

Unhappy Performatives of Statehood

Staging Incompatible Narratives of Eritrea
through Academic Conferences

Tanja R. Müller



Figure 1. Banner for the International Conference on Eritrean Studies 2016 ICES. Asmara, Eritrea, 24 July 2016. (Photo © Stefan Boness/Ipon)

Performing National Narratives

Much has been written about performing and enacting national narratives, their rituals, and the hyperbole often associated with them (Elgenius 2011; McCrone and McPherson 2009). Some of the most powerful performances are in states or quasi-states that owe their existence to wars for national liberation, independence struggles, and/or revolutionary movements (see for example McConnell 2016; N'Guessan et al. 2017). As nations are ultimately “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), performances of statehood advance nationalist goals: inclusion (or exclusion) based on national narratives and state-founding myths (see Breed 2008).

In Eritrea, the first African state to achieve de facto independence in 1991 (de jure, 1993) following a war of secession from Ethiopia, performing narratives of statehood was a twofold endeavor. First, the ruling party cum government staged theatrical ceremonies on Independence



Figure 2. Eritrean soldiers in a military parade at the celebrations of the 13th anniversary of independence. Asmara, Eritrea, 24 May 2004. (Photo © Stefan Boness/Ipon)

Day and other important holidays such as Martyrs' Day commemorating those who died in the war for independence. Over time, these ritualized celebrations legitimized an increasingly authoritarian government (Woldemikael 2009). Second, younger citizens were required to honor those who fought in the war for independence by performing national service. But over time, national service became what Bernal (2014) calls "sacrificial citizenship," a seemingly never-ending duty to the nation. Soon enough, the rate of emigration from the country became one of the highest in the world (Kibreab 2017).¹

This situation has resulted in two diametrically opposed discourses on Eritrean statehood: one advocated by a powerful

human rights lobby mainly outside the country, and one propagated by the Eritrean government and its supporters inside and outside the country. The resulting polarization makes it difficult for those seeking common ground, who are portrayed as either betraying the Eritrean people or (supposedly universal) human rights, to make their voices heard.²

In addition to more conventional ways — such as demonstrations by pro- and antigovernment supporters; social media campaigns and Twitter posts; as well as the hiring of lobby companies in order to influence the stance of foreign governments towards Eritrea — both sides used academic conferences, convened to mark the 25th anniversary of Eritrean independence in 2016, to perform their contrasting narratives of statehood. Whereas typically at conferences, the

-
1. Eritrea is the quintessential example of a diasporic state with a large percentage of its population residing outside the country but with strong linkages with and connections to in-country developments (see Iyob 2000).
 2. An overview of positions on both ends of the spectrum can be found on websites such as: www.shabait.com/; www.tesfanews.net/; www.asmarino.com/eng/; and www.meskerem.net/. An embodied performance of both sides can be seen in the annual demonstrations each year in Geneva when a new report on human rights violations is released by the UN Human Rights Council. This triggers, on two different days, a pro-Eritrea and anti-Eritrean government demonstration, respectively, attended by large numbers of people on each side (see for example Berhane 2016; Erimedrek org 2018).

Tanja R. Müller is Reader in Development Studies at the Global Development Institute and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester (UK). She has worked for more than 20 years on political dynamics in Eritrea and the Horn of Africa, and beyond. She is the author of The Making of Elite Women: Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea (2005) and Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique (2015). Her latest work interrogates performances and practices of citizenship among refugees and migrants, including "Acts of Citizenship as a Politics of Resistance? Reflections on realizing concrete rights within the Israeli asylum regime" in Citizenship Studies (2016).



Figure 3. Celebrations in Asmara for Eritrea's 25th anniversary, 2016. (Photo by Clay Gilliland; courtesy Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 2.0)

core objective is to debate theories and evidence with the ultimate aim of arriving at some sort of truth, or at least a convincing interpretation of available data and evidence, these 2016 events featured academic discussion with quasi-theatrical performances aimed at different audiences.

The two contrasting conferences—held in Geneva, Switzerland, and Asmara, Eritrea—were not conferences in the common sense of the word. They were performances of Eritrean narratives of statehood with objectives far removed from the usual meaning of the term “conference.” Although on the face of it, these conferences were scholarly events, in fact they were performatives intended to produce future actions. Such performatives matter because they influence political solutions that impact peoples’ lives in tangible ways. Both conferences were convened by Eritreans, and both failed; they were “unhappy performatives” (Austin 1962:14). Analyzing how the Eritrean silver jubilee was staged through conferences offers a new way of understanding international politics.

Putting Out the Word

Let's Have a Conference

My story with both conferences began in Geneva in July 2015. I was visiting a friend when I received an announcement that for the first time since July 2001 an International Conference on Eritrean Studies (ICES 2016) was to be held in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, in July 2016 to celebrate 25 years of Eritrean independence. Titled *Eritrean Studies: The Way Forward*, it was meant to revive scholarly discussion on Eritrea and help create global networks of researchers working on Eritrean issues.

As I read the call for abstracts, I felt excited and wary at the same time as memories flew past of the July 2001 conference. It was a time of open debate and a future full of promise after a

vicious border war with Ethiopia had ended (see Negash and Tronvoll 2000). Various new independent print media outlets had sprung up, and the conference itself brought together scholars from abroad as well as established and promising young academics from the University of Asmara (UoA). Despite various attempts by members of the Eritrean government and/or the ruling party—the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—to control the discourse through the role of chairs or discussants, there was a free exchange of ideas and controversial issues were debated in a generally open and frank manner. The crackdown on open debate and dissent that followed a few months later, in September 2001, put an end to all that, ushering in a dark era that climaxed in the eventual closing of Asmara University in 2006 (see Müller 2008).

At the time of the 2001 conference, I was ending a year based at the UoA, and many of my former students who were at that conference have since gone into exile and are now part of the diaspora. Only a few chose to remain or return from study abroad (Müller 2018b). Thinking back to the 2001 conference, I wondered if free debate would be possible at the 2016 conference in Asmara. It was a time when Eritrea more generally seemed to be opening up again to the outside world—albeit in a very controlled way and from a low base (Müller 2012).

A few weeks later, while I was still contemplating what abstract to submit, I was thrilled to find a second call for papers in my inbox. Sent via a friend, this call was issued by a well-known Eritrean human rights activist based in Geneva. Titled *Eritrea at Silver Jubilee: Stocktaking on the Nation-Building Experience of a “Newly” Independent African Country*, it solicited papers for a conference in May 2016 (a couple of days before the independence celebrations on 24 May). This second conference assumed that Eritrea had the worst government in its entire history. Thus in contrast to the call for abstracts that came from Asmara, neutral in tone and soliciting papers based on academic merit, the organizers of the opposition conference, as I shall refer to it, clearly stated from the outset that they meant the meeting to be a forum that discussed the slide into oppression; it had an advocacy function³—not least due to being held in Geneva, the city where a few weeks later the second report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI) would pronounce the Eritrean government guilty of crimes against humanity.⁴

I, in retrospect rather naïvely, thought those two conferences provided the perfect opportunity to put into practice one of my ambitions in relation to Eritrean studies: bridging the divide between those who unquestioningly support a government that while being driven by a laudable developmental mission also has a lot to answer for in curtailing freedoms versus those who vehemently oppose the government and in doing so make use of often questionable propaganda and intimidation tactics that are in essence similar to tactics used by supporters of the government. I should have known that nuances would not be welcome on either side, and that instrumentalization tactics to openly demonstrate either full support of the Eritrean leadership or its vilification are the norm when it comes to events featuring Eritrea. But I was determined to present the same paper at both conferences and see what might unfold.

One core theme both camps agree on is the central role of citizenship obligations, most materially manifest in the national service requirements that can become indefinite in duration rather than end after 18 months as stipulated in the National Service Law (see Kibreab 2017). While official statements see national service and other mobilization campaigns as the process by which the liberation struggle is passed on to generations of Eritreans, the opposition regards obligatory service as a key tool of oppression, some equating it to slave labor. Such slave labor practices are the main reason behind the high acceptance rate of Eritrean asylum seekers in Western countries (in stark contrast to refugees from other African nations).

3. For the call for papers for the Geneva conference see CCC (2015).

4. For a discussion of issues around the COI see Müller (2016).

To both conferences I submitted an abstract for a paper on changing patterns of political space in Eritrea. The themes in my paper go to the core of the national service conundrum: the contradictions inherent in the struggles to combine overbearing national obligations, which most people accept in principle but not in the way they are being enforced, with personal aspirations. My paper analyzes these contradictions in relation to concrete life histories of graduates from the former University of Asmara, all of whom are committed to national development. Some are still in Eritrea, but most have left. Their life trajectories show in concrete detail what it means to be Eritrean and global at the same time. My paper thus not only puts the contemporary movement out of Eritrea into a wider perspective, it also argues that Eritrea is not on the continuous downward spiral that the opposition conference's framing suggested. In fact, things have opened up in the last few years in a number of ways. That the 2016 Asmara conference took place at all is a clear sign of progress. (The paper was published by the *Journal of Development Studies* [Müller 2018b]).

Initially when I made my two submissions, my intention was only to attend if my paper was accepted by both conferences. For the Asmara conference, I had, in addition, put together a panel with other colleagues on foreign policy in the Horn of Africa in which I was to speak on Eritrean foreign policy, but that was the less important aspect of my involvement in the conference. I heard nothing from either event for a long time, and to be honest did not expect to hear from the opposition conference organizers, because in my submission I questioned the dictum in the call for papers that stated we already knew the answer: Eritrea's trajectory was one of disaster. But then it came, the invitation to Geneva, and with it a program that on the face of it seemed full of interesting contributions.

Shortly after, the paper I submitted to both conferences was rejected by the Asmara conference on "scientific grounds," giving me a first indication of the limitations of discussion at the Asmara conference. Our foreign policy panel and my paper within it were approved, no doubt because the paper included a critical account of Ethiopian foreign policy in the Horn (see Müller 2018a). So here was my first dilemma: should I decline to travel to Asmara, as I had originally planned? Going would mean accepting that certain issues were not up for discussion. Or was my hope for openness wishful thinking? How could I have imagined one could speak freely about a topic as sensitive as political space 15 years after the last attempt to do so within Eritrea landed many people in prison or forced them into exile? But when debating these issues with some of those who would have featured in my rejected paper, they were clear: of course, I had to go. The same answer came from colleagues from inside Eritrea who had commented in the past how valuable it was to hear from people like me who were critical but from, as one phrased it, "an insider's view that understands the rationale behind many government policies."⁵ When it also became clear that a number of colleagues from all over the world whom I had not seen since the 2001 Asmara conference were to attend, I threw my doubts out the window.

The Eritrean Silver Jubilee Conference in Geneva

Performing Stocktaking of a Dictatorship

When I mentioned that I was going to the Geneva opposition conference, most of my Eritrea-related contacts looked at me in disbelief. Perhaps they understood far more clearly than I that there had to be reasons why I was invited that had little to do with my paper. When some joked I needed police protection, I felt vindicated because I believed the conference was meant to build bridges, not burn them. Also, some valued colleagues were going to attend, even if we ended up on different sides of the deep divide within the field of Eritrean studies. I told the

5. The quoted colleague wishes to remain anonymous. For an example of my previous work widely read in Eritrean higher education circles see Müller (2012).

organizer beforehand that I would leave the event if discussions turned into personal insults. In fact, throughout the two-day conference, debates and discussions were on-topic and well-mannered. Socially, any outsider seeing the participants seated together in a Geneva restaurant would think we were old friends. It not only looked but felt like that, which made it even harder for me to accept that some of the people I shared food, wine, and laughter with at night showed a ruthless determination during the day to use all the rhetorical means at their disposal to demolish any nuanced analysis of Eritrea.

During the conference, it became quickly obvious that the participants were carefully selected, like-minded people with a clear agenda. They were on one side, me on the other. The conference was a small event of never more than around 30 people at any one time. It opened with a talk by a Swiss parliament member who repeated the major allegations of the COI report. He did not mention how deeply flawed the report is; he took for granted its claims, which were often unsubstantiated. His remarks set the tone for things to come, a bad sign for a conference claiming to adhere to academic rigor. The next scheduled talk was to be given by an opposition activist who had recently left Eritrea, but he could not attend due to visa issues. Thus, his talk was replaced with a panel that presented the assumptions behind the conference: that Eritrea had a postindependence government worse than any in its history. At the very last minute, I was asked to join the panel of three. I was the dissenting voice, not only questioning the assumption but also speaking in favor of renewed EU engagement with Eritrea and the abolition of UN sanctions. The conference convener moderated the panel, diluting what I had to say, misinterpreting me in multiple ways without giving me room to object. I increasingly realized that I had been brought in as part of a stage-managed process.

Similar management characterized the second conference day when we presented our submitted papers. This should not have surprised me. The conference was organized by a human rights lawyer who knew very well how to get his points across. In fact, I felt like we were sitting in a court judging the last 25 years of Eritrean history. A telling encounter came in one of the breaks when somebody who had not heard my presentation introduced herself as working for the COI team. She had heard my name and asked if the COI team had interviewed me. When I answered I had never been contacted by the COI team, and would have been surprised if I had, she realized who I was. Her moment of embarrassment said it all: the COI team only interviewed people who were part of a known group of human rights advocates in line with its message; the team did not engage with those known to have divergent views.

Thus, here I was at an event where I was officially introduced as a valuable participant in order to “present a range of opinions,” but to the invited listeners it was made clear in this same introduction that in fact the “truth” about Eritrea was that it was ruled by a vicious dictatorship. How unfortunate that I did not fully grasp that yet. It was very skillfully staged. I do value the work that some of my fellow presenters spoke of, and of course there are multiple human rights issues that need addressing in Eritrea. I also like most of them as people. I thus found myself in an increasingly paranoid place, being used by a group with whom I share common interests. It felt like being in Eritrea where conversations with government officials can consist of being berated for knowing nothing in the same breath as one is being commended for one’s good work on Eritrea.

The end of the conference made me feel even more uneasy. In his closing speech, the convener thanked the funders, who do not want to be acknowledged at this point in time, and promised a speedy conference report, as those funders had demanded. Not prone to follow conspiracy theories, I nevertheless wondered about those funders. The accusation by the opposition of omnipresent Eritrean state surveillance networks did not convince me. I have no doubt those networks exist and that they threaten people, but so do networks of opposition actors who are no less threatening. I have personally received threatening calls on my mobile from opposition people during a research trip with Eritrean refugees in Tel Aviv (see Müller 2015a:6).

The conference report came soon. The fact that one participant, me, put forward a different point of view was nowhere to be found. The report contained a photo of the presenters with me next to the others even if my point of view had been erased.⁶ I left Geneva with very mixed feelings. When I embraced a former Eritrean colleague who now lives in forced exile and we parted with the words, “Maybe next time in Asmara,” I felt the sadness of the whole situation descend upon me. “Next time in Asmara” would only come with regime change. But I knew too many people for whom a regime change would not solve their predicament. I have never been an advocate for regime change brought about by outside forces. I know and highly respect many Eritreans who carry out their mandate in government ministries or as party functionaries with courage and dedication. Had attending the conference put me on the wrong side of the fence once and for all, making me an accomplice in an opposition agenda I had little sympathy for? Had my attendance added me inadvertently to the *persona non grata* list of those refused entry into Eritrea? And, most importantly, as I see my ethical responsibility towards those whose life stories populate my research, and who engage with me because I refuse to take sides but “write what your research tells you” as one of them put it, what would those people say if I were barred? Would they feel betrayed because I had indirectly used our encounters to foster a political agenda, even if that was not my intention?

I need not to have worried too much about being suddenly embraced by the opposition. Shortly after the Geneva conference, I received a phone call from a Swiss journalist who wanted to understand what was happening. I was recommended as a quasi “government spokesperson”—a phrase we both laughed off in a subsequent background conversation about Eritrea; a characterization that—apart from myself—nobody would object to more than the Eritrean government itself.

The Asmara Conference

Performing an Academic Conference (Sort Of)

In many ways the Asmara conference could not have been more different from the Geneva one. It was advertised as a major public event with its own website (the Geneva event was hard to find anywhere on the internet) and was impressive in terms of size and organization, with 130 papers and an audience of more than 400 at peak times, including many government officials, foreign embassy staff, and development partners mainly from UN agencies.

In line with most African governments and certainly those who fall into the postliberation category and have a developmentalist outlook, the conference was based on the dictum that research is only valuable if it has a clear link to wider societal problems and their solutions—something to be applauded in principle.

But once I was in Asmara, and not dissimilar from the opposition conference, the wider rationale was clearly spelled out. The conference had as its main objective counteracting the polarizing scholarship on Eritrea as advanced by those scholars who do not pay enough attention to the particular conditions of Eritrea. As we were told in the opening remarks, it would do so by providing “truth based on facts,” by presenting the “real” Eritrea to the outside world.

One could see the conference as a public relations exercise aimed at countering the negative narratives about Eritrea, leaving little room for critical debate. The trope in this framing, used by some of the conference organizers to discredit those critical of Eritrea, was the “so-called expert”—an academic from outside who makes claims to knowledge that only an Eritrean could have, but whose work is seen (falsely and for political reasons or as a form of knowledge

6. In that regard, the conference mirrored well-trodden dynamics of non-dialogue when it comes to Eritrea; for an incident where this became a well-publicized discussion point on social media in which some of those behind the opposition conference played a part, see Forte (2014).

imperialism) as authoritative. A number of those who were my fellow presenters in Geneva would clearly fall into that category as would a number present in Asmara. The line between the good “international scholar” and the bad “so-called expert” has always been thin, and one could easily mutate from one to the other. The framing of the Asmara conference suggested that almost by definition, if one questioned the tightly framed boundaries of allowable criticism set not by the academic committee that was the visible face of the conference organization but by government and party, one was in danger of being put into the “so-called expert” group.

Many positives can be said about the 2016 Asmara conference, not least that it tried to bridge the gap between academic research and its applications. It also gave young (and not so young) Eritrean researchers a platform to present their often excellent work—at least the work that dealt with uncontroversial, development-centered topics that focused on achievements and future challenges. But that was as far as critique was welcomed: as an analysis of why progress had not quite occurred as planned (yet).

Our panel on foreign policy in the Horn proved to be one of the most critical ones, even if in the discussion some of us were put into our place by the Head of Political Affairs and Presidential Adviser, Yemane Gebreab, who was in the audience and questioned the validity of our panel because no Eritrean or indeed African scholar participated in it. I found those remarks infuriating if not unexpected, as not only did I explain at the outset that we had actively recruited scholars from Eritrea and the Horn who felt the topic too treacherous to agree to participate, but also because it was the conference organizers themselves, after all, who had asked us to put two more papers by European scholars on our panel. But the remark set the tone throughout: critical research could be ignored if presented by people who could not possibly understand the “native” viewpoint, people who were “so-called experts.”

Local researchers know better than to touch on truly controversial issues, as one could never be sure of future repercussions. So, at the first major international conference on Eritrean studies in 15 years, the issue at the core of life for many Eritreans that needed a political and policy solution—national service and citizenship obligations—was astonishingly absent or talked down as of little significance. A paper on representations that interrogated why so many Eritreans leave the country by a member of the diaspora was one of the very few that mentioned national service at all, but even this cautionary mention was brushed aside not least by a staunch PFDJ supporter from the diaspora who was in the audience.⁷

To somebody like me, who does believe in development alternatives and who has always been supportive of and sympathetic to the Eritrean government’s developmental agenda, this was a despairing state of affairs. I have repeatedly made the case in the past that narratives about Eritrea are one-sided and partly underpinned by geopolitical dynamics (see for example Müller 2015b). But the same is true of the overarching narrative that the conference tried to enforce, and that was repeated with vehemence at its closing session: all is well in Eritrea and the reason it is being demonized by the West is due to its focus on self-reliance. The fact that so many of its young people flee to neighboring countries or further is due to trafficking and incitement by the opposition and outside forces. Those countries who grant refugee status to Eritrean asylum seekers are to blame as well.

The paper of mine that had been rejected because the organizers deemed it “lacking scientific quality” had exactly those issues at its core. I wondered how many other papers might have been rejected because they were deemed too controversial or critical. I wondered again if in some way I had betrayed those whose lives populate the research I could not present. Those who have left Eritrea in often complicated personal struggles were written out of history throughout the conference as an aberration of minor significance in the wider scheme of

7. The paper was presented by Helen Gebregiorgis, “Representations and Storytelling: An Investigation of Why People Are Leaving Eritrea” (2016).

things. Did I make the wrong decision to attend the conference after the paper I really wanted to present was rejected?

One of Eritrea's symbols is the tortoise, meant to signify the path of the ruling party, moving often very slowly but eventually reaching its destination. Maybe I should take a more tortoise-like view? And there were many encouraging signs that vindicated me being at the conference—in addition to the joyful reconnection and frank conversations with many former colleagues from the former University of Asmara who were now teaching at various new colleges. A number of young Eritrean students and scholars told me in private how much they appreciated what I and some of my colleagues were doing; how it astonished them when we stood up to Yemane Gebreab in public. At this level of personal encounter, I was convinced my decision to attend was right.

One-to-one private conversations with government or party officials (which are everywhere more frank than public ones) proved less uplifting. When officials, some of whom I have known for decades, see it fit to end dissenting discussions with a version of the dictum “There are things you do not know, thus you have to trust me that what you say is wrong,” they are likely right at least with the first part of the statement. But social science research is not about treating official statements as truth (nor should one be regarded as a traitor for questioning them); it is about interrogation, debate, and analysis. And when I compare narratives of ordinary Eritreans with the representations of their lives in official discourse, there are things I can comment on from a unique vantage point. But if nobody wants to hear them, or if one cannot even agree to disagree with people whom I highly respect otherwise and who claim to highly respect my work, what value does engagement have?

In the Asmara conference, it was the issues that came up in private conversations that were crowded out, in favor of contributions from stage-managed participants. But who were those contributions stage-managed for? While the conference was framed around “telling the truth about Eritrea to the outside world,” as was stated on various occasions throughout the proceedings, I kept wondering if that world actually noticed the conference at all. Maybe the conference was really a show for internal consumption, an event to demonstrate not least to college students and staff that things were opening up, that a future of opportunities lay ahead. While many international media outlets visited Eritrea in the 12 months preceding the conference, the conference itself was devoid of foreign media presence and it was left to the state-owned ERI-TV to run lengthy features on each of the conference days. Maybe the conference was really meant to reinforce the “truth” about Eritrea for its educated youth, and in such a context my rejected paper, which would have picked up the silent deliberations many of those present grapple with, would indeed have been explosive. It would have brought into the open the question that dominates the thinking of a majority of youth—whether to stay or leave—who see leaving not as unpatriotic and selfish, but, tragically, as often the only way to lead a fulfilling life while being committed to Eritrea and its development.

Unhappy Performatives of “Truth”

Austin's distinction between happy and unhappy performatives, applied to these two conferences, reveals them as events created with specific audiences and impacts in mind. The ultimate objective was ostensibly to demonstrate “the truth” about Eritrea through a conference, but the two events instead turned out to be *performances* of conferences, or rather performances of incompatible narratives of Eritrean statehood staged through conference-like events. With hindsight, they proved to be unhappy performatives because they did not complete what the perlocutionary act of staging a conference intended for either side.

At first glance, both conferences could be evaluated as having achieved their intended objectives, at least in the short term, and thus could be called happy performatives. For the organizers of the Geneva event, the main performative act was to stress—to an audience of international human rights activists—the legitimacy of their condemnation of Eritrea as an

unhinged dictatorship. But the main representatives of the human rights organizations were already involved in compiling the COI report as researchers; thus they did not really need convincing. The organizers might still have felt they succeeded at least in part: The subsequent COI report, released in June 2016, not long after the conference, confirmed that crimes against humanity had been committed—using the conference as an event that provided proof of the truth (HRC 2016). As a consequence, another UN body that had been considering lifting sanctions against Eritrea recommended leaving them in place, even though monitors stated clearly that no evidence was found of Eritrea’s continued involvement in Somalia or in support of Islamic groups—the rationale behind sanctions (UNSC 2016; 2017). Of late, following the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in June 2018 after 18 years of a no-war/no-peace stalemate, the sanctions have been lifted. But even without considering these unexpected political developments, the Geneva conference had little impact on the political and human rights situation in Eritrea, which was one of its stated aims.

In a similar vein, during the Asmara conference one could easily get the impression that it succeeded in demonstrating to foreign participants and, more importantly perhaps, to Eritrean youth in higher education, the open exchange of ideas in a battle for “truth” showing them the way to a better future for Eritrea. But then, a few days after the Asmara conference ended, Eritrean reality as it presents itself for most of its citizens caught up with me: A little after midnight, once everybody had finished their work shift, I was invited to a traditional and elaborate coffee ceremony by a group of young women and a few men in Asmara. They were joyful, giggled, passed around pictures of one of their close friends. The ceremony was in fact held to celebrate this friend, let’s call her Asmeret, and her safe arrival in Germany after a three-month journey on the usual, often dangerous, migrant track, via Sudan and across the Mediterranean. A photo of Asmeret, smiling into the smartphone camera, was passed around, and the ceremony in her honor was photographed and the pictures sent back to her. I don’t know how many celebrations like this still happen every night in Asmara or other Eritrean settings; I would imagine quite a few. I know numerous parents, siblings, and friends of people who have left, waiting for signs of safe arrival, or trying to discourage those still with them from making the dangerous journey.

In the narrative of both conferences, people like Asmeret are either absent or appear as a caricature of themselves. Asmeret was not enslaved in national service as the organizers of the Geneva conference would claim; in fact she held down a job in Asmara she enjoyed. She was neither trafficked nor otherwise brainwashed or incited to leave, as government spokespeople commonly assert in relation to those who leave. But she could not see a long-term future for herself in a country where business opportunities and personal ambitions are tightly controlled, and where one never knows when a tightening of the few individual freedoms available will occur. People like Asmeret should be at the center of contemporary debates on Eritrean development and the way forward, not least to counter the almost pathological obsession among Eritrean youth (in the words of a foreign ambassador to the country) that one needs to get out if one is to have a viable future. This obsession is a direct function of the mandatory participation in national service for all high school graduates and dropouts. Young people are recruited for specific positions; the government determines where one works, often for many years, and all attempts to evade service duties are punished by imprisonment or other means, including the intimidation of family members, or lack of access to professional development activities. And while salaries are now paid to national service recruits, it is not money that is the main issue, but the freedom to choose one’s own career path. Even those who perform well in their schooling and are selected for future study have limited choice over their area of study or future professional development. Equally, even when released from national service, the fact that the government controls most economic activities and restricts travel limits opportunities for individuals who want to follow their own aspirations and remain in Eritrea.

Since the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, things have improved in many ways, but the ultimate problem remains: young people in particular, whether part of the privileged higher education cohort or not, see no future for themselves in Eritrea. In essence, the various versions of a complex “truth” that both conferences attempted to provide turned out to be unhappy performatives. The intention to provide some form of positive change for Eritreans did not happen. The Geneva conference, partly dominated by a similar generation as those in power in Asmara and driven by old grievances, excluded the youth who will determine the future of Eritrea. Their existence was only referred to indirectly through stories of victimhood and suffering. These stories were given as evidence for the “truth” of the nastiness of the current regime. The complex realities of life for youth in Eritrea, the trade-offs made in each individual decision to stay or leave that were the focus of my paper, were largely absent. On the other hand, in Asmara, many youths were present, as presenters as well as audiences, but in an equally choreographed way, not as victims but as beneficiaries of a developmentalist approach geared towards the “improvement” of Eritrea as a nation through personal sacrifice if necessary. And indeed, the numbers of students with scholarships to study abroad for masters or PhD degrees have increased, even as the number of those who decide to return to Eritrea upon completion remains low.

Ultimately, the term “conference” used to stage different narratives of Eritrean statehood on the occasion of its 25th anniversary was an unhappy performative in the same way James Thompson has analyzed unhappy performatives around the conflict in Darfur (2014:120–52): a broken promise. Instead of engaging in a proper debate seeking a common way forward, the conferences were used as weapons in a trench war about historical truth and myth between two sides who refuse to engage with each other, and in which those who should be at the center of the future, or “the way forward” as one of the conferences proclaimed, had no voice or stake.

The outcomes of both events—the Geneva report made available online shortly after, and the proceedings of the Asmara conference, which only recently have been published (Tsighe 2018)—should be taken with a grain of salt. As my insider’s analysis shows, both conferences failed to engage the core conundrum of Eritrean politics and life. Neither conference produced expert knowledge upon which wider political decisions could be based.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Austin, J.L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berhane, Daniel. 2016. “Thousands of Diaspora Eritreans Rally against COI Report in Geneva.” *Tesfa News*, 21 June. Accessed 3 September 2019. www.tesfanews.net/diaspora-eritreans-rally-against-coi-report-geneva/.
- Bernal, Victoria. 2014. *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and Citizenship*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Breed, Ananda. 2008. “Performing the Nation: Theatre in Post-Genocide Rwanda.” *TDR* 52, 1 (T197):32–50.
- Conference Coordinating Committee (CCC). 2015. “CFP: Eritrea at Silver Jubilee: Stocktaking on the Nation-Building Experience of a ‘Newly’ Independent African Country; Geneva, 20–21 May 2016.” HNet, 8 October. Accessed 3 September 2019. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/7596/discussions/88390/cfp-eritrea-silver-jubilee-stocktaking-nation-building-experience->
- Elgenius, Gabriella. 2011. *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Erimedrek.org. 2018. “Eritrea - Demonstration Geneva August 31st 2018 Justice & Freedom for Eritrea IV.” *YouTube*, 2 September. Accessed 3 September 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc33yBpWGhQ.

- Forste, Maximilian C. 2014. "On Eritrea: Cross-Talk Without Dialogue." *Zero Anthropology*, 20 September. Accessed 8 October 2019. <https://zeroanthropology.net/2014/09/20/on-eritrea-cross-talk-without-dialogue/>.
- Gebregiorgis, Helen. 2016. "Representations and Storytelling: An Investigation of Why People Are Leaving Eritrea." Paper presented at the *International Conference on Eritrean Studies*, Asmara, Eritrea, 20–22 July 2016.
- Human Rights Council (HRC). 2016. *Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea*. Geneva: HRC.
- Iyob, Ruth. 2000. "The Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict: diasporic versus hegemonic states in the Horn of Africa, 1991–2000." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38, 4:659–82.
- Kibreab, Gaim. 2017. *The Eritrean National Service: Servitude for "the Common Good" and the Youth Exodus*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey.
- McConnell, Fiona. 2016. *Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.
- McCrone, David, and Gayle McPherson. 2009. "Marking Time: The Significance of National Days." In *National Days: Constructing and Mobilising National Identity*, ed. David McCrone and Gayle McPherson, 212–21. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2008. "Bare life and the developmental state: implications of the militarisation of higher education in Eritrea." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, 1:111–31.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2012. "Beyond the siege state—tracing hybridity during a recent visit to Eritrea." *Review of African Political Economy* 39, 133:451–64.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2015a. "Universal Rights versus Exclusionary Politics: Aspirations and Despair among Eritrean Refugees in Tel Aviv." *Africa Spectrum* 50, 3:3–27.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2015b. "Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa." *World Politics Review*, 17 September. Accessed 3 September 2019. www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2016. "Human rights as a political tool: Eritrea and the 'crimes against humanity' narrative." *aspiration & revolution*. Blog, 10 June. Accessed 8 October 2019. <https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2016/06/10/human-rights-as-a-political-tool-eritrea-and-the-crimes-against-humanity-narrative/>.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2018a. "Assertive foreign policy in a 'bad neighbourhood': Eritrean foreign policy making." In *International Conference on Eritrean Studies, 20–22 July 2016, Proceedings*, ed. Zemenfes Tsighe, et al., 631–51. Asmara: Sabour Printing Press.
- Müller, Tanja R. 2018b. "Post-Liberation Politics and Political Space in Eritrea: Interrogating Aspirations among Educated Youth." *Journal of Development Studies* 54, 6:968–82.
- Negash, Tekeste, and Kjetil Tronvoll. 2000. *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*. Oxford: James Currey.
- N'Guessan, Konstanze, Carola Lentz, and Marie-Christin Gabriel. 2017. "Performing the national territory: The geography of national-day celebrations." *Nations and Nationalism* 23, 4:686–706.
- Thompson, James. 2014. *Humanitarian Performance: From Disaster Tragedies to Spectacles of War*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- Tsighe, Zemenfes, et al., eds. 2018. *International Conference on Eritrean Studies, 20–22 July 2016, Proceedings*. Asmara: Sabour Printing Press.
- United Nations Security Council (UNSC). 2016. *Eritrea report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 2244 (2015), 31 October 2016*, Report: S/2016/920.
- United Nations Security Council (UNSC). 2017. *Eritrea report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 2317 (2016), 7 November 2017*, Report: S/2017/925.
- Woldemikael, Tekle. 2009. "Pitfalls of Nationalism in Eritrea." In *Biopolitics, Militarism, and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David O'Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner, 1–16. New York: Berghahn Books.