UN enforced federation years with Ethiopia, 1952-1962, before the annexation of Eritrea when Ethiopian censorship clamped down more ruthlessly. In the late 1950s, for instance, a song was popular in *enda suwa* and *bet shahi*, tea shops, which spoke of open grass-roots resentment against Ethiopian hegemony: 'I am amazed at what's happening. / I never thought we would go / backwards in history / Would Mussolini have been / better for me?' (R. Iyob 1995: 91). After the annexation of Eritrea in 1962 by the Haile Selassie regime which stripped the country of its relative political autonomy and turned it into an ordinary Ethiopian province, greater caution was necessary. Songs became more allegorical for fear of censorship and political repression. Ghidey Rustom recalls that 'these were times of political unrest. Some men still wrote new political songs, but they gave them to women to sing because they did not want to be arrested. So the women sang them. It was only later that men like Bereket [Mengisteab] joined us women in *enda suwa*'. From the late 1960s Ghidey actively supported the two liberation movements, hiding fighters in her house or seating Ethiopian clients on boxes filled with ammunition.⁹⁹ Yet political activities by *suwa* sellers did not start with the armed liberation struggle in 1961. It is to the days of the BMA that we need to return in order to appreciate the contribution of the early singers.

⁹⁷ I 8, I 9, I 57, Anon. (31 December 1942: 2), A. Isaak (2000: 1, 7).

⁹⁸ Ghirmai Negash analyses anti-Italian songs by women from the 1930s collected by Conti Rossini, most of which seem to have been recorded in Tigray. G. Negash (1999: 113-14).

⁹⁹ See also the story of Tsehaitu Gebresellassie in Christmann (1996: 100-104).

Under Italian colonisation, especially fascist rule, Eritreans had been physically and intellectually suppressed, and were not allowed to participate in the government of their country.¹⁰⁰ Now, under the temporary British caretaker regime, restrictions were gradually removed and a limited policy of 'Eritreanization' (Trevaskis 1960: 30) encouraged. 'Discrimination continued for a long time' (I 42), Osman Ahmed, born in 1927, recalled. The grid of the Italian administration, including its personnel, had been left virtually intact for logistic reasons and with it a form of racial segregation. Yet unprecedented political possibilities emerged for Eritreans which were readily taken up. Only one month after Eritrea had been placed under the British caretaker regime in 1941, a disparate group of Moslems and Christians, intelligentsia and elders, was established 'to communicate Eritrean wishes to the BMA. Above all, they desired an end to Italian domination' (R. Iyob 1995: 65). This association came to be known as *Mahber Fikri Hager Eritrea* (MFHE), or Love of the Country Association, and initially operated clandestinely as political parties were banned until 1946.¹⁰¹ By the mid-1940s, MFHE had turned into the Unionist Party, *Mahber Andenet*, which, as its name suggests, favoured the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. Although this is not the place to elaborate on the complex political developments that took place in Eritrea under the British Administration, it is essential to note that two opposing factions emerged: the aforesaid Unionists, supported by the Orthodox Church and the Haile Selassie regime (which was known to condone terrorist activities against its opponents), and the Independence Bloc at the heart of which was the Muslim League. With the latest military conflict raging between Eritrea and Ethiopia during the largest part of my field research, tendencies to gloss over Unionist links in the 1940s were understandable. Yet there is evidence that artists in *suwa* houses campaigned on the Unionists' behalf and that it was notably the women who were active.¹⁰² In

¹⁰⁰ 'Eritreans were not even allowed to walk on the main street. If you did, they would kick you. In buses there were special spaces for Eritreans, with no seats. We had to stand like animals' (I 42).

¹⁰¹ In view of the emerging theatre associations it is noteworthy that the term *mahber*, 'association', was adopted to describe political parties after 1946, thus immediately bestowing a political edge to performing arts clubs by the sheer power of naming. R. Iyob (1995: 159-160).

¹⁰² An interesting, because similar, development was observed around the same time in the then two Somali colonies, British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somalia in the south. In the 1940s some Somali women began to join the nationalist movements, in particular the Somali Youth League, SYL, even though this had been unheard of previously. Some women became locally known for their pro-nationalist campaigns, especially their political performance poetry. Like their Eritrean counterparts, however, they faced social sanctions and sustained abuse for crossing prescribed lines, even from their fellow women. Z. Mohamed Jama (1991: 43-53), A.H. Adan (1981: 131).

December 1951 the political advisor of the British Headquarters received a petition for official recognition of the 'Female Society for Union of Eritrea with Ethiopia', signed by ten women among whom was the *krar*-player Tsehaitu Berhe Zenar. Further information on the signatories was obtained by the police and, in a confidential correspondence dated 9 January 1952, the details on three 'propagandists' were provided. Tsehaitu was identified as the 'ex-mistress of Daedacei, a former Governor of Eritrea. She now owns a house of ill-repute in the Abbascial quarter' (F.G. Green 9 January 1952) of Asmara. In Osman Ahmed's view, however, there was nothing disreputable about the artist: '*Gual Zenar* was the greatest *krar* player. She had one song and was famous for it. But she did not play in public. She was a politician and played in her house' (I 101). She combined both tasks with obvious success, for on 21 January 1952 the Female Unionist Association was officially acknowledged by the Chief Secretary of the British Administration.

Given the social set-up in Eritrea, this can be regarded not only as political progress, but also as advancement for women and their artistic endeavours. 'Our families were not only opposed to women singing, they also denied us schooling', Tsehaitu Beraki summed up the societal climate of the time:

All you were required to do was to fetch water, give birth and so on. Actually it is not difficult to imagine the social situation sixty years back. Social changes seem to have started under the British Administration. Frankly speaking, we [the *krar* players] were some of the few more advanced women at the time. I think growing up in Asmara had a great influence on us. (I 2).

Theatre Arts under the British Military Administration I:

Classrooms and Cinemas

The BMA brought new life into the artistic scene in Asmara. Their main cultural priority was to provide entertainment for their troops and civilian personnel, but 'fraternisation' in boxing and football matches with Italians was also part of their agenda in an attempt to combat fascist influence. For Eritreans, the greatest changes were the gradual removal of the so-called 'colour bar' which allowed access to previously out-of-bounds entertainment,¹⁰³ and the possibility of a better

¹⁰³ In 1942 restrictions were first removed for 'all members of his Britannic Majesty's Forces and the Eritrean Police when in uniform' (Jameson 14 October 1942). This seems to have followed an official complaint that black people working for the BMA, i.e. 'Indians, Sudanese or South Africans of colour or other Allied natives' (Setton 13 October 1941) found themselves barred from most places of entertainment.

education. Missionary schools closed during the Mussolini era were re-opened, and education, including adult education, was encouraged which included lectures, gramophone recitals and Shakespearean school drama. English replaced Italian as the main medium of instruction, though Tigrinya and Arabic were also used, if not actively promoted. This manifested itself in the publication of two weekly newspapers in these languages and the establishment of the Tigrinya Language Council which sought to 'perfect' and 'experiment' with Tigrinya written forms. Woldeab Woldemariam, the 'Father of Eritrean Nationalism', was its most eminent contributor. After years of deprivation, demand for education was high, with people willing to make substantial sacrifices. Initially only a few schools were opened for lack of textbooks, buildings and teaching staff. The situation began to improve when pupil teachers became available and a system of teacher training was introduced in 1943.¹⁰⁴

For the performing arts in the urban centres of Eritrea this was a decisive moment, for Eritrean teachers were to become the bedrock of modern theatre arts. Several of my informants, such as *memher* Abebe Iyasu, recalled being involved in school drama as students during the BMA, and said it sparked off his long love of drama and stage performance. This was a legacy in most British colonies, such as in neighbouring Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan or Somalia,¹⁰⁵ but also in Ethiopia where elite schools expressed a 'European bias in instruction' (Plastow 1989: 56) during the Haile Selassie regime. Notably, adaptations of Shakespeare, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, were mentioned which was a rather controversial choice in the aftermath of fascist rule. Tigrinya translations of Shakespeare plays were not published until the late 1960s, occasionally rendered from the Amharinya, not the English original (G. Negash 1999: 143). Both British and Eritrean teachers helped mount the productions. They were commonly shown at the end of the academic year; either in the assembly hall or out of doors in the school grounds. On the whole, female roles were taken by boys, as the few girls privileged to receive formal schooling were either too shy or feared the social stigma associated with (women) performers, including *wat'a* and *hamien*.

¹⁰⁴ Trevaskis (1960: 22-23, 30-35), G. Negash (1999: 117). See also BMA, 'Cinema Teatro "Excelsior": Promemoria', English translation of an unpublished letter, 9 January 1942; Commissioner of Police (4 September 1944); A. Sahle (26 September 1998: 9).

¹⁰⁵ Note the influence of school drama in Kerr (1995: 35), Al-Mubarak (1986: 78), Ngugi (1986: 38), Andrzejewski (1978: 87).

Eritrean teachers continued their work well into the 1960s and 70s, and also ventured beyond educational school drama. From ca. 1942-45 an entrepreneurial teacher, *memher* Abraham Redda, began writing and staging plays of his own which, however, proved too advanced for his time and hence failed to draw wider public interest.¹⁰⁶ Abraham is said to have worked with women actresses and a singer, Lucia, none of whom was to be found in Eritrea during my research period. In the late 1950s, a theatre group was established by the Teachers' Association, which was led by the ubiquitous Alemayo Kahasai. They produced educational drama and songs on issues such as filial-parental relations, literacy and the country's development.¹⁰⁷ As in most theatrical ventures, female teachers were a minority. Those who got involved, however, took part in all activities, including tours (see Figure 25). With time more girls were encouraged to join the end-of-term plays. In 1961 and 1962, girls comprised half of the two-hundred participants involved in the public performance of Students' Music Day arranged and directed by Alemayo Kahasai and his colleague, *memher* Asres Tessema, then working for the audio-visual department of the Ministry of Education.

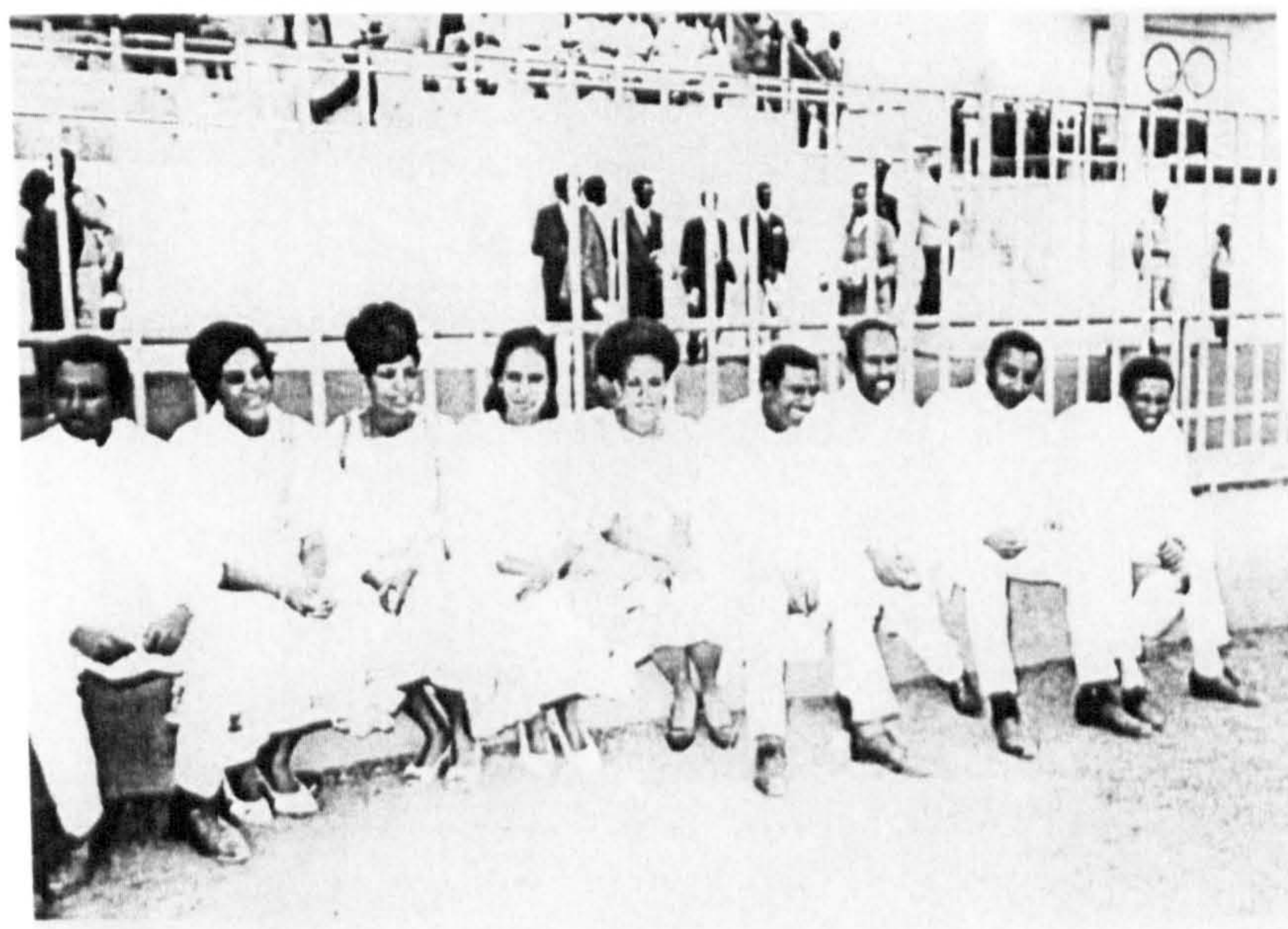


Fig. 25 *Teachers after a performance in Asmara Stadium in the 1960s.*
Third from right: member Asres Tessema.

¹⁰⁶ Osman Ahmed recalled that *memher* Abraham was the first to use traditional Eritrean costumes on stage: 'People wanted him to use European costumes. [...] For us, it was a new thing to use traditional costumes. It was a kind of revolution in Eritrean theatre. We never expected to be successful with local costumes after fifty years of Italian colonisation' (I 129). Only two of Abraham Redda's plays were recorded, though more were said to be performed: the first a religious drama, *Lidete Kristos*, 'The Birth of Christ', which was shown by a student cast in St. Mary's Church; the second, 'New World' (*Hadish Alem*), was noted in 1945 BMA files and possibly mounted in Cinema Hamassien. A. Redda (3 November 1945), A. Kahasai (15 February 1977_{EC} [1985]), ECBTP 95/13.

¹⁰⁷ For a review of teacher theatre in the 1970s see Anon (26 June 1964_{EC} [1972]).

As with all theatrical activities, décor and costumes were minimal, the message was the crux of both songs and plays. None of the play scripts is still available, but it appears that their tenor did not substantially differ from the productions at the turn of the 21st century – with the exception, perhaps, of very topical productions such as land mine and AIDS awareness drama.¹⁰⁸ Though emphasis was placed on Theatre in Education (TIE), it is crucial to acknowledge that the involvement of teachers in drama work did not stop at didactic plays for the young. Having recognised the potential of performance as early as the 1940s and '50s, teachers were among the founding members of the three national – and nationalistic – theatre associations discussed below, two of which decisively influenced modern Eritrean theatre.¹⁰⁹

For the British, the Italians and allied personnel a variety of entertainment was on offer: Italian operas, operettas and classical concerts, puppet shows for children, Christmas pantomimes and musical comedies, drama in Hindustani for Indian troops, amateur theatre in English and Italian, the occasional play in Arabic for the Sudanese Defence Forces, concert parties, ballet performances, dances at the Garrison Mess or social nights at 'The Singing Kettle' (see Figure 26).

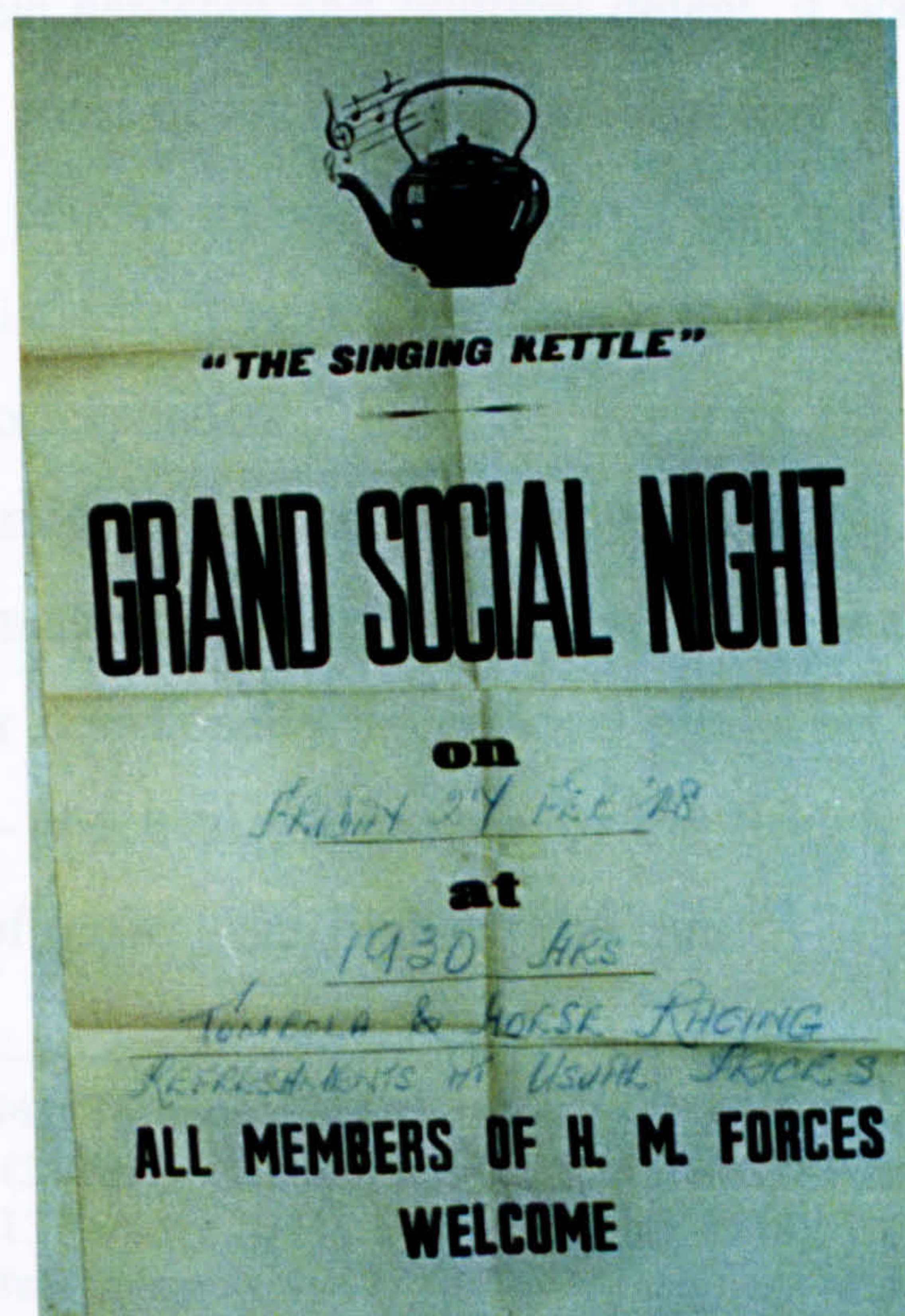


Fig. 26 *Grand Social Night at the 'Singing Kettle', 1948.*

¹⁰⁸ In 2001 *Memher* Asres Tessema was engaged in writing down songs he produced for both students and professional singers. *Memher* Asres is the long-awaited scribe of the musical and theatrical history of Eritrea, especially his involvement with local theatre associations.

¹⁰⁹ Trevaskis (1960: 33-34), Schröder (1987: 101-106), E. Lucas (1 January 1996), ECBTP 95/6, ECBTP 95/7, I 32, I 101, I 117.

The list goes on. The volunteer Troops Entertainment Committee busily plotted new get-togethers, while in 1942 a Dramatic Society for all Services and Allied Civilian Personnel was proposed by Major R. Wood. A detailed audition sheet was provided for potential participants, though I was unable to trace the production records. In 1946 another call for amateur actors and stagehands was released, this time resulting in the production of the thriller *Rope* by Patrick Hamilton. Most theatrical performances were mounted by amateur drama clubs during the BMA, ranging from the dramatic society of the Alwar Jey Paltan Unit which produced Hindustani plays, to the English-speaking Mercury Players. Three Italian amateur drama clubs were registered in Asmara and Decamhare by 1944, the latter to great public acclaim. All of these groups worked on a non-profit basis, and were obliged to donate their proceeds to charitable organisations, such as the 'Sottosezione Mutilati' (the disabled war veterans) or to 'the welfare of British Troops'.¹¹⁰

Despite evidence of dramatic activities, musical and variety shows were more popular forms of live entertainment for expatriates, and would remain so for Eritreans later. Opera was a particular favourite with the Italian community. Even in the face of economic hardship and political defeat, it was considered to be a particularly 'national' form of art: 'la massima espressione musical, patrimonio artistico di cu ogni popolo ne va orgoglioso ['the highest form of musical expression and an artistic heritage for the people to be proud of']' (Bonucelli 1 September 1944). Correspondence however suggests that professional Italian drama and opera ensembles struggled financially as early as 1942, and there is no mention of trained theatre companies later. Any want was covered by foreign touring companies, or occasionally forced local producers to seek performers in Egypt or elsewhere – much to the chagrin of the British administration which objected for reasons of security and high expenditure.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Anon. (4 December 1941: 3), Anon. (24 December 1941: 8), Anon. (22 March 1942: 6), Anon. (27 May 1942: 6), Wood (25 November 1942), Lieut. Shri Ram (18 March 1943), Societa 'Italiana degli Autori ed Editori (13 January 1944), Farmer (5 May 1948); BMA, 'Note: "Mast Bharat", Indian drama in Hindustani', August 1942; BMA, 'Amenities: Minutes and Meetings of the Troops Entertainment Committee', 1943-, unpublished miscellanies; BMA, '[Notice:] ENSA Concert Party "Dance Little Lady"', 19 September 1945; BMA, 'Notice: The Singing Kettle', 21 January 1948.

¹¹¹ In October 1944, for example, the production costs of the operetta 'La Danza Delle Libellule' amounted to 30,710 East African Shilling which included the remuneration of principal singers, dancers and chorus as well as the expenses for 'Writing of Music by ear from gramophone record', costumes and scenery. BMA, 'Statement of Expenses: Operetta "La Danza Delle Libellule"', unpublished enclosure to a letter 'To: Chief Secretary, H.Q., B.M.A. – Eritrea, Subject: Gala

It is doubtful whether these shows reached an audience outside the confines of military personnel and expatriate communities. Yet the less oppressive atmosphere during the BMA, as opposed to Italian colonisation, was conducive to greater cultural activities among Eritreans; and the British love for drama certainly helped further the emergence of indigenous theatre work.

A more booming and influential entertainment industry was the cinema sector, the rise of which had already affected smaller theatre companies in neighbouring Arabic countries (Amin 1999: 27). The struggle for survival of many European, especially Italian groups, suggests a similar effect on the performing arts scene in Eritrea. By 1943 nineteen cinemas were operating in Eritrea, seven of which were based in Asmara. The remaining cinema halls were distributed in smaller towns such as Keren, Agordat, Assab, or Decamhare, while Massawa accommodated four. In addition a Mobile Cinema Unit toured the remoter settlements with educational and propaganda films. This was also common in other British colonies, such as Kenya, Nigeria and the then Northern Rhodesia (Kerr 1995: 26), and was practised in Eritrea well into Haile Selassie's rule, calcifying the already existing understanding that performance was also always educational. In Asmara, the four most imposing cinemas (Atlantic, Impero, Odeon and Teatro) were reserved for English-speaking films. Initially out of bounds for Eritreans, they became gradually accessible from 1945, first with segregated seating, later with access to all parts of the cinemas. (Osman Ahmed recalled that at first Eritreans were only allowed to enter English picture-houses barefoot – a nonsensical regulation, possibly motivated by deluded sanitary concerns. These rules were eventually abandoned.) Two cinemas (Dante and Mulati, the first of which was open to Eritreans), showed Italian films, while Cinema Hamassien continued to cater solely for the indigenous population and the Sudanese Defence Force. Here Arabic and English films were screened together with the omnipresent War Pictorial News. All films were 'carefully censored' in the attempt to provide the locals with a 'little relaxation [...] stressing that they are not forgotten in our scheme of things and giving them something tangible to take their minds off political and other issues' (Cousland 4 September 1942). The incipient politicisation among Eritreans under the BMA would not be content with 'bread and circuses', but films did have a conspicuous influence on future Eritrean

Performances – "Odeon" Theatre', 20 October 1944; see also BMA, 'To: Chief Secretary, H.Q., Asmara, Subject: [Production of "Madame Butterfly"]', 25 January 1944; Horner (29 January 1944), La Stabile Dell' Eritrea (2 March 1942).

performers. Notably the comedies of the Charlie Chaplin,¹¹² Laurel and Hardy and, in the 1960s, of the Jerry Lewis type became popular and were imitated in comical Tigrinya sketches and playlets, at times with serious political undertones, not unlike the Chaplin movies. Comedy of the ‘slipping on a banana skin variety’ (Plastow 1989: 68) was also a favourite with audiences in Ethiopia at the time, but none of my informants mentioned – or wished to mention – possible connections with the cultural practices of their neighbours. The influence of the film industry on theatre arts certainly cannot be underestimated. Apart from inspiring performance styles and fashion, a fad especially among female singers became noticeable in the mid-1950s to ’60s, that of naming oneself after Hollywood stars: Sofia Ali, a former *suwa* house entertainer and participant of the First National Singing Contest was known as Sophia Loren; Teberih Tesfahunei, the most popular singer in the 1960s, called herself Doris Day; while their contemporary Tekabo Woldemariam was occasionally referred to as Mario Lanza in the papers.¹¹³ Though, as we will later see, purely foreign entertainment forms in non-Eritrean languages were increasingly rejected with the establishment of indigenous theatre associations, the glamour of Western modes appealed and was an intrinsic aspect of the Eritrean modernity, together with trousers for women, beehive hairdos and, in the 1960s, the fashion of miniskirts. These forms were readily appropriated by female performers to demonstrate a break with older, confining, norms, possibly also in the attempt to establish a new artistic identity against prevailing attitudes towards women on stage.¹¹⁴

Theatre Arts under the British Military Administration II:

Cabaret and the ‘Colour Bar’

The loosening of fascist race laws under the BMA did not genuinely help Eritreans to gain access to European-style performances except for film shows, school drama and religious theatre (the latter of which had already been available during Italian rule). In the early to mid-1940s members of both British and Allied Forces still objected to sitting next to Eritreans and admonished that unrestricted access for locals to cinemas led to ‘clandestine intercourse [being] arranged while

¹¹² Chaplin was also a major influence on Ghanaian Concert Parties. Barber et al. (1997: 7), Cole (2001: 79).

¹¹³ It is interesting to note the Italo-(American) connection of two of the international role models: the Italian Sophia Loren (* 1934) is an internationally renowned film actress; the American tenor Mario Lanza (1921-1959) was of Italian descent.

¹¹⁴ Taylor (28 January 1943), I 111, T. Tesfahunei (1999 & 2000), G. Gebru (1 January 1996: 30-33), Falceto ([booklet] Ref 82965-2 DK 016: 17).

in the Cinema – which takes place out of doors after the show’. An ‘appalling state of affairs’¹¹⁵ in the complainant’s view, for which Eritrean women were implicitly held responsible. At the time, there were few foreign women in Eritrea, mostly the spouses of higher-ranking officers or Italian settlers. The British troops (much like the Italian army previously) consisted mostly of single young men who eventually sought contacts with Eritrean women. Incidents such as the above evinced the gap between liberal attitudes and daily practice, fuelled by an ancient colonial fear of ‘promiscuity between natives and Europeans’ (Lauro 29 September 1941) which had seen its heyday during fascist rule. This anxiety was based on ideas of cultural and racial ‘purity’ and its possible ‘pollution’ which did not only circulate among the expatriate population.¹¹⁶ None of Eritrea’s nationalities encouraged interethnic relations, all of them being very tightly knit and wary of outsiders to their communities. Notions of ‘cultural purity’ were also prevalent in the work of the Tigrinya Language Council, with its objective of ‘safeguarding the “purity” of the language’ (G. Negash 1999: 116). Some such ideas have survived until this day, to be found in discussions of ‘tradition’ and its undesirable ‘modern’, i.e. transcultural, adulterations.

There is no doubt that foreign/Eritrean ‘contact zones’ – ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’ (Pratt 1992: 4) – were fraught with contradictions and ambiguities, if not downright exploitation. Women in particular were prone to sexual abuse and other mistreatment in certain sectors of the entertainment industry, as will be discussed below. Yet not all artistic encounters between Eritreans and foreigners were of a detrimental nature, some proving highly significant for the evolution of the urban performing arts.

The gradual, if often difficult, opening up of formerly out-of-bounds entertainment had far-reaching consequences. Easier access to performance venues and the legality of Eritrean-European interaction led to unprecedented cultural co-operation during the BMA, mostly among amateur performers. *Memher* Lemlem Ghebregziabhier recalled a ‘women’s club established by British officers’ (I 71) where two British teachers encouraged women to get involved in drama activities. BMA files did not chronicle a women’s club; evidence however suggests that my informant spoke of the Young Women’s

¹¹⁵ Ashurst (11 November 1944); see also BMA, ‘File No. 273, Subject: Colour Bar’, 19 August 1944.

¹¹⁶ Loomba (1998: 159); cf. Douglas (1970: 3).

Christian Organisation (YWCA) which had been established as part of the British War Services in Asmara. Under its director Louise Burton it was open to women of all nationalities, operating a women's hostel, tea service, and 'numerous indoor facilities' (Anon. 27 September 1944: 2.). These included a library, regular knitting classes, and evidently also a theatre society. The War Services Club in Asmara was closed at the end of January 1947, despite proposals of the World YWCA to turn it into a civilian centre, which sealed the fate of all drama activities under the Club's care (Burton 18 January 1947).

On the semi-professional and professional theatre front developments were rather more enduring. It had been common in cinemas for expatriates to accompany film shows with live entertainment. These were advertised as 'Grand Variety' and included musical bands, 'New Turns and Dances' (Anon 27 August 1941: 3), as well as sketches or possibly stand-up comedy. Now foreigners began to teach Eritreans European music and sometimes included them in their groups – a surely welcome move for the understaffed theatre sector. It also rang in Eritrean post-Second-World-War modernity. 'There was an Italian music teacher', Osman Ahmed recalled. 'Everyone paid 10 shillings to study with him. People like me, Alemayo [Kahasai], Gerezghier, Tesfai, Yohannes and Belay Legesse, we all studied with him for six months' (I 101).¹¹⁷ Gino Mill, Dr Mario Forena, Maestro Antonini and Oscar Ramponi were likewise involved in cross-cultural entertainment, that is, they worked with Eritreans on European-style variety shows, comprising mostly Italian songs, dances and comical sketches. Initially, knowledge of the colonial tongue was a prerequisite, but very soon Eritrean performers started to appropriate this type of show in their own theatre associations.¹¹⁸ An Italian woman is said to have trained Ethiopians and one Eritrean woman in classical ballet, as did Gino Mill who tutored some men in the art of ballroom dancing.¹¹⁹ Mill seems to have started his variety shows around

¹¹⁷ In a later interview, Osman Ahmed referred to two Italian music teachers, 'Regero' and 'Antonio', who are said to have taught many musicians for two years. It is also possible that Italians performed with Eritreans in Cinema Hamassien already before the BMA period, though as a venue it was meant to segregate Africans from Europeans. I 111, I 122.

¹¹⁸ Variety shows were not only popular with the expatriate communities. If we look at neighbouring Ethiopia or other East African countries, such as Tanzania, for example, it becomes apparent that local variety shows were much appreciated by the indigenous population. Plastow (1989: 67-68), Ricard (2000: 16).

¹¹⁹ The men trained in dance were Alemayo Kahasai, Belay Legesse, and Omar Dibango who was famous for his performance of the tango. Of the women, only Gabriela is remembered. An accomplished dancer, she toured to Switzerland and Beirut; later she opened a snack bar in Asmara. She died around 1975. According to *memher* Asres Tessema, Gino Mill and his troupe also performed at the Silver Anniversary of Haile Selassie's coronation in 1955. I 122, I 129.

1943 with three of the most popular local comedians, Alemayo Kahasai (nicknamed the Eritrean Toto after an Italian clown, or *Wetru Hagus*, 'Ever Smiling' (B. Abebaw [1982_{EC?}])), Ali Said (a professional nightclub musician of Eritrean-Egyptian parentage), and Belay Legesse (the man who would be remembered for his life-like rendering of female roles).



Fig. 27 *Eritrean artists in a nightclub in the late 1940s.*
Bottom row, from left: Osman Ahmed, Ali Said, Alemayo Kahasai, Gerezghier Teka (future husband of member Lemlem Ghebregziabhier). Upper row: fifth from left possibly Belay Legesse (with hat), sixth from left possibly Maria 'Buzu', second from right Tesfai Gebremichael.

The only woman member was Maria, also known as 'Buzu', who became famous as 'Donna Electrica'. According to Tekabo Woldemariam, she wore a tight-fitting costume similar to a swimsuit which the audience was allowed to touch when she was on stage. The 'joke' of the act was that people then got an electric shock because it was wired to a battery or socket. Though fanciful in that it utilised modern technology, Buzu's performance was just another three-dimensional version of the old temptress/untouchable virgin divide found in older cultural texts. Now, however, the hackneyed dichotomy was synchronised and electrically grafted onto the body of the performer (I 117).

It is likely that these types of shows were mounted in so-called '1st class' ('European') and '2nd class' ('Mixed') cabarets as well as in private clubs, given the evidently seedy character of the performance which would have made it unsuitable as family entertainment in venues such as Cinema Asmara. Clubs and cabarets abounded during the British Administration, but little is known about the

running of their affairs. According to contemporaries, Italian and other European performers were brought to Eritrea on a contract basis and, on completing their work, returned to their home countries or continued to tour. Women artists were certainly a main attraction of the shows, confirmed by newspaper advertisement announcing the 'eccentric' dancer 'Mara Marta', '10 Charming Girls' or 'The lovely sisters Ida and Adriana in their magnificent act' (Anon. 10 December 1941: 2).

It is known that people of mixed parentage often found employment in the nightclub and cabaret entertainment sector.¹²⁰ Eritrean-Italian liaisons had been common, and grudgingly tolerated, until the advent of Mussolini. The Italian governor of Eritrea from 1897-1907, Ferdinando Martini, however, had already 'despised the form of irregular union between an Italian man and an Eritrean woman known as "madamismo" on the pragmatic grounds that such intimacy between the rulers and the colonized weakened' (T. Negash 1987: 99) imperial prestige. Under fascist rule paternalist-condescending attitudes eventually turned into apartheid-like race segregation. In 1937 Italians became liable to imprisonment if they maintained conjugal relations with Eritreans. New rules also began to apply for the offspring of these liaisons. While it had been previously possible for people of mixed ancestry to acquire Italian citizenship if acknowledged by their fathers (which entailed access to schooling beyond the four-grade maximum for Eritreans, and the prospect of going abroad), this possibility was closed with the advent of the new legislation. Mixed-race people were now classified as 'Africans' and stripped of their social prerogatives; theories of racial inferiority attempted to validate 'an innate degeneracy in biracial offspring' (Barrera 1996: 33). At the same time – that is after the 1935/36 Italo-Ethiopian war which had involved many Eritrean *ascaris* (soldiers serving in the colonial army) – an officially stipulated 'Eritrean' identity emerged. This new identity was based on a racist Italian ideology which drew a distinction between 'Eritreans' – those who had already been under Italian colonial rule – and the 'natives' of the newly occupied Ethiopian territory. According to Tekeste Negash, this new identity was readily embraced and appropriated by the Eritrean

¹²⁰ Even in the 1960s and '70s, the number of mixed-race performers was relatively high. On being asked why many of the musical bands had English, not Eritrean, names, Solomon Gebregziabhier replied in 1995: 'Because a many of these bands were half-caste Italians, like "The Flames", "Flamingos", "The Teenagers". Mostly they were half-caste' (ECBTP 95/7). For a similar example see Oguntoye et al. (1992: 77-84).

intelligentsia, not only to distinguish themselves from the economically disadvantaged Ethiopia, but also as a foundation for their rising nationalism.¹²¹

Like the country itself, Eritreans and their incipient collective identity seem thus a colonial creation in origin. In the mid-1930s, this had dramatic consequences for persons of mixed parentage. Suddenly they found themselves in the interstices of two sharply defined communities, Italian and Eritrean. The new designation did not necessarily ensure acceptance of mixed-race people on either side of the divide. Rather, Trevaskis writes, it continued to incite 'bitterness in the Abyssinian' which was not only aimed at the Italian community for cohabiting with local women, but was 'particularly directed against the half-castes born of these unions' (Trevaskis 1960: 50).

Unlike their African or European counterparts who, as the Sheba legend and other cultural texts have shown, embodied paradigms such as culture, race or nation, mixed-race women in Eritrea could never be constitutive archetypes. At most, they were embodiments of 'miscegenation', and thus doubly marginalised for their gender and skin colour.¹²² That this 'un-belonging' allowed them to occupy another, more open, space, namely that of performance, is a very tempting thought and might apply to a number of mixed-race performers active in the subsequent theatre associations.¹²³ Employment in cabarets and nightclubs in the 1940s, however, seemed to have been based on racial and sexual exploitation, rather than on the women choosing these spaces to express their own concerns. In comparison with *suwa* entertainers and teachers, cabaret performers do not seem to have had great pride in their art, nor did these shows validate their experience.

BMA files from 1944 confirm that clubs like the 'Chez Vous' or bands such as 'Trio Golde' engaged so-called 'half-caste girls to dance first on the stage and later at the cabarets'.¹²⁴ While there was principally no objection from the authorities to stage performances, they nonetheless suggested that employment as

¹²¹ T. Negash (1997: 16-18), Tronvoll (1999: 1043).

¹²² Even under subsequent rulers the double marginalisation was tangible. When direct elections for the Eritrean Assembly were held in the urban centres of Asmara and Massawa in 1952, as part of the new federation with Ethiopia, 'Italo-Eritreans or any others of mixed parentage' (R. Iyob 1995: 86) were not eligible to vote, nor were Eritrean women. In my experience, Italo-Eritrean men of this generation tended to keep in touch with the expatriate community, while many women took refuge in a very 'traditional' life or returned to one in their later years. For a personal account of Afro-Italian life see Viarengo (2000: 20-22), for a literary analysis see Ponzanesi (2000: 16-19); see also Ponzanesi (1998: 97-115).

¹²³ Pierina Allegri of Ma.M.Ha.L. and Hiwot Tedla of Ma.Te.A. were both of Italo-Eritrean parentage.

¹²⁴ BMA, 'To Chief Secretary, H.Q., BMA, Eritrea, Subject: Employment of Half-Cast Girls on the Stage', unpublished letter, Asmara, 15 August 1944.

'Dance Hostesses' (Anon. 3 July 1941: 4) – i.e. dancing partners for patrons – might displease the European clientele. (So much, again, for liberal attitudes vis-à-vis daily practice). The decision however was ultimately left to the proprietors, and no records exist of how they administered their premises. Given the shortage of European women as 'fitting' dance partners for officers and lower ranks in Asmara,¹²⁵ it is likely that mixed-race and other Eritrean women were brought in to fill the gaps, especially in '2nd class' venues accessible to Eritreans.¹²⁶ 'Abeba Tewolde', Tekabo Woldemariam recalled, 'danced in a dance place called "Shanghai" near Kidane Meheret Church. Many women went there and danced, like Ghidey Fesehaye, Gabriela, Maria, Zebenesh Gebray. They were the first women to dance' (I 111).

Most Eritrean women did not frequent the music halls, yet they too wanted a slice of the Western cultural cake, especially those exposed to British education.

'In my time', Tekabo continued:

meaning in '44,'45 to around '50, there were teachers who listened to European disco dances. They also began to wear European clothes. They were a whole group which included Nigisti, Mebrahtu [male], Tsadwa [male], Bizen, Teka Hagos, Lisa Gustafo, Ghidey and Brehane [male]. They were the first to dance European dances in their houses. European dress was not common at the time, but they still did it and thus set an example. (I 111).

Once again teachers were at the forefront of embracing what was considered 'modern', 'progressive' and 'fashionable' at the time, thus being the harbingers of Eritrean post-Second-World-War modernity. Developments, however, did not stop at the mere level of 'apemanship', to borrow from the Ugandan Okot p'Bitek, i.e. the indiscriminate imitation of Western forms resulting in a 'kind of slave mentality' (p'Bitek 1973: 1-2). Rather, this borrowing of colonial cultural habits engendered an introspective self-awareness. For Eritreans began to refuse the cultural leash of Italy and Britain, and started to experiment with transcultural, hybrid performance forms that were to become an expression of Eritrean

¹²⁵ BMA correspondence from 1943-1946 reveals that there was a considerable shortage of European women for staff dances and similar occasions, especially as partners for the lower ranks since only officers were entitled to bring their spouses to Asmara. Asmara Headquarters, for example, quoted a complaint made by the British Forces in Sudan that '[t]here appears to be little effort made by the majority of the ladies of the Allied Nations living in Asmara to do anything for the Other Ranks. [...] Perhaps a little flattery and cajoling might induce some of these butterflies to grace the functions at humbler rendezvous than the Palace (but not "dressed down" for the occasion)' (Greenslade 12 April 1943).

¹²⁶ The situation does not seem to differ greatly from that at the time of writing. During a visit to Asmara in summer 2001, I was informed that a well-known nightclub on the Expo grounds had hired Eritrean girls as dancers to entice more UN staff to frequent their venue.

nationalism.¹²⁷ While one group fully immersed itself in the new-found delights of European-style entertainment, another – through its exposure to foreign performance types – began to criticise the lack of indigenous urban theatre arts.

Mahber Tewasew Dekabat – The First Eritrean Theatre Association I: Tigrinya Theatre

In 1947 seventeen men – some experienced performers, others newcomers, many teachers – founded the first-ever Eritrean theatre association under the name of Ma.Te.De., *Mahber Tewasew Dekabat*, which roughly translates as Indigenous Theatre Association.¹²⁸ One of its architects was Osman Ahmed, my principal source, others included Alemayo Kahasai, Ali Said, and the person who was to organise the First National Singing Contest in the 1950s, Tesfai Gebremichael. ‘The idea was that all the theatre groups were of Italian nature’, Osman recollected in our first meeting. ‘We, the people of Eritrea, needed our own. We wanted to narrate our own history. We wanted to oppose oppression. [...] The majority of us had nationalist feelings. We therefore only considered those who had a high degree of patriotism as members’.¹²⁹

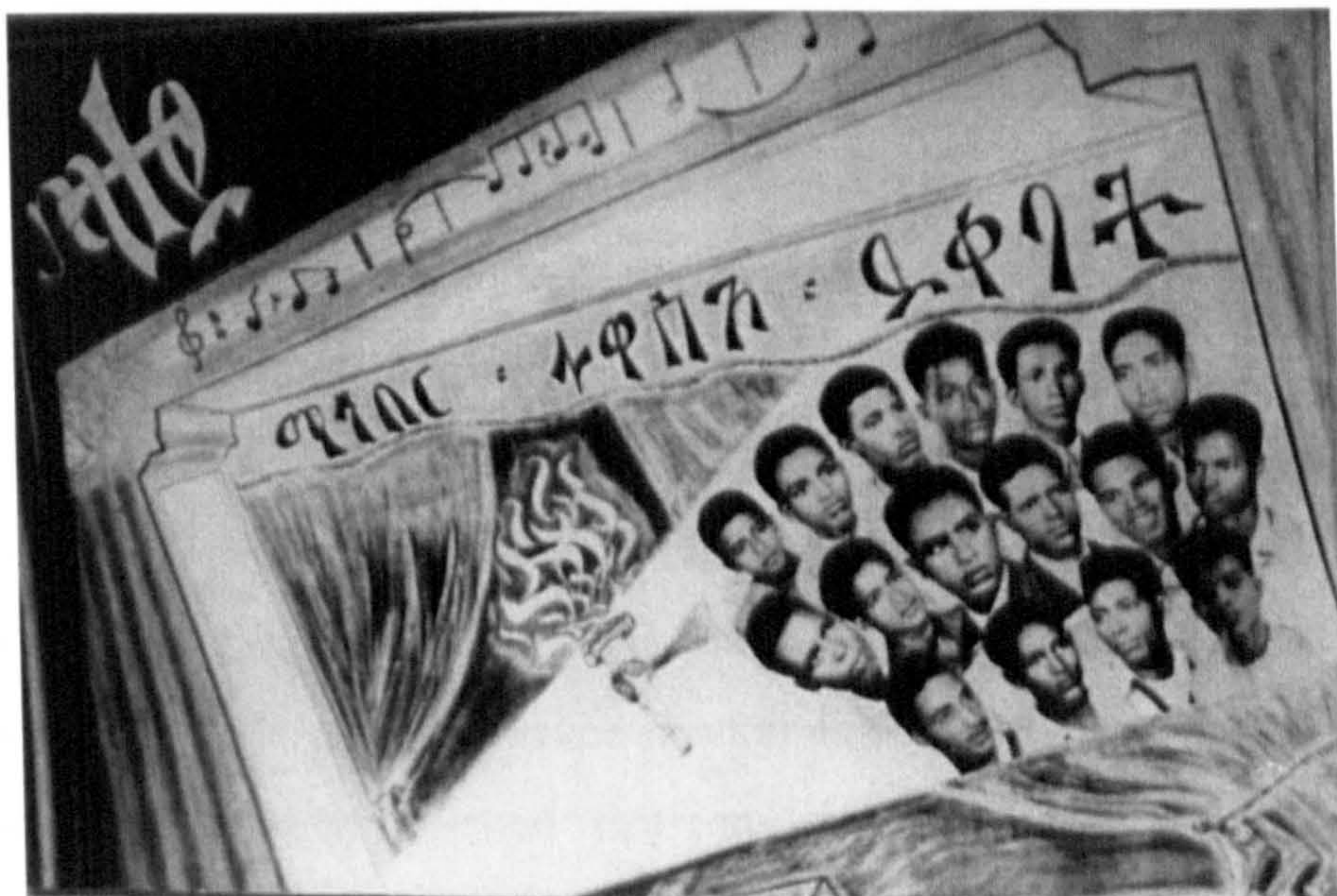


Fig. 28 Mahber Tewasew Dekabat (*Ma.Te.De.*) in the 1940s.

¹²⁷ In the given context, hybridity and hybrid, one of the most widely utilised but controversial catchwords in postcolonial theory, should not be understood in their most prevalent sense of situating the diasporic ‘Third World intellectual within a multiplicity of cultural positionalities and perspectives’ (Shohat 1992: 108). Nor does it characterise ‘forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection [or] social conformism’ (110). Rather it describes a ‘cultural transcendence’ (110) instigated by Eritrean performers who learned about and appropriated European performance forms in the urban contact zones.

¹²⁸ In other publications, Ma.Te.De has been referred to as Native Theatre Association (NTA). I prefer the Tigrinya abbreviations as they are recognised and widely used in Eritrea. Plastow (1997a: 146), Y. Estefanos (13 May 1996: 6).

¹²⁹ I 30. For a link between theatre and nationalism in neighbouring Sudan see Al-Mubarak (1986: 70).

Some secondary sources declare that Ma.Te.De. had Unionist leanings and that its origins were rooted in a drama production mounted by the *Mahber Andenet*, the Unity Association, while others attributed the plays directly to Ma.Te.De.¹³⁰ During the core phase of my field research in 1999/2000 (at the height of the latest Ethiopian-Eritrean war) this link was habitually evaded, if not outrightly denied by most informants (cf. Matzke 2001: 38, 43). Talks in 2001, however, confirmed that Ma.Te.De. had indeed originated in a Unionist theatre group established between 1944-46. Their first show was a historical play about Eritrea's colonial experience, *N'bret Z'halefe Eritrea* ('Eritrea's Past Property') by Berhe Mesgun, and was staged in Cinema Hamassien in 1946. The story of *Z'halefe* remained topical and a favourite with audiences for years, and became part of Ma.Te.De.'s repertoire. There is also evidence that the theatre association mounted lengthy Ethiopian plays, mostly in a Tigrinya translation, according to informants.

If, after all, 'pro-Unionist leanings' can be proved, then it is equally clear that 'pro-independence' (or anti-federation) sentiments rapidly mounted among Ma.Te.De. artists after the 1952 federation, with an ever-growing number of Eritreans strongly resenting Ethiopian hegemony. Ghirmai Negash, in his discussion of *Haylom, An Asmaran* (1967), a novel by Ma.Te.De. member Yosief Yishak, points to the anxieties many Unionists members were susceptible to at the time. Like the eponymous hero of Yosief's novel, they were 'torn between two loyalties, two kinds of national identities' (G. Negash 1999: 167): the union with Ethiopia as a preferable alternative to European rule on the one hand, and the wish to preserve their Eritrean selfhood on the other. The manifold incongruities regarding Ma.Te.De.'s political stance in various sources seem rooted in the fact that Ethiopia increasingly denied Eritreans their rights after the federation. Perhaps *memher* Lemlem Ghebregziabhier, herself with Ma.Te.De. from the early 1950s, came closest to the truth when referring to the political divisions among Eritreans in the mid-1940s and the ensuing mediation efforts of the association:

The people at the time had divided feelings. Muslims [predominately pro-independence] and Christians [predominately Unionists] were at each other's throats. It was rumoured that even Tsehaitu *gual Zenar* traded blows and punches with Muslim men alongside the Christians. To correct this, Ma.Te.De. came into being. (I 71).

¹³⁰ For *Mahber Andenet* see Plastow (1997a: 148), A. Kahasai (1977_{EC} [1985]); for Ma.Te.De. see Y. Yosief (1979_{EC} [1986]).

In sum, Ma.Te.De.'s artistic aim was to produce stage drama in Tigrinya and, later, Eritrean-language songs to make something home-grown as opposed to Italianised stage performances.¹³¹ Some nine full-length plays were mounted during the lifetime of Ma.Te.De., comprising Eritrean originals and Ethiopian translations. While I have had difficulties in obtaining the most rudimentary outlines of the Eritrean plays, translations from the Amharinya were usually remembered or had been recorded elsewhere. Among them were *Meswaati Abuna Pedros* ('The Martyrdom of *Abuna* (bishop) Pedros'), translated by Alemayo Kahasai (most likely from Makonnen Endalkachew's *Yedam Dems* ('The Voice of Blood', 1947)), as well as *May T'nbit Kotsera* ('Prophetic Appointment') (see Figures 29 and 30), a translation of *Yetenbit Kitero* by Kebede Michael.¹³² Most of the dramas were three to four hours long, their themes varying between historical, religious and educational topics often characterised by an anti-colonial stance. While *Meswaati Abuna Pedros* dealt with the trials and eventual heroic execution of an eminent church leader by the infamous Italian Viceroy Marshal Graziani in 1936 – the first celebration of a martyr on an Eritrean stage¹³³ – 'Prophetic Appointment' told the story of the reluctant conversion of a 'heathen' king to Christianity. All in all, thematic links to the Christian Orthodox highlands prevailed, neglecting Muslim issues or lowland culture.

While music and dance instruction was offered by expatriate tutors, training for stage theatre was not available in Eritrea. Artists learnt through trial and error, drawing on their experience with school drama or foreign theatre groups. Performance venues were initially Cinema Hamassien and Adulis Girls School, with tickets costing one East African shilling. Later, the capital's oldest theatre, a beautiful Italianate opera house built in 1920, was also used. Today known as Cinema Asmara, it has remained Eritrea's *de facto* national theatre. Ma.Te.De. moreover toured their plays to larger towns such as Keren, Decamhare

¹³¹ 'We didn't like the [European-style] music hall dances. We thought they were spoiling our people. The then Haile Selassie I School, today Red Sea School, invited us to their school closing ceremony in the first year. We were angry that they taught the students dancing instead of academic subjects. We did not do Western plays, but cultural plays, we, that is Alemayo [Kahasai], Tewolde [Abraha 'Manchu'], Yohannes [possibly Ghide]. They were not happy because they expected us to teach the students tango and all that' (I 101).

¹³² Note that Yishak Yosief attributes *Abuna Pedros* to *Abba* Ghebreyesus, the author of *King Tewodros*, in his ECBTP 1995 interview (ECBTP 95/13). Yosief (1979 EC [1986]). Anon (2 May 1983EC: 1, 2). I wish to thank Jane Plastow and Tesfazghi Ukubazghi for pointing these translations out to me.

¹³³ The character of *Abuna Pedros* was quite popular in Amharinya drama at the time. Richard Pankhurst (1973: 118-124), Plastow (1989: 83-84).

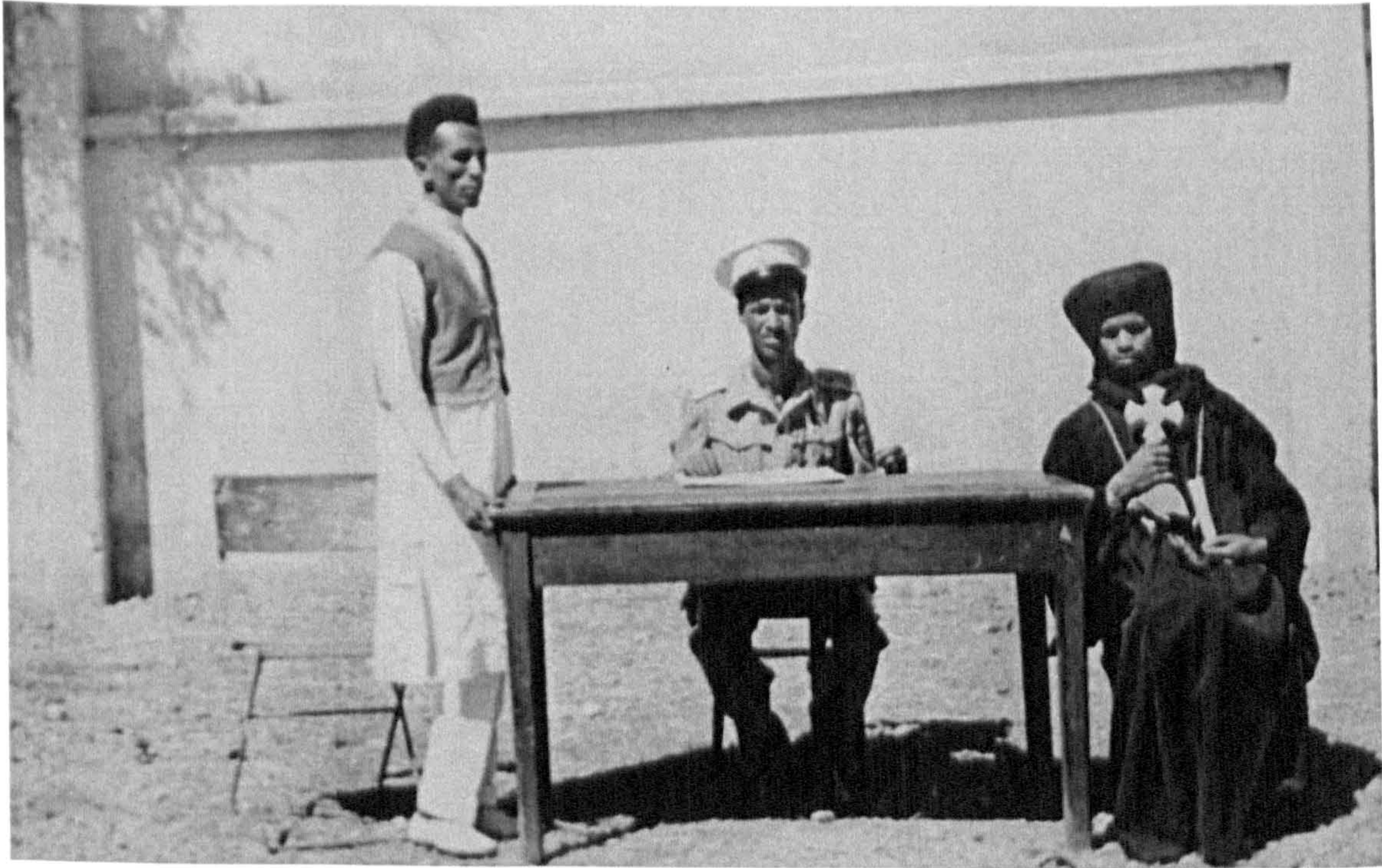


Fig. 29 Meswaati Abuna Pedros (*The Martyrdom of Abuna (bishop) Pedros*),
Ma.Te.De.

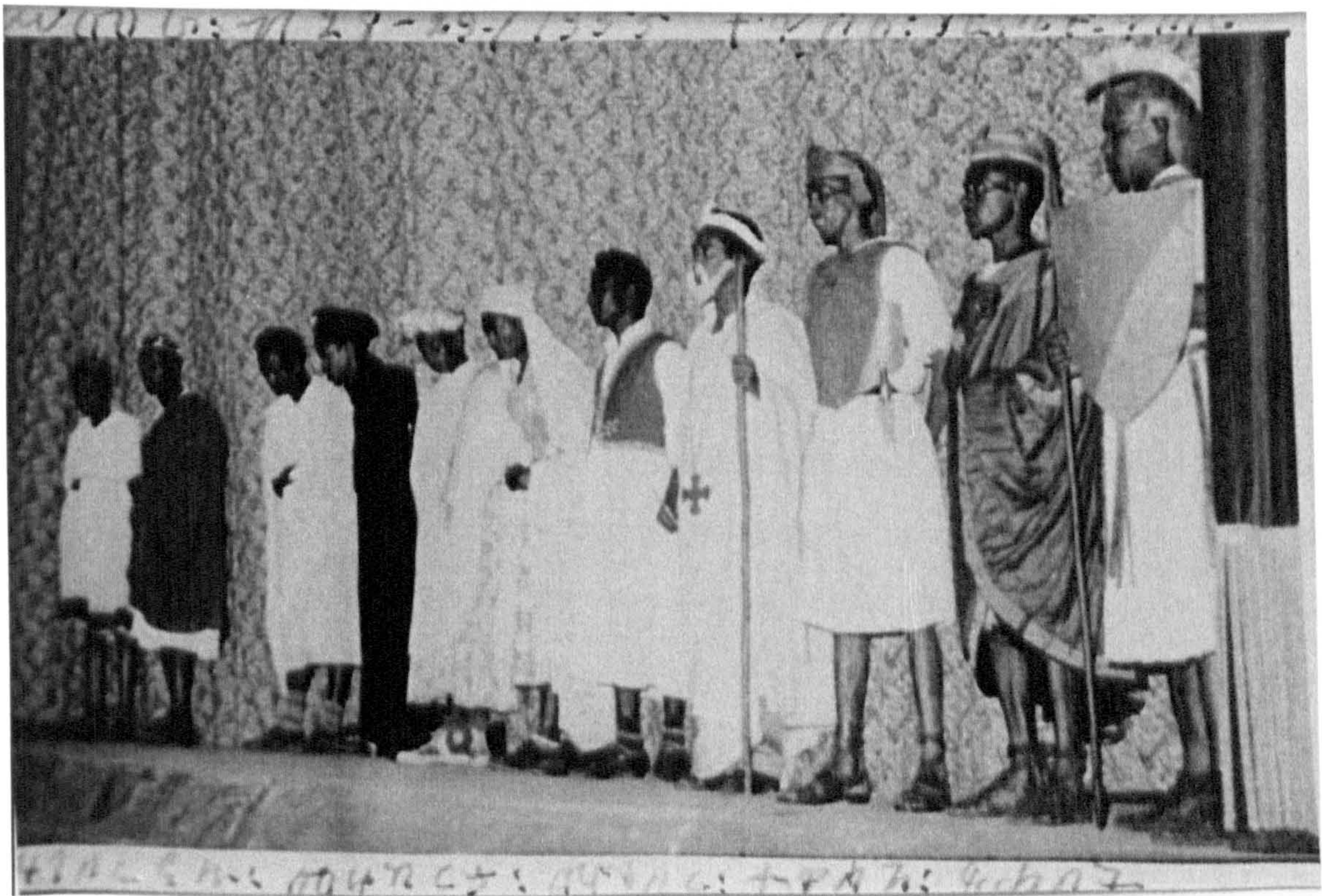


Fig. 30 May T'nbit Kotsera (*Prophetic Appointment*), *Ma.Te.De.*, 1955.

and Massawa. Most of these places lacked indigenous entertainment groups, but sported Italian cinemas-cum-theatre houses (see Figures 32 and 33).

When it emerged that audiences were bored by lengthy dialogue drama, which was not part of their local performance tradition, a musical wing, *Mahber Musica Tewasew Dekabat* (Ma.Mu.Te.De.) was introduced in the early 1950s.



Fig. 31 Mahber Musica Tewasew Dekabat (*Ma.Mu.Te.De.*).

Instrumentalists from religious associations, such as *Mahber Felege Hiwot* ('The Source of Life') and *Mahber Tsibak Fikad* (Good Will Association), were engaged to complement the artists in Ma.Te.De. Women musicians were not part of the group, though female cabaret employees, like Buzu, occasionally accompanied the shows. The band was strictly separate from the theatre group, performing at private functions, in cabarets and nightclubs, such as Mocambo, sometimes in collaboration with non-Eritrean performers. Ma.(Mu.)Te.De. was therefore not only the first indigenous theatre association, but also the first to establish an all-Eritrean music group which set the standard for future ensembles. The band played an idiosyncratic mix comprising modern European music and popular ancestral tunes, predominantly using non-Eritrean instruments, such as the violin, the guitar, the accordion, the drum set, and, occasionally, African bongos, the sole exception being the *krar*. In later years individual efforts were made to include further local musical instruments, such as the *kebero*, *embalta* or *shira-wata*.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ The *embalta* is a local flute, the *shira-wata* a one-string violin. EPLF (Research Branch) (1982b), E. Lucas (1 January 1996: 25-33).

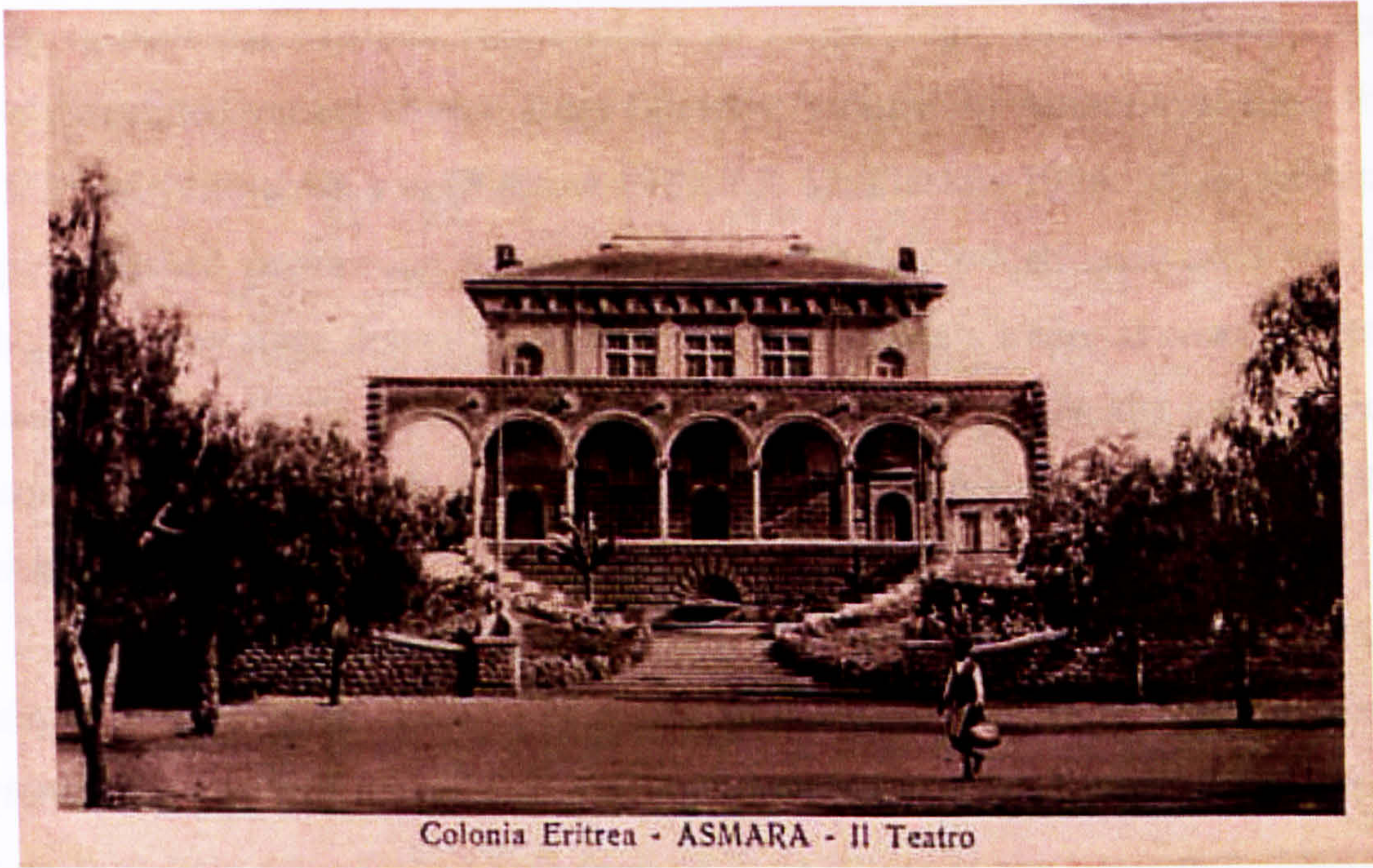


Fig. 32 *Cinema Asmara during the Italian colonisation.*



Fig. 33 *Theatre in Decamhare.*

Plays were now shortened and comical, often political, skits were performed, not unlike the variety shows of the *Hager Fiqir* in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian National Patriotic Association, *Ye Hager Fiqir Mahber Theater*, had already mounted variety shows, *kinet* (literally 'culture' in Amharinya) since the 1935/36 Italo-Ethiopian war (Plastow 1989: 65, 67; Plastow 1994: 55), combining long-established performing forms and short sketches which contrasted starkly with the lengthy stage drama favoured by Haile Selassie's imperial court. Artistic influence on Ma.Te.De. could not be established (I 122); rather, the first Eritrean theatre association kept drawing on the longer Amharinya plays preferred by the Ethiopian elite.

Prior to the federation with Ethiopia, Ma.Te.De. had been an entirely male affair. Women, even *suwa* sellers, were reluctant to join because stage performance was still associated with jobs involving commercial sex.¹³⁵ Out of necessity female roles were taken over by male actors at the beginning. *Memher Abebe Iyasu*, then still a student, was talent-scouted by Alemayo for Ma.Te.De. in the late 1940s after having been spotted as a 'woman' actor in a Shakespearean school drama. Belay Legesse was also known for his realistic rendering of female roles. 'We tried to find women', Osman Ahmed recalled, 'but it was not possible. However, we had handsome boys in the group for whom we made costumes and who acted like girls. [...] The audience took them for women' (I 30, I 101). I enquired whether this did not have a comic effect, given that male cross-dressing is not found in older Eritrean performance forms, though part of the tradition for women. 'There was no such thing as comedy', Osman vehemently objected. 'It was a serious show' (I 30).

Given the lowly social status of women and the fact that performers were generally looked-down upon, cross-dressers nevertheless suffered ridicule and were often considered as *sebetay* or 'womanish' (I 126). (Potential homosexual undercurrents were denied, homosexuality being an absolute anathema in Eritrea, as in many other African countries). The problem was eventually solved in 1953 when the association was able to recruit four female members during a reshuffle

¹³⁵ Plastow notes about the Ethiopian context that women performers 'were often pushed into prostitution in order to survive [...]. Essentially it was thought that only fallen women could so betray their modesty as to appear on stage. For many years the expectation was usually self-fulfilling, the actress having to resort to prostitution to supplement her wages, and the prostitutes being the only source of women who were willing to act' (Plastow 1989: 71-72). As noted earlier, this attitude was also prevalent in the Eritrean highlands. The 'source of women' for Ma.Te.De., however, turned out to be rather different from general expectations and female Ma.Te.De. members never engaged in commercial sex work.

of the group.¹³⁶ None had a *suwa*-selling or cabaret background, but all were conspicuous for their comparatively higher standards of education: the aforementioned *memher* Lemlem, *memher* Hiwot Gebre, *memher* Mebrat Gebre, and Amete Solomon, pupil and neighbour of *memher* Hiwot. All these women, it can be assumed, had been previously exposed to school drama, while *memher* Lemlem had also had contact with the YMCA theatre group. She recalled joining Ma.Te.De.

because they persuaded me that we were doing it to advance our national culture. Hiwot Gebre too was telling me that it was beneficial for our country. At first I did not go openly because there was pressure from my family. I am a Catholic and the church is strict about these things. My parents were also against it. I told them that I took a course in handicrafts when in fact I was going to the rehearsals. It was only when we started to tour that they found out. They were furious. (I 71).

Hide-and-seek games of this kind have been, and still are, prevalent in Eritrea whenever a girl wishes to join a drama club after school. Yet not every woman had problems with her family. Amete Solomon remembered her brother (a teacher) being rather supportive, hoping that it would help her overcome her timidity; and Hiwot Gebre was simply an exceptional person. A free and daring spirit, she was the first woman to enter a bicycle race, and among the first to wear trousers. She also refused to get married, dreading the loss of her independence. 'She was a very open person', her students recalled, 'rather unusual. She did not fear anyone' (I 120). 'In many ways, she was like a man, because she participated in activities only men were allowed to' (I 96). In a society which rested, and still rests, on rigid (gender) dichotomies, there was no greater compliment for the achievement of a woman, even if to the detriment of her 'femininity'.

Initially female Ma.Te.De. members were only involved in drama, not in musical shows. Amete, for example, recalled acting as a mourning woman, *memher* Lemlem her role as Uriah's wife Batsheba who King David (*Negus Dawit*) seduced in the eponymous biblical play.¹³⁷ In *Meswaati Abuna Pedros*, 'The Martyrdom of Abuna Pedros', she took on the minor part of a maid:

We practised two to three times a week, trying to co-ordinate our body movement with the dialogue. Before we started rehearsing, we studied

¹³⁶ For a list of Ma.Te.De. members after 1953 see Appendix I: Performers. It should be noted that female impersonation on stage was not standard practice in Eritrea as it had been in Ghanaian concert parties, for example. Cole (2001:126-127). On potential homosexual undercurrents on stage see also Chapter 7.

¹³⁷ *Negus Dawit* was most likely another translation from Makonnen Endalkachew's *Dawitna Orion* (David and Orion). Plastow (1989: 76).

our part, when to enter, when to exit. Everything was written down. For example, in the play about Abuna Pedros, we prayed before we sat down to eat. I studied everything beforehand, all the actions I should make in that scene. (I 96).

Tesfai Gebremichael was one of the director producers, Yishak Yosief among the playwrights, as was Alemayo Kahasai who also translated foreign dramas. While the women remained 'acting bodies' on stage, the men masterminded behind the scenes, arranging for venues and tours, and dealing with the censorship authorities. An English or Italian translation of the plays had to be submitted and a preview arranged with BMA officials before each first public performance.¹³⁸ At the time, these matters needed to be dealt with by male members of the association because of their higher social standing and their gender-given authority. Men also wrote the plays and songs to be performed by women on stage. Unlike in neighbouring Ethiopia and in Egypt, where individual women had already begun to write and produce plays and were not solely 'inscribed upon' as dramatic characters and performing bodies, this was unthinkable in Eritrea at the time.¹³⁹ 'I was in no position to write my own songs', *member* Lemlem, a very articulate woman, claimed – a disavowal evidently rooted in modesty and deference to the male-dominated sphere of creative writing, rather than stemming from a lack of ability. Men also provided a safe environment for the female members of the association to counteract common perceptions of women on stage. 'They [the men] were protective towards us and caring. Whenever we went to

¹³⁸ In late 1948, for example, 'La Tragedia Di Teodoro' (*Tragedi Hatsey Tewodros* or 'The Tragedy of King Tewodros'), a prose poem for performance by *Abba Ghebreyesus Hailu* was refused staging permission by the Political Secretary in the headquarters of Asmara. Dealing with the history of Emperor Tewodros in the mid-19th century (generally considered as the unifier and moderniser of Ethiopia, and thus politically loaded), it was turned down on the grounds that it was 'likely to excite certain sections of the public and work up racial hatred'. BMA (for Chief Secretary), 'To: Superintendent i/c C.I.D. Eritrea Police, Asmara, Subject: "La Tragedia Di Teodoro"', unpublished letter, 23 December 1948. BMA (Superintendent, Criminal Investigation Dept., Eritrea Police Force), 'To: Political Secretary, B.M.A. H.Q., Asmara, Subject: "La Tragedia Di Teodoro" [Compagnia Teatrale Nativa]', unpublished letter, 18 December 1948. According to Osman Ahmed, it took another three months of negotiation until permission was granted to stage the play. Given the prevalence of Ethiopian themes in Ma.Te.De. plays, a thematic link to Germachew Tekle-Hawariat's immensely successful Amharinya play 'Tewodros' seemed obvious at first. The latter, however, was written in 1949/50 when excerpts of *Abba Hailu's* play had already been published. Plastow (1989: 80-81). For a list of plays produced by Ma.Te.De. see Appendix II: Plays.

¹³⁹ Senedu Gabru, an Ethiopian educationalist trained in France and Switzerland, made her first attempt at playwriting in 1949/50, while Egypt saw women producers as early as 1917. In Sudan, women were more disadvantaged due to the influence of Islam. Here, the first female-headed company was recorded as late as 1979. In Islamic Italian Somalia the first women members were recorded in 1958. Their presence, however, was resented even in the 1990s. Plastow (1989: 84), Rita Pankhurst (1991: 71-87), Said Hersi (1999: 217-218), Amin (1999: 26-27), Al-Mubarak (1999: 228).

Keren or Massawa, people like Tesfai Gebremichael found us separate quarters so that nothing would happen to our innocence' (I 71). It was a clear attempt at invalidating the calcified performer/prostitute stereotype – the women now being teachers and middle class, and probably less streetwise than their independent contemporaries. Yet it also denied them the artistic (and social) liberty commonly enjoyed by *suwa* entertainers and female *hamien*. This pattern of representational visibility for women without administrative and creative power was to remain prevalent until the social reforms in the liberation movements – and later resurfaced post-independence, even if to a somewhat lesser extent.

***Mahber Tewasew Dekabat* – The First Eritrean Theatre Association II: The First National Singing Contest**

In the mid-1950s, with Eritrea already under Ethiopian federation, voices bemoaning the dearth of modern Eritrean songs grew louder. The music forum was still dominated by the foreign market, and the increasingly nationalistic atmosphere among urban Eritreans showed signs of ethnocentricity, if not xenophobia. Trevaskis had noted such tendencies already from the 1940s, primarily directed against the Italian population, but also against the commercially successful Muslim, that is Arab and Tigrinya Jiberti, communities (Trevaskis 1960: 50). It appears that by the early 1950s, these sentiments had found their way into the performing arts. Eritrean artists began to voice their disapproval of Sudanese music, which was prevalent at the time, and vented their resentment in the theatre. *Ali ab Asmara*, a popular Ma.Te.De. play by Gebremeskel Gebregzhier mounted in 1951, centred on the dominance of Arab businessmen in the capital and on their alleged 'deceit' (ECBTP 95/9). A favourite with audiences, the play included slapstick elements that mocked the Arab community, thus providing a stark contrast to the personal dignity highly valued among all Eritrean peoples. Plastow writes that the play 'urged the people to look to their own culture, and advocated a boycott of Arab traders in favour of indigenous entrepreneurs' (Plastow 1997a: 148). It should be noted, however, that 'their own culture' was again reduced to Christian Orthodox highlanders. The understanding of 'Eritrean' identity proffered by the play was unlike the all-inclusive national unity promoted by the EPLF some two decades later.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ According to Richard Pankhurst, 'Ali' had first been a common name for Ethiopians according to Italian idiom. After the battle of Adwa, 1895/86, when the Italian army was crushed and early

When Tesfai Gebremichael, then head of Ma.Te.De., began to organise the *Kedamy Wdeder ne Derfi Hager*, the First National Singing Contest in 1956, the reasons for doing so seemed to have moved from somewhat racist attitudes aimed at one community towards a deeper concern for the country's cultural (and political) self-determination. Over the past decade, Eritrea had been subjected to a vicious political tug-of-war which had been exacerbated in 1948 when a Four Power Commission consisting of France, Britain, the USA and the USSR was formed to decide the country's future. International and regional antagonisms prevented a consensus, and the decision was eventually passed on to the United Nations. Though the UN Commission made a half-hearted attempt at seeking Eritrean opinion on the matter by consulting elitist local chiefs and feudal families, 'the rights and claims of Ethiopia based on geographical, historical, ethnic or economic reasons including ... Ethiopia's legitimate need for adequate access to the sea' (quoted in Pool 1997: 10), eventually carried more weight in the global ring of politics. When Eritrea was finally federated with Ethiopia on a three-to-two majority resolution in 1952, her fate as an autonomous political entity was sealed. Pool notes that '[t]he history of the federation was the history of its destruction' (Pool 1997: 10). While the first three years still saw a semblance of self-government, the erosion of constitutional rights became blatant after 1955. What Eritrea was faced with under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie was a much more subtle and treacherous form of colonialism than the clear-cut ruler/ruled dichotomy under the Italians or the benevolently patronising attitudes of the British caretaker regime. As early as 1952 Eritreans were intimidated during the national assembly elections; trade unions and political parties were disbanded, and newspapers went out of circulation. In the meantime, the international community feigned ignorance. In 1956 – the year of Sudanese Independence – Amharinya replaced Tigrinya and Arabic as the official languages of Eritrea, thereby inaugurating a policy of 'Amharisation'. This process also included the adoption of the Ethiopian flag, the introduction of Ethiopian teachers and bureaucrats, as well as the downgrading of the local government to an 'administration'.¹⁴¹ Given these developments, the First National Singing Contest with its emphasis on *Eritrean* music had a rather political edge to it and was more than just light-

colonial ambitions thwarted, the Ethiopian victors retaliated by reversing the situation and calling the Europeans 'Ali'. Whether similar significations were also common in Eritrea is not specified, though highly likely at this early stage of the colonial enterprise. In the case of the play, however, 'Ali' was indisputably a derogatory term for Arabs and Muslims. Pankhurst (1983: 488).

¹⁴¹ Pool (1997: 10-11), R. Iyob (1995: 88-90).

hearted musical entertainment. Singing contests had taken place before under Italian patronage, such as in 1952, when Dr Mario Forena and Oscar Ramponi organised a similar, though Italian-language, event in Cinema Impero to which local musicians and singers had contributed (I 18). Now, however, Ma.Te.De. members and independent artists were invited to perform their work in Tigrinya.¹⁴² 'For the first time in Eritrea', Tekabo Woldemariam explained, 'we presented our own lyrics and songs to the audience, nothing copied from a different country!' (I 58). By validating the officially depreciated Tigrinya language and by extension the Eritrean experience, the 1956 National Singing Contest became a cultural signifier for growing patriotic feeling in the country and a manifestation of increasing anti-Amhara sentiment.

Thirteen songs were rendered by eleven participants, five of whom were women: *memher* Lemlem, Amete Solomon, *memher* Hiwot, Amsala Woldesakid as well as Sofia Ali (nicknamed 'Loren'), who was a *suwa* house entertainer from Aba Showel (see Figures 34 and 35). A small booklet was produced with titles, singer and the lyrics of the songs, the audience asked to vote by using the page with their most favoured number as ballot paper. In the end Tewolde Redda, arguably the most famous Eritrean guitarist, won the competition with his song *Zegitsam Fikri* ('Unfulfilled Love'), followed by *memher* Lemlem with *Yefqereka Iya* 'I Love You'. Tekabo Woldemariam came third.¹⁴³ *Memher* Lemlem evoked the atmosphere of the show which was unlike anything she had previously experienced with Ma.Te.De.:

The first song I presented was written by my husband-to-be [Gerezghier Teka]. 'You are my companion / And that is for eternity. / It is your love that has engulfed me / Please, visit me'. When I sang these lines, the crowd was roaring. 'Are you singing these lines for me?' They were going mad. Some threw flowers, others threw their coats. My eyes were beautiful at the time. So they shouted: 'Lemlem *weynoj* [my grape], give me your eyes!' [...] I did not sing this song because I was in love. Perhaps he was already in love with me when he wrote the song. I understood its meaning only when I saw the reaction of the crowd. Many people came to attend the competition. Isaak Tewoldemedhin, the then administrator of Eritrean schools,

¹⁴² Women in *suwa* houses had of course always sung in their mother tongue, but then, as we have come to understand, they were singing in their 'homes', not on stage.

¹⁴³ *Memher* Lemlem sang two songs, *Yefqereka Iya* ('I Love You') written by her future husband Gerezghier Teka (who died in August 2001), and *Lemlem Weynoy* ('Lemlem, My Grape'), a duet with *memher* Abebe Iyasu. Amete Solomon presented *Sigemay Zelela* ('My Barley Stalk') and *Zemanawi Fikri* ('Modern Love'); *memher* Hiwot with *Kokhob Tsebah* ('Morning Star') and *Gual Rubai* ('Girl from my River'), again as a duet with Abebe Iyasu. Amsala Woldesakid sang *Fikrina Ina* ('Love Me'), written by herself; and, finally, Sofia Ali presented 'Songs of our Land' by Tesfai Gebremichael. Temesgen (3 October 1956, n.p.).



Fig. 34 Memher *Lemlem Ghebregziabhier*, coming second in the *National Singing Contest* in 1956.



Fig. 35 Other participants of the *National Singing Contest* (from left): *Amete Solomon*, *Hiwot Gebre* (with bouquet), *Osman Ahmed* (front).

brought my headmistress. She was shocked! When I went to school the next morning, she asked me how I survived the crowd. (I 71).

Memher Lemlem did not join the second singing contest in the following year – then organised by Ma.Te.De.’s successor, *Mahber Memhiyash Hagherwawi Limdi* (The Association for the Improvement of National Customs) – nor any other public performance, neither did *memher* Hiwot, Amete Solomon or Amsala Woldesakid. Against her will, Amete Solomon was transferred by her employer, the Ethiopian telecommunication company, which put an abrupt end to her stage career, as there were virtually no theatre activities outside the capital.¹⁴⁴ Whether her new assignment was politically motivated remains doubtful, as does the collapse of the association itself. *Memher* Lemlem talked about a power struggle among the male members of Ma.Te.De.; others insisted that the authorities – ‘the Amhara’ (I 96) – were opposed to the portrayal of nationalistic issues on stage and therefore engineered the collapse of the group. Granted that the mere term *mahber* – ‘association’ – had political connotations (R. Iyob 1995: 159-160), a politically motivated demise of Ma.Te.De. cannot be entirely ruled out. Nonetheless, personal differences among its members seem more likely. In 1959/60 the third, and final, national singing contest was again arranged by Ma.Te.De. Contemporaries however maintained that it had been organised solely by Tesfai Gebremichael under the name of the already disbanded association.¹⁴⁵

The reasons for *memher* Lemlem abandoning her amateur stage career were of a rather different nature. Of all women I interviewed she was the only one to speak openly about the sexual harassment she suffered after her performance:

People were tantalised by my songs. It was almost impossible for me to go to my workplace without being harassed. [...] After that people never left me alone. In the streets people blew me kisses. The rude ones were trying to grab me. [...] There was one incident that I will

¹⁴⁴ The sole exception I found was the theatre group *Abna Keren* run by Ramadan Gebre, the future director of the first cultural group in the ELF. Approximately founded in the mid- to late 1950s, *Abna Keren* was exceptional at the time for being located in Keren, not Asmara, the main seat of modern urban cultural activities. The company of about twelve to fifteen men performed music and short, politically subversive comedies, later in support of the ELM, the Eritrean Liberation Movement. Though mostly working locally, they also toured to Agordat and Asmara. At the time, there were very few theatrical activities outside Asmara, with artists from the capital usually touring the hinterland. In 1995 *Ato* Abdulhagis remarked: ‘The people of Asmara used to think that people for other provinces were naïve, so we prepared a comedy to reflect this’ (ECBTP 95/27).

¹⁴⁵ Female participants of the third singing contest on 22 August 1952_{EC} (1959/60) were *memher* Sofia Mengistu, *Woizerit* (Miss) Tiebe Tewolde, *Woizerit* Abrehet Habtezion, and the well-known *suwa* house entertainer Amleset Abbai who also won the competition. Except for Amleset, I was unable to find any data on the singers. Anon., ‘The Second National Competition Prepared by Ma.Te.De. Has Been Successfully Performed’, *Zemen*, no. 1507, n.d., n.p.

never forget. It happened while I was walking in the street with my mother. A guy started to call me '*Lemlemej weyno*' [My Lemlem, my grape] from the other side of the street, all the time gesticulating wildly and making a rude sign that indicates kissing. My mother felt as though I had been defiled physically. [...] I really started to feel uncomfortable. It was irritating to hear catcalls in the street. They did not make rude signs to Amleset or Tsehaitu Beraki because they were mature enough to handle it and they also had their *suwa* houses. Moreover, I was a teacher. And for a teacher to sing love songs in public was unbecoming. (I 71).

Memher Lemlem gave up the stage, as public performances had become incompatible with her educational profession. Yet to this day she is proud of her short-lived singing career because 'it was beneficial for the country' (I 71), and because she was among the first women to perform Eritrean songs and plays in the theatre. *Memher* Lemlem, *memher* Hiwot, Amete Solomon and Mebrat Gebre were indeed pioneers in that they helped break an unwritten rule which had barred women from playing in Eritrean 'public' shows, as opposed to foreign-run nightclubs or 'private' *suwa* house entertainment. By doing so they also paved the way for entrepreneurial *suwa* entertainers and other aspiring singers to leave the 'domestic' sphere and build a flourishing career on stage. This was subsequently confirmed by the success stories of Amleset Abbai, Tsehaitu Beraki, and Teberesh Tesfahuneï who were also able to handle, and in fact enjoyed, the public attention. 'Only when we refused to join the new theatre association', *memher* Lemlem explained, 'did Amleset start to appear on stage' (I 71).

The Tigrinya language has an expression, *wenni* (already mentioned when talking about the *zar*) which describes a person who has a natural feeling for music, someone who has musical esprit, who can sing and dance the whole night and still go to work in the morning, fresh and relaxed, able to give his or her best. These people are called *wennamat* or, in the singular, *wennam*. *Wennam* also describes an artisan, a person with skilled hands who can manufacture goods seemingly without any effort. To me, this is a wonderfully captivating term for a person gifted with the ability of making (and delighting in) music, and a most befitting characterisation of many of the early women performers. As Tekeste Yonas recalled:

Hiwot [Gebre] had *wenni*. I think she had the greatest *wenni* except Amleset Abbai. Amleset, when she went on stage, she changed completely. Hiwot had it too. There were other singers. They looked on stage as usual. Hiwot, however, changed. Even in a photograph! That was brought about by *wenni*, this feeling of music. (I 120).

It was the *wenni* of these early stage performers, their hard work and, above all, their daring spirit which brought about gradual changes in the urban performing arts and helped pave the way for succeeding women performers in Eritrea.

Ma.Te.De.'s Legacy: *Mahber Memhiyash Hagherwawi Limdi*

When in 1957 some persistent Ma.Te.De. enthusiasts established the second Eritrean theatre organisation, the Association for the Improvement of National Customs, *Mahber Memhiyash Hagherwawi Limdi* (Ma.M.Ha.L.), Eritrea was going through a trying time. Ma.M.Ha.L.'s short lifetime, which barely lasted until 1959 or early 1960, saw the final demise of whatever pretence was left of Eritrea being a distinct political entity. Coercion, intimidation and imprisonment of opposition leaders were the order of the day, as was growing public indignation against the Ethiopian empire, often expressed in popular songs that circulated in tea shops, *bet shahi*, and *enda suwa*. What is more, 1958 witnessed the first organised Eritrean opposition to Ethiopian hegemony, the *Hareka Hahrir Eritrea* or Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM). Also known as *Mahber Shewate* (Association of Seven) in Tigrinya, it was organised at the grass-roots level into clandestine cells whose seven members pledged allegiance to the organisation's objectives and held regular meetings. Women were part of the organisation, though they were few in number.¹⁴⁶

Despite having been established by a group of Eritrean Muslims in Port Sudan, the movement spread quickly to the highlands and was able to overcome the religious and political schism between Muslims and Christians that had dominated Eritrean politics for the past decade. A number of Ma.Te.De. and Ma.M.Ha.L. members, such as Osman Ahmed, are known to have joined the association. Only unity would enable the emergence of a Pan-Eritrean identity and the rise of Eritrea as a nation. Ruth Iyob writes that the 'use of the cultural arena as a vehicle for national reconciliation and mobilization was one of the most significant developments of this period' (R. Iyob 1995: 99). Though culture became increasingly significant as a political tool – seen, for example, in the establishment of many cultural clubs and organisations¹⁴⁷ – the idea of culture as a

¹⁴⁶ NUEW (1999a: 17), Markakis (1987: 106-107), Wilson (1991: 29-30), R. Iyob (1995: 99-101) Christmann (1996: 100).

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, the following BMA files on 'Clubs and Societies' containing unpublished miscellanies on the following associations: 'Cultural Club [for the Eastern and Western lowlands]', 1951-1953; 'Italian Students Cultural Association', 1951; 'Clubs and Societies: The

political weapon was not new to one-time members of Ma.Te.De.. Since the mid-1940s Ma.Te.De. had helped prepare the ground for this 'new' cultural awareness to blossom (despite obvious religious animosities and an initial prevalence of Ethiopian plays), as had the informal entertainment sector in tea shops and *suwa* houses. While the highly theatrical Orthodox Church had always served the ruling aristocracy and the feudal elite, the emerging urban culture was now being utilised for the benefit of the dissident classes; the working class, white-collar employers and the intelligentsia. Ma.M.Ha.L. did not have as big an impact as the two other organisations, Ma.Te.De. and its most significant successor *Mahber Theatre Asmara* (Ma.Te.A.), the Asmara Theatre Association, in terms of creative output and political leverage.¹⁴⁸ Regarding its women members, however, certain interesting changes took place.

Like Ma.Te.De. formerly, Ma.M.Ha.L. consisted of a mixture of veteran artists, semi-professionals and theatre neophytes. People like Alemayo Kahasai, Ali Said, Osman Ahmed, Tewolde Abraha 'Manchu' and Umberto Barbuye,¹⁴⁹ belonged to the seasoned performers, as did Atowebrehan Segid, another professional musician who had recently returned from Addis Ababa (see Figures 36 and 37). Others members, such as Tekabo Woldemariam and Sofia Ali, had not been affiliated to a society before but had stage experience, while the remaining were inexperienced theatre lovers or had been talent-scouted, such as drummer and Tigre-language singer Jabre Mahmud. A house was rented behind today's Asmara City Hall, which was opened daily from 6 to 9 p.m., with members donating money for its upkeep and instruments (I 18).

The list of high-profile musicians among its fellows suggests that music – especially modern Eritrean music – was a priority of the new association, following the success of the two singing contests of Ma.Te.De. This was also reflected in the association's name – 'Improvement of National Customs' – which indicated their aspiration of promoting, but also 'improving', indigenous musical forms. The idea of 'developing' or 'improving' national culture has remained a

Eritrean Youth Club', 1952-1953, unpublished miscellanies. All societies stressed in their applications that they were 'cultural', not 'political', associations.

¹⁴⁸ Most articles relegate Ma.M.Ha.L.'s work to footnotes, if it is written about at all. Ma.Te.De. and Ma.M.Ha.L. have generally been underestimated in their importance. Yet it was there where most veteran performers served their apprenticeship years and thus paved the way for the famous Asmara Theatre Association. For an example see E. Lucas (1 January 1996: 25-33).

¹⁴⁹ Umberto Barbuye was a blind musician of Italo-Eritrean parentage. Tekabo Woldemariam stressed in several interviews that 'Umberto Barbuye was an eminent figure in the music history of Eritrea when we set up Ma.M.Ha.L.' (I 57). 'He taught many people guitar, accordion and the drum set' (I 111). See also A. Sahle (3 January 1998: 7).



Fig. 36 Mahber Memhiyash Hagherwawi Limdi (*Ma.M.Ha.L.*).
Standing: Tekabo Woldemariam (fourth from left), Atowebrehan Segid (fifth from left, with sun glasses), Sofia Ali (standing), Ali Said (to her right), Umberto Barbuye (third from right, with sun glasses). Sitting: Osman Ahmed (second from left), Arefaine Tewolde (third from left, front row), Pierina Allegri (centre).



Fig. 37 *Ma.M.Ha.L.*, far left: Arefaine Tewolde, centre: Pierina Allegri, far right (with hat): Tekabo Woldemariam.

forceful cultural paradigm in Eritrea until today, though, as we will later see, 'preservation' was to become equally pertinent. Among others, Ma.M.Ha.L. attempted to 'Eritreanise' European style songs by incorporating *kebero* and the newly electrified *krar*.¹⁵⁰ Plays too were mounted, but they only constituted a part of the evening shows and never exceeded sixty to ninety minutes. This was a Ma.Te.De. legacy and indicated a further moving away from Ethiopian elitist aesthetics (though not from popular Ethiopian performance) which had favoured lengthy dialogue-based plays. There was also no longer a rigid distinction between musical entertainment and drama shows. Occasionally Ma.M.Ha.L. plays were interspersed with music and songs to make them more palatable for the music-loving patrons, combining serious messages with catchy melodies. Possibly modelled on Italian operetta and musical comedies of the Gilbert and Sullivan style – both popular with the expatriate communities – as well as Arabic and Indian shows, this type of performance was a new genre in the urban Eritrean theatre arts and referred to as 'musical drama' (see Figures 38 and 39). Musical drama has survived as a minor genre until today and has recently begun to enjoy new popularity with its (re-)introduction on videotapes; it was also a popular form of the Ethiopian *Hager Fiqir*. Yet despite – or because of – their serious content, short funny sketches outlasted the popularity of full-length plays, as did dance performances on stage and general dances for the patrons.

¹⁵⁰ Atowebrehan Segid has been credited with this innovation. I 129, EPLF (Research Branch) (1982b).



Fig. 38 Damon and Phintias, a 'musical drama' by Ma.M.Ha.L.
Phintias, sentenced to death by the tyrant, Dionysius, asks Damon to stand bail for him to attend to urgent family matters before his execution. When Damon agrees, he is ridiculed for his ostensible gullibility. Against all expectations, Phintias returns, ready to face his sentence. This act of friendship moves Dionysius to set Phintias free.



Fig. 39 Ma.M.Ha.L. Band; Osman Ahmed (vocals), Pierina Allegri (guitar).
Note the electrified krar third from right.

One year after the first Ma.Te.De. singing contest had taken place, Ma.M.Ha.L. mounted another competition at the *Kokhob Tsebah* Junior School in Asmara (see Figure 40). This time fourteen performers presented their songs.¹⁵¹

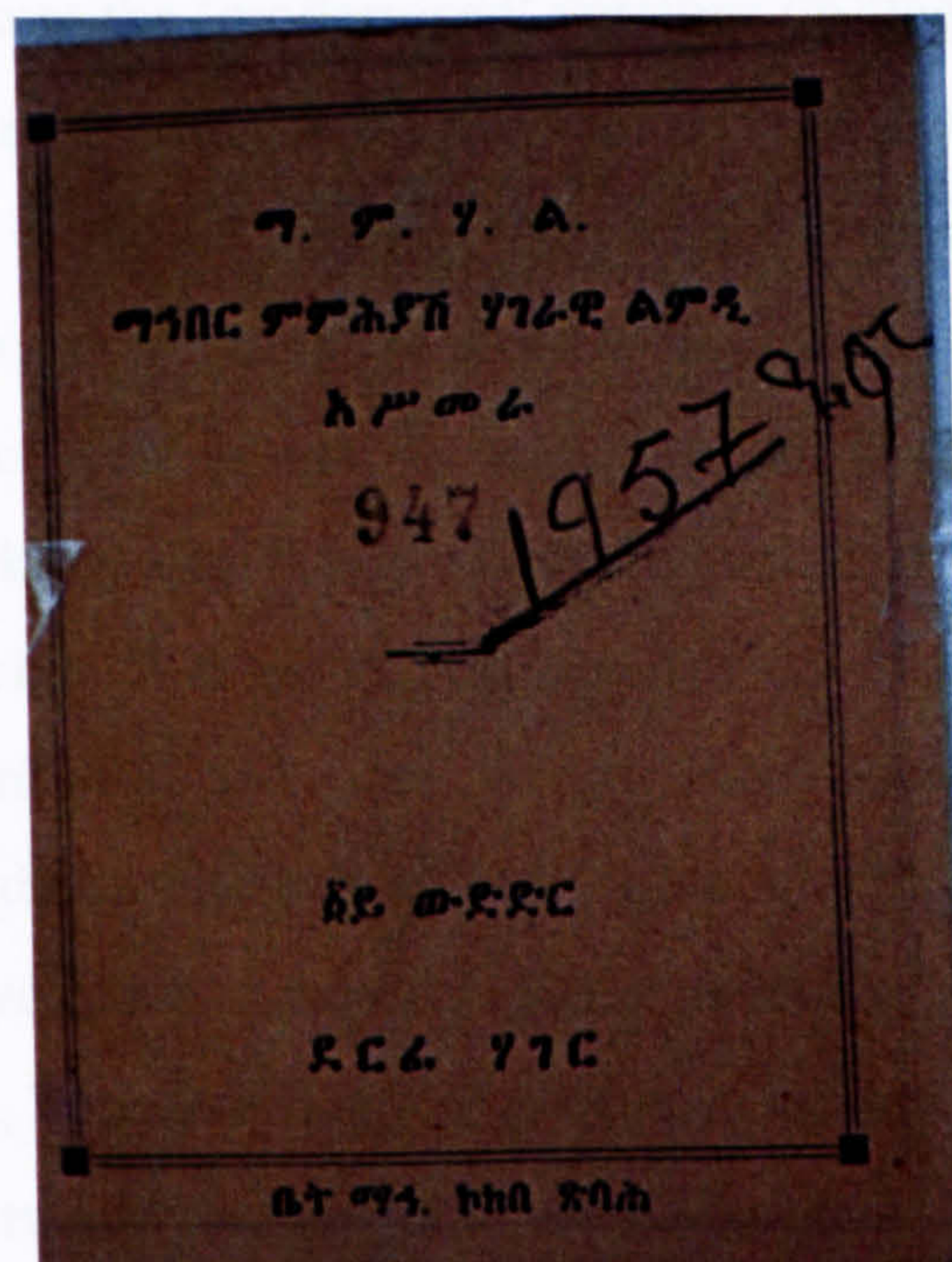


Fig. 40 Programme of Ma.M.Ha.L. 's National Singing Contest, 1957.

Apart from Sofia Ali with *Fikri Ewr Eyu* ('Love is Blind'), two other women took part in the show, fellow Ma.M.Ha.L. member Pierina Allegri (see Figures 36-39) with *Fikri Weddi* ('A Boy's Love') and Roma Gebrehiwot with a similarly sentimental theme, 'My Love and His Love'. The striking similarities in Sofia's and Roma's backgrounds allude to the shift among women performers indicated above. Without exception the female teachers who had helped pioneer Eritrean drama and songs in the theatre had left the stage, except for their continuing involvement in school drama. *Krar* players and *baristas* now filled the vacuum. Sofia had a 'traditional' urban performance background as a *suwa* entertainer, while Pierina, a proficient guitar player of Italian-Eritrean ancestry, had worked in her mother's bar before going on stage. This shift in social background seems to me of utmost significance. Had there previously been a gap between musicians in *suwa* houses and women members of theatre associations, with one group eschewing or even denigrating the other, the new emphasis on urban Eritrean

¹⁵¹ Tekabo Woldemariam, Sofia Ali and Osman Ahmed were the only participants from the first singing contest organised by Ma.Te.De.. Love songs were dominant, though some lyrics ventured into patriotic areas. Examples include Osman Ahmed's *Abotatna Aygedefun Hmag Lmdi* ('Our Ancestors Did Not Leave Bad Traditions'), for which he was briefly imprisoned by the censorship (I 129), and Abadi Alemu's *Woizerit Hagerey* ('Miss [as in: unmarried female] My Nation', which was another example of the virgin figure as national allegory. Ma.M.Ha.L., [booklet of National Singing Competition, 1957].

music, as opposed to Ma.Te.De.'s initial interest in stage drama, began to gradually bridge the divide. After all, *suwa* entertainers had been the first to promote 'traditional' urban music in Eritrea which certainly qualified them more than anyone else to present the 'modernised' versions on stage.

Though Sofia and Pierina remained the only permanent female members of Ma.M.Ha.L. during its brief lifetime, other women with similar backgrounds also started to co-operate. Among them were prominent *krar* players such as Tsehaitū Beraki and Amleset Abbai, or lesser known performers such as Tiebe (X) and Elsa (X). Working with the new women members caused initial teething problems, especially when it came to performance on stage. While Amleset and Tsehaitu were self-confident and open due to their business activities in *enda suwa*, Arefaine Tewolde recalled that Tiebe, Elsa and Pierina 'sometimes felt a little bit shy so we gave them some *areki* [anise schnapps] to warm up' (I 18). A rather dubious method, but an attestation to the still uneasy relationship of women and the 'public' platform. Unconfirmed, even if likely, is whether the new singers carried over attitudes of the disrepute of *suwa* entertainers. Ultimately, however, this question is irrelevant, for the widespread negative opinion towards women performers did not substantially change.

Elsa, Tiebe, Sofia, Pierina, and initially Amleset, were supplied with songs, Tsehaitu as an experienced entertainer provided her own, as later did Amleset. Tsehaitu only performed twice with Ma.M.Ha.L., then moved on to work as an independent artist, with occasional stints at Ma.M.Ha.L.'s successor, the Asmara Theatre Association. Amleset, on the other hand, utilised the association as a launching platform for her flourishing music career.

From 'Private' to 'Public' Performance: The Example of Amleset Abbai

It is helpful to look briefly into Amleset's artistic development as a prime example of a woman singer of her time, and of someone who moved from 'private' to 'public' performance. Though caution is in order when it comes to her life chronology – Amleset has been a particularly good example of the story-telling quality of theatre history, with oral accounts and written sources differing widely (partly, I suspect, a result of her own engineering)¹⁵² – her quandaries were

¹⁵² This section is based on A. Isaak (1 February 2000: 1, 7), E. Russom (28 November 1997: 3, 6), I 8.

nonetheless paradigmatic for many early women performers in Asmara. Few, however, had her stamina and determination to build a career on stage.

A lover of music from her childhood days, Amleset had her first singing experience in school, but also sang secretly in a friend's *suwa* house, her mother threatening to cut her hair if she dared to touch the *krar* in her own *enda suwa*.

Like any other Eritrean woman I constantly fought with my family. I love singing, but they were always against me. They never accept that you have your own way of looking at the world. They never respect your choice. One day Atowebrehan Segid from Ma.M.Ha.L. invited me to sing with them in Cinema Asmara. He was one of the people who changed my life. I was only eleven years old. (I 8).

The reception in Cinema Asmara was overwhelming, according to Amleset, as were the gifts she received from the audience, 'even by some Indians!' (I 8). Less pleasant, however, were the familial consequences. When her father discovered her picture in the local newspaper – in a story almost identical to that of other women performers, including *memher* Lemlem and Teberih Tesfahune (Tesfahune 1999 & 2000) – Amleset was in for a fight. 'My parents were divorced, you know. One day my father saw my picture in the newspaper with an article describing my success with Ma.M.Ha.L. on stage [see Figure 41]. He was so angry that he came to our house – I was living with my mother – and forbade me to sing and to dance in public' (I 8). Against her wishes, a marriage was quickly arranged, but the union was doomed to fail after two years, Amleset then being a fourteen-year old teenager. Now divorced and thus in a different social position, she went back to her mother's home and resumed playing the *krar*, which she tenderly called 'my diploma'.

Then Atowebrehan and his friends from Ma.M.Ha.L. returned and tried to persuade my mother to let me join their group again. They finally convinced her, on the premise that I should come home early before the evening. Atowebrehan gave his word and that was how I continued my career. (I 8).

Her achievements included the first prize in the third National Singing Competition in the late 1950s, a record contract with Philips Company in Addis Ababa in the 1970s (see Figure 42), and US American trophies in the 1980s. It is arguable that both Amleset and Tsehaitu's careers were facilitated, if not secured by their subsequent field and exile experiences, and that developments might have taken a different turn had they stayed amongst the civilian population of Asmara.



Fig. 41 *Amleset Abbai performing in Cinema Asmara at the age of twelve.*



Fig. 42 *Cover of Amleset's record produced by Philips in the 1970s.*

Both women contributed to the musical kaleidoscope of Eritrea for nearly half a century, while their female contemporaries had long abandoned their work, some settling into the secluded roles of homemakers and mothers, others simply vanishing from the scene. In the 1970s, when Eritrean cultural work had collapsed under Ethiopian hegemony, Amleset went to Addis Ababa before moving on to the United States. Tsehaitu chose the political path by joining the ELF, but she too went into exile in the Netherlands in the early 1980s. Only as older women did they return to Eritrea, Amleset to settle in the mid-1990s,¹⁵³ Tsehaitu in summer 1999 to help boost the nation's morale in the latest military conflict with Ethiopia. While both women prospered artistically, it should be noted that neither was ever able to make a living from their singing career, nor did the majority of their male colleagues. Most singers continued to work in other professions, as teachers, administrators, or in business. The performing arts arena in Eritrea has always been semi-professional, rather than professional, in character. Theatre as a full-time occupation was only acknowledged in the field, especially following the establishment of the EPLF Division of Culture in the Sahel region, after the strategic withdrawal in the late 1970s had forced combatants into a more sedentary existence. It is thus not surprising that only exiled or fighter women have continued as veteran artists into the 21st century. Those who stayed on abandoned their work for family reasons or because of increasing repression from the Ethiopian regime. For Amleset, however, Ma.M.Ha.L. became the springboard for her international singing career which outlived the association by decades. Ma.M.Ha.L.'s disintegration was gradual and unspectacular, a result of personal disputes and money quarrels rather than any dramatic turns of events.¹⁵⁴ As far as its women members are concerned, however, it deserves to be noted in Eritrean theatre historiography for having been the first association to enable *suwa* entertainers to become (semi-)professional stage performers.

¹⁵³ Amleset passed away two weeks after her last performance on January 15, 2000, in the small market town of Segeneiti, some sixty km south of Asmara, as part of the *Against All Odds* conference celebrating African languages and literatures.

¹⁵⁴ Tekabo Woldemariam and others attributed its demise to the large numbers of hangers-on who tried to benefit from the society without any creative contribution. 'I remember one time when we went to Mendefera. We had some 62 people going, but only 18 were performers. There were expenses – hotel, food, and so on – and they even wanted to share the profit among everyone' (I 58).

CHAPTER 3:

MAHBER THEATRE ASMARA – THE ASMARA THEATRE ASSOCIATION

From 1960 to 1961 there appears to have been a vacuum in the local theatre sector. For European repertoire bands, such as the governmental Police Orchestra or the Italo-Eritrean Orchestra Boys, it was business as usual. 'Kagnew Music' was broadcasted from the Kagnew Station, the US military base in Asmara, a strategic monitoring point for the Horn of Africa and the Arab world since the beginning of the federation. The station was to be very influential on modern Eritrean (and Ethiopian) music in the next decade, playing anything from country to rock and roll. Apart from school drama, Students' Music Day, and the odd religious play, there were few theatrical activities by Eritreans.¹⁵⁵ The reasons were presumably twofold: on the one hand lingering animosities between former Ma.M.Ha.L. members which impeded a smooth continuation of theatre work, on the other an escalation of dramatic events on the political stage. Radical Eritrean leaders were exiled, assassination attempts on lackeys of the Ethiopian crown were carried out, and so-called *shifita* ('bandits') stepped up their activities. 1960 saw a student strike demanding the restoration of Eritrean national symbols, including the flag, which led to imprisonment and fatalities among some of the demonstrators. The ELM, which had advocated ousting the government by a *coup d'état*, had grown considerably in the meantime. However, it lacked effective executive power as the ever-growing number of grass-roots followers obstructed swift communication with the exiled leadership. The establishment of a new organisation in Cairo in 1960, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), eventually forestalled the *coup* and began the armed liberation struggle. 1960 was the year in which many African, especially West African, nations gained independence, among others Senegal, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, and Chad. It was also the beginning of a decade characterised by civil rights and women's movements, by student protests, miniskirts and beehive hairdos. On September 1, 1961 Hamid Idris Awate and his contingent of less than a dozen men opened fire against Ethiopian forces and became the heralds of Africa's longest war. In the same year, the Asmara Theatre Association, *Mahber Theatre Asmara*, was successfully established. Although a coincidence, the timing was to be indicative

¹⁵⁵ There are, however, records of early American plays put on by members of the American Armed Forces. Anon., 'Teatro Asmara, Theatre Club Production of "All My Sons", September 30, October 1, 1954, Asmara, Eritrea'.

of Ma.Te.A.'s future involvement in the struggle on the cultural frontline. One year later, in 1962, Haile Selassie took the final step against Eritrean autonomy by formally annexing the country to Ethiopia and declaring it an 'ordinary' Ethiopian province. In 1963, in an attempt to align not only with Western, but also with African forces, he made Addis Ababa the home of the newly established Organisation of African Unity, the OAU. For Eritreans, this illustrious gesture made no difference, for once again they found themselves under the yoke of colonial rule.¹⁵⁶

The Beginnings of Ma.Te.A.

In late 1960, Tekabo Woldemariam and Tewolde Redda started to discuss the establishment of yet another theatre association with a more 'dynamic' character than Ma.M.Ha.L.'s had previously been, that is more entertaining and more educative in character (ECBTP 95/3). 'One thing I remember', Tegbaru Teklai, a female Ma.Te.A. member in the mid-1960s recalled, 'is that they founded the association in order to develop the language [Tigrinya], to practice our culture, to express nationalism and to assert our identity' (I 15).



Fig. 43 *Tegbaru Teklai performing in the mid-1960s.*

¹⁵⁶ Markakis (1987: 108), R. Iyob (1995: 102-104), Pool (1997: 11), Pateman (1998: 118), NUEW (1999a: 16-17), Falceto (2001: 76), Wetter (2001: 319).

Obviously, these radical ideas could not be expressed explicitly, but had to be couched in a repertoire blending Tigrinya, Tigre, Amharinya, Arabic and European performance elements.

Memher Asres Tessema and Alemayo Kahasai (both recently returned from their postings to Mendefera) were consulted, and it was agreed that invitations should be sent out to potential participants. A first meeting took place in the Olympic Cafeteria owned by Kahasai Michael to which a number of artists were summoned. No women were invited, though they discussed how female members could be engaged. 'There were no women at the time' (I 57), Tekabo Woldemariam excused the all-male convention. By now this problem had prevailed for almost twenty years, and confirmed not only the still uneasy relationship of women to the stage, but also their lack of participation at an executive level.

Ma.Te.A. eventually solved the gender imbalance by inviting one *suwa* house entertainer and three novices to the stage: Ethiopia Medhanie (see Figure 44), a divorced *suwa* publican and *barista* became involved as the result of a personal invitation from Alemayo Kahasai; the others were Genet Teferi, Tsehainesh (X), and Hiwot Tedla, an Italo-Eritrean employed in a sweater factory. According to Vittorio Bussie, 'they were selected for their conduct, body structure, and artistic performance' (I 125). With the exception of Ethiopia, however, most women were acquaintances of the founders, rather than experienced entertainers. Hiwot Tedla recalled:

I became a member in 1961. We started along with Tewolde Redda and Alemayo Kahasai. They told us to come and participate. I was selected because I was a friend of Tewolde Redda's girlfriend. He asked me one day whether I wouldn't like to join with her. That's how I started in Ma.Te.A.. (I 77).

Algenesh Kiflu, Letebrehan Dagnaw and Tegbaru Teklai followed, as did Teberih Tesfahunei who was to become a well-known singer in Eritrea (see Figures 45 and 46). Throughout Ma.Te.De.'s heyday, until the mid-1970s, women were joining and leaving the association.¹⁵⁷ While most of the early members withdrew for family reasons – chiefly marriage or pregnancy – the 1970s also saw some female artists enlisting in the liberation movements. One striking – but not

¹⁵⁷ A comprehensive reconstruction of all Ma.Te.De. members has not been possible, as movement was high. Veteran members moreover passed a resolution during my field research not to make documents available until the fate of the association was decided. For a list of performers in 1961 and 1965 see Appendix I: Performers.



Fig. 44 Ethiopia Medhanie in the 1970s.



አልጋነሽ ክፍሉ



ሐደወተ ጥደባ



ሰተብርሃን ደጎው

Fig. 45 Some of the early women members of Ma.Te.A. From left to right: Alganesh Kiflu, Hiwot Tedla and Letebrehan Dagneu.



Fig. 46 Asres Tessema, Teberesh Tesfahune, Tegbaru Teklai and Alamin Abdulatif.

surprising – fact is that many of those who stayed shared social backgrounds with the early *suwa* house entertainers, often coming from single-parent families, with little formal education, unattached, single-minded and self-supporting. (If we follow Teberesh Tesfahunei's widely contested autobiographies,¹⁵⁸ then Ma.Te.A. in fact helped her attain an independent life-style on leaving her detested arranged marriage (T. Tesfahunei 2000)). The engagement of women corresponded to their contributions to previous associations, comprising singing, acting and dancing on stage. Except for playing the *krar* occasionally, none of them worked as musician. Pierina Allegri of Ma.M.Ha.L. was to remain the only Eritrean woman prior to the armed struggle to play a European instrument. When the Ma.Te.A. band was hired by a nightclub or for private events, women only joined when needed as singers. In general, women still had little say in the overall running of affairs, their creative input being reduced to suggestions of how to improve a dance, a musical arrangement, or the choice of a costume. Their main aspiration was to perform well and to look attractive. Beauty pageants were in vogue at the time, Teberesh Tesfahunei and Amleset Abbai being among those singers to enter and triumph. In an ironic twist of fate, Teberesh, the Eritrean, even won the contest for 'Miss Ethiopia' (T. Tesfahunei 1999 & 2000). Teberesh and Alganesh Kiflu are said to have written poetry, but the main responsibility for production and content lay with the men. The relationship between both sexes was as equal as the time allowed it to be, but judging from the interviews the overall tone of men towards women was that of benevolently condescending admiration. In Tekabo Woldemariam's words: 'Women [in Ma.Te.A.] were kept as gold and their artistic skills were precious. If a play has no woman, it is non-existent. If there is no woman, there is no light. Therefore in music, a woman is of importance, she has to be kept properly. There was no way we could oppress them' (I 59). In less formal interview situations, however, it transpired that despite their prominence, these women were still considered as barmaids or '*baristas*', and that many carried the social stigma of divorce or coming from a broken home. All this indicates that, despite male lip-service and emerging female stardom, the overall social status of women in the performing arts had not yet changed. It would take another decade and the experience of the armed struggle for attitudes to transform.

¹⁵⁸ Within less than 12 months, Teberesh Tesfahunei brought out two autobiographies, the second being a revised and extended version of the first. It is to be assumed that she employed a ghost-writer, no one considering her capable of writing two full-length books without professional help. A considerable number of her fellow artists disagreed with her portrayal of Ma.Te.A. and her experience in the field. T. Tesfahunei (1999; 2000).

Ma.Te.A. was the most successful Eritrean theatre association and its work left an indelible mark on generations of future artists. Ma.Te.A.'s first creative period lasted for almost fifteen years, until the arrival of the Ethiopian military Derg regime,¹⁵⁹ its name built on a broad range of entertainment which addressed socially relevant issues and subtly criticised the political climate of the times. Ma.Te.A. perfected the art of allegory and allusions – similar to the 'wax' and 'gold' of double-entendre poetry – particularly after the tightening of censorship at the demise of the federation in 1962. Under the auspices of Ma.Te.A., Eritrean nationalists of all creeds united to vent their anger against Ethiopian hegemony. While the ELF would suffer a profound internal crisis, generating the birth of the EPLF and reaching its nadir during the civil war, the cultural arena in Asmara provided a forum for the reconciliation of different interests, religions and political beliefs. This approach was later cultivated and refined by the cultural cadres of both liberation movements, a considerable number of whom had served their apprenticeship with Ma.Te.A. (cf. R. Iyob 1995: 102-104).

The reputation of the association grew steadily. When Ma.Te.A. began its work in the early 1960s, they had nothing but a dark rehearsal room, some old drums and a box guitar. Initially the association suffered from lack of funding, props and musical instruments, the sole income being a monthly membership fee of 2 Birr.¹⁶⁰ This raised barely enough to rent a room, let alone pay for electricity. Rehearsals took place by candlelight, which gave the group the nickname *Wolaati Shma'a*, 'to light a candle'. After the first public performance in 1961, however, members were able to buy uniforms, two accordions and an electric guitar. Right from the start great efforts were made to create a corporate image for the organisation. A Ma.Te.A. anthem was composed, based on a European melody, which was sung at the start and the closing of each show. '*Selam nai Ma.Te.A., selam*' invited peace (*selam*) and, according to *memher* Asres Tessema, called for the unity of Christians and Muslims (I 127). Teberih Tesfahunei, Alamin Abdulatif, and two other singers took the lead, while the remaining company

¹⁵⁹ Ma.Te.A. was revived by some veteran members after independence, but was forced to suspend its activities with the onset of the 1998-2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war when the younger generation was called to arms. There were also old animosities among the veterans regarding finances and political allegiances. Starting in the early 1970s, some members had joined the ELF, others the EPLF, while the remainder were forced to participate in the cultural activities of the Ethiopian Derg regime.

¹⁶⁰ The Ethiopian Birr was used as currency in Eritrea until 1997, when the Nakfa was introduced. This step has been held partly responsible for the outbreak of the latest military conflict between the two countries in May 1998.

joined in as chorus. (Both ELF and EPLF were to follow their example and compose an anthem). For the visual effects, Alemayo Kahasai and Tekabo Woldemariam designed different European-style uniforms in white, black and blue which were fitted by an Italian tailor after the latest fashion, the women wearing skirts and blazers, the men matching suits.



Fig. 47 Mahber Theatre Asmara (*Ma.Te.A.*) in 1961.

This gave them an elegant and distinguished appearance, re-emphasised by numerous costume changes during the shows. Ma.Te.A. members were known as ‘Asmarinos’ and ‘Asmarinas’, men and women from the capital who took pride in their looks. Similar to the teachers who had started to wear European clothes, the dress code set Ma.Te.A. apart. They too had become part of an African modernity which had swept over large parts of the Horn of Africa, without obliterating their own cultures or negating the nationalist cause.¹⁶¹

In order to achieve and keep up a high standard, the group initially met on a daily basis, from 6 p.m. until late. ‘We just liked being around each other’ Ethiopia Medhanie described the early period. ‘There wasn’t any need to make a schedule because we came anyway. It was our world’ (I 65). In 1962, meetings were reduced to three times a week because the frequent gatherings proved too demanding for the majority, a number of whom had busy jobs or family responsibilities. Ma.Te.A. also drew up a code which stipulated a probation period of six months to a year for prospective members. Applicants had to prove that

¹⁶¹ Cf. Falceto (2001: 76), Wetter (2001: 318-321), A. Kebede (1976: 290).

they were able to meet a certain artistic standard. Discipline was strict and members could be expelled if absent repeatedly (I 15, I 32, I 125). While the founding members initially recruited (female) artists personally, applicants now started to flock to the association. In an interview Teberih Tesfahuney recalled how she and her friend, Letebrehan Dagneu, tried to join.¹⁶²

Ma.Te.A. asked both of us what our interests were. She [Letebrehan] said that her voice was low. [Note that high-pitched female voices are very popular in Eritrea and Ethiopia]. She could not sing but she could dance. Then they asked me and I told them that I could be both a singer and a dancer. They asked what sort of songs I wanted to sing. [...] Buzunesh Bekele¹⁶³ had come from Addis to Asmara. When she had finished her songs, the Eritrean audience demanded her songs again and again, three or four times. I was drawn towards her and thus told them that I wanted to translate and repeat Buzunesh's songs. I was very young at the time and my voice was not yet matured. It was Tewolde Redda who accepted my request. He told the others they would make me a singer. (I 100).

It was a providential move, because by taking on Teberih Tesfahuney, Tewolde Redda was to help create the most popular Eritrean woman singer of the 1960s. Teberih's career tried to emulate the eminence of a celebrated Ethiopian singer of professional status – an outlandish concept for Eritrean women at the time – but was distinctly different in that she insisted on singing in her own mother tongue, and not following the general course of 'Amharisation'. Her stardom had a different, above all a lasting, quality in comparison to the one-minute fame of her predecessors, who were barely remembered by the millennium. The question remains whether her celebrity status is not also attributable to the tragedy of her head injury in the field, and her resulting mental instability.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² See also T. Tesfanune (1999 & 2000). In her autobiographies, Teberih renders the story differently. Note that Teberih, like Amleset Abbai, claims to have started her singing career at the age of 12. She too is said to have had great problems with her father after her picture had come out in the newspaper. Though I would not venture as far as denying the basic problem these women had to face, there are too many identical facets to their stories to make them credible in all of their details.

¹⁶³ Buzunesh Bekele was the 'First Lady' of Ethiopian modern swing until her untimely death at the age of 54 in 1990. Falceto (2001: 100).

¹⁶⁴ Mental health problems are still considered an unmentionable subject in Eritrea, despite ample evidence that both wars left traumatic scars among the survivors, both military and civilian. Some of Teberih's contemporaries encouraged me to interview her, despite the widespread opinion that she has turned into a loud, unruly, and abusive 'madwoman'. While undoubtedly prone to unpredictable moods, I found Teberih generally friendly towards me (though not towards my male translator). Some of her Ma.Te.A. fellows hinted at her always having been difficult; while in her autobiography she refers to several 'restless' and 'unsettled' periods prior to her head injury in which she was prone to quarrels and drinking sprees. Teberih has had a difficult life which she could not have mastered without a fierce fighting spirit that was still visible during our short encounters in 2000 and 2001. While I am not denying the actual physical trauma which

The Shows

Alemayo Kahasai is generally acknowledged as the artistic director of Ma.Te.A., though he never formally claimed the position. Other colleagues assisted him in his tasks, such as Tewolde Redda and *memher* Asres Tessema. Many well-known singers, writers, musicians, and comedians passed through the fertile ground of the association, among them the comedian and playwright *memher* Solomon Gebregziabhier, the playwright and announcer Asmerom Habtemariam, the singer Osman Abdulrahim, the song- and playwright Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai' and the celebrated vocalist Yemane Gebremichael 'Baria'.¹⁶⁵ Rehearsals and shows were a collective effort rather than the product of individuals, as Hiwot Tedla recalled:

Alemayo, Tewolde [Redda] and Asres Tessema, they all wrote dramas and helped prepare the shows. Alemayo and Tewolde worked as directors. Initially I was a singer, then I shifted to drama. They gave us the lyrics and we learnt them by heart. Then they arranged the music. Then there were dances. If the song was modern, we danced modern dances, such as cancan, if it was traditional, we danced accordingly. The members created dances for every song. It was a group work. (I 77).

Dances, songs, music and drama were rehearsed separately and then arranged in a two- to three-hour show, mostly performed at either Cinema Asmara or Cinema Odeon. These venues belonged to the general Cinema Administration, Astria, which charged rent for the use of their premises. The resulting entrance fee of 5 Birr was a steep sum at the time but willingly paid by the patrons. For 25 Birr per hour, the band entertained at private and public functions – weddings, beauty pageants and dance events – and regularly played at local music venues (see Figure 48). They also made several appearances on the American Kagnev Television Station, presenting 'an hour program of traditional and modern Ethiopian music and dancing' (Anon. 4 May 1965: 4).

By the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the following arrangement was most popular with audiences: a four-hour variety show, including a twenty-minute interval, starting at 8. p.m. after the last film screening. Essentials were modern Eritrean music (mostly a blend of Tigrinya, Tigre, Amharic, European and

exacerbated her mental health problems, the link between 'madness' and women's attempts to find their own spaces outside the given social frame is certainly overwhelming.

¹⁶⁵ Yemane Baria passed away in 1998 and was mourned by the whole nation. *Memher* Solomon Gebregziabhier died in spring 2001, before I was able to interview him. His work, however, is comparatively well-documented in Eritrean theatre history. See Plastow (1997a: 152), G. Gebru (1 January 1996: 30-33), A. Sahle (21 November 1998: 7).



Fig. 48 *Tegbaru Teklai with Ma.Te.A. band. (Second from right: Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai' pretending to play accordion for the picture).*

Sudanese pieces (Falceto 2001: 72)), a thirty-minute play, stand-up comedies or comic sketches, an acrobatic act (performed by three boys), as well as traditional (Eritrean) and modern (European) dances. The latter comprised the boogie, the samba, the twist, and the cha-cha-cha and allowed women to show off the latest fashions, the costumes mostly belonging to Ma.Te.A. Stage design for plays was kept to the bare minimum. One or two pieces of furniture indicated the setting, a cinema curtain served as backdrop for the entire show. Though always part of the programme and crucial in conveying clandestine political ideas, drama was not the most important form of performance. Unlike the highly cultivated music and dance numbers, the art of acting was reduced to knockabout buffoonery and witty dialogue.

All show elements were linked by an announcer or Master of Ceremonies whose jokes and comments ensured sufficient time for a quick change of musical instrument or costumes. The uninterrupted flow of the show is said to have left a deep impression on the audience and was repeatedly mentioned as an influence on Ethiopian presentations, after the troupe had been on tour.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, Ma.Te.A. supported other groups with equipment and expertise. They regularly helped out

¹⁶⁶ A number of informants mentioned the uninterrupted running of the show with the help of an announcer as well as the quick change of costumes. This which was apparently unusual in Ethiopian variety shows which were said to have had longer intervals between the different acts. *Memher Asres Tessema* also referred to the small size of their band which did not drown the singers' voices, and the sparse use of the curtain. I 126.

local bands with instruments and uniforms, facilitated the annual theatre show by Eritrean students on vacation from Addis Ababa, and were host to a number of artists from Ethiopia and abroad. Sadly, little is remembered about their collaboration.

Ma.Te.A.'s success has been documented in contemporaneous reviews which hailed their performances as some of the best ever staged in Ethiopia. The much-quoted Mengistu Gedamu, an Amhara journalist, vividly conveyed the atmosphere of a 1973/4 show in the 1400-seater Haile Selassie I Theatre in Addis Ababa.¹⁶⁷

There were thousands of people crowded around the entrance to the hall. Some were saying it was sold out, others that the chairs were full. Women who had paid 25 Birr for their hairstyles found their hair disordered by the crush. The entrance fee was 5 Birr but many people were willing to pay 25 Birr to enter the hall [...]. On this Sunday afternoon, even though I could not understand the language (Tigrinya) or the message, I enjoyed the way the play was performed and the music enormously. In fact, it was the best I ever saw. [...] Alemayo Kahasai performed the Italian Toto and Teberesh Tesfahunei sang like the American Doris Day. [...] All the vocalists performed well. (M. Gedamu 1966 EC [1973/4]).

Beneath the amusement and light-hearted entertainment, however, nationalist sentiments were being hatched. An introduction in Amharinya to the very same show provoked querulous shouts from the (largely Eritrean) audience. Due to the tightening of Ethiopian censorship, the public began to read politics into seemingly harmless songs. Alamin Abdulatif's romantic Fatma Zahra sequence was only one among many love songs now turned into national allegories. 'People started to give them double meanings and connected them with politics' (T. Tesfahunei 2000). Artists also began to purposefully work on double-entendres. In the 1960s Tewolde Redda gained national fame with his song '*Shigei Habuni*' ('Give me My Torch') which alluded to the Eritrean flag.¹⁶⁸ Atowebrehan Segid, with '*Aslamai Kestani*' ('You, Moslem and Christian', written by Negusse Haile around 1966/67) called on people of all religious and social creeds to unite and to

¹⁶⁷ The show was staged as part of the Ma.Te.A. tour through Ethiopia, not, as previously mentioned, in Asmara (cf. Plastow 1997a: 150).

¹⁶⁸ 'Give me my torch, don't alienate me. / Give me my torch, don't make me wait. / Please, someone, listen to me / I had a friend, but he took my torch. / Why don't you give me my torch? / Is it a crime to claim, "My Torch"' (A. Tesfai 2000: 17). Alemseged also refers to a number of other song texts.

disregard Ethiopian propaganda against the liberation war.¹⁶⁹ And, last but not least, Tebereh Tesfahuneï won many followers with Asres Tessema's song '*Abi Hidmo*' ('*The Big Hidmo* [a traditional Tigrinya house]'). In this song she complained about lice and bed bugs in her home – meaning, of course, Ethiopians in Eritrea – and called for her lover in the forest – the fighter – to come to her. It is rather an irony that she also sang the song at the Miss Ethiopia contest which she won.¹⁷⁰

Subtexts of comic skits were no less political. A one-directional tug-of-war, which had already been part of the Ma.Te.De. repertoire, was subsequently censored for its implication of Eritreans pulling together against Ethiopia.

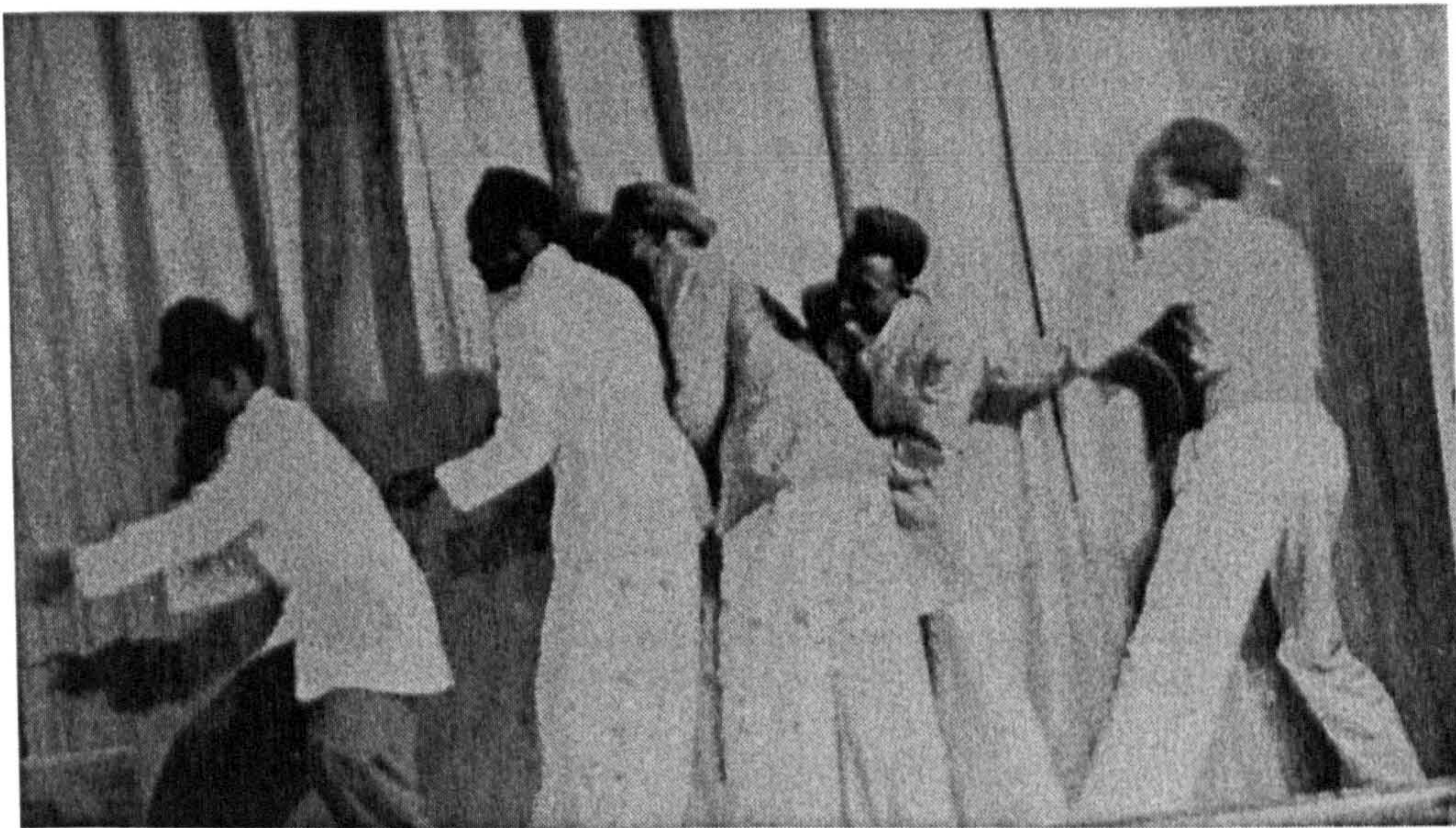


Fig. 49 *Tug-of-war performed by Ma.Te.De. in the late 1940s; later also presented by Ma.Te.A..*

Solomon Gebregziabhier's comedy *Arba'a* (Forty) – in which an embezzler avoids returning money by answering all queries with a nonsensical '*arba'a*' – was interpreted as inciting disobedience against the regime.¹⁷¹ And a musical sketch in which Alemayo mimed his skill of mastering various European and local

¹⁶⁹ 'Moslem, Christian, lowlander or highlander / Ignore the advice of enemies / Ignore it or you will just be a commodity' (A. Tesfai 2000: 18). According to Negusse Haile, the song was specifically targeted at the Ethiopian propaganda which claimed that the ELF was a Muslim-Arabic (and not an all-inclusive Eritrean) organisation (I 98/2). Both songs can also be found in R. Iyob (1995: 103) in a different translation, and in R. Bereketeab (2000: 241).

¹⁷⁰ 'Our house, the big *hidmo* is full of *tukan* (fleas) and *kunchi* (bugs) / Here or there, my love, you have captivated me / What was your promise that you neglect me, my love / What was our agreement, brother, at first / Was it not to care for one another? [Please come, my love, I will be yours and you will be mine] / Through the forest [wilderness] your love letter comes to me / written and signed by your hand. / You've been away for long, my love, you are cruel [you do not wait, nor remember]. / Please, my love, I am waiting for no one but you', transl. Mohamed Salih Ismail and Tesfazghi Ukubazghi from (T. Tesfahuneï 1999) and the selfsame song covered by Helen Meles on her audiocassette *Ti Gezana* [Our Home: Songs of Tebereh Tesfahuneï].

¹⁷¹ A. Sahle (21 November 1998: 7). *Arba'a* and other skits from the 1960s were recorded on Solomon's video *Weghi Sisatat* (Talks of the Sixties) in 1996.

instruments (played backstage by other musicians) was read as an impersonation and critique of Ethiopia. On leaving the stage, the audience noticed that Alemayo's suit only covered his front, thus implying that appearance was everything for the colonial power, but that it lacked substance.

The Plays

In stark contrast to non-gendered political skits or songs which identified women with the land and the nation, playlets involving female characters were frequently a mode of social, rather than political, critique. (Similar observations were made about the works of Musa Aaron, one of the most prominent novelists at the time, who mapped much social moralising onto his female characters (G. Negash 1999: 153-159)). Often these playlets took the form of a Manichean sexual allegory discussed earlier on, juxtaposing images of 'male and female, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, subject and object, self and other' (Stratton 1994: 15). Evidently, this was to the detriment of the representation of women, casting them as greedy, gullible and antisocial, with the men being in the educative role. Judging from recent video films featuring popular sketches – and actors – from the 1960s, actors played mostly for laughs (cf. *Weghi Sisatat* 1996); overacting and facial contortions were fairly common, less so psychological subtleties.

Atum Kilu ('Don't Touch Me'), a much cited 'musical drama' by Alemayo Kahasai, for example, featured the author and an actress (Genet Teferi and, later, Teberih Tesfahunei) in a musical mating game. The paramour tries to persuade his (married) beloved to leave her husband because he has more to offer materially. At first, the lady exclaims 'Don't touch me!', but eventually her suitor's reputed riches convince her. The lover, however, reproaches her fickleness and sends her back to her husband. In another of Alemayo's plays, *Nuruszu Kufu Nuruszu* – based on a proverb: 'The one who does evil to others will become the victim of evil', hence linking orature and modern performance forms – the female protagonist is a selfish misanthropist who gets punished when her child drinks the poisoned beer she has offered to a thirsty traveller and dies as a consequence (I 74, I 127). And though Asres Tessema's *The Effect of Traditional Funeral Ceremonies in Our Country* (A. Tessema 1957_{EC} [1964/65]) is more focused on counterproductive, because costly and time-consuming, burial practices than on the female character in his play, it is nonetheless the wife who insists on going to the commemoration, thus endangering the health of her sickly

offspring. The play ends with the near death of an infant whose parents have put her through the strain of travelling to a far away place and who thereafter find themselves without the necessary means to pay for her medicine.

While these examples prove that in the 1960s mostly local, not imported, productions were staged, they also confirm the negative image of women as socially and morally inferior beings. Often female characters functioned as scapegoats for the overly didactic messages of the plays. In contrast to many early Ma.Te.De. productions, however, women now inhabited a more central position in stage drama. Negusse Haile's *A Fair Verdict* (1969) confirms this development; yet, unusually, *both* sexes are blamed for their alleged immorality. In essence the piece is a modern Eritrean morality play which reproaches young urban libertines and calls for a return to virtuous living. One of the two printed Ma.Te.A. scripts available to me, *A Fair Verdict* is an exceptional text not only for combining various strands of then prevalent types of stage theatre in Eritrea – religious, social and musical drama – but also for featuring non-realistic elements, such as a dream sequence and personified allegories.

Three friends, Hadgu, Bashir, and Fesseha are seen in a bar where they are entertained by the barmaids Almaz, Azalech, and Meaza. Hadgu has divorced his wife, who subsequently died of grief, to start an affair with Azenegash, another *barista*. Bashir enjoys drinking, commercial sex, and love scenes in the cinema. Only Fesseha is a 'decent' person, engaged to be married and determined to change his friends' way of life. He secures the help of an elderly mentor, the *Fitewari* (a middle ranking title in Ethiopia), but their initial efforts are to little avail. It is always the glib talk of the Devil, not of the Angel (both in character), that guides the friends in their doings. Yet, after Fesseha has spent a night in prayer, the good forces succeed. The prayer, it seems, has induced the same dream in all of his friends in which they have met their final judgement by God and the Angels. The following day they decide to embark on a new life: Hadgu will marry Azenegash, Bashir will refrain from his sinful ways and it is implied that he and the sex worker, Alefech, will also stay together.

Though elsewhere dismissed as belonging to those works of Tigrinya literature that are of 'repetitive tenor' and 'mediocre quality' (G. Negash 1999:

146) – and hence unworthy of closer reading¹⁷² – the play had a lot to offer theatrically: vice, virtue and the supernatural embellished with lavish costumes. Church influence was undeniable. While for the Ma.Te.A. premiere in 1969 an abridged 30-minute version was mounted with just two women playing the choral angels in the judgement scene, a full-length run by the Catholic Youth Association, *Terzo Ordine Francescano*, in Asmara presented twelve heavenly spirits altogether, both male and female. Their sheer numbers and the extravagant attire provided a visual spectacle on an unprecedented scale. (The costumes had been borrowed from Catholic nuns in Asmara for both productions, featuring feathered wings and other suitable accoutrements, the Devil being provided with horns. I 20, I 21, I 22) What is more, an attempt was made to implicate and hold both genders responsible for their behaviour, not merely allocate the role of the (she-)devil to women, as was often the case in religious lore. In terms of the representation of women, however, the old dichotomy of virtuous and fallen womankind appeared once again in the juxtaposition of sex workers and angelic spirits. Some of the male characters served as the catalysts for redemption, while the only ‘virtuous’ female of childbearing age, Fesseha’s unnamed fiancée, remained conspicuous by her absence.

Ghirmai Negash, in his *History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea* (1999), notes that in most works published between the late 1950s and the early 70s “‘didacticism’ [was] the organising principle’ (G. Negash 1999: 146) and that

in many cases the characters who are created to personify the featured issues (predominantly revolving around topics such as Christian virtue, traditional culture, [...] importance of education, importance of work and married life, politics, [...] richness and poverty, drink, love, etc.) are hardly individualised, while they are depicted mostly in overly *unrealistic*, over-dramatised, or even fairy-like fashion. (146).

While in principle I also disapprove of the overt ‘didacticism’ in most plays, one should nevertheless ask why these aspects were prevalent at the time, instead of reading – and dismissing – them through our contemporary aesthetic understanding. Could the ‘overly *unrealistic*’ and ‘repetitive’ (146) attributes not have been a deliberate literary strategy? Repetition and moralising are characteristics of both orature and religious teachings; and the fact that some play titles were proverbs established a direct connection to traditional lore. Over-

¹⁷² In his seminal study on Eritrean Tigrinya literature Ghirmai Negash merely lists publications from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, without going into literary analysis. G. Negash (1999: 146-150).

dramatisation was a general feature of theatre at the time, while the use of stereotypes, rather than individualised personae, can be linked to the increasing political uncertainties. As Haile Sellasie's empire was rapidly crumbling, and Eritrean civilians began to suffer the consequence of the liberation war, allegories and double meanings proliferated in the attempt to interweave amusement with political statements. At the time, seemingly innocuous matters, such as the light-blue colour of a costume, could be censored for its resemblance to the then Eritrean flag.¹⁷³ Allegorical incarnations of good and evil, rather than 'realistic' characters, allowed for an easier, and seemingly innocuous, association with friend or foe and did not easily draw the authorities' attention to performers.

As regards the prescriptive nature of most plays, one of Ma.Te.A.'s aims had always been to cater for the less educated classes by trying to combine entertainment with transparent moral messages. Altruism was not the sole motif behind the show; it was also an attempt to stave off persisting negative attitudes towards the theatre world, particularly the women. (One informant, for example, stated that constant efforts were made to prove that female performers were 'decent', not 'loose'. Rumours also had it that some of these artists were not 'pure' Eritreans, especially those with Ethiopian-Eritrean or Italo-Eritrean ancestry). On occasions, Ma.Te.A.'s teaching mission was a double-edged sword, as the noble objectives were not always achieved by the members of association. While calling for a return to modest, traditional clothing in the final song of Negusse' play – 'Thank you God, Almighty, [...] we want to become families which bear children, we don't want modern clothes which break our moral maxims' (N. Haile 'Mensa'ai' 1962_{EC}) – female Ma.Te.A. members were known to wear alluring make-up and daring fashion, with no intention of becoming 're-domesticated'.¹⁷⁴ In *Woyzerit Shigara* ('Miss Cigarette'), an anti-smoking song written by Negusse Haile, the company instantly scrambled for the cigarettes they had just squashed on the floor as soon as the curtain was closed (I 20, I 21, I 22). Again, vice was gendered female in the performance: the cigarette given virginal status before being smoked. These were some of the internal and external

¹⁷³ Until formal independence in 1993, the Eritrean flag featured a green camel surrounded by a green olive wreath on a sky-blue background. Thereafter the national flag became a variation on the EPLF colours, transferring the olive wreath onto the background of the party flag consisting of three interweaving triangles in green, red and blue.

¹⁷⁴ As Teberah Tesfahunei had put it on breaking up with her husband: 'I want to be a singer from now on. I don't want to be a housewife' (T. Tesfahunei 1999).

contradictions Ma.Te.A. had to grapple with, and which also followed them on tour.

The Tours

At the end of 1966 and January 1967 a one-month trip through Ethiopia was organised to great public acclaim. Previously, Ma.Te.A. had visited other Eritrean towns – Keren, Mendefera, Massawa and Decamhare – but also less accessible places, such as Agordat and Tessenei in the western lowlands. Travelling was already quite difficult at the time, as ELF fighters operating from remoter areas were engaged in fighting the Ethiopian forces. From 1964-67 Ethiopia extended its offensives from the lowland areas to the highlands and caused considerable destruction of property. For safety reasons Ma.Te.A. kept to larger settlements and towns. Often the whole company, including the women, went on tour, at other times only one or two artists visited villages in the vicinity of Asmara to play Ma.Te.A. music on reel tapes. (Pateman 1998: 118; I 19).



Fig. 50 *Ma.Te.A. members and local dignitaries in Keren. Middle row: Asres Tessema (far left), Jabre Mahmud (fourth from left), Tekabo Woldemariam (centre, with hat), Tewolde Redda (fourth from right).*

In 1966, Seyom Hargot, a minister in the imperial government and son of the Lord Mayor of Asmara, *Grazmatch* Hargot Abbay, came to Asmara to attend the wedding of his sister. Ma.Te.A. was hired to entertain the party. The minister enjoyed the music so much that he promised to help the artists organise a tour through the ‘motherland’ Ethiopia. Three weeks before the projected onset of the

tour the group was notified that the Haile Selassie I Theatre had been booked and that they could also perform in towns such as Nazareth and Gondar. Frantic preparations took place and by mid-December the company was able to set off. The only women members to travel were Tebereh Tesfahunei and Tegbaru Teklai.¹⁷⁵

When Ma.Te.A. reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa, a grand reception awaited the them; Eritrean students, members of the *Hager Fiqir* and other performers were lining the streets.

The Haile Selassie Theatre Group had also come! They came with their cars, with flowers, and they welcomed us when we were just approaching the town. Then we went to Addis with songs. Everywhere we saw our pictures on the wall. Even in town, in Churchill Road, there was a written banner with 'Welcome Ma.Te.A.!' And who had done it? The Eritrean students at the university. (I 126).

Two shows were mounted in the large Haile Selassie I Theatre, four more in the venues of the *Hager Fiqir* and a smaller theatre. Students from Eritrea were rewarded with an exclusive show for their support, which was free of charge. With the benefit of hindsight, it is fascinating to see that among those Eritrean youngsters who had lent a helping hand were future senior EPLF cadres: Alemseged Tesfai – playwright and head-to-be of the Division of Literature and Drama, then still a law student – and Haile Woldensae 'Dru', the future Director of the EPLF Department of Political Orientation, Education and Culture and Foreign Minister during the 1998-2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war.

The reception for the shows was enthusiastic, but had serious consequences. When Tebereh Tesfahunei sang her *Abi Hidmo* one spectator started to spray insecticide to get rid of the 'lice'. (The reviewer Mengistu Gedamu deeply disapproved of this act as being inhospitable towards the foreign guests, clearly unaware of its symbolic meaning (cf. M. Zerai 2001: 25)). Another spectator tied a blue Eritrean flag around Tebereh's neck, while others began to reveal the weapons they had brought to the show. 'All people had guns', Tekabo Woldemariam described the scene, 'they were flaring with national love' (I 59). Naturally, the Ethiopian authorities were less than pleased; and the same minister, Seyom Hargot, who had invited the troupe now ordered the production to be

¹⁷⁵ Hiwot Tedla was unable to travel because of her first pregnancy, Letebrehan Dagneu had died in the meantime, at the age of 19 shortly after having delivered a baby boy by caesarean. T. Tesfahunei (2000), I 20, I 21, I 22.

censored. Half of the songs had to go, including those by Tebereh Tesfahunei. ‘They just censored my songs. I cried and was sick because of that. I couldn’t even eat or drink’ (I 100), she complained. Thereafter the tour continued outside the capital, without major interruptions.

The Gradual Decline

The profit of 11,000 Birr from the Ethiopian trip enabled Ma.Te.A. to rent new premises in a large Italian house located on Asmara’s main street, opposite Cinema Impero, today’s Harnet (‘Victory’) Avenue, then named after the Emperor Haile Selassie.¹⁷⁶



Fig. 51 *In 1999 Ma.Te.A. occupied the same premises as in the late 1960s.*

They were now at the height of their success, but not without having had to experience the bitter reality of political repression. In early 1967 the ELF assassinated a number of high officials, which led to a major military offensive by the Ethiopian government (Markakis 1987: 121). ‘There was extremely severe censorship’, Tegbaru Teklai recalled the hostilities the artists were subjected to:

They were checking piece by piece, word by word. If your song had many admirers – even if it had nothing to do with politics – you were imprisoned. For the Ethiopian security forces, Ma.Te.A. was like a political party. What Ma.Te.A. did and said – it was considered as dangerous. They saw everything in a political light. (I 15).

¹⁷⁶ Ma.Te.A. reclaimed the site in 1993. Situated in a dimly lit basement and affected by damp, the club today gives the impression of a dubious den, further emphasised by the use of blue and green light bulbs. Apart from a central stage, which seems more suitable for a musical band than a drama group, the club’s architecture is characterised by a number of darkish niches and corners equally suited for romantic tête-à-têtes and political plotting.

Tegbaru Teklai, Ethiopia Medhanie, Tewolde Redda, Negusse Haile and Alamin Abdulatif were only some of the numerous Ma.Te.A. members who served prison sentences for a time. Some were imprisoned for their political activities, others for their songs or simply out of spite. (Tegbaru, for example, was detained when visiting fellow Ma.Te.A. member Alamin Abdulatif in detention). A second Ethiopian tour in 1971 was much less jubilant. Fear of repression had forced some artists, notably the civil servants, to stay behind, and the Ethiopian authorities were no longer well-meaning towards Eritreans. The liberation struggle also experienced a difficult phase, internal strife, zonal and religious polarisation having caused reformist groups to split off from the ELF (Pool 2001: 51-55).

In 1973 Solomon Gebregziabier produced a full-length drama *Zeinires Habti* (Uninherited Wealth) independent of Ma.Te.A. The play was a blatant allegory – an influential man (Ethiopia) forcibly marrying a wealthy widow (Eritrea) until her eight children (Eritrea's nationalities) kill their mother's tormentor – and thus inevitably attracted attention. Solomon received warnings from the government and was forced to cancel an upcoming show in Decamhare, which had already been sold out.¹⁷⁷

In the same year, a letter was delivered to Ma.Te.A.'s premises with an apparent threat from the ELF to destroy the association should they continue to stage Eritrean folklore dances, the most obvious nationalistic elements of their shows. When approached by Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai', a trusted undercover member, the ELF vehemently denied authorship of the letter and instead encouraged the artists to continue with their work. The incident was put down to an Ethiopian infiltrator, allegedly an Amhara woman, who had persistently (but unsuccessfully) approached the association for membership. Feelings of insecurity rocketed and many Ma.Te.A. members decided to leave the association. In 1974, the year of Haile Selassie's downfall, more than 2000 people were rounded up in front of Cinema Asmara during a show and taken into custody. Solomon Gebregziabier was brought to the outskirts of the town, repeatedly shot and then left for dead; miraculously he survived the ordeal.¹⁷⁸ Atrocities against Eritreans continued, as did the gradual decline of the ancient Ethiopian Empire. In 1973, the 'King of Kings', His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, had attained his eightieth

¹⁷⁷ ECBTP 95/7; I 20, I 21, I 22.

¹⁷⁸ ECBTP 95/7, G. Gebru (1 January 1996: 30-33). See also Plastow (1997a: 152). Negusse Haile believes that Solomon was taken while enjoying a film show in Cinema Dante (letter to the author, December 2001). I 20, I 21, I 22.

birthday, still reigning with pomp and glory, but paying no heed to the suffering of his people. Growing economic problems, famine, and social unrest eventually created considerable political instability which helped the military to take over power. In September 1974 the last Ethiopian Emperor was overthrown. A 'Provisional Military Administrative Council' was established, popularly known as the Derg ('committee' in Amharinya), which was to serve as the new government. Power struggles however also continued within the Derg. Two high-ranking officers were assassinated, including General Aman Andom, of Eritrean origin and until then commander-in-chief. This was followed by the rise of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam as Chairman of the Council and new Ethiopian Head of State. All of these events signalled an immediate escalation of the conflict. In January 1975 the two liberation fronts, ELF and EPLF, participated in a joint attack on Asmara in a rare case of collaboration.¹⁷⁹ Markakis writes that

Street battles lasted for several days and claimed many lives, especially among the townsmen [and -women!]. The latter also bore the brunt of Ethiopian retaliation that followed the withdrawal of the guerrillas, and the brutality of that experience destroyed the last vestiges of support Ethiopia still had among Eritreans. The flow of recruits to the nationalist organisations now became a flood. (Markakis 1987: 138).

One year later, in 1976, the Derg embarked on a two-year annihilation campaign to crush any civilian opposition by means of street executions, mass arrests and brutal torture. The crusade swept over large parts of Ethiopia and was known as the 'Red Terror' (Connell 1997: 18-19).

Confronted with such atrocities, Ma.Te.A. rapidly disintegrated in the mid-1970s. New, comparatively short-lived, groups sprang up, while other musicians attached themselves to established Eritrean bands or moved to Ethiopia. Teberih Tesfahunei, Tewolde Redda and Asres Tessema were among those to depart for Addis Ababa; Teberih producing records with Philips and Amha Records.¹⁸⁰ In Asmara, Asmara Radio Station under the direction of Edjugu

¹⁷⁹ At this point the EPLF was not officially known as such, but consisted of various reformist groups which had split off from the core ELF since the early 1970s. For the sake of simplicity I am referring to these groups as EPLF. For further details on the split see the following chapter. Markakis (1987: 138), Plastow (1996: 144), Tronvoll (2000: 14).

¹⁸⁰ Amha Records was the first private music label in Ethiopia to go against the monopoly over record production and import by the *Hager Fiqir*. Amha operated from 1969-1978 until its founder, Amha Eshete, went into political exile. Phillips was the only foreign record company in the 1970s. Tewolde Redda also had a private label, Yared Music Shop, which produced 45s with artists like Tsehaitu Beraki, Osman Abdulrahim, Vittorio Bussie and Hussein Mohamed Ali. Falceto ([booklet] Ref 82965-2 DK 016: 14-16, 25). See also Chapter 2.

Kemse was inaugurated by the Ethiopian regime in the attempt to suppress, or at least control, Eritrean music. Possession of politicised Tigrinya music was likely to be considered suspect, with records supposedly buried in people's back yards (Falseto ([booklet] Ref 82965-2 DK 016: 22). Eritrean music continued against all odds, attested to by names such as *Merhaba*, Venus Band, the Black Soul Band or Star Eritrea which played with Tsehaitu Beraki. Many musical groups attempted to include sketches and playlets after the disintegration of Ma.Te.A. In the mid-1970s Rocket Band changed its name to Ma.Te.Ha.L. (*Mahber Theatre Hagerawi Limdi* or Theatre Association for National Customs) when it began to incorporate playlets and theatrical sketches into their shows. It was soon to disappear again when some of its members split off as *Zerai Deres* Band. In 1972 Bereket Mengisteab quit the Haile Selassie I Company in Addis Ababa, for which he had worked for more than a decade, to start his own group, *Mekaleh Guaila* (see Figure 52). For two years, *Mekaleh Guaila* successfully toured variety shows in the attempt to agitate for the nationalist cause. Among the players to accompany him were Ma.Te.A. veteran Asmerom Habtemariam and Aslie Tedros, a kebero drummer and one of the very few female Eritrean studio musicians of her time.¹⁸¹ Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai' established *Merhaba* (later *Merhaba Stars*) with the same nationalistic objectives, bringing together a number of well-known artists willing to continue with politicised entertainment. Yet they all eventually succumbed to the relentless pressure from the Ethiopian regime. Bands were now established by the government, as were some theatre groups consisting of former Ma.Te.A. members. When *kebeles* were introduced by the Derg – so-called 'urban dwellers associations' which controlled every Eritrean and Ethiopian neighbourhood – each was required to set up a *kinet* (or 'culture') group to produce pro-Ethiopian propaganda. Membership was by force, as was attendance at their shows (cf. EPLF 1979a: 113). Tekabo Woldemariam recalled that 'many youngsters were made to play music' (I 62). In the 1980s, Alemayo Kahasai was coerced to head one such cultural troupe which comprised some of his former colleagues; among others Tekabo Woldemariam, Tegbaru Teklai, Tsegai Negash, Vittorio Bussie and Ethiopia Medhanie (see Figure 53). None had joined willingly, but fearing punishment they obliged. Some, like Ethiopia, had already served prison sentences and were watched very carefully; others feared for the

¹⁸¹ Aslie, an illiterate musician whose maternal family came from Sala'a Daro, worked with such well-known singers as Tsehaitu Beraki, Teberah Tesfahunci and Tewolde Redda. I 78.



Fig. 52 Mekaleh Guaila *in the 1970s.*
Master of Ceremony: Ma.Te.A. veteran Asmerom Habtemariam;
kebero player on the right: Aslie Tedros.

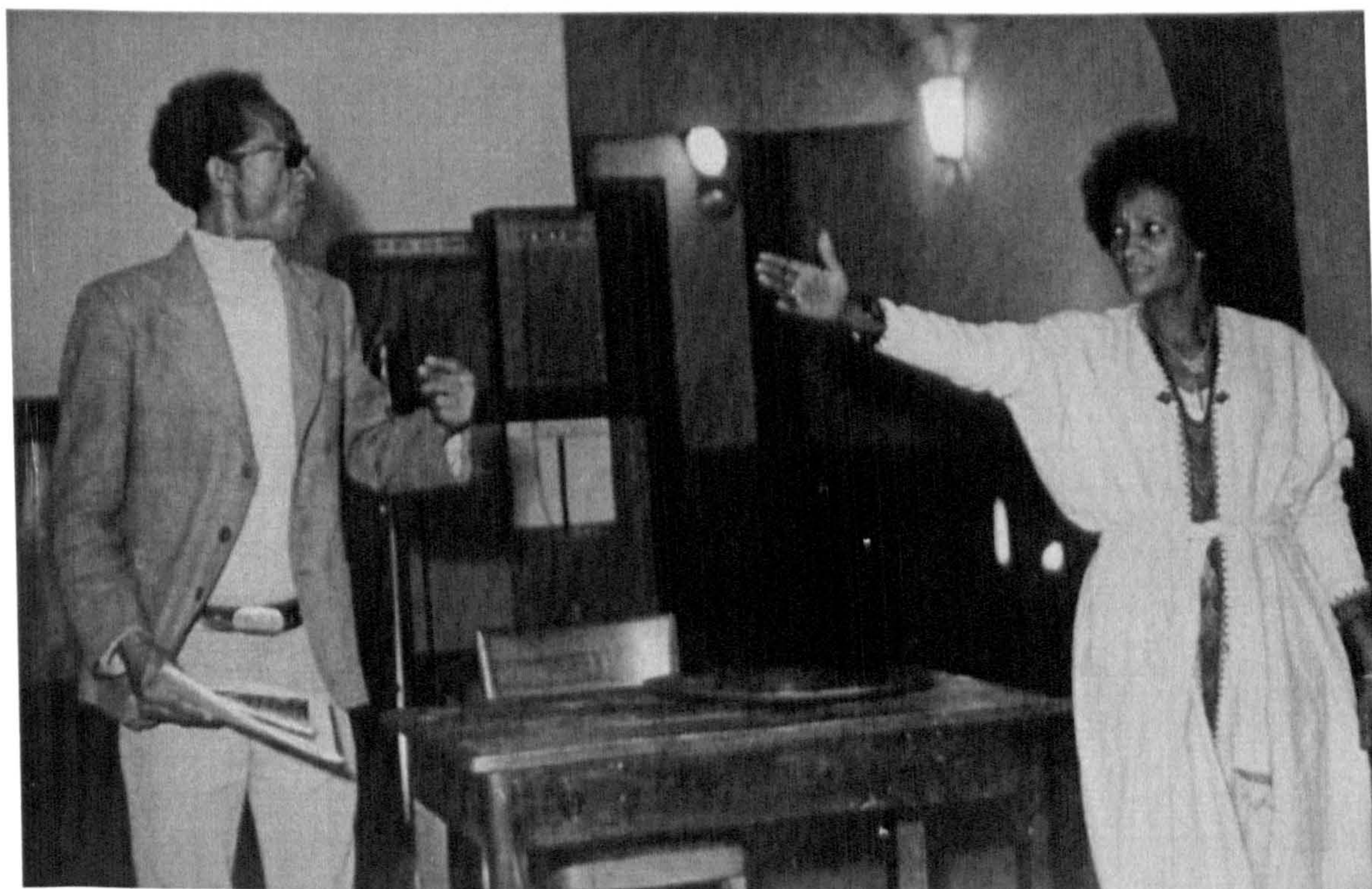


Fig. 53 *Theatre under the Derg: Tsegai Negash and Ethiopia Medhanie*
rehearsing a play against illiteracy in the mid-1970s.

safety of their children. Theatre under the Derg regime is a sensitive issue which requires further investigation. I leave that to the future, however, and to researchers closer to the sources. It was evident that some artists still felt they were stigmatised for having ‘betrayed’ the nation.¹⁸²

At the time, few Ma.Te.A. members were known to have direct links with the liberation movements, for ‘the fact that we had “field” influences was restricted to the knowledge of a few trusted members’ (ECBTP 95/8). By the mid-1970s, however, artists started to flock to the fronts. To the ELF went Negusse Haile (in 1975), Tsehaitu Beraki (in 1977), Tewolde Redda (in 1979), Yemane Gebremichael ‘Baria’, Bereket Mengisteab (in 1975) and Osman Abdulrahim; while Tebereh Tesfahunei and Asmerom Habtemariam joined the newly established contender, the EPLF. For the next fifteen years, these were the places where Eritrean theatre arts took a very different turn, and where they were truly and fervently being en-gendered.

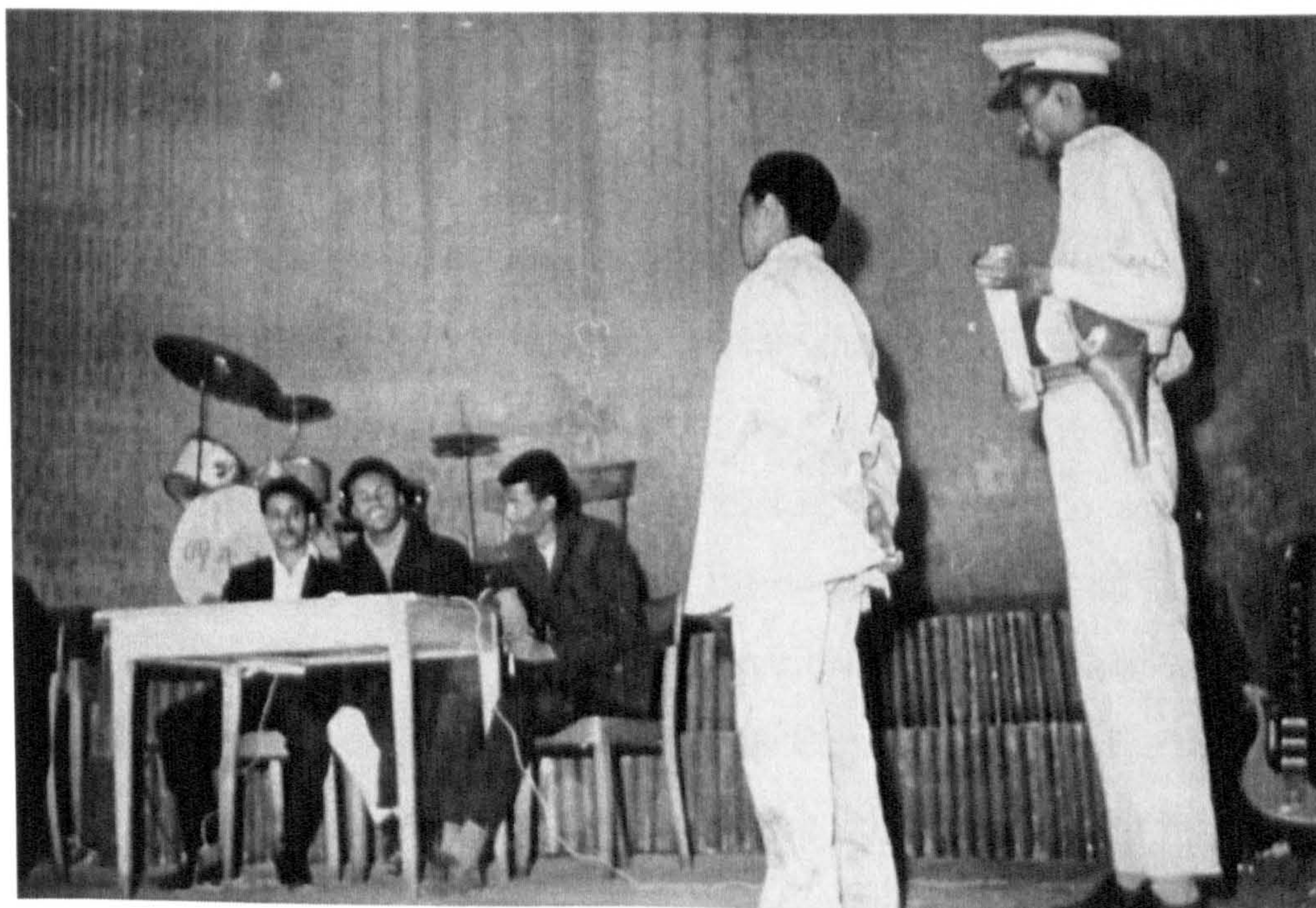


Fig. 54 *A Ma.Te.A. play, ca. 1971. Second from right: Asmerom Habtemariam.*

¹⁸² For an initial study on Eritrean theatre under the Derg see Plastow (1997a: 152-154). I 20, I 21, I 22, I 54, I 74, I 125.

PART THREE: THEATRES OF WAR: MILITARY EMERGENCIES AND THEATRICAL EXTRAVAGANZA: THE RISE OF A FIGHTER PERFORMING ARTS

CHAPTER 4: THEATRE IN THE ELF

Historical Background: ELF and EPLF

If we want to understand the far-reaching cultural developments in the field, we need to return to the early and mid-1960s. The ELF had gained superiority over the ELM as a nationalist movement and started to stake out its power base, predominately in the western lowlands. While the leadership remained located in Egypt, from which it toured the Eritrean diaspora and neighbouring Arab nations to raise support, the fighting forces – the Eritrean Liberation Army or ELA – were established inside Eritrea. A Revolutionary Command was set up in Kassala, Sudan, designed to provide administrative and military guidance and to liaise with the political leaders in Cairo. Following the Algerian example, a zonal organisation was introduced which, ultimately, consisted of five zones led by local commanders in charge of regional recruits. Most sources agree that the drawback of the system was the rise of ethnic and religious parochialism, social exclusion and personal patronage. At this stage of the struggle, women were still conspicuous for their absence. This was a rough and tough world accessible only to powerful men – at least in the general understanding.¹⁸³

Eritrean historiography is unequivocal that the ELF as a liberation movement eventually failed and that from 1970/71 reformist splinter groups, some of which later consolidated as the EPLF, were on the ascent. Critical accounts of the fragmentation of the ELF differ considerably; an outline of the split will hence suffice as background information. The main factions forsaking the ELF were the Sabbe group, also known as Popular Liberation Forces (PLF), headed by Osman Saleh Sabbe (one of the three initial leadership figures in the ELF and then head of the ELF General Secretariat); the Ala group led by the future deputy general secretary of the EPLF and now head of state, Isayas Afewerki; as well as the Obel faction, an opposition force generated by Adem Salih and other Beni Amir members of the General Command in 1970. After the first National Congress of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation *Front*) in 1971, the Obel group renamed itself as Eritrean Liberation *Forces* (also, unfortunately, ELF). PLF and the dissident ELF faction formed a coalition, ELF-PLF, in 1972 which

¹⁸³ Pool (2001: 49-52), R. Iyob (1995: 109-113), Markakis (1987: 109-115).

was strengthened by the merger of the PLF and the Ala group in the following year. In 1976, however, the honeymoon was over and the ELF-PFL broke apart, due to power struggles between Sabbe, who operated from abroad, and the combatant leaders in the field. Sabbe's followers retained the name ELF-PLF, which a number of former Obel members joined. From thereon the remaining dissident forces in the field were known as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which officially constituted itself at the first EPLF Congress in 1977. For the sake of simplicity all groupings which eventually merged as the EPLF will be referred to as such.¹⁸⁴

In 1972 the core ELF had declared war against the secessionists which led to a prolonged civil war, the fiercest periods being between 1972-1974 and 1978-1981 (R. Iyob 1995: 122). By the early 1980s, the ELF was virtually powerless inside Eritrea, the majority of fighters having fled to Sudan to seek refuge in the Arab and western diaspora. Even today, bitterness stemming from the gory civil war is rife on both sides of the divide and was exacerbated by one ELF faction siding with Ethiopia in the 1998-2000 'border' conflict. Inside Eritrea the role of the ELF in the liberation struggle continues to be neglected, as is its contribution to the cultural field. Until the onset of the latest Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998-2000, when a number of distinguished ELF veterans, such as Tsehaitu Beraki, returned to Eritrea to lend their singing voices to the mobilisation apparatus, I encountered few attempts at ELF/EPLF reconciliation. (In 1997 my frivolous suggestion to use Cinema Asmara's side entrance, which sports a picturesque balcony, to mount an outdoor performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* adapted to the ELF/EPLF civil war was met by embarrassed giggles and stony silence). Those inside Eritrea who had disowned the ELF were returned to the official fold but tended to be reluctant to speak about their old affiliations;¹⁸⁵ those who had remained loyal hinted at surreptitious discrimination. Former ELF members in the diaspora, some of whom still constitute an organised opposition in exile, were initially hesitant to share their information, wary of my potential (but non-existent) links to the Eritrean government. The internecine strife between the two camps has continued over more than three decades and often impeded fruitful

¹⁸⁴ Occasionally, the Sabbe group/Popular Liberation Forces (PLF) is abbreviated as PLF 1; the Ala group, named after their base in the old southern province of Akele Guzai, is also known as Isayas' Group, in some sources as PLF 2. ELF (1979: 44-50), Markakis (1987: 127-140), R. Iyob (1995: 114-116). For the latest account see Pool (2001: 63-70, 140-142).

¹⁸⁵ Pool notes that ELF deserters were subjected to rigid political (re-)education by selected political cadres in the EPLF, around whose own training there was a certain amount of secrecy. Pool (2001: 94).

discussions and the collation of data (cf. Pool 2001: 71). The situation was not unlike the difficulties encountered with former Unionists, but with a much graver edge. Here, relatives had fought each other in a bloody war which had separated families and caused casualties totally unrelated to combating the common enemy, Ethiopia.

These factors have contributed to the underestimation of ELF cultural work, especially in official historical narratives. Creative impulses originating in the ELF, if not earlier in civilian theatre associations, were sometimes implicitly credited to the EPLF. In this chapter I thus describe how the ELF laid the foundation for a unique fighter culture to emerge, while the EPLF developed it further. I also illustrate how both liberation movements suffered from gender troubles in the early phases, when the first women recruits joined the fronts, and how gender issues were gradually incorporated in – and mitigated by – theatre work. Older gender discourses continued to make their presence felt. On the whole, however, women in the liberation movements experienced a tremendous opening up of space, regardless of the physical, material and psychological hardships they encountered; as did the performing arts. Infused with new impulses and given creative (though not necessarily ideological) leeway, theatre started to burgeon on an unprecedented scale.

Gender Troubles and the First ELF Cultural Troupe

Research into the ELF's cultural activities has not only been suffering from the tensions between the two liberation fronts, but also from lack of contemporary documentation for triangulation. Informants willing to share their stories mostly joined in the mid-1970s and knew previous performances only from hearsay. It can however be safely assumed that no cultural group existed before 1968. Then a number of fighters who had been sent to Cuba and China for further training returned to Eritrea and joined the general call for reforms. Concerned by the mounting dissent within the organisation and by outside complaints, the ELF summoned a number of 'rectification meetings' (R. Iyob 1995: 170) to bring about a major structural overhaul of the organisation culminating in the 1969 Adobha Conference. Above all the elimination of the aforementioned zonal divisions and the establishment of a leadership inside Eritrea were sought. Thirdly, civilians were no more to be intimidated while greater grass-roots

participation in form of people's assemblies was to be aimed for.¹⁸⁶ Changes also took place with regard to the role of culture. It was reported that musical bands had been essential to the mobilisation of the Chinese masses, and suggested that culture in the ELF be used for political ends. A cultural group was needed; and Ramadan Gebre, a Beit-Juk from Keren, one of the Tigre speaking groups, was given the task. Ramadan was an old hand in the cultural field, having previously worked with Ali Said and Alemayo Kahasai during the BMA, and having had his own theatre group, *Abna Keren* (Sons of Keren), as early as the mid-1950s.¹⁸⁷ Now he travelled with the new ELF troupe, mostly in Barka, where they performed political agit-prop and revolutionary music. *Oud, krar, shira wata*, violin and accordion were the instruments available; the languages used were Tigre, Arabic, and Tigrinya. Around this time, the first women began to join the field, not yet as frontline combatants, but as aides engaged in 'political tasks, as well as caring for and helping the fighters'.¹⁸⁸ According to Negusse Haile, there were already women performers during the formative stages of the cultural group. Of Nara, Kunama and Tigre-speaking origins, they accompanied the musicians with singing and dancing pertaining to their ethnic groups.

Woman fighters of both fronts have complained about the reactionary attitudes of their less progressive male counterparts in the early phases of the struggle. The young and educated cadres, who had pushed for reforms, were a small minority among the fighters. It would take patient political education to achieve a similar sensitivity to gender issues among the rank-and-file, and later among the civilian population. In 1971 the first ELF Congress declared that the organisation 'shall remove all historical prejudice against women and will fight any discrimination in state, social and private life', with any discriminatory manifestation to be 'severely punished'.¹⁸⁹ In 1974 the ELF founded the Eritrean Women's General Union (EWGU), while the EPLF's National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was established in 1979,¹⁹⁰ two years after the movement's

¹⁸⁶ R. Iyob (1995: 113-114, 170). According to Ruth Iyob, complaints against the ELF forces ranged from looting to intimidation and physical abuse of civilians, including the rape of women.

¹⁸⁷ For *Abna Keren* see also Chapter 2. I 20, I 21, I 22.

¹⁸⁸ ELF (1976b: 26). Note that later all members of the fronts were called fighters, whether they were engaged in frontline combat or not.

¹⁸⁹ ELF (1976b: 26). This commitment was first stated 1975 and reiterated in 1978. ELF ([1975]: 30-31), ELF (1978c: 42).

¹⁹⁰ NUEW is sometimes abbreviated as NUEWmn to distinguish it from the National Union of Eritrean Workers (also NUEW), now renamed as National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW). The consolidation of NUEW took place directly after the founding congress of the

consolidating congress. Both unions sought to organise and involve civilian women in the national, anti-imperial and anti-feudal struggle, not necessarily as 'feminist' organisations (Schamanek 1998: 127). The EWGU preached 'the dialectical link between the liberation of the Homeland and the liberation of women and of the society as a whole',¹⁹¹ and did not solely focus on women's issues. (The ELF women's hymn, '*Dekanisteo Hibera*', for example, originally sung by Tsehaitu Beraki, started with the lines 'Women, let's unite/In order to break the enemy ...' (I 9)). Often, it appears, concerns about national liberation were more pressing than those about women's liberation, a problem exacerbated by the lack of qualified female cadres in the field. In 1975 Amna Melekin, of Bilen origin and a graduate of Cairo University, became the first and only woman to be elected to the ELF Executive Committee, later to become the president of the women's union (Markakis 1987: 139, 287-8). In the NUEW, too, reality was often at variance with the ideal. EPLF sources confirm the initial difficulties of recruiting women, as 'political affairs were seen entirely as a male domain' (Wilson 1991: 49), obviously disregarding women's previous engagement in political parties and social protest since the 1940s. Then there was the lack of acceptance by male cadres once women had joined the resistance movements. While the first female EPLF recruits in 1973 had the benefit of being a novelty – 'We were welcomed very much by the fighters. But they were shy with us. They used to pity us because we were women' (Worku Zerai in Wilson 1991: 96) – later EPLF recruits still mentioned sporadic gender inequalities, with men trying to demonstrate their superiority. The ELF situation is less well recorded, but here too 'the attitude of men to women was unchanged'.¹⁹²

Between 1969 and 1971 Ramadan Gebre mounted the first-ever mentioned drama in the field. The play featured a female protagonist and indicated theatrical tendencies for both liberation movements in the coming two decades. '*Imberator* ['Emperor']' told the story of an Eritrean son incarcerated by the Emperor's army

Worker's Union. However, women's associations on village, district and regional level had existed since 1976-77. Schamanek (1998: 12, 127-128), Papstein (1991: 129), NUEW (1999a: 28).

¹⁹¹ ELF (1978b: 51). Women's issues are not referred to in 'Socio-Economic Transformations' in the ELF, nor under 'Education' nor 'Economic Endeavours'. However, the women's union is mentioned as one of the numerous mass organisations whose establishment was 'the only way out of the social quagmire' (ELF 1979: 79).

¹⁹² Ex-ELF member Ghdy in Wilson (1991: 59). For the ELF see also Wilson (1991: 40, 58-59). For the EPLF see NUEW (1999: 21), W. Sellassie (1992: 69), and Christmann (1996: 110-111, 116). Madura Dabi, a young Kunama woman, was recruited to the EPLF by force in 1988 and complained about the superior airs some men put on. Recruitment by force seems to have happened rarely, but is still difficult to discuss openly. For another example see Quehl (2003: 141).

for being a member of an ELF underground cell, and the heroic, if tragic, resistance of his mother. The woman gets killed as a result, but is eventually avenged by ELF fighters (I 20, I 21, I 22).

Above all, the play projected the bravery of the fighters, but also highlighted the sacrifices made by (and expected of) the civilian population. What is more, it acknowledged the role of mothers in the struggle for independence. At this point, women were not yet frontline fighters; and mothers in theatrical representations had mainly served as (passive) embodiments of the suffering nation. In Ramadan's play, however, the protagonist tried to oppose the occupying forces, thus becoming the first female 'martyr' in frontline theatre.¹⁹³ Here, the mother figure was inscribed with more agency than in previous allegorical plays, such as Solomon Gebregziabhier's *Uninherited Wealth*, where she had silently suffered abuse from her antagonistic husband before being liberated by her (fighter-)children.

The heroic mother figure – an Eritrean version of the Mother Africa trope – was to become a staple representation in the two liberation movements, the image appealing to both reformist and conservative elements at the fronts and to the civilian population: a woman comfortably settled into her traditional role, yet fighting the colonial enemy with all her available resources. *Ade Zeinab* in the EPLF is such an example, as is the character in a recent video film *Eta Ade* ('The Mother') (2000) by EPLF veterans Mesgun Zerai ('Wadi Faraday' – 'son of the judge') and Isayas Tseggai. The film was commissioned to commemorate the 20th anniversary of NUEW in 1999 and received the theatrical Raimock Prize for exactly this type of representation.¹⁹⁴ While the image of the heroic mother had progressive features for the time, one should not forget that it also helped calcify and emblazon widespread gender norms in Eritrea: women's nurturing, self-sacrificing tendencies and their role as reproducers – and embodiment – of the nation. It also reinforced long-established links between women, their bodies, and

¹⁹³ Martyrs are fighters, and sometimes civilians, who died in the service of the liberation struggle. Redie Bereketeab explains it as follows: '*Meswa'eti* (martyrdom) was a sacred sacrifice which every *Tegadalai/Tegadalit* [male and female fighter] was prepared to make for his nation. *Meswa'eti* was so sacred that words like died, killed, murdered, or death did not exist not only in the daily vocabulary of the *Tedadelti* [fighters], but also in society in general, in reference to the death of *Tedadelti*. "In conversation with dozens of Eritrean fighters, I found that no one ever dies – instead he is 'martyred'" (Berger 1987: 30). The concept of *sewu'e/sewi'eti* (martyr) was socially constructed, not only to sanctify the martyred but also to bestow anonymity and equity so that those who sacrificed their lives in the name of the nation could be remembered eternally. This emotionally-charged symbolism made *meswa'eti* bearable' (R. Bereketeab 2000: 232).

¹⁹⁴ The Raimock Prize can be considered as the Eritrean 'Oscars' for a wide range of arts. They are awarded annually at the end of the Eritrea Festival. A. Sahle (13 November 1999b: 7).

concepts of land. Kjetil Tronvoll observes that, in the absence – and conscious rejection – of a mythical past, modern national identity in Eritrea has been constructed around land and landscape, and the blood that was sacrificed for the national territory (Tronvoll 1999: 1054). This veritable *Blut und Boden* ('blood and soil') link resonates in many creative expressions on Eritrea, from the fine arts to civilian theatre.¹⁹⁵ In Ramadan Gebre's play we find a dual blood and soil connection: the mother fighting and sacrificing her life for the motherland (which she symbolically embodies) as seen in the loss of blood which saves her son, historically linked with the initial blood loss when giving birth to him. Later, the sacrifice of female fighters would add another dimension. Zillah Eisenstein however rightly points out that '[i]n nationalism the fictive power of motherhood stands against the varied realities of women's experiences in society' (Eisenstein 2000: 41). Reproductive qualities have always featured high on Eritrean and other-African women's agenda. Yet women who decided to expand their experience beyond preordained roles in the field encountered grave resentment at times, whether as performers or as frontline fighters.

Previously, I illustrated the difficulties of civilian theatre artists and the distorted images prevalent in the public mind; in the field troubles for early women performers were initially no less painful. Before the restructuring of the ELF cultural troupe in the mid-1970s and the advent of experienced and well-known (female) artists such as Tsehaitu Beraki, women engaged in cultural work beyond the conventional, long-established performance forms occasionally faced harsh opposition from their male comrades. Whereas the atmosphere among cultural workers was considerate towards women performers (though not egalitarian in that it did not allow them to be in charge of the shows), a female fighter artist recalled her own experience:

FIGHTER: There was 'male domination' characterised by physical aggression towards us.

Q (ECBTP 1995): Could you explain why that was so?

¹⁹⁵ For the fine arts see Matzke (2002b: 35). Isaak Abraham, one-time ELF and Venus Band member, recounted a 1973 play by Negusse Haile, *Bdemkum Ferimna* (We Signed with Your Blood), in which a Christian girl and a Muslim boy get married against their parents' initial objections, signing the marriage contract with their blood. The figurative allusions to the two liberation movements, their projected reconciliation and their sanguinary sacrifices are rather obvious. See also Alemseged Tesfai's positive reading in A. Tesfai ([1983]). Doris Locher-Schofen moreover recounts an incident in which women who had been forced to serve in the Derg's people's committee's, *kebele*, refused to donate blood for the Ethiopian 'heroes' under the pretext that they didn't even have enough blood for themselves. Locher-Tschofen ([19?]: 87).

F: The men were being conservative on the whole. It was, and still is, an Eritrean tradition that women are not supposed to act openly on stage.

Q: Does that mean the men were chauvinistic?

F: They undermined the things we contributed which, in their view, was due to our smaller mental capacity. [...] I think the reaction was natural, because it was the first time women opposed the dogmas imposed on them. [...] I personally witnessed that a friend of my brother broke another woman's leg, just because she acted on an open stage. (ECBTP 95/20).

While this might be an extreme example, and certainly not the rule, it is nonetheless indicative of the length some men were willing to go in order to keep women in their place and, literally, restrict their movements. (The incident of physical abuse I witnessed in 1997 had been motivated by similar concerns). My data is too patchy to draw decisive conclusions as to when attitudes among ELF fighters began to change, but one can assume a gradual and on-going process over a long period as part of the organisational reconstitution. This holds true for both liberation movements (R. Bereketeab 2002: 233).

The ELF's Cultural Heyday

The outbreak of the civil war in 1972 considerably weakened the output of the first cultural troupe, though it was never discontinued. Ramadan Gebre was needed for other, more immediate tasks and had little time for the production or touring of shows. The lull continued until 1975 when many highlanders joined the ELF. The purportedly reformist Derg regime had overthrown Haile Selassie, but the new leadership under Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam proved to be more coercive than the Emperor. Increasingly, youngsters of both genders decided to leave for the field. Among them was the Venus Band, including the singers Yemane Gebremichael 'Baria' and Osman Abdulrahim. Their arrival injected new energy into the cultural work of the ELF, and added anxiously awaited human and non-human resources: theatrical expertise and modern musical instruments. Isaak Abraham, a former band member, recalled that they immediately set about devising new agit-prop pieces in the attempt to stop the continuing conflict between the ELF and the separatist factions. In May 1975, they also captured the second ELF National Congress with their performance. Strife between the band and the political leadership however impeded their work, as did, according to Bereket Mengisteab, resentment of rural musicians against the purportedly more

sophisticated urban colleagues. Venus Band members perceived these conflicts as censorship and an ideological clampdown on their work. Six months later they left for Sudan, some joining dissident ELF sections.¹⁹⁶

Bereket Mengisteab and Negusse Haile ‘Mensa’ai’ had both reached the field in 1975. According to Negusse Haile, negotiations between him and Ibrahim Idris Totil, the then president and head of the Political Office for Cultural Affairs, led to Bereket’s appointment as the new director of the ‘Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe’ (ELF 1977/1978a: 15); Negusse became his deputy.



Fig. 55 *Bereket Mengisteab in 1977.*

The troupe was part of the front’s political department and as such ‘expected to be involved in motivation and agitation’ (ECBTP 95/30). In 1976-77 Negusse Haile was made director, with Bereket as second-in-command. After a personnel shuffle in 1978-79,¹⁹⁷ Negusse was re-installed as the head until the virtual demise of the ELF as a liberation movement in the early 1980s. By then Bereket Mengisteab had already left Eritrea for Sudan; later he moved to Saudi Arabia before returning permanently to Eritrea during the latest Ethiopian-Eritrean war.

1975 to 1981 was the cultural heyday of the ELF. Particularly from 1975-1977 they had a clear artistic advantage over the EPLF because of the many experienced artists who had joined the organisation. ‘This made the shows more

¹⁹⁶ ECBTP 95//24, ECBTP 95/25, I 20, I 21, I 22, I 133. For a list of Venus Band members see Appendix I: Performers.

¹⁹⁷ According to Negusse Haile, an argument between him and Ibrahim Idris Totil led to his demotion from artistic director in 1977-78. A military officer, Andebrehan (X), was installed instead. Little qualified for cultural work, his post was soon taken over by Yemane Yohannes, a former member of the Police Orchestra and soon-to-be leader of the children’s cultural troupe. Negusse was re-installed as deputy director; thereafter as director of the troupe on order of the ELF Executive Committee. (Ibrahim Idris Totil was one of the leading ideologues of the ELF after having been elected to the ELF Executive Committee in 1971. In 1987, the Saghem movement which he had joined in 1983 merged with the EPLF. Killion (1998: 254).)

popular' (ECBTP 95/30), today's Head of the PFDJ Research and Documentation Department, Zemheret Yohannes recalled. Fighters were free to provide their own entertainment during leisure and resting periods, but unlike the EPLF, the ELF did not insist on cultural groups in virtually all military and non-combatant sections of the organisation. It was the responsibility of the central cultural troupe to entertain and inform fighters and civilians alike. Apart from mounting shows for meetings and larger conventions – such as the women's congress or the congresses of workers and refugees – the troupe toured frequently. In 1976, they travelled through the old provinces of Barka and Akele Guzei, then again in 1977, by which time most of Eritrea was liberated. In 1979, after a succession of Ethiopian offensives had caused heavy losses in the previous year and necessitated a major retreat, the central cultural troupe went on an extended tour through Sudan to reach refugees and scattered fighters.

Negusse Mensa'ai and Bereket Mengisteab were in charge of the adult professionals, among them Tsehaitu Beraki. Altogether the 'Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe' consisted of some 20-30 artists, with numbers fluctuating (see Figures 56 and 57)). The seasoned performers were of great importance for the troupe as they guaranteed professionalism and quality. Zemheret Yohannes recalled that 'their [musical] compositions were of high standard and very effective' (ECBTP 95/30), because of their previous experience in the urban entertainment sector. Tsehaitu Beraki joined in 1978, often performing with Tewolde Redda with whom she had collaborated previously.

Given the high proportion of lowlanders in the ELF, who had been less exposed to modern urban culture and hence women on stage, the female ratio in the cultural troupe was high and the ethnic make-up striking. Lowland women, whose non-domestic activities tended to be severely restricted by customs, participated in official cultural activities. They made up one third of the troupe and were of Tigre-, Bilen-, Saho-, Kunama- and Tigrinya-speaking backgrounds.¹⁹⁸ The quota of women artists appears to reflect the higher visibility of women in the field following a period of systematic terror and military offensives which Eritreans were subjected to after the rise of the Derg. While feigning genuine concern for 'the masses', Mengistu and his government were unequivocal on the question of Eritrea as an intrinsic part of Ethiopia. 'Secessionist' activities in the aftermath of the monarchy's overthrow were

¹⁹⁸ For female members see Appendix I: Performers.

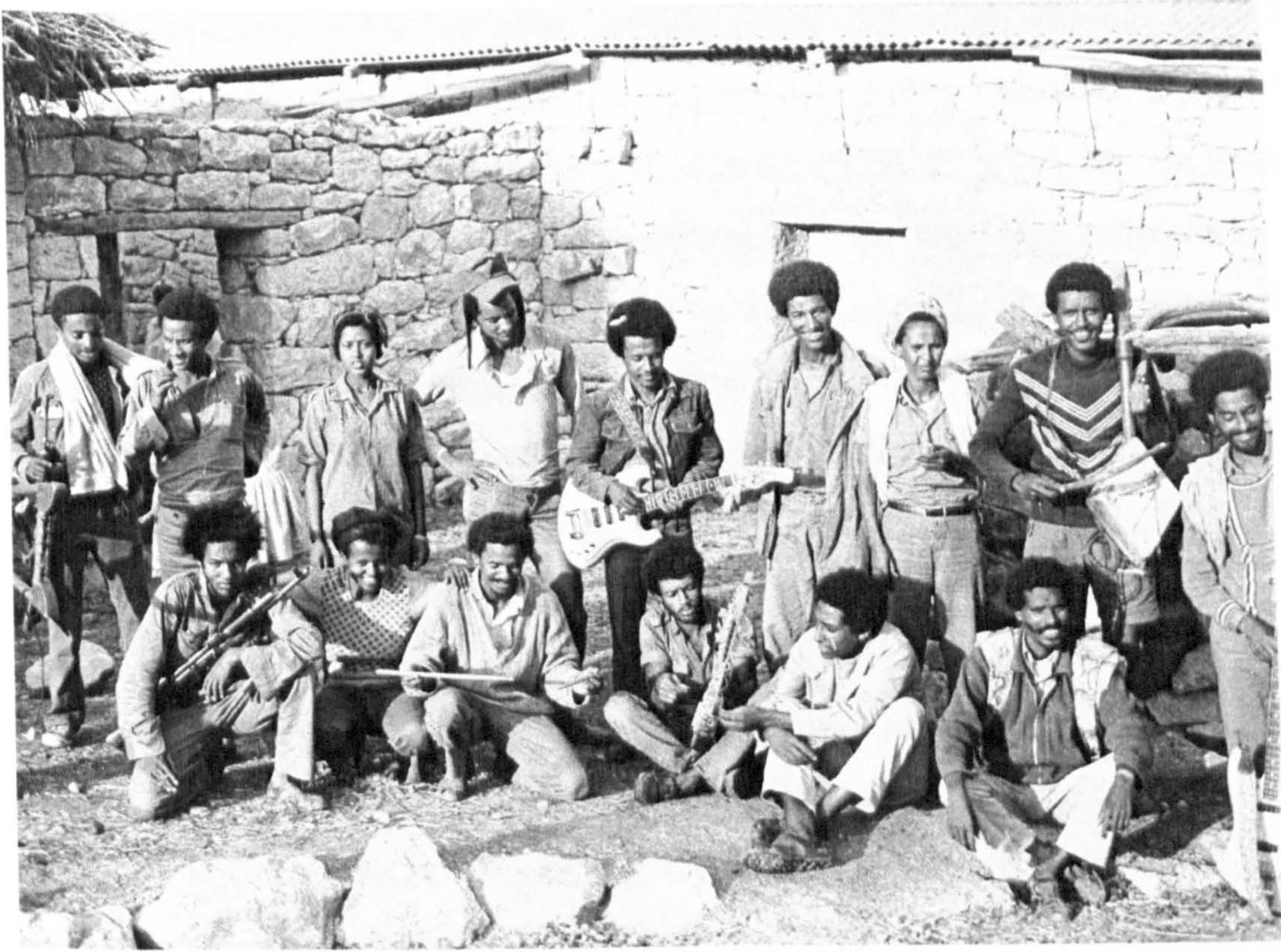


Fig. 56 *The ELF Band in 1976.*

Back row, from left: Hadgu Woldehaimanot (?), Keflom Tesfamariam, Fatna Mohamed, Mantai Ghebil, Tewolde Gebreselassie, Giorgis Keleta, Leteab (X), Solomon Gebrewolde, Negash Mohamed Berhan. Front row, from left: Abrar Osman, Ghidey Umberto, Hussein Mohamed Ali, Bereket Beyene, [?], Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'.

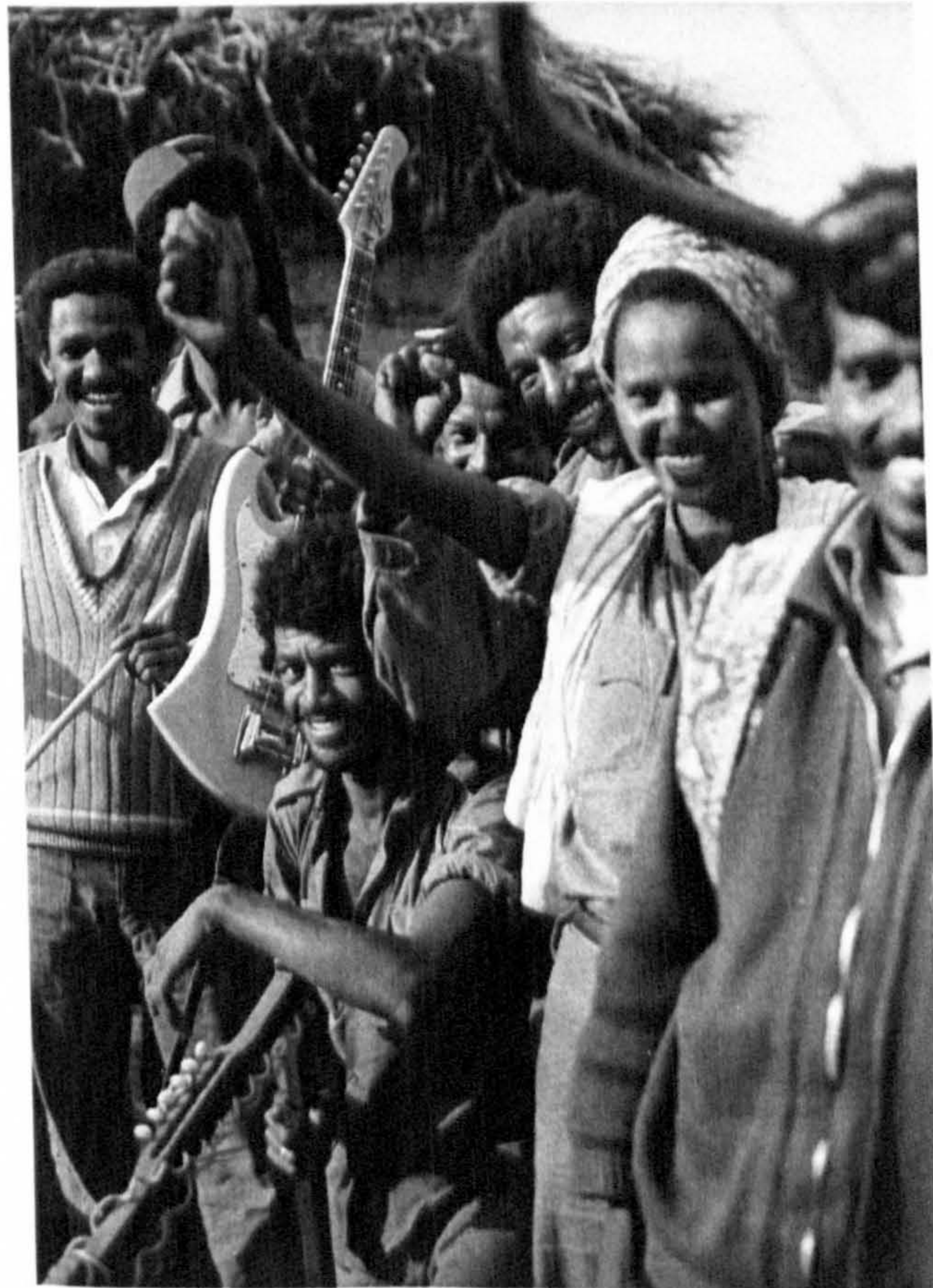


Fig. 57 *Members of the Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe, 1976; centre: Leteab (X), far right: Negusse Haile.*

(© Bruce Parkhurst, both pictures).

ruthlessly quashed. Consequently, women were not only fleeing Ethiopian atrocities, their (wo)manpower was urgently needed if both liberation fronts were to succeed. The initial resentment against women on the frontline was superseded by the necessity to encourage their contribution. This was also reflected in the performing arts. While the ELF struggled on an organisational and military level to prevent the movement from disintegration, the theatre wing was united in its battle for concord through education and entertainment, with women playing a major part.

Akin to the time-tested formula of the civilian theatre associations, the cultural work of the ELF was divided into modern (revolutionary) music, long-established performance arts and dialogue drama. Music occupied by far the largest space, having always been an essential element of creative expression among all nationalities in Eritrea. As Cynthia Tse Kimberlin in her study on women and music in Eritrea and the Tigray province of Ethiopia affirmed, 'music was effective as a teaching tool and as a socially sanctioned way of communicating information, no matter how sensitive or controversial. [...] Music served to convey what ordinary speech and other forms of communication could not' (Kimberlin 2000: 257). In a situation of twofold conflict – liberation struggle and civil war – music was one of the most important constituents of political propaganda,¹⁹⁹ and most effective in bringing about social change. Tsehaitu Beraki's song '*Dekanisteo Hibera*' is probably one of the best-known examples in respect of women's contribution to and their struggle for acceptance at the frontline. The song is still performed at ELF celebrations in the diaspora today, often by second or third generation woman singers, Tsehaitu's westernised 'granddaughters', who want to keep the memory of the early struggle alive while reasserting women's rights in their host societies (I 98/11).

Other songs referred to different aspects of the ELF's social education programme, such as the literacy campaign, or praised the dedication of civilians and fighters. By 1977 Zemheret Yohannes remembered, 'you could buy their songs on cassette' (I 95/30). Altogether five audio-tapes were produced, four by the Eritrea National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe, one by the children's

¹⁹⁹ The term propaganda will feature repeatedly in this chapter. I am following the use of Nazareth Amlesom who draws on a definition by G. Goshgarian to illuminate why liberation war songs were classified as propaganda texts. For Nazareth 'propaganda [is] defined as "expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends." (Goshgarian, G. 1980: 85). The actions may be socially beneficial or socially harmful to millions of people' (N. Amlesom 2000: 3).

troupe to be discussed below. The music was popular because of its blend of customary and 'revolutionary' elements, reflected also in the manner of presentation. Tsehaitu, for example, performed both in *suria* (a white, embroidered cotton dress commonly worn by highland women) and combatant camouflage, but never without her trademark instrument, the *krar*. Lyrics, however, were written by the artistic directors and political cadres, not by the singers; and numbers popular during Ma.Te.A. times were rarely performed. In later years, particularly the early 1980s, indoctrination against the EPLF became a major musical concern. Religion, on the other hand, did not feature at all in cultural work, a factor which runs counter to the widespread notion that Christians fighting Muslims had been the main reason behind the political break-up of the organisation.²⁰⁰

Two more examples of women and music shall suffice to illustrate the power of music as a tool for propaganda and mobilisation. When the fighting between ELF and EPLF re-arose in the mid-1970s and competition for the support of the civilian population was high, the ELF liberated Tessenei and Golutsh in 1977 in response to the liberation of Karora, Nakfa and Afabet by the EPLF (Markakis 1987: 141). As a result, the EPLF was held in high esteem which the ELF attempted to counter. Negusse Haile composed a Tigre-language song, '*Eritrea Dergi Itnebra* (The Derg will not stay in Eritrea forever)', which recounted the military feats of the ELF and mentioned the towns they had successfully liberated.²⁰¹ A group of young women belonging to the cultural troupe performed the song, the (seemingly) liberated harbingers of a (soon-to-be) liberated Eritrea. From a more critical standpoint, however, they were again the show- and mouthpieces of the organisation. Creative and political processes were firmly in the hands of higher cadres, all of who were men, similar to the situation in previous theatre associations.

In 1979 the situation once more became critical within the main body of the ELF because of multiple defections to Sudan. Between 1978 and 1979 Ethiopia had launched four massive offensives with the military and strategic backup of Russia, forcing both liberation fronts to abandon already liberated

²⁰⁰ Some, especially older, sources highlight the differences between Muslims and Christians as the main cause of the break-up of the ELF. Cf. Markakis (1987). Though this undoubtedly caused considerable dissent in the organisation, later sources acknowledge the complexities of the split and note that '[i]deology, foreign policy orientation, regional, clan and personal loyalties all played their part' (Pool 1997: 11).

²⁰¹ Negusse Haile mentioned Om Hager, Tessenei, Aligider, Adibara, Agordat, and Mendefera. I 133.

towns and large parts of the countryside. While the EPLF accomplished an orderly strategic retreat into the mountainous Sahel region, the ELF was harder hit as the areas under their control had been the first to be attacked (Pool 1997: 12). Fighters and thousands of civilian refugees fled across the Sudanese border in a desperate attempt to escape alive.

The ELF cultural troupe responded by organising a major tour through Sudan; to Kassala, Khartoum, Port Sudan and smaller places. All in all, 75 people were on the road including technicians, drivers and security staff. In refugee camps they were met by representatives of the mass organisations who had prepared their own cultural shows to welcome the travelling artists. A mobile art exhibition was part of the tour, as was the newly established children's cultural troupe, *Tsebah* ('Early Morning'), under the auspices of the General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES). *Tsebah* consisted of gifted students from the eponymous ELF school who had initially started to imitate the central cultural troupe of their own accord.²⁰² Thereafter the children were instructed in political songs and various Eritrean dances, musical instruments not being available for teaching.²⁰³ While most of their presentations were aimed at their age-mates, they also performed short 'musical dramas' and educational skits pertaining to fighter life and feudal exploitation in order to entertain and sensitise adult audiences.

Almaz Yohannes – better known under her nickname *Aga Wogahte* ('Dawn') – was among the children who went on tour. Two years earlier she had joined the ELF as a small, but very independent-minded child at the age of nine, preferring the freedom of fighter life to the sternness of her family. Attending the ELF school in Barka, it was soon discovered that she had performance talent. Music and drama training fostered her aptitude and enabled her to work as a (part-

²⁰² By 1977, some 30,000 students were attending regular classes provided by the ELF, with tens of thousands taking part in adult education programmes. After the Second National Congress of the ELF in 1975, 116 educational cadres were assigned to draw up a new educational programme, including literacy campaigns among civilian and fighters and the building of new schools. ELF (1978b: 18-19).

²⁰³ According to Negusse Haile, there was also a young people's music school in the ELF, not under the GUES, but as a direct appendage to the 'Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe'. Many musicians wanted to pass on their experience to the younger generation. Permission was given and 10 girls and 15 adolescent boys were recruited. Yemane Yohannes, once the second-in-command of the Asmara Police Orchestra, became the director of the music school; Abrar Osman and Samson Musa Aaron were put in charge of the youngsters. The children were instructed not only in music, but also in the regular school curriculum. Initially, notation and musical theory were taught. Thereafter the military bureau requested the children to form a marching band and bought the required musical instruments. The intention was to have the marching band record signature tunes which could be broadcast on the ELF radio. However, the civil war between ELF and EPLF broke out and the music school dispersed. The marching band never materialised and a number of students went to the frontline. I 135.

time) singer until today. Then, in 1979, Almaz's talent was utilised in the fight against the complete disintegration of the organisation.

ALMAZ YOHANNES: During that time, many people left the ELF and went to Sudan.

CHRISTINE MATZKE: That must have been a very difficult time.

A: Yes, now it can be said, our tour was important because so many people had left for Sudan. I remember that we sang many songs wondering why people left the struggle. This song, *Aga Wogahte*, was related to it. Why are Eritreans leaving the field? Why do they take from the Ethiopians and reject the fighters? That was what the song was about. I ran onto the stage, very quickly. 'Come back, you Eritrean people, come back to the ELF. Don't forfeit Eritrea!' During that time Ethiopia collaborated with Russia, and so many people left, so many. Then they said: 'Why do we stay in Sudan? Even small children are fighting the enemy!' So people began to return. I remember being told that a whole group had come back from Sudan. It was called 'Group Almaz'. (I 1, translation mine).



Fig. 58 *Almaz Yohannes (right, in front) with the children's cultural troupe of the ELF, early 1980s.*

Excursus: Personal Reflections on Children, Performance and War

I have often encountered moments during my research and writing up period which, to me, were rather disturbing. One was the connection between children and performance in a situation of war. To make my premises clear from the start: I have rarely experienced a more loving environment for children than Eritrea, where children are the society's wealth and where they are lavished with affection and attention, despite significant material hardships, then and now. Yet I have often wondered to what extent children were taken advantage of in the various military conflicts the country has been involved in over the past forty years, in the ELF, the EPLF and under the PFDJ regime in the latest Eritrean-Ethiopian war.

By 'taken advantage of' I do not wish to imply abuse and maltreatment. The people I spoke to who had been children at the time, whether members of the ELF children's troupe or the EPLF Red Flowers, obviously enjoyed themselves and had the time of their life. They were also encouraged to tend the more creative aspects of their character from which they undeniably benefited in their adult life. Still, there is something unwholesome about children getting drawn too much into political agendas. A horrendous picture from the Italian colonisation in Eritrea features a young Italian boy in para-military uniform, with a larger-than-life portrait of Mussolini in military gear towering over him. The picture reeks of imperial grandeur and suggests the projection of colonial continuity which, thankfully, ultimately failed.²⁰⁴ While a leadership cult has always been discouraged in Eritrea (and while I am generally more sympathetic to the Eritrean cause), a postcard bought in 2000 had a similarly disturbing effect on me. Framed by the geographical borders of Eritrea, it featured a big-eyed, chubby toddler in military camouflage who seemingly looked onto a scene of utter destruction; a town after an air-raid and, in monochrome, the blurred picture of an injured infant of roughly the same age. Wherever children are involved, emotions are high; and there have rarely been heads of state who performed their duty without demonstrating their love for children in patronising gestures of parental concern for the protégé and, by extension, the nation. Though I never had the feeling that children involved in political performance in Eritrea were forced into something they did not feel comfortable with, the systematic participation of children in war propaganda raises problems which call for more thorough investigations.

Discourses of war have pervaded all cultural expressions in Eritrea, from painting to dress code to dances and even hairstyle.²⁰⁵ Yet I have often wondered whether one could ever speak of genuine choice. Obviously, in most cases it was the liberation movement which provided child performers with the form and content of their shows. During the 'Candle' National Student Festival in 2000 – at the height of the latest Eritrean-Ethiopian war – adolescent performers were given free range regarding subject matter and style. Predictably, however, all themes pertained to the conflict with Ethiopia, either in the exaltation of *Warsay* (heir), the new (as opposed to the veteran) generation of fighters, or in the denigration of

²⁰⁴ Colonial Picture Library, Frankfurt/Main, Ref. 020-5104-9.

²⁰⁵ In 2000 I saw Tigrinya women braiding their hair not only the usual half-way down the back of the head, but covering it completely, like a cap. The hairstyle was known as *Woyane* [a derogatory expression for the then Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopian government].

the enemy. Was it a heartfelt concern of the young or partly a subconscious tuning into the general public discourse of the time, given that Eritrea is not the most liberal country when it comes to freedom of expression? Perhaps it was a mixture of both. I offer one further example. During a three-day poetry competition at the Eritrea Festival 2000, the only female presenter on the first evening was a nine-year old girl who performed her poetry with that precocious self-confidence only pre-adolescent children can have, and she did it to great acclaim. Her verse was belligerent anti-Ethiopian war poetry, entirely of her own making as she repeatedly confirmed. A cultural veteran however raised his concern and I deeply appreciated his contribution. Why do young children exclusively focus on war, why not on more positive issues, or topics related to the world of children? And what does it tell us about the society they live in?

ELF Cultural Work Continued: Performances, Politics and the Public

As there was only one official 'Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe', the artists lived the life of creative nomads in order to reach their potential audiences: fighters at the frontline, civilians in the liberated areas, and the exile community in Sudan. A large Fiat truck served as means of transport and, more often than not, as a makeshift upper stage, often used for folkloric performances (see Figure 59). A large plastic tarpaulin was spread out at the side of the lorry to mark the lower performance space and to protect the artists from excessive dust. The band took a position in front of the vehicle, a banner with slogans serving as backdrop. With the help of a generator, two 700 Watt floodlights and some smaller spots, this mobile performance space metamorphosed into a theatre at night. In the highlands, a *hidmo* was sometimes used, the anterior room serving as changing room and backstage area, the company performing in front of the house while the band sat under the roofing.

In Eritrea, the military phrase 'theatre of war' has always had a rather literal meaning, for war has continued to be the prime motif in the performing arts, often embedded in historical narrative as a means of political education. Plays recounting the history of the nation were a common drama form in both liberation movements, even if drama on the whole did not feature high on their cultural agendas. Often plays were reduced to 10-minute skits in the ELF for lack of professional players and audience appreciation.



Fig. 59 *The ELF Cultural Troupe on tour, early 1980s.*

Because the theatre tradition here was not strong, we had no professional actors like we did singers, it had always been confined to amateur groups. In Asmara actually it had become quite popular because it had become a vehicle for expressing people's aspirations for liberation and freedom. But in the field, because there were no professional actors, it didn't get the attention it deserved. (ECBTP 95/30).

Only *Dergi Zergi* ('The Corrupt Derg') by Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai' was recalled as a full-length play,²⁰⁶ confirming that dialogue drama was a minor, because historically alien, performance form for most fighters. Conceived as a national epic, *Dergi Zergi* recounted Eritrea's troubled colonial history until the coming of the Derg and involved a number of female artists who played fighters and village women. Mounting a play outside an urbanised context was a novel experience for Negusse Haile, and rather a challenge. Audiences in Asmara and smaller towns had been familiar with European theatre conventions and did not call for explanatory tags during the play. In the rural countryside, however, a narrator was needed to guide the spectators through the performance. Once, in an attempt to provide the historical background during a village show in 1978, Negusse explained the ascent of Colonel Mengistu in Ethiopia. When a Mengistu look-alike appeared on stage, a panicky outcry rippled through the audience with some 20 to 30 female spectators taking to their heels. The company did not understand the commotion and continued to play, only to be informed by the local militia that the women had believed the Ethiopian dictator was indeed on stage.

It is thus not surprising that music and long-established performance forms remained the key elements of every show, which the audience watched silently (against widespread notions that African theatre is all about 'audience participation'). Too many drastic changes in too little time had been imposed on combatants and civilians alike, the emergence of female fighters being only one of them. A smooth reception of what many still perceived as foreign aesthetics was to make excessive demands. The old order had been violently disrupted in all imaginable ways: social, political, economic, and cultural. Folklore, on the other hand, was an artistic medium that enabled one to assert oneself against foreign intrusion and provide a point of imagined stability. Ma.Te.A. had already made an attempt at incorporating time-honoured Tigre and Tigrinya elements into their

²⁰⁶ In December 2001, Negusse Haile mentioned two more of his plays for the ELF. One was *Adjochi Tessenei* ('Keep going, Tessenei') which celebrated the 1977 liberation of Tessenei, the second *Sowrawi Lebena* ('Revolutionary Recommendation') which was performed by the children's cultural troupe during the 1979 tour. It called on refugees to return to Eritrea. I 133.

shows, very much to the disapproval of the Ethiopian government which was only too aware of their nationalistic implications.²⁰⁷ Both the *Hager Fiqir* and the Haile Selassie I Theatre had been mounting folk dances of Ethiopian ethnic groups for a considerable time, including Eritrean dances from ‘Northern Ethiopia’ (I 54). Then, however, they were showpieces of (non-existent) national harmony in an extravagant endeavour of Ethiopian self-deceit, and a spectacle favoured by audiences. For the ELF, and later the EPLF, ancestral performance modes were crucial in the attempt to create a national subject and ultimately for the question of survival.



Fig. 60 *A Hedareb serret danced by members of the ELF Cultural Troupe.*

While for civilian audiences they constituted familiar elements in which they recognised themselves or learned about other Eritrean nationalities, for combatants they played an important integrative role in the effort to create a sense of unity among the heterogeneous fighters. Zonal divisions had exacerbated the fragmentation of the ELF, together with ethnic, religious and ideological discrepancies, which were feebly counteracted by slogans such as the popular ‘Unity of the Army’ (Markakis 1987: 124). In the EPLF, time-honoured performing art forms were utilised to endorse the idea of ‘Unity in Diversity’. While ethnic cultural expressions were generally promoted in the EPLF, ethnic affiliations were discouraged in the attempt to create an all-embracing ‘Eritrean’ identity (T. Negash & Tronvoll 2000: 16). Ernest Gellner, with a critical view of nation building and the emergence of nationalism, has observed that

²⁰⁷ Apart from folklore numbers performed by Ma.Te.A. members themselves, Negusse Haile engaged villagers from Elaboret – six men and six women – to perform with Ma.Te.A. in Cinema Odeon in 1970/71. The performance was immediately forbidden by the Ethiopian authorities. I 133.

[n]ationalism usually conquers in the name of putative folk culture. Its symbolism is drawn from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants, of the *Volk*, of the *narod*. There is a certain element of truth in the nationalist self-representation when the *narod* or *Volk* is ruled by officials of another, an alien culture, whose oppression must be resisted first by a cultural revival and reaffirmation, and eventually by a war of national liberation. [...] Society no longer worships itself through religious symbols; a modern, streamlined, on-wheels high culture celebrates itself in song and dance, which it borrows (stylizing it in the process) from a folk culture which it fondly believes itself to be perpetuating, defending, and reaffirming. (Gellner 1994: 65-66).

Show elements rooted in ancestral performance patterns certainly supported the creation of an imagined community in both movements. While the EPLF eventually embellished customary choreographies for greater stage effect and incorporated 'genuine' peasant performers for a more 'authentic' feel, the ELF can be credited with the reinvention of Eritrean traditions in the field, bringing together artists and performance forms from almost all nationalities.²⁰⁸ EPLF fighters later confirmed that this strategy helped them understand the diversity of Eritrean culture and taught them about other, unknown ethnic groups (I. Tseggai 2002: 10). Occasionally, in an effort to 'develop the folkloric dances and music of the Eritrean people' (ELF [1977]: 62), artists even experimented with novel gender patterns. Abrar Osman, former ELF member and musical Raimock Prize winner of 2000, then in charge of rehearsing customary performance forms, is said to have had women practise *wad sommia* accompanied by the drumming of men, in a reversal of gendered dance forms. His idea was rejected by the artistic director who preferred ancestral culture to be 'authentically' preserved.

For the survival of the ELF, however, these cultural mediation measures came too late. In the early 1980s the movement disintegrated as a fighting force inside Eritrea, when attacked by EPLF forces in second flare up of the civil war, and driven across the Sudanese border. It was the newly constituted EPLF which was to use cultural expressions to maximum effect, in the attempt to avoid further community polarisation and to help liberate Eritrea.

²⁰⁸ All nationalities were represented except for the Rashaida who had no contingent in the ELF. For EPLF examples see the video *Music and Drama of the EPLF* (1987).

CHAPTER 5: THEATRE IN THE EPLF: EARLY DAYS

A group of twenty-five students, including nine women, had also formed their own theatre company and begun improvising plays and dramatic readings. The night I visited them, they performed the history of the national liberation struggle in five acts.

Several hundred people sat on the rocky ground in a broad semi-circle around the makeshift outdoor stage, lit by two strings of bare bulbs. The show opened with a tribal dance by a scantily clad boy carrying a long spear and wielding a wooden sword as he leapt about the stage to the beat of the hand-held drum. The audience murmured and giggled throughout, unsure how they were supposed to react.

Next, one of the players spoke to the audience on the need for a new 'people's culture.' Then he led the assemblage in a song of praise for the martyrs who had given their lives for the liberation of their nation, before stepping off the stage and joining the audience.

Behind him a group of swaggering guerrilla fighters moved to stage left, opposite a man and a woman at stage right dressed as nomads. (This was the ELF in the starting phase). One of the fighters sashayed across the platform to demand taxes from the nomads. As the man started to pay, his wife demanded to know why the fighter was living an easy life at their expense while they suffered and starved. Her vehemence had the audience roaring.

Women were not supposed to involve themselves in politics, he snapped, as she made the Eritrean version of an obscene gesture at him behind his back. More raucous laughter, especially from the women in the audience. Back in the fighters' camp, the leader ostentatiously smoked a cigarette and threw the butt on the ground where his fawning comrades fought over it.

And so it went with a mixture of slapstick comedy and biting satire in scene after overacted scene, until the EPLF was portrayed as emerging in the 1970s to lead the people in a social revolution. (Connell 1997: 107-108).

The following three chapters are devoted to theatre work in the EPLF, from the early days in the mid-1970s to the staging of literary drama by the Central Cultural Troupe in the mid-1980s and cultural activities in non-military units until 1991. Though the first factions to separate from the ELF did so as early as 1969, the intricate amalgamation and constitution process of the EPLF did not allow culture to play a central role until the mid-1970s when the EPLF 'expanded its geographical and social base' (Pool 1997: 12). It can nevertheless be inferred that informal entertainment existed on all levels of the splinter groups whenever the situation allowed or required. Often, it was a pastime during *maetot*, communal work, when people sang while engaging in some other occupation. On the whole, these activities pertained to long-established performance forms. Apart from the usual anti-Ethiopian propaganda, they do not seem to have carried a socio-

political agenda. The levelling of ethnic affiliations and the constitution of a unified, if diverse, Eritrean identity through the conscious mounting of folk culture (often by members of other nationalities) was yet to come. In the early to mid-1970s, fighters still tended to mingle with their own ethno-linguistic group with whom they practised ancestral performance forms for festivities and recreation. *Eritrea: National Democratic Revolution*, a 1974 documentary directed by Christian Sabatier, showed male-only Afar, Tigre and Saho dances, the songs being of celebratory nature, occasionally carrying anti-ELF sentiments. *Krar*-play was also popular among the fighters. Female members, however, were notably absent from a proactive participation in military and cultural activities. They featured only in non-military functions, such as health workers and translators, not as frontline combatants; neither were they seen as performers. While self-consciousness might have prevented them giving recording permission, the film nonetheless seems to reflect the low visibility of women in the early days of the EPLF. This, however, was soon to change. Whereas only a handful of female members were noted in 1973, the massive increase in fighters between 1974-1978 also encompassed a large-scale influx of women. In 1979 female fighters constituted one third of the EPLF, contributing to all military and supporting departments (Pool 2001: 95, 127-128).

The First EPLF Cultural Troupe I: The Beginning

Organised cultural work in the EPLF started in 1975, in all likelihood after the second National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe of the ELF had been established. The striking similarities between the creation and the management of the two groups suggest that EPLF cultural work was initiated in reaction to arts activities in the rival organisation. It also seems to have contributed to the initial confusion regarding the difference between the liberation movements. New recruits who flocked to the fronts in the mid-1970s often did – or could – not distinguish between the two.²⁰⁹ Atrocities meted out by the Ethiopian rulers had made civilian life intolerable and participation in the liberation struggle became the common goal. As in the ELF, some experienced artists had joined the EPLF in the mid-1970s, among them the Ma.Te.A. veterans Teberih Tesfahune and

²⁰⁹ Pool (2001: 142). I too heard a number of such stories. In the mid-1970s, many new recruits did not bother too much about which liberation movement they joined. Others were said to have been 'rejected' by one organisation – asked, for example, to finish their education or form a civilian cell – only to become frontline combatants with the other.

Asmerom Habtemariam, and the singer Idris Mohamed Ali. While Idris and his band had come from Sudan, Tebereh Tesfahunei joined from Sweden where she had been living as a refugee since leaving Addis Ababa in the early 1970s. On completing their military training the artists were brought together to form the first *Bahli Wdb* or Cultural Troupe (CT), which translates as 'the culture of the organisation'.²¹⁰ The first CT, also known as Division of Culture, was administered by *Ziena*, the Department of Information, whose objectives were mobilisation and propaganda work.

Initially, the troupe was a purely musical band under the direction of Idris Mohamed Ali and Tsadu Bhata. Local, not foreign, instruments were used, such as the *kebero*, the *oud* and the *krar*; songs were performed in Tigre, Arabic, and Tigrinya. Unlike the later years of the liberation struggle, when fighters of Christian Tigrinya origin predominated in the field,²¹¹ many of the earliest EPLF performers came from the lowlands or from neighbouring Sudan. Asmerom Habtemariam remembered:

We trained day and night and all was about songs, not drama. We started to mount shows in our vicinity. The contents of the songs were meant to strengthen the people. Tebereh, for example, sang about the '*Kumandis*', that is Eritreans recruited to the Ethiopian army, and Idris Mohamed Ali had a song which said 'I prefer to die like my martyred brother'. Since these songs were influential, we were asked to perform in the highlands rather than remain in Sahel. We first went to *Semenawi Bahri* [Northern Red Sea Region]. When we mounted our first show there, people began to flock to us, even from Asmara. Asmerom Gerezghier was the leader of this area.²¹² He told us that our shows were a better tool of politicisation than two or three people telling the masses about the liberation struggle. He then ordered the show to be performed everywhere in the highlands. (I 38).

Tebereh Tesfahunei's account of the very first EPLF troupe is more critical than Asmerom's, referring to tensions between members of different political factions and describing Ethiopian attacks which disrupted the shows. Above all, she objected to being deployed in the cultural field, not as a frontline fighter – a sentiment which was shared by a number of female performers thereafter. It was

²¹⁰ For a list of members see Appendix I: Performers.

²¹¹ Pool writes that although over 'the years the EPLF had shaped itself into a state-like organization [...] and commanded the support of the mass of the population [it] was not, however, a microcosm of the Eritrean population. The bulk of the fighters were highlanders, as reflected in the official statistics: 64 per cent Tigrinya, 24 per cent Tigre, 12 per cent minorities; 63 per cent Christians and 36 per cent Muslim. These figures reflect a contingent set of factors [...] rather than a drive for Tigrinya domination of nationalism' (Pool 2001: 157). Cf. Christmann (1996: 20).

²¹² Asmerom Gerezghier was one among the five fighters to be elected to the leadership of the Ala Group in 1971, together with Isayas Afewerki and others. Pool (2001: 68).

the actual combat that held the highest prestige, and women felt a particular need to prove themselves on the frontline (W. Selassie 1992: 69). Tebereh had reinvented herself in compliance with the organisation – both in appearance and attitude – only to find herself where she had started off: singing on stage.

Before the military training I had cut my hair Afro-style. The training included military training, political lessons and criticism and self-criticism.²¹³ [...] Three months later the training was over. Some of us joined the army, some went to the health department and one of my comrades and I were sent to the Cultural Bureau to work with the cultural troupe. I was very disappointed by this assignment. I wanted to go to the front. But it was a precept in the EPLF that you must not refuse any orders. Solomon [X] was one of the fighters who told us about our assignments. I asked him why I wasn't sent to the frontline. Solomon smiled and said: 'You must hit the enemy with your songs like you would hit them with a bullet'. (T. Tesfahune 2000).

The 'cultural bullet' of the 'cultural combatant' were to become set ideas at the front,²¹⁴ especially when awareness of the importance of '[c]ulture and education as vehicles for mobilization and construction of a pluralist Eritrean national identity' (R. Iyob 1995: 129) grew. Cultural activities were, and have continued to be, a vital means of teaching and propaganda. First and foremost 'cultural combat' meant rallying against the Ethiopian enemy and 'obliterat[ing] the decadent culture and disgraceful social habits that Ethiopian colonialism, world imperialism and Zionism have spread' (EPLF 1977a: 27). 'Cultural combat' however also entailed the battle against customs practised by the various cultures of Eritrea which were considered 'harmful' or reactionary. A new, 'revolutionary', society reorganised according to the tenets of the revolution needed egalitarian laws which did not discriminate against ethnic or religious background, or against gender. For everyone – woman and man, highlander and lowlander, Christian and Muslim – was needed to help sustain the armed liberation war.²¹⁵ These sentiments were sanctioned by the National Democratic Programmes (NDP) first ratified at the EPLF National Congresses in 1977 and reaffirmed in an amended

²¹³ Criticism and self-criticism sessions were a measure taken by the EPLF to tighten discipline. They were practised at all levels of the organisation. See also EPLF (1977c: 18-19).

²¹⁴ Fine artist Terhas Iyasu, for example, mentioned that 'during the struggle, we also struggled with paintings' (I 106); while Berhane Adonai, one of the most prominent arts teachers in Eritrea, recapitulated that: 'We were fighting the enemy not only with bullets, we were also fighting them with cultural bullets' (I 75). Personally, I have borrowed these terms from the South African community theatre practitioner Bongani Linda.

²¹⁵ Pool writes that '[m]uch emphasis has been given to the social transformation of Eritrea undertaken by the EPLF. It is important to note that it was primarily established to liberate Eritrea through military means and sustaining the armed struggle required recruiting fighters' (Pool 2001: 106).

version at the follow-up congress ten years later. Among other objectives, the first NDP proposed to '[d]estroy the bad aspects of the culture and traditions of Eritrean society and develop its good and progressive content' (EPLF 1977a: 28) which included the liberation of women from the confinements of customary law. These aims were part of the EPLF social reforms aimed at liberating the 'oppressed masses' from the yoke of internal and external subjugation, and mobilising them for the liberation struggle. Workers, young people, women and the peasantry were organised in mass organisations which, ironically, paralleled developments in Ethiopia under the Derg regime; they also corresponded to ELF mass organisations.²¹⁶ Fighters received ongoing political education which ranged from a basic introduction during military training to advanced ideological education in the cadre school. One of the most pressing topics was the necessity of gender equality – despite initial resistance from the rank-and-file²¹⁷ – now that women had joined, and were actively recruited to, the front where they constituted an invaluable human resource. As early as 1971, the EPLF pamphlet *Our Struggle and its Goal* had stressed the importance of egalitarianism between the genders by aiming at 'the creation of a united national front "with no distinction as to religion, ethnic affiliation or sex"' (Pool 2001: 88). Later on, songs that stressed 'Equality' with overt reference to military involvement were composed:

We must eliminate gender discrimination among us / in order to see the fruit endowed to us. / Let's get armed together, male and female. / Whatever you are saying is right, my comrade, [...] gender discrimination must be eliminated. / You female fighter who thinks intelligently in different directions / make our people understand the importance of moving forward. / [...] We have to eliminate gender discrimination among us / in order to see the fruit endowed to us / Let's get armed together, male and female (in EPLF [1980s/c]), 11-12).

²¹⁶ Although peasants were mostly organised in local 'people's assemblies', a National Union of Eritrean Peasants (NUEP) was established in 1978. It became largely inactive after the strategic retreat and was dismantled in 1991/92. Other mass organisations were the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the National Union of Eritrea Workers (NUEW), later renamed as National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW). Several youth and student organisations associated with the EPLF existed in the diaspora, the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA), founded in 1977, being the first and most active organisation. Inside Eritrea, the Association of Eritrean Students (AES) was founded in 1978. It never functioned properly due to the constant interruption of education during the Derg regime. In 1987, after the 2nd National Congress of the EPLF, the National Union of Eritrean Youth (NUEY) was formed. It turned into the National Union of Eritrea Youth and Students (NUEYS) after the second NUEY Congress in 1994 to incorporate a number of smaller student organisations. Killion (1998: 337-338, 384-386), Volker-Saad (2003: 87).

²¹⁷ For fictional representations of the predicament of women fighters in Tigrinya fiction see Kane (1994: 381), EPLF (1982f: 133-136).

While there had never been any doubt among artists that female performers could do equally well – given such successful examples as Teberih Tesfahunei – the relationships between male and female fighter performers were markedly different to civilian theatre groups. There was no more room for good-natured sexism and benevolent condescension. For the first time women had the opportunity to be (relatively) free from male tutelage – even if they seldom reached similarly authoritative positions to men in the cultural sector. Several sources confirm that the field was an Elysium for women wanting to escape family restrictions and arranged marriages.²¹⁸ Teberih Tesfahunei's metamorphosis from glamour girl (used to a lifestyle much freer than that of the average Eritrean woman) to liberation fighter was remarkable. Asmerom Habtemariam, her fellow during Ma.Te.A. days, was astonished by her transformation:

To speak about it now [makes you aware that] everything has changed. Teberih was not like I used to see her in Asmara. In the field there was equality. Although a woman, she wore trousers like me, a man. We chatted, but she was serious enough to know her rights in the field. She had accepted the premise that women are equal to men. She had been taught in the training about equality, participation and so forth. I also knew and was aware about these things. I couldn't just hug her as I had done previously, we respected each other here. (I 46).

Intimate contact between the sexes was strictly forbidden in the EPLF until the introduction of the 1977 anti-feudal marriage laws, 'based on the free choice of both partners, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes and the legal guarantees of the interests of women and children' (in Wilson 1991: 185). Celibacy among fighting forces is nothing new, the underlying idea being the preservation of fighting power of the (usually male) combatants. In the EPLF, celibacy was also meant to give women a sense of security and protect them from possible sexual assault (as is said to have had happened in the ELF), given that the majority of male fighters came from backgrounds which customarily granted them total authority over women. Women and their families should rest assured that they were 'safe' in and 'safeguarded' by the organisation (Locher-Tschofen [19?]: 79). Never before had men and women co-operated so closely in Eritrea as now in the field, and never before had ancient gender patterns been so thoroughly unsettled.

²¹⁸ The playwright Mohamed Assanai, for example, recalled that many women 'fled their husbands and joined the struggle because their parents married them off by force. The revolution became their sanctuary and a means of enlightenment, mental progress and freedom' (I 37). See also EPLF (1977c: 17).

Excursus:

The Performance of New Social Roles and Altered Images of Women

Before I continue my discussion of the first cultural troupe and its premature disintegration, I want to look at how the new discourses on women and gender equality were ‘performed’ in the field. Ancient structures had begun to crumble while new models of behaviour were being rehearsed. Kerstin Volker-Saad and Amrit Wilson observe that the creation of a fighter self was built on the eradication of all other identities based on family, religion, class and ethno-linguistic background.²¹⁹ From the mid-1970s gender roles were also challenged in the EPLF. The transformation was dramatic and in stark contrast to the social environments most fighters had left behind. On the practical day-to-day level this manifested itself in the blurring of previously gendered tasks, thus negating established divisions of labour in Eritrea. Women now trained in combat and learned how to drive tanks and cars; the men started to take turns at childcare and cooking (cf. Christmann 1996: 110). While both genders started to cross-act in the field, women were the most visibly affected by the reformation: socially through novel transgender acts at work and in leisure periods (such as establishing an all-female football team); sartorially through the abandonment of feminine clothing, hairstyles and accessories; corporeally through new codes of posture and extrovert bearing.



Fig. 61 EPLF artists after a show.

Women fighters second to fourth from left: Gezienesh Mengis, Senait Debessai (with guitar), Birikti Woldesellasié 'Tanki' and Abrehet Ankere (hidden).

²¹⁹ Wilson (1991: 132), Volker-Saad (2003: 94-96).

In an earlier chapter I suggested that voice, body and space, as key constituents of theatre arts, could also be seen as elements of the construction and performance of identity in Eritrea. Custom had severely restricted women's vocal, physical and spatial possibilities; yet limits had gradually been transgressed by those engaged in the performing arts, starting with urban singers and actresses in the 1940s. In the field the impetus for change did not evolve from within the performing arts; rather the EPLF leadership set new standards which were then communicated with the help of theatre. Theatrical and social gender bending seemed therefore linked, even more so if we follow the idea of social gender also being a form of performance.²²⁰ Later, I will give examples of how theatrical cross-dressing and gender reversals creatively 'play[ed] with liminality and its multiple possibilities' (Ferris 1993: 9) in the attempt to 'address' and 'redress' questions of gender; but also how they calcified and reinforced conventional social mores. For now, I want to concentrate primarily on the everyday transformation of women.

The new codes of conduct established by the EPLF had tremendous consequences. On the one hand, women broadened the spaces available to them, physically as well as mentally; on the other they had to reject any form of customary 'femininity' while moving towards an almost 'androgynous' ideal of representation. One such example was the acquisition of a more self-confident posture and athletic skills intended to liberate women from their typically restricted movements. During military training, before being instructed in the use of weaponry, women were taught how to stride and march. This was in stark contrast with the usual timid 'shuffle' of women which military trainers criticised as 'uncoordinated' (Arens in Schamanek 1998: 153). A number of foreign observers noted the 'masculine swagger' (Gauch 1993: 20) of female fighters and their 'manly' bearing. (Interestingly, male fighters were noted for their extraordinarily 'tender' and 'affectionate' manners towards their comrades in a brotherly, not sensual, fashion; yet never were they described as 'feminine' or, worse, as 'effeminate'). Gradually, women let go of 'feminine' traits internalised through years of socialisation, such as the downcast eyes which were now replaced with direct eye contact. Soon some women were noted for being more

²²⁰ See, for example, Senelick (1992: ix), Butler (1990: 270-271). It is certainly no coincidence that *memher* Hiwot, one of the earliest Eritrean women to join Ma.Te.De., was reputedly the first to wear trousers in public.

cold-blooded in combat than the men; while pregnant fighters sometimes felt they had ‘betrayed’ the organisation.²²¹

Clothing codes too related to social change at the front. Having abandoned submissive posture, women discarded feminine dress and hairstyle in exchange for short Afros and military fatigues as they prepared for the battlefield – some with delight, others reluctantly.²²² From thereon civilian dress codes were relegated to theatre costumes: Female fighters only cross-dressed as ‘traditional’ women on stage – donning customary garments, scrap metal jewellery and wigs with traditional hairdos – and thus attesting to the constructedness of ideas of ‘Woman’.²²³

Marjorie Garber, writing on cross-dressing and cultural anxiety in the northern hemisphere, has argued that critics tend ‘to look *through*, rather than *at* the cross-dresser [in order to] subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders’ (Garber 1997: 9).²²⁴ Instead of this, she proposes a ‘third’ – the transvestite – category which she reads as a general critique of binarity, and not only of gender. For her, the cross-dresser is ‘a way of describing a space of possibility’ (11) while at the same time engendering a “‘category crisis,” disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances [...], putting in question the very notion of the “original” and of stable identity’ (16). Indeed, the emergence of female fighters not only ‘begot’ a crisis of ancient gender roles in the field; it also signified other unsettling social processes in times of military conflict, such as the eradication of former distinctions of class, land

²²¹ Locher-Tschofen ([19?]: 92-94), Christmann (1996: 107), Schamanek (1998:152), Kimberlin (2000: 258).

²²² Fatuma Suleiman, a future member of the CCT: ‘Im Training habe ich Hosen bekommen, so etwas hatte ich noch nie getragen. Es war ein tolles Gefühl, so leicht und frei. Von den Hosen war ich begeistert. Aber sie habe mir auch die Haare abgeschnitten, in zwei Etappen. Die Kämpferinnen hatten alle kurze Haare, genauso wie die Männer’. [‘In the military training camp I received trousers. I had never worn trousers before. It was a great feeling, so light and so free. But they also cut my hair, in two stages. All female fighters had short hair, exactly like the men’] (Christmann 1996: 121). Another fighter however remembered: ‘Sie haben uns nach Nakfa gebracht und mir die Haare abgeschnitten, einfach ab, ganz kurz. Und ich mußte mein Kleid ausziehen und in Hosen herumlaufen. Anfangs habe ich mir darin sehr geschämt’. [‘They brought us to Nakfa and cut my hair, just like that, very short. And I had to take off my dress and run around in trousers. Initially I was very embarrassed’] (Christmann 1996: 110). See also Schamanek (1998: 152).

²²³ Garber (1997: 280). Schamanek reports of a female fighter who, surrounded by Ethiopian forces, dressed up as an elderly Muslim woman and thus passed through the check-point. Schamanek (1998: 164).

²²⁴ Catherine M. Cole has argued that Western theories of drag and gender performance, though assuming ‘universal applicability’, often appear ‘provincial and culturally biased’ (Cole 2001:11) when tested on African ground. This is something to be conscious of when resorting to Western models for theoretical guidance. However, Cole also convincingly demonstrates that contemporary Western drag theory can be fruitfully applied to African performing arts, in her case Ghanaian concert parties, if adapted and appropriated for the particular context. Cole (2001: 126-132).

ownership or religious hierarchies. On closer scrutiny, however, the seemingly liberated and egalitarian EPLF had not deracinated the deep-rooted gender dichotomy from their 'revolutionary' thinking. Subliminally, women's transformation still referred to 'masculine' paradigms as parameters for appraisal. Belligerence and toughness were attributes aspired for; and fighters continued to 'dress up', to the 'superior', i.e. the masculine, role. This was in stark contrast to the new generation of women soldiers during the 1998-2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war who managed to claim a recognisable 'femininity' at the frontline by tucking their braids under caps or occasionally wearing jewellery in combat.²²⁵ Though male combatants also made an effort at modifying conservative attitudes towards their female comrades by respecting them as equals, it is noteworthy that, to my knowledge, they never 'dressed down' to exchange the attire associated with their gender, except in emergencies to escape approaching enemy forces (Christmann 1996: 124). Only women transformed to become androgynous-looking frontline fighters almost indistinguishable from the men. Claiming that fighting in feminine clothing would have been impracticable does not sufficiently explain away women's altered appearance which cast doubt on 'identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded and "known"' (Garber 1997: 13). Garber has called these normalising interpretations the 'progress narratives' which often use registers of cultural or socio-political necessity to rationalise transgender acts on life and on stage (Garber 1997: 69).

The early enactment of women's 'androgyny' was certainly related to the initial suppression of sexuality at the front and the idea to promote celibacy as a protective measure. In contrast to other military contexts, where women fighters were known to have a certain sex appeal (cf. Arrizón 1998: 90-112), the intention in the Eritrean liberation struggle was to obliterate all signifiers of female sexuality. Menstruation, for example, was an issue not talked about among the fighters (Volker-Saad 2003: 94). Trish Silkin in her study on the changing marriage law confirms that:

Men and women recruits underwent separate military training and were expected to have learnt a new asexual body language by the time they had graduated from the training school and joined mixed units. Female fighters were given baggy trousers and loose shorts to wear,

²²⁵ See, for example, Smolczyk (1999: 185). Women in the EPLF had to hand over their jewellery, as did some civilian women, in order to support the organisation financially. It should be noted that, especially in contemporary highland culture, men too wear jewellery, predominately necklaces and rings which, however, are less flamboyant than the jewellery of women.

which concealed their figures, and they were required to keep their shirt buttoned up to the neck. (Silkin quoted in Wilson 1991: 132).

Wilson notes that ‘the idea of female sexuality being a dangerous temptation was retained from traditional culture’ (Wilson 1991: 132). Despite efforts at equality, age-old gender patterns still persisted in the liberation movement, sometimes furtively regaining admittance through the backdoor. While life at the front gradually led to a mutual acceptance of women and men – resulting in an unprecedented 1977 EPLF policy on marriage and sexual morality based on partnership rather than arrangement²²⁶ – new and established gender discourses often produced discomfiting tensions. Older images, such as the clichéd virgin/mother/seductress divide, still surfaced at the front and set subliminal standards for women.²²⁷ For one thing, corporeal concealment to avoid any erotic allure remained a requirement for female combatants until severe hardship forced fighters to wear shorts and short-sleeved shirts, and sometimes even clothing made of disused flour sacks for lack of material. Rarely were women fighters depicted in a sexually attractive stance.²²⁸ Though a potential taker, not giver of life, the female combatant also corresponded to the idealised ‘traditional’ mother figure in her dedication to the organisation and her willingness to sacrifice herself. Indeed, Addis, Russo and Sebesta, writing on images and realities of women soldiers, see the two as antagonistic representations of essentially the same idea, for ‘the figure of the patriotic woman in her various manifestations as mother, wife, [...] is just as militarized an image of femininity [...] as that of the woman in uniform carrying a rifle’ (Addis, et al. 1994: xvii). In visual and performative representations, this correlation was often depicted as a woman selflessly rescuing a fellow fighter from the battlefield, utterly unconcerned about her own survival.²²⁹ There was a constant blurring of images going on, and meanings were

²²⁶ Cf. Wilson (1991: 133-137, 185-197), Volker-Saad (2003: 126-130).

²²⁷ Readings of other virtuous women warriors, such as Jean d’Arc or the Amazons of Dahomey, have revealed the same problematic. They too often oscillated between harlots and maidens in the public imagination. See, for example, Edgerton (2000: 153); for a reading of Jeanne d’Arc, see Hotchkiss (1996: 49-68).

²²⁸ For readings of Elsa Yacob’s painting *Woman Hero* (1984) (see Figure 1), which features a woman fighter reminiscent of Blaxploitation movies, see Schamanek (1998: 154-155) and Matzke (2002b: 22). Mussie Asgedom’s *The Interrogation* (1988), on the other hand, shows a captured female fighter in a sexually degrading posture before two Ethiopian officers. EPLF (National Guidance Department) (1990: 18).

²²⁹ In *Music and Drama of the EPLF*, a video produced by the EPLF Cine-Section in the 1980s, for example, the actress Gezienesh Mengis is seen rescuing a ‘wounded’ Michael Amhatzion ‘Jende’, fellow performer and MC of the troupe, from the imaginary battlefield and carrying him on her back. See FN 166.

perpetually negotiated. Female fighters inhabited a liminal position in the field from where cultural change could occur and which held an enormous potential for transformation. Yet, as other liberation struggles have shown, the 'new' woman was also an ambiguous figure, particularly once a post-war 'normality' had returned.²³⁰

The First EPLF Cultural Troupe II: The End

While gender relations began to improve to the advantage of women, personal rapport in the 1st CT deteriorated by the end of the year due to political factionalism, especially between Sabbe followers and other groups. On the larger political arena, there was discord among the two main liberation fronts in their attempt to negotiate possible unification and collaboration against the common enemy. At times the EPLF cultural troupe was not welcomed in ELF administered areas and had to 'play' hard to gain support among the locals. Then again, ELF fighters provided alcoholic beverages after their show. Opinions regarding the amicability or spitefulness of the ELF-EPLF relationship were divided, as were the various branches of the liberation movement. Among the members of the EPLF cultural troupe, tensions were of both a personal and political nature. Teberah Tesfahunei accused Sabbe disciples of boycotting communal 'criticism and self-criticism' sessions, and of receiving better provisions (T. Tesfahunei 2000). Asmerom Habtemariam too noted dissent and conflict among the performers. The microcosm of the cultural troupe seemed to mirror the overall problems among the guerrilla fronts and the lack of unity even within one organisation. The armed factions of the splinter groups had little in common but their shared opposition to the ELF. Everyone suffered the consequences of the civil war in addition to the ongoing liberation struggle. To make matters worse, the leadership of the EPLF faced internal opposition in the constitutive phase of the organisation.²³¹ Asmerom Habtemariam recalls:

²³⁰ Comparison with other liberation struggles suggests that the greatest 'battles' for women's liberation have often been those waged post-independence. For Algeria see Hélie-Lucas (1988: 171-189), for Zimbabwe see Ranchod-Nilsson (2000: 164-180), Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000: 145-149).

²³¹ Throughout its formative years in the early to mid-1970s, the EPLF encountered a number of power struggles and leadership crises. The greatest challenge presented was the *manqa* (bat) crisis within the Ala group in 1973-1974, in which a small number of dissidents raised objections against the 'undemocratic nature of the front, the lack of rights for fighters and the failings of the leadership in a wide range of areas: administration, supply, health and military' (Pool 2001: 76). The dissidents were executed in 1974, while 'more forceful internal policing' corrected prior 'rumbustious brawling' (Pool 2001: 78-79).

We did not have experience in the struggle and were without a framework of unity. We did not really have deep thoughts about the struggle. All we had were strong national feelings. This meant we were not united enough in our daily life. For instance, those who came from Asmara used to socialise among themselves, while others did the same among their own people. I talked with Tebereh but not with Sadiya because I didn't know her. This was seen as a complete separation by foreign observers – they thought it was a religious divide. [...] The language too was not unified. But you should have something to unify the differences. This was the biggest problem, though we didn't understand at the time. (I 38, I 46).

It is thus not surprising that the first EPLF cultural troupe began to disintegrate. Idris Mohamed Ali and others left for Sudan; some performers were rumoured to be 'spies' or infiltrators. On the political level, dispute between Osman Salih Sabbe and the commanders in the field led to the collapse of unity meetings between the factions, and Osman was renounced as the external representative of the EPLF. Sabbe had been the main fundraiser abroad and his removal called for a new strategy to procure financial sources. Self-reliance became the keyword of the day. While the EPLF established the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and started to organise diaspora communities abroad, the new need for self-reliance also entailed a structural and ideological tightening of the movement. Among other things, it was implemented by stepping up on political education, introducing an array of disciplinary controls, and increasing propaganda work.²³²

Less than a year after its foundation, the first cultural troupe was dissolved and the remaining artists were assigned to various tasks. Mostly, they were sent to combatant forces to experience what the struggle was 'really' about. Tebereh Tesfahunei was deployed in the 3rd Battalion, joyful that she would now be engaged in frontline combat. Within the first year of her deployment, she sustained a serious head injury while stationed near Decamhare. The injury left her marked for the rest of her life, resulting in severe mental instability, and was the end of her career as a singer and stage performer.

The Second EPLF Cultural Troupe

I have not been able to obtain detailed information regarding the second EPLF CT and, as in the previous sections, only outline their work. As experienced artists had been sent to the front or left for Sudan, there was a serious vacuum in the cultural sector. Still, another '*Bahli Wdb*' had to be put together, given the need

²³² Pool (2001: 140-43), Killion (1998: 205-6).

for some form of 'official' entertainment. If anything had come out of the first experience with performance work, then it was the understanding that culture was a most valuable tool for propaganda. 'We had seen for ourselves', Asmerom Habtemariam confirmed, 'that cultural troupes could change the thoughts of the people' (I 38). Hence, cultural work was stepped up. In 1977, the year of the First EPLF Congress, a new Department of Political Orientation, Education and Culture was founded, headed by one-time Ma.Te.A. aficionado Haile Woltensae 'Dru', under which the Division of Culture was placed.

The talent scouting for the second CCT in 1976 seems to have been a rather haphazard undertaking, resembling the eclectic selection process for women during the early Ma.Te.A. days. Young and very young fighters of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds were gathered after brief observation for likely performance potential and then taught by more proficient artists who had not been part of the first cultural group. According to the writer Isayas Tseggai, they were sixty-two of them, aged between 13 and 18. The youngsters were predominately recruited among the Vanguarders or *Fitewari* which was a special company in the EPLF. The Vanguarders had been established in 1974 to provide political and military training for women and adolescent boys. Both groups were believed to need different training to that of the average male recruit to allow for their physical strength to develop and their 'revolutionary' mindset to mature.²³³

Ali Mohamed 'ya Assina', one of the most influential music teachers during the liberation struggle, became the main tutor of the new cultural troupe.²³⁴ Some of the members were almost children at the time, just past the age to be sent to the EPLF Revolutionary School. Yet, like the Tigre-language singer Kedija Adem, they would mature into household names and future pop stars. A former colleague humorously called them the 'new breed' in Eritrea 'which could commit itself to the cultural activities and the central principles of the EPLF'.²³⁵ This tied in with the idea that the Vanguarders were more malleable in their views and would far better embody the new revolutionary spirit than some of the older artists. They seemed also less likely to challenge the leadership and were less affected by the factionalism which had divided the first Cultural Troupe.

²³³ EPLF (1977c: 16-17), I. Tseggai (2002: 9).

²³⁴ 'ya Assina' means 'mother' in Saho and was derived from the title of one of Ali's pre-revolutionary songs as a member of the Police Orchestra in Asmara. A. Tesfai, (12 February 2002), I. Tseggai (2002: 9). Ali ya Assina died of natural causes in Sudan, but many performers still consider him as the link between the veteran and the younger generation of artists.

²³⁵ The source did not wish to be quoted.

For obvious reasons, the follow-up troupe was initially inexperienced and not as successful as the ELF National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe, which featured more seasoned performers. I wondered whether there was some kind of competition between the two groups. Solomon Tsehaye, a senior cultural officer in the EPLF, was undecided in this matter: ‘Well, not really competition, but there was always politics. [...] It would be good to ask these people and find out whether they had met somewhere. I am sure the veteran singers would have looked down on these children’ (I 103). The EPLF CT nonetheless went on tour as early as 1976 and also played at the 1st National Congress of the EPLF in January 1977 by which time they were said to have been ‘much more organised’ (ECBTP 1995/30). At the Congress the organisation officially constituted itself as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front. Snippets of the shows were recorded on *Awet Nehafash* (‘Victory to the Masses’), a film produced by the EPLF Cine-Section.²³⁶ It showed performers in file, wearing identical uniforms with white collars and cuffs, who sang songs and rhythmically waved white handkerchiefs in a performance reminiscent of rigid socialist mass celebrations.



Fig. 62 *The Second EPLF Cultural Troupe.*

²³⁶ It appears that the film drew heavily on footage from Sabatier’s second documentary, *Sawrana* (Our Revolution) (1977), which does not feature any cultural performance during the Congress. (What Sabatier does document is the greater presence of women, due to the mass influx of new recruits since 1974.) The Cine-Section of the EPLF was established in the early 1980s, producing films for documentation purposes and as a life line for Eritreans in the diaspora. It is said that the first video camera was introduced in 1981, but that it took about two years for the technology to be more widely used. The documentation of plays started in 1985.

Thereafter, the troupe visited the liberated and semi-liberated areas under EPLF control, as part of an educational ‘multi-media’ tour. The monthly official organ of the EPLF, also entitled *Vanguard*, reported that:

Ever since the successful conclusion of First Organizational Congress, the Department of Political Education and Culture has been touring the liberated areas presenting the masses and fighters with revolutionary cultural shows and patriotic songs, a slide show explaining the general developments of the E.P.L.F. and the highlights of the First Organizational Congress, and discussing the resolutions and commendations of the First Organizational Congress. (EPLF 1977b: 40-41).

Little is known about the staging of their shows, but generally theatre props and equipment were basic. A hummock or elevation served as performance space, and lighting does not seem to have played a great role. If needed, huge fires were lit in front of the ‘stage’; later sources speak of a generator. Sometimes, if appropriate, music and dance were also mounted during the day. Air raids, which forced fighters to move and perform at night, only came with the Ethiopian offensives in the late 1970s.

As in the first cultural troupe – and much of cultural work thereafter – emphasis was placed on music, not drama, though short playlets are said to have been mounted occasionally. In 1975 a play, ‘Gherey and Meley’, was published in the *Reading Book for Fighters*, which was widely read but never performed.²³⁷ The tenor of most performances was in praise of the revolution, or commemoration of the heroic martyrs who had sacrificed their lives. Denigration of the rival ELF was also common.²³⁸ Emphasis was increasingly placed on the long-established performing arts as a means to further the unification process among the heterogeneous fighters as well as civilians (not all of who agreed to integration and ‘revolutionary’ norms). It was then that such songs as ‘Consolidate our unity, nine nationalities one nation’ (I. Tseggai 2002: 24) and slogans like ‘Unity in Diversity’ were born. Instead of being entertained among comrades of one’s own linguistic group, artists would now also perform songs and dances of other peoples. Kedija Adem, for example, a Tigre-speaker initially recruited as a dancer to the second CT, soon gained knowledge of unknown

²³⁷ A. Tesfai ([1983a]), see also M. Zerai (2001: 27), I. Tseggai (2002: 9).

²³⁸ Solomon Tsehaye explained: ‘There were several songs concerning the ELF or other forces. Naturally, the ELF CT had songs to prepare their forces against the EPLF, and the EPLF has such songs too, and plays, about ELF leaders and people in power who were abusing their power. In this case [the ELF-EPLF civil war] cultural activities also concerned themselves with the ELF-EPLF conflict’ (ECBTP 95/29).

melodies and dancing movements; later dancers were expected to know the full ethnic repertoire. Solomon Tsehaye explained that ‘even if one was not from that nationality, one would just pick up something, some words or a melody, and then play it’ (I 103). Obviously, performance standards were sometimes low, but it was the communal participation that mattered, not flamboyant aesthetics. Aesthetic concerns were to arise with the reconstituted Central Cultural Troupe (CCT) in the 1980s when concerted efforts were made to give longstanding performance forms an equal platform with modern music, which was by far the most popular form of entertainment. Several authors have emphasised the idea of secular nationalism as the ideological bedrock of the EPLF, based on an ideological vision which ‘demonized religion and tribe’ (Pool 2001: 89). Parity of rights was to be granted to all ethno-linguistic groups, while sectarianism was to be strictly avoided. Partaking in the longstanding cultural forms of all Eritrean nationalities was intended to promote this understanding.

‘Children are the Flowers of Our Revolution’:

The *Sowra* School Group and The Red Flowers

During the three-year lifespan of the second CT, three further groups emerged, two of which were interrelated: the *Sowra* School Group and the Red Flowers. Both troupes were to become important sources for creative talent and were particularly supportive of girls.²³⁹

In early 1977, a cultural troupe was set up at the *Sowra* (‘Revolutionary’) School which had been established to care ‘for the children of martyrs, [fighters,] poor peasants and the displaced’ (EPLF 1982a: 93). Founded in 1976 in an area which had been coded ‘Adi [Village] Zero’ for security reasons (hence also the name Zero School), it initially operated as a primary boarding school for some 90 to 300 children. Ten years later, the *Sowra* School housed over 3000 pupils up to grade eight – by then a fraction of the 25,000 students studying in 125 EPLF-run schools, excluding adult education. Evidently, social reforms and education were

²³⁹ In his 1983 drama study Alemseged Tesfai also refers to drama activities among members of the cadre school where selected fighters received higher ideological training. Cadres were officially known as such, but ‘there was a degree of secrecy about the cadre school insofar as the topics of lectures and discussions were supposed not to be passed on to those outside the cadres’ (Pool 2001: 94). Though theatre activities were not necessarily meant to be shrouded in secrecy, I was unable to obtain further information, let alone details on the roles of female cadres or on women’s representation.

seen as the key tool for the betterment of society and the creation of a new 'revolutionary' Eritrea, even if not always welcomed by local peoples.²⁴⁰

In 1977 Tsega Gaim was one of the 14 teachers at the *Sowra* School, together with Alemseged Tesfai, a trained lawyer, who had abandoned his doctoral studies in the United States to join the armed liberation struggle. Tsega remembered the initial difficulties they had teaching the children for lack of resources and teaching aids. Often they sat together to sing songs in the classroom.²⁴¹ Gradually the idea emerged of forming a cultural troupe consisting of the most talented pupils, the majority being girls. Tsega Gaim was assigned as the co-ordinator and artistic director of the group.

The school director, Wadi Sheik, knew I was trying to write poems. He just said, 'This is good, you will work with them!' 'No, no', I objected, but it was an order. If your director said you must do it, you had no choice. It was very difficult for me. I didn't know anything about songs, but I had to try to write lyrics. (I 114).

At first, the children imitated the songs of the Vanguard CT, which had entertained them on various occasions.²⁴² With only a single drum to accompany them, the children enjoyed this role-play tremendously. Tsega also wrote poems and songs more appropriate to their age and begged her colleagues for melodies from their childhood. Short didactic sketches on education, illiteracy, and Eritrea's future arose, as did traditional dances and songs translated into languages other than Tigrinya. Among the children was a large Tigre-speaking contingent which had been displaced from Hirgigo, near Massawa, and other areas along the coast; with time, performances from other nationalities followed.

The first show outside the confines of the school was staged in Debat where internally displaced people, including some of the children's parents, had

²⁴⁰ Les Gottesman reports that the pastoralist population in the vicinity of the *Sowra* School persistently rebuffed education. Gottesman (1998: 230-231), Pateman (1998: 220-221), Killion (1998: 446-447), EPLF (1982a: 95).

²⁴¹ Cf. Firebrace's description of the appalling conditions under which the kindergarten close to the Revolutionary School operated: 'The children have hardly any toys or games, but the staff try to keep them occupied and teach them songs and dances' (Firebrace 1985: 121).

²⁴² On 22 March 1977, with the end of the first semester celebration in full swing, news of the liberation of Nakfa reached the Zero School, bringing the party to a point of near ecstasy. 'The presence of the Branch of Culture, made up of Vanguards, amidst the children who are the flowers of progress of the new society with the new culture, and hundreds of fighters gave a new dimension to the festive occasion. Revolutionary cultural shows and patriotic songs, throbbing with the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and progressive content of our new-democratic culture, filled the evening. [...] The dancing and rejoicing that filled this festive night was unprecedented for the school children who are the flowers of our revolution and the harbingers of our future society. At the same time, the member of the Branch of Culture were presenting newly composed songs hailing the victory of Nacfa and praising the heroism of the EPLF People's Army' (EPLF 1982a: 93, 94).

found a temporary home. The audience was deeply moved, and so was their leader who finally witnessed the fruit of her work. Altogether the group reflected the ongoing social changes in Eritrea. 'At the age of seven or eight', Tsega Gaim confirmed, 'when they danced – it was not something we had done when we were children, dancing in front of our parents, our elders. But now, society was different' (I 114).

In 1977 Decamhare and Keren were liberated and teachers who had come to visit the Zero School invited the group to visit them. At the end of term, the small cultural group hit the road, equipped with two *keberos* and boundless enthusiasm. Many children had never moved beyond the village border and were astounded to see multi-storey houses and to eat unknown foods. The tour was a great success and the reception of their two-hour show was overwhelming. Tsega remembered that 'the place was not big enough for all the people at the time. Everyone came, mothers, fathers, and all the children' (I 114). Alemseged Tesfai, in his study on Eritrean theatre, observed that the emotional appeal of the group was very high, thus echoing the experience of the ELF children's troupe:

There were not many who gave much attention to the quality of the dramas' contents and their artistic presentation. Most of the fighters who saw the students of the *Sowra* School were too fascinated to recall messages or artistic presentation. The children themselves were the message the fighters needed and no one left dissatisfied. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

The *Sowra* School Group set off an unprecedented creative avalanche in the liberated areas, for host schools often founded their own cultural troupes. These troupes were commonly known as the Red Flowers – the colour red symbolising the revolution, with flowers being a wide-spread endearment for children at the time. Some well-known actresses, such as the future CCT member Weyni Tewolde, had their first performance experiences with such groups. Located in urban or urbanised areas with prior exposure to western-type entertainment – Decamhare and Keren, for example, sported Italian theatre halls – the Red Flowers often presented longer dialogue drama in addition to the usual variety shows. The Decamhare group in particular was noted for its theatrical works which covered topics as diverse (and predictable) as women's inequality and victories over Ethiopia.²⁴³ The Red Flowers were short-lived, however, for the impending Ethiopian offensives put an end to their activities. Only after the

²⁴³ A. Tesfai ([1983a]), Schröder (1980: 70).

strategic retreat did performing arts education for children continue, then in form of the Music School in the rear areas of Sahel.

Culture after the Strategic Retreat

By 1978, the events on the front called for a complete reconsideration of military strategies and organisational structure. Beginning with a setback at the strategically important port of Massawa in December 1977, Eritrea suffered five major Ethiopian offensives up to mid-1979.²⁴⁴ The Soviet-supplied high-tech equipment and military expertise which backed the Ethiopian onslaught was superior to the comparatively meagre resources of the two liberation movements. While the ELF was hardest hit during the First Offensive along the Gash-Setit front, losing Tessenei and Barentu and retreating into Barka and Sahel, the EPLF surrendered territory in the subsequent attacks, above all Decamhare and the province of Akele Guzai. The siege of Massawa was discontinued. When the Second Offensive broke through critical frontlines in the Senhit province and heavy fighting occurred in Elaborod, some 25 km south of Keren, the EPLF decided on an orderly strategic retreat. By withdrawing from most of central Eritrea to Nakfa in the rocky mountains of Sahel, they managed to avoid entrapment and conserve energy. The strategic retreat – borrowed from Mao Tse Tung's long-term tactics to win a guerrilla war – 'enabled the EPLF to defend its base area against all further assaults, and thus survive the most difficult days of the war for independence' (Killion 1998: 384). As a result, the Fourth and Fifth Offensives of the Derg regime failed.²⁴⁵

Together with the retreating fighters, tens of thousands of civilians fled their homes. Some followed the EPLF into Sahel, others tried to find their way into Sudan in the desperate attempt to save their lives and families. While former pastoralists found themselves nomadic refugees, the fighters, paradoxically, had to adapt to a more sedentary existence. For the cultural work of the EPLF, exodus and retreat had tremendous consequences and led to a comprehensive restructuring of all cultural activities in the field.

²⁴⁴ 'The first offensive (*kedamai werrar*) was launched in July-August 1978; the second offensive (*kal'ai werrar*) in November 1978; the third (*sal'sai werrar*) in January-February 1979; the fourth (*rab'ai werrar*) in March-April, 1979; the fifth offensive (*hamushai werrar*) in July 1979' (R. Iyob 1995: 174).

²⁴⁵ Killion (1998: 327-328), Pateman (1998: 135-137).

The Challenge Road to Freedom: Revolutionary Culture on all (Front) Lines

In late 1979 or early 1980, shortly after the strategic withdrawal, the second CCT was dissolved and artists were deployed in different units to experience 'real' life in the field, most of them having been recruited straight from the Vanguard military training. They were also instructed to help set up higher-level, especially Brigade, cultural troupes. 'The EPLF knew that the struggle against Ethiopia would be very long because the Russians supported them [the Ethiopians], but there was no significant foreign support for the Eritrean cause', Solomon Tsehaye explained.

So the EPLF thought that cultural activities, cultural preservation, revitalisation of our cultural values were important to strengthen the Eritrean people's endeavour to achieve freedom. The entertainment aspect was also taken into consideration. So, in every Platoon, in every fighting force, cultural activities were encouraged.²⁴⁶ Guidelines were sent out that every person who can contribute to the arts and culture should get involved: as a writer, as a singer, as an actor, as a painter, as a sculptor, whatever. So theatre groups, theatre performances, regardless of their quality and depth, sprouted. Starting from Platoon, you pick the best ones, then from a Battalion, you take the most talented performers to establish a Brigade cultural troupe. At that time the Brigade was the highest organisation in the liberation forces. By late 1979 or the beginning of 1980, we started to have Brigade cultural troupes. (I 103).

1979 was certainly a watershed for cultural work in the EPLF. For one thing, culture was now encouraged on all levels of the liberation movement; secondly, it was more aggressively promoted as 'revolutionary culture' in the field. As such it was a vital component of the EPLF propaganda machine, even if recreation remained an important factor. The concept of 'revolutionary culture' had been starkly influenced by socialist realism in the communist world and embraced all art forms practised in the struggle; music, fine arts, and drama as well as literature.²⁴⁷ Revolutionary culture hoped to amalgamate aspects of resistance

²⁴⁶ The military hierarchy was as follows at the time: a) Team: contained 5-10 people, normally led by one member of the same group; b) Squad: 12-20 people, normally led by one of its members; c) Platoon: contained three Squads (36-60 people) led by a Platoon Commander; d) Company: contained three Platoons (78-180 people), led by a Brigade or Division appointed Company Commander; e) Battalion (approx. 450 fighters): contained three Companies led by a Battalion Commander; f) Brigade: contained 3 Battalions led by a Brigade Commander; g) Army Division: consisted of three Brigades. I wish to thank Mussie Tesfagiorgis for this information. Isayas Tseggai notes that EPLF had nine infantry Brigades when the 2nd CCT members were split up and sent to the Brigades, four performers to each, in order to help set up cultural troupes. I. Tseggai (2002: 11-12). Divisions and Division cultural troupes were introduced later with the expansion of the Eritrean People's Liberation Army, EPLA.

²⁴⁷ In his study on *Literature, Its Development, and Its Role in Revolution* Alemseged Tesfai referred to literary examples of revolutionary China, Korea and Vietnam 'from which writers in

cultures from other liberation wars with elements from orature and longstanding performance traditions to create something national and uniquely Eritrean. Clear guidelines were needed to shape the product into its projected form, but so was the input of talented, creatively unfettered individuals. Alemseged Tesfai, in his study on Eritrean drama, writes:

All aspects of revolutionary culture are intended to be centralised and provided with a progressive and scientific direction. Because decentralised development of art helps to reveal the masses' undiscovered abilities, it has to be let free for a certain period. If decentralisation is limitlessly continued, however, each person involved in the arts can do what they want. Art can take a wrong direction and be invaded by various harmful and destructive tendencies. Distorted and destructive tendencies like subjectivism or surrealism are greatly encouraged by decentralisation. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

The succeeding expansion of EPLF cultural activities followed the pattern outlined above. Cultural ventures were decentralised in that the Central Cultural Troupe was dissolved for a time and performance groups founded at virtually all levels of the organisation. At first these ideas met with resentment and difficulties which were partly counteracted by means of political education. Sometimes, however, fighters were simply ordered to get engaged in cultural work. What materialised was a distinctive fighter culture which encouraged individual artists and strove to improve art forms practised in the field without transgressing the prescriptive pattern of the revolution. A great number of gifted women artists emerged; yet none of them ever reached similarly authoritative positions to the leading male cultural cadres.²⁴⁸

Culture at the Frontline I: Platoon and Company Level

Before CTs were established at Battalion, Brigade and finally Army Division levels, grassroots work started in Platoons and Companies, with supporting departments, such as the Social Affairs and the Health Service, to follow. Initially, no one in the military units had any experience and shows were rather humble events. Fighters were selected for their voice or their outgoing character; and people who had never sung, acted, or made music started to get engaged. 'You

developing nations can fruitfully "learn" (G. Negash 1999: 183). On the whole, the EPLF followed the Chinese model of communism, even more so after the Soviet Union had aligned with the Derg.

²⁴⁸ For similar 'liberation arts' in Zimbabwe see Plastow (1996: 108, 120-123), Abah (1994: 89-90). See also Mlama (1991: 58-59).

see, it was a communal affair', Ibrahim Ali 'Akla' (today's head of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs) explained. 'Different people would make comments and suggest who should get involved in which cultural activity. [...] It was not your own will to decide whether or which group to join' (I 67). There were no special criteria for selection and often people refused, 'simply because they could not understand the necessity of culture' (M. Zerai 2001: 28). 'Most of us didn't want to be in the cultural troupes' Akla recalled. 'Most of us preferred combat to culture. [...] You did not think about education or culture or marriage, only about war and how to attack the enemy' (I 67). Others objected on the grounds that public performance seemed an unworthy task for a fighter, echoing ancient prejudices against theatre arts. 'However, they told us that all occupations were equal in the field' (I 67). Since the EPLF defined 'fighting' more broadly than engaging in frontline battles, comrades who refused to get involved in performance activities were strongly criticised by their peers (M. Zerai 2001: 28). Gradually, through political education, the importance of culture became more accepted in the field. 'There were awareness campaigns regarding recreation in the companies to refresh the minds of the members' (I 93), the actress Tsega Hagos explained. 'You accepted and adopted the idea because you had been told that it [culture] was part of the struggle' (I 67).

Wednesday had been declared the official day of rest in the EPLF, as opposed to the usual Christian Sunday and Muslim Friday, to avoid privileging one religious community over the other. Tuesday night was reserved for partying and recreation should the military situation allow; fighters often entertained themselves during the daytime when there was a lull in fighting. Whether at Squad, Platoon or Company level, *suwa* was prepared and enjoyed while the fighters watched the impromptu shows. Props and musical instruments were simple affairs, a plastic bucket sometimes serving as *kebero*, the fighters' *netselas* – a plain white cotton cloth – as costumes or curtain.²⁴⁹ Nechi Fesehatsion recalled her first singing performance in the military training camp when a cluster of stones served as 'stage'. 'I sang standing on the stones, but then I wanted to dance and jumped down. Obviously, my voice no longer reached the audience and people started to shout and complain' (I 87). Her colleague Atsbehet Yohannes confirmed that the shows 'were not particularly organised. There was no training or capable leadership or any ordered programme. The performances were put on

²⁴⁹ I 98/5, M. Zerai (2001: 29).

whenever they were needed. It was just for the fun and enjoyment of our unit or group' (I 7).²⁵⁰ 'It was everywhere in the trenches', Tsega Hagos resumed. 'You just shared things, and after you had put on a show, you went back to the trenches and continued guarding' (I 93).

In the majority of cases, popular songs were reproduced and sketches made up on the spot according to the occasion. There was little time to document plays in writing, and paper was scarce anyway. Lemlem Gebreyesus, one of the first known woman writers, experienced such situations: 'We were forced to write on anything we found. It was very difficult to preserve or document our work because we could not imagine that after independence they might be important' (I 12).²⁵¹ If occasionally plays were indeed recorded in writing – as was the case with some Brigade level work – they were rarely dated and never credited to an individual author. To proclaim that one had written a song or drama was considered as boastful and therefore deplorable. 'In the fighting experience', Isayas Tseggai explained, 'the pronoun "I" was seen as totally negative, except to say "I do this and I do that". Many times I wouldn't tell people that it was my lyrics which were so popular in a song. [...] When I met people in the field and they told me that Isayas Afeworki [then EPLF General Secretary and party chairman] had written the poem, I couldn't say, no I did it' (I 55).

Occasionally, performers still attended literacy programmes and were thus forced to rely on oral transmission rather than on a written script. 'You just learnt by heart what you had been told', Tsega Hagos verified. 'I personally used to study dramas of 35-45 minute length by heart because I was not educated. They told me my lines and I repeated them. Sometimes I repeated them all night, like a madwoman' (I 93).

I have heard many stories of this kind, and also those of female fighters discovering unknown talents in low-key frontline theatre. Others were able to pursue their artistic inclinations as a result of being encouraged – or being ordered – to get involved. Birikti Woldesellasié 'Tanki' was noticed as a singer, as was Abrehet Ankere ('*Gual* Ankere'), both of who joined the Central Cultural Troupe after its re-establishment in 1981. Lemlem Gebreyesus was spotted as a creative

²⁵⁰ Atsbehet Yohannes is today's leading actress of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, and also works as an assistant director; Nechi Fesehatsion has become one of the most popular actresses, especially in video film, after her post-independence demobilisation.

²⁵¹ Lemlem has worked as an actress and writer, and was the only woman member on the PFDJ Board of Directors and Writers post-independence.

writer, actress and singer; so were the Tigre-speakers Sadiya Omer, an actress, and the singer-cum-actress Zeinab Bashir.²⁵² The list could be continued.

Other women realised that they were gifted in more than one area. Elsa Yacob, painter, art teacher and women's activist, had already gained practical theatre experience during her military training, where she had written and produced a play. Having become a member of the Art Branch however,²⁵³ she predominately produced paintings and drawings for the organisation and was not engaged in any kind of performance. In 1985, when fighting resumed, she was called to arms and continued her previous theatrical activities. Her account nicely recapitulates low-key performance processes in the field.

People were totally mixed and they didn't have anyone in the group they knew, so they were quiet. Our commander said that we should prepare *suwa* and drink it together. I asked the commander how this was going to work, whether we would just sit there and drink *suwa*. 'Why should we sit down and drink *suwa*', I said, 'it's just like drinking tea!' 'What do you want us to do', he asked and I suggested we make some theatre. [...] Then I gathered the people I knew, or chose them by their looks. 'This one looks as if he could act in a play'. I tried to put on some traditional performances which we knew. Just little things, nothing complicated. I just told them 'You will be this character, you will sing this song. Then there will be a comedy', and so on. (I 107).

Culture at the Frontline II: Battalion, Brigade and Army Division Level

While Platoon and Company entertainment remained an ad-hoc affair, some performers were recruited to higher level cultural troupes where they were given more time, space and resources to develop their talents. Birikti Tanki's progress is a good example of the gradual rise of performers after the strategic retreat. In 1979 she was sent to a Battalion CT, followed by an assignment at Brigade level until she joined the re-established Central Cultural Troupe in 1981. Fatuma Suleiman's work followed an identical pattern. (Incidentally, both had been members of the 31st Brigade CT, led by Zeinab Bashir until she too was recruited to the CCT). Fatuma, a Saho, had originally been selected for her ethnic background. Fighters from minorities, such as the Kunama, Nara, Afar or Saho, were scarce in the liberation front, and women from such backgrounds were even

²⁵² Today, Sadiya and Zeinab work with *Abbot* (Development), the Tigre-language theatre group of the PFDJ, but they are also engaged in independent projects; Sadyia in drama, video film, and as a writer.

²⁵³ The Art Branch, or Visual Arts Section, under the painter Brehane Adonai was established in 1978/79 as part of the Department of Political Orientation, Education and Culture. For details on their work see Matzke (2002b: 21-54). On Elsa Yacob see Matzke (2001: 20-21).

rarer. Higher level cultural troupes aspired to a broad ethnic spectrum among their members, even though traditional songs and dances of whichever nationality were eventually represented by performers of all ethno-linguistic groups.

Generally, the atmosphere towards performers changed positively during this period, especially for women, who had been the most affected by stereotypes and social bigotry. Alemseged Tesfai noted in 1983 that:

[a]bove all, prejudices against artists started to fade quickly. Their work was being accepted as a great and revolutionary duty. The singer had been derogatorily called *hamien*, the musician *wat'a*, and the actor *shkaba*. These backward views used to impede the arts, and when they were overcome, suitable conditions for the progress of the arts began to appear. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

Tanki explained that at Battalion level 'fighting was still our first and foremost aim. At night we sat in the trenches, in the morning we started the rehearsals. It was additional work to us' (I 56). Yet, the standard of the performance came close to that of the early Brigade CTs – all of which was still rather basic in terms of performance quality, props and musical equipment. Some aspects, however, improved. Shows now ran for three to six hours, instead of the previous one or two, which often pushed performers to their physical limits. Tsega Hagos recalled that 'you didn't get any rest during the shows. You had just beaten the drum and jumped all the time, then you had to change your clothes and adornments and go back on stage to act' (I 93).

Cultural work in the Brigades was accorded more time and status, with artistes gradually turning into 'professional' performers, even if, as Alemseged Tesfai has perceptively pointed out, they remained 'invariably amateurs' (A. Tesfai 2000: 25) for lack of training opportunities. 'When we started at the Brigade level', Tanki resumed, 'it was our priority unless something really serious happened. At Battalion level cultural issues had been secondary. At Brigade level it was our main work. It started to be really organised' (I 56).

For many artists, the availability of musical instruments and simple technical equipment began to make a genuine difference to their work. While most cultural troupes had started off with one or two traditional instrument, if any at all,²⁵⁴ gradually more modern equipment was added which the artists themselves had produced. Amplifiers, micro- or megaphones were not readily

²⁵⁴ The Brigade 23 CT, for instance, had started off with a *krar*, a *famfam* (mouth organ) and a *shambuko* (traditional flute). I 98/5.

available at this point, but were sometimes substituted by simpler gadgets capable of projecting sound. By the mid-1980s, especially after 1986, the situation improved. The biggest offensives of the Ethiopian army were over, and equipment of all kinds was now to be had via Sudan. Traditional musical instruments were also manufactured in EPLF workshops, especially the *krar*, all of which enabled a higher standard of presentation.

Theatre Practice I: Costume and Stage Design

With time, the staging and performing skills of the fighters matured, due to increasing experience and the innovative input of individual performers. More attention was, for example, paid to costume design. In the late 1970s, coloured flour sacks had sometimes been used as basic costume material. Afewerki Abraha, then a member of Brigade 23,²⁵⁵ remembered that when they once needed uniforms, the troupe had used bed sheets onto which they painted stripes and other military insignia. Starting from the 1980s, fighters were supplied with yards of *yedid*, white muslin material, which could be dyed according to need. Clothes and costumes of finer quality emerged, thereby helping to heighten the visual aspects of the shows. In the mid-1980s, unisex suits resembling uniforms were frequently used for the CCT, often black with flashy red lapels and stripes for the chorus, sometimes with reversed colours for the lead singer. The representation of traditional clothing was also improved, partly because of the accessibility of material via Sudan, partly because of civilian donations (see Figures 63 and 64).

The most prominent costume designer in the EPLF was Fatuma Suleiman. The daughter of a liberal-minded couple, a teacher father and an artisan mother who had nurtured her creative and academic talents, Fatuma pursued a career as painter, singer, songwriter, dancer and actress in the field before distinguishing herself in tailoring and wig-making.²⁵⁶ With growing performance and staging skills, wigs became essential in frontline theatre, especially for the mounting of traditional performance forms. Hair and head movements were an essential part of certain dance choreographies, such as *shellil*, and a signifier for ethnic and marital

²⁵⁵ At the time of our first interview, Afewerki Abraha was Eritrean Consul to the United Kingdom. For Afewerki's biographical background see Plastow & Tsehaye (1998: 38-39).

²⁵⁶ Fatuma has made herself a name particularly in the area of handicrafts which she turned into her profession post-independence. In 2000 she ran a souvenir shop in *Bachti Meskerem*, September Square, at the bottom of Bana (Liberation) Avenue in Asmara. Though no longer working for the EPLF/PFDJ Cultural Affairs, she still produced wigs for their shows and designed costumes for demobilised or independent artists. For an account of her life see Christmann (1996: 118-122). See also I. Tsegai (2 October [n.d.]), W. Gerezgiher (October 1995).



Fig. 63 *EPLF artists in unisex suits with reversed colours for the lead singer.*

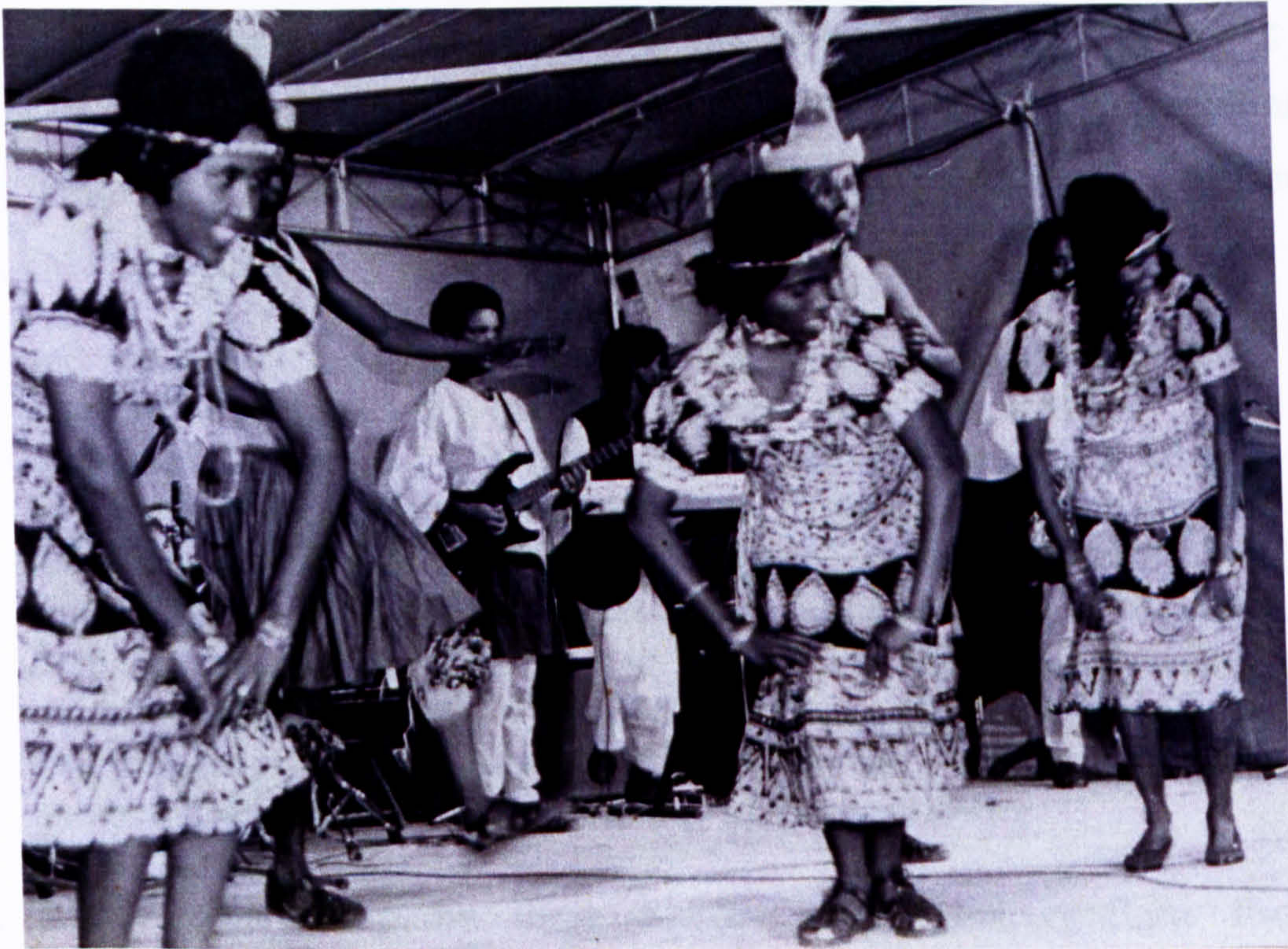


Fig. 64 *EPLF artists performing a Kunama dance. Note the wigs.*
(Front row, from left to right: Birikti 'Tanki', Fatuma Suleiman, Zeinab Bashir).

status in civilian Eritrea. These aspects needed to be recreated on stage, given the ubiquitous 'Afro' sported by male and female fighter performers. Fatuma recalls:

The first time I prepared wigs was in Brigade 31. Initially, real hair was not available, we used sacks and dyed them with used battery powder. There was nothing but these batteries, and at that time we were not aware of the health hazard they constituted. When the women danced, the battery powder came off and coloured their face. Later, we used cloth for gun cleaning which was made of black thread. And when wigs were available from Sudan, we started to prepare the real wigs. At first I would draw a head and design the wig, then I would prepare it for real. It was also the time I started to work as a tailor. During the days of hardship, people were running around bare-chested because there were no clothes. So I tailored clothes from wheat flour sacks. I made clothes for the whole Company. (I 49).

Later, by then a member of the re-established Central Cultural Troupe, she sewed underwear in her spare time for some 150 fighters who had not been given supplies. During the Sixth Offensive she made gas masks to save her comrades' lives, working day and night to replace those rendered ineffectual by poison gas attacks. Life was immensely hazardous in the field and did not allow for a sharp distinction between culture, creativity and combat.

The most memorable costume Fatuma Suleiman designed was a dress used for a Brigade 31 drama performed in 1981. The play was a realistic rendering of Ethiopian atrocities against Eritreans, the looting, abuse and the daily killings. 'They killed pregnant women to know whether the baby inside was a girl or a boy', Fatuma explained,

and particularly made fun of Muslim women. [...] So, for the play, I prepared a costume of a pregnant woman who gets killed by the enemy and whose baby is removed from the womb with a knife. Everyone in the audience cried when they saw this. I had sewn an invisible zip into the costume which covered a small pocket at the front of the dress. Inside the pocket I put a thin plastic bag filled with *berbere* [the customary red spice in Eritrea] and water, and a doll as the baby. I also prepared an umbilical cord from plastic. It looked so real that many people fainted. One woman in Dirfo fainted and another when we performed on the way to Tserona. (I 49).

The scene conjured up by these images once again confirms that a representational, life-like rendering was aspired to in most theatre performances, in line with ideas of revolutionary culture. Stage design, though less developed, also moved towards a projected verisimilitude. According to Afewerki Abraha, many Brigades had fine artists who provided backdrops for the shows, mostly in

form of a large landscape painting or scenes from the battlefield.²⁵⁷ Stage design did not stop at backdrops, though they played an important role. Curtains – preferably red – were a similar obsession with theatre groups, a relic, it seems, from the colonial period under the Europeans, to which the urban theatre scene in Ethiopia had equally taken a fancy. The painter Demoz Russom (today the stage and costume designer of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs) sewed strings on the curtain to allow it to be opened from backstage, and designed a portable rostrum from wooden cases of artillery bombs. For daytime shows sometimes a *das*, or tent, was built to protect actors and audience from the scorching sun. The CCT was given a more sophisticated stage which featured a ceiling of suspended flats and side wings for the band. The curtained-off backstage area served as a changing room. Special effects and lighting also became increasingly popular, even if sometimes used to light the auditorium, not the stage.²⁵⁸



Fig. 65 *The stage during the National Cultural Week in 1987.*

Demoz once invented a multi-coloured disco-style lighting console connected to the pedal of a drum set, while another group devised special sound and explosion effects to recreate battles on stage. Technical innovations notwithstanding, bonfires remained a major source of illumination for regular shows. Props also were kept to a minimum: a stool, a *forniello* (portable coal stove) and a *jebenna* (traditional coffee pot) indicating a domestic scene, military gear for a battle. Isayas Tseggai writes that '[m]odels of tanks and big guns were designed out of

²⁵⁷ One backdrop caught my eye on a 1987 performance video tape, featuring today's Bar Lilli and Nyala Hotel in Asmara in wonderfully cheerful colours. Even the choreography accompanying the song performed was noteworthy as it changed from an animated market scene with a 'traditional' mother, two lovers, a cyclist and other characters to a still picture or *tableaux vivants*. *National Cultural Week* (1987), Part I.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Kavanagh (1997: 133), I 34.

boxes and empty gun shells. Every element had to be improvised using what little you had' (I. Tseggai 2002: 14).

Soon there was strong competition between the Brigades and, later, Army Divisions, with Solomon Tsehaye and other cultural cadres coming to watch and evaluate the shows. 'There was a lot of competition between the Brigades', Tsega Hagos recalled,

which was the most special, the 23rd, the 31st, the 44th, and so on. This was all organised by our respective Brigade Commanders. [...] At Brigade level competitions, songs, dramas and all kinds of things were considered. Preparations for competitions were very secretive – you didn't even present them to members of your own [Brigade]. Brigades 31, 34 and 44 can be deployed in the same trenches, but you do not let them know what you are planning to perform until the actual competition. You feared that some other group might copy the things you have prepared. [...] The Brigade as a whole competed, and if you won, it was everyone, not individuals. If you won, you didn't get money but you became famous. Of course, when the Eritrea Festival started [in Bologna] in 1989, you could be rewarded by being selected for the festival. Once you were famous, even the enemy was terrified. Our Brigade 23 was even known by the enemy. (I 93).

Culture at the Frontline III:

The Tour of Brigade 23 during the Sixth Offensive

Due to its popularity, I want to use Brigade 23 as an example of cultural activities in the military. From 1981-83 their cultural troupe went on tour, covering some 4000 km through Eritrea and Tigray, the northern province of Ethiopia. It was during the Sixth Ethiopian Offensive, also known as the Red Star Campaign, and a very dangerous time for the artists to travel. After the Fifth Offensive in July 1979, the Derg had taken three years to prepare for another onslaught, intent on finally eradicating the liberation movement in Eritrea. The Sixth Offensive in 1982 comprised unprecedented military attacks with napalm, cluster bombs and poison gas, and was accompanied by a massive political propaganda campaign to demoralise the Eritrean population. Advancing rapidly on three fronts in Barka, Nakfa, and northeast Sahel, the Ethiopian army nonetheless failed to break through the EPLF lines. Losses were heavy on both sides of the divide, but the defeat of the seemingly all-powerful enemy instilled great confidence into the liberation movement. This self-assurance was also reflected in their performing arts.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Killion (1998: 355-356), Wilson (1991: 102-103), Patemann (1998: 83-85).

When the artists of Brigade 23 set off on tour, they knew they would move into semi-liberated and enemy territory, a potentially life-threatening undertaking. While the EPLA (Eritrean People's Liberation Army) defended the liberated areas, the artists were engaged in a number of confrontations with the Ethiopian forces on the latter's turf. Of the thirty members of the group – 20 men and 10 women – all were heavily armed, for first and foremost they remained fighters. Travelling took place at night to avoid air raids and enemy attacks during daytime. As transport was difficult to come by, props and provisions were carried on the back of camels, including the stage. Altogether 60 – 70 shows were mounted to great acclaim, according to the performers. Afewerki Abraha attributed their success to the collaborative character of their work, not only among the artists who shared all responsibilities, but also in their attempt to involve local villagers. People, especially highlanders, had suffered horrendous atrocities during the Red Star Campaign and morale was extremely low. The aim of the cultural troupe was therefore to reassure the communities, recruit local militias in support of the liberation movement and give people a sense of security.

The Brigade 23 CT was run by a committee of four artists, Hailemichael Haileselassie 'Lingo', Ibrahim Ali 'Akla' and Habteab (X),²⁶⁰ with Afewerki Abraha as the chair. Women were conspicuously absent from the caucus. (Afewerki felt that on the whole women were less educated than men, implying that they were less equipped for leading positions. This was a widespread opinion at the time and belied the involvement of women in the field as well as the efforts of the EPLF, including Brigade 23, to raise awareness of gender equality.) Before the shows, research was carried out in the villages by committee members, each one being responsible for a particular sphere: local traditions; agricultural methods and animal husbandry; possible contacts with the ELF and the people's political inclination; and, finally, generation conflicts and gender relations. Performers went from door to door, talked to the villagers and made notes. The findings were incorporated into the shows and adapted to the local context. 'This was very important to reach the heart of the people,' Aferwerki Abraha explained. 'People were often amazed and said that we were telling them everything straight from their hearts. Obviously, the content had to be simple. Sometimes, a small play was

²⁶⁰ 'Lingo' became well-known as an announcer of one of the two later Central Cultural Troupes; 'Akla' was put in charge of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs post-independence; Habteab (X) was later killed in action.

made up on the day according to what had happened in the village, or a song or poem was composed' (I 98/5).

The most popular drama by Brigade 23 was *Kemsie Ntezhrewn Nehru (If It Had Been Like That)*, which had a successful two-year run in the field and has remained one of the best-remembered pieces of the period. Plastow and Solomon Tsehaye have extensively documented the play and this section only adds some details to their findings (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 38-42). In the context of women's roles and theatrical representations, however, the play inhabits a central position. Written by Afewerki Abraha for the occasion of Women's Day (March 8th) in 1980, *If It Had Been Like That* addressed the inequality between men and women by means of farcical gender role reversals. The idea was later copied by other CTs.²⁶¹ *If It Had Been Like That* depicts the life of an ordinary Eritrean family, but with the wife as the head of the household. Unlike other instances of cross-dressing in the Eritrean performing arts, *If It Had Been Like That* did not resort to sartorial, but to social inversion – or cross-acting – as a dramatic device. The woman remained a biological female, signified by her feminine clothes, while being endowed with the socio-economic standing customarily associated with men. As such, she was the breadwinner of the family, went out drinking with her female friends, and had children by other men. Her spouse, on the other hand, led a secluded life, ran the household and perpetually attended coffee ceremonies (which are usually very feminine affairs) with his male neighbours. Plastow and Solomon Tsehaye write that:

Much of the play relied on slapstick comedy to deliver its message. [...] When the wife finally came home she beat her husband because there was no food immediately ready. This involved the woman jumping up to reach her much taller spouse, to predictable laughter. The husband cried and neighbouring wives appeared to adjudicate and say he had been beaten enough. Meanwhile the men shyly peeped around doorways, only to be sent home by their wives who said this was none of their business. Further cultural taboos were breached when children were named by women, and moreover named after grandmothers who were clearly identified as leaders in the community. (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 41).

By inverting existing gender roles while leaving the hierarchy intact, Afewerki exposed the inequity of the prevalent social system, even if not projecting alternative spaces for men and women. 'I wanted to show extremes in my play' (I

²⁶¹ An almost identical play was staged in the late 1980s by the staff of the Central Pharmacy in the underground Central Hospital of Orotta. I 119.

134), he explained, emphasised by the choice of the protagonists – Fitsum Tekleab, a very tall actor, and Tsige (not Tsega) Hagos, who was very petite. ‘Once a brigadier commander wondered whether this play was such a good idea after all, but when he had seen it he said it was good. It was the shortest way of showing the audience on what level the fighters were’ (I 98/5). Plastow and Solomon Tsehaye claim that fighters generally appreciated the show and that ‘laughter predominated’ (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 41). Yet laughter can convey more than amusement; it can express defensiveness and anxiety as well. A second interview with Afewerki Abraha in February 2002 confirmed that fighters too struggled with the drama’s social implications. To the playwright, there were *two* plays going on simultaneously, no matter whether staged before military or non-combatant audiences: one on stage, the other among the spectators. In some villages the show was incomprehensible; in others men took it as an attack on their promiscuity. Fighters reacted in a similar manner, as many had not entirely shed conservative value systems, especially the newer recruits. According to Afewerki Abraha, both men and women were extremely incensed, the former by the husband’s inability to assert the dominant position, the latter by the wife for abusing her spouse (thus indicating that women interpellated in the patriarchal order were often its most diligent perpetrators) (I 98/5; Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 41-42). At times, male spectators grabbed Fitsum Tekleab on leaving the stage, shouting at him to ask why on earth he had let this happen. On other occasions, male fighters blamed the actors for suffering abuse by their female colleagues. Audience reaction was always vociferous and sporadically even violent.

Initially, the play was performed before Brigade 23 and other military units stationed in Northern Sahel. Afewerki would provide the audience with the first half of the drama’s title and invite them to complete it after the show. ‘Some people said it was ‘in Japan’ or ‘in a primitive or pre-colonial society’ (when women apparently ruled) or simply ‘unthinkable’. So if it is unthinkable, why should we accept it, even in its reversed form? Why do you accept it the other way round?’ (I 95/8). The play offered no equality, nor did it re-reverse gender roles for the temporary appeasement of the spectators (cf. Plastow & S. Tsehaye: 42). It did, however, indicate that social inversion on stage was a powerful means of shaking people out of their complacency which still took the customary gender culture for granted. The new fighter identity had yet to be internalised by the

majority of combatants, to say nothing of civilians under their care. The claim of how far the challenge to gender roles had been accepted within the rank and file of the EPLF had probably been overstated by the leadership. Nonetheless, the play suggested that theatre in the EPLF was more than crude anti-Ethiopian agit-prop propaganda which had been a staple of much 'revolutionary' theatre work and to which I will return later. Rudimentary affinities with Theatre-in-Education and Theatre-for-Development techniques, such as the attempted post-performance discussion, helped highlight the more sophisticated educational nature of Afewerki's play. It is noteworthy that gender issues and social reforms were being addressed in places then heavily under Ethiopian fire. This confirms the indeed powerful possibilities of theatre in the field, though a number of obstacles were yet to be overcome for drama to reach its full potential.

Theatre Practice II: Audiences

So far, most examples of dialogue drama have indicated that, despite its awareness-raising potential, the form was under-appreciated in the field, often based on a lack of knowledge of its possibilities. Music was, and would remain, the most favoured form of entertainment (A. Tesfai [1983a]). When a popular song was played, people tended to swamp the stage, dancing around the performers, pasting banknotes on their heads, sometimes donating small items of jewellery or clothing. With time, artists were increasingly venerated in the EPLF – despite the discouragement of individualism or leadership worship in the organisation – which resulted in the gradual emergence of 'stars' and their 'fans'. Women singers became especially popular at the front, fondly remembered up to the present day.

A particularly spectacular incident of such adulation took place in early 1990. On January 1st, the Army Division CT *Beilul* mounted a show for Ethiopian Prisoners of War (POWs), who were guarded by EPLF fighters. Kibra Mesfin, a singer, was already on stage, while her colleague, Nechi Fesehatsion, waited for her appearance in the following piece, a historical drama entitled *Ras Tessema*.²⁶² Nechi recounts the scene:

NECHI FESEHATSION: I had to get ready while she [Kibra Mesfin] sang the song, '*Woinai* [Beloved]'. I changed into my costume and waited

²⁶² Kibra Mesfin is the sister of Atsede Mesfin – playwright, songwriter, and musician, with whom she forms the M-Sisters duo today. For Atsede Mesfin see the section on *Bana Harnet* in Chapter 7. For a journalistic reading of the play see D. Mebrahtu (8 April 1995: 7).

until she had finished. Kunye [my colleague] acted as my husband. We were chatting backstage. Then I watched this guy loading his gun. It was common to shoot during shows, I even liked it. Then, while I was still looking at the fighter he lifted the gun and shot, and suddenly I was shot and fell down. I lost my balance. People thought I was dead and wouldn't pick me up. Then some barefoot doctors came and carried me to a safer place. The bullet had passed through my shoulder.

CHRISTINE MATZKE: But what was the reason?

NF: He was happy and simply fired a shot. He didn't mean to. He was just overwhelmed by emotions. [...] He had heard that we were showing in this place. He liked the song and even had it on tape. But he still wanted to see Kibra in performance. He followed us everywhere, even to Sudan, but he couldn't find us. [...] He just arrived while the song was on. He loaded his gun and shot all his bullets. It was not only me who got shot. [Someone] approached him and took his gun away. He was also shot. All the instruments were damaged. Actually, this guy was moved by the song. He shot simply to express his joy. But he couldn't control his gun.

CM: What happened afterwards and how did the audience react?

NF: *Ras Tessema* was one of the best-liked dramas in the field. Kunye was the announcer. Everybody shouted '*Ras Tessema!*' Kunye got angry and shouted back: "You shot the main actress, go to hell, I will not act on my own!" Thereafter he refused to announce the rest of the show and only the songs followed. The drama was cancelled. (I 87).

While, thankfully, the incident remained a one-off misfortune, it nonetheless points to the extremes (male) spectators were ready to go to order to watch and show appreciation of their favourite performers. The scene moreover suggests that by the early 1990s, drama had gained greater popularity. Until then, people had been more familiar with short, often crudely staged, agit-prop sketches, with poetry recitals or the well-liked genre of 'musical drama'. Musical dramas had been shown since the early Ma.M.Ha.L. days, usually featuring a song enacted by two or more performers.²⁶³ When it came to dialogue drama and its guiding principles, however, theatre was often equated with slapstick comedy à la Alemayo Kahasai, thus reducing plays to a 'medium of laughter' (I. Tseggai 2002: 14). The inability to distinguish between an offstage 'reality' and fictional happenings in a 'serious drama' (A. Tesfai [1983a]) was often to the detriment of the performers. Sometimes it led to abuse of 'wicked' characters after the show. Weyni Tewolde recalled how a number of actors had been beaten up on mounting a play about feudal exploitation in front of traditional village authorities. Sadyia Omer, in her first role as the Eritrean wife to an Ethiopian, had to cope with people throwing stones at her and insulting her as 'prostitute'. Even artists could

²⁶³ For a reading of such a musical drama in the field, see I. Tseggai (2002: 35-37).

fall prey to such attitudes, as did a member of a smaller CT who unexpectedly refused to be seized during a scene, fretting that he might be nicknamed 'captive' later.²⁶⁴



Fig. 66 *Audience in the underground cafeteria of the EPLF Central Hospital in Orotta, 1980s.*

Martin Rohmer, in his analysis of Zimbabwean community theatre, writes that an 'audience is more than just a context to the performance – it is an equal partner in the theatrical process, interacting with the actors and creating the performance together with them' (Rohmer 1999: 74). While, unlike other African contexts, the reactions of Eritrean drama spectators have always seemed to be rather restrained, the performer-audience relationship was nonetheless crucial for the success of a performance.²⁶⁵ Alemseged Tesfai, in his 1986 drama study, considered the theatrical inexperience of spectators to be a serious obstacle to a deeper understanding of full-length plays. Drama, he rebuked, was seen as a mere appendix to musical entertainment. Audiences were inattentive and strongly disliked longer plays, while their responses were often inappropriate and uncritical, if not totally out of place. He writes:

The mistakes and shortcomings mentioned above were not committed deliberately to impede drama work. Rather it was a lack of understanding of drama. To boot, plays were not prepared in an instructive and captivating manner which caused failure. [...] What is demanded of the audience is to help overcome the problems drama is

²⁶⁴ I 51, I 93, I 97. The inability to distinguish between stage action and reality was of course not an exclusively Eritrean phenomenon. For examples in Ethiopia see Pankhurst (1986: 187-188).

²⁶⁵ Cf. Rohmer (1999: 77). Urban viewers witnessed during my field research, probably familiar with western theatre conventions, tended to sit quietly, occasionally commenting on the happenings by laughter, clapping, and ululating, thus belying the widespread idea of energetic, over-excited African spectators. Responses in rural areas were often more boisterous. Video documentation from the field seems to confirm my observations.

facing. There is no point in developing drama alone. The attitudes of the spectators need also improvement. [...] Though the demands on the audience are not as high as on those involved in the making of theatre, [...] they must realise that they have equal responsibility. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

Hence, with the reconstitution of the Central Cultural Troupe and the creation of a Section of Literature and Drama, concerted efforts were made to promote literary and theatrical works in the field in order to deepen the understanding of both audience and performers.

The Re-establishment of the Central Cultural Troupe

In 1981, almost two years after its second dissolution, the Central Cultural Troupe (CCT, or *Maekelay Bahli Wdb*) was revived and the Division of Culture was split into two separate subdivisions, due to increasing specialisation: the Music Section under the saxophonist Aklilu Daniel, and the Section of Literature and Drama headed by Solomon Tsehaye. Solomon was in charge of Literature, while Drama was under Alemseged Tesfai. In 1984, the Visual Arts Branch under Berhane Adonai – established in 1978/79 and until then a separate Division – was to join the Division of Culture as a third subsection which collaborated extensively with the performing arts. The Division of Culture was directed by Tsadu Bhata, a former member of the first Central Cultural Troupe, with Alemseged Tesfai as his deputy. To my knowledge, there was no woman administrator or artistic director.

Until 1981 Alemseged Tesfai had worked in education, teaching and helping draft a school curriculum for the *Sowra* School. Now he was appointed to advance drama though, as a trained lawyer, he had virtually no theatre experience.²⁶⁶ Solomon Tsehaye was recruited to the Drama and Literature Section from the rear area, where he had been active in the cultural troupe of the Department of Social Affairs, after having sustained injuries in frontline fighting. The new base where they were to take up their work was located in the safer rear area, the inaccessible highlands in Northern Sahel, and was known under the codename *Arag*. At first, in a joint effort of *maetot* (communal work), a permanent, subterranean base had to be built: offices, shelters, and rehearsal halls, all underground to protect the fighters from Ethiopian air raids. ‘We had been recruited in 1981’, Solomon Tsehaye recalled, ‘but we started [cultural work] in 1982. From June 1981 to the end of the year we prepared the place to work in. We

²⁶⁶ For further biographical details Plastow (1999: 54-60).

were in hard labour, so to say. Digging, digging, digging – for six months we worked the whole day. Well, it was worth it because we stayed there until 1991, nine to ten years!’ (I 103).

When it was decided to reconstitute the Central Cultural Troupe, it was clear that it had to have ‘a higher level of thinking and organisation’ (I 103) than its predecessor. The new CCT should complement the existing entertainment groups and function as the official cultural representative of the EPLF. The performers, who had been mostly recruited from Brigade level CTs, were assigned to the appropriate subdivision. Stage and costume design remained a communal affair, the former assisted by the Art Branch, the latter by Fatuma Suleiman, now a member of the Music Section. Directing was not known as a distinct category and was mostly taken over by the author of a play, sometimes in collaboration with a more experienced actor. Acting, on the other hand, was now considered to be ‘a serious task’ (I. Tseggai 2002: 13) and developed into a separate vocation.

In theory, given their experience in smaller CTs, women had now the chance to inhabit more authoritative positions – as administrators, playwrights or announcers, thus ‘challeng[ing] the patriarchal appropriation of power over the Word’ (Bryce-Okunlola 1991: 201). In practice, however, women remained mostly ‘executing’, not ‘executive’, organs, as singers, dancers and actresses, albeit with greater leverage to influence the production process. A number also succeeded as musicians of modern instruments, a previously male-dominated task. Those who worked as administrators, directors or writers, however, remained a minority.

Even so, for the singer Abrehet Ankere (*Gual Ankere*), ‘it had a great significance to see all the professionals gathered in the Central Cultural Troupe. All of those who had been selected from the combatant forces came together. The new Central Cultural Troupe included the best singers, dancers, and writers’ (I 95). Solomon Tsehaye confirmed the gradual transformation of their work, the most significant being the opportunity to develop an area of expertise. Though artists were still engaged in all types of cultural work and were expected to step in wherever they were required – singers participating in plays or dances, for example – a number started to specialise in a particular field. The Music Section began to differentiate between singers and song writers. As a result the creation of songs in languages other than Tigrinya and Tigre grew.

Similar developments were observed in Literature and Drama. Here, the distinction was gradually being made between authors and actors, the former being almost exclusively men. This is not to say that women did not occasionally write sketches or songs,²⁶⁷ or that writers no longer subjected their works to communal criticism. However, the attitude towards playwrights and songwriters changed. While in earlier years written works had been credited to the liberation movements, not an individual person – especially since they were indeed often communal works – things began to change in the 1980s. Alemseged Tesfai, for example, was among the first to be acknowledged as a playwright when, in the mid-1980s, one of his works, *Eti Kale Kunat (The Other War)*, was documented on video film. More individually known authors followed with the promotion of literary competitions in the field.²⁶⁸ A more general division of labour could also be observed among the subsections in the Division of Culture. Solomon Tsehaye resumed:

Those in the Literature and Drama section prepared their own work. In 1981 the reorganisation of the Division of Culture resulted in specialisation. Our section prepared drama, the music section rehearsed a musical show and then the various elements were brought together for performance. (I 103).

Working conditions for fighter artists had never been better, now that sufficient underground facilities were at their disposal, with the Arts Branch sporting workshops and even a subterranean gallery. More importantly, there was time for the study and practice of the various arts, with everyone honing their skills in their designated area. Research was strongly encouraged, mostly by way of participatory methodology. Abrehet Ankere, for example, contributed to the investigation of long-established Eritrean performance forms:

We had members from all ethnic groups amongst us [in the Music Section], so we usually asked them when we had questions. However, when we did not get information about a particular cultural

²⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that no prominent female playwrights are remembered from the field, though women like Lemlem Gebreyesus, Sadyia Omer and Atsede Mesfin are known to have worked as writers. In the Music Section Zeinab Bashir and Zahra Ali collaborated on Tigre-language songs.

²⁶⁸ For *The Other War* see *Music and Drama of the EPLF* [mid-1980s]; cf. Plastow & S. Tsehaye (1998: 51). From the mid-1980s to independence, three literary competitions took place in the field. While the first couple of contests were organised by the EPLF radio station, *Dimitsi Hafash* ('Voice of the Masses'), the third was a better-documented event in September 1987 with a sixteen-member jury featuring such public cultural figures as Solomon Tsehaye, Alemseged Tesfai, Afewerki Abraha, Asmerom Habtemariam, the writer Isayas Tsegai and Dr Michael Gebrehiwot, a medical doctor in Orotta. All contestants and their works were individually listed in the report. For further details see G. Negash (1999: 187-192); for cultural activities in the central Hospital of Orotta see Matzke (2003).

performance form, we went to the villages for research. Sometimes we studied traditional dances, memorised and practised them until we were ready to perform. (I 95).

Alemseged Tesfai was not engaged in field research, but was adamant that only by delving into local performative expressions could a truly Eritrean theatre emerge. 'I knew in my mind that if Eritrean theatre was to develop it needed to go back to Eritrean culture and folklore, deep into the thoughts and actions of the population and develop from there. But I didn't have that kind of capacity, there were physical limitations at that time' (Plastow 1999: 57). Instead, he spent his days reading, and partially translating, books on theatre. The choice was limited and mostly related to European drama – Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and Gogol,²⁶⁹ but also covered selected African plays and theories, above all works of the Kenyan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, arguably the most influential African intellectual concerning cultural matters for the EPLF at the time. Between 1982 and 1984, Alemseged wrote and directed three plays – *Le'ul* (the eponymous heroine of a workers' play) (written in 1982, performed in 1983), *Anqzi (Meningitis)*, in 1983) and *Eti Kale Kunat (The Other War)*, in 1984) – and published a novel, *The Son of Hadera* (1983). He also produced the first two full-length studies on Eritrean literature and theatre respectively, *Literature, Its Development, and Its Role in Revolution* (1982) as well as *Drama* ([1983a]).²⁷⁰ Obviously, he was not the only one to start writing seriously, but given his prominent position, became the most influential intellectual concerned with cultural work in the field. 'We in the Literature and Drama section began to understand what literature meant to the author and drama to the actors', Weyni Tewolde recounted the steep learning curve.

The work we started now was different to the work we had done previously. Then we didn't have any idea about drama. Now, Alemseged taught us what drama meant and how it had developed historically, for example among the ancient Greek or about Ngugi's drama. We became totally absorbed. Thanks to Alemseged, we were getting to know fundamental ideas about drama. (I 51).

²⁶⁹ Earlier on it had been assumed that Alemseged had also had access to J.B. Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls* (1946); Alemseged, however, lately confirmed that it had been Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* (1836). A. Tesfai (8 May 2003); cf. Plastow (1999: 57).

²⁷⁰ The publication of *Drama* is dated '1986 (?)' on the Tigrinya manuscript. Cf. G. Negash (1999: 181). Solomon Tsehaye, however, insists that the study was written in 1983, prior to Alemseged's theatrical masterpiece, *The Other War*, as he tried to realise his own critical suggestions. I find Solomon's argument convincing, especially since Alemseged had already been moved to a different department in 1986. The author himself was unable to remember the exact date.

CHAPTER 6: ENGENDERING DRAMA IN THE EPLF (THEATRE PRACTICE III)

The previous sections have already given a sense of the difficulties encountered by theatre work; the lack of materials, time and even performative skills, especially among the so-called 'recreational groups' (A. Tesfai [1983a]) which organised informal weekly entertainments but were not part of the official Division of Culture. Yet even the designated professionals lacked experience in the mounting of certain performance forms. Literary drama in particular was little established. Only a minority of fighters were familiar with its urban Eritrean form; and only a tiny fraction of those who had spent time abroad had been involved in theatre. 'In connection with this', Ghirmai Negash remarks:

it is perhaps relevant to mention that play writing is not a developed craft in Tigrinya.^[271] True, plays have been staged by students and by professional music & [sic] theatre groups such as 'Asmara Theatre Association' [Ma.Te.A.], [...] and, today, several other groups continue to do so. Moreover, (touring) cultural and musical troupes of the liberation organisations have regularly shown theatre performances in the liberated zones of Eritrea as well as for Eritrean expatriate communities during the liberation time. Nevertheless, actors have almost always relied on provisory [sic] sketches, and printed versions of the texts are seldom found. (G. Negash 1999: 181).

It is not the question of the alleged 'superiority' of literary drama that I want to discuss in this chapter, given that other contexts have proved the potential complexity of unscripted African theatre forms, such as dance dramas and masquerades, or the more recent manifestations of Yoruba travelling theatre and the concert party. The attempt at reviving, appropriating and advancing a (literary) performance form historically alien to Eritrean cultures signified much more than aesthetic concerns; it had substantial political import. For one, developing literary drama was part of the larger internal and external decolonisation process of the EPLF; second, it was a means of gauging and controlling the 'revolutionary' merit of theatre in the field, including artistic standards.

With the few exceptions of drama work in Eritrean theatre associations, literary drama had been the prerogative of every colonising power during the past century; the Italians, the British and the Ethiopian forces. Europeans had introduced ideas of 19th century realism and naturalism into urban Eritrean theatre, 'long after the dynamic of Western theatre had moved on to existentialism,

²⁷¹ Nor is it in any other Eritrean language.

absurdism, alienation and a host of other experimental ideas' (Plastow 1989: 60); they had also popularised buffoonery of the Chaplin and Laurel-and-Hardy type via the cinema. Modern Ethiopian theatre forms, on the other hand (with their roots in classical western tragedies, ecclesiastical symbolism and Ethiopian *gene*, promulgating the superiority of language over physical performance) had been one of the mainstays of early Eritrean theatre work. In concert with the clerical orthodox culture predominant in the highlands, they had begotten a predilection for iconic, not individual, characterisation (as seen in the production of allegorical plays) and a tendency to dichotomous, 'black and white' presentation. The absence of mythological themes, as found in West African theatre, for example, was striking.²⁷²

Literary drama in Tigrinya had emerged by the late 1960s, but had remained a rather marginal theatre form in comparison to music, comical sketches, and dance performances. Now the EPLF set about appropriating the genre for their own 'revolutionary' ends, driven by an Eritrean-style socialist-marxist agenda. As in the early urban theatre associations, the language of drama remained Tigrinya, not Italian, English or the much-hated Amharinya which had been imposed since the Haile Selassie regime. The use of a local language was in line with ideas of decolonising the mind advocated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o since the late 1970s (Ngugi 1986); it did, however, neglect other Eritrean languages as possible modes of theatrical communication. The exclusive use of Tigrinya was certainly problematic in that it furthered the already privileged position of Tigrinya speakers in the field, who had always had better access to education and modern amenities due to their proximity to urban areas. While long-established performance forms and musical numbers catered for virtually all linguistic communities, Tigre-language plays were only introduced in the late 1980s; other-language drama still remains an exception, rather than the rule. This made the EPLF potentially vulnerable to accusations of being dominated by *Habesha*, or highland people.²⁷³ Most cultural officers were indeed of Tigrinya background

²⁷² In February 2000 Alemseged Tesfai noted in an interview that West African plays were not appreciated in Eritrea: 'Too many images, too much mythology. We are not very strong on mythology in Eritrea. Here it is all religion, either Christianity or Islam. There is not much place for mythology. Our mythology is about saints – Gabriel, Michael, and so on. We are very old Christian and Muslim societies' (I 44).

²⁷³ M. Muhammad Omar (2002: 214), cf. Plastow & S. Tsehaye (1998: 54). Mohamed Assanai recalled one of the earliest Tigre-language productions in 1987, *Sray-Sraye* ('Medicine, my Medicine'), written by Ibrahim Ali 'Akla', about a young girl who is not allowed to marry the man of her choice; two other plays – *Feraset Shaabna* ('Our People's Bravery') and *Feena* ('Pledge') – are said to have been distributed on video. Though efforts were made to write and stage more

with a better than average education. They found it difficult enough to grapple with the intricacies of playwriting in their mother tongue, let alone in any other Eritrean language.

It should be noted that the appropriation of literary drama did not limit itself to a possible counter-discourse against foreign usurpers. The written word had always been associated with the church and the landed gentry in Eritrea which, as we saw earlier on, had joined forces to constitute an oppressive feudal system over many centuries. Extensive literacy campaigns in the EPLF – to which literary drama was a creative extension – were thus a means to claim control over the written word.²⁷⁴ Writing plays and attempting to develop a ‘revolutionary’ form of theatre moreover served purposes linked with the internal dynamics of the EPLF; it was not, however, intended to establish an elitist form of ‘art theatre’ as happened in various other African countries during the period of decolonisation. David Kerr writes in his study on *African Popular Theatre* that ‘art theatre’ ‘had its roots in the colonial theatre of school drama and elitist theatre clubs’ (Kerr 1995: 105) whose 19th century European conventions were later reproduced by ‘status-seeking local elites’ (106), with little or no consideration for indigenous cultures. This had never been the case in Eritrea. While literary drama and traditional performances remained distinct theatrical entities, both had their definite place in the Eritrean theatre scene. Drama had never slavishly imitated western (or Ethiopian) theatre practices and subject matters; on the contrary, drama had always been utilised to articulate Eritrean concerns and was thus pertinent to local audiences. The distinction of ‘art’ and ‘popular’ (or ‘literary’ and ‘people’s’) theatre known in other African theatre contexts thus failed to relate to theatre in the field.²⁷⁵ Indeed, Isayas Tseggai confirms that it ‘would not be exaggerating to say that theatrical activities during the latest years of the war had a sense of belonging to all’ (I. Tseggai 2002: 20). If literary drama in the EPLF can be categorised as ‘art theatre’ for drawing on certain European stage conventions and for being documented in scripted form, then it certainly did not

Tigre-language plays after independence, including the foundation of a Tigre-language theatre group, *Abbot*, under the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, they have always been outnumbered by Tigrinya theatre. I 37. For a list of Tigre-language plays see Appendix II: Plays.

²⁷⁴ It should be noted that for a time literacy campaigns were also a concern of the Derg in their attempt at Marxist nation-building. Ethiopia Medhanie recalled how in the late 1970s or early 1980s she and another former Ma.Te.A. member, Tseggai Negash, had to rehearse a literacy comedy in Cinema Odeon under the scrutiny of Ethiopian cadres. I 74; see Figure 53.

²⁷⁵ For examples see Mda (1993: 47), Rohmer (1999: 39), Etherton (1982: 9-10, 242-243), Kruger (1999: 200). Jane Plastow related that during her first meeting with Alemseged Tesfai in the early 1990s, the latter had never heard of the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘popular’ theatre.

strive for 'theatrical codes of national elites [that are] beyond the comprehension of the rest of society' (Mda 1993: 49). On the contrary, theatre in the EPLF was 'mass'-oriented, not 'elitist', especially after the affirmation of 'revolutionary culture'.

The advancement of literary drama undoubtedly helped to improve and monitor artistic standards in the field. However, it was also a means of controlling both content and the 'revolutionary' qualities of plays. It is telling that in a 1995 interview conducted by Jane Plastow, Alemseged speaks of 'controlled' as opposed to 'informal' or 'amateur' theatre staged by low-key troupes and mass organisations; larger military CTs were known to hand in manuscripts for evaluation. It makes perfect sense to regulate artistic production in a liberation war, theatre necessarily being a mode of propaganda on both sides of the divide, even if intended for genuine empowerment. I am just as convinced that cultural officers who wanted to 'control' literary drama were primarily dismayed at the then standard of theatrical productions. However, in the light of the recent undemocratic developments in Eritrea, the 'control' of artistic production cannot help but be tainted with 'censorship' – whether 'official' or in the form of self-restriction. When, in the mid-1990s amateur theatre groups started to flourish in urban areas, many were asked to have their work previewed by a committee of theatre veterans in the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. While some groups welcomed the evaluation of more experienced artists, others felt their work being meddled with. And when the ECBTP staged its plays in 1997, not only church members, but also government officials tried to change certain scenes, to the chagrin of some of the theatre workers.²⁷⁶

The question of (self-)censorship in all its subtleties certainly calls for further investigation in Eritrea; given the current repressive climate, however, it

²⁷⁶ There were several smaller incidents that did not go down too well with government officials during the ECBTP 1997. I remember hearsay that the authorities had objected to the community actors complaining about their broken village pump in one scene. This apparently went against the Eritrean tenet of 'self-reliance'. The facilitator in charge of the play was, however, unable to confirm the incident, neither was the director, Jane Plastow. A third theatre worker, on the other hand, recalled another incident which I too remember: 'There was very definite interference from [a cultural officer] in my show. He objected to [one of the actor's] hairstyle and costume [...] – one day [the actor] arrived with new hair and clothes. Under orders from on high. The Director was not happy! I think it was part of a much wider issue as you say – I guess from an official point of view there was a concern about reflecting positive images. It was a superficially trivial thing that I became very angry about. Partly a hissy fit about my work as a director, partly a feeling that this was actually an insidious piece of censorship – a feeling that has been borne out by developments in style of government' (email to the author, 4 May 2003). For the post-independence evaluation committee see Conclusions. ECBTP 95/31, A. Berhe (1999), Plastow (1998: 97-113).

cannot be dealt with sufficiently at this point in time. Then, in the mid-1980s, it was not at the top of the agenda. The front was unified in their collective goal of national liberation, which detracted from latent conflicts and dormant internal disagreements. Given the average standard of dramatic presentations, however, literary drama required the direction of someone with a theatrical vision. This person was to be Alemseged Tesfai.

Alemseged Tesfai's Critique of Drama in the EPLF

In the virtual absence of a critical discourse on theatre in the liberation war and a larger body of creative writing,²⁷⁷ I will utilise Alemseged Tesfai's insightful drama critique of 1983 to highlight some of the limitations of scripted drama work in the field. According to Alemseged, literary drama in the EPLF had passed through two distinct stages by 1983. Phase one covered the period from 1979 to the early 1980s in which 'long serious dramas, mostly tragedies, and some short educational comic sketches' were shown; phase two continued from 1980 to 1983 and was characterised by 'message-carrying comical sketches and short, serious symbolic dramas' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). At the time of writing, a third stage was said to be underway on which the author felt not yet ready to comment.

While I cannot necessarily confirm the first couple of phases for lack of dated material, it can be safely assumed that from the mid-1980s drama by individually recognised playwrights was steadily on the rise.²⁷⁸ Besides, the key aims of 'art theatre' in the EPLF were clear: illustrating and analysing Eritrean realities, mostly fighter life and civilian predicaments, while mobilising, educating and, of course, entertaining the audience. As much as possible, dramas were produced in neo-naturalistic, illusionistic mode; representational acting was aspired to, though presentational performance (with its focus on display rather than verisimilitude) often made up for lack of means to produce a 'life-like' portrayal on stage. 'Abstract' scenery was unheard of in the field. Non-figurative

²⁷⁷ Altogether I was able to trace 16 scripts from the field, some providing a mere plot summary, others being fully scripted. Most scholarly writings on EPLF theatre so far (virtually all produced in conjunction with the University of Leeds) draw attention to the enormous theatrical achievement in the liberation struggle, rather than viewing matters more critically. For a list of plays see Appendix II: Plays.

²⁷⁸ Isayas Tseggai, for example, writes: 'Continuous practice by a wide range of writers and with the introduction of more advanced plays by Alemseged Tesfai, *Luel, Iti Kal'a Quinat* (The Other War) [*sic*] Bruk Habtemichael, *Sdra Bet* (Family) and *Ande Wedo Geba* (Ande, the Traitor), Afewerki Abraha *Kemzi Neru Inte Zikwn* [*sic*] (If It Had Been Like This), Semere Berhe, *Keya Mesobey* (My Bread Basket) [the play was called *Keyah Mendil*, The Red Kerchief] and others, it became necessary to look for plays of permanent literary value' (I. Tseggai 2002: 13).

art works were rejected as a rule for being incapable of projecting the Front's revolutionary agenda,²⁷⁹ while orthodox symbolism was abolished because of its link to religious dogmatism and the old feudal order. Equally uncommon was experimental dramatization of whichever kind, for the simple reason that ideas of avant-garde theatre had not reached the liberation movement.²⁸⁰ Over-acted slapstick and buffoonery, on the other hand, remained very popular in the field, and was often the only form of theatre audiences recognised as 'drama'.

It should be noted that neither theatre practitioners nor spectators were particularly familiar with western theatre jargon on which EPLF drama work ostensibly drew.²⁸¹ Hence theatrical terms were sometimes confused, or words were imbued with atypical meanings. According to Alemseged, plays in the early days were 'mainly about the miserable situation of our people in the recaptured areas, their determination to continue with the struggle, [and] the betrayal of the feudalists' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). These plays dealt with everyday human suffering and thus constituted the so-called 'serious drama'. Others were straight propaganda pieces about the 'oppressiveness and corruption of the ELF, the heroism of the popular army [EPLA] and the spinelessness of the enemy' (A. Tesfai [1983a]), followed by numerous lengthy enactments of Eritrean history which presented the comings and goings of successive colonial powers. Agitprop pieces confirmed the didactic element of drama, such as *The Lazy Fighter* who objects but finally accepts the necessity of learning; the *Not-I* playlet which tells about the necessity of community-centred, as opposed to selfish, deeds; and instructive, consciousness-raising 'campaign theatre', mostly about health matters, such as Alemseged's meningitis play, *Anqizi*.²⁸² Phase two seems to have been characterised by a return to mainstays of early urban civilian drama, namely farcical exaggerations and allegorical plays in line with Solomon

²⁷⁹ When I researched into the visual arts in Eritrea in 2000 and 2001, the majority of painters still opted for realism for people to 'understand'. Some critics condemned non-figurative art works as 'lazy' and 'decadent'. Cf. Matzke (2002b: 44).

²⁸⁰ The most 'experimental' staging in terms of *mise-en-scene* and use of technical equipment was to be found among the theatre group of the Central Hospital, most of whose members had studied abroad. Yet they too did not go beyond ideas of verisimilitude. See Matzke (2003).

²⁸¹ Even today, theatrical terminology is often given different meanings to those commonly accepted. 'Classical theatre', for example, as taught in drama courses by the Ministry of Education and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) and understood by most Eritrean theatre practitioners, does not denote the theatre of the ancient Greek, but naturalistic theatre forms of 19th century Europe.

²⁸² Frank (1995: 13), Rohmer (1999: 70-71), I 55. In other African theatre contexts, such as Zimbabwe or Uganda, campaign theatre is usually commissioned and sponsored by an NGO (or even the government) to disseminate a particular message among the audience, for example AIDS awareness plays. There was, of course, no sponsoring in Eritrea, but sometimes the EPLF mounted plays directly connected to pressing health or educational issues.

Gebregziabhier's 1973 *Uninherited Wealth*. The latter play type became known as 'symbolic theatre' which, despite denominative similarities, had nothing in common with the western symbolist theatre movement of the early twentieth century. While the latter had sought alternative acting styles and modes of production by transcending 'reality' on stage, 'symbolic drama' in the EPLF continued to produce neo-naturalistic national allegories.²⁸³

The reason for this shift in the second phase appears to have been a general discontent with the standards of theatre. At times plays were too long and too didactic to be enjoyable. Combatants got bored and started to dub drama 'political education' (M. Zerai 2001: 30). Though Alemseged believed in the creative potential of 'the people', he soon realised that without clear guidance the project of 'revolutionary culture' would fail. Criticism of cultural works was tentative and sporadic, mainly for fear that it would discourage budding, but inexperienced, artists.²⁸⁴ Even so, criticism was essential for drama works to improve. Now and then playlets tended to be so crude that performances were effectively counter-productive to the objectives of the organisation. Alemseged observes that in non-scripted pieces actors often lost a sense of direction in terms of plot, character building or overall meaning of the play, resulting in 'muddled' messages or incoherent 'rambling' on stage (A. Tesfai [1983a]). This was also the case with some of the early play scripts available to me. Generally discourse-, not action-based (thus mirroring Ethiopian drama aesthetics), early plays tended to be extensive plot summaries, rather than giving the lines of the various characters. Alemseged points out that playwrights often had difficulties in focusing the plot or creating a coherent story line. In a drama by Brigade 31, for example, entitled *Illiteracy Has to be Eradicated and the Masses Have to be Enlightened* the title barely tallied with the happenings on stage: a crude historical overview concluding with a student demonstration against the introduction of Amharinya in schools which ends with fatal casualties. Then there was the tendency to overload

²⁸³ A. Tesfai [1983a], M. Zerai (2001: 30). 'Symbol' and 'symbolic', as Patrick Pavis has pointed out, have become widespread terms 'in dramatic criticism, with all the imaginable imprecisions and with little advantage for theory. Clearly, everything on stage symbolises something; the stage is semiotizable, it gives the spectator a sign' (Pavis 1998: 374).

²⁸⁴ Indeed, in his earlier work of literary criticism Alemseged had noted that with the introduction of 'professional' writers in the cultural sector, other aspirants had become even more hesitant. 'Clearly there is a weakness among the fighters. That is, they undermine their own skills and capacity and think they are incapable of writing. Some fighters have the attitude that "there are comrades directly employed for writing, therefore I cannot write like them". Other fighters know they can do it, but they are too busy. [...] It is important to understand that any contribution, be it acceptable or not, is better than merely criticising the already existing literature' (A. Tesfai 1982). See also E. Ogbagiorgis (1987).

the plays thematically. *Rse Malawi Sraat (The Capitalist System)*, an undated drama staged on International Workers' Day at the Central Hospital in Orotta, introduced so many subplots and heart-breaking personal misfortunes that the play was rendered long-winded and repetitive, even if apparently well received by the spectators (I 119).

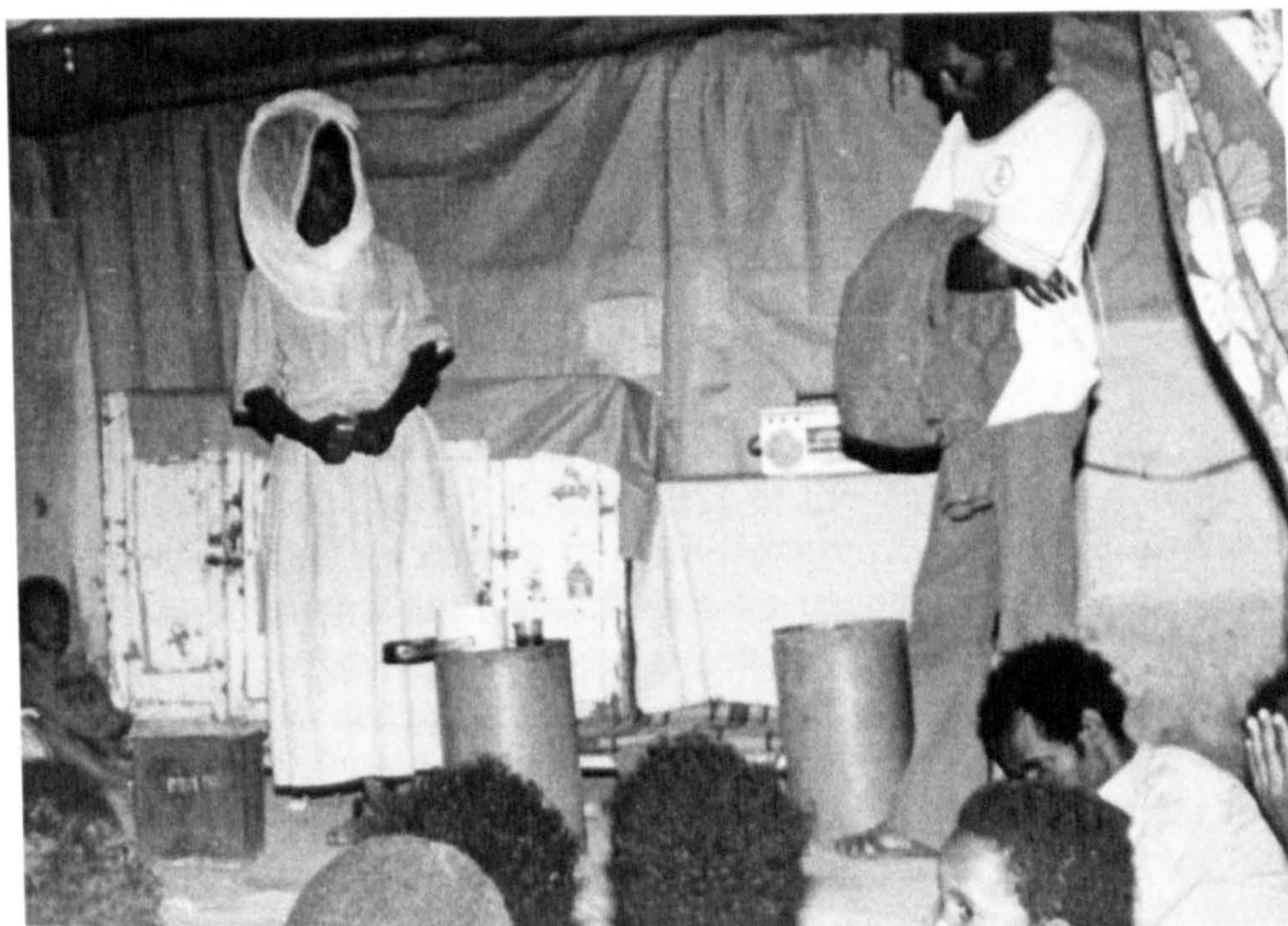


Fig. 67 Scene from a play on Workers' Day in the Central Hospital of Orotta.

'Although drama is a reflection of reality', Alemseged explains, 'it cannot hold all of its aspects' (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

Stereotypes were also a problem for early scripted works, as were overacted stock characters. The bespectacled, serious-looking bearded young man reading a newspaper – a representation of the 'learned revolutionary' in *The Capitalist System* – was just one example of modern typecasting, as was the greedy licentious *barista*. The ignorant old peasant, on the other hand, constituted a typical 'traditional' image.²⁸⁵ While, unlike the almost sacrosanct mother figure, old men have often served as buffoons in Eritrean theatre works – possibly as a means to ridicule traditional authority – the foolish villager figure was not unproblematic. It was fairly questionable to confront rural spectators with images of stupid fellow peasants as opposed to 'learned (urban) intellectuals'. The Kenyan theatre activist Ngugi wa Mirii is among those who have sharply criticised 'the undignified and denigrating characterisation of the ordinary people'

²⁸⁵ Similar stereotypes can be observed in contemporary AIDS awareness plays: the omniscient medical doctor, for example, or the promiscuous 'westernised' young man going out with the licentious *barista*.

(Rohmer 1999: 211) in so-called community plays. As an educational concept, it was certainly dubious and suggested a rather 'top-down' approach to theatre; as entertainment, however, it was immensely successful. Alemseged concedes that 'comedies are captivating, but the harmful views they covertly slip in are not easily overcome. This is true whether it is done on purpose or inadvertently. In our and many other societies, for example, jokes and proverbs exist which belittle women [or] cheapen the relationship between husband and wife' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). Time and again, these attitudes were utilised to engender laughter among the spectators, for mirth was believed to be the ultimate measure for the success of a show.²⁸⁶ Alemseged expounds:

Actors go to great length to use abusive language for comic effect. In plays against feudalism women are beaten just to make people laugh, not because of the logical development of the drama. Sometimes the audience demands an *encore* of such things. [...]. Even if it makes people laugh, such things should not be encouraged through crude drama. If women are to be slapped on stage, if it makes people laugh, there has to be an accompanying message telling that such practices as beating women should be abolished. Laughter should be a form of objection, not derision. The spectator should say: 'We cannot help laughing, but the matter is burning in our hearts'. Otherwise our laughter will be at the expense of the oppressed and will be counterproductive to the objectives of revolutionary culture. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

Indeed, Alemseged feared that such tendencies would hamper 'the development of writers, directors and actors' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). Devising comical sketches was not a laughing matter; it had to be taken as seriously as literary drama.

The above examples indicate that Alemseged was also immensely concerned about the theatrical representation of women, in both his critical and his creative works. He especially objected to the persistent usage of women as national allegories, mainly the woman-forced-to-marry-cruel-husband type of drama which referred to Eritrea's annexation by Ethiopia. 'Such plays', he writes, 'have been performed so many times that no aspect of it is new and appropriate for dramatic utilisation' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). As the novelty of the motif had worn off, theatre of this kind had become shallow and trite.

²⁸⁶ There were certainly similarities with Ethiopian theatre. Outlining theatrical developments after the Italian occupation, Plastow writes that '[t]raining was non-existent, rehearsals were minimal, and the main object of the performers was to hold the audience's attention by making them laugh. [...] Comedy is and always has been the most popular form of drama in Ethiopia, and in order to serve the audience's wishes actors have turned every possible situation into crude slapstick' (Plastow 1989: 68).

On closer scrutiny, however, it emerges that the reason behind the censure was not limited to the stereotypical casting of women into the passive role of sexual object and patriotic symbol. Rather, it was connected to the unpredictable nature of allegorical plays. 'Symbolic drama' had always been appreciated in Eritrea for carrying clandestine meanings, similar to the 'wax' and 'gold' of much of local orature and early modern songs. It also complied with the 'culture of secrecy' (cf. A. Tesfai 2000: 28) cultivated in the field which was rooted in the ancient practice of withholding one's deeper thoughts and feelings. Allegorical plays, so it seems, would have been an ideal theatrical medium had they not been open to a multiplicity of interpretations and thus too cumbersome to control.

If unsophisticated plays can look as if carrying a political message, there will be no limit for symbolic drama [i.e. allegorical plays]. As meaning is indistinct, different interpretations are encouraged which will serve different interests. This violates one of the basic principles of social realism. [...] Since we are in the process of building a revolutionary culture, which needs full protection, we must make it one of our main tasks to see that no loopholes exist through which distorted views can invade. It is for such views that symbolic drama should not be mounted too frequently. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

These ideas, reminiscent of Bolshevik theatre criticism, illuminate why modes and forms in Eritrean (fighter) theatre have continued to be inclined towards farcical sketches, moral fables, campaign theatre and other straightforward realistic plays, often in hyperbolic exaltations of Eritrean strength and ethics. Plays that could potentially criticise the official view of things had to be curbed and contained. No matter how much the 'masses' were invoked in the struggle, drama in Eritrea was, and has continued to be, a theatre for, not of, the 'people', even if critically engaged as in Alemseged's work. To my knowledge, theatre never criticised the elite sector of the EPLF, and much drama was characterised by a benevolent top-down approach to enlighten the semi-literate 'masses', without engaging them in a participatory way.

One last point of critique I would like to mention – for its link to women's theatrical representation – was the portrayal of love stories in theatre which had become increasingly popular over the years. Alemseged devotes a considerable section of his critique to it. The 1977 EPLF marriage laws had somewhat loosened restrictive sexual morals by condoning premarital relationships and supporting marriages across religious and ethnic boundaries. Yet the notion of disclosing one's feelings in public was still thought of as shameful or, at best, a considerable

weakness. In drama work this resulted in two contrasting portrayals of love: on the one hand a highly romanticised, even if melodramatic picture (still popular in many contemporary Eritrean video films),²⁸⁷ on the other hand the ridicule and thus denigration of matters of love, often by using vulgar language. 'To secure its [love's] revolutionary form', Alemseged explains:

love has to thrive from the love of society. A society has to be safe for individual love to blossom, for the reason of two lovers to live and enjoy their love is social stability. When an individual relationship breaks up, it can be replaced by a new love; but when society disintegrates it cannot be replaced by personal love. Therefore personal love should promote the safety of society and should support individuals in fulfilling their revolutionary duties. (A. Tesfai [1983a]).

This was of course the projected ideal, not necessarily the theatrical reality. Yet, Alemseged's recommendations were taken very seriously among cultural workers on all levels of the organisation.

In the following section I will analyse four scripted plays produced in the field in order to illustrate certain traits of EPLF literary drama, with special emphasis on the representation of women. (Indeed, all of these plays implicitly centre on female characters, even if their focus ostensibly lies elsewhere). Initially I had intended to read two plays by less illustrious authors which seemed representative of theatre in the EPLF – *The Red Kerchief* (1984) by Semere Berhe, and an undated, anonymous health campaign play, *Pray for the Safety of the Eritrean People* – before moving on to two of Alemseged's works, *Le'ul* (1983) and *The Other War* (1984). In January 2003, however, during my last visit to Eritrea, my carefully balanced division was (fortunately) shattered. While reading a draft version of this chapter, Solomon Tsehaye was convinced that I had somehow unearthed Alemseged's second play, *Anq'tzi (Meningitis)*, which the author had long thought lost in the field. Questioning the playwright confirmed the find. Renamed as *Tselot Ndhmet Hzbi Eritrea (Pray for the Safety of the Eritrean People)* by an apparently unknown author, the play had been in the Asmara Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) all along, just one floor below Alemseged own spacious office. Because of this extraordinary chance, I

²⁸⁷ Dr Michael Gebrehiwot, today's head of Clinical Services in the Ministry of Health, described a playlet about two young lovers devised by health workers in Halibet where the Central Hospital was originally located. 'We had a show where the young lovers would kiss. We couldn't show it right in front of the audience, so what we took a white sheet and we showed the shadows behind it. It looked like kisses, but they were actually not kissing. And then everyone went 'Ooooooh!'. You know, kissing is not an expression of love here. You don't kiss, it's not part of the culture' (I 116).

have decided to retain my original selection, though changing the sequence of Alemseged's plays to abide with his personal theatre chronology.

Keyah Mendil – The Red Kerchief

There is a certain irregularity about the play script of *Keyah Mendil* which reflects on the extreme working conditions in the field and signifies the blurring of genres in Eritrea, literary and performative, suggested earlier on in this study. Originally written by Semere Berhe on the back of tin labels in 1983,²⁸⁸ *Keyah Mendil* was officially approved in the subsequent year and then toured by Brigade 77. As with many other written sources from the liberation struggle, the original was lost, but was recreated post-independence by a friend and comrade of the dramatist, Abraham Berhe. Unusually, Abraham chose to retell the story in the form of a *novel*, rather than a drama, though publishing another of Semere's plays in an addendum to the book. In the course of this section, however, *Keyah Mendil* will be largely read as a melodrama, a term which has been applied not only to certain forms of theatre, but also to Gothic novels or popular romance fiction, thus linking prose fiction and dramatic texts (Brooks 1976: xiii). Despite the relative 'inauthenticity' of the 'play' – translated through time, genres, writers and two languages (Tigrinya and English) – it can be assumed to be fairly close to the original script. *Keyah Mendil* is the only drama for which secondary sources from the liberation struggle are available; a detailed outline was also recalled by Atsbehet Yohannes, one of the actresses involved. At the time, attempts were made to engender critical discourse among the fighters which resulted in several play reviews in *Netsebraq* (Reflection), the cultural magazine of the EPLF. The following synopsis hence follows Asmerom Habtemariam's scene-to-scene scenario in his 'Criticism of *The Red Kerchief*', with reference to the prose version by Abraham Berhe. Asmerom's detailed performance review also serves as a major reference point for my own reading of the play, together with the counter-critique of Efriem Ogbagiorgis.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ A former teacher and undercover agent for the EPLF, Semere Berhe had been founder of a teacher theatre group and was thus predestined to be deployed in the cultural sector on joining the field in 1978 at the age of thirty. Semere later became a member of the Army Division 85 CT. E. Haile (1999: V).

²⁸⁹ A. Habtemariam (198[7]: 43-51), E. Ogbagiorgis (1987: 47-51), I 7. Abraham Berhe notes two other critical pieces on *Keyah Mendil* in his introduction to the book, which I was unable to track down. He also writes that changes included in the prose version were discussed with the playwright during his lifetime. A. Berhe (1999).

Outline

Keyah Mendil is divided into ten scenes which cover a time span of some twenty years, thus tracing the development of the main protagonist, Tedros, from childhood to becoming a fighter. The setting alternates between predominately indoor scenes – of mostly domestic background – and outdoor locations, both in urban surroundings and in the field.

The play opens with Tedros, a small boy, getting lost in the woods where a freedom fighter (Baja, in the novel) comes to his rescue. The fighter lectures him on ‘colonisation’ and ‘oppression’ before returning him to his family. In retrospect the encounter marks Tedros for life: though young he has understood the magnitude of the struggle for independence.

At home Tedros’ mother, Tsion, is troubled by the incident and threatens to tell his father, Eremia, who is still at work in the cement (in the novel: shoe) factory. An Ethiopian officer, Aregawi, enters the house to make a telephone call. He is immediately attracted to Tsion’s beauty. On the following day, when Eremia is on a business trip to Addis Ababa, Aregawi tries to rape her; Tedros is helplessly watching his mother’s ordeal. However, Eremia’s flight has been cancelled and he reaches home soon enough to rescue his wife. Blinded with rage, he kills the intruder and throws the body into a local garbage dump, where it is found in due course. Eremia has no choice but to go into hiding. He leaves a message for his wife tied in a white kerchief. Tsion is subsequently arrested and sent to prison for killing a high-ranking Ethiopian officer.²⁹⁰

In Scene 3, Tedros visits his mother in prison, some years later. The boy has grown into a young man; Tsion has aged visibly. Mother and son have not seen each other in years and do not recognise each other immediately. Having been offered a chance to study abroad but lacking funding, Tedros now seeks his mother’s advice. She sends him to her old friend, Rawha, a wealthy and very generous woman. Before they part Tsion gives Tedros the kerchief she once received from her husband, now coloured red by the blood of innocent people suffering in Ethiopian prisons.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ In the novel Tsion initially moves in with her sister Lemlem. A peasant arrives carrying a message from her husband which she ties into her white kerchief. Thereafter an investigator arrives and arrests her. She is maltreated and wipes her forehead with the kerchief which then turns red. In the novel there are three incidents which connect the red kerchief with blood shared by the victims of colonisation.

²⁹¹ In the novel Tsion divides the kerchief and keeps one part.

Enter *Woizero* Rahwa and her family. Rawha is delighted to meet Tedros and promises to provide financial support. On his return, now a law graduate, Tedros visits Rahwa in order to thank her. Tedros is unwell after his journey, and Rawha sends him to the local health clinic where her daughter, Eden, is employed as a nurse. Eden and Tedros immediately fall in love and agree to meet after working hours.

Scene 6: Eden takes her new lover to her mother's house. On their way, they happen on an old beggar who reminds Tedros of his mother. Tedros shows Eden the red kerchief and recalls its tragic history. When they arrive home, Rawha is overjoyed and organises an impromptu engagement party.²⁹² During the celebration, Tedros receives an urgent telephone message pleading with him to leave instantly for the field. The young man is an underground member of the EPLF and his life is in danger. Broken-hearted, Eden takes in the necessity of their separation.²⁹³

Now on her own, Eden meets the beggar woman again. The old lady is indeed Tedros' mother, Tsion, who was released after 18 years in jail. Tsion is overjoyed by the encounter, but her happiness is short-lived. The police arrive and detain the old woman on the pretext that she had been released by mistake. A re-opening of Tsion's case concludes with her death sentence. Before being taken to the gallows, Tsion hands over her husband's last letter to Eden for safekeeping.²⁹⁴

In the meantime, Tedros has received a letter from Eden in the field in which she explains the tragedy of his mother. Stricken with grief, he confides in his comrade, Abraha, who seizes the kerchief and deserts the organisation.

Back in the city – we have reached Scene 9 – Abraha introduces himself to Eden. Displaying the red kerchief, he pretends that Tedros no longer cares about her. Kiflay, an EPLF fighter, however warns Eden of Abraha; and she agrees to help eliminate the traitor. The girl invites Abraha to her house for a meal. When he tries to make love to her, she pretends to go outside to wash herself. In the meantime, Abraha undresses and falls asleep, leaving his pistol on top of a pile of

²⁹² In the novel Eden keeps her new relationship secret for while even though her mother insists on her getting married. She even sneaks off on a weekend trip to Massawa with her lover without telling her mother.

²⁹³ In the novel Eden gets angry with having had so little time to her enjoy her happiness. To her, they have everything: jobs, wealth, love for each other. For Tedros, however, his love for the country comes first.

²⁹⁴ In the novel she also hands over her part of the red kerchief.

clothes. At this moment Eden returns and shoots Abraha with his own weapon before fleeing with Kiflay to the field.²⁹⁵

In the final scene, we see fighters celebrating the beginning of the armed liberation struggle. A group of people has gathered around Eden to listen to her story. Tedros, who is amongst the combatants, is overjoyed to see his fiancé. Eden hands him the red kerchief and letter she received from his mother which Tedros reads out aloud. An old man among the audience reveals that he is Eremia, Tedros' father, who wrote the letter many years ago. At last, father, son and lover are happily reunited.

Reception and Criticism

Keyah Mendil is a fairly typical EPLF drama in terms of motifs and episodic plot structure; it is also typical with regard to its epic scale and narrative incongruities. Measuring the play against an ideal of realism, Asmerom Habtemariam, cultural cadre and Ma.Te.A. veteran, spots a number of inconsistencies, both in the overall structure of the play and in performance. Among his points of critique are such issues as the presentation of the family as working class, whereas their affluence clearly identifies them as 'petty bourgeois'. The incident of Tsion's attempted rape seems far-fetched in the critic's view, who wished the playwright had focused on factual Ethiopian aggression towards civilians rather than 'such a complicated incident' (A. Habtemariam 198[7]). It also seems exaggerated that the mother no longer recognises her offspring in prison; and then there is the question of why she became a vagrant after her release 'instead of trying to find relatives who could help her' (ibid.). Some scenes seem contrived and absurdly linked – such as Tsion's death sentence after almost twenty years, or the larger-than-life love story between Tedros and Eden. The list continues, but overall poor scripting and acting are said to have hampered a better understanding and appreciation of the play.²⁹⁶

The above synopsis indeed suggests certain flaws in terms of story line and coherence of character. Judging from the general picture of fighter theatre as it has

²⁹⁵ In the prose version Abraha falls asleep and Eden anxiously awaits Kiflay's arrival. When he finally turns up she wakes Abraha and threatens him with his own handgun. Knowing that his pistol is not loaded, Abraha tries to overpower her, but Kiflay shoots him.

²⁹⁶ '[The author] forgets that every message an actor transfers is knowledge. It is, for example, not only the fault of the actor when he says that he completed "Law and Justice Ministerial Education". Actors should not only know their role by heart, they should also understand what they say. Instead of saying that Tedros studied law, he said "Law and Justice Minister"! This shows that he did not understand what he was saying' (A. Habtemariam 198[7]).

emerged, it can be assumed that the aspiration towards a socialist-realist style was not often fulfilled. Hence Asmerom's criticism of the play's 'fictionality', which was in stark contrast to the mode of production officially projected by the liberation movement: 'It will make people laugh or cry for it touches their feelings. But as it is based on fiction, rather than facts, it is not practical' (A. Habtemariam 198[7]). Yet, it seems to have been exactly this blend of heightening and hyperbole '[w]ithin an apparent context of "realism"' (Brooks 1976: ix) that made the drama so popular. There are many melodramatic aspects to the play – such as Tsion's suffering, the lovers' encounter and parting, and the final family reunion – which can appear over-done to non-Eritrean spectators and obviously to the critic. For local audiences, however, it held profound appeal (and continues to do so as suggested by the prevalence of such motifs in contemporary stage and video drama). As Efriem Ogbagiorgis writes in his counter-critique: 'This drama was one of the stage dramas greatly admired when it was first shown on the Right Front. [...] No one in the audience failed to appreciate *The Red Kerchief*. It was admired by about 90% of the spectators' (E. Ogbagiorgis 1987).

The parallels to melodrama are indeed striking in Semere's work. Having played a significant role in the cultural dynamics of the western world in the 18th and 19th century, Hays and Nikolopoulou argue that melodrama 'underwent multiple transformations [...] [which] carried with them the unmistakable traces of the socioeconomic and political transformations that were played out at the same time in the home, [...] and the political sphere, and even in the theatres where the melodrama was staged' (Hays & Nikolopoulou 1996: ix). If we follow their argument that 'the generic mutability of melodrama is a sign that it responds more to historical than to aesthetic demands' (xiv) – hence implying that its aesthetic formula are more or less 'international' (Schmidt 1986: 15) – then it is fruitful to look at *Keyah Mendil* primarily in terms of melodrama. While advocates of the new revolutionary culture renounced the genre's histrionic methods, as seen in Asmerom Habtemariam's critique, there was no denial that at times socialist realist theatre employed comparable methods, such as extreme polarisation.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ Another melodramatic device employed in EPLF theatre were *tableaux vivants*, motionless dramatic groupings. *Tableaux* were usually employed at the end of the shows, when the EPLF signature tune was sung by performers dressed as combatants or civilians. Peter Brooks, in his study on the melodramatic imagination, has pointed out that *tableaux* on stage were often utilised to illustrate 'a resolution of meaning [...] where the characters' attitudes and gestures,

When looking at melodrama in various contexts and eras, a number of similarities emerge. Most significant is an underlying moral Manicheanism which determines most melodramatic works, as well as a heightening of expression. Central features are the endurance of pain, injustice and suffering of the righteous and innocent, as opposed to the evil rascals in the play. Joseph Schmidt, in his analysis of 19th century English melodrama, moreover stresses the importance of types, rather than fully rounded characters, and an emphasis on contrived scene-by-scene development in place of coherent plot structure. Schmidt identifies various categories of *dramatis personae* which can also be found in Semere's play: the villain (the Ethiopian officer Aregawi in Tsion's case, the traitor Abraha in the instance of Eden); the virtuous, helpless heroine who is 'acted upon' (predominately Tsion,²⁹⁸ to a lesser extent also Eden), as well as the male hero figure, here in the person of a 'bandit hero' as embodied by Tedros and Kiflay (Schmidt 1986: 169-200).

Over-emotional in quality, *Keyah Mendil* thus presents the fighters with events they can identify with (the people's suffering and bravery, or the killings of enemies and traitors) while partly set in a fairy-tale world (wealth, education, and the happy-ending reunion). For the audience, realism and escapism are satisfactorily combined; collective desires are presented in brazen bill-board manner (Schmidt 1986: 52). *Keyah Mendil* also draws on the well-known dramatic device of woman-as-national-allegory, without however foregrounding the motif.

Asmerom records that the performance was introduced by an allegorical poem presenting a charming 'Woizero' ('Mrs') before abruptly turning to 'our country Eritrea surrounded by sea, comfortable weather, [and] virgin farm lands' (A. Habtemariam 198[7]). In conclusion, it calls on everyone to join hands in the fight. While commending the poetic qualities of the verse, Asmerom criticises its allegorical implications and its apparent lack of connection to the actual play. 'Many poets have presented the nation as mother or as a girl they truly love', he writes, but the poem seems 'irrelevant' in the context of the performance (ibid.). A look at its overall structure however reveals that the play is indeed suffused

compositionally arranged and frozen for a moment, give, like an illustrative painting, a visual summary of the emotional situation' (Brooks 1976: 48). Schmidt (1986: 303).

²⁹⁸ Brooks notes that frequently the heroine figure is supported by a child who serves as 'the bearer of the sign of innocence' (Brooks 1976: 33-34). In the case of Tsion it is her son who helplessly watches on while Aregawi attempts to rape his mother.

with emblematic meaning; for once again virtuous women serve as national allegories.

The first and the final scene – both with an outdoor setting – mark the beginning and successful conclusion of Tedros' encounter with the liberation struggle and thus constitute the frame and the thematic focus of the play.²⁹⁹ Scenes 2 and 3 can be read as the drama's prologue – introducing the family history and its tragic turn which has considerable bearing on the subsequent action. Following Tsion's death, which constitutes the tragic anti-climax of the play, the remaining events uncannily echo earlier happenings: the attempted sexual assault, the killing of the perpetrator and a complete break in the survivors' life histories. The duplication of scenes is confirmed by the doubling of villain-, heroine- and hero-figures. The difference, however, is that in the second part the tables are turned. Now it is the virtuous heroine who controls the scene and eventually kills her assailant, thus reversing the earlier power hierarchy. Instead of ending up incarcerated the woman finds refuge in the field. Metaphorically speaking, Eden thus breaks the vicious circle of woman/country being subject to violent assault by (internal and external) adversaries; or, as Edna Levy has put it, the potential 'incursion of the enemy into "our" territory – the bodies of our women' (Levy 2000: 207).

With Eden the author introduces a female character that mirrors and is yet dissimilar to Tsion, the primary maternal figure in the play, and as such inevitably the embodiment of 'Mother Eritrea'.³⁰⁰ Eden can be read as the quintessence of the modern (fighter) woman: educated, strong-willed and, with the help of the liberation movement, capable of defending herself. It is illuminating that only the character of Tsion, not of the younger woman, is characterised by altruism and sacrifice; as with so many other portrayals of 'Mother Eritrea' her suffering metaphorically paves the way for the freedom of her 'children', the liberation fighters.

²⁹⁹ Tedros, by the way, is a Tigrinya version of the biblical Pedros/Peter – the rock; Eden means paradise.

³⁰⁰ A quote from the novel indicates her hyperbolic characterisation: 'Tsion was a pretty woman. Her skin was smooth, her teeth white like ice, and her hair silky. She was tall and had a narrow waist and such striking eyes that made her the most beautiful woman. Especially when she smiled and tilted her head, her hair fell in her face and everyone said that she looked at them with loving eyes. [...] But this was not the only thing she was gifted in. She had very matured nationalistic feelings. She was a young mother who cared about the suffering of her people. She contributed immensely to the clandestine nationalistic movements despite her domestic work at home. Tsion started this holy [*sic*] activity while she had been in school' (S. Berhe 1999). Compare with earlier praise songs on women, e.g. Wuba.

While Asmerom has little to say about Tsion's unconvincing arrest and subsequent immolation, he once again criticises the implausibility of Eden's role: her initial romanticism and search for comfort seem to clash with her subsequent ruthlessness and nationalistic determination. 'Scene 9 shows the attitude of the masses towards traitors. In comparison with her previous attitudes, however, how can Eden arrive at such a courageous deed? Were there other incidents that influenced her attitude? Such action should be based on something' (A. Habtemariam 198[7]). Efriem Ogbagiorgis, on the other hand, sees nothing contradictory in Eden's behaviour; even cowards could eventually be brave. 'It is also a fact that there are some women who have profound national feelings and follow their lovers to the field' (E. Ogbagiorgis 1987).

Both critics function at a rather literal level of interpretation, incapable of moving beyond the surface of an imagined reality. Mother Tsion is as little a life-like character as is her future daughter-in-law; both are hyperbolic in essence. While Tsion remains totally trapped in the (national) object position traditionally assigned to her gender, Eden breaks this pattern to a certain extent by means of reversing the gendered power hierarchy. However, though embodying a transformed discourse on women, she is nonetheless determined by patriarchal norms. Her infatuated behaviour clearly indicates that she is still caught in conventional gender patterns. And though she kills the traitor in the original version of the play, she can do so only with Kiflay's backing. I am not advocating the portrayal of radical militant feminists on stage; rather I want to draw attention to the subliminal return, or residuum, of older gender discourses which still determine the outcome of most plays. It is striking that, to a greater or lesser extent, productions which ostensibly foreground women often retain male characters as the true agents of authority.

Overall the play is a crude but effective piece of melodrama which draws together romantic and national propaganda narratives in a manner evidently satisfactory to the vast majority of spectators. It does, however, fail to meet the 'revolutionary' aspirations of Alemseged Tesfai and his intellectual cultural cadres.

Le'ul

Le'ul was Alemseged Tesfai's first play as Head of Drama in the Division of Culture. Written in 1982 and performed for the Workers' Congress at Arag in 1983, it went on tour throughout the field, including parts of Sudan, until eventually succeeded by the production of *The Other War* (1984), Alemseged's most prominent drama. With *Le'ul*, the author explains, 'theatre controlled by a script took shape in the field' (A. Tesfai 28 August 2002); it was also the first better known play to comply with socialist realist standards. From its very inception, *Le'ul* was intended to be more than a mere agit-prop piece mounted on the occasion of an important labour convention. 'I did not want it to be a one-show affair', Alemseged goes on:

... and so I tried to give to it a theme that would make it more appealing and somewhat more durable. The intention was to celebrate the role of women factory workers in Asmara who were very active in the clandestine cells within the city. Before I wrote it, I talked at length with a former woman worker who had to leave Asmara because her cell had been broken or discovered by the Ethiopian security. From the insight that she gave me, I tried to give as realistic a picture as I could of a woman squeezed between harassment at work, the anxieties of a clandestine and closely watched and suspected fighter and a good husband who vents his political and financial frustrations on a wife who loves him and who he loves. (A. Tesfai 28 August 2002).

As with all of his plays, *Le'ul* was written with particular actors in mind. The eponymous heroine was acted by Gezienesh Mengis, Weldu, her despondent husband, by Habte 'Wadi Shawl'. Weyni Tewolde was seen as Letegergish, Almaz Gebrehawaryat as the Cadre. Two of the original cast, Wezente (X) and Saki (X), in the roles of Kidisti and Mussie respectively, died in action in 1984. Mussie was thereafter played by Isayas Tseggai until Michael Amhatzion 'Jende' took over. Though they were household names in Eritrean fighter theatre, it was a rather challenging undertaking for Alemseged to get the performers learn their lines. 'I remember having a hard time trying to convince the actors that they should stay true to the dialogue as originally written. We had some big fights' (A. Tesfai 28 August 2002). In the end, however, the artists got the better of it and began to appreciate working with scripted drama. Alemseged writes that some of the play's lines even ended up as quips and common sayings among the fighters.

Outline

Le'ul is a realist one-act play in five scenes which alternate between a factory, Le'ul's home and a bar in the streets. Scene I opens in a small part of an Asmara textile workshop. Three women are finishing their daily chores: the eponymous heroine, Le'ul, a tall and dignified woman; her older, but vivacious colleague, Kidisti; and Letergergish, the youngest of the three, ambitious and vain. Le'ul is still mourning the death of her infant son, angry at having been denied three days leave to receive condolences; Kidisti is trying to comfort her. A squabble arises between Kidisti and Letergergish, who has been seen flirting with an Ethiopian and who prefers to be called by foreign names. At this moment the Cadre walks in and reproaches Le'ul and Kidisti for being quarrelsome. Well-dressed and obviously not engaged in any menial work, she oversees the Derg's current production campaign with a heavy hand. Le'ul is blamed for causing trouble among the workers by inciting them against the Ethiopian government, while Kidisti is penalised for her razor-sharp candour. After work Le'ul lingers to meet Mussie, a colleague and trusted comrade. Mussie cautions her to be more careful and vigilant. It seems that Letergergish has informed on her, which deeply upsets Le'ul. Problems are mounting, at home and at work. Nowadays her husband, Weldu, spends his time either drinking or abusing her. Unable to bear it any longer, she begs Mussie to send her to the field. Mussie, however, declines and Le'ul resigns herself to staying in Asmara.

Scene 2 is set in a medium-sized room in Asmara, Le'ul's and Weldu's modest home. Weldu is arriving from work. His wife has prepared a simple dinner, yet Weldu has lost his appetite. His wages were cut again because he broke an appliance. The couple start quarrelling about money matters. In anger, Weldu strikes his wife and rushes out of the room. Shortly thereafter, Mussie arrives to find a dejected Le'ul. Again, she pleads with him to let her join the fighters. Mussie, however, is adamant that the field is not a hiding place from personal problems. He will look for Weldu and talk to him.

Scene 3: A bar. Weldu is sitting alone drinking ouzo. Amharic music is blaring from the radio. The barmaid wants to have a drink with him, but Weldu brushes her off. Mussie appears and tries to bring him back to his senses, but this infuriates Weldu even more. Recklessly, he complains about his revolutionary friends who are unable to help improve his situation. To prevent worse from

happening, Mussie pays the bill and takes Weldu home. It becomes clear that he still loves his wife but that he can no longer bear the burden of daily living.

Scene 4 is again set in Weldu's and Le'ul' room. Le'ul is getting ready to go to bed, regretting the harsh words she had earlier spoken to her husband. When Weldu comes in, she serves him food. Weldu tells her about his encounter with Mussie. Tentatively, they begin to make peace. Weldu apologises for hitting her, Le'ul for her abrasive behaviour. Both agree that they have back-breaking jobs and, rather than quarrel, should support and comfort each other at home.

The concluding scene brings us back to the beginning of the play, the factory, a few days later. Le'ul looks much happier than before. Kidisti is busy, Letegergish conspicuous for her absence. Kidisti tells Le'ul that she received a letter from her sister in Italy which suggests that she has become a member of the EPLF mass organisations. Kidisti too wants to join, but Le'ul pretends to know nothing about the matter. Before they can finish their conversation the Cadre and Letegergish return, the former again admonishing the friends for chatting. From now on, Letegergish will be their *maestra* or forewoman. When the Cadre leaves, Le'ul and Kidisti begin to tease the young woman. Soon, it is time to go, but as usual Le'ul stays behind to meet comrade Mussie. She tells him about Kidisti's wish to join the organisation, but Mussie is guarded in his response. Though Kidisti 'is sincere and innocent' (A. Tesfai 2002: 165), she is too hot-headed and might therefore cause problems. Le'ul divulges that home has become a much happier place, with Mussie assuring her that this is only the beginning. Weldu is going to grow into someone stronger. All it needs is patience, courage and fortitude.

Analysis and Criticism

Similarly to *The Red Kerchief*, where the opening and closing scenes frame the play within the armed liberation struggle, the clear and symmetric structure of *Le'ul* highlights the 'revolutionary' contribution of the working class. The drama begins and ends with a factory scene which embraces a domestic setting, with the bar as the *cul de sac* midpoint of the play, denoting a crisis. *Le'ul* is cast in a framework of Marxist ideology where oppressive modes of production and the sufferings of the working class mirror the dealings of the authoritarian regime. The structure of the play signifies that socio-economic conditions have enormous bearing on people's private life, and that it is from there that challenge and change

must begin. Unlike *The Red Kerchief*, *Le'ul* does without hidden motifs or national allegories; it equally forgoes melodramatic love scenes or dramatic moments of Ethiopian mayhem. *Le'ul* operates with subtlety rather than spectacle, and succeeds in creating an atmosphere of the trying everyday suffering of Eritreans. It equally succeeds in ending on a hopeful note by expressing people's commitment to the liberation struggle and suggesting 'revolutionary' strategies. Even the love story between Le'ul and Weldu serves this purpose, for it anticipates what the author had formulated before: 'To secure its revolutionary form, love has to thrive from the love of society. [...] For this reason personal love should promote the safety of society and must give strength in fulfilling one's revolutionary duties' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). In essence *Le'ul* remains a piece of nationalistic propaganda without, however, the usual blatant didacticism found in the majority of EPLF plays.

In four of the five women characters the author explores the allegiances with either the 'people's' struggle or the capitalist system which, in a matchless twist of irony, is represented by the purportedly socialist Derg regime. We do not know whether the Cadre is Eritrean or Ethiopian; what matters is her total commitment to an exploitative ideology that trusts in production increase and profit rather than human potential. Letegergish, lured by the glitter of modern commodities, represents that part of the population for whom immediate material gratification is more important than long-term nationalist goals. Indeed, having seen her flirting with Kelemu, the Ethiopian technician, Kidisti literally accuses her of sleeping with the enemy. There are other signifiers which mark Letegergish as unpatriotic by linking the current rulers with the whole lineage of colonising powers in Eritrea. Letegergish's promotion to *maestra* (Italian for forewoman) is one such example, as is her preference for European names. What had signified a break with confining norms among urban performers in the 1960s, is now seen as a betrayal of the nationalistic cause: foreign identification suggests the foregoing of one's Eritrean identity. Among Letegergish's co-workers her new names thus result in derision, not status, and make her an object of contempt and ridicule.

Kidisti, on the other hand, is a character with 'revolutionary' potential; good-natured and diligent, with a strong sense of right and wrong. However, her unseemly emotional outbursts prevent her joining the urban underground movement. This indicates that a person engaged in revolutionary duties needs to be not only passionate, but also trustworthy and mature. Le'ul, the eponymous

heroine, is such a character; committed, fearless, and obedient. Though never clearly spelt out, it is obvious that the struggle for independence is essentially based on a strict hierarchy, those who give orders and those who follow them. Mussie, the omniscient underground leader, is of course a most exemplary character in the play; astute, prudent, and personally concerned about the comrades under his care. This allows Le'ul to unburden herself to him; and thanks to his guidance she can overcome her marital problems. Yet Mussie is almost too good to be true. It is noteworthy that it is not Le'ul, the protagonist, but a male character who controls the happenings on stage. One word from Mussie, and Weldu miraculously transforms from abusive husband to caring partner. One word from Mussie and Kidisti is not yet admitted to their inner circle. There is an element of wishful thinking (reminiscent of melodrama) in the play, above all Weldu's astonishing metamorphosis from drunkard to committed revolutionary. Weldu initially serves as foil to the overlarge figure of the underground leader, but also as a paradigm for what the revolution can achieve.

In sum, *Le'ul* is an open-ended propaganda play which, unlike most pieces in the genre, offers neither prescriptions nor neat solutions. It does, however, emphasise the continuation of the struggle for independence by affirming that accord, vigilance and solidarity are the true weapons against the oppressive Ethiopian regime. With men and women working together, the play suggests, Eritrea will finally overcome its subjugation.

Anqzi – Meningitis

Anqzi or *Menigitis* was Alemseged's second drama which, like *Le'ul*, was also performed in 1983. According to the author 'it was a hastily written play and staged only once, I think, for a medical conference in the field. I doubt if they ever played it again' (A. Tesfai 16 January 2003). Around half an hour in performance, it featured most of the familiar actors, but also novices to the stage: Gezienesh Mengis as the mother, Medhin; Senait Debessai in 'an unforgettable performance' (A. Tesfai 5 February 2003) as the main female character, Demet Welela; Almaz Gebrehawaryat as her friend, Haregu; Solomon Tsehaye as the authoritarian priest; as well as 'Tanki' and 'Jende' in the roles of the EPFL barefoot doctors.

Anqzi is a useful example of campaign theatre in the EPLF which met the projected standard of socialist realism. Alemseged writes that:

The play tried to portray the fear and disruption that epidemic diseases caused in the countryside, the total helplessness of innocent peasants in the face of such calamities, their resistance to acceptance of new ideas even while in danger [...]. There was also a propaganda element in it as we tried to impress upon the conference participants the need to send medicines to the field. (A. Tesfai 5 February 2003).

By aiming to put across a specific developmental message, however, *Anqzi* remained 'top-down' theatre-for-development, without giving 'the people' a 'voice' as researchers, discussants, 'spect-actors', or performers. It also did not draw on indigenous cultural media which are seen as crucial modes of communication in community theatre practice today. The play predominately focused on the problem of meningitis infection; yet like most of Alemesege's creative works it was concerned as much with the representation of women as it was with health education.

Outline

Anqzi is set in an unidentified Tigrinya highland village in the 1980s during the rainy season. The setting alternates between the house of an affluent farmer, Sheka ('peasant') Kflu and his wife, Medhin, and a small health clinic set up by EPLF barefoot doctors. The play is divided into three scenes, Scenes 2 and 3 with two subdivisions each. The script is marked by comparatively elaborate stage instructions which follow western conventions, rather than early Eritrean play scripts which resemble extensive plot summaries.

Scene 1 opens with a desperate Medhin praying fervently for her only son, Tekie, whom we never meet but who is critically ill. Two women from the neighbourhood, Demet 'Honey' Welela – talkative and rather outspoken – and her friend Haregu drop in to enquire about the boy's health. Medhin informs them that her husband insisted on trying various traditional treatments, to no avail. Demet suggests taking the child to the liberation fighters who have set up a health clinic in the village. At this moment the local priest, *Kechi* Tesfazghi, arrives, accompanied by Medhin's husband, Sheka Kflu. An argument arises about sin, suffering and the present state of affairs. Demet adamantly refuses to see illness and the country's condition as a punishment for the sins they have committed. On the contrary, despite incessant fasting and praying the suffering has continued. Endless discussions about sinful behaviour merely impede a more pro-active engagement with the world. Incensed by her words, the priest retreats to an

adjacent room to see the boy. The sight seems frightening, for he hastily returns, covering his nose and mouth. He cannot believe that such 'an ugly disease' can befall a home of such standing. Taking this as a bad omen, the two visiting women also depart hurriedly.

In the first part of the following scene the two barefoot doctors, Rezene and his colleague Dehab, a Muslim woman recently arrived, are treating a villager in their clinic. The man is exasperating and insists on having injections. Demet rushes in and explains at length what happened at Sheka's. Rezene is troubled by the news and asks Demet stay with them until they all return to the patient's house. It appears that meningitis has afflicted the village.

In the meantime Tekie's parents have been anxiously trying to help their son by injecting him with diluted goat medicine. Luckily, the barefoot doctors arrive before they can administer the lethal medication; Rezene's diagnosis is confirmed. Since the disease is contagious, all persons who have had contact with the boy will have to be quarantined.

Rezene returns to Sheka's home together with *Kechi* Tsefazghi, Haregu, Demet and *Ato* Mehasho. The latter had bled the boy the previous day and harshly condemns the fighters for not believing in traditional medicine. Initially everyone refuses to stay; the priest insists on gathering the village in church in order to pray for the safety of the Eritrean people. A heated quarrel results. Demet argues for the view of the barefoot doctors and is criticised by the men for ignoring the opinion of the old and wise; the priest threatens her with excommunication. Haregu however supports her friend, and in the end everyone agrees to stay and conduct prayers in Sheka's household.

In the concluding scene only the priest, Haregu and Medhin are present, the latter being comforted by Haregu. Thanks to modern drugs, Tekie's health has improved, though Medhin's husband has passed away in the meantime. Everyone is anxiously waiting for Rezene's return. The fighter had left the village to help get more medication across the flooded region. On cue, Rezene arrives. Dehab quietly briefs him on the happenings: Sheka's demise and Demet's infection. *Ato* Mehaso has also fallen ill but with the tablets arriving in time there is hope for his recovery. For lack of antibiotics Dehab had decided to continue only Tekie's therapy, rather than treating several patients with a lower dose and thus risking further fatalities. Rezene approves of her decision, but is upset that it is too late to

save Demet. The priest apologises to Rezene for his earlier rudeness, to which the fighter replies that in their own way they all tried to save the village people.

Analysis and Criticism

Anqzi is not an extraordinary play; rather it strikes one as being a piece of commonplace campaign theatre, didactic and informative without being dreary. There was evidently no opportunity for the target audience to influence and shape the theatre process. Participatory theatre-for-development and community theatre practices were unknown to Alemseged and other cultural cadres, despite occasional attempts to facilitate 'post-performance discussions' as noted in the aforementioned role reversal drama. It seems therefore inappropriate to measure *Menigitis* against standards totally unheard of in the field. In the given context, however, the uncluttered structure of the play and the lack of distracting subplots common to much of EPLF drama are significant. The overall message of *Anqzi* is lucid and clear: meningitis can affect everyone, whether rich or poor, and only conscientious treatment with modern drugs can cure the patient. Furthermore, it is a very contagious disease; hence people in contact with the victim need to be quarantined and watched carefully.

Occasionally, the play resorts to stereotypical imagery, such as the uneducated peasant in the health clinic who is fascinated by the mysterious powers of jabs. Health theatre in many contexts has set 'ignorant' treatment against the benefits of 'modern' medicine, and is known to resort to stereotypes as witnessed in recent AIDS awareness drama mentioned above. Although a minor episode in the overall structure of the play, the appearance of the illiterate farmer indeed belittles the 'traditional' life, as opposed to the 'modern' and 'enlightened' ways of the fighters. As *Ato* Mehaso puts it to the barefoot doctors in the play: 'You say that all the traditional ways of curing are useless. You should listen to us at least sometimes' (A. Tesfai [1983b]). That stereotyping does not necessarily further communication between actors and audience has been explained before, even if it was bound to cause hilarity among the spectators. Generally, however, the critique of the 'old' is a critique of an outmoded social order whose representatives refuse to surrender privilege and authority, therefore jeopardising the community.

As typical of all of Alemseged's plays, much of *Anqzi* focuses on the female, rather than the male, characters in the play, though the ending suggests

that once again men remain the most authoritative figures. Medhin embodies the 'traditional' wife, obedient towards her husband and local dignitaries, as is Haregu initially. Demet, on the other hand, is the paradigm of the 'new' generation of mothers – content in her customary role as housekeeper and carer, yet influenced by 'revolutionary' ideas and ready to speak her mind. It is thus the drama's true tragedy that the medicine arrives too late to save the person considered to be the most 'useful' by the fighters.³⁰¹

Demet's integrity initially becomes evident in the argument on sin and suffering with Sheka and the priest, for she refuses to surrender to the fatalism perpetuated by the Orthodox Church. Misery, she insists, is not a god-given punishment but the result of man-made conditions. Her words drop like a bombshell and are considered outright blasphemy. Sheka assumes she has been manipulated by the fighters, but Demet retorts that she was always capable of thinking for herself. It is not surprising that Sheka dislikes being challenged, for it implies the curtailment of his own privileged space: 'Two things have been worrying me about our society, Father', he complains to the priest. 'One was when women started to leave directly through the room in which a man was sitting instead of going around. The second was when people started to have no respect for the village gathering of old men. I am really worried, dear Father' (A. Tesfai [1983b]).

The loss of space and the implied loss of power is revisited with the priest being prohibited to return to his church, the ultimate space of authority in traditional highland life as we saw earlier in an example of ECBTP community theatre. When Demet takes the fighters' view of staying in Medhin's home, rather than gathering in the church and so spreading the disease, the men are livid with rage.

Mehaso: You, Demet, have now completely returned to your infancy. You have started to ignore the views of the old and wise. It is for this reason that people call you 'Demet Honey' because your mind has become infantile.

Priest: She has been like this the whole morning. Listen, you, woman, if you don't stop this behaviour I will excommunicate you! (A. Tesfai [1983b]).

³⁰¹ Alemseged recalled that 'Demet Welela (Honey), the character, stole the whole show. The few who remember the play insist that I should recreate her in another context. Now that I have the play back, I might think about that' (A. Tesfai 16 January 2003).

Demet remains undeterred and continues to challenge the elders: 'The children [fighters] are only telling us not to gather in church. Let's accept that and say our prayers here. God is everywhere and will listen to us no matter where we beseech him' (A. Tesfai [1983b]).

It is Haregu who finally manages to mollify the fuming community leaders. Having acknowledged Demet's reasoning, she starts the prayer but gets it all wrong. Falling back into her traditional role, she meekly asks the priest to continue. Unwilling and hesitant at first, the *Kechi* finally leads his small congregation into a *mhlela* (a prayer sung by a vocalist with a chorus response) before the curtain falls.

While in the end even the stubborn village elders have to agree with the know-how of the barefoot doctors, a word needs to be said about the relationship between the two fighters. Once again, the more authoritative figure is the male, not the female, combatant. Rezene is not a pushy character, and Dehab's insecurity can be explained by her being new to the job. Less experienced, she often needs her colleague's support, in medical and interpersonal questions. Dehab is very upset when she first hears about the disease, whereas Rezene remains calm, controlled and mildly patronizing.

Dehab: Did you say meningitis?

Rezene: Yes.

Dehab: Look, how he takes it as if it were a simple matter!

Rezene: Should I jump up when I tell you about it?

Dehab: I can't understand how you can take it so easy! It is meningitis, meningitis!

Rezene: I know, but what can I do?

Dehab: You can get up and try to do something. But what you are doing is sitting there restfully as if it were a case of influenza instead of meningitis!

Rezene: This is a good point of criticism. All right, let's move. (*He picks up his bag and starts to leave, but does not pick up hers. She only shows mindless haste*). Do you see that your haste is worse than my calmness?

Dehab: What are you trying to tell me now?

Rezene: One, that you have forgotten your bag; two that we should take drugs against the disease as it might prove very contagious. Haste only produces ashes.

Dehab: And too much restfulness destroys the country.

(*They look at each other and laugh while Dehab picks quinine [sic] from her bag. Curtain*). (A. Tesfai [1983b]).

There are moments when the play seems to deconstruct its own tendencies to fall back on 'unrevolutionary' patterns. Dehab talks back and therefore diffuses

Rezenes well-meant, but somewhat depreciatory, instructions; while *Ato Mehaso* criticises the belittling attitude towards traditional practices that generally pervades the play. In the end, all are reconciled, knowing that they have done their best in the given circumstances: representatives of the old and new order, as well as women and men.

Without having the innovative and provocative potential of the earlier gender role reversal play or the relative complexity of Alemseged's other dramas, *Anqzi* nevertheless attempts to include a certain amount of social criticism in its health propaganda. First and foremost, however, it remains developmentalist theatre with the sole purpose of making its audience aware of a deadly disease. Considerable social analysis would be the prerogative of Alemseged's other plays, especially *The Other War*, which would turn him into the premier playwright of the Eritrean liberation struggle.

Eti Kale Kunat - The Other War

Eti Kale Kunat or *The Other War* was premiered in 1984 and confirmed Alemseged Tesfai's position as leading playwright in the field. The last play in a series of three, it has to date remained his final drama.³⁰² During 1985-86, *The Other War* toured the frontline in the field; later it was video-filmed and widely distributed on EPLF music and culture tapes among exile and diaspora Eritreans. It was also the first Eritrean play to be translated, published, and staged in an English translation abroad; and the first to receive international critical attention.³⁰³

Plastow et al. have already provided extensive coverage of the play, especially in terms of history and background material; further details can be found in Alemseged's own afterword to the most recent edition.³⁰⁴ The idea for *The Other War* was conceived as early as 1970 when Alemseged, then a junior legal assistant to the Ethiopian Ministry of Finance, was taken on a trip to the Ogaden in southern Ethiopia, where the authorities had been trying to suppress a long irredentist war with ethnic Somalis. As the military conflict was impossible

³⁰² Alemseged Tesfai's last literary production was a collection of memories, plays, and short stories from the field for which he won the Raimock Prize, the highest national cultural award, in 1997. The collection contains *Le'ul* and *The Other War*, and has been recently published in an English translation. G. Negash (1999: 181), A. Tesfai (2002).

³⁰³ *The Other War* saw a short run at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in 1997, and again in 2001 at Barnsley College, UK.

³⁰⁴ A. Tesfai (2002: 211-216), Banham & Plastow (1999: xxi-xxiv), Plastow (1999: 57-58), Plastow & S. Tsehaye (1998: 42-53), Warwick (1997: 229-230).

to contain, Amhara soldiers, then the leading ethnic group in Ethiopia, were encouraged to have children with local women, by consent or by force, in order to 'breed out' Somali identity. Such concepts struck a cord with the playwright. Banham and Plastow write that the 'calculated genocide through the manipulation of sex and love deeply horrified Alemseged' (Banham & Plastow 1999: xxiii). In a recent afterword to his play, Alemseged notes that

the Colonel's 'policy' settled into the depths of my thinking, my consciousness. I could neither forget nor forgive it. It became a permanent fixture, a grudge-generating fixture in my psyche. In 1981, when I moved to the EPLF's Cultural Division to help develop drama, the urge to portray such a 'policy' in a play became an obsession. It proved difficult and I had to tear up a couple of attempts. (A. Tesfai 2002: 215).

Alemseged however insists that he never objected to inter-ethnic marriage as a rule. The play had 'and still has everything to do with governments and colonizers that use sex and marriage as instruments of ethnic cleansing. It has nothing to do with love and lovers, no matter their origin' (A. Tesfai 2002: 216).

The second incident on which *The Other War* draws was an anecdote about an Eritrean mother whose daughter had divorced her Eritrean husband to live with an Ethiopian cadre. Alemseged managed to track down the woman in a refugee camp and learnt how the war had affected ordinary Eritreans. The mother had found living with the new couple intolerable and had left for the field, taking with her the 'three purely Eritrean grandchildren from her daughter's earlier marriage and leaving the children of the Ethiopian' (Plastow 1999: 58). Both sexual and ethnic 'purity' are central themes in *The Other War*, to be critically scrutinised in the course of the action. Ultimately in the play, unlike reality, both grandchildren are taken to the liberated areas, the Eritrean granddaughter, Solomie, and the baby boy, offspring of an Amharic father. For the most part, however, the focus is on the female characters in the play who, according to Plastow, 'are not mere sexual or maternal objects, but active, politically, socially and domestically engaged subjects of the drama' (Plastow 1999: 57).

In my reading of *The Other War*, I will refer not only to its authorised English translation, but also to the video film produced by the EPLF Cine-Section in the mid-1980s, featuring Gezienesh Mengis as Letiyesus, Birikti Woldeselassie 'Tanki' as her daughter Astier, Weyni Tewelde as granddaughter Solomie, as well as Habte 'Wadi Shawel' as the Ethiopian husband. The role of Hiwot was played

by Almaz Gebrehawaryat; while a real baby took the part of Kitaw. The video was a 'feature film', rather than the documentation of a live performance, generated by chance when a video crew happened to see a rehearsal of the play (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 51). All the same, the video gives certain clues about performance aesthetics in the field (to be discussed in the subsequent section), and will help highlight some of my arguments.

Outline

The Other War is divided into five acts with no further subdivisions: all are set in the protagonist's living room. The play runs for just under an hour with no interval.

Act I: Letiyesus, a woman of around fifty, returns home after an exhausting trip to her village. She finds her friend and neighbour, Hiwot, waiting for her. It turns out that during Letiyesus' absence, her daughter, Astier, and her new husband Assefa, an Ethiopian cadre, have returned from Addis Ababa to live with her. Astier has a teenage daughter, Solomie, from a previous marriage to an Eritrean, Zecharias; and an infant son, Kitaw, whom Letiyesus does not yet know. Delighted to see Solomie, Letiyesus gives the rest of her family a rather cold welcome, including the baby whose name means 'punish him'. Her heart is with Miki-el, her son, a liberation fighter whose house is now to shelter the family of an Amhara.

Act 2: The living room has changed: A telephone has been installed and banners with Ethiopian slogans have been put up. Solomie does her homework, while Letiyesus is going about her daily chores. Solomie is upset that her mother has become the chairwoman of the local *kebele* (urban dwellers's association, the Derg's administrative units, usually a means of government control) since her friends are now shunning her. She tells her grandmother about life in Ethiopia – the beatings and daily miseries until her parents' divorce, and how Astier then found a new partner in Assefa. At this moment, Astier walks in and sends Solomie to look after Kitaw. Mother and daughter sit down for a heart-to-heart talk which soon escalates into a bitter quarrel. Apart from her acting as chairwoman of the *kebele*, Letiyesus fundamentally opposes Astier living with an Ethiopian. As it turns out, Letiyesus is not entirely blameless in the matter. Astier had been married off against her will at an early age to a man twice as old who was a violent drunkard. With her new husband, she has found love, kindness and

understanding; the new relationship, however, has made her reject her Eritrean roots.

When the argument reaches a crisis point, Assefa comes in, trying to mediate between the parties. He reproaches his wife for arguing with her mother yet again.

Act 3: The living room after a rowdy party. Empty bottles, glasses and cigarette butts are all over the floor. The first banner has been replaced by a new one about the ferocious Red Star Campaign, the cause of celebration the night before. Letiyesus, suffering from a headache, is trying to tidy up the room. Hiwot arrives and consoles her friend. Astier is very much disliked in the *kebele* and Letiyesus should know that people are plotting against her. Letiyesus realises that the bond between her and her daughter is irreparably broken; little by little she also acknowledges some of her own mistakes. Soon after Hiwot has left, Solomie enters with the baby. She has heard other children talk about the combatants and now wants to know more about her fighter uncle. Before Letiyesus can explain, Assefa and Astier come in, obviously suffering from hangovers. Assefa's attitude towards his mother-in-law has visibly changed. He is no longer considerate and caring, but demands to know the whereabouts of her son, Miki-el. The fighters are supposedly surrounded by Ethiopian forces, and Assefa acts as though trying to rescue his brother-in-law. Recognising the trap, Letiyesus feigns ignorance. Assefa orders Solomie to bring some hot water to wash his feet, but the girl deliberately scalds her stepfather. Furious, Assefa slaps her and storms out; Astier accuses her mother of turning Solomie against them, before following her husband. Letiyesus however is secretly pleased with the girl whom she much prefers to the 'Ethiopian' grandson.

Act 4: A new banner has been put up about the 'Foundation of the Civilian Party'. Solomie and her grandmother are on their own, sharing confidences. The girl has been listening to EPLF radio which broadcast the failure of the Red Star Campaign; Letiyesus confirms the victory in Miki-el's recent letter. At this moment Assefa barges in. Suspiciously, he demands to know the topic of their conversation and orders his mother-in-law to sit and listen to him. Astier has been imprisoned, and he suspects Letiyesus and Hiwot of supporting the '*wembedie*', or 'terrorists', as he calls the fighters. Letiyesus seems to care more about Solomie than about Kitaw, or her imprisoned daughter for that matter. Threatening her with a pistol, Assefa declares that Eritrea belongs to the Kitaws, the new

generation of Eritreans who are Ethiopian at heart. The encounter prompts Letiyesus to leave for the field without delay, together with Solomie and her friend Hiwot. On her granddaughter's insistence, she also takes the baby boy, now renamed Awet – Tigrinya for 'victory'.

Act 5: Astier and Assefa are on their own in the living room, visibly tense and shaken. For days they have been trying to trace the whereabouts of their family, especially Kitaw. A telephone call confirms that all have crossed into Sahel, the area under EPLF control. For Assefa, this is entirely Astier's doing. He no longer trusts his wife and, in a virtual repetition of the previous scene, threatens her with a gun before hitting her. The young woman is left lying on the floor pleading for her life, devastated in the knowledge that she has lost everything (see Figures 68 and 69).

Analysis and Criticism

On the surface, *The Other War* is a drama about civilian life under the Derg. Set in the intimate space of a home, however, it replicates the larger conflict in the divided loyalties of the family members. As in *Le'ul*, but more dramatically, the personal and political are intertwined. As the title suggests, *The Other War* is as much about conventional warfare as it is about another site of conflict, the bodies of women, on which a different kind of battle is fought. Alemseged takes up the well-worn motifs of Mother Eritrea and woman as national allegory, only to defy their one-dimensional interpretation. Instead, he deconstructs theatrical clichés and translates them into a more self-directed system. He does not, however, do away with assumptions of masculine authority entirely, even though he questions the historical agency of men.

The Other War is naturalistic in form and does not resort to other media of artistic communication, such as dance, songs and poetry. The set shows the typical Eritrean living room of a rather affluent highland family; a chest of drawers, a table and some chairs, with one door back centre stage as the only exit. While this is the more representative part of the room, some stools and a *forniello*, a portable charcoal stove, indicate the 'women's corner' on the lower floor. It is here that Letiyesus and Hiwot have their heart-to-heart talks, and the grandmother comforts and confides in her granddaughter. Significantly, Astier never ventures into that part of the room except once, when her husband orders her to see to his footbath herself. Astier and Assefa usually occupy the 'representative' area of the



Fig. 68 *The Other War* (1984).
From left to right: Assefa (Habte 'Wadi Shawel'), Astier (Birikti 'Tanki') with the baby boy Kitaw/Awet, Letiyesus (Gezienesh Mengis), Solomie (Weyni Tewolde) and Hiwot (Almaz Gebrehawaryat).



Fig. 69 *The Other War* (1984).
Assefa threatening his Eritrean wife, Astier.

living room which the other family members only use in their absence. (Solomie in Act 3, for example, immediately gets up from the chair when her stepfather walks in). All this establishes a spatial hierarchy, which resembles the then current political power structures in the country. At first sight, Ethiopia is represented as the more powerful force, further indicated by the banners high up on the wall, by Astier's frequent changes of clothes which are rich and fashionable, by the radio and the telephone they have installed. These are imposing status symbols which contrast starkly with Letiyesus' modest frocks and her ordinary kitchen equipment. However, it is from her viewpoint the spectator experiences the events and learns to see through the hollow facade of Ethiopian pretensions.

House and body – often related concepts in Eritrea – are the main symbols in Alemseged's play. Letiyesus returns from the village to find her home invaded by Astier and her Amhara husband. Earlier on, she had been subjected to a crude physical inspection:

Letiyesus Mbwa! I left this morning but because of all these checkpoints it took all day. Oh, what a terrible life ... and those men at the checkpoints! Tell me, are they human beings, or animals? Shameless people! (*Grabbing her breasts and imitating their voices and gestures.*) What have we got here ... huh? What have you hidden here? They wouldn't spare anyone, even old women.³⁰⁵

The incursion into the domestic and corporeal terrain immediately translates into the occupation of the national territory. This of course is anything but a novelty in Eritrean theatre. Women have always been a signifier for the country in Eritrea, both of which were 'our territory' to be protected from the 'incursion'/ 'impregnation' of whoever constituted the enemy. The 'purity' of the nation depends on the 'purity' of the women as its reproducers. For Letiyesus, the idea of her daughter willingly sleeping with 'the enemy' – a voluntary, perhaps even pleasurable, incursion – is therefore the ultimate form of treason. 'We had no idea she would be driven to this, no idea whatever that someday she would betray her own country and people' (280). Alemseged first feeds, then cleverly deconstructs this notion by portraying a more complex picture than the usual Manichean allegory. As the embodiment of the traditional mother figure, and an icon of national values, Letiyesus does not quite fit into the stereotype of the gentle self-sacrificing carer. Letiyesus is tough, headstrong, and sometimes narrow-minded; she also comes across as aloof, even if dignified. (Indeed, when the video version

³⁰⁵ A. Tesfai (1999: 263). All further references in the play will follow the 1999 edition.

had reached Eritrean diaspora communities, the figure of Letiyesus was criticised 'for being too cold, especially towards the small boy whom she effectively stole from her daughter' (Plastow & S.Tsehaye: 48)). More importantly, the tense relationship with her daughter is partly Letiyesus' own doing. Marrying her off at an early age, she exchanged the girl for material well-being.

Astier [...] remember when you married me off to Zecharias? That's when you lost me. Yes, Mother, you and father gave me to a drunkard, just because his parents had money and some fancy titles. You didn't even notice that I was only half his age. Now, who are you to give me any advice? (275).

For Astier, we learn, this was only the beginning of a torturous ordeal. Beaten and sexually abused, she could only survive by cutting the bond between herself and her Eritrean heritage which she experienced as far more oppressive than Ethiopian colonisation. Legs crossed and arms folded in a gesture of defiance and defence, she continues to relate her tale:

Astier [...] Listen, Mother. I was beaten up, trodden on by Zecharias so much that I thought it would never end. My face was constantly swollen. Look at the marks under my eyes. I spent my youth, lying in bed, crying endlessly, waiting for him to come back drunk and use or misuse me, as he saw fit. Now, Mother you are asking me why I am so enthusiastic about these people here? And why shouldn't I be? Zecharias locked me behind bars, Assefa opened the door and my eyes to the world. My heart was full of hatred, Assefa filled it with love. I was ignorant, today I am a chairwoman. [...] Now, what do you have to say? Who are my people? You or them? (275).

Letiyesus is left speechless and on the verge of tears. Initially, this was criticised as an 'unrevolutionary' weakness by cultural cadres who had been invited to comment on the play (Plastow & S. Tsehaye 1998: 47). Yet, the strength of the drama lies in the fact that it does not reduce the story to a single propagandist dimension, even if ultimately adhering to the official party line. Sympathies between Letiyesus and her daughter are divided, and this caused considerable controversy. Plastow and Solomon Tsehaye write that 'it was argued that Astier's strength overwhelmed that of her mother and that it was not good to show any sympathy for her' (1998: 47-48). Yet, Astier's change of heart is comprehensible and demonstrates that 'there is bad in the good, and, even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad' (Sachs 1990: 20), as the South African lawyer and senior ANC member, Albie Sachs, once put it. After all, Assefa is quite a sympathetic figure initially, polite and considerate and trying to mediate between

the household members. At one point he even invites Letiyesus to sit on a proper chair, thus trying to lift her 'up' symbolically to his own level. Letiyesus, however, adamantly refuses to be drawn into the world of power mongers and traitors. Throughout the video performance of the play, the gap between the two factions is mapped out spatially, not only in terms of the layout of the room, but also corporeally. Except for the brief welcome in the opening scene, there are no affectionate exchanges between the two parties; Letiyesus and Solomie on the one hand, Astier and Assefa on the other. If two members of each group happen to be close physically, distance is immediately created by avoiding eye contact. Astier and Solomie have their own cheerless history. In her previous marriage Astier had taken out her frustration on the girl, thus perpetuating the vicious circle of abuse and aggression. And since, for Letiyesus, Solomie is the only family member 'purely' Eritrean in body and soul, she lavishes her affection on her. Scenes between Letiyesus and Solomie are the most demonstrative in the play, an interplay between loving hugs and caresses that contrasts starkly with the otherwise frosty atmosphere. Usually, '*they immediately separate*' (287) when someone else enters the room; yet, when Assefa threatens Letiyesus with a pistol, Solomie clutches her grandmother with one hand from behind, with the other holding her baby brother, Kitaw. (The formation is significant in several ways, for Solomie will indeed become the key mediator between age and ethnic schisms). Determined, and with his son on their side, the women are too strong a force for Assefa to dominate. His menace with the phallic pistol shrivels into a sign of impotence, and so he exits the room. The women do not follow his orders to stay inside the home but chose to seek refuge among the liberation fighters. However, when Assefa uses the same hand gun in the final scene to terrorise Astier, there is no one to give support to his wife. Broken, she is left lying in the floor, imprisoned in the very house she had helped to occupy.

The true 'object of contention' (Plastow 1999: 58) in the play is of course the baby boy, the offspring of an Eritrean woman and her Amhara husband. For Alemseged he constitutes 'a symbol of either oppression or freedom' (Plastow 1999: 58). Like Miki-el, he is a mute and (semi-)absent character throughout, but one who literally embodies the conflicting positions. Having been told that his name means 'punish them [him]' (268) – i.e. the liberation fighters – Letiyesus never touches the boy, even if partly responsible for his care.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ In the video, Letiyesus gives the boy an unfriendly rap on the nose.

([...] Letiyesus *looks at Kitaw in disgust*). Ouff, what a nose. I hate noses like that.

Solomie No, he's handsome, Grandma.

Letiyesus (*going to her fornello [sic]*) He doesn't look like us. He is not one of us. (285).

Letiyesus still believes in the ultimately racist conception of ethnic 'purity', which goes in line with the sexual 'purity' so important for Eritrean women. Both are equally repressive and misused instruments of control. Initially, the play seems to validate these beliefs, only to deconstruct them in the penultimate scene. For Assefa, his son is a means of penalising and subverting this secessionist nation; Solomie, Hiwot and Letiyesus however, turn the tables on him and 'appropriate' the boy as a symbol for liberation.

Assefa [...] Your daughter, Astier, comes from that Eritrean womb you are so proud of. I, Assefa, planted my seed on you own daughter's womb. Kitaw was born. Kitaw walks on this earth, just like your Mika-el [sic]. My roots are firmly planted in Eritrea and no power can ever pull them up. So, get this straight. Eritrea no longer belongs to the Mika-els [sic], it belongs to us, (*Pointing at Kitaw.*) to the Kitaws. (291).

It is initially Solomie who deflates this idea. The girl is adamant that the infant must come with them to the field, because he is her brother and only a child guiltless of political scheming. Hiwot reinforces her view for different reasons, urging her friend not to be governed by the same bigoted opinions, but to twist them around in self-defence: 'Take the child away from them. Snatch him, Letiyesus. He is your flesh and blood too. Burn them inside, just as they burned you. Don't let them use our wombs to rule us!' (294).

Thus Kitaw becomes Awet – 'victory' – and the sexual manipulation of women is shattered. Together, the three women take down the myth of ethnic purity, demoting the power of Amhara 'blood' to a fancy of the imagination. By 'appropriating' Kitaw/Awet for the liberation struggle, they draw attention to the construction, not innate essence, of social and cultural identities. (This would be confirmed in later years, when Ethiopian Prisoners of War were given the chance to become EPLF liberation fighters). The genealogy of Amhara rule is thereby broken. Astier betrays her country not necessarily by giving her body to the nation's enemy – there are enough examples of female underground agents using sexual favours to trap and betray their Ethiopian suitors (Wilson 1991: 84-86) –

but by a change of heart. This, however, the play reveals, was brought about by a repressive social order in Eritrea which the EPLF proposes to eradicate.

Praise notwithstanding, there appears to be a minor snag in the play. While women are finally portrayed as agents of historical events, masculine authority is still unquestioned. According to custom, it is Assefa who rules the family. Together they live in a house which is not Letiyesus', but 'Miki-el's' (265). The absent fighter becomes the ultimate reference point for the nationalist faction in the play, while Kitaw heralds an 'Ethiopian' Eritrea for his parents. Yet again, Alemseged manages to diffuse these symbols by reducing them to cherished, but mute and silent icons, not unlike former representations of women stylised into patriotic, but powerless, emblems. It is Solomie who is the true heroine of the play, defying both old and new(ly imposed) authorities. That she looks for guidance to the liberation movement is the logical conclusion for a play set against and emerging from a struggle for independence. Solomie (in the video) marks this change by replacing her childish braids with an unruly Afro in the course of the action.

Ultimately, *The Other War* continues to be a piece of EPLF propaganda, but the most subtle I have been able to trace. It demonstrated the immense development of literary drama in the field, especially with regard to the portrayal of woman. It would also remain an exception rather than the rule whose common denominator was still a preference for one-dimensional representations and simplified morals.

A Note on Performance

It is difficult to assess the actual staging of literary drama in the field, given that the performances documented on videos are short 'feature films' rather than plays mounted in front of an audience. Often, however, videos were also used to document live events, mostly major shows mounted by the Division of Culture. In the introduction I have already pointed out some of the benefits of video film, but also its limitations. While films are as much interpretations as are writings, they allow for a more detailed analysis through the possibility of repeated access to performative material, as opposed to written descriptions of the events. If we bear in mind that theatre in the liberation struggle was transitional and dependent on the military situation, the location and the make-up of cultural troupes and spectators, video material can give us leads as to how bodies and voices in motion

helped create a particular fighter culture. Given the nature of my material, the following observations are necessarily eclectic and incomplete.

Videos, scripted plays and interviews indeed confirm earlier observations that dialogue drama was not to be mixed with other performing forms, even if all were included in the customary EPLF variety shows. Occasionally, plays were introduced or concluded by a poem or song (as seen in *The Red Kerchief*, for example), but never were they interspersed with elements such as dance, music and mime to create a particular atmosphere or highlight the performance.³⁰⁷ What emerged on stage was a mixture of stilted social realism and melodrama (often thought to be 'naturalism'), with the living-room serving as the principal domestic setting. As directing was often minimal, characters tended (and still tend) to be lined up on seats, the emphasis being on dialogue rather than dramatic action, similar to Ethiopian drama with its emphasis on rhetoric and the spoken word.³⁰⁸ Yet, stereotypical overacting was also common, clichés often being intrinsic to the script. The more experienced performers however managed to introduce a certain subtlety into their performance which helped create the more 'life-like' rendering that was aimed at. Characters were built around stock images made up of recognised visual features and kinesic codes which could either turn into a farce – such as the bespectacled, beard-stroking intellectual in *The Capitalist System* – or develop into a more discerning presentation. Gezienesh Mengis from the CCT, for example, or Atsbehet Yohannes and Nechi Fesehatsion were known for their sensitive embodiment of traditional (Tigrinya) mothers. They were known by their clothes (a modest dress, sandals and a *netsela*), their hairstyle (a grey-haired wig with braids half-way down the back, indicating the character's marital status), and certain kinesic features. Among others, 'mothers' were noticeable by their measured walk, their backs bent forward at work and in conversation, and by the frequent lifting of an open hand in order to call on the saints, all of which are reminiscent of orthodox church iconography. As by definition a mother had to be gentle and kind, a concerned, but smiling face and a soft-spoken voice usually

³⁰⁷ To my knowledge, dance was first introduced into drama shows by the ECBTP in 1997; Plastow again utilised dancing in her millennium production of *I Will Marry When I Want* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii in 2000. Matzke (2000: 89-94). In the last years of the liberation struggle it became common to use instrumental background music in video drama, a feature that is still utilised in video production today.

³⁰⁸ In his study on fighter theatre Isayas Tseggai writes: 'A sense of direction and characterization were introduced to a certain extent. The playwright (who was usually the 'director') began setting the play in motion, teaching each actor to move and say his lines in a certain way. Yet the main focus was on the text' (I. Tseggai 2002: 13).

signified her benevolence. It is thus not surprising that the figure of Letiyesus in *The Other War* was initially criticised for failing to hide her aversion towards her infant grandson, especially by diaspora Eritreans. Insiders to the struggle, on the other hand, saw mothers as the ultimate harbingers of patriotism, and thus wanted Letiyesus to be tougher with her wayward daughter, Astier.

While on the whole dialogue drama attempted to mirror customary codes of posture and conduct, the transformation of women's social 'performance' and their new clothing codes played an important role in the gradual modification of other theatre forms. As combatants started 'to develop a unique socio-cultural bond among themselves which was different to that of the general public' (Mitias 1993: 8), performance aesthetics were modified accordingly. Music and drama videos of the 1980s suggest that kinesic developments in performance were often rooted in the fighters' field experience. Unpretentious dance movements, such as the *sisiit* or *cuda* (in Tigrinya), became more vigorous for combatants: the basic, anti-clockwise 'walking' movement was now pronounced by bending knees and chest, reminiscent of tracking the enemy; while the shoulder shimmy during phases of accelerated rhythm was heightened. Often the latter was additionally marked by a gun slung across the dancer's chest. (On her return from the village, Letiyesus demonstrates the new *cuda* to her friend Hiwot, which has both women laughing (A. Tesfai 1999: 265)). Because men and women had developed an almost identical kinetic code at the front, choreographies accompanying modern fighter music – as opposed to traditional songs – also developed non-gendered patterns. Often, the mixed-sex background chorus stood in rank and file, moving in a simple stylised dance routine according to the music: a step forward and backward or a jump to the side; a military mime, such as the cocking of a real or imagined gun (especially when dressed in military uniforms); fists raised in the air in an expression of victory and exhortation (see Figures 70 and 71).³⁰⁹ Sometimes the movements were less formalised, but from afar it was still difficult to distinguish male from female performers. The only exception were all-female musical numbers in which women fighters sang to (often stilted) choreographies which had evidently been influenced by girl groups in international pop music circuits (see Figures 72 and 73). Even then performers wore non-gendered clothing. For the presentation of modern music, fighters were generally clad in

³⁰⁹ These formations were reminiscent of those of the second CCT in the mid-1970s, but with more verve and vigour. Film material suggests that they were also common among the ELF performance troupe. See *The Land by the Sea* (1982) by Björk, Danneborn, and Aslun.



Fig. 70 *A military mime on stage.*



Fig. 71 *EPLF artists in performance.*



Fig. 72 *All-female musical number with choreography.*



Fig. 73 *Abrehet Ankere, Fatuma Suleiman and Gezienesh Mengis on stage.*

identical suits consisting of matching tops and trousers; sometimes simple T-shirts and jeans, on other occasions the abovementioned black-and-red mock uniforms, or blouses and trousers in glossy beige (see Figures 72, 73, and 63). This stood in stark contrast to the rendering of traditional performance forms where women and men had their gender-specific dress codes and conventions of moving.

Yet changes were also taking place in the representation of long-established performing arts. For one, the individual background of each performer was bound to modify their rendering of unfamiliar performance forms; and there are clear indications that those new to certain dances, such as the *serret* with its characteristic movement of the chest, had more difficulties than those familiar with them. More importantly, as dances were removed from their customary context onto the stage, they were modified to make them more presentable and flamboyant.³¹⁰ One dance, for example, embedded the all-female *shellil* into an elaborate choreography in which women carried winnowing baskets in their hands, imitating the characteristic movement, the dancers wearing colourful dresses and long-haired wigs with fake jewellery.



Fig. 74 EPLF artists performing a stage choreography of *shellil* at the Bologna Festival in 1989. Note the wigs.

The mere fact that dances commonly performed for rather intimate (and often single-sex) audiences were now presented before thousands of people already signified a challenge to customary cultural norms; the idea that performers now

³¹⁰ I 33. This is still the case with performances of *Sbrit*, the National Cultural Folklore Troupe of the PFDJ. For examples see their 1999 video with 'traditional music and dances' (*Sbrit* 1999).

'cross-dressed' to embody 'traditional' roles even more so. Though treasured for the construction of a national identity, 'traditions' on the whole were radically questioned. While on the one hand long-established performance forms were utilised in the creation of an imagined Eritrean community as mentioned before, it was clear that the dances presented on stage were not necessarily identical with those performed among the various peoples. In his 1983 drama study, Alemseged Tesfai remarks that 'It is not easy to evaluate how much of the original presentation has been achieved' (A. Tesfai [1983a]). I would argue that, ultimately, this was not the decisive goal. While researchers and performers often aimed at a large degree of 'authenticity', the modified dances were moving signifiers for the socio-political changes instigated by the EPLF, especially for women.



Fig. 75 *An unusual sight: women parading with swords during International Women's Day in Keren, May 2000.*

CHAPTER 7: CULTURE ON THE GROUND:

MASS ORGANISATIONS AND SUPPORTING DEPARTMENTS

Culture on the Ground I: The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)

Culture had started to play such an important role in the field that the EPLF now sported a miscellany of non-combatant cultural troupes in supporting departments. Among them were a children's 'symphonic orchestra', a theatre group mounting international literary drama in the Central Hospital, and a troupe of war-disabled fighters under the Department of Social Affairs.³¹¹ Mass organisations also began to utilise cultural activities for their work. *Awet Nehafash* – 'Victory to the Masses' – had become the ultimate EPLF signature slogan (Pool 2001: 105), chanted whenever possible with fists raised in the air. Bonding civilians to the EPLF was a matter of vital necessity. Without the material and non-material support of the civilian population, the armed struggle could not succeed. Pool writes that half of the new recruits to the Vanguardians came through the mass organisations which were aimed at women, youth, and the urban working class, with exile and refugee communities all over the world starting diaspora branches. Peasants living in liberated areas were also organised by the EPLF, mostly in local 'people's assemblies' intended to replace the traditional village leadership. Like the fighters, members of mass organisations and people's assemblies had to attend political education classes to implant EPLF thinking into the mindset of civilian society. Sometimes this involved cultural activities.³¹² No doubt within the liberated areas such pursuits also constituted a source of recreation, while for diaspora Eritreans they created a sense of home; yet culture remained an essential part of the EPLF propaganda machinery which helped monitor 'revolutionary' thinking and forge a common Eritrean identity (cf. Pool 2001: 105).

Documentation of cultural work in mass organisations is relatively scarce and mostly mentioned in passing. Pool, for example, notes the establishment of a Keren youth club to help develop a 'new culture' and eliminate 'decadent behaviour' said to have been introduced by the Ethiopian regime: 'dancing, drinking, prostitution and the use of hashish' (Pool 2001: 125). In political

³¹¹ *Bana Harnet*, the children's band, and the Ethiopian POWs will be discussed below; theatre in the Central Hospital I have written about elsewhere. Matzke (2003). Regrettably, I was unable to interview members of the war-disabled CT.

³¹² See objectives of agitation and EPLF propaganda work in EPLF (1979a: 109). The RDC in Asmara holds a number of videos documenting smaller celebrations of mass organisations abroad which were not part of the larger Eritrea Festivals ('Bologna').

education programmes, songs were taught with a 'distinctly old-fashioned Chinese ring to them', testified by such verses as 'Rise up, workers and peasants' (Pool 2001: 100). A 1991 television documentary on refugees, *Einmal Flüchtling, Immer Flüchtling* [*Once Refugee, Always Refugee*] suggests that songs and dances were often used as a 'warm-up' before official meetings. Soon booklets with 'revolutionary songs' proffering a 'new culture for the new society' were produced, helping to distribute popular propaganda songs pertaining to both military and social issues, as did broadcasts on the EPLF radio, *Dimitsi Hafash* ('Voice of the Masses'). On occasions, union members also staged simple agit-prop plays to get topical issues across.³¹³

Given the limits of my field research with regard to the work of mass organisations, an outline of activities in the National Union of Eritrean Women, NUEW, will have to suffice. NUEW primarily aimed at 'politicizing and organizing Eritrean women to play an active role in the national liberation movement, ascertain their rights in all spheres, creatively develop their political, cultural and technical levels, [and] eliminate illiteracy' (EPLF 1982c: 125). All this indicated a significant shift for women from the private to the public sphere (Pool 2001: 127), which was also expressed by partaking in performance culture. In 1980, the year after the official foundation of NUEW, it was noted that 'members have actively taken to dramas, poems, songs, traditional folklore which depict the coming new society' (NUEW [1980a]: 7). A female delegate to the 1980 Women's Congress recalled (in the typical EPLF register at the time) how the 'principled and self-sacrificing mothers, who had only lately emerged from their kitchens' actively participated in the gathering, 'recounted their victories over assorted reactionaries, recited the poems they wrote and sang the rich lyrical songs which they composed' (EPLF 1982b: 122). Other NUEW publications equally exalted the cultural contributions of women, said to give 'vitality to the mass manifestations' and voice to 'popular sentiment, throughout Eritrea, with great mobilizing effect' (NUEW 1999a: 38). Abiding by the objectives of the organisation, the governing theme remained the struggle for independence. The

³¹³ ECBTP 95/31. For examples of songs see EPLF ([1980s/a]), ([1980s/b]). The similarity to certain Derg publications which also featured 'revolutionary' songs was striking. Eshete (1979). The EPLF radio station was established in January 1979 and provided an essential link between the fighters and central Eritrea after the strategic retreat. Initially broadcasting in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic, it later extended into Kunama, Afar and Amharinya. Killion (1998: 351-352).

Kunama singer Dehab Fayitinga,³¹⁴ then a NUEW representative in the Barka region, noted that while discussions on women's rights took place regularly, she never particularly sang about such issues. Still, there is ample evidence that songs and plays related to women's emancipation were also composed, replacing traditional lamentations with self-assertive revolutionary verse which firmly embedded women in the armed liberation struggle: 'Debased she was / See how graceful she is / With her Bren-gun / Eritrean woman took over the assembly / She made the man's land hers. / Fetch me pen and paper / Thanks to my organisation / I am literate' (NUEW 1999a: 57-58). Such songs were in stark contrast to conventional laments, such as 'Time passes by / And time also will come / When I will have / Someone to defend me / I note and deplore / My being a girl / For I cannot avenge / A man's beatings' (NUEW 1999a: 57).

One of the biggest annual events for the Women's Union was March 8th, International Women's Day. It was usually honoured by a national celebration which featured the Central Cultural Troupe and was complemented by presentations from union members. Smaller commemorations were staged all over the liberated areas, while diaspora communities held their own festivities. Sadly, few of these activities inside Eritrea have been recorded. Wilson, participating in a local 1987 celebration in Orotta, seat of the EPLF's underground Central Hospital, witnessed two plays staged between flour sacks in a camouflaged bakery: one 'about the role and sufferings of a mother', the second portraying a marriage in feudal society (Wilson 1988: 203). Visual images of national events, on the other hand, can only be deduced from scanty film material and attendance at contemporary shows. Gordian Troeller's *Im Dienst der Revolution* (1980) showed a moving procession of some 2000 war-disabled fighters making their way to the national festival – limping, hopping or shuffling on crutches over a stretch of rocky desert. Some 12,000 spectators were expected for the all-night show which attests to high attendance rates and large-scale involvement in such events by combatant and non-combatant units. A second documentary featured a celebratory procession on International Women's day in *Filfil* Camp, a settlement for the internally displaced, with camp dwellers singing and dancing their way to the local assembly ground, the women holding green twigs and beating the *kebero*, the men carrying sticks, some playing the *embalta*, a local wind instrument. A

³¹⁴ Dehab Fayitinga uses her father's name, Fayitinga, as her artist's name and will henceforth be referred to by the latter. She is one of the very few performers able to forge an international career post-independence.

serious-looking woman gave an opening speech on the importance of the struggle for independence, followed by further communal singing and dancing.³¹⁵ From these meagre sources, including my attendance at the millennium nationwide celebration in Keren, certain performative key patterns can be deduced: a celebratory procession to the meeting place, followed by patriotic speeches focusing on the liberation struggle with reference to the contribution, and emancipation, of women. National, and certain local celebrations then mounted lengthy variety shows, followed – or simultaneous with – communal singing, dancing and similar revelries.³¹⁶



Fig. 76 *International Women's Day in Keren, 2000.*

One song I witnessed in 2000 drew a direct link between the present and Eritrea's past. Birikti 'Tanki', one-time CCT member, now turned business woman with a *pasticheria* (cake shop) in Asmara, performed the EPLF women's hymn, 'A Woman's Plight', which had made her well-known in the field. The

³¹⁵ *Einmal Flüchtling, Immer Flüchtling*, dir. Roman Barner (© ZDF, 1991).

³¹⁶ In March 2000, the national celebration of International Women's Day in Keren started on the previous night with a concert by the all-female band, *Bana Harnet*, which will be discussed below. In the early morning of the following day, hundreds, if not thousands, of women sang and danced their way towards the local stadium where the main show was to be held. The women were dressed in their finest clothes, a number had decorated their hair with bougainvillea flowers. Some were throwing *embaba* (popcorn made from a local cereal, *mashella*, or imported maize) into the crowd; a small group of Bilen women practised jumping a sword, traditionally a feature of *beredg*, an all-male dance among Tigre- and Bilen-speakers, now appropriated by the joyful women. Soldiers and armed paramilitaries guided the procession to the meeting point. (There were no women soldiers, only uniformed men, some of whom displayed unnecessarily bossy behaviour to keep the performers 'in their space') (see Figure 75). After the regular speeches and a one-minute silence in commemoration of the martyrs of the liberation struggle, a variety show unfolded with poetry recitals, music, sports competitions and parades meant to reflect and honour women's diversified participation in society. As one might expect, the ever-present reference point in 2000 was the ongoing war with Ethiopia. FN 68.

song had been written by Solomon Tsehaye, and was first performed at the 2nd National Congress of the NUEW in 1982:

When first / I saw the world / with my new-born eyes, / there were no cries / of celebration / no drums, no ululation; / It was an unwanted birth / one without mention. // Tradition labelled me worthless / except in the power of birth; / Culture denied me freedom / destroying my sense of self; / This heavy burden / like a hump on my back / stole my every breath / milked my sweat and blood. // But, a turbulent storm / swept my way, / carried my burdens / and miseries away. // I defied the imprisonment / of tradition / I broke free from the chains / of custom; / No longer forced to / bow in submission, / No longer locked / in the confines / of the kitchen. // Having offered my life / as a dowry beyond price / to my country's service; / Dressed in shorts / and with rolled up sleeves / alongside my brothers, / I irrigate the soil / with my sweat, / I toil and toil / to make the land green and fertile.³¹⁷

In a detailed analysis of the song, Nazareth Amlesom has pointed out the oppositional 'discourses or ideologies which organise the text' (N. Amlesom 2000: 5): tradition ('kitchen') characterised as 'imprisonment', 'heavy burden' and 'worthlessness'; the revolution symbolised by a 'turbulent storm' sweeping over the land to unfetter both country and women. Revolution is seen 'as enlightenment' (6), traditional customs as the 'oppressors' (12), thus reinforcing the dichotomous thinking typical of most propaganda texts. Nazareth carefully examines the songs to prove how the choice of words reasserts the contrasting connotations. However, she also draws attention to the silences in the text, how 'unpalatable references to death, mutilation, blood, killing and so on are excluded' (16). While this was not necessarily the norm in creative expressions, it was common to elevate such themes as heroism, bravery and the ultimate 'sacred sacrifice' (R. Bereketeab 2000: 232) of martyrdom which fighters were prepared to make for their nation. Wilson, in a brief commentary on the above mentioned plays, remarks that the women's 'deaths, their willingness to die, are not a sign of defeat or passivity, but a reaffirmation of the strength and continuity of the struggle' (Wilson 1988: 203).

³¹⁷ The above English translation is the final version made by the song writer, Solomon Tsehaye, and Elsa Gebreyesus. (Solomon is also the author of the national anthem, 'Eritrea'). Initially I had used an earlier translation for my reading which was more forceful in its imagery. The last stanza, for example, read: 'Dressed in tattered shorts, with my sleeves rolled up, / I fought on burning battlefields besides my fearless brothers. / Watering the parched soil with my sweat, nourishing the land with my spirit, I cultivated a garden of peace. / Now, my worth is no longer questioned, and my power understood'. Nazareth Amlesom uses her own, more literal, translation for a linguistic analysis of the song whose title she translates as 'Goodbye, Kitchen'.

The clash of contrasting discourses is again striking. The liberated female fighter – sartorially signified by ‘unfeminine’ shorts and rolled-up sleeves who crusades alongside her brother in the battlefield – ultimately envisions herself as a cultivator and nurturer of the land, not as a warrior. By doing so, the songwriter has linked her new to her former self, where woman’s worth had been principally as the bearer of children. Not surprisingly, therefore, references to violent bloodshed and the taking of life are evaded. Subliminally, or perhaps consciously, the mother/carer image is still projected as the most prevalent role model for women, even if the object of concern has been transferred. Whether it was an image offered by the largely male EPLF intelligentsia, or whether it was welcomed by the women themselves because, not in spite, of associations with familiar discourses, cannot be answered here. It is certain, however, that mothers as performers continued to hold great appeal, as the two following examples will demonstrate.

Despite the staging of national festivities, it seems that performance activities in the Women’s Union were spur-of-the-moment affairs, often related to a particular cause of celebration. (Even today, cultural work in the Women’s Union seems to play a marginal role, limited to handicraft activities as an income generating activity. There are no permanent theatre or music groups under their aegis, though they are known to have supported a couple of all-female bands as well as individual artists). Given the data available to me, it is doubtful whether NUEW’s performance groups operated on a more regular basis. This was unlike cultural work in non-military departments and refugee camps under the Department of Social Affairs, where due to the settled – if temporary – nature of people’s existence, it became a continuous, efficiently organised activity.

Performing Mothers in the Field I: *Bana Harnet* – ‘The Rays of Liberation’

In 1983, an all-female cultural troupe, *Bana Harnet* (‘Rays of Liberation’), was officially founded in Camp Solomuna, a refugee camp under EPLF Social Affairs which was predominately occupied by internally displaced women with small children and their elderly dependants. Some were the non-combatant wives of male fighters who had followed their spouses to the field. Robert Papstein described Camp Solomuna as ‘the oldest and most developed of the refugee settlements’ (Papstein 1991: 89) under the EPLF. Established in 1975/76 in Debat, it was moved to Gelhanti in Sudan during the strategic retreat and, after a

brief move to Halibet, eventually found a permanent base in the mountains at Solomuna in Northern Sahel. Life was at the material minimum, but women developed a new kind of confidence as they shouldered unprecedented responsibilities and acquired new areas of expertise and knowledge. The camp was administered by an all-female people's assembly which took charge of the distribution of food aid supplied by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA). Daily living was a communal affair. Some women worked at a central bakery which produced *injeera* for the community, others looked after an egg and poultry project, mended clothes or built shelters. The extensive adult education system at the camp was remarkable, with most women attending school at some level (Papstein 1991: 91). The new confidence was also reflected in cultural work. Most women had come from 'traditional' backgrounds where their 'public' performance was still frowned upon.³¹⁸ In the virtually all-female space of the camp, which resembled the women-only spaces in more traditional settings, public performances were not only non-threatening, but liberating and empowering. 'When my husband joined the EPLF, I had no alternative but to follow him', Alganesh Sinem recounted her first experience away from her home. 'Later I was assigned to *Bana Harnet*. It was then that I realised I can play a great role in the struggle for independence through culture' (I 13).

According to Alganesh and her colleague, Hiwot Gebregiorgis, activities had started as early as 1975-76 in the camp. The story is a repetitively familiar one, beginning with informal entertainment sessions throughout the settlement, the women singing and playing *krar* for each other's pleasure, later also competing with singers from different administrative units or *zobas*. There were about eight *zobas* in the encampment among which informal contests were held. When the camp was temporarily relocated to Gelhanti the women started to entertain disabled and injured combatants who had been taken to the rear area for recovery and lived in the nearby *Bidho* Camp. *Bana Harnet* was established after the Sixth Offensive in 1983 and consisted of 36-37 female camp dwellers from all *zobas*. Largely, as *krar*-player Akberet Feshaye explained, the group had been

³¹⁸ Hawa, a Tigre-speaking member of *Bana Harnet*, originally from Halhal in Northern Sahel, explained: 'Among Tigre-speakers as well as in any other Eritrean ethnic group attitudes towards women were low in general. Particularly among Muslims, women were not allowed to go out and attend to school. For this reason, they rejected actresses, singers, and artists in general. During the struggle, many things changed, even though it is still not enough. I myself was the victim of ['traditional'] culture before I joined the armed struggle. In the field I went to school and studied until grade three. Thereafter, I never had any problems' (I 14). Other *Bana Harnet* members echoed her opinion. Cf. Papstein (1991: 118).

founded for the sake of ‘having an all-women’s band [though] its aim was like that of any other cultural troupe, namely to play its role against Ethiopian colonisation’ (I 14). Initially Goitom (X), a male fighter from the Department of Social Affairs, was assigned to the group. In 1983, some of the women were sent to *Bidho* Camp to be trained in modern musical instruments together with disabled fighters. Two years later, in 1985, a female trainer was put in charge of the band. Her name was Atsede Mesfin.



Fig. 77 Bana Harnet in front of Cinema Asmara, 1999.
Front row, far right: Atsede Mesfin.

Atsede has remained one of the most versatile women of her generation. An actress, singer, musician, and music teacher, a published author of short stories, writer of film scripts and producer of video films, she has been involved in many areas of cultural expression, except for the fine arts. Atsede and her younger sister Kibra joined the EPLF in their early teens in pursuit of their older brother, following the death of their mother. While Kibra was taken to the *Sowra* School for the younger children, Atsede was allocated to the Department of Social Affairs. After the Sixth Offensive, in which she served a frontline combatant, she was sent to the music school in the Revolutionary School, followed by her immediate assignment to Camp Solomuna.

I had been taught all kinds of musical instruments in the music school, especially the guitar. This skill I tried to share with my students. [...] In Camp Solomuna, there were thousands of women and children. When it was decided that they should have their own cultural group, a CT was founded in 1983. Some of the women were as old as 60! Most

of them did not know how to play instruments, so some men did it for them. When I joined them in 1985, they still had relatively little knowledge. [...] I divided them into different groups and taught each group a different instrument. The lessons took place in an open area, from 8 – 12 a.m., and in the afternoon from 2 – 4 p.m. Then they went to their academic classes. I had never seen such hardworking women before. (I 11).

Gradually, the repertoire of the group grew, featuring the well-known medley of local performance forms, modern music and dramatic interludes, with an emphasis on songs and 'musical drama'. The women mentioned Tigrinya and Tigre dances and songs pertaining to their own ethnic background, but also Saho and Nara performance material, their subject matters referring to women's rights, social predicaments, and the usual revolutionary propaganda. One play, '*Sidet*' ('Asylum') portrayed the dangers of trying to flee to Sudan – the female protagonist getting raped and robbed in the course of her journey; other pieces highlighted the injustice of favouring boys over girl-children. Soon *Bana* toured the frontline, the liberated areas, and refugee settlements in Sudan, equipped with a mobile stage and a banner featuring their name. If necessary, artists assigned to Social Affairs took care of props and stage design. Decoration, however, was left to a minimum, mostly in form of a hand-painted backcloth depicting scenes from the play. Instruments and more essential materials were enough to carry. In 1988, they embarked on a six-month tour, starting in Kassala, Sudan, then moving south to the Tigray region in Ethiopia, and back to Eritrea where the closing show took place in the port of Massawa. Hiwot Gebregiorgis recalled:

On the frontlines our performances were highly appreciated and in much demand. They always wanted to watch *Bana Harnet*. The civilians, especially those in the countryside, brought us sheep and goats and other things, whereas in Kassala the young people decided to join the armed struggle after they had watched our cultural performance. (I 13).

It was not only their popular variety shows that made them a favourite with both civilian and combatant audiences. They were also seen as the 'mothers' of the nation in support of their fighter 'children'. In contrast to female fighter performers, who had to resort to female-to-female cross-dressing to become 'traditional' women on stage, *Bana Harnet* were believed to be the 'real thing'. While embodying the achievements of the social reforms – self-determination for women and a voice in the public space – they remained in the realm of cultural

custom, especially as 'mothers', and were thus relatively non-threatening to conservative societal elements.³¹⁹

Bana Harnet guarded their newly found liberty against possible male encroachment. This included the taking over of male roles in plays which, for dialogue drama in Eritrea, was a novelty. The shows were not meant to have a comic effect (as in some post-independence examples),³²⁰ nor did the cross-dressing arise out of necessity as in the 1940s. (After all, there were some men in the camp who could have joined if the women had let them). More importantly, in contrast to earlier examples from Tigre and Tigrinya culture, the performers did not return to a 'normal' underprivileged social position on shedding masculine garb and gear. For *Bana Harnet*, the donning of men's clothes signified their independence and emancipation, as did theatre work generally. They were entirely self-sufficient as an all-female performance group, and by extension, capable of living a life of their own. Wearing men's clothes in the performance space was thus an act of proactive self-definition. Atsede Mesfin explained:

All performers had equal status. If we had 25 songs, there would be one drama and one comical skit. Since the group was entirely made up of women, they took on male roles whenever a play required. For *Bana Harnet*, there was no need to call male actors from outside. It was really attractive and interesting. (I 11).

I have no data as to whether audiences were titillated by the women cross-dressing as men, as has been argued for other theatrical contexts (Moore 1994: 1). Given that by then female fighters were often clad in skimpy uniforms, this seems rather unlikely. What is interesting, however, is that *Bana Harnet* performers only remembered playing men in positions considered 'inferior' in the field – an Ethiopian POW, a 'traditional' father unable to control his children, or one enraged about his wife bearing a girl. Among the nine plays I was able to identify not one featured a 'revolutionary' role-model male. A coincidence, perhaps, or a sign of the perceived inappropriateness of such roles for women? Or was this an

³¹⁹ Female fighters, on the other hand, were often considered a class apart and though revered for their fighter status, frequently found themselves social outsiders after independence, in particular, they were less 'marriageable' than their more 'traditional' sisters. In 2000, a fighter well-known for his cultural activities, expressed his dislike of 'the mothers' playing modern Eritrean music on electrified modern instruments, instead of presenting more 'traditional' performances.

³²⁰ During the Closing Ceremony of the Eritrea Festival in Asmara in 2000, for example, performers of the *Zoba Makel* (Central Zone) group presented a comic interlude with old men carrying infants, and bearded women beating up their husbands. The sketch was non-verbal and, according to Abrehet Berhane, veteran fighter singer who had performed with the group, had no deeper meaning than the provision of comic relief through gender reversal slapstick. See Matzke (forthcoming).

attempt at undermining conventional ideas of male superiority by omitting such characters from their repertoire, reflecting women's actual experience of men or simply focusing on the strength of women? I have no answer to these questions, but other examples have already shown that despite the social reforms advanced by the EPLF leadership, grassroots fighters and civilians still had some difficulties with the rapidly changing gender roles on- and offstage.

Performing Mothers in the Field II: The National Icon, *Ade Zeinab*

I have already mentioned *Ade* (or Mother) Zeinab as a singular phenomenon in the field, a radical individual who 'came to voice' in the liberation struggle to give life to the tenets of the revolution. Her rise as performance poet had been provoked by her rage against Ethiopian occupation which she channelled into voice and verse. Her now legendary declaration that 'even the stones are burning in Eritrea' provided the title for a historical study and a documentary film in the 1980s; while in 2000 she told BBC journalists that 'The fire in my stomach would have cooked raw meat'.³²¹ Born during the Italian colonisation and married during the BMA, *Ade Zeinab*, a Muslim Tigre-speaker from Afabet, had already been involved in EPLF grassroots work when the Ethiopian offensives of the late 1970s forced the liberation movement into strategic retreat. She describes her emergence on the cultural scene:

In the later 1970s we had complete confidence that the EPLF would liberate the country. We were counting day and night to see our dream come true. Then, unfortunately, the EPLF withdrew. We never thought that the revolution could withdraw so unexpectedly. We had established our councils and committees and our unions and then the retreat came. We did not understand its meaning. We thought our sons and daughters were destroyed by the enemy. We never thought we could survive the Ethiopian campaigns. This is when I started to say poetry. [...] I started to perform poetry when the revolution withdrew from the liberated areas and I stopped it after the Sixth Offensive. When it came to an end we were triumphant. My worries and anger faded and gradually I stopped saying poetry. (I 24).

Though she appeared in shows until the late 1980s,³²² *Ade Zeinab* 'formally' discontinued performing in the year *Bana Harnet* was officially established. This was the military and cultural heyday of the EPLF and, sensing imminent victory,

³²¹ Quote taken from unreleased BBC interview footage, Segeneiti, Against All Odds Conference, January 2000. My thanks go to Alex Last and Sami Sallinen for letting me watch the material. Cf. *Even the Stones are Burning* (1984), directed by Steve Levitt, and Pateman (1998).

³²² See, for example, *National Cultural Week* (1987), Part I.

Ade Zeinab no longer felt the need to perform. (When asked about the latest military conflict with Ethiopia and her possible come-back as performer, as had been the case with Asmara-based members of the *Bana Harnet* group, she replied ‘I don’t see any point in saying poetry about the *Woyane*. We don’t give them any value’ (I 24). She nevertheless agreed to take part in a show during an international conference on African languages and literatures in January 2000).



Fig. 78 *Ade Zeinab* at a conference event in Segeneiti, 2000.

Like *Bana Harnet*, *Ade Zeinab* fell into the ‘category’ of militarised ‘mother’ performers, a projection she clearly aimed at. ‘My poetry is about patriotism’, she explained to us during the interview.

It is about my children [the fighters]. Of course I don’t mean my own children, but I mean the children of Eritrea. Since no one can live in a country without people and no grass grows without any rain, I said many poems to encourage the fighters and mobilise our people. This was the only thing I could offer at these moments since I was too old to fight the enemy. I would have very much liked to die with my children in the trenches, but you know, old people, they don’t fit into any job. (I 24).

Despite their common ‘mother’ image, there were distinct differences between the *Bana* women and *Ade Zeinab*. The latter had a penchant for more aggressive, bellicose verse and, judging from the examples available to me, preferred military to social issues. Rather than styling herself in the manner of fighter CTs, as had been the case with *Bana*, *Ade Zeinab* followed in the footsteps of individual praise poets who had once accompanied warriors to the battlefield. (In 1997 Kahasai Gebrehiwot mentioned that in previous times it had been

common for musicians to accompany warriors to the battlefield and to encourage them by playing and singing; Richard Pankhurst describes a similar scenario, with particular reference to Amhara and Tigray women.)³²³ Her artistry did not need the guidance of fighter performers, nor did it need the sustaining environment of an all-female troupe. While *Bana Harnet's* productions were essentially communal affairs, *Ade Zeinab* worked on her own, driven by her fervent belief in the revolution and the power of her patriotic poetry. 'I have never performed other people's poetry, not even on special occasions. I only say my own poetry without anybody's help, because I say it whenever I feel it inside me' (I 24). This was unusual in a movement in which collective effort was preferred over the individual, even if the first steps toward acknowledging distinctive artists, especially writers, was about to be made.

If integrated into a show, as documented on a 1987 cultural video (in which she opened the all-night entertainment), *Ade Zeinab* stood out as a solo performer, her body erect in front of the microphone, her hand clasping a sword with which she accentuated the rhythm of her verse, while a number of younger women danced *shellil* to accompany her performance. The verve of her recital was located in her voice, not her body movement. Gestures and motions were fairly restrained, in line with socially prescribed gender roles for women of her ethnic background and age. Yet, there she was, performing on a portable stage before thousands of spectators. Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones, in their introduction to *Embodied Voices* (1994), have pointed out that the broader range of utterance, which they call 'vocality', not only encompasses language and linguistic content, but also the 'performative dimension of vocal expression' (Dunn & Jones 1994: 2). Having encountered *Ade Zeinab* live in 2000 and on various videos produced in the field, I sensed something distinctive about her performance. This, I believe had to do with the ostensible discrepancy between her lyrics and voice, as well as her physical appearance. In contrast to many high-pitched female singers, whose tones reflected customary ideas about gendered vocal qualities, *Ade Zeinab's* voice was husky and low, thus belying her fragile-looking body. Even for non-Tigre-speakers, her verse was pleasant to listen to, the merits lying in the interplay between metre and rhyme, evocative of a rhythmic lullaby, due to the guttural tones of the Tigre language.

³²³ Richard Pankhurst (1992: 259, 261), ECBTP 97/6.

While the vision of national liberation drove her to perform public poetry, *Ade Zeinab* was also a staunch supporter of women's emancipation. Still, judging from the examples available to me, *Ade Zeinab's* verses focused less on women's social than on their military achievements, as the following example confirms:

What shall I do about the today's girl? / She does not wrap herself with a *kani* [the traditional dress for Tigre women] and never wears gold jewellery. / She prefers to leave the home, / She attacks with the boys. / She never waits for her father with the animals / And never looks back to her mother who cries. (I 24).

Having deeply internalised the objectives of the EPLF, her subject matter was thus limited to nationalistic, especially militaristic, themes to encourage the fighters.

As the embodiment of the resistant mother, *Ade Zeinab* was an exceptional asset to the liberation movement. Married, a mother, and past childbearing age, *Ade Zeinab* had achieved what is traditionally achievable for women and hence did not essentially challenge traditional social structures.³²⁴ Leaving her domestic space in order to sing in public thus could not be seen as inherently 'dangerous', especially since she addressed issues officially condoned. *Ade Zeinab* kindled the fire of national liberation in poetry and song, which women had always done in times of crises. She also embodied women's liberation in a manner that went down well with the EPLF: an elderly, secluded Muslim Tigre woman who through the social reforms had discovered her voice – predominately to praise the revolution. When chosen as image for the annual EPLF publicity poster in 1988, *Ade Zeinab* became a twofold symbol for a 'revolutionary' Eritrean identity. For one, she was the epitome of the 'new' woman in Eritrea as embodied in the 'old' and revered; as a Tigre-speaking Muslim – and as such one of the minorities in the EPLF – she also helped avoid social division along religious and ethnic lines, into the much publicised split of lowlander Muslim ELF and highlander Christian EPLF at the time (Sorenson 1991: 310).

Since independence, *Ade Zeinab* has no longer been in the limelight. Whether this was a symptom of women's increasing silence in the new nation-state, as suggested by Schamanek (Schamanek 1998: 140), or simply a matter of old age, I was at first unable to confirm; having talked to the artist it seemed her own conscious decision. When, in 2000, *Ade Zeinab* was brought down to

³²⁴ Women in Eritrea usually achieve a higher social status by being mothers. To my knowledge, however, they cannot become 'honorary men' freed from feminine restrictions once past menopause, as in other African societies.

Segeneiti from her hometown Afabet as part of the above-mentioned conference, she appeared like a relic from the past, exhibited in an effort by the organisers to revive the glorious days of the liberation struggle at a time of renewed military crisis.³²⁵ During those former days, however, as one of the then most disenfranchised people, she had stood for the possibilities of a new national order which embraced both combatants and civilians alike.

Culture on the Ground II:

The Red Flowers Continued, and Musical Education in the Field

When the EPLF lost ground in central Eritrea in 1978, all schools in the liberated areas were closed.³²⁶ Most children who had been Red Flowers joined the liberation movement, with some of the older ones instantly becoming frontline fighters. The Revolutionary School was forced to change location and move to a safer area, first to Gelhanti in Sudan, later to Arag in Sahel. The military situation obviously affected the running of the school. The children were frequently on the move to escape Ethiopian attacks and air raids; sometimes they incurred casualties.

In Gelhanti children from various Red Flowers joined the *Sowra* School and formed a gigantic cultural troupe. They were now about 200 in number and thus too large to be manageable as a single company. Following the overall reshuffle within the EPLF during the withdrawal period, one-time CCT members Ali ya Asina and Estifanos Abraham 'Zemach' were assigned to the Zero School where they took over cultural work from Tsega Gaim who became a school director elsewhere. The two musicians immediately set about downsizing the children's group. In a most entertaining interview, Tsega Gaim recalled:

TSEGA GAIM: My colleagues and I in the Zero School had not been professionals. We were selected initially and we in turn selected students according to whether they liked to sing or whether they could dance or had a good voice. It was very traditional, I guess. Then the professionals came. [...] They tried to establish a 'symphony orchestra', a very large group. The children should become musicians and singers, play the guitar and the organ. They were selected to learn the flute and the saxophone and other things. So they were selected according to [the shape of] their lips. [She giggles].

³²⁵ Though impressive in demonstrating the variety of performing arts forms from Eritrea and other-African, including diaspora, backgrounds, the entire show had a constructed ring to it, with professional PFDJ artists performing as 'village elders'.

³²⁶ Pateman speaks of 150 schools with 30,000 students before the strategic retreat. Pateman (1998: 220).

CM: Where did they get all the instruments from?

TG: From Sudan and somewhere from Europe. I don't know. They didn't have all the instruments at the time. They had only one or two guitars and a *krar*, but they hoped that in future they would have this symphony orchestra. They were going to teach the children musical notation. And then, when all the instruments arrived, these people learned very quickly. Some students were crying at the time: 'Ali ya Asina kicked us out because my fingers are not right! [meaning: not long enough to play certain instruments]' [She giggles]. It was really terrible. [She giggles]. I don't know how this was supposed to work. When I see some of these musicians now, some of them are very short. [She giggles again]. (I 114).

While the establishment of a Big Band (rather than a 'symphony orchestra') during the struggle might have seemed an unorthodox idea – as were the trainers' selection methods – it proves that there was almost no limit to 'thinking big' in EPLF cultural work, provided it stayed in line with the ideological tenets of the organisation. (There were, of course, also stories of those who felt their ambitions were thwarted because their lips or fingers were deemed unsuitable). Given the dire circumstances under which the teachers operated, musical education was bound to show certain idiosyncrasies. The experience of Sarah Maidlow, a British music educator working in the Asmara School of Music in 2000, suggests that enthusiasm to explore new areas was high, even if music instruction seems to have followed a rather dry approach 'unaltered from the Italian model on which it was built' (Maidlow 2003: 6). While the idea of establishing a children's Big Band was not as outlandish an idea as it might at first seem – European-style string orchestras and brass bands had enjoyed great popularity before and during the Haile Selassie regime when they were meant to mirror the crown's 'cosmopolitan' viewpoint (Falceto 2001: 52-66) — not all areas of musical education could be covered. When queried by a British visitor in 1988, students knew nothing about the unfamiliar music they had learnt to play, 'a medley including Lennon and McCartney, Bob Dylan and George Gershwin on cornets and trombones donated by Italians of Eritrean origin'.³²⁷ The story, however, confirms that with the establishment of various EPLF cultural sections at Arag equipment could now be obtained via Sudan; often donations from the diaspora.

Despite certain incongruities, the creation of the 'The Zero School for Music' (I 103) had a great impact on the cultural work of the EPLF. Unsystematic

³²⁷ Kinnock (1988: 40). Kinnock's experience stood in stark contrast to the educational tenets of the EPLF which demanded adapting the curriculum to the social and physical environment of the students. Zimmermann (1990: 114-117).

as it might have been, the training provided many future musicians with the basics of – and love for – their profession, such as the Tigre-language singer Zahra Ali and the clarinettist Asieb Solomon.³²⁸ The Red Flowers were reconstituted with some 45-50 students involved in the scheme which combined the general EPLF teaching curriculum with musical education. Provisions were made for children on tour to keep up with their school work. Usually this was done by alternating the teaching and performance schedule of smaller teams who lived and worked together like a family unit. (When Asieb Solomon and other demobilised women musicians founded the all-female band *Shushan* (Lily) after independence, they realised that ‘our ideas were pretty similar. Most of us had grown up together. The time we lived together was longer than the time we had lived with our families’ (I 73)). Sometimes, the emphasis was on the arts rather than education. In 1983 the Red Flowers toured all of the liberated areas with their shows, comprising the usual blend of dramatic skits, modern music, poetry declamations and ‘traditional’ performances. Asieb Solomon remembered:

We departed from the field and toured the vicinities of Decamhare, Asmara, Tera Emni, Halhal, Haren Gedele and Ala. We toured on foot. Even Zemach who was disabled [he had lost one leg] came with us on the back of a horse. We toured for a year and six months without rest. Even before then, and even though we were students, we always had shows for the armed forces. (I 73).

Killion notes that the Red Flowers were dispersed in 1983 to help fight the Seventh Ethiopian Offensive (Killion 1998: 318). In March 1983 Ethiopia launched a surprise attack on Halhal, with heavy fighting continuing until June, in which many Red Flowers lost their lives. The survivors were deployed in various other (cultural) units, some starring in the celebrated 1989-91 Bologna Festivals. Zahra Ali joined the re-established Central Cultural Troupe, others were assigned as school teachers in the liberated areas,³²⁹ while Asieb Solomon was to take a two-year course in advanced musical studies. In 1986, together with two male colleagues, she left for Khartoum where she studied musical theory and learnt to play clarinet under Korean tutelage. Though language difficulties impeded their work – students had to extract meaning from a medley of Korean, Arabic and

³²⁸ Other girls mentioned were Veronica Solomon, Alem Okbai, (today a teacher) and three who did not survive the war: Yordanus Iyasu, Yirgalem Bahre, and Hannah Gebregziabhier. I 73.

³²⁹ Today, a number of (second-generation) Red Flowers are in the Marching Band; others, mostly first-generation performers, have become music teachers at the Asmara School of Music. The British music educator Sarah Maidlow has conducted research into their work; her findings are awaiting publication. Maidlow’s research also suggests that the Red Flowers were re-established in 1987. Maidlow (2003).

Tigrinya – Asieb was grateful to have been given this chance. ‘Our language of communication was the music. For us it was nonetheless a great opportunity. We were removed from the field for two years and were able to concentrate on our studies. It was a great advantage for us’ (I 73).



Fig. 79 *Asieb Solmon in Sudan, 1980s.*

On her return she was assigned to the Division of Music where she taught new members of the CCT musical theory and provided introductory courses to other departments. She also contributed to the creation of a musical curriculum in the field and translated musicological terminology into Tigrinya. While never gaining artistic prominence in the EPLF, like a number of other women, Asieb was still a formative influence on a whole generation of Eritrean performers.

Culture on the Ground III: Ethiopian Prisoners of War

The last, and perhaps most extraordinary group ‘on the ground’ I want talk about was an ensemble of Ethiopian prisoners of war (POWs).³³⁰ A men-only troupe, since female soldiers were not recruited to the Ethiopian army, they nonetheless played a crucial role concerning the representation of women, and the context of ‘en-gendering’ theatre in the field. Initially formed in 1981 to provide

³³⁰ Over the course of the liberation war, the EPLF captured tens of thousands of Ethiopian soldiers. Since the Derg refused to recognise their existence, and the EPLF was not internationally acknowledged as an organisation to receive help from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the EPLF was forced to take care of the POWs with their own inadequate means. The POWs lived in separate camps, produced their own food (as far as this was possible), set up their own schools and received ‘political education’ courses to identify with and understand the Eritrean cause. Killion (1998: 346-348).

entertainment for the detainees (then known as 'The Cultural Troupe of the Ethiopian Prisoners of War' with about 25 members), the group quickly rose to prominence due to their lively and animated shows. Renamed as 'Ethiopian Oppressed Nations and Nationalities Cultural Troupe' – which was divided into a drama, a dance and a music section comprising some forty-odd performers – they became popular with fighters and foreign delegates, and even performed at official EPLF functions. They also performed before civilian audiences, often as part of a larger show. Usually, they were on the road for more than six months a year, producing two shows per annum. The group only disbanded with Eritrea's de facto independence in 1991, ten years after its formation.

Coming from all over Ethiopia, the POWs, who had volunteered for the group, attempted to present a relatively comprehensive cultural kaleidoscope of their country. According to Eshatu Ebrahim, a POW turned EPLF fighter and then the leader of the troupe, artistic direction lay with the performers and was apparently not censored by Eritreans.³³¹ The programme of the group included the presentation of some thirteen Ethiopian cultures, among them Oromo, Woleita, Amhara, Gurage, Tigray, and Sidama. Songs and long-established dances constituted the bulk of the shows which required male *and* female performers; as did some of the plays. Without women, the POWs saw themselves with no alternative but to perform in drag. Eshatu Ibrahim explained:

ESHATU IBRAHIM: We wanted to show the reality of the culture. There had to be two opposite sides: a woman and a man. If you want to perform it just with men, it is senseless. So we tried and trained. In fact it was very hard because it is not easy to change your gender in your mind. [He laughs.] I remember there were five or six friends. They discussed how they could act as a woman. Someone said, well, let's do it, we can try. And they danced. It was fantastic! When you were at a distance, you wouldn't think he was a man! Perhaps you have seen it on the videocassette – they just looked like women. But there was no woman at all!

CM: How was it for these men? I remember some visitors saying that they were much 'sexier' than other cultural troupes. Knowing how strictly Eritreans adhere to their social gender roles and presuming it

³³¹ The EPLF has always stressed their even-handed treatment of POWs who were even given the chance to 'convert' to the EPLF after rigid ideological training, i.e. they could become EPLF fighters in the liberation war. Yet despite certain goodwill, in people's minds they often remained 'the enemy'. It should also be pointed out that most of the interviews were conducted during a time of war (1998-2000) or internal crisis (2001) in which it was difficult (if not outright dangerous) to criticise the EPLF/PFJD. Following the mass deportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia during the latest war, Ethiopian nationals living in Eritrea suffered a similar fate. I was surprised to find Ethiopians involved in theatre during the struggle in the first place.

to be the same for Ethiopia, it must have been very difficult. Did some men refuse to perform as transvestites?

EI: No, because there was no choice. It was just a need [necessity]. If women had been there, you wouldn't even have thought of it. But at the time we had no choice, we *had* to do it. (I 131.A).

The effect was striking and without any parody of gender, the illusion of 'authenticity' being almost complete (see Figures 80 and 81). The men were not only acting as, but 'passing' for, women. On video footage of the Second EPLF Congress in 1987 and various other shows, the performers appeared feminine and flirtatious; and they were evidently enjoying themselves. By cross-dressing and embodying what were considered to be very feminine mannerisms, however, they did not create the neat male/female binary Eshatu Ibrahim had been talking about, but something else, something liminal or in-between, even if categories of male and female were reinscribed in explanations. This posed a challenge to both artists and audience, possibly engendering unprecedented desires and, like *If It Had Been Like That*, also unease. Claudia Schamanek, commenting on a performance in the EPLF's Central Hospital in 1988, writes:

I found the situation bizarre. Male Ethiopian POWs played women, the spectators were patients, mostly war casualties. Some were lying on stretchers; one girl whose leg had been amputated was on crutches. [...] I think I remember that some of my Eritrean companions [sex unknown] mentioned that the sexual norms of Ethiopians were much more liberal and amusing than their own. (Schamanek 20 January 2001, my translation).

For the first time, the performers' sexuality and sex appeal were overtly mentioned in the spectators' responses, a topic usually off-limits in Eritrea and, according to Garber, also avoided in 'progress narratives' (Garber 1997: 69). Now, cross-dressed performers appeared to be subject to multiple layers of readings. Here it was not just a straightforward progress narrative of 'gender-sensitisation' as in the cross-acting play of Brigade 23, or of 'self-sufficiency' as in *Bana Harnet's* case. Even the interview with Eshatu Ibrahim suggests that, despite his insistence on cross-dressing as a 'necessity', artists experienced a certain ambivalence about their performance. Sabrina Ramet refers to the ambiguity associated with male drag when she mentions that: 'Watching beautiful women sing and dance is a delightful experience, but watching beautiful women who are really men sing and dance necessarily evokes additional feelings' (Ramet 1996: 7-8). Was there, as Kathryn Hansen has noted for Parsi theatre, 'an



Fig. 80 and 81 *Ethiopian POWs performing in the Central Hospital of Orotta, 1988.*
(© Claudia Schamanek, both pictures).

underlying homoerotic valence that linked the gazes of hero and male heroine on stage, and impersonator and male spectator in the theatre hall' (Hansen 1999: 139)? (Homosexual practices as such were denied by the fighters, but that would not explain away potential homoeroticism in the performance space).³³²

Did the transvestite act perhaps assert 'the common privilege of maleness' (Garber 1997:60) as has been argued for other (all-male) military contexts where drag shows were an inherent part of army entertainment? Or was the donning of women's clothes an expression of the POWs' longing for their homes, for beauty and tenderness symbolised by the embodiment of women? Was it perhaps liberating for the POWs in that it provided the playfulness that was lacking in their lives, a relief from having to act as 'tough men'?³³³ Obviously, I lack in-depth data and can only speculate about possible intentions or the reactions of the spectators. Could Eritrean audiences have read the transvestite act as degrading? After all, by getting captured, they had failed as combatants. To the audience the dancers were still Ethiopians; and though Eritrean fighters appreciated their shows, some admitted to having felt uneasiness about seeing the one-time enemy forces on stage. Being compared to a woman was certainly more of an insult than an endearment – despite the gender-sensitising social reforms – and thus 'befitting' for people covertly still resented and looked down upon. In his essay, 'At the Battle of Afabet', Alemseged Tesfai writes that '[f]ighters had the habit of referring to the enemy in the female gender. More because they knew it irritated the other side than anything else' (A.Tesfai 2002: 114). In the light of the above findings, however, this appellation appears to be part of a general devaluation of 'femaleness' rather than 'anything else'. David Pool, commenting on the civil war between the two Eritrean liberation movements, speaks of an infamous EPLF

³³² As in many African countries homosexuality is absolutely off-limits in Eritrea (cf. Aarmo 1999: 255-280). It is however rumoured that in the all-male POW camps homosexual practices were common. This was purportedly considered to be a serious 'problem' by the EPLF, punishable by the death penalty. Homosexuality is a completely underresearched area in Eritrea, and I have no concrete evidence for the report above. So far, I have only found a single reference to male homosexual practices in Eritrea. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, citing a report by the Italian Paolo Ambrogetti from 1900, mention 'age-based homosexual relations between Eritrean men and what he [Ambrogetti] called *diavoletti* (little devils) [...] [which] were pursued quite openly and tolerated by the boys' fathers since it was a source of income. After puberty, the boys generally began to have relations with females' (Murray & Roscoe 1998: 21). Whether Ambrogetti's findings were representative for the time, is questionable.

³³³ In the 1995 and 1997 community theatre projects the male actors obviously enjoyed dressing up as women which, according to Jane Plastow, they apparently experienced as liberation from their usually 'tough' and 'unemotional' selves.

song which ‘stressed the effeminacy of the ELF fighter’.³³⁴ Earlier on we saw that female impersonators in the 1940s had faced similar slurs. I cannot offer a neat untangling of possible meanings, but it appears that ideas of ‘dressing up’ (masculine) and ‘dressing down’ (feminine), which were rooted in older gender discourses, had again surfaced in the field’s performance space. Tellingly, the negatively imbued ‘dressing down’ was only applied to the ‘Other’ – the captured enemy soldiers and the rival liberation front. It is significant, as I mentioned before, that male EPLF fighters never donned women’s clothes in the war, not even in slapstick comedy, except for the purpose of camouflage to escape the enemy.³³⁵ Yet, earlier examples, such as the theatre of *Bana Harnet* or Afewerki Abraha’s play, confirm that theatrical gender reversals and (female-to-male) cross-dressing could indeed engender more affirmative ‘category crises’ which allowed for a redressing and redefinition of gendered norms.

Culture after the Second National Congress of the EPLF, 1987-1991:

Towards Independence

In 1987 the Second National Congress of the EPLF was held, this time attended by a considerable number of foreign delegates. Their presence indicated that the EPLF had consolidated new (inter-)national alliances, including Ethiopian dissident groups such as the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), commonly known as *Woyane* (R. Iyob 1995: 132). (More than a decade later, now constituting the Ethiopian government, the former TPLF was to constitute Eritrea’s opponent in the 1998-2000 war). Eight years after the strategic retreat, the EPLF had regained control over larger parts of Eritrea despite Soviet-backed offensives with recurring air raids and poison gas attacks, and a devastating famine in 1984/85. After the defeat of the Red Star Campaign in 1982, which had marked the acme of Mengistu’s effort to suppress the Eritrean struggle for independence, the EPLF had gradually recuperated, despite heavy losses among its fighting force. At the Congress, the military strategy of ‘strategic retreat’ was

³³⁴ Pool (2001: 89). Volker-Saad notes a similar song: ‘Dem Körper von AMA, der sich mit Öl eincremt, fehlt nur noch Henna, um eine Frau zu sein. (*Tägalalay ‘amma täwäwaday zäyti henna täریفuwo kekawwen säbäyti*) [AMA (derogatory term for the ELF) who oils his body merely needs henna to become a woman]’ (Volker-Saad 2003: 123).

³³⁵ Christmann (1996: 124), Schamanek (1998: 164). The only exception to this rule seems to have been the Kunama. According to Baumann, with reference to Pollera’s *I Barea e I Cunama* (1913), they are said to have had an officially recognized group of ‘Weibmännern’ (effeminate men) or transvestites in the past. There are no reports of Kunama transvestites during the liberation struggle. Baumann (1986: 37).

replaced by 'strategic offensive'. There were also a number of changes on the leadership front. Isayas Afewerki replaced Ramadan Mohamed Nur as the secretary-general of the EPLF, now imbued with extensive powers, including the position of commander-in-chief, while the core leadership was reduced. Members of the former ELF Central Command (*Saghem*) – the largest of the ELF splinter groups – were incorporated into the EPLF, including the one-time head of the Political Office for Cultural Affairs, Ibrahim Idris Totil.³³⁶ This indicated that provisions were made for a more pluralist Eritrea in anticipation of independence (with pluralism and multi-party system yet to become reality), but it also signified the concentration of power in the hands of a few. Ruth Iyob notes that registers which had featured highly in the past, such as '[a]nti-American imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric, and solidarity with international revolutionary movements [...] were markedly absent in 1987' (R. Iyob 1995: 132). Instead, there was a 'shift from defiant to conciliatory nationalist rhetoric' (133). All indicated that the EPLF had matured from a break-away guerrilla splinter group to an efficient pro-independence organisation to be reckoned with at home and abroad.

While performance arts in mass organisations and supporting departments were little affected by the new resolutions, the official culture sector was once again restructured to unite cultural production, mass media and propaganda machinery. As a result, the Department of Political Orientation, Education and Culture merged with the Department of Information to become the Department of National Guidance.³³⁷ Culture, schooling and ideology seemed indeed inseparably linked in the worldview of the EPLF. Despite the emergence of very successful female fighter performers, statistics from 1989 suggest that women played a relatively minor role in the new department. The percentage of women working in National Guidance was a meagre 1.7%, as opposed to Health with 55.2%, or 23% in frontline combat (W. Selassie 1992: 69).³³⁸ The majority of women in National Guidance were deployed as teachers (11%), rather than as artists (another 1.7%)

³³⁶ To my knowledge, Ibrahim Idris Totil did not continue to work in cultural affairs on joining the EPLF, though he worked in the front's political department. Among the *Saghem* members who joined the EPLF was also Zemheret Yohannes, the future Head of the PFDJ Research and Documentation Department. Pool (2001: 87), Killion (1998: 89, 254, 355-356, 365), Pateman (1998: 111, 122, 139, 144), R. Iyob (1995: 132).

³³⁷ The Department of National Guidance existed until 1991/92, when it was renamed the Department of Information and Culture, followed by the establishment of a proper Ministry of Information and Culture on formal independence. The Ministry was restructured in 1995.

³³⁸ A senior cultural officer doubted the validity of the statistic with regard to the Department of National Guidance; indeed he was convinced that there was tendency to give preference to women. Regrettably, I was unable to find data that would confirm his view.

or workers in photography, video and film (1.5%). News writers or women in Documentation were a mere 0.2%, as opposed to 96.7% midwives and 87.5% OR [Operation Room] technicians in Health (W. Selassie 1992: 70).

The production process and shows of the Central Cultural Troupe essentially remained the same after the Second Congress; its organisation, however, needed to be adjusted to the improved situation in the field. Increasingly, artists were required to perform in more than one location; from 1989, they not only toured neighbouring countries, but also performed at the Bologna Festival. To meet the demand, the CCT was evenly split into two. Solomon Tsehaye explained:

It was really a waste to move all these people at the same time. Waste of resources, waste of everything, waste of talent even. One might not be able to sing amongst a group of ten or fifteen. To be more productive and creative, we divided them into two: one was called *Hayot* [Tigre: renaissance] the other *Warsa* [Tigrinya: heir, heritage]. They prepared their own programmes and it went very well. There was competition amongst them. (I 103).

Abrehet Ankere, who became a member of the *Warsa* group, confirmed that they were divided 'to be more effective in mobilisation campaigns for both the army and the people. When one group went to Sudan, the other one would stay in the field. If both are in the field, one will show in Northern Sahel, the other at the Nakfa front' (I 95). At times, one group was on the road while the other remained in the rear areas to have their work documented on film or videotape, or recorded for transmission on the EPLF radio.

Naturally, there were moments when the partition was not strictly followed. With the beginning of foreign tours in 1989, performers from both CCTs and smaller military cultural groups were selected as official cultural representatives of the EPLF. Alganesh Yemane 'Industry', who went to Bologna in 1991, remembered that artists needed to be particularly versatile to be chosen for overseas shows, able to work as singers, actors, dancers and musicians. Generally, however, *Hayot* and *Warsa* worked separately, the former headed by Aklilu Daniel, the latter by the keyboard player, Iyob Habteab. The two groups were essentially musical bands; drama, as the more minor genre, was still administered by Literature and Drama.³³⁹ However, with audiences increasingly

³³⁹ Between 1981, when the Division of Culture was first reorganised, and the Second National Congress in 1987, several changes in the subdivisions had taken place. In 1984, the Arts Branch under Berhane Adonai had become a subsection of the Division of Culture, while Music and

appreciating longer plays, an attempt was made in 1988 to arrange for a drama-only tour, with relatively few musical numbers. The play presented was *Sedra Bet (Family)* by Bruch Habtemichael which dealt with the predicaments of an Asmara family – a widowed mother, her two sons and a daughter – facing repression for their links to the liberation front. The basic storyline was typical for the EPLF, aiming at an emotive pro-liberation struggle message: the fighter son gets caught in combat and is eventually executed, withstanding the temptations of the Ethiopian authorities and the pleas of his brother to betray the cause; the mother rejoices in her son's steadfastness, while the daughter flees the capital to join the fighters. The play was critically acclaimed and turned into a popular video, with several post-independence screenings on the national television station, ERI-TV. I have few details of the tour which, as far as the exclusive showing of drama is concerned, remained a one-off enterprise.³⁴⁰ It did however help pave the way for the establishment of various post-independence drama groups as part of the EPLF/PFDJ Cultural Affairs.

All examples in this chapter have demonstrated that in the mid- to late 1980s, cultural work in the field expanded enormously. There were also attempts at establishing a critical discourse on fighter culture, such as Alemseged's studies on 'revolutionary' drama and literature, and reviews in the cultural magazine *Netsebraq*. Formal and informal contests attested to the effort to develop and promote the various Eritrean arts (cf. G.Negash 1999: 187-192). In 1988 the idea of promoting promising artists in peripheral CTs and turning them into full-time 'professionals' on a par with performers in *Warsa* and *Hayot* arose. Division CTs in particular were known for high quality work, but with less wide-ranging exposure. It took until April 1991 until these issues were finally discussed at the first two-day Cultural Conference of the EPLF in Arerib (Orota). Solomon Tsehaye explains:

After the experience of some 15 years of cultural work there was a need in the organisation to evaluate what had been done, identify new areas of cultural activity and devise appropriate structures (both

Drama were merged; Literature became an autonomous subdivision. This changed again in 1986. Music (headed by Aklilu Daniel) once again became a separate entity, while Drama and Literature were reunited. The latter was now directed by Solomon Tsehaye; Alemseged Tesfai became the head of the Division of Culture. However, after the Second Congress, Alemseged left for a different job, and Solomon Tsehaye took over his post. Solomon Dirar replaced Solomon Tsehaye as the director of Literature and Drama. Conversation with Solomon Tsehaye, 8 January 2003.

³⁴⁰ According to Isayas Tseggai, the tour covered 'all frontiers of Sahel, the northern stronghold of the EPLF, and some places in the Sudan where more than 900,000 Eritrean refugees lived' (I. Tseggai 2002: 28-29). For a detailed description of the play see I. Tseggai (2002: 27-29).

administrative and operational) for the EPLF's culture sector. The issue of establishing a museum and promoting oral and traditional culture were among the topics discussed. Members of the various cultural troupes, members of other culture related departments and many interested individuals attended. Some high ranking members of the EPLF leadership also attended the conference. [...] All the women in the cultural troupes were participants. (S. Tsehaye 18 July 2002).

Among other matters it was proposed to re-divide the cultural troupes yet again. This time, the split was to be carried out along genre lines – music, drama and traditional performing arts – to avoid one discipline overshadowing another on stage. Tigre- and Tigrinya-speaking drama groups were to be set up, and a National Cultural Troupe established which would present and 'develop' the long-established performance forms of Eritrea, particularly since non-Eritrean instruments had dominated music in the liberation struggle (cf. Maidlow 2003).

Several ideas deliberated at the conference were endorsed for implementation in the following months. But innovations in the cultural sector were outpaced by those on the military front. In January 1990 the EPLA had embarked on its biggest offensive, overpowering Ethiopian defences in Semhar province and liberating Massawa, followed by the port of Assab in early 1991 (Killion 1998: 89, 158-159). The last major battle of the Eritrean liberation struggle started on May 19, 1991, near Decamhare, some 25 km south of Asmara, leading to Ethiopian surrender after only three days. On May 22nd, Mengistu Haile Mariam took flight to join his family in Zimbabwean exile; the following day his commanding officer in Asmara deserted to Saudi Arabia. Asmara, as the last Eritrean bastion of the Ethiopian forces, was about to be taken by the liberation fighters (Connell 1997: 245). On the evening of the 23rd, remaining Ethiopian officers planned a hasty retreat, their panic-stricken troupes scrambling to Sudan via Keren. Dan Connell, capturing the spirit of the moment, writes:

When Asmara residents in the southeastern suburbs saw the EPLF fighters entering at 10:00 A.M., they crawled out from under their beds and emerged from makeshift bomb shelters to fill the streets, dancing and cheering. One civilian produced an EPLF flag and draped it over the lead tank so there would be no mistaking whose troops were rolling into town. Others phoned friends across the city, sparking a riotous celebration throughout the tense metropolis before the Ethiopians had finished their helter-skelter evacuation. This made it impossible for the fighters to catch up to the escaping government forces and inadvertently prevented a last battle. 'It was complete hysteria!' said one Eritrean afterward. 'Nobody bothered to lock doors or wear shoes. Every resident was in the streets. People were dancing

a few meters away from the retreating Second Army as if they were in a dream. (Connell 1997: 246).

The thirty-year liberation struggle was finally over and people were drunk with excitement and joy. Celebrations went on for days. While people were partying and the challenge of nation-building seemed far ahead, those who had always been engaged in creating a 'revolutionary' society, quietly resumed their work. Solomon Tsehaye describes the effort, but also the confusion and errors, of the Division of Culture in the following months.

We did not know we would be independent so soon. [...] In fact, all the ideas of organising drama on its own and having a traditional cultural troupe – this had all been discussed at the conference and entertained before. When we wanted to implement them a month later, independence came. The situation was of course different after independence. Many things should have been taken into consideration, but somehow [some of these ideas] were translated into practice. *Sbrit*, for example, emerged as a result. We had always dreamt of having a group like *Sbrit* in the field. [...] Then, in July and August 1991 we had continuous meetings. There was a committee to see to the workings of the new structure. Back then we set up three drama groups, two in Tigrinya, based in Asmara and Mendefera, the third a Tigre-language group located in Keren. However, I still think we should have done more research instead of basing ourselves on the pre-independence views. [...] It was a dramatically different situation, before and after independence. The purpose of our struggle had been to make that change and it had happened. A change as big as that – we simply should not have passed it over like that. (I 103).

For Solomon, refusing to take the new situation into account was the main reason behind the partial failure of the novel mode of organisation, even if cultural production as such was not genuinely affected by managerial difficulties. However, cultural troupes in the army disintegrated, with the exception of *Walta* (Shield), a group run by the Ministry of Defence today. Some performers, especially musicians, now preferred to work on their own, unfettered by a central administration. A number of artists therefore decided to be demobilised with the first and second phase of planned demobilisation in 1993 and 1994; others left as early as the demobilisation office was set up, some six months after the country's liberation (Killion 1998: 155-156). They were allowed to establish their own bands independently, though permission from the government was required. Several very successful independent music groups emerged, among them *Alba* and the all-female band *Shushan* (Lily), both comprising demobilised ex-fighters. Drama and long-established performance forms, on the other hand, continued to

stay largely under EPLF care which, at the Third Congress in 1994, was renamed as PFDJ, The People's Front for Democracy and Justice.



Fig. 82 *Side Entrance of Cinema Asmara in 1999.*

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN AND BEYOND NEW FRONTLINES:

THEATRE AMID DEVELOPMENT AND STAGNATION

Since 1991, when the EPLF finally triumphed over the Derg and established a provisional government in Eritrea, a number of events have marked the country's social, economic and political developments: the 1993 referendum and the formal declaration of independence; the 1994 dissolution of the EPLF and its (re-) launching as PFDJ; various wide-ranging reforms, such as the introduction of national service for both genders in 1995, and a land reform programme which gave women equal rights as property owners. From 1994 to 1997 a new constitution was drafted by a fifty-member commission (nearly half of them women) which was widely acclaimed. Many of these happenings also influenced the Eritrean theatre scene. As theatre had been utilised as a means of communication in the liberation struggle, it now became a vital tool in the daunting task of nation-building. Travelling theatre groups presenting skits on constitutional questions were just one of the more obvious examples, as were songs invoking Eritrean unity, courage, and self-reliance. In 1995, the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project (ECBTP) produced shows on land reform and HIV infection; in the late 1990s health-related themes, especially the worrying increase of AIDS cases, became the focus of many drama groups. Yet more and more theatre work turned to less public topics, as seen in the rise of (melodramatic) plays about love and family problems, and the production of related video films. There were also successful productions of foreign drama; with international touring groups and consultants being invited to Eritrea.³⁴¹

Between 1991 and 1997, considerable efforts were made to infuse theatre with new spirit in an attempt to move (at least partly) beyond issues and aesthetics prevalent in the liberation struggle. The outbreak of the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia however brought most regular theatre work to a halt; in the political sphere the implementation of the constitution and the national election were indefinitely postponed. At the same time there was an upsurge in nationalistic cultural expressions, whether in music, stage drama, dance or poetry. A number of veteran artists from the diaspora, such as the *krar*-player Tsehaitu Beraki, temporarily returned to the country to show solidarity with the Eritrean cause; others decided to stay and make Eritrea their permanent home. One-time EPLF

³⁴¹ A. Tesfai (1999: 271-274), Pool (2001: 162-194), Connell (2002: 43, 348).

performers – now housewives, clerks or prosperous business people – returned to the stage, some co-opted by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, others to celebrate a comeback of their own volition. Groups long scattered were re-established, as happened with *Bana Harnet*, the former Camp Solomuna band. Younger groups rallied to the cause as well; and attempts were made to link (ex-)liberation fighters, *Yikealo* ('all-powerful'), ideologically with the new generation of drafted soldiers, *Warsay* ('heirs', 'inheritance'), in artistic representations.³⁴² Militarist iconography returned to popular art works and stage productions; a huge fist of papier-mâché – a relic from the 10th Anniversary of Independence Celebration – survived in front of Cinema Asmara until late 2001. All activities were aimed at uniting and strengthening the beleaguered nation against the perceived Ethiopian attack on its sovereignty. *Hade Lebbi* (One Heart) became an ever-present slogan, flaunted on banners, shop windows and as neon display. *Hade Lebbi* also served as name for a newly established PFDJ music group, and was turned into a popular song by the singer and guitarist, Abeba Haile.³⁴³

It is tempting to divide post-independence Eritrean theatre into two separate phases to date; the developments from *de facto* independence to 1997, and from 1998 to early 2003, covering the latest military conflict and its aftermath. The 'dramatic' upsurge of nationalistic articulations with the onset of the latest war certainly confirmed the link between theatre and politics in Eritrea. Yet it would be erroneous to suggest that the latter period has been a stage of theatrical regression as opposed to the earlier, more 'progressive' phase. While the latest military conflict led to an extreme narrowing down of theatrical topics, it also brought many (new or retired) artists to the fore. And while unprecedented forms of theatre were being tried out in the immediate post-liberation war period, they also clashed with (re-)emerging conventions and social traditions.

³⁴² *Yikealo* is someone who is capable of achieving anything. In the case of Eritrea it refers to the EPLF liberation fighters. The name can be traced to the Battle of Nadow, specifically Adi Shirum, when the combatants managed to break through the strong enemy trenches. At the time, the singer Wadi Tukul sang a famous song which said '*yikealo*' – anything is possible for you [the fighters]. *Warsa* means 'heir', someone who inherits the values, culture and customs of his predecessors. In Eritrea it refers to the national service soldiers, implying that they inherited the values and courage of the *tegadelti*, the fighters of the revolution. The relationship of *Yikealo* and *Warsay* has been a frequent topic of artistic representation, on posters, in plays during the National Student Festival 2000, and in form of a sculpture by the current Head of the Asmara Arts School, Feshaye Zemichael, which graces the front of an insurance building in Asmara. I wish to thank Mussie Tesfagiorgis for the linguistic clarifications.

³⁴³ The lyrics of *Hade Lebbi* were written Solomon Dirar, music by Abeba Haile. *Lebbi* was also the title of a play by Isayas Tseggai, written in 1988 and performed four years later, which dealt with 'the unity of the Eritrean people' (I 55). The leader of the PFDJ music group *Hade Lebbi* was Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiango'. A. Sahle (28 November 1998: 7).

It is beyond the scope of this conclusion to discuss in detail the theatrical endeavours, successes and failures of the past decade; rather I want to use this space to highlight selected developments and point to certain directions theatre has been taking: the work of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Education; the efforts of amateur theatre groups, including young people's drama work in schools, *Sewit* Children's Theatre and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS); the contribution (or lack of it) by parastatels, churches and non-governmental cultural organisations; as well as the emergence of a local video film industry. Most noteworthy, perhaps, has been the rise of independent women performers, though their numbers have remained few. Attitudes towards (women) singers and actresses had changed considerably in the EPLF and the areas long under their control; elsewhere, however, negative views often endured or re-surfaced after independence. Once the first euphoria about political autonomy had waned, Eritrea underwent a similar post-war gender-backlash to that previously experienced in other liberation contexts, such as Zimbabwe or Algeria,³⁴⁴ as the following overview will show.

Women in Post-Independence Eritrea

Several book-length studies on women's issues have appeared since Eritrean independence, as have a number of critical articles; all of them tone down earlier expectations of women's liberation.³⁴⁵ The increasing return to conventional gender roles has also been acknowledged by the government and various non-governmental organisations. Traditions proved to be remarkably resilient in the new nation, despite the EPLF social reforms. 'In post-war Eritrea', Dan Connell notes, 'custom remained more important than law, and the most powerful institution was not the government, democratic or not, but the family' (Connell 1998: 192). Initially hardest hit were the women fighters, many of who had to realise they were expected to return to diffidence and domestic roles. Demobilisation and reintegration into civilian society created many problems. Those unwilling to abandon their 'emancipated ways' often found themselves penalised or 'unmarriageable'; others with few or no children were seen as 'failures'. Male fighters were reported to be buckling under family pressure and to abandon their war-time spouses for 'traditional' virgin-brides, while symbols of

³⁴⁴ For examples see Hélie-Lucas (1988: 171-189), Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000: 145-149).

³⁴⁵ For examples see Christmann (1996), Schamanek (1998), Connell (1998), T.G. Gebremedhin (2002).

female delicacy regained new currency. Women's voices, bodies and spaces were not only curbed in the domestic terrain. As early as 1992 men tried to block women from post-war land distribution; and though women had actively participated in the government since independence, they were, and still are, under-represented in positions of leadership. This, by the way, has also been the case with women within the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. As in so many countries professional women often struggle to straddle work and family responsibilities which continue to be seen as a predominantly female terrain; female-headed households suffer additional problems, often lack of formal employment and educational opportunities, and higher levels of poverty.³⁴⁶

With the benefit of hindsight it seems that women's achievements in the liberation struggle have been overestimated in their (post-war) effects, even though much has been achieved on formal and legislative levels. Yet theory and practise are often at loggerheads. Many war veterans wistfully remembered the 'good old times in the field', when life was characterised by more equality and a communal spirit as opposed to the sudden 'rat-race' after independence. Female (ex-)fighters are also less influential on societal processes and have less role model functions than they assume (Volker-Saad 2003: 16). Yet often they seem better off than the average civilian woman, given their relative social privileges (especially those with close party ties), and their still commanding presence in many aspects of public life. The proud declaration, 'I am a fighter', habitually signifies women's claim to belong to a social elite, no matter what their economic status. Such expressions are unheard-of among the younger generation who defended the country in the latest war. Women veterans are also granted more social leeway than 'civilian' women, as seen, for example, in the greater number of female performers with a fighter background. The introduction of compulsory national service for both sexes has not really worked as a leveller for gender equality, neither has women's frontline contribution to the latest conflict. (Indeed, unconfirmed reports of sexual harassment and abuse in the military camps were rampant at the time, as were unofficial stories of an increase in pregnancies, some apparently deliberately undertaken to escape military service. Unverified as these accounts may be, fighter ethics were certainly less internalised than in the

³⁴⁶ Christmann (1996: 52-53), Schamanek (1998: 139), T.G. Gebremedhin (2002: 66, 138-139, 197, 219, 221), Connell (2002: 114).

previous struggle).³⁴⁷

Conflicts were also created by the post-independence return of refugees. Thousands moved back from neighbouring Sudan, often with few means and little or no vocational skills or formal training. Others came from the western diaspora, sometimes assisted by overseas repatriation programmes, and thus privileged by foreign capital and professional qualifications. Often, however, they were also alienated by their experience abroad, having acquired different habits and values and 'demanding a new and different kind of freedom' (Hoff 2000: 15). Karl Hoff, in a NORAD survey on the Eritrean cultural sector, reports that these influences have turned the country into a melting pot 'where illiterate Islamic nomads, business men [and women] from Canada or Germany, spoilt teenagers dressed like Bronx-rappers and intellectually trained people from Stanford and Cambridge meet; in villages or the urban cafes of Asmara where CNN and BBC bring the high-tech new world closer and closer day by day' (Hoff 2000: 15).

All of these factors have transformed Eritrean women into a heterogeneous group with much potential, but equally with many problems which would have been difficult to tackle at the best of times. Given the propensity to centralisation in Eritrea – an inheritance from the liberation war which has left little room for a non-governmental, non-militaristic civil society to emerge – the pluralism on the ground has not yet been met by equally varied efforts to diversify work on gender issues. NUEW is still the only national women's organisation, and rarely challenges party or government decisions.³⁴⁸ Though successful in spearheading a number of gender policies and legal reforms, calls for the NUEW 'to act as a vanguard for social change rather than just a service provider' (Connell 2002: 124) have continued. NUEW training and recreation programmes have often focused on 'traditional' female spheres, such as typing or handicraft courses as an income-generating activity (Christmann 1996: 89). While these are certainly useful pursuits for a great many women, numerous fighters did not see their needs

³⁴⁷ Volker-Saad (2003: 16), Hoff (2000: 15), Schamanek (1998: 150). The National Service in Eritrea consists of six months military training, followed by one year of virtually unpaid work (150 Nakfa per month) as service to the community. Since the latest war, the latter has often been extended randomly, given the country's economic difficulties. Teachers under 40, for example, have continued to be on National Service which makes economic survival for families without links to the diaspora indeed demanding.

³⁴⁸ In a 1998 article on women and politics in South Africa and Eritrea, Connell recounts the success and eventual failure of two NGO experiments set up by demobilised women fighters, both of which attracted considerable foreign funds. They were eventually closed down by the government for apparently 'duplicating' the work of the Women's Union. Connell (1998: 192, 195), see also Connell (2002: 116), Pool (2001: 183-184).

represented sufficiently, neither did the small number of intellectual civilians. The same can be said for female performers. When I visited the NUEW headquarters in summer 2000, cultural activities were few, possibly due to the still ongoing military conflict, but partly because they had never been a priority. True, NUEW had financially supported a number of projects by female artists and music groups, such as the all-women's *Shushan* Band which toured parts of Africa, Europe and the United States. NUEW had also supported women's arts and handicraft projects by Elsa Yacob and Fatuma Suleiman, and commissioned the aforementioned video film, *Eta Ade* (The Mother), to mark their 20th anniversary and honour the contribution of Eritrean mothers to national liberation. Yet permanent groups placed under NUEW had faltered post-independence for reasons unknown to me, as happened, for example, with *Bana Harnet*. The band was only revived by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs at the onset of the most recent war, when Asmara-based members insisted on contributing to the cultural frontline in order to boost the morale of their 'children'.

The PFDJ Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Education

Given the above developments and the overall tendency to centralisation, it does not come as a surprise to see today's PFDJ Cultural Affairs as the pivot for all official theatre activities. Located in Cinema Asmara, next to the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Education, it runs several music and drama groups and oversees a miscellany of on-going projects. Among them are the Raimock Prize Unit which awards the most prestigious national prize for various art genres each year, and the National Holiday Committee in charge of annual events such as the Eritrea Festival, Martyrs' Day and Independence Celebrations. The Cultural Affairs Bureau, on the other hand, is predominately involved in policy making, training and educational schemes, and serves as contact partner for foreign cultural institutions. Though the two departments are accountable to different authorities, they often collaborate, especially on larger events such as festivals and national celebrations. Both offices pledge commitment to gender equality and the significant contribution of women artists in and beyond the field. While having a great number of female performers under their care – many of them high-profile artists – none employs a principal woman cultural officer. This seems to mirror the general state of affairs. In late 1999, Lemlem Gebreyesus was the only woman

to serve in the middle management of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, as the Head of the Administration Office. While in a much more authoritative position than the numerous efficient secretaries, her job also belonged to the female-dominated service – not the male-run executive – sector. Lemlem was accountable for the smooth running of touring schedules and day-to-day organisational matters, rather than the artistic achievements of the various companies. Together with family responsibilities, this left her no time for acting or creative writing, which she had engaged in previously. By mid-2000, Lemlem would eventually become the second woman member (and first woman playwright) of the newly established Board of Directors and Writers in the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, together with Atsbehet Yohannes, lead actress and occasional assistant director.³⁴⁹ The Board was established in 2000 to relieve writers and directors from managerial possibilities. However, it seems to have been operative only temporarily; the house which served as their office is now being used for other purposes.

In September 1999, PFDJ Cultural Affairs director, Ibrahim Ali 'Akla', provided me with a list of eight permanent music and dance ensembles under their care; seven bands for modern music, and *Sbrit*, the National Dance and Folklore Troupe, for 'traditional' performance.³⁵⁰ Only one group, *Bana Harnet*, is under a woman director, Atsede Mesfin. While some of these bands are either semi-professional, such as *Bana*, or do work outside party circles as full-time musicians, most actors in the PFDJ Cultural Affairs have retained their 'fighter' status and are thus state employees. Experience after liberation has proved that professional drama ensembles independent of state structures cannot survive economically. If required, demobilised performers too can be called for shows, no matter whether they now work as business people ('Tanki') or freelance performers (Nechi Fesehatsion). It is obvious that those working with Cultural Affairs belong to an in-group of (former) fighters; and that it is as yet difficult for civilian performers to be admitted to their circle permanently. There are indications, however, that sooner or later this will have to change. PFDJ artists are increasingly involved in projects semi- or unconnected to the Cultural Affairs, where they perform with other, 'civilian', performers; *Sbrit* has employed a number of young dancers who do not necessarily have a combatant background;

³⁴⁹ In late 1999 the following people were members: Mohamed Assanai, Mesgun Zerai 'Wadi Faraday', Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiango', Demoz Russom who is the costume and stage designer of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, Angesom Isaak and Atsbehet Yohannes. See Appendix I: Performers for the set-up of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs at the time.

³⁵⁰ The list is incomplete. See Appendix I: Performers for further groups.

while *Abbot*, the Tigre-language drama group under Mohamed Abdella and Mohamed Assanai, has already voiced their need for new actresses, limited as they are to four veterans who are much in demand: Sadyia Yohannes, and the singers Zahra Ali, Zeinab Bashir, and Kedija Adem. Once bashful teenage girls have to be played by forty-year old mothers, a younger (non-fighter) generation of artists will have to be admitted to the Cultural Affairs.

Of the three post-independence PFDJ drama groups mentioned earlier, only two are still operational to date: *Arag*, directed by Wadi Shawel, which mounts Tigrinya-language drama, and *Abbot*, the above-mentioned Tigre-language group. All of their shows are managed by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, including tours to rural areas and the frontline in the latest war. Some 30-odd plays were written between 1993 and 2000, mostly in Tigrinya, some in Tigre; no other language seems to have been employed. None however has been written by a woman playwright, or produced by a female director.³⁵¹ Not all dramas were eventually staged; some got shelved, others produced as video drama. The list also includes some productions by the Arts Lovers' Association, *Mahber Fikri Sine-Tibeb* (MFST). Founded by a group of (ex-)fighters in 1991, it is said to be an autonomous cultural organisation, though working under the umbrella of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs.³⁵² Given that the latter also serves as contact partner for (often temporary) amateur theatre groups with no other affiliation,³⁵³ it can be surmised that further plays were mounted in Cinema Asmara and other larger theatre halls. No central record exists of these; neither is there a comprehensive documentation of plays by the Cultural Affairs. Before the onset of the 1998-2000 war, some 20-odd independent drama groups were reported in Asmara. Research from 1997 suggests that prior to the latest war theatre was also mounted in semi-urban areas or smaller towns, such as Keren, Tessenei and Decamhare; sometimes in languages other than Tigrinya or Tigre. (Many interviewees were indeed convinced that had it not been for the conflict with Ethiopia, amateur drama shows would have exceeded those of official cultural organs). Between 1992 and

³⁵¹ Some women told me they had written plays, some of which seem to have been performed. They were not featured on the list provided by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. See Appendix II: Plays.

³⁵² In 1999, MFST consisted of ten members, mostly teachers, journalists and university lecturers, all of them men. Between 1991-1996, it mounted 9 full-length dramas, various playlets for AIDS awareness campaigns and was involved in a whole range of cultural activities including the publications of novels and short stories. From 1994-97 the association was supported by the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, a body which would fund cultural NGOs, but no government bodies. *Mahber Fikri Sine-Tibeb* (1998: 8-9). FN 12, 15.

³⁵³ Most amateur theatre groups are affiliated to NUEYS or use their facilities. In 1996, Elias Lucas listed some 20 independent theatre groups in Asmara. E. Lucas (1 January 1996).

1994, Cultural Affairs ran an evaluation committee to preview amateur productions in and around the capital which received mixed reactions from the groups under scrutiny. While the Cultural Affairs stressed that it was advice they offered, not clandestine 'censorship', some actors were relieved to see the commission disbanded. Others however agreed that the team had primarily been concerned with artistic standards.³⁵⁴

The majority of Cultural Affairs productions have been original Eritrean works, except for the odd adaptation or full translation of foreign plays. Though few manuscripts were available to me, interviews and plot summaries suggest that most plays continued to follow the tenets of 'revolutionary culture'. Many productions looked back on the achievements in the field, others hoped to further the process of nation-building; all of them were patriotic in content. Few dramas were performed during and after the latest war; those which were could either be categorised as 'apolitical' plays (in form of moral fables and short comedies), or as more or less obvious war propaganda.³⁵⁵ All in all the main objective of theatre has remained awareness-raising and mobilisation. Women have continued to feature fairly prominently in PFDJ plays, especially in those addressing domestic problems.³⁵⁶

Exposure to international theatre has continued to be minimal in Eritrea, often in collaboration with locally based foreign culture bodies, such as The British Council and The Alliance Française.³⁵⁷ Other theatre experts visited

³⁵⁴ According to Isayas Tseggai, one-time member of the evaluation committee, some groups still ask them to preview their work, even though the committee was dissolved around the onset of the latest Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict. He also insisted that standards were often so low and that drama shows in Cinema Asmara would have been brought into disrepute, had the committee not kept an eye on the quality of these works. I 89.

³⁵⁵ FN 117, 118, 152, 164.

³⁵⁶ *Mengel* (Tigre: The Sin) by Mohammed Assanai was one such play, a family tragedy performed by *Abbot* in 1997. Hassan, the husband, has divorced Fatna (Sadiya Yohannes), his first wife, in order to marry the more attractive Muluk (Zeinab Bashir), also a divorcee. True to her negative image as step mother and husband snatcher, she mistreats Hassan's daughter, Jamila (Zahra Ali), until the girl runs away. Dejected, Fatna can no longer bear the misery and kills Muluk, before committing suicide. Other plays have addressed the practice of arranged marriage, betrayal or thwarted love. Often these dramas have resorted to melodramatic techniques also prevalent in modern popular video films. For a list of Tigre- and Tigrinya-language plays by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs see Appendix II: Plays; for a list and critique of independent plays see E. Kahasai (1999: 23-31), M. Assanai (1997).

³⁵⁷ In 1995 and 1996, for example, the Alliance Française sponsored two productions of Molière which had been translated by Amanuel Sahle into Tigrinya; *The Imaginary Invalid* (1995) and *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1996), the latter of which operated on the opulent budget of 200,000 Nakfa. The British Council sponsored, among other things, the Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project and the Tigrinya production of Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, directed by Jane Plastow, on occasion of the millennium conference on African languages and literatures in Asmara. FN 105.

directly at the invitation of the Ministry of Education.³⁵⁸ Since its establishment in 1995, the Ministry's Cultural Affairs Bureau has been the second public linchpin of culture. Above all it fulfils 'government responsibilities in administering culture at the public level and in schools' to ensure that all Eritrean nationalities are given equal chances to 'exercise, preserve and develop their cultures' (S. Tsehaye 15 August 2000: 1). Other long-term commitments have been the development of a cultural policy and the collection and publication of local orature, while helping issue propagandistic works, such as dramas, essays and poems, during the latest war. One of the Bureau's key concerns has been the organisation of training programmes at home and abroad. Solomon Tsehaye, the Bureau's Director until 2001, has stressed the need for exposure to other cultures to broaden 'the knowledge and scope of thought of the artist, enabling him or her to think universally. The creator of works of art must have a wider comprehension of humanity before he [*sic*] may be able to contribute to its safeguarding' (in Hoff 2000: 4). Under-exposure has always gone hand in hand with the problem of under-training in Eritrea. There are no official schooling facilities or qualified trainers for the performing arts; and although the thirty-year isolation led to the development of a particular theatre aesthetic, it has also impoverished the performing arts. Looking back on her first Eritrean work experience in 1995, Jane Plastow observes 'that although Eritrean cultural traditions were strong they were also thin. The nation has acquired something of a siege mentality and lacks the energy and vibrancy that comes from cross-fertilization' (Plastow 1997b: 392). In the mid-1990s, attempts were thus made to help the country build a cultural 'knowledge base from which to choose its way forward'.³⁵⁹ So far, two major long-term theatre collaborations have taken place, one with members of the Norwegian Playwrights' Union, the other with the Workshop Theatre at the University of Leeds. Members of the Playwrights' Union collaborated on several theatre productions and ran various training workshops;³⁶⁰ they also supported the

³⁵⁸ According to Jane Plastow, these theatre experts included Ethiopian directors who had been invited to put on plays in the mid-1990s.

³⁵⁹ (Plastow 1997b: 387). Karl Hoff, stage director, dramatist and initiator of the Norwegian-Eritrean partnership, too spoke of providing Eritrean artists with 'a kind of opening of windows into other ways of seeing, of thinking, of understanding literature' (I 101) and theatre arts.

³⁶⁰ In 1992 and 1993 both practical and theoretical workshops were run for Eritrean theatre artists; the 1994 training course had to be cancelled because the funding money got stolen. The most memorable collaboration was a stage production of *Jeppe of the Hill*, an adaptation of a 1723 drama by Ludwig Holberg which involved PFDJ actors, independent performers and, to the delight of the audience, a number of Ma.Te.A. veterans.

projected establishment of a similar Eritrean association which has yet to materialise.

While on the whole these activities have been worthwhile for both Eritreans and foreign partners, it appears that support for women artists is still lacking at times. In February 2000 two Norwegian experts, Axel Hellstenius and Jesper Halle, conducted a script writing workshop with 18 Eritrean playwrights, all of who had been personally selected by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. To my and the trainers' dismay – and to the regret of many participants – no Eritrean woman was present.³⁶¹ Some of the purported playwrights were journalists, rather than creative writers, or worked as administrators in the Ministry's Cultural Affairs. This is not to discredit their potential talent; rather it was striking that aspiring women writers – no matter how 'insignificant' their creative output thus far – had simply not been considered in the first place. It somehow appeared that being an 'author' was linked to 'authority', and that attitudes towards female writers were still patronising, that they were granted less 'voice' than the men.³⁶² There was also the nagging suspicion that some possible candidates had not been admitted because they no longer belonged to the cultural caucus of the PFDJ, or had never done so in the first place.

It is of course wrong to draw general conclusions from a single incident. Both the PFDJ Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Education have, in their own way, furthered and supported the creativity of artists, men and women alike. Yet it is undeniable that they have also sought to monitor the country's artistic output. It is crucial to understand that virtually all international cultural co-operation has been directed through government or party channels, occasionally also through the mass organisations which are affiliated to the government. This has necessarily shaped the work on the ground. While in the first post-independence period there was more openness towards outside influences and new ideas, internal and external conflicts in recent years have often be a hindrance to theatre work in Eritrea. There has also been an increasing tendency to view all input from the outside as 'interference', especially in politics

³⁶¹ The only exception was an African-American artist, Star, who happened to be travelling in the country and had asked to join the workshop.

³⁶² I heard several denigrating remarks about women writers, mostly in passing. One independent woman artist, for example, with songs, short stories and film scripts to her credit was dismissed by a cultural officer as 'Oh yes, we know her'. Another performer who had her drama mounted by the PFDJ was not mentioned on the official list given to me by the Cultural Affairs (which, of course, could also have been an oversight). Potential female participants of the playwriting workshop in 2000 were angry that they had not been invited.

and development co-operation.³⁶³ With the outbreak of the latest Eritrean-Ethiopian war, most international collaboration was suspended and artists returned to propaganda work. While this was understandable given the situation, internal dissent at the end of the war impeded a new beginning for the performing arts. In September 2001 the government clamped down on increasingly critical voices from within its own echelons. Eleven members of the National Assembly, all of them senior liberation fighters, were arrested for having published an open letter to the President requesting democratic reforms, among them the former Foreign Minister and Head of Political Orientation, Education and Culture, Haile Woltensae 'Dru'. These are poor conditions for unfettered theatre work. Private news media were also shut down and ten journalists (including some theatre activists) detained; dozens of other critics of the government have since then been arrested. When Jane Plastow, the director of the Eritrea Community-Based Theatre Project, had first come to Eritrea in 1995, she recalled that 'the crucial pre-condition was that the theatre produced must be free to say whatever it felt was necessary' (Plastow 1998: 98). Elsewhere she wrote that 'the intention of the new government was to promote a wide range of arts and to encourage an arts establishment independent of state control and support' (Plastow 1997b: 387). Theatre was meant for the genuine 'empowerment' of 'the people'. While, on close scrutiny this had never been truly the case – theatre always having been 'for', rather than 'with' the people³⁶⁴ – conditions deteriorated in the new millennium. Hoff astutely observes that 'many artists in Eritrea now live with an ethical pressure of utilising their talents to the benefit of the nation-building process, in the service of unifying the people, the ethnic groups of the country, serving the cause of the freedom struggle, the common goal of independence and peace' (Hoff 2000: 17). Very rarely do they concentrate 'on cultivating their own inner visions and emotions, in their expressions' (17), and those who do have

³⁶³ Connell, for example, describes the deteriorating relationship between the Eritrean government and overseas NGOs before the latest war, the former distrusting the latter 'as vehicles for foreign intervention' (Connell 2002: 122, 355-358).

³⁶⁴ Many participants of the 1995 training workshop, for example, had been employees of the PFDJ Cultural Affairs; those outside their circles rarely continued to work in (community) theatre once the project was over, partly because of a lack of infrastructure for such work. Those who did became part of the official cultural establishment; very few managed to forge an independent performance career. Play themes and motifs, though based on participants' suggestions, often reflected official policies such as land reform and AIDS awareness programmes. Compare also with what Connell notes for the first two years after the liberation struggle: 'Much was done *for* the people in this period, but little was done *with* or *through* them. As so often happens when a revolutionary moment seizes power, the people became the objects of programs rather than the agents of their own development' (Connell 2002: 42).

mostly returned from abroad. This has led to a narrowing of cultural expression, and has virtually eliminated any form of critique. A cultural milieu in which ‘debate on politics and the relation between the political and the artistic’ (Rohmer 1999: 259) is encouraged – as described by Rohmer for Zimbabwe in the early 1990s – has become unthinkable in Eritrea at the present time. Though ‘self-reliance’ and ‘people’s participation’ are invoked perpetually – not only in politics, but also in the cultural sphere (cf. A. Sahle 13 November 1999) – not much room is given to genuinely ‘free’ articulation. Whether implicitly imposed, a form of self-censorship or simply an unawareness of other possibilities (given the artists’ previous isolation), plays, songs and other creative expressions continue to revolve around the same ideas, often in hagiographic exaltations of the nation’s achievements. (Indeed, one promising young woman writer complained that people ‘don’t want you to write about women’s issues, poverty and other sensitive subject matter. They only want you to write about “freedom” and “liberation”’.) Social criticism seems acceptable only with regard to the private domain – as seen in plays on divorce and arranged marriages, or in HIV/AIDS campaign plays warning against promiscuous behaviour. While Letiyesus in *The Other War* had been a complex, though not uncontroversial, character, one-dimensional portrayals of the self-effacing, sacrificing mother now returned. *Eta Ade*, for example, the aforementioned Raimock-prize-winning video produced for the 20th anniversary of the Women’s Union, combined the heroic stories of many women during the liberation struggle embodied in the character of a Mother Supreme (A. Sahle 14 November 1999: 7). A technically accomplished film with a strong story line, it nonetheless lacked the critical edge found, for example, in Alemseged’s plays. Theatre in Eritrea seems to have been (re-)domesticated, like so many women fighters after the liberation war.

Karl Hoff has rightly pointed out that ‘the problem has been the unity of the nation, the fear of expressing critical or different opinions, and this creates a kind of hollowness in the dramatic expression which can lead to a simplification of reality and a superficial, even somewhat violent, description of life’ (I 110). Sebastian Saad, facilitator of a 1996 theatre-for-development project among returnees from Sudan, likewise confirmed that participants were reluctant to voice their views for fear of offending the authorities.³⁶⁵ Such propensities naturally

³⁶⁵ Saad (1997a: 50), (1997b: 7). Plastow did not record such incidents.

affect the unhindered expansion of the performing arts on both 'official' and 'independent' levels.

While these developments are very regrettable, some areas of theatre arts have continued to prosper prior to, during, and after the latest war, especially school drama and young people's theatre, as well as local video film, the latter of which can only be mentioned in passing. Both areas have kept conspicuously to private issues such as love stories and family matters, or (health-related) campaign theatre, whilst following the overall trend towards anti-Ethiopian propaganda during the latest war. Even if topics have been limited, both fields have opened up unprecedented opportunities for women, especially younger performers.

School Drama and Young People's Theatre

This is not the place to enlarge upon school and young people's drama in Eritrea; yet it is crucial to recognise its significance in the post-independent theatre scene. Four major agents can be identified in this area: secondary schools, assisted mostly by the Ministry of Education; the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), by far the most active organisation in this field; *Sewit* Children's Theatre run by demobilised EPLF veterans; and, to a lesser extent, religious establishments of all denominations. The latter's pursuits tend to be sporadic, often limited to one-off religious playlets mounted on holy days (see Figures 83 and 84). There have also been theatre activities in Sawa, the national military training camp in the western lowlands, which seemed to have increased during the latest war. While interviews from 1997 suggest that most drama at Sawa was crude agit-prop reminiscent of EPLF entertainment before the strategic retreat, plays mounted by young soldiers at the 2000 Eritrea Festival – written and rehearsed during lulls in fighting – almost matched the professional shows by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Young people's theatre in the military certainly calls for further investigation.

All the same, the primary location for children's initial contact with theatre has remained the school compound. Though still an extracurricular activity, and hence given less weight than other subjects, drama activities in schools have continued to be as influential on potential theatre enthusiasts as they had been during the BMA. Plays are usually performed at parents' day, school ceremonies or graduation celebrations. For the most part educational in nature, they are largely accepted by families. Theatre activities beyond the school gates, however,



Fig. 83 *A group of young people rehearsing plays for Easter on the premises of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Asmara, 2000.*



Fig. 84 *A play on the back of a truck during Meskel, an important religious celebration of the Orthodox Church.*

are often viewed with suspicion, a potential threat to the innocence of their daughters, or so it seems. (One girl I interviewed had to make up excuses every time she went to her local amateur drama club, whereas her brother was allowed to join freely). Given that my research has been qualitative rather than quantitative in method, it is difficult to come up with accurate figures regarding gender participation. Interviews with pupils and teachers from all over Eritrea during the 2000 National Student Festival (see Figure 85) however suggest that the involvement of girls is still lower than that of boys; and that it tends to deteriorate with each grade, corresponding to the declining numbers of female students.³⁶⁶ Even today boys are sometimes reported to be playing female roles for lack of girls (as was said to have happened in Mendefera, for example), though this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Wherever girls are involved in theatrical presentations, they are said to be given equal chances and responsibilities. By and large, this has been confirmed by the female interviewees.³⁶⁷ In line with the gender distribution at the PFDJ Cultural Affairs, however, girls seem to favour acting over directing and playwriting. Yet there are also those who have been honing their creative writing and directing skills, which indicates that women can indeed progress as playwrights and directors, even if the odds are against them.³⁶⁸

While this is encouraging news, it also brings up once more the troubled area of theatre training in Eritrea. As in the professional performing arts, there have been few opportunities for theatre tuition in the educational system. A Theatre-in-Education workshop run by the ECBTP in 1996 has remained a one-off event so far, largely because of the latest military crisis. Teachers are usually well-meaning, but often inexpert at mounting shows; and rarely can they encourage female students prohibited to join in by their families. While drama

³⁶⁶ In April 2000 an enrolment statistics of the previous year was published in *Newsletter of The British Council*, stating that nationwide 45.2 % of all elementary pupils were girls, as opposed to a mere 39.4% in secondary schools. In secondary schools their enrolment levels ranged from 25% in Gash Barka to 46% in Zoba Makel (the Central Zone in and around the capital). In October 2000 the *Newsletter* featured figures from the University of Asmara: Of 3864 day-time students in the academic year 1998/99 only 525 had been female.

³⁶⁷ The girls I interviewed at the National Student Festival, came from Zoba Anseba (with Keren as the regional capital) and Zoba Makel (the Central Zone around Asmara). They were Tigrinya-, Tigre- and Bilen-speakers of both Christian and Muslim backgrounds. I 80, I 81, I 83, I 84.

³⁶⁸ One such example was an exceptionally bright secondary student of Muslim background who I met at the National Student Festival in 2000. At the time she had just given a convincing performance with the drama group of her school. In 2003, now a twenty-year-old student at the university, she had won the 3rd prize for her own plays at the Zoba Makel Student Festival in the previous year, followed by an invitation to join a six-month drama course of the Ministry of Education. I 84, FN 177.



Fig. 85 *Theatre performance at the National Student Festival, 2000.*



Fig. 86 *Theatre Practice at NUEYS, Central Zone, Asmara, 2000.*

competitions on regional and national levels have worked as incentives for theatre activities in schools,³⁶⁹ many students prefer to join private drama clubs in their leisure time in order to broaden their experience. The majority of amateur groups are supported by NUEYS, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, which caters for the requirements of young people aged 14 to 35 (see Figure 86). With some 135,000 active members throughout the nation, NUEYS is one of the largest national NGOs with branches in all Eritrean regions. Initiator of numerous projects and campaigns, NUEYS has always tried to enable 'youths and students to become aware of their importance in the society as a source of creative energy' (NUEYS [2000], 1). They also have a good record of gender awareness, judging from their gender sensitising and other educational programmes; girls seem as keen as boys to join their theatre courses. A NUEYS fact sheet from 2000 stated that about 800 adolescents had received training in art, drama and literature (3); other activities included musical bands, theatre performances, puppetry, clowning and acrobatics (Hoff 2000: 28). Most amateur drama clubs are given free access to NUEYS facilities, though practical advice is rarely available; theatre training is provided whenever the opportunity arises. In 1995, for example, NUEYS offered a six-month drama training course in Keren which was conducted in Arabic; in 1996 two courses were held in the capital on 'developmental' and 'classical' theatre over a period of one year. Four years later, one of the then participants conducted similar classes for some 150 students. Whatever the scope of tuition, however, it does not yet meet demand. The lack of (formal) qualification of many trainers is also a source of difficulty, while skilled input from abroad is erratic because of the costs involved.³⁷⁰

Notwithstanding these problems, NUEYS seems to be the biggest institution capable of accommodating young performance talent, for girls and boys alike. They also have the largest infrastructure at their disposal, which could be useful should nationwide theatre programmes be revived or new ones be established.

³⁶⁹ Drama competitions have largely been organised by the Ministry of Education as part of regional or national student festivals; there are also examples of private bodies, such as the Eritrean Pharmaceutical Association (ERIPA) which sponsored the stage reproduction of an educational video film on sexually transmitted diseases, *Self-Deceit*, in secondary schools. I 61, I 88.

³⁷⁰ In 2000, for example, two Kenyan community experts, Jack Omondi and Rusuf Eshuchi from C.H.A.P.S., Community Health Awareness Puppeteers, held a workshop on puppetry, while a UNICEF consultant from Tanzania, Richard Mabala, agreed to work with NUEYS students on their AIDS plays. FN 52, FN 70, FN 87, I 84, ECBTP 97/23.

Last but not least, *Sewit* Children's Theatre in Asmara must be mentioned here. With some 20 to 30 members, it is a much more exclusive affair than the NUEYS drama courses. Established in 1994 by two experienced EPLF veterans, Isayas Tseggai and Feshaye Yohannes 'Joshua',³⁷¹ *Sewit* is committed to quality training for children as potential professionals in all areas of the performing arts (see Figures 87 and 88). One unusual factor has been the involvement from the very beginning of associated theatre experts, such as the singers Fayitinga and Kedija Adem, or the actress Nechi Fesehatsion (the most quoted female role model for aspiring performers). Details of the history and work of *Sewit* will have to be dealt with elsewhere;³⁷² here it should just be noted that their efforts to provide a skilled training environment have already shown results. Members of the group have been called for professional engagements, particularly video films, while NGOs and ministries have commissioned educational plays and video dramas on condom use, landmines and disability. The initial reluctance of parents to let their offspring participate – fearing that their school performance would suffer or, worse, that their innocence would be abused when on tour³⁷³ – has turned into pride in their involvement. In the almost ten years since its establishment, *Sewit* has trained a number of young adults who stand a good chance of making the leap into the professional Eritrean performance world, should they wish to do so.³⁷⁴

Independent Women Artists

It is my contention that some of the older girls engaged in young people's theatre today will constitute the coming generation of female performers – freelance or as successors of those in the PFDJ Cultural Affairs. With independence in 1993 came the gradual return of non-military performers as had last been seen during Ma.Te.A. days. Civilian performances under the Derg had been mostly coerced;

³⁷¹ Joshua was among the ten leading journalists who were imprisoned after 18 September 2001 when all privately-owned newspapers were shut down. At the end of May 2002, the journalists began a hunger strike, demanding their release or trial before an independent court if they were charged with breaking the law. Their whereabouts are currently unknown. Amnesty International (18 September 2002: 11).

³⁷² Jane Plastow and I are currently planning a joint article on *Sewit*.

³⁷³ In 2000 Joshua mentioned that girls were often taken to work in cultural groups during the Derg regime, only to suffer abuse by the Ethiopian officers. This, he emphasised, was still in people's minds when they started to recruit girls for the children's theatre. I 91.

³⁷⁴ It is noteworthy is that some of the older girls have become indispensable to *Sewit* over the years and are now regularly consulted for their opinions. However, *Sewit* also lost a number of skilled female members when the theatre was temporarily shut down in the academic year 2000/2001, due to Joshua's imprisonment and Isayas studying for an MA at the Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds.

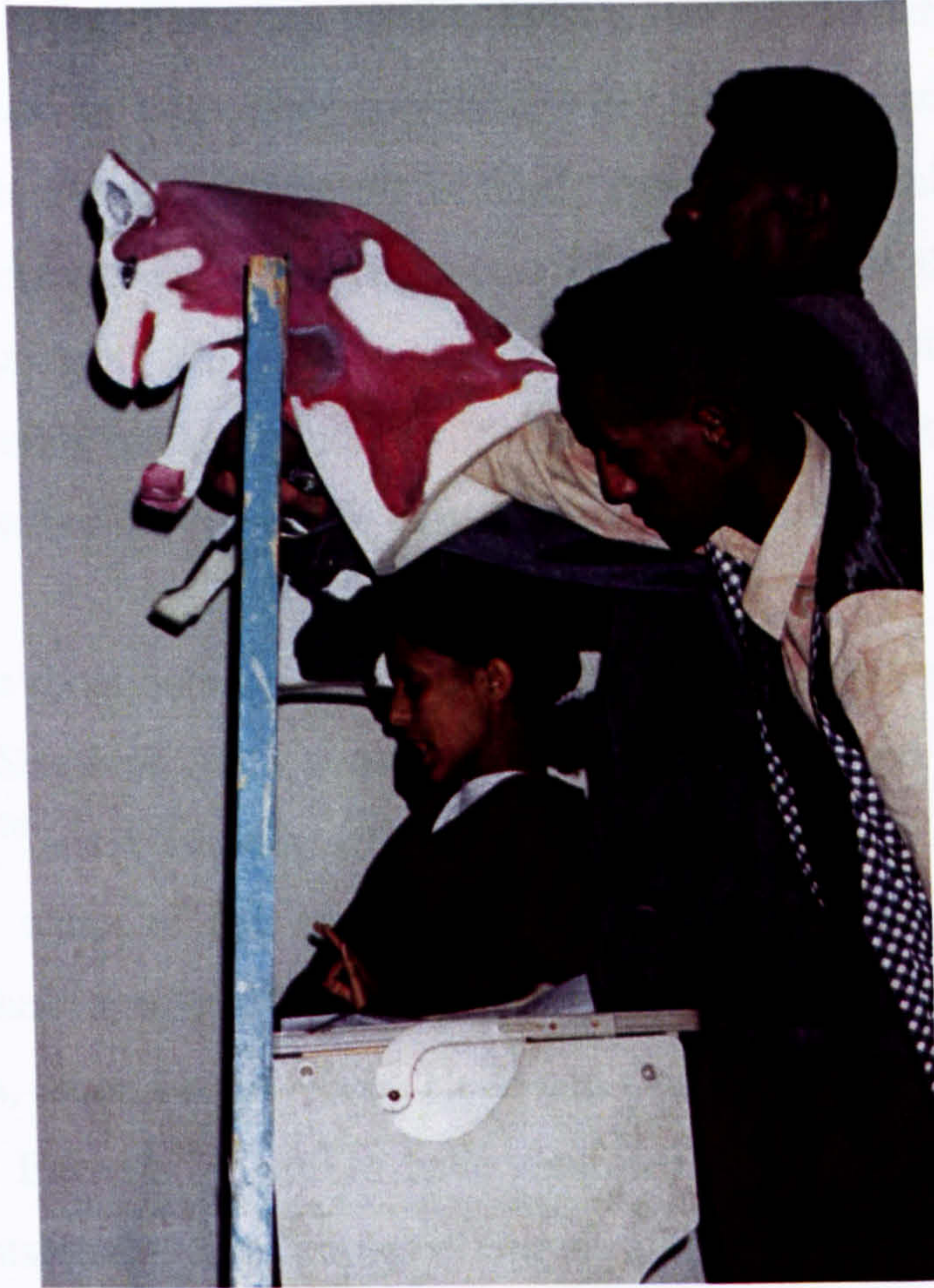


Fig. 87 and 88 *Members of Sewit rehearsing a puppet play on condom use, 2000.*

and better known artists had often tried to keep a low profile during this period. None of them made an immediate comeback after liberation, though there have been attempts at building a female performance genealogy by linking younger to more senior performers in recent years (see Figure 89).³⁷⁵ In the early 1990s, when post-war normality gradually began to return, 'civilian' artists were mostly demobilised fighters who had opted to work independent of a central organisation, among them a number of women. In closing only a few examples will be touched upon.

One of the most notable early music groups in the post-war period was the aforementioned *Shushan* Band consisting of nine demobilised women fighters (see Figure 90).³⁷⁶ Established in 1994, *Shushan* toured worldwide for a year, but disbanded when some of the artists were no longer willing to be perpetually separated from their families. Other band members had already begun to work on their solo careers, among them Abeba Haile and Dehab Fayitinga. Fayitinga is one of the very few Eritrean singers to have established a reputation in the 'world music' scene, outside the usual circles of diaspora Eritreans.³⁷⁷ Others, like the M-Sisters, Atsede and Kibra Mesfin, have predominantly worked on home ground, while distributing audio and video material overseas. In recent years, video productions have become a major source of income for independent actresses, demobilised fighters and civilians alike. There is a considerable market for Eritrean video films abroad – from the documentary type to folklore and educational plays, or the ubiquitous melodrama of unrequited love and illegitimate pregnancies – with substantial commercial potential. Increasingly, local productions are also screened in cinemas at home. This has opened a niche for non-fighter performers. Weyni Hareg Haile, Terhas Kiflay or Saron Berhane are just some of the names that have emerged in recent years. Weyni is an already established actress with both stage and screen engagements; Terhas and Saron belong to the up-and-coming generation that cannot yet make a living from

³⁷⁵ Helen Meles collaborated with Amleset Abbai on one audio cassette; she also covered songs of Tebereh Tesfahune. *Memher* Asres Tessema noted in an interview conducted in 2002: 'I recently heard some of Tebereh's old songs replayed by a young singer, Helen Meles. I was really happy about it – it makes them immortal' (K. Abbera 2002: 3). Abeba Haile also spoke of being 'attracted' to this music (Anon. 11 June 2003: 3). In early 2003, Angesom Isaak was involved in a traditional music project together with two former EPLF performers which consciously tried to make a link between older and younger women performers (see Figure 89).

³⁷⁶ The members of *Shushan* Band were Abeba Haile (singer and guitarist), Asieb Solomon (clarinet), the sisters Veronica (guitar) and Yordanus Solomon (base guitar and saxophone), Dehab Fayitinga (singer and dancer), Freweyni Tewolde (saxophonist and dancer), Almaz Berhe (organ and dancer), Tsege Teklesenbet (singer, dramatist, actress), Kedija Adem (singer). I 70, I 73, I 92.

³⁷⁷ Elongui (2000: 19), Grauman (2000: 12-14), Klee (2000).

ምጻመወ

አምላሳት አባይ


ጸሃይቱ በራሽ


አምና ሳልሕ


ከበደሽ አይንአለም


ግደይ ርስተም


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ንዘናጋዕ ብሃገራዊ ፍርያት



አለናልክን ወረሰናክን ይብላ አብርሀት ብርሃን ማዓሽ ሓለፋ

ምዕቃብ: ምስናድን ምዝርጋሕን ባህላዊ ዛንታታት ሓይ ካብተን እርባዕተ ዓበይቲ ዓላማታቱ እዩ።
ማሕበር ፍቕሪ ስነ ጥበብ ማ. ፍ. ስ ከም መቐጻልታ መብታዊ ስርሓቱ ንትንሳኤ ደቀንስትዮ ከረርቲ አበጊሱን አተባቢዮን እዩ ።

• እወሃሃዲ ስራሕ
ባህላዊ ጉዳያት ህግ.ደ.ፍ

• ቤ/ጽ ውጥን ምዕቃብ ባህላዊ ቅርሲ
ንትንሳኤን ዕብየትን ባህላዊ ውርሻ ኤርትራ ዝነጥፍ መንግስታዊ ትካል ኮይኑ እብ ምሕጋዝ ባህላዊ ንጥፈታት፡

MBY printing press

Fig. 89 Abrehet Berhane (left) and Measho Halefa (right), consciously trying to establish a link with older women performers (from left to right): Almeset Abbai, Tsehaitu Beraki, Amna Salih, Kebedes Ainalem and Ghidey Rustom.



Fig. 90 Shushan Band. Clockwise from bottom centre:
 Almaz Berhe, Yordanus Solomon, Veronica Solomon, Freiweyni Tewolde, Tsege
 Teklesenbet, Dehab Fayitinga, Kedija Adem, Abeba Haile, Asieb Solomon.

theatre.³⁷⁸ This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for performers just starting out: to find sustainable employment. Often established (fighter) actors are preferred to newcomers in the field, who are also less provided for by cultural structures of government and PFDJ. While generally having an optimistic view on the future of younger women performer, Tsehaitu Beraki has wished for official bodies to provide them with their own rehearsal space to help 'develop their artistic career freely' (I 2). Were it not for the unaccommodating climate towards new lobbying organisations, it would indeed be worth considering the establishment of a women artists' union which could represent their concerns.

A continuing problem remains the general attitude towards women performers, though their status has without doubt improved over the years. Saba Kidane, a young performance poet in the tradition of *Ade Zeinab*, for example, complained in an interview in early 2000 that people had deemed her a drunkard when she started presenting her poems in public (I 29). While (demobilised) fighter artists, too, struggle to negotiate family pressure, domestic responsibilities and their creative vision, it is still much harder for civilian women to escape the ancient gender patterns that have begun to re-emerge. As Weyni Hareg Haile explains:

Comparatively, fighters are still in a better position because they fought equally with the men in the field. Hence they do not face such pronounced problems from their husbands. But we, the civilians, we inherited the legacy of our mothers; being in the house, being mothers, cooking in the kitchen and obeying your husband. [...] My grandmother, who raised me, sometimes refused to take care of my children when I had an engagement. But my boyfriend (I am not formally married) encouraged me. In fact, had it not been for my great efforts to continue with my profession, I would have quit after I had the children. That has been the case with many of my colleagues. (I 79).

Her story and recent developments suggest that much remains to be done for the coming generation; challenging old gender patterns and public opinion, and helping create an environment in which social, political and artistic concerns can be discussed without restraint. This will be the responsibility of both artists and official cultural organisations, and requires openness from the public as well as the state. Given the current internal and external tribulations in Eritrea, and an

³⁷⁸ Terhas was the lead actress in *Tsena'at* (2000) – a film by Fitwi Tecklemariam that linked the liberation struggle with the recent war against Ethiopia –; Saron played the female protagonist in *Belessa I* and *II*, a sequel of rather sensitive HIV campaign films produced by the National Union for Eritrean Youth and Students. I 79, I 124, I 130, Hoff (2000: 35).

overall climate that *dis-* rather than *encourages* critical debate, we cannot expect an entirely effortless undertaking. However, Eritreans are known for confronting rather than submitting to challenge, and for walking the long road for the betterment of their society. It is to be hoped that eventually the arts will again be used for genuine intellectual stimulation among people of all camps and creeds, rather than continuing to stick to an anodyne agenda or, in the worst-case scenario, wither away for fear of offending the authorities. It would also be desirable if Eritrean theatre (re-)entered a constructive dialogue with international performing arts communities, not only to be exposed to other dramatic forms, but also to show the world some of the achievements of its own theatre.

As for gender issues, this study has shown that social concerns are strongly linked to cultural practices in Eritrea, and that both are inextricably connected to local political processes and the wider historical context. An enquiry into women's roles and representations in Eritrean theatre arts is unlikely to instigate immediate change in any of these spheres. However, this thesis has demonstrated the transformational potential inherent in performance and has highlighted the importance of women's involvement. By attempting to recover a 'lost' tradition of women's participation in performance practice, and by examining the various discourses on women and their transgressions in both modern and long-established theatre arts, I hope to have made a small contribution to a better understanding of the changing gender dynamics in Eritrea and, ultimately, to creating the conditions for a more equitable participation of both sexes in the arts and other public areas.

APPENDIX I: PERFORMERS

(Please note that these lists are eclectic and incomplete. They are but a small means to acknowledge those artists I was unable to include in the main body of the text.)

Early Urban Women Performers (*Enda Suwa, Secretos, Bars, Homes*)

Tsehaitu Berhe [Zenar], Fana Itel, Yolanda and Rosina Conti (*oud*), Fantaya Gebreselassie, Meriem Ibrahim, Abeba Woldesellassie, Aberash Shifera, Tsehaitu Beraki, Amleset Abbai, Catherina Tela (*gual* Mamet), Letenkial, also known as Teresa (both entertainers in Catherina's bar in Kidane Meheret), Bishat Gebresellassie, Abeba Ashafa, Guae Liay, Nigisti (X) and Alganesh Gerezghier, Valerina (*oud*), Teresa (*oud*), Zefun Selassie (*oud*).

Ma.Te.De.

Ca. 1948:

Yosief Giovanni, Gerezghier Teka, Kahasai (X), Belay Legesse, Osman Ahmed, Yohannes Ghide, Tesfai Gebremichael, Alemayo Kahasai, Akate Gebremariam, Abraha (Woldegebriel?), Estefanos Tseggai, Asefaw Fasil, Bereket Tekabo.

As re-established in 1953:

Male members: Alemayo Kahasai, Tesfai Gebremichael, Gerezghier Teka, Osman Ahmed, Estefanos Tseggai, Ali Said, Yishak Yosief, Abebe Tesfamichael, Arefaine Yendego, *memher* Sebhatu Tesfazghi, Obazghi Tesfazghi, Woldemariam 'Yambo', Gebremedhin Berhe, Tewolde Abraha 'Manchu', Abraha Woldegebriel, Teklehaimanot Mengisteab, Tedla Hagos, Mesfin Hailu, Haile Nemariam, Russom Bairu, Ghide Tseggai, Yosief Yohannes, Khasai Ayele, Ato Tikuu, Yohannes Ghide, Arefaine Gebremichael, Aka Gebresad, *Ato* Tseggai, Asefaw Fasil, *memher* Habtemariam Gheregziabhier, Berhe Tekabo.

Female members: *memher* Hiwot Gebre, *memher* Mebrat Gebru, Amete Solomon, *memher* Lemlem Ghebregziabhier.

Ma.Mu.Te.De.

Alemayo Kahasai, Arefaine Yendego, Osman Ahmed, Gerezghier Teka, Tesfai Gebremichael, Yohannes Ghide, Ali Said, Dr Feshaye, Belay Legesse.

Ma.M.Ha.L.

Male members: Alemayo Kahasai, Ali Said, Osman Ahmed, Tewolde Abraha 'Manchu', Atowebrehan Segid, Tekabo Woldemariam, Jabre Mahmud, Arefaine Tewolde, Abubabker Sheikd, Tesfamariam Goitom, Amserom Haleka, Tewoldemedhin Woldeselassie, Kahasai Ghirmasion, Habte Demoz, Ramadan Mohamed, Ibrahim Mahmud,. Gebremeskel (X), Tesfaldet Andimeskel (first chairman).

Female members: Pierina Allegri, Sofia Ali, Tiebe (X), Elsa (X), Alganesh Solomon, Amleset Abbai.

Ma.Te.A.

Ca. 1961:

Male members: Tewolde Redda, Tekabo Woldemariam, *memher* Kahasai Bezaber, *memher* Abebe Iyasu, Atowebrehan Segid, Tesfaldet Marcos, Jabre Mahmud, Abraha Gebretensae, Asmerom Woldentesai, Alemayo Kahasai, Asres Tessema, Tewolde 'Manchu, Abraha G/medhin, Araya Belay, Abbai Alemu.

Female members: Ethiopia Medhanie, Genet Teferi, Tsehainesh (X), Hiwot Tedla,

1965:

Male members: Alemayo Kahasai (president, comedian), Tewolde Redda (vocals, musician), Tekabo Woldemariam (vocals), Asmerom Woldetensae (vocals), Asres Tessema (treasurer, musician), Araya Belay (dancer), Abebe Iyasu (comedian, drummer), Haile Tekleberhan (dancer), Solomon Gebregziabhier (comedian), Tewolde Abraha 'Manchu' (vocals, musician) Jabre Mahmud (vocals, drums), Alamin Abdulatif (vocals, dancer), Gebrehiwot Keleta (musician), Abraha Gebretensae (vocals), Tesfamichael Keleta (musician), Bashir Nur (dancer), Berhane Michael (musician), Embayo Amha (musician).

Female members: Ethiopia Medhanie (vocals, dancer), Teberesh Tesfahunei (vocals, dancer), Letebrehan Dagneu (dancer), Alganesh Kiflu (vocals, dancer), Hiwot Tedla (vocals, dancer).

Male members after 1965: Asmerom Habtemariam, Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'.

Female members after 1965: Tegbaru Teklai, 'Semira', Fantaye Selassie.

Rocket Band (later Ma.Te.Ha.L.)

Tesfamichael Keleta, Gebrehiwot Keleta, Arefaine Begru, Tekle Tesfazghi, Osman Abdulrahim, Abraham (X), Solomon Gebregzhiabhier, Yedega (X) [female], Gideon Mengesha, Abdella Abubaker (later Zerai Deres Band).

Zerai Deres Band

Arefaine Berhe, Abdella Abubaker (ex-Ma.Te.A.), Haile Gebru, Brehane Gebremariam.

Merhaba Stars

Male members: Negusse Haile ‘Mensa’ai’, Atobrehan Segid, Alamin Abdulatif, Yemane ‘Baria’, Yunus Ibrahim, Idbareh Gebretensae, Solomon Gebregzhiabhier.
Female members: Fantaye Gebresellasié, Elsa Isaak, Letechida Gebremedhin.

Venus Band

Yemane ‘Baria’, Osman Abdulrahim, Yonas Ibrahim (singer/actor), Isaac Abraham, Sultan Yasin (singer), Tewolde Gebreselassie (guitarist), Bashir Said (drummer), Abeba [X] [female], and Tecklemichael Gebru (*krar*).

ELF

Selected members involved in cultural activities – ‘Eritrean National Theatre and Music Revival Troupe’:

- Ramadan Gebre, Negusse Haile ‘Mensa’ai’, Bereket Mengisteab, Tewolde Redda, Mantai Ghebil (Kunama), Giorgis Keleta (drum set), Solomon Gebrewolde (accordion, keyboard); Negash Mohamed Berhan (guitar), Abrar Osman, Hussein Mohamed Ali, Mohamed Shaabi, Musah Salih.
- Ex-Venus Band: Tewolde Gebreselassie (guitarist); Yemane Gebremichael ‘Baria’, Osman Abdulrahim, Isaak Abraham.
- Ex-Police Orchestra: Hadgu Woldehaimanot (saxophone), Keflom Tesfamariam (trumpet); Bereket Beyene (drum set), Negash Tekie, Yunus Ibrahim (later: Venus Band), Yemane Yohannes.
- Women: Tsehaitu Beraki, Sadiya Hassan (a Tigre-speaker from Nakfa), Gemia Ali, Meriem Feki (also from Nakfa), Arhet Abdala, Mehret Zerehannes and Mehret Kelati (all of Bilén nationality), Fatna Mohamed (a Saho-speaker),

Leteab (X) (Tigrinya), Leila Leghi and Gidhey Umberto (Kunama), Lya (X), Akbereth (X).

EPLF (all lists are incomplete)

First Cultural Troupe (CT):

Tebereh Tesfahunei, Sayida (X), Berhane Wadi Ge, Tesfahannes (X), Wadi Fire, Wadi Tsaidu, Idris Mohamed Ali and his band from Sudan, Ibrahim (X), Abu Dawoud Salih, Idris (X), Tsadu Bhata.

Second CT:

Kedija Adem, 'Fihira', Aaron Tekie, Estifanos Abraham 'Sematch', 'Wadi Zagir' and 'Wadi Tukul', Sitom (X), Amna (X), Bachita (Ali?).

Selected women members of the reconstituted Central CT in 1981

Literature and Drama: Gezienesh Mengis, Almaz (X), Letenigus (X), Genet (X), Weyni Tewolde; Music: instrumentalists Hewan (X) and Senait Debessai, the singers Abrehet Ankere, Kedija Adem, Zeinab Bashir, Birikti Woldeselassie 'Tanki' (also in Literature and Drama), Alganesh Yemane 'Industry', Fatuma Suleiman. Zahra Ali came from the *Sowra* School and joined in 1986.

Selected members of the original Zero School Cultural Group:

Zahra Ali, Halima (X), Alem Ogbai, Saba (X), Iyob (X), Yonas (X), Ghirmai Gebremichael, Ali Wadi Kahdi, Isa Omharin.

Set-Up of PFDJ Cultural Affairs, 20 September 1999 (FN 13)

1. Secretary

2.A Board of Directors and Writers: Mohamed Assanai, Mesgun Zerai, Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiago', Demoz Resoum, Angesom Isaak, Atsbehet Yohannes

2.B Administration Office: Lemlem Gebreyesus

3. Finance and Property

4. Technical Office

5. Dance and Music

- a) Traditional Cultural Troupe: *Sbrit* (Head: Kahasai Gebrehiwot)
- b) Seven Modern Groups:
 - 1. *Gutschele Sawa* (Group of Sawa) (Head: Semhar (X))
 - 2. *Hade Lebba* (One Heart) (Head: Girmai Yohannes 'Sandiago')
 - 3. *Halaw Wosan* (The One Who Protects the Border) (Head: Abraham Tesfai)
 - 4. *Keyah Meriet* (Red Land) (Head: Fitsum (X))
 - 5. *Mai Ambesa* (Lion's Water [spring]) (Head: Mohamed Osman)
 - 6. *Salena* (Name of a place in Massawa) (Head: Iyob)
 - 7. *Bana Harnet* (Head: Atsede Mesfin)

6. Drama and Theatre

- a) *Abbot* (Tigre-language group) (Head: Mohamed Abdella): Sadyia Mohamed, Lula Osman, Asia Mohamed Said, Zaynab Bashir, Zahra Ali, Nurit Nur, Nohamed Nur, Idris [?], Feshaye Debesai, Mohamed Salih.
- b) *Arag* (Name of a place in Sahel) (Tigrinya group) (Head: Wadi Shawel)
- c) Other groups, amateurs, often temporary
 - 1. *Mahber Fikri Sine-Tibeb* (Angesom Isaak)

7. Documentation and Raymoc Unit

- a) *Walta* (Shield) – theatre group in the Ministry of Defence
- b) radio drama – *Dimtsi Hafash* (Voice of the Masses), National Radio, including radio programmes by the Ministries of Agriculture and Health
- c) religious theatre groups

APPENDIX II: PLAYS

(The following lists are incomplete and by no means claim to be comprehensive).

Ma.Te.De. plays

- *N'bret Eritrea* (Eritrea's Past Property) by Berhe Mesgun.
- *Meswaati Abuna Pedros* (The Martyrdom of Abuna Pedros), translated from the Amharic by Alemayo Kahasai.
- *Tragedi Hatsey Tewodros* (The Tragedy of King Tewodros), a play by Abba Gebreyesus Haile
- *Ali ab Asmara* (Ali in Asmara) by Gebremeskel Gebregzhier. (According to the author, the original cast of 'Ali in Asmara' mounted in 1951 were Alemayo Kahasai, Tesfai Gebremichael, Gerezghier Teka, Abebe Iyasu, Ali Akak, Yosief Yohannes, Belay Legesse, Tewolde 'Manchu', Osman Shahay (ECBTP 95/9)).
- *Negus Dawit* (King David).
- *May T'nbit Kotsera* (Prophetic Appointment), another Ethiopian play in translation. *M'khri Seytan* (Satan's Advise)
- *Aden Gualn* (Mother and Daughter)
- *M'khri Woladit Ade N'deka* (A Mother's Advice to her Children)

EPLF (selection, see also Bibliography)

- Semere Berhe, *Keyah Mendil* (The Red Kerchief)
- Afewerki Abraha, *Kemsie Ntezhrewn Nehru* (If It Had Been Like That)
- Bruk Habtemichael, *Sdra Bet* (Family)
- Alemseged, Tesfai, *Anqzi* (Menigitis), *Le'ul*, and *Eti Kale Kunat* (The Other War)
- *Ande Wedo Geba* (Ande, the Traitor)
- *The Prolonged Popular Struggle Will Inevitably End in Victory*
- *Illiteracy Has to be Eradicated and the Masses Have to Be Enlightened*
- *While the Struggle is Going on*
- *Nai Derghi Fashitauzi Mlki* (The Derg's Fascistic Dictatorship)
- *Hakai Tegadalai* (The Lazy Fighter)
- *Rse Malawi Srat* (The Capitalist System)

Tigrinya Plays / PFDJ Cultural Affairs, post-independence (until 2000)
(list provided by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs)

Title	Author	Director	Date of Performance
<i>Metzawedia</i>	Solomon Dirar	Michael Amhatzion 'Jende'	?
<i>Harena</i>	Isayas Tseggai	Isayas [Tseggai] (film)	22/05/95
<i>Tesfa</i> (Hope)	Michael Amhatzion 'Jende'	Michael Amhatzion 'Jende'	06/06/95
<i>Zeikeal Yelen</i> (Nothing Impossible)	Hailemichael Hailesellassie	Teamrat Yohannes	20/02/98
<i>Seleste Weledo</i>	Angesom Isaak Bruk Habtemichael	Bruk Habtemichael	23/04/99
<i>Nab Libina N'meles</i> (Let's come back to our hearts [minds])	?	?	02/05/99
<i>Imun Luuk</i> (Trusted Messenger)	Michael Berhe	Mohamed Assenai	10/07/99
<i>Nai Mecheresha Dekik</i> (The Last Minute)	Michael Berhe	Mohamed Assenai	1999
<i>Menyu Neaa Zeibele</i> (Who doesn't favour her)	Angesom Isaak	Mohamed Assenai	?
<i>Eta Godena 1, 2, 3</i> (The Street, 1, 2, 3)	Mesgun Zerai	Mesgun Zerai	?
<i>Kulu Biana</i> (Everything by us)	Solomon Dirar/ Ali Abdu	Mesgun Zerai	?
<i>Aboi Kibreab</i> (My Father Kibreab)	Mesgun Zerai	Mesgun Zerai	?
<i>Metni Neninet</i> (The Nerve of Identity)	Angesom Isaak	Not performed	?
<i>Ganta Ruba Meo</i> (The River Meo Squad)	Samuel ('Aka Aka')	Not performed	?
<i>Tistbit</i> (Expectation)	Feshaye Yohannes 'Joshua'	Feshaye Yohannes 'Joshua'	?
<i>Lebbi</i> (Heart)	Isayas Tseggai	Isayay Tseggai	?
<i>Mesli Megazaeti</i> (The Colonial Character)	Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiagio'	Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiagio'	?
<i>Gonai</i> (Dwarf)	Angesom Isaak	Ghirmai Yohannes 'Sandiagio'	?
<i>Hakote</i> (Hard Working)	Mesgun Zerai	Mesgun Zerai	?
<i>Oedipus</i> (Translation)	Goitom Besrat	Teferi	?

		(Manyazewal)	
<i>Tsewae Himam</i> (The one who calls for a disease to come; translation [possibly Moliere: <i>The Hypochondriac</i>])	Amanuel Sahle	Michael Amhatzion 'Jende'	?
<i>Makbez</i> (transl. Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>)	Amanuel Sahle	Not performed	

**Tigre Plays/PFDJ Cultural Affairs, pre- and post-independence (until 2000)
(list provided by the PFDJ Cultural Affairs)**

Title	Playwright	Director	Date of Performance
<i>Sirai – Sirai</i>	Ibrahim Ali (Akla)	Ibrahim Ali (Akla)	1987
<i>Halib Butuk</i>	Ibrahim Ali (Akla)	Ibrahim Ali (Akla)	1993
<i>Nour</i>	Mohamed Assanai	Mohamed Assanai	4/1994
<i>Tiluk</i>	Mohamed Assanai/ Mohamed Abdella		10/1995
<i>Tsamer</i> (Second Wife)	Mohamed Abdella	Mohamed Abdella	1995
<i>Dingeir</i> (About a Hero)	Mohamed Assanai	Mohamed Assanai	1997
<i>Mengel</i> (The Sin)	Mohamed Assanai	Mohamed Assanai	1997
<i>Dibo</i>	Mohamed Assanai/ Mohamed Abdella	Mohamed Assanai/ Mohamed Abdella	1998
<i>Tabrat</i> (Donation)	Mohamed Assanai/ Mohamed Abdella	Mohamed Assanai/ Mohamed Abdella	1999
<i>Embei Dib Edra</i>	Ibrahim Ali (Akla)	Not performed	1999
<i>Asrar Nidal</i> (Secrets of the Struggle)	Mohamed Assanai	Mohamed Assanai	24/5/2000

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Eritrean and Ethiopian authors are listed listed with their father's name ('surname') first to comply with international citation systems. Articles published according to the Ethiopian calendar are given with their original date of publication where possible, indicated with EC, and followed by the approximate Gregorian year(s) in brackets. Articles originally published in Tigrinya are quoted in the English translation available to the author. The following abbreviations have been used:

AWP	Africa World Press
CUP	Cambridge University Press
OUP	Oxford University Press
RSP	Red Sea Press
UP	University Press

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Plays

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Professions, if stated, are those at the time of the interview.

Abbreviations: interviewer (int), notes (nts), recorded (rec.), translator (ttr), transcript (tpt), unrecorded (unrec.). Christine Matzke (CM), Ghirmai Woldegeorgis (GW), Mohamed Salih Ismael (MSI), Mussie Tesfagiorgis (MT), Samson Gebregzhier (SG), Yakem Tesfai (YT), Temesgen Gebreyesus (TG), Tesfazghi Ukubazghi (TU).

Interviews ECBTP 1995

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|--------------------|---|
| ECBTP 95/1 | Male Derg censorship officer, 1989-1990. |
| ECBTP 95/2 | Male playwright during the Derg regime. |
| ECBTP 95/3 | Abraha Gebretensae, Ma.Te.De. |
| ECBTP 95/4 | Male playwright. |
| ECBTP 95/5 | Tareke Tewolde, playwright, actor. |
| ECBTP 95/6 | <i>Memher Abebe Iyasu</i>, Ma.Te.De., Ma.Te.A. |
| ECBTP 95/7 | Solomon Gebregzhiabhier, playwright, actor, comedian. |
| ECBTP 95/8 | Tekabo Woldemariam, Abebe Iyasu, Jabre Mahmud, Ma.Te.A. |
| ECBTP 95/9 | Gebremeskel Gebregzhier, author of <i>Ali in Asmara</i>. |
| ECBTP 95/10 | Male playwright, actor. |
| ECBTP 95/11 | Male actor, contemporary theatre groups. |
| ECBTP 95/12 | Amanuel Sahle, playwright, academic, translator. |
| ECBTP 95/13 | Yishak Yoseph, actor, writer, Ma.Te.De. |
| ECBTP 95/14 | Male actor from Keren (Derg propaganda theatre 1971). |
| ECBTP 95/15 | Actress from Keren, refugee in Sudan. |
| ECBTP 95/16 | Male founder of contemporary theatre group. |
| ECBTP 95/17 | Solomon Gebregzhiabhier, 2nd interview. |

- ECBTP 95/18** Haijat (X), EPLF, CT member.
- ECBTP 95/19** Zahra Ali, EPLF, CCT member, student at the Revolutionary School ('Red Flowers').
- ECBTP 95/20** Female fighter performer, ELF and EPLF.
- ECBTP 95/21** Atsbehet [Yohannes], EPLF fighter, CT member.
- ECBTP 95/22** Mohammed Nour Idris, EPLF, military trainer, CT member.
- ECBTP 95/23** Yohannes Bereketab, CT member, EPLF, now works in children's theatre group.
- ECBTP 95/24** Isaak Abraham, ELF and EPLF, CT member, music and theatre teacher at EPLF, Revolutionary School, member of Venus Band before joining ELF in 1975.
- ECBTP 95/25** Isaak Abraham, 2nd interview.
- ECBTP 95/26** Tsega Hagos, EPLF, CT member.
- ECBTP 95/27** ELF member, before ELF Actor in Keren and Asmara.
- ECBTP 95/28** Kahasai Gebrehiwot, EPLF, CT member, now choreographer for PFDJ CT, *Sbrit*.
- ECBTP 95/29** Solomon Tsehaye, EPLF; CCT member, writer, now Director of Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Education.
- ECBTP 95/30** Zemheret Yohannes, ELF, EPLF.
- ECBTP 95/31** Alemseged Tesfai, EPLF, Head of Division of Drama, playwright.
- ECBTP 95/32** Haiwanot (X), member of *Bana Harnet*.
- ECBTP 95/33** Mohamed Assanai, PFDJ CT.

Interviews ECBTP 1997

- ECBTP 97/1** Mussa Salih, singer, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview, 18 July 1997, Asmara, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/2** Male teacher, workshop participant from Keren, member of two theatre groups. Rec. interview, 19 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/3** Mohamed Assanai, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview, 18 July 1997, Asmara, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/4** Male workshop participant from Agordat. Rec. interview,

- 19 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/5** **Mohamed Idris Humadai**, High Court judge, translator of K.G. Roden's *Le Tribu dei Mensa* (1913). Rec. interview, 25 July 1997, Asmara, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/6** **Kahasai Gebrehiwot**, artistic director of *Sbrit*, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview, 24 July 1997, Asmara, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/7** **Mohamed Idris**, Secretary of the Anseba Region Assembly, with male workshop participant from Halhal. Rec. interview, 30 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/8** **Male workshop participant from Tessenei**, returnee from Sudan, member of a theatre group in Sudan, founder of a theatre group in Tessenei. Rec. interview, 31 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/9** **Male workshop participant from Tessenei**, member of a theatre group, Tessenei. Rec. interview, 31 July 1997.
- ECBTP 97/10** 2nd rec. interview with **male teacher from Keren**, 1 July 1997.
- ECBTP 97/11** **Male workshop participant from Sheeb**. Rec. interview, 30 July 1997.
- ECBTP 97/12** **Male workshop participant from Sheeb**. Rec. interview, 30 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/13** **Male workshop participant from Sheeb**. Rec. interview, 30 July 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/14** **Male workshop participant from Agordat**. Rec. interview, 4 August 1997, Keren Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/15** 2nd rec. interview with **male workshop participant from Agordat**, 31 July 1997.
- ECBTP 97/16** **Female workshop participant**. Rec. interview, 1 August 1997, Keren Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/17** **Male participant from Halhal**. Rec. interview, 1 August 1997.
- ECBTP 97/18** **Demobilised male fighter from Gheleb, and demobilised female fighter**. Rec. interview, 6 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.

- ECBTP 97/19** Male workshop participant from Hagaz. Rec. interview, 1 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/20** Male and female workshop participants from Nakfa. Rec. interview, 7 August 1997. Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/21** Male workshop participant from Keren. Rec. interview, 7/ August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/22** Male workshop participant from Keren. Rec. interview, 7 August 1997.
- ECBTP 97/23** Male and female workshop participants from Keren. Rec. interview, 7 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/24** Male workshop participant from Tessenei. 2nd rec. interview, 12 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/25** Retired teacher from Gheleb. Rec. interview, 18 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/26** Four female workshop participants. Rec. interview, 16 August 1997, Keren, Eritrea.
- ECBTP 97/27** Three elders. Rec. interview, 21 August 1997, Mensura, Eritrea.

Interviews Academic Year 1998/1999

- I 98/1** Two male members of the ELF-RC. Unrec. talk in German, 9 December 1998, Bonn, Germany. Int/nts: Christine Matzke (CM).
- I 98/2** Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai', Ma.Te.A., Merhaba, ELF. Unrec. interview in German, 22 December 1998, Kassel, Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/3** Alganesh Yemane 'Industry', singer, EPLF. Unrec. talk in English, 24 January 1999, London, UK. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/4** Alganesh Yemane 'Industry'. 2nd unrec. interview in English, 28 January 1999, London, UK. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/5** Afewerki Abraha, Eritrean consul to the UK, EPLF playwright, 23rd Brigade CT. Unrec. interview in English, 29 January 1999, London, UK. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/6** Eritrean artist. Informal talk, 1 February 1999, London, UK. Int/nts: CM.

- I 98/7** **Efriem Kahasai**, playwright, theatre activist, MA theatre student. Rec. interview, 7 February 1999, Leeds, UK. Int: CM, tpt: Samson Gebregzhier (SG).
- I 98/8** **Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'**. 2nd unrec. interview, 10 July 1999, Frankfurt/M., Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/9** **Female singer I**, 14th Eritrea Festival, ELF. Unrec. interview in Tigrinya/German, 7 August 1999, Kassel, Germany. Int/nts: CM, ttr: (X).
- I 98/9** **Female singer I**, ELF. 2nd unrec. interview in Tigrinya/German, 12 August 1999, Frankfurt/M. Int/nts: CM, ttrs: various.
- I 98/10** **'Semira'**, Ma.Te.A. Unrec. conversation in German, 14 August 1999, Frankfurt/M. Int/nts: CM.
- I 98/11** **Female singer II**, ELF. Unrec. interview, 28 August 1999, Frankfurt/M., Germany. Int/nts: CM.

Interviews 1999-2003

- I 1** **Almas Yohannes**, singer with both ELF and EPLF. Rec. interview in German, 8 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 2** **Tsehaitu Beraki**, singer. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 13 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM (and SG), ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 3** **Dehab Fayitinga**, singer, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 15 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Beneam (X), tpt: SG.
- I 4** **Ghirmai Woldegeorgis 'Menkenino'**, journalist, Ministry of Information, freelance theatre artist. Rec. interview in English, 16 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: SG.
- I 5** **Alamin Abdulatif**, singer, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English, 17 September 1999. Int: CM, tpt: SG.
- I 6** **Ibrahim Ali 'Akla'**, Head of PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 20 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM (and SG), ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 7** **Atsbehet Yohannes**, actress, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 23 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Beneam (X), tpt: SG.

- I 8 Amleseth Abbai**, singer (died Jan. 2000). Partly rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 24 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Ints: CM and SG, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 9 Tsehaitu Beraki**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 25 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Ints: CM and SG, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 10 Mohamed Abdella**, *Abbot*, Tigre-language drama group, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 27 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 11 Atsede Mesfin**, musician, M Sisters, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 27 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 12 Lemlem Gebreyesus**, administrator PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 29 September 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 13 Bana Harnet**, Group 1: Alganesh Sinem, Hiwot Gebregeorgis, Haimanot Tewelde, Haimanot Eyob. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 6 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Ints: CM and SG, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 14 Bana Harnet**, Group 2: Akberet Feshaye, Brhin Habtegeorgis, Shewa Sahle, Hawa. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 7 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Ints: CM and SG, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 15 Tegbaru Teklai**, receptionist, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 8 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: SG.
- I 16 Lemlem Gebreyesus**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 11 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Yakem Tesfai (YT), tpt: Mulugeta Yirga.
- I 17 Atsede and Kibra Mesfin**, musicians, The M-Sisters, demobilised fighters. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 12 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: YT.
- I 18 Arefaine Tewolde**, Red Sea Press, Ma.M.Hal. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 13 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: YT.
- I 19 Jabre Mahmud**, owner of a snack bar, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 14 October 1999, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: YT.
- I 20 Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'**, Ma.Te.A., Merhaba, ELF. 3rd unrec. interview in German, 7 November 1999, Kassel, Germany. Int/nts: CM.

- I 21** Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai', Ma.Te.A., Merhaba, ELF. 4th unrec. interview in German, 4 December 1999, Kassel, Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 22** Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai', Ma.Te.A., Merhaba, ELF. 5th unrec. interview in German, 12 December 1999, Kassel, Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 23** 'Semira', Ma.Te.A. 2nd unrec. conversation, 21 December 1999, Frankfurt/M., Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 24** Ade Zeinab, performance poet. Rec. interview in Tigre, 17 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: Mohamed Salih Ismail (MSI).
- I 25** Angesom Isaak, *Mahber Fikri Sine-Tibeb*, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English, 21 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: Mussie Tesfagiorgis (MT).
- I 26** Danga (X), dancer with *Sbrit*, PFDJ Cultural Affairs Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 24 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: YT, tpt: MT.
- I 27** Abdul Raouf, NUYES co-ordinator of Youth Centre(s), and Nurse, Health Centre in the Asmara Youth Centre. Partly rec. interview in English, 25 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 28** Lasche (X), dancer with *Sbrit*, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 25 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: YT, tpt: MT.
- I 29** Saba Kidane, performance poet. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 26 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 30** Osman Ahmed, Ma.Te.De., with Arefaine Tewolde, Ma.M.Hal., Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 27 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: YT, tpt: MT.
- I 31** Atsbehet Yohannes. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 31 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: MT, tpt: Tesfazghi Ukubazghi (TU).
- I 32** Asmerom Habtemariam, Ma.Te.A., *Mekaleh Guaila*, EPLF cultural troupe, now Ministry of Information. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 31 January 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 33** Mesgun Zerai 'Wadi Faraday', playwright, director, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English, 2 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.

- I 34 Demoz Russom**, painter and stage designer, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 3 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 35 Kahasai Gebrehiwot**, director of *Sbrit*, National Cultural Troupe, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 3 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 36 Dehab Fayitinga**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 4 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 37 Mohamed Assanai**, writer and director with *Abbot*, Tigre-language group, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 8 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 38 Asmerom Habtemariam**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 14 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 39 NUEYS drama students**, Girls I: L. (X) and G. (X). Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 16 February 2000. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 40 NUEYS drama students**, Girl II: M. (X). Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 16 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 41 NUEYS drama students**, Boys I: Y. (X), M. (X), S. (X). Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 16 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 42 Osman Ahmed**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 18 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, [no ttr present], tpt: MT.
- I 43 NUEYS drama students**, Boys II and Girl III. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 19 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 44 Alemseged Tesfai**, playwright, lawyer, historian. Rec. interview in English, 22 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 45 Miriam Hagos**, director, Eritrean Cinema Administration. Rec. interview in English, 23 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 46 Asmerom Habtemariam**. 3rd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 23 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 47 Two male actors**, amateur theatre group. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 48 Semhere Tesfai**, drama co-ordinator, NUEYS, with Abdul Raouf and Nurse Abeba Brehane. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, (n.d. [2000]), Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Abdul Raouf, tpt: TU.

- I 49** **Fatma Suleiman**, singer, artisan, owner of Roble Traditional Gift Article Shop, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 24 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 50** **Abeba Haile**, singer, musician, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 24 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 51** **Weyni Tewolde**, actress, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 29 February 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 52** **Female and male actor**, contemporary theatre group. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 1 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 53** **Michael Adonai**, painter. Unrec. interview in English, 3 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/nts: CM.
- I 54** **Bereket Mengisteab**, singer, *Mekaleh Guaila*, ELF, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 6 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 55** **Isayas Tseggai**, writer, theatre practitioner, SEWIT Children's Theatre. Rec. interview in English, 7 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. rec. interview, in English. Int: CM, tpt Temesgen Gebreyesus (TG).
- I 56** **Birikti Woldesellasié 'Tanki'**, singer, actress, PFDJ Cultural Affairs, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 10 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: TG.
- I 57** **Tekabo Woldemariam**, Ma.M.Hal., Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 11 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: TG.
- I 58** **Tekabo Woldemariam**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 13 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: TG.
- I 59** **Tekabo Woldemariam**. 3rd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 15 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 60** **Isayas Tseggai**. 2nd rec. interview in English, 15 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 61** **Eskias G. Yohannes**, Eritrean Pharmaceutical Association (ERIPA), school drama contest. Rec. interview in English/, 17 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.

- I 62 **Tekabo Woldemariam.** 4th rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 21 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 63 **Anon.,** singer. Unrec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 23 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/nts: TU.
- I 64 **Amateur actress.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 23 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 65 **Ethiopia Medhanie, Ma.Te.A.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 25 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 66 **Bereket Mengisteab.** 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 28 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 67 **Ibrahim Ali 'Akla'.** 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 29 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 68 **Mesgun Zerai 'Wadi Faraday'.** 2nd rec. interview in English, 30 March 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 69 **Actress, SEWIT Children's Theatre.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 1 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 70 **Abeba Haile.** 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 3 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 71 **Memher Lemlem Ghebregziabher, Ma.Te.De.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 4 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: TU.
- I 72 **Lemlem Gehreyesus.** 3rd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 5 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt TU and MT.
- I 73 **Asieb Solomon,** musician, Shushan Band, Falcon Travel Agency. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 6 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 74 **Ethiopia Medhanie.** 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 6 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 75 **Brehane Adonai,** painter, former Head of the Asmara Arts School. Rec. interview in English, 6 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 76 **Actress, SEWIT Children's Theatre.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 7 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 77 **Hiwot Tedla, Ma.Te.A.** Rec. interview, in Tigrinya, 7 April 2000. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.

- I 78** Aslie Tedros, drummer, *Mekaleh Guaila*. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 13 April 2000, Massawa, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: *memher Daniel (X)*, tpt: MT.
- I 79** Weyni Hareg Haile, independent actress. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 20 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TG, tpt: MT.
- I 80** Female participant, National Student Festival, from Keren. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 21 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: Ghirmai Woldegeorgis (GW).
- I 81** Two female students with their teacher, participants of the National Student Festival from Decamhare. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 22 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: TU, tpt: MT.
- I 82** Ghidey Rustom (with Ghirmai Woldegeorgis), *suwa* house publican, krar player in the 1950s to 1990s. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 22 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: GW.
- I 83** Three female elementary school students from Zoba Anseba, National Student Festival. Rec. interview in Tigre/Bilen, 23 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Mesmer Andu, tpt: MSI.
- I 84** Female secondary school student from Asmara, National Student Festival. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 25 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 85** Aaron Teckle, Head of Haematology, Central Medical Laboratory, Medical Unit Theatre in the field, SEWIT Children's Theatre. Rec. interview in English, 28 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 86** Besrat Haile, singer, Police Orchestra. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 29 April 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: GW.
- I 87** Nechi Fesehatsion, actress, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 1 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 88** Yakem Tesfai, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Education. Rec. interview in English, 2 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 89** Isayas Tseggai. 3rd rec. interview in English, 2 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 90** Gabriella Senatori, Italian expatriate, amateur theatre. Rec. interview in English, 3 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.

- I 91 Feshaye Yohannes 'Joshua',** journalist, SEWIT Children's Theatre, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English, 5 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 92 Dehab Fayitinga.** 3rd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 8 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 93 Tsege Hagos,** actress, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 11 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 94 Orthodox priest, his wife, daughter and a female neighbour.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 14 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Weyni Fessha, tpt: MT.
- I 95 Abrehet Ankere,** singer, business woman, demobilised fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 16 May 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 96 Amete Solomon, Ma.Te.De.** Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 21 July 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 97 Sadyia Omer,** actress, *Abbot*, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 22 July 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 98 Zahra Ali,** singer, former Red Flower. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 22 July 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: GW.
- I 99 Zeinab Bashir,** singer, EPLF fighter. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 29 July 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: GW.
- I 100 Tebereh Tesfahunei,** singer, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 31 July 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 101 Osman Ahmed.** 3rd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 1 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 102 Amanuel Sahle,** journalist, academic. Rec. interview in English, 2 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MSI.
- I 103 Solomon Tsehaye,** Head of Cultural Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Education. Rec. interview in English, 4 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 104 Silas Mehari,** wata player in Bologna. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 9 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: GW, tpt: MT.
- I 105 Abrehet Brehane,** singer, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 11 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.

- I 106 Terhas Iyasu**, painter, Curriculum Department, Ministry of Education. Rec. interview in English, 14 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MSI.
- I 107 Elsa Yakob**, painter, teacher in the Asmara Arts School. Rec. interview in English, 16 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: CM and MT.
- I 108 Osman Ahmed**. 4th rec. interview in English Tigrinya, 21 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 109 Feshaye Zemichael**, Headmaster, Asmara Arts School. Rec. interview in English, 23 August 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MT.
- I 110 Karl Hoff**, Norwegian theatre director and playwright. Rec. interview in English, 1 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 111 Tekabo Woldemariam**. 5th rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 6 September, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 112 Kedija Adem**, singer, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 8 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Isayas Tsegai, tpt: MT.
- I 113 Demoz Russom**. 2nd rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 13 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 114 Tsega Gaim**, NUEW, teacher with the Zero School. Rec. interview in English, 14 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 115 Rhawa Ghirmai**, batique artist. Rec. interview in English, 17 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 116 Michael Gebrehiwot**, Head of Clinical Services, Ministry of Health; Medical Unit Theatre. Rec. interview in English, 22 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 117 Memher Abebe Iyasu** – Ma.Te.De., Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in Tigrinya, 23 September 2000. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 118 Bernardo Kifleyesus**, Head of Drug Unit, Ministry of Health, Medical Unit Theatre. Rec. interview in English, 26 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 119 Kidane Woldeyesus**, pharmacist, Medical Unit Theatre. Rec. interview in English, 27 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 120 Tekeste Yonas**, researcher. Rec. interview in English, 28 September 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.

- I 121** Mama Tebletz, 'Eva Nera', bar owner, film actress. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 2 October 2000, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MT.
- I 122** Arefaine Tewelde and Osman Ahmed. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 2 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MSI.
- I 123** Helen Meles, singer, PFDJ Cultural Affairs. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 4 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MSI.
- I 124** Terhas Kiflay, actress, plays and video films. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 4 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MSI.
- I 125** Vittorio Bossi, musician, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 8 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr/tpt: MSI.
- I 126** Asres Tessema, musician, playwright, Ma.Te.A. Rec. interview in English, 9 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 127** Asres Tessema. 2nd interview, 13 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Rec. interview, in English. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 128** Amare Woldesellassie, teacher, playwright. Rec. interview in English, 16 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, tpt: MSI.
- I 129** Asres Tessema and Osman Ahmed. Rec. conversation in Tigrinya between two theatre veterans, 21 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Tpt: MSI.
- I 130** Saron Berhane, independent actress, NUEYS video films. Rec. interview in English/Tigrinya, 27 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int: CM, ttr: Miriam Meharena, tpt: MT.
- I 131.A.** Eshatu Ibrahim, Governmental Houses Administration, Ethiopian POWs. Rec. Interview in English, 28 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/tpt: CM.
- I 131.B.** Asres Tessema. 3rd unrec. conversation in English, 31 August 2001, Asmara, Eritrea. Int/nts: CM.
- I 132** Almas Tekeste, pharmacist, Medical Unit Theatre. Rec. interview, in Tigrinya, 25 December 2001, Massawa, Eritrea. Int/tpt: MSI.
- I 133** Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'. 6th unrec. interview in German, 11 December 2001, Frankfurt/M., Germany. Int/nts: CM.
- I 134** Afewerki Abraha. 2nd unrec. (telephone) interview in English, 24 February 2002. Int/nts: CM.
- I 135** Negusse Haile 'Mensa'ai'. 7th unrec. interview in German, 28 August 2002, Frankfurt/Main, Germany. Int/nts: CM.