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Eritrea's Chosen Trauma and the Legacy of the Martyrs: The Impact of Postmemory on Political Identity Formation of Second-Generation Diaspora Eritreans

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Abstract

In the collective memory of Eritreans, the liberation struggle against Ethiopia symbolises the heroic fight of their fallen martyrs against oppression. After independence, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front created an autocratic regime, which is adored by many second-generation diaspora Eritreans living in democracies. I engage with bodies of literature exploring the political importance of collective trauma in post-conflict societies and apply two theoretical notions, "postmemory" and "chosen trauma," to explain how the government's narrative of Eritrean history produced a culture of nationalism through the glorification of the martyrs. This narrative and the trauma experienced by their parents created experiences of postmemory among the second-generation diaspora that have influenced their worldview. I demonstrate how Eritrean pro-government activists utilise US-born artists who recently discovered their Eritreanness, such as Tiffany Haddish, to instil long-distance nationalism. The article is based on a social media analysis, long-term observation of Eritrean diaspora communities, and recent fieldwork.

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Keywords

Eritrea, postmemory, chosen trauma, second-generation diaspora, nationalism

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Introduction

In the collective memory of Eritreans, the thirty-year-long struggle against Ethiopia from 1961 to 1991 is memorised as a period when heroic fighters sacrificed their lives to achieve independence against all odds and to liberate the country from oppression. Ever since, President Isaias Afewerki, the leader of the victorious Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, has ruled the country with an iron fist. Eritrea has no constitution and national elections were never held. Instead of ending oppression and developing the country, the leadership engaged in a disastrous border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. Two years later, the regime implemented an open-ended national service – a system of decade-long forced labour for the military and the ruling party, which has turned Eritrea into one of the largest refugee-producing countries in Africa (International Refugee Rights Initiative, 2017).

Diaspora Eritreans have watched events unfolding in Eritrea from afar, including the renewed war and the ensuing crackdown on prominent dissidents and journalists who had demanded democratic reforms in 2001 (Amnesty International, 2004). They watched how the young state was transformed into a dictatorship ruled by the president and a small political elite in the absence of the rule of law (Ogbazghi, 2011). Yet, a surprisingly high proportion of diaspora Eritreans are still ardent supporters of the government, many of them having been socialised in democratic countries.

The Eritrean regime has mastered mechanisms to garner support by making use of legitimation, coercion, and oppression as pillars of autocratic regime stability (Gerschewski, 2013). These mechanisms are applied in the diaspora and inside Eritrea, where only small segments of the population have remained supportive of the regime; these are mainly profiteers of the militarised command economy. The vast majority has lost all hope after two decades of subjection to the national service, and hundreds of thousands have put all their energy into fleeing the country.

While oppression is omnipresent inside the country, strategies of legitimation are important to maintain diaspora support (Hirt, 2015a; Hirt and Mohammad, 2018). This article focuses on the ways in which the government reaches out to one specific subgroup of Eritreans, the second diaspora generation. I explain why second-generation diaspora Eritreans – defined as persons either born outside their country of origin or having spent their formative years of childhood in the diaspora – who enjoy civic and political rights in their adopted homes glorify an autocratic regime that holds their relatives inside Eritrea hostage. It seeks to understand why they idealise a country to which they would never consider returning for good. The article shows how representatives of the Eritrean regime and its transnational institutions strive to produce a new generation of uncritical government supporters abroad because the diaspora provides a financial lifeline for the government through a diaspora tax and remittances (Hirt, 2015a). It also highlights regime supporters' strategies to instrumentalise second-generation Eritrean diaspora artists to strengthen government support.

Many authoritarian countries have developed transnational policies to control their citizens abroad (Glasius, 2018). Yet I argue that the Eritrean leadership has been exceptionally skilful in exploiting psychological mechanisms to mobilise the diaspora from

the times of the independence struggle up to the present. Thereby, I reflect on the political dimension of a psychological phenomenon. I use two theoretical notions, "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2008) and "chosen trauma" (Volkan, 2001) to explain why and how the ruling elite strives to control the narrative of Eritrean history, grounded in a national culture of sacrifice and in the responsibility to preserve the legacy of the martyrs of the struggle. I revisit literature exploring processes of identity formation among Eritreans abroad (Afeworki, 2018; Bernal, 2013; Conrad, 2010; Graf, 2018; Redeker Hepner, 2008 and 2015; Von Nolting, 2002) and demonstrate how the experiences of the war refugees of the 1980s have shaped their children's image of Eritrea, which often diverges significantly from the reality on the ground. This literature shows how identity formation among the second generation is influenced by the first generation's feelings of guilt of having fled Ethiopian war atrocities instead of fighting in the liberation movement, and by the EPLF's distorted narrative of Eritrean history, which has shaped the second generation's imagination.

I show how the leadership in Asmara is striving to create enthusiastic nationalists among the second diaspora generation – not only by organising them in the Young PFDJ (YPFDJ), a youth organisation established exclusively for diaspora Eritreans in 2004, but also by using culture as a tool of manipulation. I show how second-generation Eritrean artists in the United States of America who have recently discovered their Eritreanness without being familiar with life in their country of origin are instrumentalised to improve the image of Eritrea and its leader. Among them are comedian and actress Tiffany Haddish, the late rappers Sandman Negus and Nipsey Hussle (both of whom were lethally shot in Los Angeles), and Reggae singer Layne Tadesse.

The article is based on theoretical reflections related to postmemory and collective trauma and on the analysis of social media and Eritrean state media publications. It is further informed by long-term observations of Eritrean diaspora communities in Europe since the 1980s, by numerous conversations with diaspora Eritreans, and by extensive fieldwork among Europe-based diaspora Eritreans in 2018 and 2019. I elaborate how long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992) is not only nurtured by the narratives of the first diaspora generation, whose perception of Eritrean history has been systematically manipulated by the EPLF (Conrad, 2006), and how the narrative of a heroic past has formed the second-generation diaspora's perception of their homeland.

Notably, not all young Eritreans in the diaspora have adopted the perspective of the Eritrean government; many are convinced that, to the contrary, the regime has betrayed the legacy of the martyrs by committing gross human rights violations. However, this article does not engage with those diaspora Eritreans who participate in anti-government activities through political parties or civic movements, but instead seeks to understand the roots of pro-government enthusiasm.

The remainder of the article explains the concepts of postmemory and collective trauma as a part of large group identity, analyses the process of identity formation among second-generation diaspora youth raised in democratic countries, and highlights how the Eritrean leadership has shaped the country's history to establish a tale of national unity and a myth of a heroic past. I show how the leadership was able to anchor the traits of

martyrdom and self-sacrifice as foundations of an Eritrean national identity and how regime criticism is being characterised as treason against the legacy of the martyrs. The article then explores how young American artists with Eritrean roots were used by government proponents to improve the government's image. I conclude that postmemory experienced by children of conflict-generated diasporas and the nurturing of a nation's chosen trauma can help to create romanticised narratives of an imagined homeland among second-generation diasporans that create active support for a distant autocratic system.

Postmemory, Eritrea's Chosen Trauma and the Second-Generation Diaspora

The term "postmemory" was coined by Marianne Hirsch (2008: 106–107) in the context of Holocaust survivors and their children and describes:

> the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right.

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory experienced by all generations that "come after," because it is not derived from personal experience but from imaginations built on narratives of previous generations who had to go through traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated by later generations (Codde, 2011: 1; Hirsch, 1997: 22). Each new generation creates their own imagination of traumatic stories lived through by others. They carry the burden of the "guardianship" of a traumatic generational past (Hirsch, 2008: 104). These collective traumas constitute "a social, interpersonal phenomenon, which, when narrated into national identity, can constitute the nation-state's identity" and influence its activities (Lerner, 2019: 563).

Postmemory is closely interconnected with the psychological process of transgenerational transmission of trauma and experiences of secondary trauma (Lambert et al., 2014), which clinical psychiatry often links to mental disorders such as PTSD (Bombay et al., 2009; Dekel and Goldblatt, 2008). However, the focus of this article is the political dimension of trauma-affected postmemory as a part of the human psyche that can be actively manipulated by political entrepreneurs, as Volkan (2001) has shown for Serbia, Conrad (2006) for the Eritrean diaspora, Duschinski and Hamrick (2018) for Namibia, Orjuela (2020) for Rwanda and Sri Lanka, and Bernal (2013) for the politicisation of collective memorialisation processes.

The analysis of postmemories helps to trace the formation of (trans-)national memories, which can be transported through narratives and symbols such as Holocaust

memorials, monuments of national heroes, flags, or music. In the case of Sri Lanka, Orjuela (2020: 13) observes that:

> for the young [diaspora] generation, the veneration of martyrs provides a space where a postmemory is shaped which does not (mainly) derive from traumas their parents have faced, but instead builds on a shared witnessing of the retelling and reenacting of the painful past of the Tamil community.

The fact that postmemory affects people whose immediate ancestors were not direct witnesses of the events of the past makes it a useful manipulative tool for political memory entrepreneurs.

Memories transmitted from one generation to the next have become known under the term "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992: 109) and can become what Volkan (2001: 79) calls a "chosen trauma," defined as "the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the groups' ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy." He states that the transgenerational transmission of trauma as a psychological phenomenon can affect the course of history because large groups (be they ethnic, national, or religious) can reactivate a chosen trauma of the past to protect their threatened identity by rallying around a leader (Volkan, 2001: 84–89). He explains how the historical truth can be modified at will by political leaders, who "intuitively seem to know how to reactivate a chosen trauma, especially when their large group is in conflict […] and needs to reconfirm or enhance its identity" (Volkan, 2001: 88).

Volkan shows impressively how the former president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, used a century-old event, the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, where Serbian Prince Lazar was slain by soldiers of the Ottoman Empire, to evoke rage in the late 1990s. The battle had been turned into a chosen trauma of the Serbian people, and Kosovo was turned into a symbolic place representing the chosen trauma of the Serbs due to their humiliation by the Turks. Milosevic stirred nationalistic sentiments by touring the mummified remains of Prince Lazar through Serbian towns to ignite feelings of anger (Volkan, 2001: 89–95). The tragic end was the ethnic cleansing of Muslim Albanians during the Kosovo War, which claimed the lives of 8,600 civilians. This incident shows how the past can be translated into the present with the help of (distorted) memories and storytelling.

The second-generation Eritrean diaspora are the children of Eritreans who left their homeland between the 1970s and the late 1980s to flee the atrocities of war when the Eritrean Liberation Front and the EPLF fought against the Ethiopian military regime. Civil war between the liberation fronts, political terror committed by Ethiopia in the cities, and scorched-earth policies in the rural areas forced about one million Eritreans to flee their country by 1991, when Eritrea was liberated from Ethiopian rule.

The number of freedom fighters was about 90,000, which means there were far more refugees than active fighters (World Bank, 1994). However, the EPLF had relied on exiled Eritreans from its early times as a source of material support by organising the emerging diaspora in mass organisations in all major refugee hosting areas in the Sudan,

Europe, North America, and elsewhere, and during the 1980s the Eritrean diaspora became highly politicised (Hirt, 2015a).

Many of these refugees suffered from "survivor's guilt" and felt like traitors, because they did not actively participate in the armed struggle for liberation from Ethiopian suppression (Conrad, 2006: 257; Von Nolting, 2002: 56). They tried to overcome these feelings by sticking closely to the Liberation Front's transnational organisations, attending propaganda meetings, and fundraising festivals. For this purpose, the EPLF, whose main support base was ethnic Tigrinya Orthodox Christians, created its own historic narrative. EPLF ideologists consciously denied the rifts within Eritrean society that had existed at least since the 1940s, when Eritreans were diametrically split between opponents and supporters of unification with Ethiopia. The front came up with a completely altered narrative in which the entire Eritrean people had been subjugated by Ethiopia and forced into an unwanted federation in 1952, ignoring the fact that most Orthodox Christians, about half of the population, had supported unity with Ethiopia (Mohammad, 2013; Trevaskis, 1977).

EPLF-constructed historical narratives were actively (and possibly more intensively than at home) inculcated into the minds of the Eritrean refugees:

> Many Eritreans would have been quite unable to tell any coherent "Eritrean history" when they arrived in Germany in the 1970s and 1980 s. The EPLF's cadres abroad organised the – often uprooted and alienated – refugees and provided them with a role, a sense of identity and a link to the EPLF's struggle at home […] Political seminars, speeches by EPLF representatives […], books used for language and history classes […], films, slogans, banners and magazines, all repeated the official line over and over again. That way personal and individual memories were gradually subordinated and overwritten by a collective memory that contributed to creating an even stronger sense of solidarity. (Conrad, 2006: 257)

Documentaries on video tapes presenting an idealised picture of life in the "liberated" (EPLF-controlled) areas could be found in most Eritrean diaspora households. The martyrs of the struggle played an important role in the EPLF's narrative, which portrayed the Eritrean struggle as unique: a people under the threat of elimination and betrayed by foreign superpowers chose a proud way of self-reliance and collective self-sacrifice to achieve liberation under the motto "victory to the masses" (*awet n' hafash*). This image was purported by many leftist visitors from democratic countries, who were shown around in the liberated areas and came up with books titled *Never Kneel Down*: *Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea* (Firebrace and Holland, 1985) or *Against All Odds*: *A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Connell, 1993), which strengthened the perception of Eritreans in exile to be a part of an extraordinary revolutionary movement. Accordingly, they abstained from any criticism of the EPLF and its autocratic leadership, which rigorously silenced dissent in the field by eliminating fighters who had criticised its leader Isaias Afewerki, such as members of the *Menkae* movement in the 1970s (Pool, 2001).

The narrative of the "failed decolonization of Eritrea" – starting from the betrayal of the Eritrean people by the United Nations in the 1950s, which led to federation with and annexation by Ethiopia in 1962, followed by thirty years of struggle without any international support against superpower USSR-backed Ethiopia and the resulting suffering, unheeded by the international community – constitutes Eritrea's chosen trauma on which Eritrean nationalism is based until today. It has not been used to ignite violence as Volkan has shown for Serbia, but it has contributed to the negligence of the suffering of Eritreans inside the country by parts of the diaspora, who have been demonstrating and lobbying in favour of a regime that has been accused of having committed crimes against humanity (UNHRC, 2016).

The glorification of the martyrs' self-sacrifice by diaspora Eritreans played into the hands of the EPLF leadership, because it inculcated feelings of pride for being a part of the emerging Eritrean nation. The leadership profited from the bad conscience of those who had left the country instead of participating in the struggle, although many had paid a high price for their safety by leaving properties and family behind (Von Nolting, 2002: 55–56). This emotional ambivalence prevented many Eritrean refugees from actively adapting to their new environments. While most of them found work, many first-generation diaspora Eritreans refused to consider their host countries as their homes and assured that they would return to Eritrea once independence had been achieved. However, only a small faction returned to their war-torn homeland (Clayton and Pörksen, 1994); the overwhelming majority settled in the diaspora for good and eventually adopted the nationality of their new home countries.

The children of this refugee generation grew up in an atmosphere where the Eritrean struggle was omnipresent. Samuel Graf (2018: 121) quotes a second-generation diaspora Eritrean in Switzerland:

> My father was very active within the diaspora and I have learnt much about Eritrea from him. At the weekends, he was at sessions and meetings. He also organised community events here in Switzerland. On Sundays, the families used to come together for the traditional coffee ceremony, watching videos from the struggle and the children also watched these films, which often showed bombing of civilians and other atrocities. They became active government supporters once they grew up and many are active in the government's youth organisation, the Young PFDJ (YPFDJ).

Their parent's feelings of guilt were often transferred to the younger generation, who feel obliged to support the PFDJ's nationalistic cause out of the vague perception that they did something wrong. Von Nolting (2002) interviewed Solomon from the second diaspora generation in Germany. He told her that they were harassed by young Eritreans while visiting Eritrea's capital Asmara: "You know, they see you as a tourist, like somebody who is doing well in 'rich Germany' […] As if we had just cowardly run away. And then I really had feelings of guilt" (Von Nolting, 2002: 70, translated from German by author). This statement clearly expresses how the actions of the parents are evoking negative feelings by the next generation through their postmemory and the transmission of guilt from one generation to the next.

A second-generation diaspora Eritrean told this author that his parents regularly spend time in Eritrea. However, they have never criticised anything they saw because they still regard criticism as treason. He believes this is related to the fact that they left Eritrea and feel guilty because they were not fighters, although they actively supported the struggle from afar. He believes that the culture of sacrifice and martyrdom is still alive: “I don’t think many peoples in the world would make as many sacrifices as the Eritrean people without protesting, because they are still influenced by the culture of sacrifice inherited from the struggle” (personal conversation, 2018).

To this day, even diaspora Eritreans with no interest in politics like to connect to the government-controlled community organisations (*mahbere.koms*), as a female opposition activist explained:

> Most members of our anti-government association are men. The women here [in South Germany] are all with PFDJ; they want to dance with PFDJ. This is simply their community, all their relatives are there, so they just participate without thinking much about it. (Interview, 22 December 2018)

Postmemory, the Government of Eritrea and the Legacy of the Martyrs

Sangalang and Vang (2017) found in a meta-analysis of literatures examining intergenerational trauma in refugee families that posttraumatic stress affects the psychological well-being of entire families including subsequent generations. In a similar vein, Bloch (2018: 661) describes patterns of transmitting trauma from one generation to the next by passing on stories about experiences of violence and flight among second-generation diaspora communities in the UK originating from Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Turkey. She finds that:

> telling stories can build bridges between generations, giving children a better sense of their history and identity, but they can also result in guilt, gratitude and a sense of duty – the need to please and to compensate for the trauma, sacrifices and losses of the parents.

In a similar vein, Orjuela (2020: 369) shows how postmemory is experienced by the second-generation Sri Lanka diaspora in relation to the traumatic past of their inherited homeland and their perceived lack of transitional justice.

The passing of memories, be they actually lived memories or parts of a constructed collective memory, is a process that produces certain states of mind and political opinions that can influence the further course of history (Lerner, 2019: 550). Matthies-Boon and Head (2018) found that authoritarian governments are not only creating individual trauma such as PTSD, but also social and political trauma: “The social trauma occurring in repressive authoritarian societies […] occurs due to the restriction of communicative spaces and the strategic deconstruction of potential forms of social

and collective flourishing” (2018: 262). Their insights on post-revolutionary Egypt are comparable with the situation inside Eritrea, where mutual mistrust due to intensive surveillance has severely damaged the social fabric. Duschinski and Hamrick (2018: 440) demonstrate how the post-colonial memory politics of the former Namibian liberation movement SWAPO (South-West Africa People’s Organisation) influenced public memory by producing a hegemonic historical narrative centred around the anti-Apartheid liberation struggle and its “One Namibia, One Nation” slogan, while suppressing the memory of the genocide committed by the German colonisers against ethnic Herero and Nama.

While the politicisation of memory is a frequent phenomenon, the Eritrean case seems to be special in that the postmemory of the second generation and resulting feelings of guilt are systematically used by the home government to control its diaspora population, thereby continuing a process that began during the independence struggle and has proven highly successful. The EPLF’s ideologists stressed the inseparability of the Liberation Front and the people, and after independence they created a psychological conflation between Eritrea as a nation, the State of Eritrea as an institution, and the PFDJ under President Isaias as a symbol for the glorious struggle (Conrad, 2010: 166) . This thought-construct implies that criticism of the government means betrayal of the nation and of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for Eritrea’s independence. This narrative is nurtured by varying conspiracy theories, implying that Eritrea’s enemies – including the CIA, Ethiopia, and anti-Eritrean “Quislings” (Tesfamariam, 2019) – are endangering the very existence of the nation.

Postmemory is used to instil feelings of national pride in young diaspora Eritreans, despite the dire situation inside their home country. “Large-group identity is formed on the basis of shared anxieties, fantasies, defenses, myths and memories and can be mobilised in response to chosen traumas and chosen glories” (Hollander, 2016: 66). Accordingly, second-generation diaspora Eritreans have grown up with mixed feelings between pride about the glorious struggle and doubts due to unfulfilled promises of a prosperous future. Koinova and Karabegović (2019: 1819) assert that new diaspora generations can either acquire old ideas and values from their predecessors and thus perpetuate conflict-generated identities, or they can internalise democratic values acquired in liberal host societies. I argue that narratives created by transnational political institutions and political entrepreneurs serving authoritarian regimes often have a bigger impact on substantive parts of the diaspora than the historical narratives of the host society linked to struggles for democracy and civil liberties, which are not a part of their collective memory.

PFDJ proponents in the diaspora created narratives specifically designed for consumption by Eritreans who grew up far from their homeland to alter their perception. Many of them have never been to Eritrea or have only spent their vacations there. Still, they are told that it is their duty to glorify the sacrifices of the martyrs and live up to the nationalist enthusiasm of the first diaspora generation, thereby turning the chosen trauma into a chosen glory as “shared mental representations of pride and pleasure evoking past events and heroes that are recollected ritualistically” (Smith, 2016: 20).

However, it is important to distinguish analytically between diaspora-born Eritreans and the refugees who fled from Eritrea during the past two decades after having suffered from the atrocities imposed by the government, first and foremost the open-ended national service. These two groups of Eritreans can be referred to as “one Eritrean generation, two worlds” (Hirt, 2015b), even if they are now sharing the same country of residence.

Pro-government second-generation diasporans and refugees rarely socialise due to fundamental differences regarding the situation in their homeland; and if such encounters take place, they can be very stressful, as a female informant who fled Eritrea in 2010 at the age of fifteen narrated emotionally:

> When I went to school in Norway, I was approached by government supporters. When they noticed that I was against the government, they told me many ‘not nice’ things, and they always harassed me. They hated me and they always talked bad things about me. Once I tried to explain them why I don’t like the government. When I was in my village, me and my sister could not go to school because they kicked us out after the 5th grade because my mother was in jail for no reason. We couldn’t even buy bread. But these people simply told me that I am a liar. (Interview, Norway, 17 July 2018)

Government supporters are influenced by people like US-based Amanuel Biedemariam (2018), one of the most vocal promoters of the PFDJ ideology and a regular contributor to diaspora-based pro-government websites such as tesfanews.com or awetnayu.com, who explains the mindset of many second-generation diaspora Eritreans as follows:

> These Eritreans [first diaspora generation] expressed their love for Eritrea in their daily lives. They lived, breathed, sang and played Eritrea every day. They gathered in Eritrean events, honored Eritrean heroes and supported Eritrean struggle for independence financially, morally and advocated for the Eritrean cause every day. Eritrea was in their heart. It was and remains their purpose, mission and life. They are dedicated backbone of Eritrea. They support their families and Eritrea at the same time equally. Eritreans have demonstrated to the world what it means to love a country, family and community as one. The kids grew up in these environments and were influenced by it. *They knew Eritrea emotionally and grew up loving Eritrea as their parents did* […] They ate Eritrean food, listened to Eritrean music and […] went to all Eritrean events and wherever they travelled, Eritrea travelled with them. (emphasis mine)

He provides a moral guideline and reminds second-generation Eritreans of their duty to support both their family at home and their country. The government demands the payment of a diaspora tax, special contributions to counter alleged foreign conspiracies, and support to martyrs’ families (Hirt, 2015a; Hirt and Mohammad, 2018). Second-generation Eritreans are constantly reminded that they belong to a heroic nation built on the ultimate sacrifice of the martyrs. For instance, the *Merih* (“Leadership”) newsletter, an official

news outlet of the YPFDJ, links the fate of the freedom fighters to the present lives of second-generation diaspora Eritreans:

> We all claim Eritrea with pride, but is that enough? […] Do we understand the depths of the sacrifices made for Eritrea to have its independence? Imagine living under constant fear, oppression and violence […] Imagine […] waking up only to feel like a prisoner in your own home – your own country. Then imagine at the age of 18 leaving your friends and family to take on a most heroic task, one that demanded sacrifice […] Imagine transitioning from the comfort of your home to the cold trenches, from learning in schools to learning in the battlefield. With one goal in mind – "Awet *n*'Hafash" [Victory to the Masses] – you become a vital part of what would become a 30 yr [sic] long struggle […]. There is not a social, political, or religious privilege that we enjoy today, that was not bought for us by the blood, tears, and suffering of our heros [sic] […] It is because of those individuals that we all can say "I am Eritrean" with pride. (YPFDJ (2010a), *Merih Newsletter* 3, May 2010)

What is most intriguing of this reference to Eritrea's chosen trauma is the complete omission of the post-independence period. Passages like "imagine living under constant fear, oppression and violence," "waking up to feel like a prisoner in your own country," or "at the age of 18 leaving your friends and family" mirror exactly what Eritrea's youth inside the country has to go through every day now in the twenty-first century. Yet the regime supporters are supposed to disconnect today's reality from the heroic past and ignore that all "social, political, or religious privilege" they enjoy today is granted to them by their host countries, not by the Eritrean government. Nevertheless, the pro-government diaspora proudly calls Eritrea their own, without ever considering to return for good. Many second-generation diaspora Eritreans actively adapt what they experienced as postmemory through the narratives of either their parents or through the transnational PFDJ organs. In the same issue of the *Merih Newsletter*, YPFDJ member Simone Mariotti from Washington, DC explains what Martyrs, Day means to her:

> Vision. Our martyrs were visionary […] They saw things beyond their own lives and they could not bear the thought of their children and grandchildren living life with no identity and suppressed by tyranny. *They loved the "Eritrea the child" so much that they gave their lives and sacrificed it so that you and I can live in peace, enjoy freedom, pursue life to the fullest*, and have a better and bright future. (YPFDJ (2010b), *Merih Newsletter* 3: 16, emphasis mine)

This statement has clear religious connotations. The martyrs are (unconsciously) portrayed like "God who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son" (John 3:16) to safe humankind (Eritrea). The ultimate sacrifice of the martyrs means an obligation of the younger generations to be proud Eritrean nationalists and act as guardians of the memories of the independence struggle-generation without questioning what has become of the martyr's legacy in present Eritrea.

A sober and precise analysis of the role of postmemory in second-generation diaspora youth's identity formation comes from Selam, living in Switzerland and interviewed by Samuel Graf (2018: 120):

> People in my age [second-generation diaspora Eritreans] often are conditioned by their parents to develop a national pride as if they used to live there. As if they had witnessed it all by themselves. As if they had been to war and etc.[sic]. But, we simply were not. We have been growing up *here*. And all we know, we know just from stories.

Von Nolting (2002) observed that the liberation struggle plays an enormously important role in the collective memory of the exiled Eritreans in Germany; possibly because they did not actively participate in that struggle. The Eritrean government safeguards nationalist feelings by organising seminars and festivals to strengthen the national identity of the exiled Eritreans through the continuous reconstruction of history and the idealisation of Eritrea (2002: 99–101). Similarly, Conrad (2006: 259) stresses that a strong martyr's cult is at the core of the regime's narrative prepared to influence the diaspora:

> The absence of photographs of 'martyred' fighters and soldiers, or other overt forms of personalised 'cults' in Eritrea obscures the central meaning of 'martyrdom' in people's memory. The memory of the 'martyrs' and the 'ultimate sacrifice' they paid is skilfully used by the regime to lend it legitimacy and rationalise the maintenance of power.

Niat Afeworki (2018: 16), a second-generation Eritrean based in California, confirms the accuracy of these empirical observations more than a decade later by stating that postmemory has fostered Eritrean nationalism among the second-generation diaspora over time because they acknowledge the collective sacrifices of the imagined Eritrean community. Afeworki (2018: 2) observes that:

> diasporic nationalism among second-generation Eritrean youth has two distinct features: First, a post-memory of the war with Ethiopia for Eritrea's independence; the second, an obligation to be of service to Eritrea, which can be recognized in their defense of Eritrea's sovereignty and their ideas for and real actions towards the nation-building effort.

Diaspora Artists in Search of Their Roots: Reconnecting to Eritrea's "Glorious Past"

Music has played a pivotal role in liberation struggles in Africa and elsewhere. According to Vershbow (2010), music was considered as a weapon of the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, and in Zimbabwe's anti-colonial struggle, the *chimurenga* ("war") songs inspired the fighters (Chiridza et al., 2015). In Mozambique, the liberation front FRELIMO used popular revolutionary songs to promote its ideas (Meneses, 2018). Generally:

> music plays a key function in every struggle against socio-political oppression. From the civil rights movement's 'We Shall Overcome' to the 'Rockers' music of Jamaica, it is difficult to find a resistance movement that did not utilize the power of music in some form. (Vershbow, 2010: 2)

The EPLF/PFDJ was no exception and states that "[a]long with its military offences the EPLF used education, political awareness, culture, and most importantly music as its weapon" (shabait.com, 2012). After independence, songs like Abeba Haile's "*Hade Hzbi*, *Hade Lbi*" ("One People, One Heart")[1] were used to uphold the people's morale and corroborated the PFDJ's nationalist ideology inside and outside Eritrea. However, the government lost some of its devoted artists, most prominently the popular singer-songwriter Wedi Tikabo to the side of its opponents, and many second-generation diaspora Eritreans are not proficient enough in Eritrean languages to understand messages transmitted through lyrics.

Against this background, it was a cultural windfall revenue for the Eritrean regime that a number of diaspora-born artists, mainly from the United States of America, have recently rediscovered their Eritrean roots and created music that directly mirrors the YPFDJ's narrative: second-generation Eritrean-American reggae artist Layne Tadesse's song "*Awet n' Hafash*" is an homage to the freedom fighters and their sacrifices. The video-clip[2] glorifies the struggle and shows graphic pictures symbolising the massacres that the Eritrean people had to endure. However, there is a happy end: with Eritrea's independence won and the victory of the masses achieved in 1991, the song strengthens the imagination that ever since then the Eritrean people have been enjoying their independence and have lived in peace.

This example shows how far diaspora-Eritreans searching for their identity are alienated from their relatives at home who have been subjected to year-long forced labour under the national service scheme (Hirt and Mohammad, 2013; Kibreab, 2018). The disregard of the reality on the ground demonstrates that postmemory, either adapted through the narratives of the first diaspora generation or through YPFDJ propaganda, is a powerful psychological tool that creates strong emotions leading to a distorted reality perception.

Another young Eritrean diaspora artist, the late Sandman Negus, who died in Los Angeles in 2012 at the age of twenty-seven, expressed his admiration for Eritrea's military service in his song "Sawa." Sawa is the remote military training camp where students must pass their last school year before joining the national service at the age of eighteen.[3] Negus had been brought up in violence-prone areas of Los Angeles, California, just like Ermias Asghedom, son of an Eritrean father and a successful rapper better known under his stage name Nipsey Hussle, who died in 2019, aged thirty-three. He last visited Asmara in April 2018 and was interviewed by *EriTV*. Answering the question "what does being Eritrean mean to you?" Hussle said:

> More than anything I am proud of being an Eritrean. The history of our country, our struggle and the underdog story, the resilience of the people and our integrity is something I feel

> pride in being attached to. Most definitely I do remain closely in touch with our history and our people. (shabait.com, 2018a)

Hussle's reflections show that he internalised the PFDJ-narrative of a suppressed ("underdog") people that revolted against its enemies. Like many diaspora Eritreans, he refers to "our struggle" as if he had been a part of it. Talking about politics, Hussle remarked that in Eritrea, unlike in his Los Angeles neighbourhood, the leaders, the police, and the business owners all "looked like us" and have a say in the "overall power structure" (shabait.com, 2018a), taking the optical appearance as a sign of "being in charge." This perception reflects the feelings of powerlessness experienced by many African Americans.

Tiffany Haddish, another prominent American Eritrean, who grew up in Los Angeles under difficult circumstances before she became a famous comedian and actress, interpreted things from a different angle during her first visit to Eritrea in 2018. Interviewed by Eritrean state media, she stated that she was feeling "like a princess" residing in the only two upper-class hotels Eritrea has to offer and was reminded of her childhood dream when she saw young boys herding goats and farmers working together. Haddish, who had reconnected to Eritrea to discover her personal roots, focused on the bright side and announced that "my biggest plan is *to tell the world about Eritrea and its history*. I now know that the country has been through a lot" (shabait.com, 2018b).

Haddish did not grow up under the influence of parents committed to the cause of EPLF nor did she have any ties to the YPFD. However, she seems to have adapted Eritrea's chosen trauma and the narrative of its troubled history. It seems that Nipsey Hussle, Sandman Negus, and Tiffany Haddish all connected their own troubled past to the struggle of the Eritrean people. These American-Eritrean artists were not directly influenced by transgenerational transmission of trauma, because their relations to their Eritrean parents were either weak or their parents were not EPLF activists. However, when they came in touch with the politicised Eritrean historical narrative as purported by the YPFDJ, they obviously identified with the chosen trauma of the Eritrean nation.

It may have been by coincidence that these young artists rediscovered their Eritrean heritage, but it is remarkable how their personal experiences fit into the memory politics of the pro-government diaspora by reviving the postmemory of the struggle and making it accessible to new audiences. Accordingly, the PFDJ's propaganda machine has exploited them as instruments to reach ordinary kids on the block who are not linked to political diaspora activism.

Pro-government activist Amanuel Biedemariam praised all Eritrean-American celebrities who have demonstrated to be proud Eritreans. When Layne Tadesse released his album *Awet N'Hafash*, he called him "the unstoppable warrior" in reminiscence to the armed struggle (Biedemariam, 2014). When Tiffany Haddish appeared at the 2018 Oscars wearing a traditional Eritrean dress,[4] he interpreted this event as satisfaction for Eritrea, which suffered from endless vilification campaigns aimed at alienating diaspora Eritreans from their country and claimed that the Tiffany Haddish Story "is the story of resolve, resilience, perseverance, struggle and victory" (Biedemariam, 2018). These are

all attributes associated with freedom fighters, which means he is indirectly elevating her to the status of a national hero, thereby politicising Haddish's personal life struggle and search for her roots to link Eritrea's chosen trauma to the artist's success and fame.

Even President Isaias, who usually keeps a safe distance from ordinary people, received Tiffany Haddish and Nipsey Hussle in person; the pictures of a friendly-looking president posing with the young artists were used to improve his image among diaspora Eritreans (eastafro.com, 2018; face2faceafrica.com, 2019). Such images strengthen feelings linked to Eritrea's chosen trauma that are shared by many second-generation diaspora Eritreans. Seeing their idols in company with the Eritrean leader makes them feel as a part of the victorious independence struggle. The diaspora celebrities posing with the former guerrilla fighter Isaias invoke feelings of pride in second-generation Eritreans, who often feel as underdogs in their home countries.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored how psychological processes such as the experience of postmemory by children of trauma survivors and the chosen trauma adopted by a nation can influence attitudes of second-generation diaspora members towards their homeland and towards its government. I explained why second-generation diaspora Eritreans who were brought up in democratic environments often feel obliged to actively support a government that has been accused of crimes against humanity and rules a country that is among the largest refugee-producers worldwide. I argued that the picture of Eritrea as perceived by the pro-government second-generation diaspora has been shaped by the historical narrative created by the EPLF during the independence struggle and varies widely from the reality on the ground experienced by the youth inside the country that is subjected to an open-ended national service and enjoys no political rights and civic freedoms. I also showed how the historical narrative that emerged during the struggle and was used to rally the refugees around the liberation movement's flag has been passed on to the second diaspora-born generation as postmemory. Eritreans born outside their homeland are indirectly affected by their parent's feelings of survivor's guilt grounded in the fact that they did not participate in the struggle as freedom fighters. These feelings were passed on to the next generation, and many second-generation diaspora Eritreans proudly identify with the Eritrean nation that emerged victorious out of a heroic struggle, and they feel obliged to honour the memory of the martyrs.

The role of postmemory in post-conflict societies, and among conflict-generated diaspora communities, has not been systematically explored, and further research in this field is needed. However, the manipulation and instrumentalisation of historical narratives has not been limited to Eritrea. Similar debates exist in the Namibian context, where the "politics of memory production" by SWAPO has been criticised by ethnic minorities (Duschinski and Hamrick, 2018: 437). Exposure to postmemory has also influenced the diasporas of Sri Lanka and Rwanda (Orjuela, 2020), and it seems that postmemory and chosen trauma play a political role in many post-conflict societies. The

attempt to manipulate collective memory can be seen as a general trait of authoritarian politics, but the case of Eritrea stands out due to its systematic control of the diaspora.

The government has mastered the art of manipulating the feelings of diaspora Eritreans for its own purposes. It is keeping the legacy of the martyrs alive and pretends that young Eritreans must show unconditional loyalty to the government, which represents the Eritrean nation and upholds the sacrifices of the martyrs. The reality of today's Eritrea, a failed economy based on forced labour of national service conscripts and the absence of democracy and rule of law, is excluded from this narrative. I have demonstrated how agents of the Eritrean leadership in the diaspora have used US-American celebrities with Eritrean roots for their own purposes. These artists tried to connect to their country of origin as a process of self-discovery. Nolens volens, they were used as propaganda tools by the government during their journeys to Eritrea.

In conclusion, the Eritrean case shows how the chosen trauma of a nation, seen as an imagined community (Anderson, 2006), can be transferred from one generation to the next and demonstrates that diaspora communities do not lose their emotional connection to the homeland easily. On the contrary, the imagination of a glorious homeland can compensate for problems they face in their adopted homes. Thus, non-democratic governments can easily manipulate second-generation diasporas as members of communities whose collective historical memories and chosen trauma have been widely ignored by the democratic societies in which they grew up and settled for good.

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Notes

1. Abeba Haile's song "*Hade Hzbi Hade Lbi*" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9OSENIm0v8 (accessed 9 July 2020).
2. Layne Tadesse's song "*Awet n' Hafash*" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PRK9nud_fI&list=RD7PRK9nud_fI&start_radio=1&t=18 (accessed 8 April 2019).
3. Sandman Neguses' song "Sawa" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWVYXPxD_MM&t=148s (accessed 15 April 2019). The video clip was not filmed in Sawa, but in the capital Asmara.

4. The fader.com, 4 March 2018: "Tiffany Haddish Wearing a Stunning Oscars Gown to Honour her Fathers' Eritrean Roots." Available at https://www.thefader.com/2018/03/04/tiffany-haddish-wears-a-dress-to-honor-her-fathers-eritrean-roots (accessed 17 April 2019).

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Eritreas "Chosen Trauma" und das Vermächtnis der Märtyrer: Der Einfluss von Postmemory auf die politische Identitätsbildung von Diaspora-Eritreerinnen und -Eritreern der zweiten Generation

Zusammenfassung
Im kollektiven Gedächtnis der Bevölkerung Eritreas symbolisiert der Kampf gegen Äthiopien den heroischen Kampf ihrer gefallenen Märtyrer gegen Unterdrückung. Nach der Unabhängigkeit schuf die Eritrean People's Liberation Front ein autokratisches Regime, das von vielen Eriteerinnen und Eritreern der zweiten Diasporageneration, die in demokratischen Staaten leben, verehrt wird. Ich setze mich mit Literatur auseinander, welche die politische Bedeutung kollektiver Traumata in Nachkriegsgesellschaften untersucht und wende zwei Theorieansätze, „Postmemory" und „Chosen Trauma" an, um zu erklären, wie das von der Regierung geprägte Narrativ der eritreischen Geschichte eine Kultur des Nationalismus durch die Glorifizierung der Märtyrer hervorgebracht hat. Dieses Narrativ und die Traumata der Elterngeneration riefen bei der zweiten Diasporageneration Erfahrungen von Postmemory hervor, die ihr Weltbild geprägt haben. Ich zeige auf, wie regierungstreue Aktivisten in den USA geborene Künstlerinnen und Künstler, wie z.B. Tiffany Hadish, die ihre eritreischen Wurzeln entdeckt haben dazu benutzen, um „Nationalismus aus der Ferne" zu generieren. Der Artikel basiert auf einer Analyse sozialer Medien, Langzeitbeobachtung von Diasporagemeinschaften und kürzlich durchgeführter Feldforschung.

Schlüsselwörter
Eritrea, postmemory, chosen trauma, zweite Diasporageneration, Nationalismus