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**THE MAKING OF ELITE WOMEN WITHIN REVOLUTION AND NATION  
BUILDING – THE CASE OF ERITREA**

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**Summarising Remarks**

The Eritrean revolution was the combination of a national revolution coupled with a social revolution (Hermassi, 1976; Selbin, 1993). Even though it unfolded at a historical moment in time often referred to as post-modern or post-developmental (see for example the discussion in Sachs, 1996), the Eritrean revolution belongs to the tradition of revolution as a modernising project, inspired by (socialist) notions of “economic, social and cultural progress” (Cabral, 1980:150). But far from being an anachronism, it is argued here that the Eritrean revolution – in combining a developmentalist orientation with a concept of women’s rights – was, like other revolutions before and possibly in the future, in various ways a successful attempt to “improve the human social condition” (Dunn, 1989:20) of the Eritrean people.<sup>1</sup>

As such it puts the usefulness of labels such as ‘modernity’ versus ‘post-modernity’ into question (see Kolakowski, 1990). The line taken here and within the ideology of the Eritrean revolution is to conceive of modernisation in its most basic sense, resting on the idea of “progress” as a “near-universal aspiration” (Edwards, 1999:19), albeit without assuming that a standardised way ‘forward’ exists to move from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’, but acknowledging the need to take account of the particular conditions within a particular society at a particular juncture in its history.

At the same time, however, to arrive at a ‘better’ future in economic, social and political terms, most revolutionary movements in the twentieth century in the developing world were guided by very similar ideological beliefs: The anticipated ‘new’ society was to be created through the spread of education and the (anticipated)

simultaneous diminution of superstitious beliefs, coupled with technical development and a general drive to eradicate ‘backwardness’. Concerning the latter, the status of women within a given society received prominence as an indicator for its ‘revolutionary progressiveness.’ Gender relations became to “constitute an important part of the culture, ideology, and politics of revolutionary societies” (Moghadam, 1997:137).

This rationalist worldview which underlies revolutionary ideology – ultimately relying on the emancipation of secular reasoning from revelation – ties revolutions to the “transformations wrought on the consciousness of ‘the people’” (Lazarus, 1999:138). It makes them – at least in the short term – elitist endeavours, as “the process of revolutionary change is one of instruction of the many by the few” (Dunn, 1989:7), guided by the idea of a movement in popular consciousness from “local knowledge to knowledge of the principles of national and social revolution” (Lazarus, 1999:138).

In the context of revolutions in developing societies in the twentieth century, this in fact made the majority of such revolutions endeavours in which revolutionary change was combined with nation building. Within the modern era it is the nation which has been the site for forging “this articulation between universalist intellectualism and popular consciousness” (ibid.). The Eritrean revolution was no exception here, and with the attainment of Eritrean independence, which in itself at the same time fundamentally altered the structural conditions of Eritrean society, achieved the main objective of the national revolution.

This leaves the focus on the social revolution and the question what became of the social-revolutionary agenda the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) set out to implement during the process of revolutionary consolidation, after national liberation was achieved and the former revolutionary movement took over power in the new state and transformed itself into a political party – the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).<sup>2</sup>

The EPLF’s programme of social transformation placed a change in the status of women within Eritrean society at centre stage. The Eritrean revolution has thus been described as an outstanding example for Moghadam’s ‘Woman’s Emancipation model’ of revolution (Alayli, 1995). Revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea was

therefore here looked at from the perspective of emerging possibilities for women's emancipation and a change in gender roles within Eritrean society – following the dictum that gender is a prism through which wider processes of social change can be illuminated as well as evaluated (Einhorn, 1993:2).

Women's emancipation in itself is a wide concept. The focus in this study was on individual, present and potentially future elite women, for three reasons:<sup>3</sup> Firstly, in the lives of present elite women the contradictions within the revolution are bound to be particularly pronounced.

Secondly, the EPLF's approach to bring about societal change in the status of women was guided by the principle to create female role models and the accompanying belief that the more of these role models existed, the easier it would be for 'ordinary' women to advance. This belief is in line with the general model of revolutionary change as a process relying on an elite to instruct the ignorant. Often it were in some ways 'exceptional' women who became such models and therewith part of the elite. While this is not a sufficient condition for women's emancipation, it is regarded as a necessary one in the Eritrean context. It will be the present and even more so the potential future elite women who will in the longer term shape the conditions for institutionalising and consolidating progress for the majority of 'typical' women.

And thirdly – instead of examining a revolution's promises predominately in terms of fulfilment on a collective level, related to a change in the structural conditions within a society as revolutions are about mass movements and grievances and to succeed require the mobilisation of large parts of the population – it is argued here that a revolution's most important legacy can be found in examining the grandeur of individual lives. The focus is thus on understanding how individuals – individual women in this case – were freed by the Eritrean revolution, possibly in ways not anticipated by its agenda. This line of thought follows Wertheim's dictum that "the mental forces released through a revolution may embody its most important effect on a society", these "mental forces" understood as encompassing for example a "heightened sense of human dignity and a fresh belief in new social values" (Wertheim, 1974:220).

Taking gender as the prism through which the EPLF's social revolutionary agenda is being illuminated and evaluated, the potential impact of the Eritrean revolution on the present and future generations of Eritrean women (and men) can be situated at two opposite poles. These are expressed here by Asmeret Abraha on one hand, and Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel on the other.<sup>4</sup> Asmeret believes that:

The history of Eritrean women it's unparalleled, no one can compare it ... I read many books about the different liberation struggles, and no one did like Eritrean women, what they achieved should be preserved in the coming generations (...) their history should be preserved and the coming generation should inherit it ... and the society will then also understand (...) it cannot change the whole society, but there will be some people who will be influenced by reading the story (...) I believe that we are models, we fighters, and the women have to take lessons from our experience (...) not only here in Eritrea, we have to exchange experiences with other women around the world, women are still not given equality of opportunity, so our experience might be useful for other women around the world ... this exchange between Eritrean women and other women, it can be helpful to change the women's situation around the world (my emphasis).

Dr. Azieb, in contrast, draws the following, different picture:

In Eritrea, it is still so often the culture that holds the girls back, the expectations of the outside world, that girls are expected to marry ... so to change that situation, the culture will have to change, and that will only happen gradually, and the women who fought for the EPLF after all only had a small impact on facilitating this cultural change, I thought the liberation movement would open a door for women in this country, but it did not as much as I hoped it would (...) the culture needs to change and become supportive of women, the cultural change did not come in the revolution, in the field, it was something out there far removed from the culture of the society as a whole, it turned out that the tradition was more powerful than what they [the female fighters] had done, they have done the hardest thing, fighting, related to that everything else seems so much simpler, but they did not really break the tradition, and what is sad, some of them after they came back they have some position, are successful, but many struggle, they are single mothers and find it hard to make a living, but at least what happened through the experiences in the struggle is everybody could see their contribution and now there are women in many fields which were unthinkable for women to join before ... but in the longer run, I think only education can help women to truly liberate themselves (my emphasis).

These two statements point to the major themes which emerged in the individual lives of the women in this study. They expose the main contradictions within the Eritrean revolution and to what degree these will be resolved is bound to be decisive for a successful process of revolutionary consolidation. These themes can be

described as: the conceptualisation of the dichotomy between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ by the revolution and its practical implications in individual lives; the model of social change towards (more) gender equality; and the almost exclusive focus on collectivity. The model of social change envisages women to enter the elite and act as role models for others to follow. But it does not take account of the fact that the women to do so are often ‘exceptional’, nor, particularly in excluding the importance of the domestic in women’s lives, of the fact that individual women might choose to follow different models. The focus on collectivity not only ignores the ‘personal’ in women’s lives, but equally – and at least for the potential future elite women in this study more crucially – that the revolution’s modernist agenda, resting above all on the expansion of educational opportunities and advancement on merit, will create individual ambitions “and help women to truly liberate themselves”, not (only) the nation.

The following will discuss each of these themes in more detail – albeit acknowledging that they are in fact very much interlinked and cannot easily be separated. Finally, some more general conclusions will be presented.

### ***Caught Between ‘Tradition’ and ‘Modernity’***

One thing the above quoted statements by Asmeret Abraha and Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel have in common: A ‘modernist’ outlook, in which women’s emancipation is seen as a quasi natural outcome if certain paths or models are followed. Be it that women should take the ex-fighters as a model on their own way ‘forward’, or that they should get educated and thus become enabled to “liberate themselves”, or a combination of both – modernity is put in contrast to a ‘traditional’ lifestyle regarded as backwards and in need to be overcome.

But this dichotomy between the ‘progressive’ agenda fostered by the Eritrean revolution and the ‘backwardness’ of traditional society does not necessarily correspond to how women in this study conceptualise their lives. In the way it is conceptualised by the hegemonic political ideology, this dichotomy implies rejecting parts, possibly valuable parts in one’s personal judgement, of one’s own culture.<sup>5</sup> It resulted in the conception of an “enlightened vanguard” (Hale, 2001:134) with the task to educate the unenlightened majority. But for many women the right to choose

certain parts of their tradition may be as important as the chance to lead a ‘modern’ life.

Among the generation of present elite women, be they former fighters or civilians, as well as among many women of the younger generation, the attitude dominates that for ‘backward’ (read ‘traditional’) attitudes towards women to be overcome, women need to prove their capability in a (male-dominated) professional environment – ideally in a high position. But even in the lives of some young women with aspirations for a modern lifestyle as professional women, the break with some of their traditions does not come easy. For many women, marriage, including arranged marriage, can indeed be a very rational (and fulfilling) choice for their future.

Besides, women can and do use certain cultural traits and traditions to their personal advantage and, arguably, personal emancipation. This is most strikingly visible in the discussion of ‘shyness’. In demonstrating how shyness – perceived as a handicap in Eritrean modernist thinking – can serve as a valuable asset, it becomes apparent that the postulated neat dichotomy between ‘backwardness’ and ‘modernity’ does not correspond to Eritrean women’s reality. This is particularly the case in the recent political climate, where national service obligations are enforced with a rigour not seen before: Having started on an irregular basis in 2000 mainly in Asmara, the authorities have meanwhile mounted a nation-wide campaign to identify men and women who did not fulfil their service obligations.<sup>6</sup> This happens at a time when going to Sawa is as unpopular as never before.<sup>7</sup> Married women, however, are exempted from national service, whereas women who would qualify for joining the university are not. Thus, choosing the ‘traditional route’ for women might in the end lead to more personal freedom and fulfilment. After all, what traditional expectations and the EPLF’s gender ideology have in common is that they leave little room for individual choices, but centre on the collectivity of either the extended family and the cultural environment on one side, or the nation on the other.

In addition, the conditions the vast majority of former female fighters – mostly rural women who defied traditional roles and, in the words of Dr. Azieb at the beginning of this paper, have “done the hardest thing, fighting” – experience in their present civilian lives, the problems they have on the professional as well as familial

level, makes them unlikely role models for the vast majority of Eritrean women to follow (see Zimprich, 1996:97; for some individual experiences also Christmann, 1996; Bernal, 2000). They point to a more general failure to institutionalise and consolidate the advance of ‘ordinary’ women. A similar failure – at least so far – becomes apparent in the composition of female (and male) students at the University of Asmara (UoA) in 2000/2001, with only a negligible number of females from a non-urban, not-advantageous background.

Aspirations of ‘traditional’ women – women who for example opt out of formal education and with it out of the ‘modern’ vision – is an issue beyond the scope of this study and its focus on elite women; here lies scope for future research. More generally, the different aspirations of Eritrean women in the aftermath of the struggle – as the Eritrean revolution is commonly known – seem to show the same pattern that Summerfield (1998) reports for women after World War II: On one hand, the war “hastened women towards modernity”, on the other “it stimulated a return to traditional feminine lifestyles” (ibid.:253).

### ***Revolutionary Women as ‘Bearers of Modernity’***

As has been discussed above, women were regarded by the EPLF as important ‘bearers of modernity’. The ‘revolutionary EPLF woman fighter’ was constructed as a desirable female role model – a model for an emancipatory understanding of gender roles, where women in the way they lived their lives, an important aspect of which was women doing ‘men’s work’, presented an alternative to the traditional understanding of women’s status in society. This view neglected to define women’s emancipation in terms of women’s own interests (see Bernal, 2000; Silkin, 1983), resulting in what Bernal has called the “repression of the domestic” (Bernal, 2000:61) together with the neglect of other specific traits of womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

While in the field its members complied with the prescribed EPLF culture of what amounted to the attempt to create a ‘gender-neutral’ organisation, based on an elimination of female gender characteristics without a “comparable erasure of masculinity” (Bernal, 2000:67). In the aftermath of the struggle they are pressured – and especially men are often more than willing – to conform to the rules of civilian society. For male ex-fighters this entails “proclaiming positions of authority within

their families and enjoying male privileges such as freedom from domestic work” (Bernal, 2000:65). In de-facto concentrating its efforts to change the status of women on mobilising women into participating on an equal footing in the societal sphere, the EPLF on one hand failed to acknowledge that the individual circumstances in a woman’s familial environment often lay the foundations for her future (in addition to the accounts narrated in this study, see Asgedet Stefanos, 1997). On the other hand the EPLF failed to take account of women’s specific role within the process of social reproduction, which in Eritrea is embedded into a general cultural environment in which marriage is regarded as the aspect of prime importance in a woman’s life.

The modernising aspects of the EPLF’s ideology and practice opened up new spaces for women to join the elite – though mostly for women whose biographic traits were conducive to such a future life path. But these spaces could, and in fact have on past occasions been, equally opened up by a ‘modern’ attitude within individual families in defiance of usual cultural norms. Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebiel, one of the female academic staff at the UoA and representative for the group of present elite women remembers about her childhood – and similar biographic traits were found among many of the ‘typical’ present day female students at the UoA:

You are not immune from what the outside world is saying, when I grew up, for example when guests came, they saw me reading rather than helping my mother in domestic work. And they say ‘she should help her mother’ and argued and discussed with my father, but my father always said in front of me and my sisters, also to encourage us ‘the children should not do housework, they should be free to study’, and also we had a maid to support my mother, still, it would upset the guests, and they would continue to argue with my father, but he would always defend us and basically not allow us to get involved in these domestic tasks (...) and also my mother, even though she left school after elementary level, supported my father and always told us ‘do something with your own life, do not depend on anybody else’ that is what she always said.

Overall it seems fair to say that the revolution and its aftermath created new conditions – apart from a gender-progressive legacy within individual families – which exposed Eritrean women in different ways to a future outside the traditional. This exposure reflected back on the lives of the women in this study in different ways: In the field the EPLF’s programme of political education opened new horizons for at least a certain group of women who had joined the Front and made them define their liberation in the context of the collective liberation and modernisation of the



Eritrean nation. In contrast, exposure in the revolution's aftermath is related to different encounters with and exposure to the modern global environment, leading to more individualistic visions for the future.

These different 'encounters with modernity' opened up space for certain women. In fact, the women in this study for whom this was the case can be described as similar in terms of structure of personality: What they have in common is a strong personal determination to succeed in using the opportunities that were given to them – be it in the struggle, in business, within the family, through education, coupled with the inclination to make the 'modern' agenda their agenda. The latter not least because the modernisation of Eritrean society is almost a prerequisite for allowing many of these women to live the lives they want to live.

What these 'encounters with modernity' largely failed to do was to transform the mass of Eritrean men and their understanding of gender roles – apart from individual exceptions – and as such the general cultural environment for women in Eritrea. This wider transformation is, however, a necessary condition for more 'ordinary' women to advance and an important challenge for any revolutionary society. The only indication in this study that gender attitudes among men might have been altered over the last ten years since the EPLF came to power was among the 'modern' elite of students at the UoA. In contrast, among many professionals as well as secondary school students, this seems not the case.

Within the broader context of the EPLF's ideology this points to the Front's failure to exercise sustained leadership on gender transformation based on the interpretation by women themselves of the reality they live in. This becomes apparent not only in the repression of the domestic by the (post-)revolutionary leadership discussed above, but more generally in the negligence of the "cultural bases of womanhood" (Bernal, 2000:64), which amounts to women being let down by the political leadership. This, according to one of the female lecturers at the UoA, is most prominent in the stance taken by the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in ignoring most of the issues that really concern women. Citing the example of women in the military, she says:

I would say this organisation [the NUEW] does not represent women, the organisation just supports the government and wants to hide all the government's

faults and victimise women, for example always women in the military service, they try to express their opinion, they have these problems, sexual problems, other problems ... they [the NUEW] always try to silence them ... they don't see objectively the problems women are facing (...) we need strong women in politics, independent women.

The perceived failure to incorporate “gender consciousness into the Eritrean world view and definition of development” (Rentmeesters, 1993:81, who in a presentation on women and development planning at a conference on policy options for Eritrea held in Asmara in July 1991, immediately after the EPLF had come to power, recommended to do just that) relates back to the fact that the Eritrean revolution was predominately men led.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the continued absence of women from the major decision making bodies within the state and the PFDJ means women's concrete experiences are not part of the political deliberations (Connell, 2002).<sup>10</sup>

This is connected to a wider issue: the control over virtually every aspect of Eritrean development by the highly centralised executive branch of the state (ibid.). It points to the main shortcoming in the process of revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea: a lack of democratic participation, combined with a lack of decision making power over one's individual life.

### ***The Individual versus the Nation***

Saba, the informant to Bernal's research, expresses this shortcoming like this: “I can only understand the problem of Eritrean women as the problem of democracy in Eritrea” (Bernal 2000:73).

For Abrehet Ghebrekidan, former fighter and present lecturer at the UoA, it is the “coming into the constitutional government” which means that “people have to be elected rather than appointed” that will allow at least the educated women to occupy influential positions.

What Abrehet refers to as “constitutional government” should have been started to be put in place in 1997. From 1995 onwards a new constitution was widely debated in the whole country and finally ratified in 1997 “as the fundamental law of our Sovereign and Independent State of Eritrea” (Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE), 1996) by the highest legislative body, the National Assembly (NA) (Bereket Habteselassie, 1998; Luckham, 2002).<sup>11</sup> Even though in the constitution

national duties are arguably given priority over individual rights (see CCE, 1996; Christmann, 1998; Ruth Iyob, 1997), the constitution does provide for the creation of representative democracy and the guarantee of basic human rights – including free speech, free press, freedom of movement (within and outside Eritrea) and freedom of assembly as well as equality before the law (CCE, 1996).<sup>12</sup>

For the time being, the implementation of the constitution has been suspended indefinitely. This move is officially justified with the national emergency in the course of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war.<sup>13</sup> It could, as will be argued in due course, endanger the whole social revolutionary project, as the forces of modernity that were unleashed by the EPLF develop their own dynamics and cannot easily be subdued again under authoritarian control.

To this day, the political leadership places the enhancement and persistence of national unity above all other aspects of its agenda (see EPLF, 1994). An agenda that is otherwise characterised by a high amount of pragmatism, an “awareness of how the world had changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall” (Luckham, 2002:253), which includes (at least on the surface) a commitment to “market-oriented development and democratic constitutional government” (ibid.) – the same pragmatism that had characterised the EPLF in the field. However, these commitments become “secondary to this prime goal” of national unity (Tronvoll, 1998:462). This unity is to be fostered by national development policies which rely for their implementation on broad participation, arrived at by mobilisation of the people and comparable to the EPLF’s war strategy, combined with a propensity to individual self-sacrifice – while at the same time ensuring the influence and power of the leadership.<sup>14</sup>

But, in contrast to the years of the struggle, where it has been observed that the “democratic centralism had a genuinely democratic or participatory content, which was never extinguished by central control” (Luckham, 2002:251) today’s participation has been described as a mere “response to government dictates” (Tronvoll, 1998:482).<sup>15</sup> While not called “democratic centralism” any longer, the present government structure reflects the idea that only a few individuals at the top of society are to be entrusted with the power and duty to decide what the optimal

strategy for the future development of Eritrea and its citizens should be (Tronvoll, 1998).

What is ignored here is the fact that the process of modernisation of Eritrean society – relying above anything else on various forms of formal and informal education – develops its own dynamics and with it people’s ambitions and their visions for the future change.

Looking at the former women fighters in this study, their ambitions were geared towards an independent Eritrea and more liberated women within it. Once that was achieved personal visions for the majority remained tied to the collective of the nation. Ambitions were already altered and became broader for the children of the revolution, those who grew up in the revolution school or other EPLF institutions, as Mehret’s story is testimony to. She recalls when visiting her father and other family members in the trenches during the struggle:

There was something that they were giving us as a message ... they were telling us that you are children, and you have to learn more, we are going to make your country very free and you are going to build it ... so what you have to stress is school, not fighting or something ... that was their advice, and fortunately it became like what they said and I can say this advice also gave us some strength to study hard.

For others, it was with the attainment of Eritrean independence that a personal ambition for their future developed. For others again, independence resulted in new avenues of exposure with the outside world. These exposures could take the form of the chance to travel abroad and meet women from different cultural environments. Or, particularly for the present student generation, it could mean increased contact with the Eritrean diaspora – as since independence, each year many Eritreans return at least for a visit, some to stay<sup>16</sup> – and with friends or relatives who study abroad, coupled with the not unlikely prospect to be sent for further study by the UoA dependent on one’s academic performance. Last but not least exposure to global opportunities is provided through the internet.

### ***By Way of Conclusion***

Looking at these issues from a wider perspective, the development of strong personal ambitions is a logical consequence of the EPLF’s model of social change in terms of

altering the status of women in Eritrean society, based as it is on some ‘vanguard’ women accomplishing something ‘extraordinary’. In the past it was a small elite of female fighters who in the course of the struggle became models for their sisters. Today, it is for example the “brilliant” girls – brilliant being related to their academic performance in formal schooling – who are presented and encouraged as models for others.

The same philosophy is behind certain policy measures, for example the decision by Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, president of the UoA, to “try to create some role models for them [the female students], I wanted to have women at the helm of authority [*referring to his appointment of two women as director of academic affairs and director of research respectively*].” What all these approaches have in common is that they are related to the ‘promise of a better future’, ‘better’ understood as ‘modern’ – in contrast to ‘tradition’ with the connotations of being ‘harmful’ and ‘backward’. In striving for the same goals as these ‘model women’, this future can be attained – ideally within the parameters of the Eritrean revolution, what Foaza Hashim, Minister of Justice, refers to as the third phase of the struggle: submitting power to the next generation who are expected to take over the ideals the revolution fought for.

What is overlooked here is the fact that ‘modernity’ means different things to different people, and that the social changes brought about by educational and other opportunities for women within Eritrean society do have an important individual component. Concerning the young women at the UoA in the centre of this study, as well as their counterparts in secondary schools, Asmeret Abraha’s belief – a belief enforced by an official ideology in which the dominant female role model is the ex-fighter woman with her propensity to serve the nation – that she and her ex-fighter sisters are models from which the younger generation of Eritrean women will take aspirations for their future does not correspond to reality. Former fighters like Asmeret are rather regarded as what Hale has described as “symbols of a romantic era that passed, metaphors for and icons of the struggle” (Hale, 2000:349), their deeds admired and respected, but to a large degree irrelevant in confronting the challenges women in present-day Eritrea face. Today’s role models for the young

women in this study are educated women, diaspora women, not least women like the author – women who are successful in both, their professional careers and their family lives.

Overall, concerning revolutionary consolidation and here in particular looking at the EPLF's socialist-modernist ideology, one can argue – and the different women participants in this study bear witness to this – that its modernist agenda, particularly its believe in education in fostering modernity and gender equality, led to increasing agency for individual women and opened up opportunities which in many ways would not have been possible without the revolution. It is this agenda which will remain the most successful legacy of the Eritrean revolution, and as such has contributed to “the building of the [*Eritrean*] people's economic, social and cultural progress” (Cabral, 1980:150).<sup>17</sup>

Looking at formal education in (post-)revolutionary Eritrea, this study, in having focused on higher education, shows that tertiary education can act as the lowest common denominator for social change in potentially fulfilling three different roles in the process of modernising Eritrean society and gender relations within it. These roles can be situated in the three different spheres of the economic, the political, and the cultural.

Firstly, concerning the economic sphere, the development of human capital in line with modernist assumptions about human capital development and economic growth is the major role attributed to tertiary education by the political leadership. Secondly, concerning the political sphere, tertiary education is regarded as helping to create a meritocratic, non-corrupt post-revolutionary political leadership – a leadership in which certain women will be included by virtue of their academic achievements. And thirdly, concerning the cultural sphere, tertiary and other forms of higher education are viewed as important tools in overcoming ‘cultural backwardness’. The data in this research shows higher education to make a valuable contribution for moving along each of these three roads towards modernisation. But at the same time, each road can only be travelled for a short distance before diverse and often contradictory demands produce friction and slow progress in that direction.

Concerning the economic, the problematic nature, technically as well as ideologically, of planning human capital development and deployment becomes apparent in the (more often than not contrasting) individual aspirations of young women and men at the UoA (Müller, 2004b). Concerning the political, future recruitment of a female political elite by educational achievement is bound to (continue to) select primarily those with an ‘exceptional’ background, and more generally women who are detached from the living experiences of the mass of ‘ordinary’ women. As such, the political leadership is likely to continue to fail to consolidate the advance of ‘ordinary’ women. Lastly, concerning the cultural, for many women in tertiary or secondary education, to be able to complete or continue their education often mainly postpones certain ‘traditional’ obligations, for example marriage, for a few years rather than leading to a real confrontation with ‘traditional’ values – even though the ungendered survey responses indicate a slow change in cultural attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Taken together, for the majority of the women in this study it is – ironically, considering the fact that for the EPLF the collective or the nation is of overarching importance – on the individual, personal level that the revolution (partly) succeeded and will continue its influence into the future, and created what Moore describes as “the possibility of liberation” (Moore, 1967:506).

Looked at from a wider perspective, this increasing focus on individuality is a logical consequence of processes of modernisation: As they progress and offer increasing opportunities for individuals in a rapidly changing world – while at the same time traditional certainties lose their hold – individuals are forced to negotiate “lifestyle choices” (Giddens, 1991:5), which in turn become more and more important in the constitution of personal identities (McCrone, 1998).

For the constitution of the latter, what has been called “personal nationalism” (McCrone, 1998:40), understood as an active process of affirmation of one’s national identity, can however be equally important – and is definitely so in a nationalist culture like Eritrea’s. Personal nationalism in the Eritrean context is not only reinforced by rituals like the nation-wide daily minute of silence when the national flag is raised or lowered at all official buildings, when all traffic comes to a hold, as does any other activity in public spaces. It is equally reinforced by the propensity to

at least partly serve the country in one's professional life, as expressed to different degrees by the protagonists of this study.

In terms of consolidating a change in the status of women, the survey conducted among a sample of UoA students indicates that a change in gender attitudes seems to have taken place at least (and possibly only) among the younger generation of educated men and women with a modern outlook, namely those who attend university.

In the longer-term future, the process of modernisation will lead to new contradictions which are bound to have their impact on gender attitudes. Whereas for example at the present stage of Eritrean development, enough good employment opportunities exist for the vast majority of qualified people who complete their university education, in a few years this might be different and might lead to a situation where women compete with men for scarce resources – already secondary school leavers have problems in finding adequate working opportunities. But a discussion of these issues is beyond what is attempted here, and can in any case only remain speculative in the present situation.

By way of conclusion, the women in the centre of this study show their identities being constituted by the certainties of tradition, and the nationalist, collective-centred ideology of the Eritrean revolution and its practical implications on one hand; on the other by uncertainties as a product of the fragmentation of individual experiences in a post-traditional, modern world (Giddens, 1991).

Their lives can be described as the individual search for a compromise between these contradictory forces. Despite and because of the Eritrean revolution the women in this study and Eritrean women in general are left with the challenges familiar to women the world over: challenges of a professional life within a male-dominated society; family concerns; simple issues like domestic work; early marriage traditions – to name just the most prominent. But the conditions within which they have to make their decisions – or have decisions made for them – differ from those before the revolution. While new avenues opened up for Eritrean women, the challenge lies in coming to a synthesis of the fulfilment of personal ambitions and the satisfaction of the collective context, a context determined by a strong nationalist ideology with practical obligations and certain cultural impositions.



The last words shall thus be given to two of the 29 female students at the UoA, Misgana and Ruth, and how they intend to negotiate their future within the parameters of modern aspirations, tradition and a patriarchal state.

Misgana - in relation to her future as planned by the government and her personal ambitions – has this to say:

I am not sure about my future, I mean, at the moment, I don't know whether it is the policy of the government to go outside ... it is not free to go for studying, I don't know whether the government will allow us [*asked how important it was for her to eventually continue her education*] it's important, I mean you are increasing your living standard, if your education is increased, you are going to be paid highly and like that, and you can learn also something, you can learn a lot and improve skills and you can be stronger in your field (...) to increase my knowledge actually (...) if the policy of the government is changed, you can have a lot of choices (...) even due to the current situation many are ... I mean we are lucky, we studied, we have at least something (...) and we can get a job in here (...) and overall, the government was doing good for us, in the past I mean.

And finally Ruth, who says about her future and the trade-off between professional career and marriage, probably the most burning issue for the majority of young women in this study:

But there is social problem, I think, mostly, most women who reach up to their doctorate courses, they are not successful in their private lives, they don't marry, they don't give birth, mostly (...) it is according to the perception of the men, I think ... mostly the men are not willing to have a woman with higher education, that is their thought, but if he is good minded, it's possible, I see it, it is possible and I would like to complete my PhD and also at the same time I would like to get married, to have children and all, I would like to continue ... and then if I am among the successful ones I would like to have both, but if it's a difficulty I would like to quit at my Master's course level, but mostly, up to now, I would like to have PhD, I would like to be PhD major [*when asked if she had to make a choice, what would she choose, she said both and basically hoped she will meet somebody, maybe an Eritrean abroad who is more open minded, and it will not be a problem*] (...) in general, when I have certain goals, when I intend to be or do something, I don't see the problems, I see only the aim, to reach my objective.

Ruth's last sentence shows the same mindset that led eventually to the victory of the Eritrean national revolution – and might turn out to be its most important legacy: to have created the conditions for young women like her to aspire for and actively bring about a 'better' future.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the most recent discussion on the potential future relevance of revolutions see Foran (2003).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the exact status of the PFDJ partway between “a single ruling party and a national movement” (Luckham, 2002:256) remains unresolved.

<sup>3</sup> These women include a sample of former fighters who in present-day Eritrea occupy positions of authority; a sample of women who are successful in business or academia; and in the centre a sample of female university students.

<sup>4</sup> Asmeret Abraha is a former fighter with the EPLF and now occupies a position of authority at the Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare. Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel is Dean of the College of Health Sciences at Asmara University. She returned to Eritrea from Canada after independence.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Tesfa Gebremedhin (2002:15f): “Traditional institutions and social structures (...) are constraints when improving the well-being of society”, and “many long-established values, customs and ways of thinking and doing are incompatible with human resource development objectives”, before he concludes that these will have to change in order to “accelerate economic development and social progress in the country.” It is not only in relation to the status of women that the EPLF’s modernist development strategy ignores parts of people’s reality. Another prominent example is agricultural policy with its focus on the settlement of pastoralists – which has been described as a revival of modernisation theory and its agricultural applications, characterised by a lack of understanding of the value of pastoralism as a mode of production (for further discussion see Fullerton-Joireman, 1996; Hirt, 2000 – who quotes the responsible minister as having described pastoralism as “a very backward way of raising cattle”, *ibid.*:144).

<sup>6</sup> Within this campaign, groups of soldiers are posted at busy street corners and check the identity papers of all passers-by of national service age, and particularly young people. Increasingly, soldiers also conduct searches in bars, taxis and people’s homes. If identity papers do not show that the person in question has fulfilled his/her obligations, they are immediately brought to a holding centre and in most cases subsequently sent to Sawa (author’s observations in Asmara and Barentu during 2001; see also BBC, 18 July 2002).

<sup>7</sup> This has not always been the case: The first batch of national service recruits in July 1994 comprised of 10,000 youth mainly from Asmara; accounts of their service were widely broadcast on radio and TV and made many young people registering for the second batch. Eventually, 30,000 youth had registered, while Sawa can only accommodate a maximum number of 20,000 at a time (UNICEF, 1996). It is mainly since the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war that people are reluctant to go. During the war, many volunteered to defend their country – including university students who had to be convinced to stay and rather concentrate on their education.

<sup>8</sup> In this context Christmann (1996) quotes a former fighter (who herself is divorced with one daughter and continues to work as a midwife) on the problems this approach creates for many of her comrades: “After liberation, many women finally had the child they were dreaming about all along. Now, they would prefer to stay at home and nurse it properly. But in doing that, they would risk losing their fought for equality” (*ibid.*:125; author’s translation from German original).

<sup>9</sup> At the UoA an attempt might be made in the future towards the incorporation of gender consciousness into public discourse. Former Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Belainesh Araya, was relieved from her duties at the beginning of the academic year 2001/2002 in order to investigate the establishment of a women’s/gender study unit. Whether this project will receive the financial and institutional support needed remains to be seen (for a discussion of a preliminary agenda see Belainesh Araya, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> For example according to Connell, high government and party officials regard childcare facilities as an unnecessary luxury (Connell, 2002:121).

<sup>11</sup> The Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE) was established in 1994 and consisted of a 50 member policy-making council and a 10 member executive committee drawn from the council. Members presented all sections of Eritrean society (rural and urban populations, all ethnicities, ex-fighters and present army personnel as well as Eritreans from the diaspora); twenty-one women were part of the council, albeit only two in the executive committee. The Commission’s mandate was to draft a constitution on the basis of “a wide-ranging and all-embracing national debate and education through public seminars and lecture series on constitutional principles and practices” (CCE, 1995:1).

<sup>12</sup> Representative democracy does not necessarily mean multi-party democracy, but (according to a conversation the author had with two members of the CCE in 1997) was more envisaged following the Ugandan model of no-party democracy (see also CCE, 1996:Article 20). While the constitution provides for the possibility of a multi-party system, parties along religious or ethnic lines are forbidden and the legislation needed to establish a multi-party system has yet to be prepared (CCE, 1996; Luckham, 2002). Luckham in this context quotes a senior minister's mistrust of a multi-party system which from the author's own experience is paradigmatic for a wider part of the political elite as having said: "Whatever the provisions of the constitution, where is the social and political basis for multi-partyism? Who would form an opposition party? Anyone who tried to challenge the PFDJ would be asked 'where have you been during these thirty years of armed struggle, what have you contributed to this nation?'" (Luckham, 2002:256).

<sup>13</sup> The current security situation does on the whole not provide any justification for the delay of the constitution's implementation or the government crackdown on its critics (see Amnesty International, 2002; Jayasekera, 2001). The military phase of the war ended when – after Ethiopia militarily gained the upper hand and occupied large chunks of Eritrean territory mainly in the western lowlands of the country – both parties signed an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, brokered by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in June 2000 in Algiers, followed by a further agreement in December 2000 which paved the way for the deployment of an international peace keeping force along the border and the establishment of a buffer zone between the warring parties 25 kilometres inside Eritrean territory. In due course, a border commission was appointed to determine the exact boundary based on colonial treaties and applicable international law. It gave its ruling in April 2002. The demarcation of the border on the ground should have begun in October 2003. It has for the time being been put on hold indefinitely as Ethiopia suddenly voiced serious objections to the commission's ruling. There seems, however, no imminent threat of a return to war. (Agence France Press (AFP) 24 October 2003; AFP, 30 October 2003; Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), 2002; Müller, 2004a; UN-Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), 18 November 2002; for an analysis of the commission's ruling and its implications see Clapham, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> This finds its most concrete expression in the presidential office at the core of executive power. Not only is Issayas Afewerki president, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, chairman of the NA and secretary general of the PFDJ; he also commands wide ranging powers of appointment (including ministers, provincial governors, high court judges and ambassadors). In addition, the presidential office, including the Office for Macropolicy attached to it, is the ultimate decision making body, often sidelining the relevant ministries and through its own directives undercutting ministerial authority (Christmann, 1998; Hirt, 2000; Pool, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> An example for the loss of genuine democratic input provides the administrative reform of 1996, which in addition to establishing new regional boundaries altered the way decisions are made at local level. The power of the Ministry of Local Government (MLG) has been considerably enhanced, whereas the traditional *baitos* (the village councils strengthened by the EPLF during the struggle) only retain an advisory role. This move has been described as a government strategy to ensure its development policies are executed on the village level (see Hirt, 2000; Tronvoll, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> According to official sources, in the first half of the year 2002 alone, 78,000 foreign visitors (most of which were diaspora Eritreans) entered the country (<http://www.shaebia.org>, 13 July 2002).

<sup>17</sup> In addition, structural changes in (particularly rural) Eritrean society were caused by the large number of (male) casualties during the thirty years of struggle (the EPLF gives the number of its combatants killed as 70,000 - see Berhane Woldemichael and Ruth Iyob, 1999:29), resulting in an unusually (by Eritrean traditional norms) high percentage of female headed households (see Rentmeesters, 1993; Green, 1994 for more details). These female heads of households in due course needed to carry out a variety of tasks autonomously which were previously reserved for men (the most prominent example being ploughing). Whether and how this demographic impact of the Eritrean revolution will in the long run have a lasting impact on the cultural traditions of rural Eritrea only time will tell (see Christmann, 1996). In any case, these issues are beyond the scope of this study with its focus on part of the elite of educated women and the assumption that the challenges they face will in the longer term shape the conditions for the majority of Eritrean women caught between the forces of modernisation and tradition.

<sup>18</sup> A study on the experiences of women in higher education (students as well as academics and from backgrounds comparable to those of the urban women in this study) in Ethiopia came to a similar conclusion: they „mostly (...) avoided the traditional pressures rather than confronted them“ (Ridley, 2000:138).

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