

Work In Progress

Being Eritrean in Milan¹

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This research concerns the Eritrean community resident in Milan where it originated at least forty years ago. In this paper, I reflect on how to work on the Eritrean perceptions of the self as a community away from their native country; on the views on differences and similarities between each other and those considered to be outside this community; and on the memories of the past of people with different personal and social histories, and loyalties. Moreover, since this research relates to the formation of identities and perceptions of the self among a migrant community, all the relevant issues are being collected and analysed with the awareness that movement, dislocation, and re-location have great impact on the perceptions of "home" and of the self in cultural, historical and social terms. I'm looking not only at individuals and their experiences and how they relate to the past, present and future, but I'm also searching for the wider forces that constitute their present identities. Memory, societal structures, transnational links, daily practices and discourses are seen as forces to be elaborated in this research. However, greater attention is devoted to issues arising around how categories of "us" and "them" are shaped, away from the sending context, which has been furthermore a conflicting one due to the wars with Ethiopia. To understand the shape of the formation of categories, I not only focus on Eritreans themselves but also on Milanese citizens and other migrants with whom they share the city. The attention on identity formation always presents dangers in notions of its authenticity and underlines the relevancy of considering the contextual and historical complexities that involve individuals in a creative negotiation with the surrounding contexts. Therefore it is useful to explain the processual formation of identity through concepts of multipositionality and of ambivalence between discourses and practices.

The anthropology of identity has had a long history from the colonial description of the "tribe" to the modern studies on "ethnicity". As a discipline, anthropology tends to study the "other". Although not all anthropological studies focus specifically on identity formation, there is often an attention to social categories and an analysis of their constitution. By focusing on the "anthropos", the human being, the spotlight on categories is practically intrinsic in the type of gaze itself. Generally, anthropology is a type of analysis which tends to describe, shape and often create typologies of cultures and societies. The creation of papers and scripts does not only concern linguistic descriptions and theoretical analyses; the study of society often has wider impacts and becomes incorporated in social definitions of otherness and difference. The example of the latter statement can be broadly seen in the anthropology of the colonial period, which often supported the colonial apparatus in controlling and in ruling their subjects by dividing them into different "tribes". Anthropologists have thus had, and still have, the power to shape the other and to theorise about people's lives, socialising norms and practices (this power however must not be overestimated, as I will argue later). It is because of their participation in the constitution of social discourses that anthropologists need to be reflexive and cautious in collecting data, reporting and transcribing it into literature. This underlying awareness has been brought out especially by the last decade's turns and trends such as postmodernism and feminism, which have upset anthropology and many other disciplines, and have inspired deeper discussions on research methodologies as well as on their outcomes. Through this latter analysis on the implications of anthropological studies on society, there has also been a greater application of all forms of reflexivity during fieldwork and in all the other stages of the research. This paper therefore points to the need to reflect even before fieldwork itself. My aim here is not only to reflect on my work in progress and the ways in which I approach the field and the data, but also to understand the ways in which identities have changed form and meaning in anthropological literature and in the social domain of discourses and practices.

Thus, the research unfolds as a description of a work in progress with its theoretical and epistemological concerns and methodologies. The theoretical background is divided into four parts and deals with four different aspects of the epistemology. The first part elaborates the constitution of identity through history. Here I describe the change and development

of concepts such as race, ethnicity and nationalism, through the history of the Horn of Africa and its colonial relations with Italy and Ethiopia. Furthermore I emphasise the importance that the concepts of ethnicity and nationalism have nowadays in relation to the conflict with Ethiopia and the outcomes in loyalties and individual positioning. The historical development of concepts of difference will also be a useful background in my future elaboration on how ideas of race and bounded cultures are still inscribed in the ways Italians perceive the other. The structure that Eritreans have left behind by migrating to Italy is still present in their lives nearly as much as the receiving context. In fact the second part deals with the politics of identity where both the individuals and the structures come into play. By having its own politics of identity, such as policies of inclusion and exclusion and the rights to citizenship, every nation-state forces individuals to act and negotiate through its structures. Introducing the core anthropological concern on discourses and practices, the following part looks into identity formation through which I appreciate transnationalism, memories, loyalties and the embodiment of culture. The two forces, the mnemonic one and the structural one, which shape the constitution of identity, should be looked at not only in the ways people talk about them but how they embody ideas of the self through practices. Here identity is observed in its networks, in the ways people shape communities and loyalties, and therefore, the ways in which they constitute the self in relation to others. Through three specific sections I investigate the different forces that are affecting identity constitution among Eritreans in Milan. Methodology is discussed through the appreciation of the "field". This last part of the paper is related to the previous theoretical sections, expanding on issues previously raised and explaining the ways through which I'm exploring the field. Identity here is explored through some hypotheses on consumption of space and of meaningful objects. The focus is cast on the relation between culture and the body, the embodiment of identity.

Identity and the development of concepts of ethnicity and nationalism through time and space

Migration is such a loaded aspect of society that it not only becomes visible in policy making, in the jurisdictional, political and economic sectors, but also it is very widely discussed in the media and in many other social contexts. This anthropological research on identity formation

through migratory experiences specifically wants to contextualise the formation of social categories; by deconstructing them it intends to identify the implications that these have on individuals. Here, I reflect on categories constructed under the Italian colonisation and the ways in which they still continue under other guises. Through a preliminary analysis of their conceptualisation, race, ethnicity and nationalism are understood not as given natures of peoples but as social constructs. Specifically, in present times ethnicity often becomes instrumental to those who have interests in extorting memories and advancing conflicts in the name of a symbolised identity.

History and imagined communities

Historical contingencies here are connected to questions of memory and self-identity. Disruption is thus often related to the difficult history starting from the period of Italian colonialism (1889-1942). After the Italian defeat in 1942 there was a period of transition in which a British mandate was initially installed; following the decision by the League of Nations, Eritrea became a federation in the Ethiopian nation state in 1952. The subsequent annexation in 1962 of the Eritrean territory into Haile Selassies empire brought about complex reactions and fragmented discursive nationalistic rhetoric in Eritrea. At this time, there were many attempts to constitute what it meant to be Eritrean. First, there was an Islamic movement opposed to the Ethiopian imposition not only of Amharic² as the official language but most of all to the Orthodox Church³ as the national faith. After the organisation of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), the EPLF (Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front) was born with its ideology insisting instead on a multiethnic Eritrean nation. There was however another contemporary movement, which fought for the continuation of unity with Ethiopia. In the following years there was organised guerrilla warfare between these three different factions and after some years the EPLF gained the majority's consent. It was at this time between the seventies and the nineties that Eritreanness was constituted as the founding ideology for an independent Eritrean nation-state (officially achieved only in 1993) and its long-lasting conflict with Ethiopia.

The description of colonial history allows an analysis of the constitution of perceptions of the self, in relation to "the other" on both sides, the

Italian and the Eritrean one. Thus, the period of the Italian colonisation of Eritrea can be identified as the beginning of the differentiation of Eritreanness from Ethiopianness, hence the rise of such ideas of identities as uniform wholes. Before the Italian invasion and the contemporary scramble for Africa by the European super powers, identity was most likely perceived in other terms. During the 19th century the territories of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia were composed of different chiefdoms, which had trading relations between each other and with people along the Red Sea and other neighbours (Selassie 1980). We can imagine that there were similarities and differences between and within groups, and that views of the "other" were often perceived in terms of religion and/or geographic location and/or language, but probably not bounded into nationalities or ethnicities, nor essentialised and naturalised in the ways they tend to be now. It has been argued many times that the idea of homogeneity according to religion, culture and language within a defined territory is in fact a recent one.

The constitution of ideas as a whole, identified with a nation, is recognisable in the West as an outcome of the rise of capitalism and the use of the press for mass consumption from the nineteenth century (Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1983 and Anderson 1991). In the African context it can instead be understood as a post-colonial symptom. Yet different identities were shaped in the same period as in the West, not in the order of nation building as in Europe, but as categories imposed by the colonial administration. During colonialism the super powers acted as sovereign nations with specific boundaries, while at the same time they "regionalised" and "tribalised" their subjects in the colonies. These classification systems fixed previously unbounded notions of culture and religion in the same ways as nation building proceeded in the West. Though they were contrarily used to differentiate into tribes and clans, to divide rather than unify their subjects, favouring some and neglecting others, ranking peoples through dichotomies based on notions of race, civilization, and religion. This colonial surgery has had a huge impact on the ways in which African liberation movements have imagined their nations and have competed for political power since independence.

*Italian colonialism and "la questione della razza"*⁴

The premises for the analysis of the Italian colonial period in Eritrea arise from the fact that at the time when the Italian government decided on its politics of expansion Italy itself was a newly born nation-state. Most of the citizens did not yet know what it meant to be Italian and to belong to a nation-state. Moreover, the state itself was not mature in its structures. Since Italy did not provide sufficient facilities in all its territory, an enormous number of emigrants were moving abroad in search for work. Consequently, the decision to colonise was not due to the quest for primary resources abroad or to expand a saturated economy, which was the motivation for British or French colonialism. Italy still needed to constitute itself as a nation in all its internal structures and ideologies. Thus colonialism was a reaction to the lack of consent and nationalistic feelings and to achieve hegemonic power *in Italy*. It has been recounted that the Italian civilians in the Eritrean colony in the early years ridiculously numbered fewer than twenty people (Rainero 2001). Nonetheless, although it failed to colonise in the same organised and economically effective way as other superpowers, it cannot be argued, as often happens, that Italian colonisation had no impact and, therefore, that historical memory can be dismissed simply with an embarrassed smile. In present days, the issues around the lack of post-colonial reflection needs to be thoroughly dealt with. This premise to an analysis of Italian colonialism needs to be spelled out in order to understand the context, which spooned the obsession in defining bounded categories of racially, culturally and religiously differentiated subjects in the colony.

The first period was characterised by a stance identifiable with the patriotic ideal of an Italian "civilising" mission towards the "primitive" Eritrean population. Ethnographers such as Alberto Pollera were hired to facilitate an understanding of the subjects and, therefore, to achieve more means of control. Ethnography was, at this time (1985-1920 circa), used to sustain the customary law through which the administration of the colony was supported. Ethnography was thus combined with the employment of local chiefs, the manipulation of customs, and the mapping of the territory. The Italian colonial period before the arrival of Fascism had already, in many ways, fixed ideas of an Eritrean territory not only with defined boundaries, but also with internal differentiations and divisions, often in terms of "grades" of civilisation of the subjects. Dur-

ing the second period with the Fascist colonialism, there was no such contact with the native population. The two periods differ drastically in their rhetoric, linguistic meanings and discourses, and in the formulation of policies and laws. With the rise of Fascism the previous interpretations of difference, which not only related to a biological definition, but also to a social and historical understanding, disappeared. With the Empire, the civilising mission was over and replaced by a sort of apartheid in limited terms of race. Although the level of racial components of the Eritrean population was recognised as superior to that of other "Negroes" (Biasutti 1941), still the Fascist racial classification system created not only a legitimised climax of terror and violence, but also discriminations between the various groups. The change, however, did not happen suddenly; it was instead a slow process in which old colonial administrators were moved from one position to another, with the final intent of getting rid of them and substituting them with the newly recruited colonial officers, trained with the ideology of the Fascist regime. This trend is revealed in the biography of Alberto Pollera, colonial administrator and ethnographer during the first period of Italian colonialism and who was slowly but meaningfully rejected during Fascism (Sòrgoni, 2001).

The ethnographic attention that was building up in the first period followed particular lines of enquiry such as that found in Polleras work. The terms of classification and categorisation of administrative units by which research was carried out certainly determined the answers that referred to essentialised, uniform and bounded groups. Though, as Fardon (2000) briefly argues, this is due to the fact that those ethnographers were also administrators for the same colonial administration that was posing the questions of enquiry. The following Fascist attention to the "questione della razza", the race issue, was not applied through ethnographic enquiry but through bio-measurements and descriptions of typologies of physical connotations among different grades of racially defined groups. Ethnographers at this point were a hindrance for the new regime of truth since they were questioning the differences between human beings through attentions to variables other than bone structures. Anthropology in many ways supported the dominant discourse during the first "civilising" period. Though, as was argued by Sòrgoni, it was appreciated more for its provision of maps and brief and easily understandable descriptions of tribes and clans in the appendices. Pollera,

however, not only focused on those dominant issues. He was also describing processes by which groups shape certain customs rather than others in more complex terms than the ones quoted by the administration. It is true, therefore, that he never stood up to explain that his work should be read in its complexities.

Here arises the question concerning the power of anthropology. The interpretations of anthropological work, by those commissioning it, certainly determined more than what the ethnographer actually wrote. This does not mean that the way in which people were described should be acceptable in modern anthropological debates, but that the analysis carried out by Pollera was at that time probably groundbreaking in many aspects. Moreover, as Kuper (1995) argues, anthropology was often not listened to and even mocked. Ethnographic work was rarely commissioned from professional anthropologists, but rather from those who were amateurs of the discipline while being, career-wise, colonial administrators. The problem therefore resides not so much in how the ethnography of the colonial period, such as Polleras, produced and reproduced those static identities but how this intellectual work was used by the colonial administration at that time and by liberation movements later.

Liberation and Nationalism

“Did Africans swallow ethnicisation wholesale simply by adopting the European gaze and without projects of their own?” (Fardon, 2000: 146). Obviously the answer is no. The recurrent argument of the influences of European colonisation on ideas of the self is often overemphasised in terms of a passivity of the African subjects. It has now been confirmed by many scholars that the European gaze shaped ways of defining the African self, but that “modern” ethnicity that has grown since colonialism has more complex character than that of being a simple clone of European ideologies. This passage by Turton clearly explains the spirit of ethnicisation in the contemporary scramble for power:

First there is the extreme fear and hatred that ethnic difference is capable of arousing in people who formerly lived together as neighbours. Second, there is the use of ethnicity by political leaders to mobilise their followers and manipu-

late the international community, a strategy which is not only deliberate but also cynical, because it requires at least some degree of detachment from the collective emotions it plays upon. Third, there is the use of electronic media for the global dissemination of images of grief, suffering and destruction brought about by the ethnic enemy. Fourth, there is the territorial imperative of ethnic nationalism: the appeal to a selective remembered and invented past to justify current claims to territory. And finally, [...] the characteristic readiness of nationalist leaders everywhere to sacrifice the lives of their followers, supposedly to advance the cause of that abstract entity, the nation, but in reality to extend and consolidate their own hold on political power (1997:1).

In Turton's passage, the fourth and the final points are especially connected with the previous argumentation around colonialism and anthropology and they are, moreover, useful for the discussion of how the contemporary form of Eritrean national identity was constituted. The "territorial imperative" and its combination with the imagination of an historical justification are very relevant in the case of Eritrean liberation movements. The sacrifice of lives in order to pursue nation building is another extremely important issue to have in mind since millions have died and this has really soaked into the memories of Eritreans. In both issues, it is the strategy of the political, nationalist leaders that needs to be understood in this section, since in many ways they have channelled the whole of Eritrea into a nation built with bloodshed. As has been argued by Araya (1997), before 1974 the imagining of Eritrea was fragmented and contentious. The liberation movements had so many conflicting views of what to fight for that they ended up in guerrilla warfare. From 1974 onwards it was the EPLF who incorporated many fighters under the same name, thus building a strategic ideology which was bound to work in moving the civilians into the struggle for liberation. The fight against Ethiopia was often quoted by the EPLF leaders as the unifying issue which increasingly constituted the national identity; the ideology of nationalism was constituted more by the hatred for the Ethiopian enemy than by the love for Eritrean similarities and shared past.

Therefore, the selected history chosen by the nationalists was based on the Eritrean "colonised past", not so much the Italian but more the Ethiopian one (Minority Rights Group 1983).

To a large extent, intellectual work contributed to the selection of the history and symbols incorporated in the memory of the Eritrean nation. Gramsci, in his work, often emphasises the role of intellectuals in building ideologies to be thereafter applied not only in the constitution of political parties, but also to be incorporated in civil society as motors for revolution. Intellectuals have largely, though sometimes even unwillingly, brought their influences to bear on issues of ethnicity and nationalism. The work of historical reconstruction and political activism from abroad, by Eritrean refugees and émigrés, has certainly been deliberate. Nationalists have often manoeuvred previous histories and ethnographies in order to support their theses. Even the work by Westerners interested in determining the nature of ethnicity and nationalism has had its impact. Talking about identities in one way or another often ends up being a resource for political rhetoric. Political activists, on their part, not only maintain and construct ideologies through symbolic tokens and memories to support their activities, but also to move civil society. Those leaders, as emphasised above by Turton, are ready "to sacrifice the lives of their followers, supposedly to advance the cause of that abstract entity, the nation, but in reality to extend and consolidate their own hold on political power" (ibid). This can clearly be seen in Eritrean history through those moments in which the EPLF literally eliminated entire opposition groups (Minority Rights Group, 1983) that were diverting the liberation movement through their focus on class-consciousness rather than on ethnicity and regionalism, as the EPLF was doing. The shift that MENKAE, for example, would have furthered was an analysis of the weakness of the EPLF as an elitist movement, pretending to be populist (Araya 1997).

Through this description of the historical path to the present, I do not want to assess the truth of those historical memories that are the fundamentals for nationalism. Contrarily, like Anderson (1991), I wish to understand the ways in which this identity has been imagined and practised. Anthropologically, this latter task can only be followed through peoples discourses and daily practices. The pursuit of this type of data collection and its intrinsic epistemological and philosophical significance is explained in the third part of this paper. Here, I am concerned

with the political and intellectual constitution of loyalties and, therefore, of idioms explaining history and naturalising political ideologies. In the light of the political games nationalists have played, I have included this analysis of the ideological constitution of Eritrean nationalism because it introduces the mnemonic force through which to look at "Eritreanness" in Milan. Eritrean refugees in Italy were highly organised during the seventies with annual meeting in Bologna and Rome. These took place at the time when the discourses of the EPLF started to have relevancy in Eritrea. Migrants and refugees were to large extent the minds and the sponsors of this political activism. Thus, many people have lived abroad intensely hoping and fighting for, and believing in, one ideology or another. Consequently a politically loaded past is affecting the constitution of different memories among the Eritrean community in Milan.

Structure and politics of identity

The previous part contained an analysis of the history of Eritrea and its implications for the constitution of identity. In describing the various ways in which identity has been imagined and used, I encountered the instrumental use of identity by elites and nationalists. This type of historical analysis helps me to understand the political value of the memories of people who have migrated to Italy, or who have applied for political asylum. In continuing on this background analysis, I discuss the institutional influences of the structures in which individuals live now and how these affect the formation of identity. I consider the role of the nation state and its policies and institutional order. This part is positioned after the previous one not only for theoretical reasons but also for the chronological succession of events, from the formation of the nation state of Italy first and of Eritrea later, to the present consolidation of power and application of nationalism within civil society. While the first part focused on the invention and imagination of the nation, this part hinges on the politics reinforcing and reproducing the rhetoric of being a nation and on policies of inclusion and of exclusion which consolidate the imagined community. In this background reconstruction, the discussion leads to an analysis of current policies and rules by which my informants are constrained and enabled and with which they are negotiating through official or unofficial paths.

Integration and the nation-state

The nation state is an entity that defines and shapes individuals within. It presumes a model of homogeneity. The nation has an underlying need to constitute a shared language, territory, history and culture, which are perceived as natural and human. After 140 years, throughout the regions of Italy, there is still a perceived difference between the various geographical areas (Pratt, 2002). But the nation has been successfully incorporated into the minds of the Italians who identify with this imagined community when the need arises. In this way, the concept of Italy has become a tool of identification, at times symbolising a need of society to relate to a world that is outside the self-imaginary.

Hobsbawm (1990) thought that the nation was on its last legs. He thought that with the spread of globalisation the nation-state would have to shift to something different, more suitable for the times. Appadurai (1990) and Featherstone (1990) instead argued that nationalism and globalisation are two faces of the same process, trying to cannibalise one another and, at the same time, feeding each other. Whatever the theories say about the nature of this relation, the facts show that these two social processes find it difficult to communicate and to stabilise with each other. One example is directly related to migration. On the one hand, we have a huge flow of people moving in the world often to other wealthier or politically more liberal countries and the need of societies to open up to the inputs arising from a globalising world. On the other hand, we have a conservative idea of community (the nation-state) that does not allow internal difference. The state, therefore, organises itself using conceptual frameworks to explain the contradictions arising from the need for economic overture and social and cultural closure. The nation state as an organisation finds it difficult to merge inclusion and respect for difference and similarities. Thus, we need to understand the effects that different policies have on civil society and on the shape of ethnicity of both the citizens of the nation, and the immigrants who are trying to settle, who are briefly passing through, or who are staying for a short term.

Integration is an awkward mission in the nation state. If it's seen as a coming together of parts into a whole (group, community, society, nation), so as to render it organic and well organised (J. Foot, 1999: 160), it becomes an act of complex surgery inside civil as well as political society. The immediate outcomes might be painful and contradictory.

Contrarily though society as a fluid entity could be appreciated as having the ability to change and adapt to new social relations. In the specific case of the impact of mass immigration, both the host society and the migrants themselves change by interacting with one another. Integration, as a political intervention, in this context becomes even more loaded with constraints and contradictions.

Integration: the Italian style

Confronted with the more tangible and incumbent problems that migration unexpectedly brought to Italian society, the policies did not have the means or the time (or were not receptive enough) to harmonise the flux of newcomers and the residents. Problems like housing, health practices, and illegal moonlighting (*lavoro nero*), have found Italian governments unprepared and powerless to act. After twenty years the problem is still unsolved and complex. Laws and policies have been approved without successful results. Confusion and conflict end by ruling the tactics of the state and policy making. But in the same way, as Favell (2002) argues, it is because Italy is a chaotic society that this new emergence of peoples might be integrated in a more elastic way than elsewhere. People find their way through a system that is highly bureaucratic, but for this very reason, they locate other means for organising themselves.

Italy, after all, has a different history of migration from that of other European countries such as the UK and France. This diversity is first of all due to the relative novelty of foreign⁵ immigration in Italy, secondly to its lack of colonial and post-colonial relations with the newcomers⁶, and finally to the deficiency of post colonial reflection in the Italian society (Riccio 2000). As pointed out by Favell (2002), another peculiarity that characterises the Italian situation is its economic sector and bureaucracy, which allow relatively easy initial and temporary access to resources, providing low wages in exchange for labour (also Salih 2000). Problems encountered by the Italian society, although very significant, have been exaggerated by the media, where migrants have been pictured as generally responsible for unemployment and involved in criminal activities. Within Italy, there have been various political responses to migration. Bossi, leader of the Lega Lombarda, who demands a change in the constitution in order to include the clandestine and illegal presence

of migrants as prosecutable by law, represents the more common approach.

The Bossi-Fini law is the new Act, which was officially accepted in October, 2002. It intends to identify and expel illegal migrants and deny access to those without a work contract. It paradoxically allows people to stay in the country up to two years if possessing a long-term contract of work, forcing employers to “legalise” their position and that of employees. Moreover, and this is the weakest part of the law, it intends to collect and record the fingerprints of all “legal” migrants. This latter section has been highly criticised by many politicians, intellectuals and central exponents of the public scene. They have above all advanced the accusation that the law would create discrimination and criminalisation of the immigrants and, therefore, Italian citizens should also have their fingerprints on identity cards. Radio Popolare, a left-wing activist radio in Milan, has even collected fingerprints of Milanese residents and immigrants, but rather than that of the index, they asked people to donate the fingerprints of their extended middle finger (!); these fingerprints have then been sent to the government. Members of the Catholic Church have openly discussed the xenophobic character of this law. Many organisations such as Caritas and some churches have even announced that they will continue to shelter “illegal migrants” regardless of the law. The UNHCR⁷ has accused this law of denying all rights to asylum seekers and ignoring the entire issue of political asylum.

As the Bossi-Fini law shows, the issues of population movement, legitimacy of movement and asylum seeking are highly sensitive, contested and loaded. It reveals the extent to which ideas of difference are sharply emphasised by the present right-wing government, escalating discrimination and fear. Furthermore, it demonstrates lack of reflection on the social dimensions. The multicultural element has never even been approached; there has been no concern about what type of integration to allow; no interest on the migrants’ social status in the Italian society; nor has there been any analysis of the impacts of this kind of discourse on society itself. This law has passed, but hasn't shown itself fully enacted. This instability is greatly affecting the lives of many Eritreans in Milan, especially those who have recently arrived asking for political asylum. Moreover, the stereotypical categories arising from

this kind of political debate themselves become strong forces in the constitution of the Eritrean self.

Practices of Identity

Great attention has been placed in the social sciences on the issue of the relationship between individual agency and the forces of the structure's systemness. In anthropology, this constituted the initial motor for ethnographic research. In Malinowskis (esp. 1922), for example, we can find the origins of many other anthropological and sociological approaches to the issue. In the functionalist and structuralist analyses of individual agency and social structure, however, the mechanical character of, and the concentration on social stability divert attention to something not empirically applicable (e.g. Parsons, 1951 and Giddens, 1984). Experience through fieldwork is what is needed to understand the dynamics that occur between the institutional organizations and their practitioners, and the people using the facilities, who are therefore "integrated" within society. It is not the question of rules and regulations which most concerns the research. The focus on agency must be applied through looking at the "little politics of daily life". After discussing the politics of identity in the Italian structural context and investigating the dynamics of integration in the nation-state, it is thus necessary to elaborate on the ways in which individuals live the proprieties of modern society. Individuals in this structural formation have to interact within its rules, and negotiate in order to be included. The structure is not something detached from the individual, since the former does not exist without the latter. Individual and collective actions and discourses are thus producing and reproducing the structure in which they live. The dynamic between structure and agency is therefore a fundamental issue in this research and it is dealt with through an analysis of discourse and practice.

Plurinational subjects and transnationalism

In the transnational context which my research examines, individuals are engaged with more than one of these structures. In migratory experiences individuals often find themselves duelling not only with the hosting society, but also with the sending nation. The ways in which individuals live in transnational contexts constitute them as "plurinational subjects" (Salih, 2000). By the term plurinational subjects, Salih

explicitly emphasises the fact that people living in more than one structure will need to negotiate with the rules and regulations of both societies: the sending and the receiving one. With this term she intends to describe those new citizens who move to Italy but, nonetheless, want to keep their citizenship in their home country. To do this, these people need to engage with the structures of both nation-states, becoming not only participants in both societies, but also subject to their systems.

Transnational patterns are found in those practices occurring beyond the boundaries of a nation. There has been great attention to the ways in which migrants and refugees live their lives across nations, the sending and the receiving one. This has been called transnationalism and has been widely discussed across disciplines (Vertovec, 1999; Basch et al., 1994; and Al-Ali et al., 2001a). Transnationalism has been widely examined in its relation with nation building. As has been briefly noted in the historical analysis, the states and liberation movements have promoted transnationalism as a means for nation building. Transnational activities are therefore not a novelty, but have increased their visibility in recent times through the development of media, international communication and the movement not only of ideas but also of material products and money. Different groups and individuals, however, do not experience transnationalism in the same way. Transnational activities need to be understood in their single cases and in their changes.

The Eritrean state has devoted considerable attention to its diaspora. Efforts have been made - by the EPLF before liberation (in Minority Rights Group, 1983 and in Al Ali et al., 2001a,b) and by the PFDJ (Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice), the present ruling party in the government - to keep Eritreans abroad active in helping their homeland. The government demands payment, as the liberation movement previously did, of two per cent of wages earned abroad. During the last war with Ethiopia (1998-2001) the percentage increased. In 1993, during the election for the independence of Eritrea as a nation, all those abroad were given the rights to vote. The Eritrean state and embassies also often organise events, such as conferences and music festivals and so on, encouraging Eritreans abroad to identify with a transnational community always in contact with the sending nation-state. Al-Ali et al. (2001a,b) have noticed that in Germany and the UK the social pressure to respect these dynamics was so high that donations were publicly shown on boards stating the names and the amounts paid. Other remittances, such

as family responsibilities and bureaucratic affairs have been described as forms of "forced transnationalism", leading refugees and migrants to an evident involvement with the sending context.

In the milieu of Eritrean communities in Germany and in the UK, Al-Ali, Koser and Black have noticed the visible difference between the "culture of remittances" (2001a,b) and transnational links before the last conflict and how peoples are experiencing their relation with the homeland in present times. Some have been caught in the rhetoric of Eritrea "as the victim of more populous, more powerful and internationally-supported neighbour bent on recolonisation" (2001a: 595) and, therefore, supported the nation in stronger ways. Many, however, are now disenchanted with the politics of the PFDJ⁸ which has monopolised political power and has engaged Eritrea in the recent conflict with Ethiopia, costing thousands of lives and great suffering, but also bringing the country to an economic situation even worse than the previous one. Therefore, the consent that was previously more or less widespread among the Eritrean diaspora has now changed. It is therefore very interesting to understand the impact which recent events have left on the transnational practices linked with the state and with kin ties.

The constitution of the homeland

Transnational practices, however, are not limited to those described above. The transnational levels at which my research looks, are not only related to the movement of money or goods through remittances from the host country to Eritrea. On the contrary, I am engaged above all with the opposite dynamic, that of the movement of goods, ideas and so on from Eritrea to Italy. In this research, the daily practices are followed in their multiplicity of layers and positions. Loyalties are recorded not so much in relation to people's involvement in the reconstruction of Eritrea but more in relation with their lives in Milan. Transnationalism is therefore a concept leading to the elaboration of ideas of "home", "community" and the constitution of the self abroad.

Malkki's ethnography of displacement clearly shows how the experienced deterritorialisation often affects refugees in shaping "attachments to specific territories and links between people, polity and territory" (1995: 1). Furthermore, her research demonstrates that there are struggles over history and truth coming into play. The comparative nature of

her fieldwork revealed different “communities of memory” (Malkki, 1997) that have arisen in two different contexts. The research focused on Hutu refugees in Tanzania who were displaced after the genocides in Burundi and Rwanda between 1993 and 1994. Malkki carried out fieldwork in a refugee camp and among town refugees. The different shapes of identity that the researcher has noticed are striking. Refugees in the camp were describing a primordial social harmony among the original Hutu nation. They saw themselves as a “nation in exile” (Malkki, 1995: 3). The town refugees were instead seeking ways of assimilating multiple and shifting identities. “In the course of the everyday, those in town were creating not a heroized national identity, but rather a lively cosmopolitanism - a worldliness that led the camp refugees to see them as an impure, problematic element in the ‘total community’ of the Hutu refugees heroized as people in exile” (ibid). The contrast between the historical-national identity of the camp refugees and the cosmopolitan one of the Hutu living in the town shows the multiplicity of “communities of memory”, which arise among displaced people in different contexts.

Povrzanovic's fieldwork among the Croatian diaspora in Sweden shows another type of differentiation in the imagination of the homeland. In this research the author has noted that there is no unified “Croatian Diaspora”, since it entails an ensemble of different homeland experiences, different positions in the countries of residence and generational differences. People with diverse experiences are however often involved in the creation and re-creation of diasporic discourses and politics. The celebration of national symbols constitutes a high emotional significance which is also opposed to the prohibitions under the previous Yugoslav communist regime. Povrzanovic, therefore noticed the symbolisms that unified many Croatians under the dream of the homeland. The dream though was privately experienced in many different ways by different peoples. The wish to return was alive for some and was completely absent for others who contrarily lived the idea of return with fear and pain. The different perceptions of the homeland and emotions linked with it depended on the individual experiences which had led to their exile and on the positions they hold in the host society (Povrzanovic, 1999).

The insight in these two researches demonstrates to what extent refugee-ness, displacement and diaspora need to be understood in their pluralities and multiplicity of voices. Moreover the issues of

Alternate Routes

transnationalism in contexts where individuals are duelling with pain and violence become more complex in their significance and perceptions. The peculiarities of individual experiences conflate with the lack of comprehension often present among the host community. The anxieties and insecurities with which many transnational people live are augmented by the policies not always allowing inclusion and by the lack of understanding and historical memory of the mainstream of the Italian society. These dynamics are now included during fieldwork through a focus on discourse and practice and through an analysis of the relation between the large scale of Italian society and the small scale of social life in Milan. Thus, identity is present through this search for the forces within people's practices and discourses.

Discourse, practice and embodiment

Discourse and practice are the realms of the anthropological debate. Both the historical and the structural-institutional contexts are to be understood as important milieus. They provide great insight into the heart of the issues relevant to this research and they are basilar for an understanding of exegesis and day-to-day practices among Eritrean communities in Milan. Thus, since the research wants to go beyond structure and mnemonics, the epistemology supporting the fieldwork needs to be spelled in order to introduce the methodology which will be dealt with in the next section.

Discourse is in itself a multi-faceted concept intrinsically linked with the linguistic formation through which people explain their perception of reality. In recent debates, though, discourse has been conceptualised as the production and reproduction of social understandings. The Foucauldian analysis has been widely applied to streams of debates included in the post-modern turn. The ideological concern, prevalent in Marxist analysis, has been further developed through discourse analysis. Ideology, with its (Marxist) implicit idea of alienation, has been expanded in a theoretical appreciation of individual production and re-production of discourses. Discourse is therefore a concept used to explain those topical formations of reality in which every individual is involved. Although the formation of discursive explanations do not constrain themselves solely to a linguistic reality, in Foucault's analysis, discourse is a regime of truth which pervades practice as well as language. In many ways dis-

course is like an ideology not produced by the powerful elite which alienates the working class to keep the means of production. Discourse is not something over which someone has the power of manipulation (Foucault, 1980). Every individual is, in fact, subjected to it and at the same time empowers it by re-producing it. It is a snake with no head and no tail.

Practice has instead been the focus of the phenomenological trend (starting from Bourdieu and continuing through M. Jackson and H. Moore) privileging an attention to performance rather than linguistic exegesis. In this approach, there is a conceptualisation of praxis as something that comprehends the dialectics occurring between structure and agency, and between the material and symbolic domains, away from linguistic interpretations. Experience becomes the concern through which the relation between the self and the other is understood. The attention to practical engagement shifts away the structuralist concern about the individual's act of following predefined social rules and norms. The phenomenological and experiential focus also reduces the importance of the social structure by explaining symbolic and ritual practices as concrete bodily engagements, rather than as abstractions depending on the social structures themselves.

In the same way as the Foucauldian analyses do, phenomenological approaches have developed a theory in which the individual participates in social processes rather than being passively adapted to a-priori rules and meanings. What thus links the two trends is the fact that the individual is not a passive nor alienated being who reproduces something residing outside. Neither does the involvement of the individual imply that s/he is independent and, therefore, may completely detach her/himself from shared meanings. Moreover, the concept which links but at the same time differentiates the two trends is that of embodiment. In Foucault's analysis of institutions such as the clinic (1973) and the prison (1977), language and categorisation shape the bodies of individuals. The gaze, through which discourse is imprinted, is an embodiment of the linguistic formation of reality; but at the same time, by applying categories on the body, it produces embodiment. There is, therefore, a relation between language and practice in Foucault but it is the former which shapes the latter. In the analysis by Bourdieu (1977), the experience of the body itself is the motor for embodiment. In his analysis, cognition is not a state of the mind, its a process occurring in the body; he is thus not

talking about knowledge but about embodiment. Social incorporation is not simply a sterile reproduction of symbolic frameworks but a process of acquisition. He identifies embodiment through communication; the learning of how to act is achieved through the body, creating memory, posture and feelings. Thus social incorporation is achieved through experience. The linguistic exegesis most of the time does not achieve logical explanations of action; it is action itself which shows the meanings. Action therefore is the meaning itself. These two stances differ in their focuses. In the first it is discourse which produces and reproduces regimes of truth, and in the latter, it is practice which shows social incorporations. The two stances, one leaning to language, the other to practice, are asking different questions.

The Foucauldian discourse analysis has, in fact, opened the path towards an understanding of the force that linguistic explanations have on reality. I apply this perspective to understand the Italian policies and their discursive influence on people's ideas of the other. Moreover, this view leads to the questions on the implications of the discursive formations on individuals. I am thus looking for the ways in which the categories formed by the Italian mainstream affect the ways Eritreans act, and embodying the gaze which is defining them. At the same time I am interested in the ways in which discourses of identity are produced and reproduced among the Eritrean communities in Milan. The work by Povrzanovic has shown how people may be reproducing symbologies and sharing unified ideologies, while in their day-to-day practices and in their dreams they interpret discourses in different ways through their personal experiences and their specific positions in society.

Practice and experience are very useful conceptual tools to understand what I call the "politics of little things". Questions around the embodiment of social practices are thus dealt with through a particular attention to the body and consumption. There is also an interest in understanding the religious experiences of Coptic Orthodox Eritreans in Milan, focusing not on the doctrinal nature of religion but on the process of acquisition of belief and ritual meanings. The phenomenological approach is also interesting as a methodology for research. The experiential scope is needed to understand the field in its humanity, through the eyes of a human being. Moore (1999) and Jackson (1989) have explained that it is important to look not only into the particularities of the field of study and its local exegesis but also into the link that the

peculiarities of every social field have with each other. The general focus on what they like to call human experience is important to surpass the relativistic approach which would arise out of the sole attention to specificity and difference. On the other hand, the Foucauldian discourse analysis leads the researcher to reflect on his/her own words and re-productions of existing discourses and power dynamics, and forces the anthropological gaze to be aware of its impacts and interpretations. Both approaches are therefore useful for the research.

Methodology and Fieldwork

The site

Eritrean discourses and practices are looked at specifically from the context of an extended and complex city such as Milan where there is room for a variety of perceptions of the self, networks allowing transnational social economic and symbolic activities - affecting identity, narratives and practices of cultural negotiation, and different spheres of resistance to social and economic marginalisation, and subjection to the nation-state. The field is one of the focal Italian Eritrean locations in which the Eritrean community began with the first arrival of immigrants in the sixties. As receiving milieu, Milan has a long past with articulated conceptions beginning with the arrival of people from southern Italy throughout the twentieth century and before. In Milan, the "other" was previously branded with the southern migrant workers, and then switched to the recent foreign arrivals, thus continuing to use similar discourses of intrusion, invasion and criminalisation. As J. Foot (1999) argues, the Milanese site is remarkable in its experiences of migration. Additionally, the focus on the Eritrean case in Milan is significant because its history stretches across almost half a century. Eritreans, therefore, not only experience the present political environment, but also some of them have encountered various periods of Italian political culture. They have been dealing with issues of citizenship and difference through time in different ways. The newly arrived asylum seekers are negotiating with the system in yet other ways.

The area in Milan where the first Eritrean migrants moved in the sixties is still the social area where Eritrean restaurants, bars and clubs are located today. Porta Venezia has now become a central area of the city. Corso Buenos Aires is a sort of high street swarming with shops, commercial businesses and street sellers, with some organised little market

stalls cutting through the middle of the area. On both sides of Corso Buenos Aires the Eritrean community is found. It was one of the first foreign migrant neighbourhood to form in Milan. But now they are a small minority among the various foreign communities that share this space in Porta Venezia. In fact, not only Eritreans are found there, but also Ethiopians and people from other countries. Here, there are Eritrean bars, restaurants and clubs. There are also phone shops and Internet cafes which serve the purpose of continuing transnational ties; these are run by different peoples and only one of these is Eritrean. In the same area, one might notice that there are different businesses run by Italians, for example old ironmongers, who have remained small and humble. Contrarily, some shops have followed the "ethnic" fashion and sell African objects and hand-made crafts sophisticatedly Europeanised, and sold at high prices. Although this area of Milan is characterised by the presence of people from Eritrea, now it has moved on to be a mixture of many peoples. Porta Venezia remains a socialising context although not all Eritreans are actually living there; in fact, since housing is very difficult to find, people have spread into more peripheral areas. The various religious communities, the Eritrean Coptic Church, the Catholic Eritrean Church and the Mosques are situated in other areas of the city.

In Porta Venezia I am collecting data on the politics of identity happening within the Eritrean community, where a conflict has been noticed between the "new ones" who have arrived asking for asylum, and those participating with the official side of the previously constituted community. The latter are instigating a strong form of nationalism that points to the young arrivals as deserters and, therefore, as opposing to the political line of the PFDJ. Instead, the new ones are struggling with the slow enactment of the Bossi-Fini act and are sharing memories of years of limbo in the territories that divide Eritrea from Italy. Here, communities of memories show themselves through performances and visual imagery about the home country and Eritrean culture.

The second site where I am slowly entering is one of the council estates where many Eritreans live. Here I wish to understand the daily life of people of different generations, memories and experiences. While Porta Venezia is a socialising terrain the latter is more of a mixture of daily encounters. Here, it is the marginality and the inequality of the people living in these forgotten corners of the city that must be looked at. Through an understanding of living conditions shared by many people of

poor backgrounds, integration is analysed in its multiple realities. To collect data in this context I am working for a community project run by a few coordinators, the secretary (me), the president and most of all university students who are volunteers. It is a bottom-up committee which provides political, cultural, and social spaces for the tenants of three council estates. This role is enabling me to look into the daily life from very close; here, I wish to collect data not only on the Eritrean community but also on their integration in this Italian context, through an understanding of the various structures and institutions, and through an attention to the linguistic formations among the tenants, and also among the people involved in this community project.

Participant observation

There is the need to carry out fieldwork in a multiplicity of levels. The socialising areas illustrated above is a place to “hang around”; the Coptic Churches is part of a specific case study; the personal and family environment is dealt through the collection of life histories, and through individual and group interviews and informal relationships. The Italian field of discourses and practices will be followed in non-governmental organisations and institutions. Specifically, I'm working, thus participating and observing, in the community project mentioned above which deals with life quality in a council estate area where many Eritreans live. I'm also achieving access to governmental and non-governmental organisations for refugees and migrants. It's important to understand how the “*mediazione culturale*”, cultural mediation, is taught to teachers and alums in the educational system and in other institutions. Above all I'm very interested in observing how and where the new Bossi-Fini law is being applied. Throughout the many sites, I'm collecting data on practices of negotiation and resistance and not only on reproduction of societal norms. The multisided-ness of the fieldwork is fundamental to understand the multipositionality of individuals. As in everything, the butterfly effect is present and active in more sites than those specifically involved with the matter. Although the insight into multisited fieldwork has been firstly approached through an analysis of globalising effects on society (Marcus 1995 and Gupta and Ferguson 1997), the need for this type of research stems from the porous nature of society not solely in present times.

In the wideness of the context in which I need to look, there is a specific and more focused attention to three fields of study. The first is on ideas of collectivity and community ties and is generally dealt throughout the fieldwork in this multisitedness, but more specifically in Porta Venezia and in the community project in which I collaborate. The second is topical and followed through two case studies, one focusing on a place and community -the Coptic Church-, the other looking into the consumption of Imnet, the sacred earth, which is a commodity arriving from Eritrea. The third is focusing on the individual and personal responses, negotiation and perceptions and is being carried out through intensive collection of life histories and the participation in family reunions and intimate contexts. Through these three levels of interaction and experiences I wish to understand the multiplicities of identity, the pluralities of sites in which these are shaped, the ways in which they fluidly change according to situations, time and space and how discourses may be sometimes ambiguously framed not always in accordance to practice.

The Church

The study of the Eritrean Orthodox Coptic Church is very important given that many studies on migrant communities in Italy have focused on Mosques and Islamic belief (Carter 1999, Riccio 2000, and Salih 2000). Italian society is pervaded with Catholic rhetoric and discourses flowing especially in the encounters with the "other" - more and more identified with Islamic people. This classification, however, becomes generalised to often include migrants from different backgrounds and religions. The 'other' becomes identified not only with the foreigner but also with people of different religions. The focus on a Christian community is interesting since it entails an attention to its recognitions (or lack of recognition) of relatedness but yet of otherness. On the other hand, some kind of classification and differentiation is constituted among Copts who have had conflicting moments with the Muslim branch of the liberation movement, and with the Catholic followers (often linked to Italian colonial officials and missionaries). The Church is a context in which categories of "us" and "them" are shaped and performed.

The relationship with Catholic Church organisations is growing since some religious members are active in their opposition to the present state of political debates and practices around migration. In Milan especially,

the activity of Cardinal Martini, who has just retired in the summer of the year 2002, has been posing interesting frames for understanding the hardship that the Bossi-Fini law and similar rhetoric have in relation to the occurring social change. He has stated that it would be detrimental, if not anachronistic and impossible to revert the social process of overture and pluralism which is taking place in Milan through recent migratory processes. Caritas and many other Catholic organisations -as already stated above- have started an opposition movement, which does not only publicly deny consent to the present government, but which moreover has become a site of political and social asylum for those that the state wants to reject. There are interesting developments of resistance against the present politics of identity and of exclusion which are moreover led by some branches of the Catholic Church.⁹ It's therefore very motivating to look at the development of relations between the various religious communities and their struggles.

The Church often plays an organisational role; the outcome and experience of migratory processes frequently depends upon and is closely related to the religious institutions in the host country (Riccio 2000). Thus I'm looking at this aspect of the Coptic Church in its transnational links and its role of mediator for people arriving from Eritrea. This position and responsibility of the Church most probably influences the constitution of discursive frames of reference and practices. Questions around this issue regard the ways in which the Church becomes a force in the constitution of identities and of loyalties. The Church often ends up being a site where people escape from the outside world (Block 1992) through its moral guidance. Contemporary it also becomes a context in which there is not only one fixed and applied shape of identity; there are negotiations. Thus religion is a field to be looked at in the ways in which people also contest and oppose discourses around authenticity, tradition and modernity (Salih 2000). Politics of identity occur in diverse contexts and are not one-way projects; they are shaped by discourse and practices which entail individual involvement and experiences in creating the field.

The Sacred Earth

The religious practices are followed in the Church every Sunday and in every other occasion and they are also analysed through a related case study entailing another gaze and point of view. There is a focus on the

sacredness of objects. Sanctified substances, generally called Tsabel, will be linked with theories on consumption -regarded as and compared with commodities holding special roles and meanings- and the body and embodiment. Out of all the religious goods, such as holy water, bread, crosses,¹⁰ it is the sanctified earth, Imnet, that has called for special attention. The earth comes from Coptic Monasteries in Ethiopia and Eritrea; it is sanctified by the Monk and then used as a medicine by ingestion or application on the skin. During my preliminary fieldwork in November 2001 some informants told me about its use in Milan. Kin members in Eritrea send it to them when needed. There appears to be a transnational movement of this substance, which remains still in small scale and without a highly developed consumerist element.

Some insight may be achieved from an Appadurais analysis of exchange and value, which allows a description of Imnet as a commodity of some kind. Its cultural criteria must be understood in context referring to destination, metamorphosis and diversion. The journey from production to consumption is a great insight to elaborate on its meanings and values. This quote from Marx defines the relation between value and exchange in the nature of commodities: "to become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange" (Marx 1971: 48 in Appadurai 1986: 8). The process through which a product becomes a commodity is very interesting in its power dynamics and knowledge definitions. To follow up the political dimension of consumption there must be awareness around processes of enclavement and diversion, which specifically show the power struggles over goods by elites and between the various agents engaged in its commoditisation. "It is in the interests of those in power to completely freeze the flow of commodities, by creating a closed universe of commodities and a rigid set of regulations about how they are to move. Yet the very nature of contests between those in power (or those who aspire to greater power) tends to invite a loosening of these rules and an expansion of the pool of commodities" (Appadurai 1986: 57). In the case of Imnet it is the Coptic Church that has the role of elite whose power is to enclave its consumption. At the same time though there are other agents engaged in the production of knowledge and the diversion from its closed predestined path. The constitution of mythologies is how Appadurai explains the knowledge relations between the various agents:

(1) Mythologies produced by traders and speculators who are largely indifferent to both the production origins and the consumption destination of commodities, except insofar as they affect fluctuation price. [...] (2) Mythologies produced by consumers (or potential consumers) alienated from the production and distribution process of key commodities. [...] And (3) mythologies produced by workers in the production process who are completely divorced from the distribution and consumption logics of the commodities they produce. (Ibid: 48)

Although his description applies to goods that have entered a structured system of production, it may apply to Imnet in the division of roles and knowledge. Those who he calls traders might be kin members in Eritrea or people practicing transnational links. It might even be that the earth has become a commodity in the same terms and that therefore there are traders who export it to Milan. Consumers will be members of the Eritrean community in Milan. The workers, in Appadurais analysis, will be the Monks of the Coptic Monasteries in Eritrean. Although it seems inconceivable to analyse the commoditisation of Imnet in these terms, it might be interesting to understand the various games occurring around the creation and re-creation of value of the earth in terms of specialised knowledge. Primary technical knowledge in fact combines technological and cosmological layers in the production discourse and include the three contexts of interaction: market, consumer, and destination. Knowledge thus is not only related to the appropriate ways to consume the commodity, there is a distribution of knowledge at various points of the exchange process.

Moreover “the social history of things and their cultural biography are not entirely separate matters, for it is the social history of things, over the large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories” (ibid: 36). Simmel recalls value through this statement, which is interesting in relation to Imnet: “We call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them” (Simmel 1957: 73 quoted in Appadurai 1986: 3). Imnet from this point of view certainly has more value:

the distance and difficult trajectories, which the earth has to go through, resist in many ways its consumption and therefore increase its value when possessed. Distance though may not only affect value but also meaning, "as commodities travel greater distances (institutional, spatial, temporal), knowledge about them tends to become partial, contradictory, and differentiated" (ibid: 56).

The other theoretical approach, which can be interestingly applied, is that of the analysis of the social and cultural significance of the practice of consumption. Geissler (2000) has studied the practice of geophagy among the Luo in Kenya. He explains earth eating as a practice creating social distinctions not in terms of ethnicity but according to age, gender and class. The discursive formation around the consumption of the earth is related to status. Women and children are the only ones who are allowed to consume the earth; the status of geophagy is low. Pregnant women are the single category who can eat earth without any social consequence, though normally women may practice geophagy but might be mocked. Children may consume it, but when they reach adulthood they have to stop. Men found in the act of earth eating are dishonoured and shamed. Moreover the quality of the earth is at stake. Women know where to find the best, tastiest earth -normally close to a termites nest- and children learn when collecting it for their mothers. Wealthy women, however, buy "clean" earth from the market and serve it on special occasions. Issues around the differentiation according to the status of the various age sets and genders, and to the quality (purity) of the earth according to status, allowed Geissler to understand how the consumption of earth and its role of commodity shape and re-produce social distinctions in the same way Bourdieu (1984) has argued. The type of social distinction occurring through the consumption of *Imnet* might be different but it may also be closely associated. Distinctions might be related to religious affiliations, ethnicity and modernity but they may also allow insights into age and generational and gender differences.

The questions that follow this case study are many and relate to core anthropological domains of enquiry. Social distinction, consumption, belief are all analytical focuses which are dealt with in regards to identity formation and transnational movements. Its symbolologies and meanings are looked at through its related practices and experiences. The relevant discourses on the knowledge of the body, health, religion and the motherland inspire the focus on individual and collective percep-

tions. Especially the focus on the ways to experience and talk about the motherland must be one of the major issues since there certainly is a very close link with the ingestion of Imnet and the fact that it comes from "home". Imnet is not only a symbolic motherland earth but it is in its actual material substance. Here symbol and matter conflate in the act of swallowing.

Life histories

Biographical data collection will be included in the research. Life history is seen here as both a method and a site. Since every site and every method provide insights into a variety of issues, the collection of biographies of individuals, their family and people closely related to them opens up a different type of analysis from the ones encountered in participant observation and case studies. The peculiarity of life histories is related to the focus on the individual subject, the diachronic nature of the data, the world of emotions permeating personal memories and experiences, and, above all, the close relationship and dialectics occurring between the researcher and the researched.

In the specific case of this research in Italy the use of life histories is very significant because of its centrality as a method in social and historical research among Italian intellectuals. In Italy, life history as a methodology for research has been widely used, in many contexts, disciplines and for different purposes. Rammstedt (1995) describes in detail the peculiarity of biographical research in Italy in its multiplicities. The objectives connected to the collection of life histories are primarily linked to the desire to let marginalized groups have a chance to speak, giving them a space in the history in which they were denied a voice. Life histories, "storie di vita", have been collected since the 1940s, although they had no place in academia until the 60s. They were at times used to fill the gaps in topical and thematic data. Anthropology and sociology used them in a complementary function added to other methodologies of research, providing further insight for theoretical frameworks and hypothesis. Later, life histories in the 70s, also presented the possibility for interdisciplinary research. Moreover biographies in Italy gave insights into context, the past through memories, and present through the description of the circumstances in which interviews were carried out. For some the narrative event was important in its linguistic significance; the narratological axis was for them the analytic framework. Others

focused on the dialectical procedure of interaction, between the researcher and the researched, but also between the micro and the macro level. There was also an attention to the self of the researcher; the description of life histories included a self-narration. The political motivation behind the collection of life history is above all significant in Italy. Marxist scholars started to do biographical research to achieve a description of “popular culture”, emphasising the importance of voices from the working class never heard before: peasants and those who were absent in the mainstream production of history. They thought of themselves as doing advocacy, empowering their researched and trying to give them equal status.

Although biographical research in Italy has a longer past than in most other Western European countries, similar issues are at stake today in the work of all those who focus on life histories (e.g. Caplan, 1997, Miller 2000 and Plummer, 2001). There are, however, different ways to use the material collected, as has been argued above through the Italian cases. My research will not produce only accounts of individual lives but will engage with these in order to achieve further insight in the particular themes and issues dealt with in the previous sections. The conceptualisation of life history as method and field of inquiry is important since it allows insight into those domains of identity difficult to investigate through collective sites. An individual’s experiences, looked through the time span of a life, provide the site for an analysis of individual and social change, and life cycles. The narratological event is mostly interesting since the act of describing oneself encompasses the sole depiction of the history of a life. The discursive and the mnemonic formation link together mixing with personal and collective narratives. So, in the analysis of life histories, the multiplicity of voices must be included also with the researchers one. While collecting the biographical data I keep a personal diary, so to record my own voice. When transcribing the interviews I want to include the subjects and try to cooperate with them to gain further access into the linguistic and experiential side of the narration. I include interviews with members of the household, I visit kin and friends in order to have a wider range of data. Finally given that, within the context of the whole research, life histories have specific roles, themes and provide specific insight, they must be included and compared with the data collected through other sites and therefore analysed in their collective as well as individual dimension.

Access

Access is a practicality which must not be underestimated. Life histories allow access into the intimacy of the household and of personal lives and vice versa. The learning of Tigrigna is being done through exchanges. In the past few months I have been learning with people who want to learn either Italian or English and therefore we exchange language skills. This, added to the life histories collection, gives me the personal level of communication which allows an understanding of key issues about community dynamics and to access public spaces, through some kind of snowball effect. Tigrigna learning in one-to-one meetings throughout a prolonged time span also allows access into the hidden domains of language, the field of the meaningful unsaid, and the tacit forms of communication (Pratt, 1989). Fieldwork is being carried out with the reflection on my double status of insider in the Milanese population, to which also my informants belong, and initially of outsider to their communities. Nevertheless, I try to gain as much access as possible in order to feel and be felt as an insider in many ways. The shift to the insider rather than the outsider status enters into those domains in which anthropologists in present times have diverted from the classical ideas of fieldwork among the "other", through "detached" participant observation. Reflexivity is thus crucial since not only do I need to keep track of my actions as well as my informants, but also I need to reflect on my own experiences of being a "migrant" in the UK where I study. To understand the implications of displacement and movement of my informants I must draw attention to the ways in which I have perceived "home" and myself while abroad. During the fieldwork it is usual that people want to know me through my own life experiences, often looking for similarities with their own. Reflexivity therefore is not only a politically correct practice but also it becomes a way to get to know people, to gain trust and to achieve creative relationships with informants.

Ethics

With the rise in tension around the status of immigrants in Italy and their "legality", this research needs to take into consideration the ethical dimension. Issues of movement and asylum seeking have become very politicised and dangerous in many ways. Many of my informants are in a fragile position in regards to the Bossi-Fini act and to the internal frictions within the Eritrean community. Therefore not only do I need to

achieve access through trust but also I must always explain to them the work in progress, its risks and empowering effects in order to receive a fully informed consent. The information that I gather is conceived as possession of my informants and therefore it's a duty to ask for permission to use it in my work. Especially in the case of life histories the ethical issues arising are higher because of the detailed and in depth nature of the information. There will be a close cooperation while transcribing the data and therefore there will be the chance to choose together whether to omit information which might end up harming my informants or me. The emotional side of this type of research needs attention since the relation with memory and pain is disrupting in most cases and for that reason it needs care and understanding. Especially in the collection of life histories there has to be a continuation of the relationship when needed, since the existence of emotional disturbance cannot be simply dismissed. The Belmont report states that the primary ethical issue is to carry out research without harming anyone. This aim is the primary concern not only in legal and political terms of but also in terms of an awareness of the human encounter with emotions and of the importance of reciprocity in the research.

Summary

There are many levels in which the research gains legitimacy and significance. Anthropologically, issues of identity and perceptions of the self in relation to "communities of memory" (Malkki 1997) are here in the spotlight. After the turn in "writing against culture" (Abu Lughod 1992) and the reflexive scope of the discipline itself which previously was over-categorising communities and homogenising cultures, this research leads to a discussion of the multiplicity of voices and actions. This anthropological gaze consents to look not only at similarities but also at differences in identity formation among the same community. The concept of communities of memory is important since it allows an awareness of the impact of different experiences in the formation of identity. Theoretically, with the stress on agency, this research engages in the discussion around the relationship between structure and agency, which raises fundamental issues in the social sciences. In the Italian context, on the one hand the insight into historical memory and post-colonial reflection is useful to start a debate which has been delayed for many years. On the other hand, migration and asylum seeking are urgent issues to be

dealt with, through an insight not into the negative impacts of this phenomenon on the Italian society, but more in terms of social change. The focus on a foreign migrant community with one of the longest histories in Milan raises first of all issues around the different cultures of politics which Eritreans have experienced in Italy and in Milan. Secondly it inspires the research to look into the different communities that have been forming throughout time and to analyse the contemporary ones which may have diverse loyalties. For my informants and the Eritrean community in Milan there is also an empowering side to the research for there is space for their voices to be finally heard. Moreover my informants advise are most appreciated and cooperation is part of the methodology for fieldwork itself. Through the reflexive scope, the research should also be an account of an ethnography in which the author is actively participating with all her strengths and weaknesses.

Notes

1. This is a revisited version of an MSc thesis in research methods. The paper proposes an insight inside a research in progress, these are my first few months of fieldwork: In September 2002 I started learning the Tigrinya language and gaining preliminary data and access, and since January of 2003 I have started doing multisided participant observation.
2. Amharic is the official language in Ethiopia, in Eritrea the languages most often used are Tigrigna and Arabic.
3. In Eritrea nearly half of the population follows the Christian churches, slightly more than half are Muslims and other indigenous religions also exist.
4. The race issue
5. Though not internal migrations
6. Eritrea and Ethiopia are exceptions and this is also why this research is important.
7. In "LaRepubblica" 12-07-2002
8. The PFDJ is the political party which developed from the previous EPLF liberation movement.
9. Not all branches of it: some Cardinals, like Biffi, have been stating the incommensurability of religions and cultures and therefore they have been prone to deny access to those "different" people.
10. The Coptic Crosses are different from the Catholic ones and are very often worn, especially by women, on the body or tattooed on the forehead and on arms.

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