

## Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants in Britain: refugee organising, transnational connections and identity, 1950-2009

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### Abstract

*This paper explores key aspects of the immigrant experience of 50,000-plus Ethiopians and Eritreans who live in the United Kingdom. We seek to understand the extent to which immigrant life in the UK has acted 'as a kind of pivot' between integrating in their country of settlement and enduring forms of connection with their country of origin. This question is explored by an examination of immigrant organising in the UK – in Refugee Community Organisation's – and through interviews about their life in the UK and evolving ideas about self-identity. We argue for an open-ended approach to understand immigrants which sidesteps assumptions about forms of collective identity and which asks how the social and policy context has affected immigrant settlement and integration in the UK.*

**Key words:** Ethiopians, Eritreans, immigrant transnationalism, United Kingdom.

### Résumé

Cet article examine les aspects clés de l'expérience de plus de 50,000 immigrants éthiopiens et érythréens vivant au Royaume-Uni. Il cherche à établir dans quelle mesure leur vécu immigrant au Royaume-Uni a servi de sorte de pivot entre l'intégration dans leur pays d'établissement et les façon durables de maintenir les liens avec leur pays d'origine. C'est par l'analyse des initiatives immigrantes au Royaume-Uni – au sein des organisations communautaires pour les réfugiés –, et par le biais d'entretiens sur leur expérience de vie au Royaume-Uni et l'évolution de leur notion d'identité que la question est abordée. En plaidant pour une approche d'analyse ouverte de la situation des immigrants, les hypothèses émises sur les diverses formes d'identité collective s'éliminent, et l'impact du contexte social et politique sur l'établissement et l'intégration des immigrants au Royaume-Uni s'éclaircit.

**Mots clés:** Éthiopiens, Érythréens, immigration, mondialisation, Royaume-Uni.

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### Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> focuses on individuals who left the Horn of Africa and began to arrive in growing numbers in England in the 1960s following the decolonisation of the African

continent. We pursue a transnational perspective to understand the complex relationship between these immigrants, their country of settlement and their country of origin as this played out in UK-based Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs).

Our research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Britain, including RCOs, and was undertaken between 2007 and 2009. The central focus of our research was to understand how Ethiopians and Eritreans sought asylum in Britain (Campbell 2013). In addition to interviewing 30+ asylum seekers and following their cases through the courts, we interviewed staff in ~~twenty-seven~~<sup>27</sup> Ethiopian and ~~eleven~~<sup>11</sup> Eritrean RCOs, undertook in-depth fieldwork in four RCOs, met and interviewed large numbers of settled Ethiopians and Eritreans, and attended a wide range of social activities, events ~~and~~ venues, etc. One of the authors is an Ethiopian anthropologist who was also a refugee.

We begin by reviewing relevant literature on immigrant transnationalism. Section (ii) examines the history of Ethiopian and Eritrean settlement in the UK, the development of RCOs/‘community’ institutions and integration into British society. Sec. (iii) uses interview material to explore these immigrants’ experience of living in the UK and how life here influenced their social identity. We conclude that the effect of restrictive asylum and integration policy together with key elements of the wider social context which Ethiopians and Eritreans confronted as they settled in the UK tended to reinforce social differences – between and among refugees and between refugees and citizens – which created barriers to integration and perpetuated certain types of attachments/connections to their country of origin.

### **African transnational immigrants**

The expanding movement of goods, capital, services, and people across the globe in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century has given rise to a number of pressing political and intellectual questions. One important question concerns the implications of the movement of people across international borders for nation-states and for immigrants: sovereign states seek to exclude unwelcome aliens and assimilate/integrate immigrants, whereas immigrants face hostility and other problems in settling in a host-country and are reluctant to being assimilated.

The connectedness which some immigrants have for their country of origin, as exhibited through participation in diverse types of cross-border ‘connections’, has given rise to questions about how immigrants should be viewed and how their relationship to their host state and their country of origin can best be understood. As Waldinger (2014: 6) has recently reminded us,

If international migration is a recurring phenomenon, cross-state social action, whether uncoordinated or concerted, will also reappear. Moreover, the analysis can’t be confined to a ‘transnational social field’ linking movers and stay-at-homes in distant and separate locations. That field is embedded in a broader field, made up of state and civil-society actors here and there, who respond in various ways to the challenges and opportunities generated by the cross state flows produced by migration.

In short we need to examine the inter-play overtime between immigrants and their families and friends back home, and the role of states and other actors in strengthening or weakening the connections between a migrant and their host-country and their country of origin. It is useful to differentiate between three types of immigrant, each of which exhibits somewhat different connections to their country of settlement and their country of origin: low-skilled labour migrants (economic migrants who seek to earn money and

remit cash home); high-skilled migrants (legally resident here, but ultimately interested in returning home), and refugees and asylum seekers who cannot return home.

Because of geographic distance and the fact that Ethiopia/Eritrea are not members of the British Commonwealth, there has been very little skilled or unskilled labour migration to the UK. There have, however, been relatively large numbers of refugees and asylum applicants from the Horn of Africa coming to the UK. Settlement in the UK has tended to become permanent and has understandably led to a variety of cross-border connections with home, e.g. by sending remittances, visiting, involvement in homeland politics, consuming goods produced at home, communicating with relatives and friends and ultimately assisting individuals to migrate to the UK.

The literature on Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants illustrates various aspects of their connections to the Horn of Africa. For instance Koser (2007a) has written about Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants and their differential engagement in the politics of their homeland. Koser (2007a, b) is primarily concerned with possible policy initiatives to enhance the way that Eritreans engage with their homeland and with the potential threat of migrant transnationalism to Eritrea.

A similar approach is taken by Lyons in his discussion of the Ethiopian Diaspora in North America and its involvement in politics in Ethiopia (2006, 2008). In the US there are an estimated 460,000 Ethiopians from among whom a small number of individuals

are key players in homeland politics in part because they provide key financial support but also because they frame the conflicts through their control over media

outlets and other institutions where political strategies are debated and leaderships and strategies legitimized. (2008: 10)

It is important to note, however, that the relationship between Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants to their homeland differs radically. The Eritrean Diaspora is policed and taxed by the Eritrean government through its embassies and consulates (fieldwork, Human Rights Watch 2009). In contrast, some Ethiopians in the US – who are well organized on ethnic and political lines – actively participate in homeland politics and they assist families and communities left behind. A feature common to both populations has been the development of, and variable ‘participation’ in, vibrant on-line ‘virtual communities’ which arguably foster new forms of social belonging and which may link a fractured and geographically dispersed population to one another and their homeland (Bernal 2005; Hafkin 2006).

Research on these immigrants has adopted a range of conflicting approaches and definitions. For instance, the work of Koser and Lyons, cited above, is narrowly focused on a specific issue and tends to assume rather than demonstrate the existence of a shared identity/community without examining the historical, lived experience of these immigrants in their country of settlement. Similarly Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) analyse the construction of identity among Ethiopians and Eritreans in North America. They argue that the sense of national identity articulated by these individuals

is based on nostalgia for stable communities that offer order, security, continuity, and guaranteed inclusion. Necessary to these nostalgic constructions are various inventions and revivals of cultural traditions, which are considered constitutive of

a distinct society ... [T]hese identities are often asserted in essentialist form and against resurgent racism in host societies. (2001: 11).

Ethiopians and Eritreans in North America have experienced considerable isolation, racism and difficulty in obtaining work commensurate with their qualifications and expectations. They have had to significantly readjust their gender roles, expectations, and ambitions for themselves and their children (Tekle Woldemikael 1998; McSpadden & Moussa 1993; Matsuoka & Sorensen 2001). Disorientation, isolation and frustration have characterized the lives of the first generation of migrant-refugees, regardless of their involvement in ethnic, political or refugee organizations. However the second generation which was born in and/or who grew up in North America appear to have a different orientation to their 'homeland', and a hybrid identity that reflects their experience of living overseas (Chaco 2003; Arnone 2011). Thus in a study of young Ethiopian-Oromo in Canada, Martha Kumsa (2006) argues for a fluid conceptualization of identity-formation as young people affirm a pan-ethnic Oromo identity in the face of pressure to assimilate.

In short the assumption in much of the literature is that Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants have a 'collective identity' and that they form a 'community', but these assumptions are not grounded in empirical research. What is needed is to understand the lived experience of diverse African immigrants in their host country through an open-ended approach which 'transcends the discursive politics' of diaspora based on Anglophone theorisations and a preoccupation with the relation between diaspora and nation (Zeleva 2005: 39). Phrased somewhat differently, we need to understand whether and how the migrant experience in their country of settlement acts 'as a kind of pivot which

while anchored, pivots between a new land and transnational incorporation' (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1011).

Rather than assume certain kinds of connectedness to the homeland, research needs to demonstrate the precise type of connections which develop in a country of settlement, and the changing importance over time ~~which-that~~ connections have for the way that individuals engage with their country of settlement and their country of origin. For instance, the limited research on the experience of immigrants who visit 'home' clearly shows that immigrants are viewed as different by 'stay at homes'. For instance, Mikal Walden (2014: 35) found that 'when second generation Eritrean immigrants returned 'home' for the first time and interacted with 'locals', youth from the diaspora are 'forced' to renegotiate their identity and their sense of 'Eritreanness' due to their perceived lack of fluency in speaking the local language, their dress, and their behaviour'.

It is clearly the case, as Waldinger (2013: 760) reminds ~~us~~, that 'connectivity does not imply collectivity', i.e. that diverse forms of identity and ways of connecting – across immigrant communities as well as between immigrants and their homelands – are possible. He also argues that social identities change more slowly than social connections and that we should expect 'home country spill overs' into the country of settlement. In the following sections we adopt this approach to analyse the experience of Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants in the UK.

### **Immigration and settlement in the UK**

Displacement and movement out of the Horn of Africa is an ongoing process linked to the formation of modern nation-states. International migration from the Horn began in the mid-1960s ~~when~~ civil war, drought, and famine pushed increasing numbers of

Ethiopians – at this time Eritrea was a province of Ethiopia – into The Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, and Somalia from where some embarked on transcontinental journeys to Europe, North America, the Middle East, and beyond (Campbell 2013). Indeed tens of thousands of individuals are still in transit from The Horn.

Ethiopian refugees came to Britain because it hosted exiled Emperor Haile Selassie (1936-1943), because of its involvement in liberating Ethiopia from Italian fascism and because it administered the Italian colony of Eritrea under a League of Nation's mandate (1941-1951). However while a small number of Ethiopians have been present in the UK since World War II, substantial numbers did not arrive until the mid-1970s. Individuals have arrived in four phases: in 1975-78 following the fall of the Haile Selassie government; in the mid- to late-1980s in an attempt to flee violence by the Ethiopian *Derg*/military; in the early 1990s following the defeat of the *Derg* by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front; and from 2000 onwards individuals fled from the Ethio-Eritrea border war of 1998-2000 and from human rights abuses and poverty.

Papadopoulos et al. (2004) suggested that there were 30,000 'Ethiopians' in the UK. Koser (2007a) put the number of 'Eritreans' at 25,000. IOM has suggested that 58,000 'Ethiopians' reside in the UK (2006). All three estimates are problematic because they are based on figures provided by RCOs. Until the mid-1990s, official asylum-related statistics recorded all arrivals from Ethiopia and Eritrea as 'Ethiopians'. Based on an analysis of Home Office data we suggest that the total number of Ethiopians and Eritreans was approximately 40,000 in 2007. In addition to these early arrivals, there is now a relatively small second generation of individuals born in the UK, to which must be

added an estimated 10,000 individuals who have come to the UK in recent years as asylum seekers (many of whom do not have legal status).

Prior to 1999, most refugees settled in London or south-east England. After 1999 asylum applicants have been compulsorily dispersed by the government throughout England, Wales and Scotland in accordance with the 1999 Asylum & Immigration Act. There is no information regarding where many of those who were dispersed currently reside, though anecdotal evidence suggests that many have moved to London and other large cities.

What types of social connections have Ethiopians and Eritreans forged in Britain, and what role have these connections played in shaping the politics of life here and there? In the UK asylum applicants do not have a right to work, to housing, education or to social benefits until after they are granted legal/refugee status, a process which restrictive government policies adopted after 1999 have made increasingly difficult to achieve. Restrictive policies have contributed to the exclusion of refugees, to racism and to economic marginalization reinforced by an inability to work.

It is in a socio-political context of increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration policy and hostility to migrants that immigrant organizing, the focus of this paper, needs to be understood as a form of 'defensive' social capital (Zetter et al. 2006). Thus in the 1970s and early 1980s a small group of 'Ethiopian' refugees, primarily former officials and individuals who had been sent to study at British universities, arrived and created the first RCOs – the Eritrean Relief Association (1977), The Oromo Relief Association (1982) and Ethiopian Help Line (1982) – to provide material support for individuals from their own ethnic groups in The Horn.

These individuals briefly came together in the early 1980s to provide legal and other assistance to newly arriving refugees. While the first arrivals were relatively well educated, most of those who followed were not. Among the organizations created by the second wave of refugees was the Ethiopian Community in Britain (1984), the Eritrean Community in Haringey (1988), the Eritrean Community in the UK (1989) and the Community of Tigrean Refugees in Britain (1989).<sup>2</sup> These organizations supported specific political parties/movements in Ethiopia. At this time the Greater London Council provided funding to many immigrants to set up ‘community’<sup>3</sup> associations to assist individuals with their asylum applications, find them housing, etc.

From a total of five RCOs in the late 1980s, the number grew to ~~twenty-four~~<sup>24</sup> by 1999, and to 69 in 2008. Reflecting a move to more restrictive asylum/migration policies and government concerns about ‘community cohesion’ (see below), the Greater London Council stopped funding RCOs in 2004. Regulations also abruptly changed making it illegal for RCOs to provide legal advice to refugees; at the same time the Home Office attempted to co-opt RCOs and refugee-NGOs into implementing its asylum and immigration policies. Not unsurprisingly as government funding ended, the number of functioning RCOs declined sharply.

If we step back from looking at individual RCOs, it is clear that the arrival of growing numbers of refugees contributed to the creation of new, and the splitting of existing, RCOs which had a much narrower focus. For instance, RCOs were formed to assist refugees with specific health/social needs, to assist specific ethnic groups and to promote specific political programmes back in The Horn. Among the first type of organization was the Eritrean Parents and Children Association (1993), Ethiopian

Community Centre in the UK (1994), Fifty+ Eritrean Elderly Support Association (1998), Action Group for Ethiopians in Ealing (1999), the Ethiopian Health and Support Association (1997), and Ethiopian Elderly Support Association (2004). Among the second category of organizations were those which drew members with specific ethno-national origins – increasingly differentiating between Ethiopian and Eritrean nationals – and those supporting a specific political party or linguistic group. This latter category included the Ethiopian Refugee Association (1991, which supported ethnic Amhara), Concerned Ethiopians Civic Organization (1997, which publicized the misdeeds of the Ethiopian government), the All Amhara People’s Organization (1993), the Oromo Community in the UK (1995), the Eritrean Saho<sup>4</sup> Cultural Association (2002) and the Rahwa Eritrean Community (1998). All these organizations were led by a small number of educated individuals – an elite – and all had relatively few members. In effect, RCOs became single-issue organizations.

Most refugees also organized on religious lines.<sup>5</sup> Thus in response to tensions and politics in The Horn which spilled over into the UK and beyond, separate Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christian churches were created: St. Mary (founded in 1992), St. Michael (1994), and The Holy Trinity Church (2008). At the same time many individuals abandoned Orthodox Christianity to join evangelical churches such as the Emmanuel Evangelical Church (2008) which attracts Ethiopian and Eritrean members. Muslim organisations were also created such as the Eritrean Saho Community and the Eritrean Muslim Community Association (1994). Virtually all these organizations are based in London but from 2002 a small number of new ones – with a small membership and

limited support from London-based organisations – developed in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, and other large cities.

Furthermore, the growing number of RCOs did not have an organisation capable of meeting its costs or running its activities,<sup>6</sup> nor did they have a large membership base. By 1999 government policy initiatives, including the dispersal of asylum applicants and the cessation of government funding for ‘community’ organisations, led to a decline in the number of RCOs. For a variety of reasons, most individuals tend to participate in an RCO on an irregular basis and they contribute little to an organisation’s finances. The principal exceptions are the Orthodox Churches, one RCO which transformed itself into an organisation that provided services to a larger ‘African’ clientele, and small RCOs whose focus is explicitly cultural/religious. Eritrean cultural associations are small in size and provide a limited range of activities, but their strength lies in drawing their membership either from a specific ethnic group (and eschewing politics) and/or on the basis of a shared language or religion. Thus Arabic, while not a first language, became an important organising principle for some groups because conflict in the Horn had dispersed many people into The Gulf and North Africa.

The growth, splitting, and subsequent decline of RCOs also reflects a tendency to organise along ethnic lines, the organisational role played by a small elite and, in a hostile environment where funding came from government, a tendency to compete for external resources (and be co-opted by funders; Griffith, Sigona and Zetter 2005: chap.4).

Throughout the 1990s RCOs also encountered difficulties caused by political ‘spill over’ from the Horn. Following Eritrean independence in 1993, the ruling political party has used Eritrean embassies to mobilise party supporters to police public meetings

of immigrants and take over Eritrean RCOs. In the US, this situation contributed to large numbers of Eritreans withdrawing ‘from secular politics into more autonomous religious organizations where they are able to practice Eritreanness beyond its tortured politicization and offer a different organizing principle for the community’ (Heppner 2003: 279). In the UK, however, with its relatively small population of Eritreans, intimidation by the Eritrean government forced Eritrean RCOs to close.

Ethiopian RCOs have also been affected by political tensions in Ethiopia. For instance, following the collapse of the All Amhara People’s Organization, an ethnic-based political party in Ethiopia, its counterpart RCO in the UK also collapsed. In addition, following the establishment of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in 1993, tensions between Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox congregations in the UK developed over who led the church and their different connections to The Horn. Indeed there were further splits within UK-based Eritrean churches following the Eritrean government’s<sup>2</sup> detention of the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in 2006.

Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants have had to rely on one another to form associations/networks to meet a variety of material and social needs which the British state did not provide. Furthermore the RCOs, organizations and associations which came into being attempted to serve competing interests: support for groups and political parties back in The Horn, support for economic development back in the Horn,<sup>7</sup> and simultaneously assisting refugees to settle in the UK. The original organizing principle on which many RCOs were founded, ethnicity, proved inadequate to the task of serving the needs of a diverse and fragmented refugee population and coping with political spill-over from the Horn. Indeed the decline of RCOs parallels the settlement of refugees in

the UK and their incorporation into British life. Throughout the period, RCOs performed ‘an essentially defensive role in an environment of hostile immigration policy’ (Zetter et al. 2006: 11) where the forms of social capital they established increasingly differentiated between individuals on ethnic, religious, and national lines at the expense of creating ‘bridging’ social capital across their perceived differences and with British society.

The British state, and in particular the Home Office, has taken the lead in defining and implementing asylum and integration policy. The Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) and subsequent asylum legislation put into place a policy of deterrence which has made it increasingly difficult for individuals to obtain asylum. First, administrative practices aimed at withdrawing welfare support and the right to work were put on a statutory basis creating a highly stratified system of entitlements which sharply differentiated between the rights of asylum applicants (admitted temporarily while their claim was being assessed), refugees (who were granted status), and individuals granted temporary/humanitarian protection, from failed asylum seekers and economic migrants who were subject to impoverishment and deportation (Dwyer and Brown 2004). Second, asylum applicants were compulsorily disbursed across England, Wales, and Scotland where support services were largely unavailable and few spoke their language, to await a decision on their claim. Third, the Home Office/UK Border Agency (which refuses between 66 and 88 percent of all initial asylum applications) and the Immigration and Asylum Tribunal which hears appeals against Home Office decisions, were repeatedly restructured compounding the difficulty faced by asylum applicants who sought to appeal against official decisions (Campbell 2013, chaps. 5 & 6).

Following an inquiry into ‘civil disturbances’ in English cities in 2000, ~~g~~Government policy ended the policy of promoting ‘multiculturalism’ and replaced it with a policy of ‘community cohesion’. The Cantle Report (2001: 9) argued that ‘Separate: educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives’. In short, multi-culturalism had created social segregation which had led to a ‘lack of contact’ between communities which failed to contribute to ‘a sense of belonging and shared values’. As Hepburn (2015) and others have noted, the Cantle recommendations ‘bled’ into UK immigration policy and ~~has~~ resulted in the creation of ‘coercive integration policies’ which compel refugees and immigrants to attend programmes and pass citizenship tests, etc. to demonstrate their respect for UK values. However UK policies on integration/cohesion lack coherence and, in part because responsibility for implementation has been devolved to local authorities, the policy has failed to address the constraints preventing refugees and migrants from integrating.

The factors which constrain immigrants from integrating – and which are not addressed by current UK policy – include the absence of language skills, the failure to recognise immigrant qualifications, enforced mobility, lack of knowledge about how to access schools and housing, etc., inadequate specialist services, legal barriers preventing a timely decision on asylum application, and public hostility (Spencer 2005). Indeed these social and policy constraints are partly responsible for the insular nature of RCOs and their inability to develop ‘bridging capital’ with local communities with whom they are now expected to integrate. To the extent that RCOs created parallel lives for

Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants, current policies on ‘social cohesion’ which put the responsibility on immigrants to integrate, will not succeed. Instead, ~~current~~ the current policy approach will at best incorporate Ethiopians, Eritreans, and other immigrants into the Black and Ethnic minority population<sup>1</sup> as second-class members of society.

### **Looking back, looking forward: How Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants see themselves today**

How an individual comes to see her or himself is the outcome of many factors. Following Mead, Barth and others, identity is the outcome of social interaction with others and is generated through social transactions that give rise to potentially flexible, situationally specific, and negotiable identities (Jenkins 1996). One key element in the processual emergence of social identity of immigrants arises from the broader socio-political context in which immigrants are classified and treated by a state – i.e. as a problem – which influences how the public perceives immigrants as racially, ethnically or religiously different. How immigrants have responded to such perceptions, and how they come to see themselves, was explored through open-ended interviews with immigrants aimed at teasing out aspects of their social identity.

One early arrival was an Ethiopian general, born in the province of Eritrea, who defected and settled in Britain in 1975. He brought his wife with him to the UK, but their two children had to wait a decade until they were allowed to settle in the UK. As he recounted, in the mid-70s all those from the Horn were known as ‘Ethiopians’, and it was much later that individuals began to self-identify as Oromo, Tigrean, Eritrean, etc. In the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘black’ to refer to the way in which individuals such as Caribbean and African migrants are categorized by British policy makers, and by some ethnic communities and community organizations in the United Kingdom, as belonging to ‘BME’, i.e. the Black and Ethnic Minority community.

early 1980s he helped establish ‘The Eritrean Community in Haringey’ and ‘The Ethiopian Community in Britain’. Both RCOs were initially non-sectarian, non-political, and non-religious organizations, but over the years they fractured on ethnic and party lines. The General has few if any non-Ethiopian friends, indeed as the RCOs he founded declined he has focused his energies on assisting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Though many elderly refugees of this generation have the ‘right to remain’ in the UK and/or they have British citizenship, men in particular remain focused on homeland politics. This generation also lacks formal education and has a poor command of English (Hailemariam Legesse Wolde Yohannes 2005). Bearing in mind the demographics of the population, the elderly are further disadvantaged by isolation, the absence of family support networks, and poor housing, and require specialized support.

The experience of more recent arrivals is quite different. Take for instance ‘A’, a man born in Eritrea in 1946 who arrived in the UK in 1990 at the age of 44. He was among the first generation to attend Addis Ababa University in the early 1970s but due to his involvement in student protests he fled to The Sudan. During 13 years in The Sudan he worked as a teacher and at a refugee camp before becoming a journalist, but his writing brought him into conflict with the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). He came to the UK to participate in a conference in 1991 just as the EPLF seized power in Eritrea; unable to return to Eritrea, he sought asylum.

When asked how he saw himself after 17 years in the UK – during which time he obtained British citizenship, voted in British elections, married an English woman and raised a family – he said:

‘I spend ... my time reading websites on Eritrea, talking to Eritrean fellow friends and [in] discussion about Eritrea, or thinking about the language ... or reading Tigrinya books. ... I feel Eritrean, yes without a doubt .... But I also feel Ethiopian. I feel Sudanese. I feel British ...’

He explained,

‘I cannot feel really British ... but I have seen plays like Shakespeare. I have listened to music like Bono and, you know, poetry ... I have gone to places to have holidays like the Lake District and [I] went to Canterbury Cathedral ...’

He defines his identity in terms of a series of accommodations to British society.

This is partly a defensive position developed in relation to British hostility towards refugees. The effect of these factors has led him, and others, to develop situationally specific identities, adopting the one which best suits his purpose at a given time and place (cf. Coutin 2003; Chaco 2003).

‘A’s experience has some parallels with ‘B’ who was born in Eritrea in 1963. At the age of 10 his parents sent him to The Sudan where he attended a school organized by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Utilising family connections, he obtained a student visa to the US allowing him to live with extended family in California and attend high school.

This was a formative period during which he was immersed in a mixed ethnic youth culture with Hispanic and Black friends and had a French girlfriend. In 1990 his uncle sent him to the UK where his life took a radically different course. In 1991, following the EPLF’s assumption of power in Eritrea, he claimed asylum. In the following year he became involved in an Eritrean community organization and by the time he entered university (1994) his political and cultural orientation was firmly fixed on Eritrea. While

he made friends at college and university, the only relationships he maintained were with Eritreans. As he says: ‘When I moved to the UK I became very, very *Habesha*’.<sup>8</sup>

‘B’ eventually obtained British nationality and has used his passport to travel to Eritrea where, after initially feeling a stranger, he ~~has~~ developed a strong affinity with the country. Though he votes in British elections and is raising a family in the UK, his intellectual and emotional attachments are with Eritrea. He has thought about his identity extensively and says that, though he cannot at present return to Eritrea, ‘as far as I am concerned my citizenship is still Eritrean but I have a British passport because it is more convenient. But in my mind and my heart my citizenship is Eritrean.’

While many Eritreans and Ethiopians use the internet to ‘connect’ with The Horn, a small number of our informants – older men with status in the UK – actively participate in homeland politics via membership in RCOs, in political protests in the UK,<sup>9</sup> at events held by the Ethiopian or Eritrean embassy<sup>10</sup> and by travelling to The Horn. One Eritrean informant is funded by Ethiopia to participate in meetings of Eritrean opposition political parties which are based there. Compared to the US, however, the level and nature of participation of UK-based individuals in political activities in The Horn appears to be limited due to the lower incomes of Ethiopians and Eritreans in the UK and the potentially high ‘cost’ of directly participating in politics in the homeland, particularly for individuals opposed to the Eritrean government.

Other interviews confirmed the importance of age, gender, education and family in shaping an individual’s identity. ‘D’ was born in Eritrea in 1981. Her father was Eritrean, a senior officer in the Ethiopian military, and her mother was Ethiopian. Shortly after her birth her family relocated to Addis Ababa, where she and her brother and sister

grew up and attended elementary school. Her social life was restricted to a military compound which meant that socialising was limited to her extended family. In 1990 she visited the UK with her mother and siblings. Six months later her mother claimed asylum, though her father remained in East Africa. She completed primary school in London, quickly picked up English and made friends with the Asian children who attended her school. Her friendships at school were, however, increasingly counter-balanced by family obligations to attend bible study.

A growing commitment to Christian Fellowship led to the development of her more enduring friendships with Ethiopians, Eritreans and Africans. On entering university she told us, 'For the first time in my life I ... didn't have any African friends ... I was the only black.' The influence of her mother and Christian values have precluded even the idea of having a boyfriend though her 'choice' of husband is clear: 'He must be a *Habesha*, speaking my language (i.e. Amharic) ... He has to be Christian as well.' As a British citizen she has travelled to Ethiopia, an experience which she described as 'strange, like, wow, it is going back to the future! Everything is different ...'. This reaction has given way to a sense that Ethiopia is where her 'roots' are, and to an interest in learning Ethiopian languages though she has no intention of participating in Ethiopian RCOs. She intends to keep her British citizenship 'because it is safe here.'<sup>11</sup>

Another informant, F, provided perceptive insights about his identity. He was born in Eritrea c. 1975, but aged 9 he crossed the border and lived briefly in a refugee camp in Sudan before moving to Libya where he stayed for five years. He came to the UK in 1990, applied for asylum, learned English, completed secondary school and obtained a BSc and an MA. Up to this point he had not been involved with Eritrean

RCOs, but in 2003 he came to London and joined the Eritrean Saho community (a small ethno-cultural association) before joining the Eritrean Muslim Community Association as a part-time administrator. Asked about how he saw himself he commented,

You cannot leave politics [out from] any kind of life ... It has to do with politics and ... what is happening in Eritrea. Although you are British there is that kind of link, [which] always rings in your ear. You want to know what happened in Eritrea because you have distant relatives there ... Eritreans used to be one despite their faith, despite their language and tradition ... they had one common goal, one thing that unites them ...

He thought it too early for the development of a pan-Eritrean organization or a common, shared identity because,

It is early ... you see ... from one stage to another we ... let's say for example at a period of time we were refugees, and from refugees or an asylum seeker we became naturalised citizens. So it is a jump from this to this ... It takes time ... My children will be more integrated into [British] society ... they are not going to be like me. It is going to be totally different, but they will [also] be Eritrean...

Discussions with informants left us with no doubt if an individual arrived as an adult, as opposed to arriving as a child, their relative openness to British culture, values and forms of social interaction was more restricted (e.g. children learned about their hosts at school, on the playground). Secondly, access to higher education tended to open new social horizons and, at the very least, allowed an individual to make a better living, become more autonomous and they showed a greater willingness to participate in British institutions.

The situation is very different for individuals who arrived after 1999 and who were dispersed across Britain, a process that produced isolation and alienation. Indeed many informants stressed the difficulty of finding one's feet as a refugee and all argued that dispersal away from established 'communities' reinforced their isolation and vulnerability.

Recently arrived refugees do not have the time to participate in RCOs should there be any in their area. Over the past decade, a large number of Eritreans and some Ethiopians have been refused asylum and are illegal migrants/aliens. 'Illegality' is a stigmatizing discursive construct saturated with racialized difference and implies that the individual willfully violated the law. In this view aliens have no legal rights, are not allowed to work and should be arrested, detained, and deported. The discourse on illegality has indeed stigmatized many individuals who live in poverty and fear of arrest.

Many Ethiopian and Eritrean failed asylum seekers who are unable, or who do not want, to return to their country of origin, are subject to extensive surveillance in the UK and end up in immigration detention (but are released if they cannot be deported). The individuals we spoke to feared arrest and had devised various strategies to avoid the police. For instance, 'G' said:

... if I see a police gathering from a distance, I will change my direction [so as] not to face their serious questions. I am always serious on these things. Especially before a year I was trying my best to avoid such unexpected contacts with police and others ... I am still bothered by my safety if I am deported, but mentally I am ready to accept if anything at all comes.

'H' observed that,

Comment [N01]: ?

I ~~am driv~~inge a car and I always try to be sure about my insurance, road taxes and so on ... Most of the time I am with my wife and the baby and police attention is ~~lessow~~er when you are with a family so that also protects me from being in their hands<sup>2</sup>.

‘I’, who was working illegally to support elderly parents in Ethiopia and his wife and three children in London struck a more despondent note:

Look, ~~I am~~ for almost 20 years I have been outside my country. I have not seen my parents and never been to my country and that worries me a lot. You do not know what is going to happen and you are not in a position to [help] if something happens to them. I think that also worries my wife and it has had an impact on our way of life.

With a few exceptions, such as religious services which can be attended without fear of detection ~~because everyone is Black~~, failed asylum seekers avoid public events. These individuals also refuse to register with the Home Office for fear of being picked up and deported<sup>3</sup>; they tend to rely on friends or religious organi~~s~~zations for support.

At some point, however, destitution or the obligation to care for family members drives individuals into the labour market. Several individuals we interviewed continued to use the National Insurance number or work permit they were issued on arrival to work, and they pay taxes.<sup>12</sup> A few individuals are married to British citizens or are supported by a British ‘friend’, but when their work permit is revoked they lose their job. Thus ‘J’, who was sacked after his work permit was revoked, told us

I am out of a job and life is getting harder and harder. There ~~is-are~~ no jobs except some temporary ones-... ~~Sometimes for two or three days a week with low pay~~

Comment [N02]: ?

and sometimes you do not get even that ... In order to keep myself busy I do some voluntary work.

While some failed asylum seekers use illegal or expired papers to earn money, there ~~was~~ no indication that Ethiopians or Eritreans ~~bought~~ buy or 'rented' false identity documents. Indeed, the majority of those we spoke to were attempting to regularize their immigration status. If they were in 'regular' employment they paid taxes and National Insurance contributions, and they attempted to renew work permits, driving licences, etc. Many were paying lawyers substantial sums to raise their case with the Home Office in the hope of legalising their stay, but in so doing they risked detection and arrest.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have examined the experience of Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants who have arrived in the UK from the late 1960s onwards. Whereas other studies have focused on the 'transnational social field' to examine the 'connections' these immigrants have with their country of origin etc., we have focused on forms of ethnic organizing to understand whether and how the experience of immigrants in the UK has indeed acted 'as a kind of pivot which while anchored, pivots between a new land and transnational incorporation' (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004: 1001). In fact we have found a much more complex process than was envisaged by some authors.

The experience of the ~~fifty thousand~~ 50,000 Ethiopians and Eritreans who currently reside in the UK has varied considerably over time. For many decades a principle focus of immigrant life was to establish and socialize through RCOs in which shared ethnicity was the key organizing principle; however, as larger numbers of

refugees arrived from the Horn ethnicity proved an inadequate basis to organize support for a much more diverse and, due to dispersal, more geographical fragmented population.

Immigrant organizing between the late 1970s and today is marked by two constants. First, and in the absence of support by the British government, immigrants have had to rely upon each other by forming RCOs, associations, and churches to meet the material and social needs of their members. Second, the social and political context which confronted immigrants has had a decisive impact on the way they organized and on their ability to successfully settle and integrate into British society. While seeking asylum in the UK between 1960 and the early 1990s was relatively straightforward, the situation changed radically from the late 1990s when ever more restrictive asylum and immigration policies were introduced. The effect of an increasingly unwelcome reception contributed to the creation of RCOs which increasingly differentiated between individuals on ethnic, religious, and national lines rather than seeking to create bridges (social capital) between one another and with British communities.

In 2001 this form of immigrant organising was, following a major policy change which repudiated ‘multiculturalism’ in favour of the idea of ‘social cohesion’, seen as highly problematic. But rather than addressing the very real constraints which prevented immigrants from integrating, the government has opted for coercive integration policies requiring immigrants to demonstrate their knowledge of and respect for British values by passing tests, etc.

Not surprisingly, this policy shift together with restrictive asylum policies, has resulted in a very partial incorporation of immigrants into British society as part of the black minority population. The situation has led older, less educated and less well-off

Eritreans and Ethiopians to continue to value their connections to, and identification with, Eritrea or Ethiopia. However individuals who arrived in the UK while young, or who have been educated or socialised here, have nominally become British. Thus while some individuals possess a British passport, which is an important asset, they do not self-identify as 'British' (except in situations where they feel compelled to affirm this).

Instead many ~~they~~ see themselves as British Muslims, Orthodox Christians or as a kind of hybrid British-Ethiopian/Eritrean (cf. Chaco 2003; Arnone 2011). The situation among migrants who arrived after 1999 is in sharp contrast to earlier migrants because the latter continue to experience a hostile reception which begins with dispersal outside southeast England and which has been accompanied by social isolation, vulnerability, impoverishment and an inability to secure legal status.

Is the experience of Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants in the UK one that can be generalis~~ed~~ elsewhere? Such a conclusion is unlikely because, following Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004), it is clear that what is needed to answer this question is comparative national research on an immigrant population and their transnational social field in order to understand the limits of a single case study and to better understand how temporal changes here and there and across generations affects ~~s~~ immigrant identity.

Finally it is worth noting that by adopting a transnational perspective we have been able to identify important contextually specific processes at work in the UK which have shaped the experience of settlement of Ethiopians and Eritreans, the form and extent of immigrant organi~~s~~ational life, and their participation in a wider transnational social field.

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#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> The first Eritrean RCO was created by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and the first Tigrean RCO was formed by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front; both organizations eventually fought together against the Derg and came to power in Eritrea and Ethiopia, respectively, in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> While state officials may see RCOs as constitutive of 'communities' for various official purposes, in sociological terms no such link exists for reasons which this paper makes clear.

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<sup>4</sup> The Saho are a small ethnic group which resides on the Eritrea-Ethiopian border. They were caught up in the liberation of Eritrea and were displaced during the 1998-2000 border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

<sup>5</sup> Some religious organizations seek to preserve the culture of their members by providing supplementary language classes for children in their ‘mother tongue’.

<sup>6</sup> Many RCOs had IT facilities – reportedly for ‘training’ purposes – which were unused.

<sup>7</sup> Eritreans have long remitted money to family back home, but a 2% tax on their income is levied on them by the Eritrean government which is ostensibly used for development (see HRW 2009). Ethiopian immigrants have been equally active in funding a range of development projects back ‘home’, not least of which has been a major financial contribution to a Bond issue to fund construction of the Gil Gibe Dam project (an estimated US\$500 million was provided the Diaspora buying these bonds; interview by the author with Mrs. Bekrdu, Ethiopian Electricity Corp. in Addis Ababa, 23 April 2010).

<sup>8</sup> This vernacular term refers to individuals from Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea and is used to refer to the Amhara, Tigrayan<sup>2</sup>s and individuals from Tigre. Detractors of the current regime in Ethiopia use this term to disparage such groups.

<sup>9</sup> There are regular protests outside the Ethiopian embassy and less regularly in response to visits by Eritrean politicians.

<sup>10</sup> The current regime in Ethiopia has invested considerable efforts to encourage ‘the Diaspora’ to return home and invest in the country with the result that tens of millions of dollars have been invested in key development projects in Ethiopia by US-based Ethiopians. In contrast, Eritrean embassies have put pressure on Eritrean immigrants to

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pay (an illegal) tax to Eritrea and to publicly demonstrate their support for the ruling party in Asmara.

<sup>11</sup> Other female informants with a very similar social and family background created far more space within which to live in the UK which was linked to her fluency in English on arrival and to academic success in the UK.

<sup>12</sup> Asylum applicants no longer have the right to work.