

# ***If you don't do it our way, forget it!***

## **Contextualising Education in Eritrea: Reflections on a Research Experience**

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The claim by some Eritreans, that “a foreigner is not able to produce any truth or knowledge about the Eritrean society”, is too general. It depends of course on the background, willingness and commitment of the researcher. I wouldn't expect one single short-lived paper written by an ‘outsider’ to fulfil such a huge demand. But it is always better than an ‘insider’ who does nothing. Many of such papers are treasures if done genuinely. (EPLF ex-fighter/educator).

### **Introduction**

This paper<sup>1</sup> is part of an unfinished journey into African education and reflects on experienced cultural dilemmas involved in doing qualitative research on the context of educational thinking in Eritrea. The thirty-year Independence War (1961-1991) – the two last decades under the leadership of Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Eritrea's short post-colonial history, the unexpected recent war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), and the fact that central EPLF leaders are still in political power, are reasons why Eritrea attracts researchers from many continents. I came to study in Eritrea because the Government's intention to create an *African secular* state (to prevent internal strife between Christians and Muslims), and its emphasis on education for national development, unity and identity building, had brought me to wonder what kind of education it would be developing for this purpose – and how.

My research took place in 1998 and 1999, during two periods of altogether 20 weeks. My purpose was to trace an African ”voice” – in this case represented by former EPLF educators' post-war reflections on their wartime ideas and experiences. The following research question was chosen: **What was the role of education in the Eritrean Liberation War, and how do the wartime experiences of former EPLF educators influence what they think and do as MoE administrators today to create an Eritrean national culture of education?** An underlying issue was: *What or whose education for what or whose purpose?*

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on a thesis written for the Cand. Polit. Degree (MPhil) in Multicultural and development-related education from Oslo University College (HIO). The title of the thesis is “We Never Felt Like Soldiers!” Education in Eritrea: From EPLF and Liberation to a National Culture of Education – A Hermeneutic Conversation (Bjorndal 2003). The title of this paper is extracted from conversations with Eritrean officials on the Macro Policy for national educational development and their view on the role of external aid and donors.

The research question was broken into three research themes:

- 1) Cultural “baggage”: EPLF education, mental liberation and cultural change;
- 2) Present thinking: Contemporary challenges, priorities and principles of education;
- 3) Present practice: Educational reconstruction, self-reliance and aid.

Specified questions emerged from the themes (see Annex) and were organised into individual sets of questions according to the background and present position of my informants.

Informants were identified mostly through the snowball method<sup>2</sup>. They included former EPLF educators, teachers (also foreigners) and others who have either participated in, observed or contributed to Eritrean educational development – students, researchers and representatives of NGOs, the UN, other agencies and external donors. Key informants were members of the core group of teachers and students who established EPLF’s Revolution (Zero) School, developed EPLF’s new Eritrean curriculum and education system, and organised the Literacy Campaign of the early 1980s. Today, these men and women are government officials in the ministries and running the national education system from top (MoE) to bottom (local school level). Appointments were made with each informant, and questions were handed out (on request) one day before the conversational interview took place – usually in their offices. My aim was to identify their core ideas or ‘culture of education’<sup>3</sup> (Bruner 1999), i.e., what they think about education which influences their practices of extending educational opportunities to all.

My research methodology was inspired by philosophical hermeneutics which means applying philosophical thinking to the interpretation of written texts. In Eritrea, the hermeneutic circle of cross-checking information led me from the MoE to the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), to the University of

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<sup>2</sup> In brief, the snowball method may be explained as one informant leading to another and another ... until the researcher has built up a network of contacts with complementing background information, experiences and views. It may be necessary to establish many networks depending on the nature of the research (see Annex).

<sup>3</sup> Bruner’s central thesis is that “culture shapes mind, that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of ourselves and our powers” (1999:x). He differentiates between two models of how the human mind works. The first, by Bruner named ‘computationalism’, equals the mind to a computer that can be programmed for specific actions. The other – ‘culturalism’ – is launched by Bruner himself. It concentrates on “how human beings in cultural communities create and transform meanings” (p. 4). The task of ‘culturalism’, says Bruner, “is a double one. On the “macro” side, it looks at the culture as a system of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities, power. On the “micro” side, it examines how the demands of a cultural system affect those who must operate within it. In that latter spirit, it concentrates on how individual human beings construct “realities” and meanings that adapt them to the system, at what personal cost, with what expected outcome” (p. 12-13). Bruner says that it matters ideologically what model of mind one embraces because it is the model which shapes the ‘folk pedagogy’ of schoolroom practice. Accordingly, research into the cultural context of educational thinking is a requirement for understanding educational practice.

Asmara (UOA) and Asmara Teacher Training Institute (TTI), to technical schools and schools in both highlands and lowlands, to summer camps for secondary school students, to Pavoni Social Centre and Library, to camps for displaced Eritreans, to development projects in Zula, to Elabered Industrial Farm, and to private homes and celebrations. At the University of Asmara (UOA), I attended a summer course on educational management for Education Officers and school directors. At the Ministry of Information, I looked at videos and photos from the Independence War. I interviewed administrators and union representatives, read documents and reports of EPLF, the government, UN and other agencies, and discussed with teachers. All dialogues, observations, memories and taped conversations were converted into written texts. My research process followed the '*hermeneutic circle*' of going back and forth between primary sources and secondary references to check and cross-check, reformulate and refocus. During both periods, I experienced situations where my ideas were challenged; where I had to rethink what I was doing, change my questions, or seek for alternative literature. As a result, I experienced what Gadamer (1999) terms a "fusion of horizons"<sup>4</sup>; my views were enriched with the perspectives of my informants. Research literature (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997) warns against the danger of "going native". I will return to that and other issues in the section on cultural cross-overs.

Ricoeur (in Herda 1999:112) says that hermeneutics is the art of deciphering indirect meanings; of going beyond the words and perspectives of both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. This paper will reflect on such experiences. A brief introduction to Eritrea, EPLF education, my secondary sources, and my research methodology, will be followed by examples of cultural dilemmas related to interpretation and understanding, of cultural border crossing and, in turn, of identifying "common ground" for interaction – which is referred to as establishing a "third culture" or a "third alternative" (Högmo 1998, Gilchrist and Williams 1999). Extracts from taped conversations and field notes are included to illustrate the processes of gaining access to informants and recording information from published and unpublished documents, personal stories, reflections, views and events. Extracts from documents are indented and printed in simple spacing. Extracts from notes and taped interviews are given a grey background.

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<sup>4</sup> A "horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer 1999:302). In human contexts, it refers to a person's consciousness; to his/her specific perspectives on life. "To have a horizon means not to be limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it" (ibid.). A 'fusion of horizons' happens during personal encounters when individuals or groups take on the perspectives of others and add them to their own. The result is a deeper understanding, a wider perspective – a new horizon.

## Eritrea

Africa's newest nation, the torch shaped country slightly larger than England, but with a much smaller population of between two and three million<sup>5</sup>, is located on the Horn of Africa. It shares the borders with Sudan (north and west), Ethiopia (south) and Djibouti (south-east). To the east, the coast line enters the Red Sea, which has given name to the country (Greek: *Erythraeus* = 'red'). The Eritrean territory covers around 125,000 sq. km. The landscape is varied and rugged with mountains, desert, bush country, plains and volcanic wilderness. Off the coast there are some 150 coral islands (Tronvoll 1998). The climate varies from the cool weather in the capital, Asmara (2000m above sea level), to the extreme heat of the lowlands. Eritrea has nine major ethnic groups equally divided between Christians and Muslims with some animists, each with a distinct language and cultural characteristics. Christian Tigrigna speakers constitute around half of the population. 80% live in rural areas (mostly in the highlands) and are farmers or pastoralists. There is no official language. Working languages are Arabic and Tigrigna. 30% of the adult population is literate (less for women). Around 50% of school age children (mostly urban) are enrolled in elementary schools, 35% in middle schools and 15% in secondary schools (MoE Education Brief 1999). Instruction at elementary level (1-5) is conducted in mother tongues and in English from junior level (6-7) onwards.

Eritrea's more than 1,000 km long Red Sea shoreline along the world's busiest shipping lane has attracted international interest throughout the country's history. It has been colonised by the Italians (1889-1941), administrated by the British (1941-1952), federated with Ethiopia (1952-1962), and was finally incorporated as a province of Ethiopia (1962-1991). This Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea led to the longest and bloodiest guerrilla war on the African continent in the last half of the 20th century. After 30 years of armed struggle, the Eritrean people, led by EPLF, gained control of the country on 24 May, 1991. EPLF formed a Provisional Government (PGE) which ran the country's affairs until the UN-sponsored referendum in April 1993, when 98.5% of registered voters turned out and 99.8% voted "yes" for Independence. Eritrea declared Independence on 24 May 1993. On 28 May, it joined the United Nations (Emb. of Eritrea, Wash. 1997; Iyob 1997; Gottesman 1998; Tronvoll 1998).

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<sup>5</sup> During my second research period (1999), I was told in the Ministry of Education that since there has been no proper census in Eritrea since Independence, their statistics are based on estimated figures. It was believed, however, that the population *inside* Eritrea does not number more than around 2 mill. people.

## **EPLF: from Liberation to Independence**

Former EPLF educators say today that Independence was won because EPLF succeeded in mobilising the rural masses. Their tool was education. EPLF's process of building an *Eritrean* national education system started during the last decades of the Independence War (1961-91). Literacy classes were organised among the fighters. In 1976, the Revolution (Zero) School was established at EPLF's base camp in Sahel. It became a boarding school for thousands of orphans, for children of fighters, nomads and displaced highlanders in EPLF camps, and for Eritrean youth who had run away from Ethiopia, areas occupied by the Dergue, or camps in Sudan. EPLF educators produced and tested a new curriculum and teaching material, started to transliterate Eritrean oral languages, introduced mother tongue instruction, and developed participatory methods which combine theory with practice. Finally, the Zero School graduates were trained as teachers and brought to liberated or semi-liberated areas. Here, they organised cultural shows, adult literacy classes and schools for children. The purpose was to mobilise workers and the rural people; to make them aware of the goal and objectives of the War and their role in it. EPLF's conscientisation strategy aimed at cultural change; at empowering the Eritrean population to develop their own resources and liberate their country in all aspects. When Independence was finally won, EPLF said it was the result of the joint efforts between the Front and the rural population. They had all been fighters. (Iyob 1997, notes 1998-99).

After Independence, EPLF leaders formed a government (PGE) and continued to implement EPLF's wartime plans. Many officials had no home but slept in their offices, worked without salaries, reconstructing and laying the foundation of independent Eritrea. In education, to overcome inequities between regions and peoples, priority was given to school construction in rural areas. To solve the lack of teachers (50% had left for Ethiopia), short term teacher training was organised as 'crash' summer courses and in-service-training during the year.

In 1994, EPLF changed its name into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The National Assembly established a Constitutional Commission (CC), including Eritreans from every ethnic and religious background and refugee communities abroad. 48% were women. In order to present a 'living document' based on consensus of all the peoples of Eritrea, the CC sought the views of the population on the future structure of the Eritrean government and the rights and obligations of its citizens. Constitutions of other countries were examined and international jurists were consulted. The Constitution of Eritrea was ratified on 23 May 1997 but is still not implemented. According to Iyob (1997), it will, eventually,

provide for a unitary state, a *presidential* and *multiparty system*, and combine the traditional ‘respect for elders’ with gender equality. Key principles are ‘unity in diversity’, ‘broad and active participation’ by the citizens, and ‘fulfilment of their rights to social justice and economic development’. A Transitional National Assembly (TNA) was established in May 1993. It holds the highest legal power until a National Election has put a democratic constitutional government in place. TNA has 150 members: 75 from the central committee of PFDJ, 60 representatives of regional assemblies, 15 representatives from Eritreans abroad. The officially-described distinctions between the government and PFDJ were maintained until 1996. At present, the movement seems to function as a political party (Iyob 1997).

During the War, political, economic, and social policies on democracy, development and multipartyism were discussed among the EPLF leadership, disseminated to the rank-and-file, and communicated to the people through radio and journals. Organised popular participation is considered a condition for development also today, but I was told that “you cannot simply take people from the bush and tell them to vote. Democracy must be learnt. It is a matter of education and time” (notes 1999). The GoE insists on its right to define democracy plus determine scope and time-frame. The President, who is criticised for clinging to power, says:

I would like to reiterate that we do not want to establish political parties in order to please external powers. Let me say with all certainty that political parties will emerge in Eritrea ... as a natural outcome of the engagement of our society (President Afewerki in Iyob 1997:664).

The GoE claims that politisation of religion and ethnicity has previously caused immense suffering and fragmentation among the Eritrean people. To avoid the fate of African states that are torn apart by religious and ethnic conflicts, it does not allow political parties based on religion or ethnicity. The former EPLF leaders intend to create a secular state and insist on their right to establish “a timetable for the announcement of multi-partyism in the early years of the new millennium” (Iyob, 1997:667). Feeling that they have “won the State” (Barth 2000) – the right to transform Eritrea into a self-reliant country, they experiment with self-rule to eradicate poverty, ensure social justice for all, and nurture a national identity<sup>6</sup> (Iyob 1997).

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<sup>6</sup> Högmo explains that, a person’s *self* or *identity* is constructed through different symbolic processes whereby s/he, during interaction with others, constructs a picture or metaphor of *herself/himself*. Every human *individual* identity is based on *self-ascription* and *ascription by others*. Similarly, a *group* identity is defined both from the *inside*, through the members’ shared beliefs of what bind them together – you are what you feel like, and from the *outside*, through what their “significant Others” mirror back of what makes them different from members of other groups. A group identity is thus based on two feelings or perceptions, that of having something in common (a geographical territory included), and that of being different from others (Högmo 1998 and also Barth 1967).

The fact that Eritrea is still ruled by the EPLF leaders from the War allows for a continuation of their development philosophy and a stage by stage implementation of their policy which was formulated *before* Independence, says Iyob (1997). In her view, the combination of same leadership, same programme and same principles has proved a successful strategy for national development. Foreign analysts, she continues, are surprised by the Eritrean achievements after Independence; that the leaders have actually implemented what they said they would do.

Although Eritreans may agree that EPLF leaders deserve time to prove their ability to rule the country, many argue that “we were all fighters!”. I was told that “Since all Eritreans sacrificed for the war, EPLF’s ex-fighters do not have a right to be privileged or entitled to political power ” (notes 1999). Opposition groups have emerged inside and outside the country. Exiled Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) leaders have recruited fundamentalists into their ranks, organised border incursions, launched internet debates, and criticised the government in different ways. The Muslim Eritrean Jihad Movement (EJM), a splinter group from ELF, opposes the secular policies of the government and is supported by the ruling party of Sudan, the National Islamic Front (NIF), which in 1997 suggested a *Jihad* – a holy war – against Eritrea (NORAD 1997, and Iyob 1997). In 2001, a group of Eritrean intellectuals and officials sent an open letter to the President, calling for more political parties to be accepted. Most of them were jailed. It is said that opposition to the government has resulted in detention, losses of lives and destruction of property. Private newspapers that were sold in the streets in 1999, are banned now. The promised National Election is postponed indefinitely.

In the meantime, convinced that literacy and an increased educational level of the population is necessary for raising the standard of living and developing the nation, and claiming that Eritreans are *thirsting* for education, the GoE has obtained international funding (World Bank, UN and bilateral donors) for an ambitious education programme aiming at giving *all* Eritreans access to basic education. This includes a three-year *non-formal* education program targeting *adults* above 15 years. The government of Africa’s newest nation is committed to proving Eritrea’s ability to diverge from the development paths that have led other African states into economic and technical dependency. Claiming that Eritrea is different from them because Eritrean Independence was won as a result of EPLF’s success in mobilising the “masses”, the leaders are committed to transforming Eritrea into a technically advanced and economically independent modern, African “Tiger” with a united population who loves their country. The slogan is “Slow and steady like the tortoise!” Methods are based on self-reliance – the war principle which brought the GoE to expel foreign NGOs in 1998. I will return to that later.

## Field Studies

I met Petros Hailemaryam<sup>7</sup> in January 1998, at the Educational Conference of the University of Bristol. Representing the Eritrean Ministry of Education (MOE), he presented educational achievements after Independence and challenges to further development. At that time, I had already thought about going to Eritrea for my research. Petros<sup>8</sup> made this possible, for which I am very grateful. During two periods of field studies (1998 and 1999) in Eritrea – altogether 20 weeks, I collected information, experiences, anecdotes and personal reflections on EPLF's wartime and post-war efforts of building a national system of education for Eritrea.

I have mentioned the new war with Ethiopia which started in May 1998. In June, Asmara Airport was bombed, foreigners were evacuated from Eritrea, and international air flights were cancelled. I arrived in Eritrea on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, on one of the first flights after the airport was reopened, to study education at a time when most foreigners had left the country and most Eritreans were confused and distressed about this totally unexpected war which had already affected almost every family. Although I felt that this was perhaps not the appropriate time to study education in Eritrea, I received a warm welcome. In the Ministry of Education (MOE), I was given an in-depth explanation about the background and present status of the war. It seemed to be appreciated in the MOE, as well as by people I met in private contexts, that I came to visit the country for a “normal” purpose. The Eritreans themselves were trying to combine two different life situations – that of war, and that of everyday life. When I arrived for my second period in 1999, it was obvious that Eritrea was even more affected by the new war. International development assistance and private investment were “frozen” or limited to a minimum. Production, reconstruction and development activities had been brought to a halt also because most men and young women were needed at the front. Heavy human losses<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Petros Hailemaryam is the Director General of the Ministry of Education in Eritrea and Head of the Human Development and Research unit. He was among the founders of EPLF's Zero School and Literacy Campaign.

<sup>8</sup> “Everyone” in Eritrea is known and addressed by their first name, also people in government positions. In official contexts, the title Ato is added to a man's name to show respect – just as the British Mr.. In this paper, after a presentation of my informants' full name, I will stick to the Eritrean tradition of using first names.

<sup>9</sup> Exact numbers and names of casualties were not released by the Eritrean government. In Eritrean private contexts, I was told about local traditions of how to release the news to a family that a close relative had accidentally died. Specific procedures had to be followed. Certain relatives and certain symbolic procedures were involved. Without any word being spoken, these procedures would signal to relatives what had happened. There were specific procedures for informing the wider family and relatives in distant places. It was considered wrong to let newspapers, radio or TV release news about sudden deaths before the extended family was informed. In my opinion, there may be a relationship between the traditional practices and the government's secrecy about war casualties although it is believed, internationally, that governments in war keep death numbers a secret to maintain the fighting spirit of soldiers, or for fear of losing support in their people.



were reported on both sides of the border. Around 200.000 people were internally displaced in camps, driven away from bombed homes and villages near the border conflict areas, and the number of Eritrean deportees from Ethiopia had increased to 60.000. (After my return to Norway, the number increased to 75.000 [NCA 2001]). I met deported people everywhere. In Asmara, it seemed as if most Eritrean families had “Ethiopian” relatives living with them. The government was facing enormous economic challenges, but had still little success in drawing international attention. However, life went on as normal as possible for everyone. Important religious and cultural festivals were celebrated as the year before. And the EPLF ex-fighters found time to talk with me. I was told that *even during times of war, you have to think ahead. You have to plan for the future.* That was what the Eritreans had been doing during the Independence Struggle, and that was what they were doing now.

## **Access to Information**

My research was recommended to Eritrea by Dr. Teame Mebrathu and Dr. Roger Garrett at Bristol University. Together with a letter of introduction from Dr. Robert L. Smith, Head of the international centre at Oslo University College (LINS), who was my supervisor for the thesis, this has helped me gain access to *the official Eritrea*. In Eritrea, my research was facilitated by the MOE, represented by Petros Hailemaryam, Head of the “Human Resources Development” (HRD) division, and Ayn Alem Marcos (“Joe”<sup>10</sup>), Head of the “Technical, Vocational and Adult Education” division. I was encouraged by Petros and “Joe” to go anywhere and speak to anyone. Petros assigned Berhane Demoz from the Research Unit to assist me in making appointments with the people and institutions I needed to meet and visit.

Berhane organised for me to attend classes of the management course that was organised at Asmara University for former EPLF educators and students who were now working – or planning to work – as school directors, school inspectors and Regional or District Education Officers. He also introduced me to his colleagues in the MoE and provided me with Letters of Introduction to regional education offices and schools. Abraham Tecele (HRD) brought me to Asmara Teacher Training Institute (TTI). “Joe” took me to different summer work camps for secondary school students, to Maj Habar Technical Institute, and to the Education Unit of the New Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Meheret Iyob (Project Management Unit) informed me about the Eritrean cooperation with the UN system, NGOs and bilateral donors.

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<sup>10</sup> In the field, the fighters were known by nicknames. After Independence, “Joe” is still using his.

Additional assistance was offered by Arild Jacobsen, the country representative of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Eritrea (office facilities, transport and travels); by Lily Garbouchian at the Norwegian Consulate (extensive list of informants, transport and good advice); by Froydis Aarbakke as a NORAD representative (office facilities and transport); by “Father” Augustino and “Brother” Ezio at Pavoni Social Centre (library, travels and social network); and by Terje Thodesen, former Redd Barna representative, now representing British Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) (practical assistance and good advice). My friends at the Eritrean Teachers’ Association and Asmara Teachers’ Club were most helpful in organising school visits, focus groups of teachers, and in collecting information from teachers through questionnaires.

During my first stay, I travelled a lot, talked to administrators and teachers, visited schools and institutions, and met people in private contexts. Back in Norway, reading through and reflecting on all my material, I realised that since most of my informants in official positions had been involved in EPLF’s educational activities during the Struggle, it would be crucial to my understanding of their present philosophy and principles to gain knowledge about their previous ideas and educational experiences. In other words, I needed to learn about the educational experiments initiated by the EPLF during the Independence War; to record or note down the EPLF educators’ wartime experiences in their own words. I therefore returned to Eritrea to revisit the people I had met before.

In the MOE, it was appreciated that I had come back for more information. Telling me that little was written about EPLF and education, so that experiences would have to be collected from people’s heads, my informants led me to the core group of ex-fighters<sup>11</sup> who played central roles in wartime education, to those who founded the Zero School, trained teachers, developed an Eritrean curriculum, introduced participatory teaching methods, combined theory with skills training, organised cultural shows, conducted adult literacy campaigns, and opened schools in liberated and semi-liberated areas and in refugee camps (Sudan). I was also given access to the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC), where PFDJ is developing a national archive, and to the film and photo archive of the Ministry of Information (MOI).

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘fighter’ refers to a soldier who is or has been involved in frontline battles. In silent periods, EPLF soldiers were assigned to the civil departments of the EPLF, taking turns at the front. Even EPLF educators were soldiers who were called upon when needed. However, the teaching force also counted ex-fighters, soldiers who had been seriously injured or disabled during combat and thus were no longer able to serve at the front.

When I arrived to do research on education in Eritrea, I had in mind my previous educational experiences from Sudan where I realised that formal education in school buildings not only interfered with rural systems and practices of raising children. It also turned traditional power relations between adults and children upside down. I came to Eritrea to study if this was the case also here. From the beginning, I was told that Eritrea is different. I will return to that. Below, are a few reflections on what I had intended to be my research theme.

## Identifying the Research Theme

Giddens defines 'globalisation' "as the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (1990:64). An example is the Jomtien<sup>12</sup> EFA Conference (1990) which declared basic education a human right and resulted in a renewed commitment to education and a world wide promotion of primary schooling in the Western sense. While 'globalisation' implies a harmonisation on a global scale of *organisations* and structures such as educational institutions and school systems, 'globalism'<sup>13</sup> is a term for globalised *thinking*. The fact that EFA is widely associated with formal primary *schooling*, may be a result of 'globalism'. Western<sup>14</sup> standardised school systems are believed to be necessary for all and everything. In rural Africa, on the other hand, life is less affected by formal education than was expected in Jomtien a decade ago. Education is therefore reported to be in crisis<sup>15</sup>. Leaving the impression that where there is no school, no education is going on, educational

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<sup>12</sup> The World Conference on Education for All, EFA, was sponsored by the World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO and took place in Thailand. Representatives from 155 governments, 20 intergovernmental bodies and 150 NGOs discussed the basic learning needs of children, youths and adults, placed 'Human Development' at the centre of the global and national development agenda and adopted the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), which called for an expanded vision and a new world wide commitment to education (Little, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> An example of 'globalism' is the opinion voiced in international fora that even the remotest and most secluded societies of the world will, eventually, have to change their ways and develop in the "universal" sense since they are increasingly affected by modern ideas, technology, communication networks, trade and aid.

<sup>14</sup> 'West/Western' and 'North/Northern' are terms applied to industrialised capitalist countries mostly of western Europe and North America. Included are also Japan, New Zealand and Australia. The 'North' is sometimes contrasted with the 'South/Southern' which refers to developing countries. One of my Eritrean informants commented on the concept 'Southern': I sincerely don't even like this terminology; it reminds me of the Hollywood movie series 'North and South' and plus ...

<sup>15</sup> The EFA 2000 Assessment of education in Africa reports lagging primary school enrolments and an increased number of students dropping out of school. Statistics for Sub-Saharan Africa, based on the countries' own estimates between 1990 and 1998, suggest that only 56 per cent of the boys and 48 per cent of the girls are enrolled in schools. The figures reveal great disparities between rural and urban children's school participation. Although enrolment is very low in remote and rural areas, particularly amongst girls (World Bank: *Framework for Action in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 1999), the obvious mismatch between formal education and rural life, values and norms is not much taken into consideration (Odora 1994, Brock-Utne 2000).

statistics of the World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO and UNICEF focus mostly on the problems of *schooling*, i.e., low enrolment and high repetition or drop-out rates, particularly among girls and in rural areas south of Sahara. What children are doing *instead* of going to school and whether such activities include traditional elements of education, is not an issue. In the West, even by African scholars, the greater part of Africans are still regarded as uneducated.

Why do external agencies so one-sidedly promote basic education as primary schooling for all when statistics reveal the mismatch between schooling and rural ways of life? My interest in African educational traditions and the cultural aspects of aid was triggered in Southern Sudan (1982-85) where I – a Norwegian, female teacher working for the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) – experienced that formal schooling is not the preferred educational alternative of all. In rural areas, government schools interfered with indigenous systems of raising boys and girls and training them for their respective future responsibilities. Parents resisted sending children (girls in particular) to school for fear that they would be alienated from life in their local societies. I was told that modern educational ideas and methods which encourage children to teach their parents turn traditional power structures upside down, but that people appreciate new knowledge if it is given to them on their terms – to *adults first* (or at least separately from children) and according to their needs, suggestions and available time.

After Sudan, I continued to study educational practice in more African countries. Concerned, mostly, about education in *rural* areas, my interest has centred around: What does a man need to know – and a woman, and how do they learn that, traditionally? As a result, I began to question the formal system of schooling children – in general, not only in Africa. For what or whose purpose is it necessary to separate children from everyday life contexts and teach them in classrooms away from parents, relatives and other adults? Do children have to go to school all day in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and attitudes to get work and function well in society? In short, why should children go to school? I had planned to study such issues also in Eritrea, but here my journey took, rather unexpectedly, a different direction.

I went to Eritrea to explore issues such as: What is the status of Eritrean education? How do macro level principles match with the micro level priorities? Is it possible for a national education system to cater for the needs of all? What is EFA in Eritrea going to include? How are local representatives included in decision making? What influence do they have? During my first stay, I travelled a lot, visited schools and institutions, talked to directors and teachers, and met people in rural and urban areas. I interviewed MoE and MoI administrators about

their wartime ideas and experiences of education and what they have tried to accomplish after Independence; what they see as conflict areas or constraints to achieving national goals; how local participation is organised, etc. Back in Norway, reflecting on my material, I wondered: the rebuilding of Eritrean education is guided by the people who won the liberation war. What experiences are influencing what they plan for education in Eritrea? I realised that I would have to shift my focus from micro level practices to educational thinking at the macro level; that the relationship between wartime and contemporary ideas and ideals of education would be a central theme of my study; that knowledge of EPLF education would be crucial to my understanding. I therefore returned to learn more. In the MoE, I was told that since little is published on EPLF education, I would have to seek information directly "from people's heads". I was given access to more information and to members of the core group of EPLF educators who could tell me about the educational experiments initiated by EPLF during the Independence war. The result is hours of taped information in my informants' own words.

To place Eritrean education in a wider context, I have been seeking for relevant literature throughout the whole research process including the period of writing the thesis. I started by reading literature on African education and philosophy – preferably by African writers.

## **Previous Research and Secondary Literature**

### **African Context**

The Millennium Conference on EFA (Dakar 2000) calls for a paradigm shift in African education. This claim is supported by writers such as Njoroge & Bennaars (1987), Odora (1994), Tedla (1995) and Brock-Utne (2000) who agree that the values, knowledge, skills and social structures of African indigenous societies are underrated. Tedla (1995:13) claims that "African thinkers who espouse ideas that appear strange to the West are viewed as primitive, childlike, or inconsequential" and that "[t]his insistence that Western culture is superior to all other cultures has effectively barred out from consideration other ways of interpreting or understanding our world". She adds that to be able to understand Africans on their own terms, "it is essential to explore new ways of presenting African thought and actions" (p.19). The starting point for renewing African education should neither be the negative statistics that view it through Western lenses, nor the colonial projections of Africa as "the other" of the West (Said 1979, Serequeberhan 1994). It is recommended that African education systems for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century should build on African traditions, and that more research into traditional

thought and practice is undertaken. Africans are advised to take advantage of *all* inherited educational traditions – colonial systems included – and build something new out of that (Njoroge & Bennaars 1987, Sifuna 1990, Appiah 1992, Serequeberhan 1994). The liberation aspect is emphasised (Cabral, 1973). This is said beautifully by E. B. Castle (1979):

One  
mistake  
we must  
guard against.  
We must not  
now think of what  
is called the ‘African  
background’ as *old* and the  
influences of the western world as  
*‘new’*. We must remember that in Africa  
this impact of the western world on African  
ways of life has been going on for over a century,  
and Africans have to a large extent adapted western ways  
to their own needs, and made them their own. In this way, much  
of what we regard as western has now become truly African. So when  
we ask what the environment of Africans is, and what it is to be ‘African’,  
the answer is that to be African is to inherit the African past and also to accept  
Africa as it is *now*. And Africa as it is now, the Africa we have to live in, includes the  
home and the school, the hoe and the tractor, the medical doctor and the witch-doctor,  
science and magic, African clothes and European clothes, donkeys and motor cars, men who  
carry spears and men who carry ball-point pens, women who till the soil  
and women who teach in school or work in shops and offices, strong tribal  
loyalties and weakened tribal influences. And at our feet and all around us  
is the African geographical environment, with its riches still to be exploited  
and its poverty to be overcome by the intelligent application of man’s know-  
ledge and industry. All this wonderful variety is the African world in which  
African education plays its part. And the good teacher will take note of it all.

(From E. B. Castle: *Principles of Education for Teachers in Africa*, 1979:12)

Such issues were touched during my conversations with former EPLF educators. My research material from Eritrea includes their taped reflections on the relationship of Eritrean education to the international discourse on African cultural liberation from colonial mental dominance. So I added Non-African writers to my list of references, such as Paulo Freire (1970, 1998). I learned during my second visit that EPLF teachers were happy when they discovered him because they found that their ideas of education and liberation had international support:

We liked the work of Paulo Freire, especially his thinking of education as conscientisation and liberation – that liberation also includes the liberation of culture from colonial ideological imperialism. He is highly respected (Petros Hailemaryam, on tape, Eritrea 1999)

In Eritrea, I asked former EPLF educators to explain the educational aspect of the Struggle and the philosophy/ideology behind EPLF's vision of a new Eritrea and a **new** kind of education. This had been difficult to study in Norway as little was published on EPLF and education. My background knowledge was therefore composed of bits and pieces from sources on the Struggle as a whole. This literature is vast and belongs to political science, anthropology and development studies (Gebre-Medhin 1989; Pateman 1998; Wilson 1991; Doornbos, Cliffe, Ahmed, Markakis (eds.) 1992; Donnell 1993; Iyob 1997; Abbay 1998; Tronvoll 1998). In Eritrea, I found information about EPLF and education in EPLF's wartime documents, and in the internal reports of the MoE, bilateral donors, different UN agencies, the World Bank, and Redd Barna. RDC and Pavoni Library were good places for tracing historical material. The NUEW Library had started to specialise on gender literature.

After my first period, I found the first external *analysis* of wartime education in Eritrea, *To Fight and Learn* (1998), by Les Gottesman. His study was undertaken in 1993 among EPLF educators and literacy teachers. After reading it, I realised that I had already met quite a few of his informants in the MoE, other ministries or international agencies (UNICEF, UNDP etc.). I had chosen an approach to my own study that was similar to his and even looked into issues he touches upon. However, there was a time span. While Gottesman's study was conducted at the time when Eritrea celebrated its birth as a new nation (1993), my first research period took place five years later. And while he had concentrated on EPLF's literacy campaign during the war, I had mostly looked into contemporary education. But he confirmed my impression that EPLF educators themselves represent the link between wartime education and education after Independence, and that knowledge about the role of EPLF's Zero School is crucial to understanding educational priorities and principles in Eritrea today. During my second stay, I brought *To Fight and Learn* to my conversations with EPLF informants. They were pleased about it and very interested in who was quoted and what stories were included. Sometimes more information was added. Berhane Demoz, the MOE researcher, told me that he liked Gottesman's research approach very much because he had asked them to comment on his material before it was published. This was a good way of showing respect.

## **Arrival in Eritrea**

Eritrea was on the track towards a prosperous future when a new war with Ethiopia (1998 – 2001) put development activities on hold. At my first arrival seven years after Independence, I met people who were proud of their achievements in such a short period of time, curious

about what the world was saying about them, and shocked about the new war. In the MoE, I was told that Badme, an *Eritrean* border town (it had been administrated by Ethiopia since Independence as part of an agreement between EPLF and TPLF), had suddenly appeared as an *Ethiopian* town in new Ethiopian maps. This had provoked the Eritrean government to take Badme back. But Ethiopia had “won” the media. Hosting more embassies, agencies and international correspondents than Eritrea, it had succeeded in making the world believe their version of the story; that Eritrea had been the aggressor. As a result, Eritreans felt left alone – as they had been during the Struggle<sup>16</sup>. When I arrived in 1999, the situation had worsened. International assistance had been “frozen”. My informants felt this was unfair. Why should they be treated like their attackers? Self-reliance was again forced on them. I had heard that the ‘self-reliance’ that characterised EPLF during the Struggle was its own decision. Ex-fighters<sup>17</sup> told me that this was not the case. EPLF simply had to survive without help from the outside – and it did. Now they were confident that Eritrea would manage on its own again. The government followed a step-by-step development plan. External aid would help Eritrea reach the goals faster, but it was regarded as a supplement as it had proven to be unreliable.

## **Qualitative Research Approach**

For this research, I needed access to ‘insider’ experiences of wartime and post-war education in Eritrea. I needed detailed, subjective information gained through personal encounters rather than quantifiable data collected through statistical survey methods. A qualitative approach was therefore chosen. It takes into account the insider’s perspective by trying to understand a studied phenomenon in the light of the perceptions and explanations of the persons involved. The researcher is also recognised as an active participant in the research process. As said by Hammersley & Atkinson (1996), s/he *is* the research instrument.

Discussions about qualitative and quantitative research are often limited to considerations of data collection techniques. While *qualitative* researchers prefer observation and unstructured interviewing which produce *words* as data, *quantitative* researchers tend to use questionnaire

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<sup>16</sup> The Independence War (1961-1991) is among Eritreans usually referred to as the Struggle.

<sup>17</sup> The term ‘fighter’ refers to a soldier who is or has been involved in frontline battles. In silent periods, EPLF soldiers were assigned to the civil departments of the EPLF, taking turns at the front. Even EPLF educators were soldiers who were called upon when needed. However, the teaching force also counted ex-fighters, soldiers who had been seriously injured or disabled during combat and thus were no longer able to serve at the front.



surveys and experiments which produce *numbers*. However, most qualitative researchers do not view distinctions by data collection methods as the crucial differentiating feature between the two approaches (Crossley & Vulliamy (eds.), 1997:4). Crossley and Vulliamy distinguish between “research techniques or methods on the one hand and what is variously termed as “paradigm” (derived from Kuhn, 1962), “methodology” or “strategy” (where these refer to the underlying epistemology of a research project) on the other” (Crossley & Vulliamy (eds.) 1997:5). Thus, it is not what the researcher *does* which distinguishes the chosen methodology. It is rather identified by *what s/he thinks* and *how s/he thinks* about the research.

In qualitative studies, human beings are recognised as research *subjects* who of course act according to how they see the world and not on the basis on how that world appears to the outside observer. Trying to get first-hand knowledge about the social world in question; to see the world from the *actor's* perspective, the researcher usually relies on data collection methods such as field studies, participant observation, in-depth-interviewing, etc. According to Crabtree and Miller (1999), qualitative research is distinguished by the fact that there are no prepackaged research designs to choose from. The researcher may select from a wide range of specific sampling, data collection, data management, and data analysis options. Almost any mix and match is possible depending on the aims, objectives, and research question. Another distinguishing feature is the cyclical nature of the process. Gathering and interpreting are going on at the same time; an initial analysis is often followed by changes in sampling strategies and collection methods. This requires a flexible research design.

### **Cultural Aspects of Research**

Culture and theory are important aspects of qualitative research. ‘Culture’ is in this context explained by Crabtree & Miller as “a complex set of learned categories and associated plans; it is the entire socially transmitted inheritance; it is the mental map or model of our landscape and how we understand and navigate it” (1999:xv); it is how people make sense of the world. They describe ‘theory’ as “an explicit formalisation of some cultural category or construct”. There are many alternative ways of categorising and perceiving the same reality. What makes one cultural viewpoint preferable to another is a question of values and goals. As researchers, we need to be reminded that there is always a cultural filter between ourselves and reality, even though the goal is to expand our cultural horizons. Crabtree and Miller claim that most of us are unaware of our culture and how it limits or directs our activities and imagination. In research it is impossible to eliminate the investigator bias. Qualitative traditions therefore

devote “considerable attention to ways of incorporating and accounting for the researcher’s self in the research process – an issue referred to as *reflexivity*” (Crabtree & Miller 1999:xv). Hammersley & Atkinson (1996) explain that reflexivity in research means taking into account the role of the researcher. Addison (1999:150) adds that facts “are always value laden, and researchers have values that are reflected in their research projects. Any interpretation must attend to how researchers’ biases color the framing of the problem, the data selected, and the analytic decisions made”. With this in mind, I landed on the following methodology.

## **Philosophical Hermeneutics**

The task of hermeneutics is to clarify [the] miracle of understanding which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning (Hans Georg Gadamer, 1999:292).

‘Hermeneutics’ simply refers to the business of interpretation. The term originates from the Greek god Hermes, who carried messages from the gods to the people, and whose role it was to translate these messages and make them understandable. “Trying to understand, take meaning from, or make intelligible that which is not yet understood is not only the central task of hermeneutics, it is an essential part of our being in the world” (Addison 1999:48). Hermeneutics was long only associated with biblical exegesis, legal interpretation, and linguistic and literary analysis. Starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has continued to gain prominence as a research approach also to human studies:

[We] start from where we are, in the midst of society, observing persons and actions that are deemed good or bad, right or wrong. We attempt to clarify our ideas about action by rational reflection and discussion, but action itself is rooted in established practice (*hexis, habitus*) that is not caused by nor fully amenable to theory or theoretical reconstruction. This is one reason why interpretation (of potentially inexhaustible meanings) takes precedence over explanation (in principle without remainder) in the human studies (Bellah in Gottesman 1998:5).

Philosophical<sup>18</sup> hermeneutics means applying philosophical thinking to the interpretation of written texts. Every experience must be converted into a text before it can be interpreted. During the analysis process, the philosophical approaches will help the researcher focus. For my study, I have relied on approaches described by Njoroge and Bennaars in *Philosophy and Education in Africa* (1987). Through the *analytical* approach I have focused on language; on

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<sup>18</sup> The history of philosophy is as old as human history. Derived from the Greek word *philein*, meaning to love, to strive after, to search for, and from the word *sofia*, which means wisdom, philosophy involves a search for wisdom by philosophers. In ancient Greece, a *philosophos* was a scholar, an academic specialist, who by use of reason tried to explore the nature of man and the world he lived in (Njoroge and Bennaars 1987).

the meaning of terms, concepts and events. Through the *critical* approach I have reflected on every aspect of my material and of doing research, including my own research philosophy: Who am I and what am I doing here? During this process, the focus of my research changed considerably from what was planned. This affected my choice of perspective, informants and methods (Herda 1999). Applying a *phenomenological* approach, I studied EPLF education as a particular phenomenon, but also in a wider context, as mentioned earlier.

The philosophical approaches influence what the researcher sees, experiences and learns and eventually what s/he writes and how. The danger is that methods may imprison the thinking. Today, African researchers complain that educational research in eastern and southern Africa has been and is donor driven, and that Southern perspectives are seldom included (Mwiria and Wamahu (eds.) 1995; King 1995; Brock-Utne 2000). Worth noting is that the hermeneutic approach allows for flexibility and the participation of informants in forming the research project; it is “a means for learning how to think about problems in a different light” (Herda 1999:4). Interpretation is located within a specific philosophical context (Addison, 1999:150), and must take the contemporary historical and cultural situation of the text into consideration.

A text is not only a fragment of a past world but should be viewed with respect to what it actually says today. “Understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning”, says Gadamer (1999:392). It is drawn on the subject matter only. A text, then, cannot be limited by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person it was meant for. “What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships”, (Ibid. p.395). As for my material on the EPLF and wartime education, my analysis has viewed it not only as texts reflecting a historic past; the politics of liberation, student movements of the seventies, the age and educational background of the EPLF founders. Today, the Eritrean leaders themselves represent the link between the past and the future; their wartime ideas and experiences shed light on their contemporary priorities and administrative decisions.

In short, hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation and meaning making. Understanding depends on repeated ‘hermeneutic circles’ of cross-checking information from various angles and sources. Hermeneutics recognises “that social science is a moral as well as a cognitive enterprise and that the relations between the social scientist and those who are studied must be moral rather than manipulative” (Gottesman 1998:4). This calls for a collaborative research process, sharing of research findings “and reciprocal self-interpretation between the social

scientist and the society that is studied” (Ibid.). In Eritrea, this approach included informal chats where topics were raised and most of the questions asked by my research participants. The former EPLF educators expressed interest in my experiences as a teacher at various levels in Norway. More so than in my experiences from Sudan. I was reminded several times that “This is not Sudan. Eritrea is different!” I was even asked to share my experiences of adult education with administrators within the MOE Adult Education Unit. My study has followed a pattern characterised as action-reflection-universality (Gottesman 1998). My informants’ narratives and reflections shed light on education as a strategy and on ‘consciensisation’ and ‘empowerment’ as goals and objectives of a liberation struggle. These views and comments include insider perspectives of EPLF educators and outsider perspectives of other informants.

### **Research Participants**

I have read most published literature on EPLF and education, but this is not much. In Eritrea, I did not want my limited knowledge to limit my empirical material. I was therefore grateful for any information my research participants would find relevant and useful to my study. In my thesis, I therefore alternate between the terms *‘informants’* and *‘research participants’* instead of ‘respondents’ or ‘interviewees’. An ‘informant’ is a person who ‘shares his or her information’ with the researcher. ‘Research participant’ refers to the active participation of the informant in the research process (Gilchrist & Williams, in Crabtree and Miller [eds.] 1999).

For both research periods and topics – wartime education and education today – I needed to trace the group of EPLF fighters who started and were involved in EPLF education during the war, and who are still in educational administrative positions. But I also needed to speak to anyone who could share Eritrean educational experiences with me. My informants represent the sometimes overlapping categories: educational administrators, Zero School teachers and students, union and agency representatives, teachers and researchers, non-Eritrean residents. I could have broken the categories into subcategories according to ethnicity, religion, gender, age, educational background, period when people joined the EPLF etc., but with a sample of less than 40 persons, it would have been difficult to secure anonymity for the participants. My participants were mostly Eritreans and both men and women, but a few also came from the international community of teachers, UN staff and administrators of external assistance to Eritrea. They were, as mentioned earlier, selected through the informal ‘snowball’ method which implies that people I met gave me names of more persons with the experiences I was

looking for. In this way, I was able to meet new informants through the informal and formal networks of my initial participants. Some became my friends whom I met frequently.

## **Research Methods**

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject (Gadamer, 1999:374-375).

Philosophical hermeneutics is a conversational process which includes a number of dialogues between: 1) the researcher and his/her research participant(s); 2) the researcher and a variety of written texts; 3) the researcher and the research community; 4) the researcher and the public sphere. To secure a wide range of information, a triangulation of methods (interviews, focus groups, questionnaire, observation, etc.) was adopted for this study. Information obtained through one method was cross-checked through other methods or sources. My approach to recording personal insights and reflections was the conversational face-to-face interview with 'key informants'. These are persons who can "provide the researcher with both *access* and *sponsorship*. This may mean access to information that is unavailable except from the key informant" (Gilchrist & Williams, in Crabtree & Miller, 1999:74).

In Eritrea, I usually interviewed the former EPLF educators in their offices. Individual lists of questions were prepared and, in most cases, handed out one day before the appointment. I emphasised that the purpose of my questions was to indicate what kind of information I was looking for. Before the interviews, I encouraged my informants to talk freely and include any information they might find useful to my purpose. I said I was more interested in their stories than in specific answers to questions limited by my imagination. As a result, a few issues were sometimes left out, but this procedure worked well. I will return to that later. During my first research period, the interviews were noted. During my second visit, most of the interviews were taped. The result is hours of detailed information in my participants' own words. I had been afraid that the tape recorder might make my informants feel uncomfortable, but it didn't. Usually, I asked my participants to control the tape recorder themselves, and that worked well. Altogether 44 semi-structured interviews and conversations were conducted during the two research periods. 20 interviews were noted down during my first period. My second study resulted in 18 transcriptions of audio-taped interviews and six noted interviews. Eight of the taped interviews are second and third time conversations with persons I met during my first research period. Notes from informal conversations are not counted here.

## Conversational Interview

Speaking – or conversing – is a basic human communication technique. The term interview is derived from French (*entrevue* = exchange of views). The Norwegian professor in educational psychology, Steinar Kvale (1997) describes an interview as an exchange of views between two persons who are talking about an issue of interest to both of them. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1999) the conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus,

it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with the other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views (Gadamer 1999:385).

Kvale (1997) says that qualitative approaches are increasingly applied to research interviews. The researcher engages in conversations with his or her participants, the research community and the general public. In social sciences, conversation permeates the whole research process. Philosophers emphasise that although knowledge is constructed through conversation, 'understanding' is linked with the topic, not with the persons involved. As said by Gadamer, "To understand what a persons says is ... to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside the other person and relive his experiences (Erlebnisse)" (1999:383).

Kvale says that while participants in an everyday conversation exchange views and opinions on equal terms, the research interview is different. It is not between equals. The professional conversation has a specific structure and purpose, and the situation is defined and controlled by the researcher. In Eritrea, my experience was different. Closely linked to the question of controlling conversations were issues of availability, time, language and territorial ownership. In my informants' offices, I was literally on 'foreign' ground and at their mercy, so to speak, and sometimes the conversation seemed to have a life of its own. Gadamer (1999) agrees that it is impossible to 'conduct' a conversation because it normally takes its own twists and turns: "No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us" (Gadamer 1999:383). This was my experience too.

Two different views on knowledge production are illustrated by Kvale's (1997) metaphors for the interviewer, the *miner* and the *traveller*. The *miner* applies the general view within social sciences that knowledge is something "given". Knowledge is seen as minerals, as facts or meanings that are hidden deep inside the informant and waiting to be discovered and dug up

by the researcher. The *traveller*, taking the post-modern view that knowledge is constructed, prefers a conversational approach to social research. As a travelling story teller, a journalist or an author, s/he converses with people to hear their stories. Bob Smith explains, “Meaning comes through events of understanding; it is not there to be discovered” (1996:72). Everything the *traveller* sees and hears is described in detail and reconstructed as stories. The result is more than the given information as the original story is coloured by the traveller’s personal reflection and interpretation. This “dynamic interplay between the researcher and the researched” (B. Smith 1996:72) may lead to new insight, self-understanding and changes within the researcher as well as within the people s/he conversed with, says Kvale (1997).

### **Cultural Perspective and Analytical Framework**

Eritrean policy documents emphasise the importance of education for political transformation, economic growth, social justice and the alleviation of poverty in the country (EFA 2000 Report, Part I, Descriptive Section, p. 1). To trace the core ideas of Eritrean education, I tried to go beyond the insider stories and the observations by others. I approached education from a cultural perspective and related it to the international discourse on African education. My analysis was inspired by Smith’s (1988) cultural layers, Hofstede’s (1994) ‘Culture Onion’, Njoroge & Bennaars’ (1987) educational levels, Rood’s (1998) ‘Empowerment Triangle’, Fägerlind & Saha’s (1997) Dialectical Model and Bruner’s ‘culturalism’ (1999).

### **Research Areas**

My first research period was useful as a general introduction to education in Eritrea. My second visit gave me a chance to focus on what I had identified as a key research area, i.e. EPLF and wartime education. My questions were grouped into three research themes. The first was about *wartime philosophy*: What ‘backward’ traditions and mental models did the EPLF want to change, and what did they want to achieve? Keywords were ‘mental liberation’, ‘modernity’, ‘cultural diversity and national identity’. The second was about *wartime educational practice*: How did EPLF use education to achieve their goals, who participated, how did people respond, and what were the results? Keywords here were the Revolution School, Literacy Campaigns, ‘conscientisation’, ‘empowerment’, and mobilisation. The third area was *contemporary educational principles and practice*: What is the relationship of the EPLF educators’ wartime experiences to educational thinking and practice in Eritrea today? What characterises Eritrean cooperation with international aid agencies and bilateral donors?

Keywords included ‘globalisation’ in terms of ‘EFA and Human Rights,’ and aid versus Eritrean ‘self-reliance’. In Eritrea, I experienced that a fourth research area was important as well, namely dilemmas related to *doing* research; questions of methods, roles and ownership, power and knowledge, truth and interpretation. I often found myself in situations where people had preconceptions of me based on previous encounters/experiences with foreigners. Similarly, my own pre-assumptions were challenged. My research thus implied repeated two-way processes of identity construction and negotiation, and of crossing cultural boundaries.

## **Crossing Cultural Boundaries: Issues of Culture and Identity**

“[O]ur *self* or our *identity* is constructed through different symbolic processes where I during interaction with others construct a picture, a metaphor of *me*. These types of interaction can be seen as discourses – argumentative linguistic interaction – which take place at the expressive level through a variety of sign related behavioural expressions like a glance, body language, deliberately misleading expressions, and movements. Messages are explicit, but also implicit. These forms of expression are, from the perspectives of others, understood as the picture of *me* through which I manifest myself. Within the same theoretical framework we can also understand how *others* are seen by me (Högmo 1998: 183-184, my translation and emphasis).

Anthropological semiotic theory is, at the same time, a theory of culture and a theory of identity. Within this tradition, ‘culture’ is explained as a result of the human production of and relationship to signs and symbols (Högmo 1998). Geertz (1993), agreeing with Max Weber that Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, takes culture to be those webs. Such metaphors are based on a combination of our personal and other people’s interpretation of our *life practice*. A person’s ‘identity’, says Högmo, is an image constructed through symbolic interaction. As human beings, we exist, in fact, within our environment as sign related expressions through which we are identified and recognised. By focusing on semiotics, human identity can further be identified as *local, national, or international*.

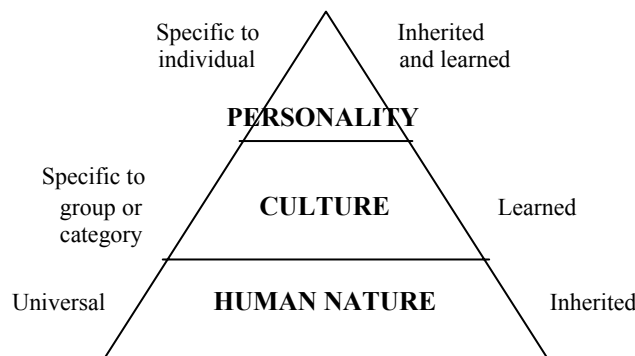
Goffman (1997) says that communication implies, *firstly*, verbal or similar communication – the message a person *tries to give* (explicitly); *secondly*, meta-communication – the message he *actually gives* (implicitly); and, *thirdly*, the perceived impression – the message *received*. The perception depends on the interpretation of signs and symbols attached to the message. If there is double communication, a contradiction between explicit verbal and implicit symbolic messages (between what is said and how it is said), the latter is perceived as the truth. The interpretation of “[a] sign is related to a mental model. The thought is formed on the basis of the mental model, and the response is determined by the thought” (Smith 1988:37). Every



person's repertoire<sup>19</sup> of symbols and keys to interpretation is embedded in his/her cultural core of basic beliefs which influence his/her behaviour and perception in fundamental ways:

Basic beliefs are not consciously held, but acquired from the time of birth through the process of enculturation. In countless gestures, in words and in all of communication, babies learn about the world – life, God and the nature of things. Normally these things cannot even be adequately expressed, partly because *they have not been consciously learned*. That which has been learned without words is difficult to express with words. The core is nevertheless strong, very resistant to change, and the controlling element is shaping a life. It is the core that determines what the person can even perceive out of the massive number of stimuli in life. ... To a considerable degree, these basic beliefs determine what personal experience we have, what groups have authority over us, and consequently how we outwardly behave (Smith 1988:18, my emphasis).

The basic beliefs are not subject to argument or correction. “They are basic “truths” accepted as fundamental understandings about all reality....“Everyone” knows these things to be true, that is, “everyone” in a particular cultural grouping” (Smith 1988:18). According to Hofstede (1994), such beliefs are part of a person's *personality*. They belong to our mental software which can be structured into three levels as illustrated by the figure below.



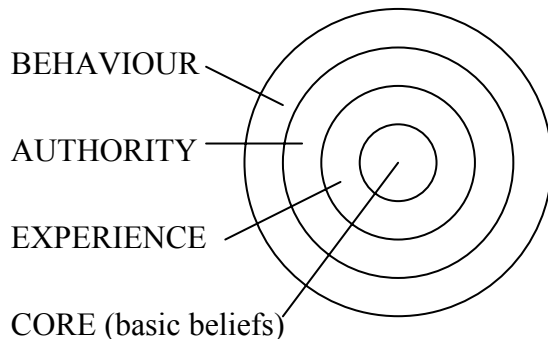
**Figure 3:1 Hofstede's Three Levels of Uniqueness in Human Mental Programming**

The first level, *human nature*, is the *inborn* ‘operating system’ which determines a person's physical and basic psychological functioning. Included are the “human ability to feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, the need to associate with others, to play and exercise oneself, the facility to observe the environment and to talk about it with other humans” (Hofstede 1991:5). What a person *does* with all these feelings, is not part of the human nature. This is modified by *culture*, which is learned. The *personality* is a *unique* set of mental programs which is not shared with any other human being. It is partly inherited and partly learned; formed by

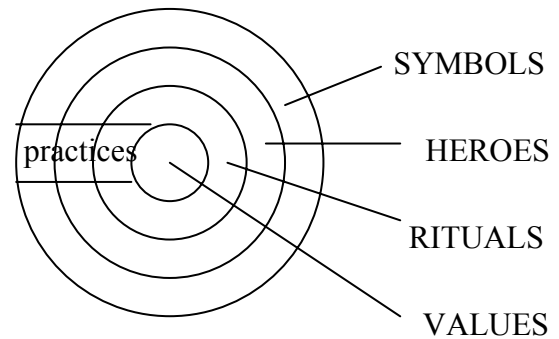
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<sup>19</sup> This term refers to what G.H. Mead terms ‘significant symbols’ which include words, gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices, natural objects – anything that can be disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience (Geertz 1993).

“collective programming (culture) *as well as* unique personal experiences” (Hofstede 1991:6), and founded on certain basic values<sup>20</sup>, beliefs or ideas. The individual human personality thus incorporates the basic ideas of his/her culture; the inner layer of four cultural layers:



**Figure 3:2 Smith's Four Cultural Levels (1988)**



**Figure 3:3 Hofstede's Culture Onion (1993)**

Smith (1988) sees culture as three invisible and one visible levels. *Behaviour* is the only visible level, made up of observable actions and artifacts. It corresponds with Hofstede's layer of *symbols*: words, gestures, pictures and objects that carry a specific meaning among those who share that culture. Hofstede and Smith agree that *authority* and *heroes* are observable in their effects; as collective rituals and activities such as ways of greeting and paying respect to others. Smith says that most visible actions at the behaviour level rest on standards that are maintained by authorities and accepted by persons or groups. Most individual behaviour rests on group authority. Even the personal *experience* level is difficult to distinguish from group authority, although much of our behaviour is based on what we personally have found satisfying – what works well or not, what is rewarding or not. The *core* of culture, the *basic values or beliefs*, represent the fundamental influence on behaviour. Hofstede says that values are “feelings with an arrow to it: they have a plus and a minus side” (1994:8) and deal with opposites: evil–good, dirty–clean, ugly–beautiful, abnormal–normal, etc. These are among the first things children learn – not consciously, but implicitly. By the age of 10, most children have their basic value systems in place. After that age, values hardly change. Bruner (1999) warns against reducing the mind to a computer that may be pre-programmed. The crucial issue is how the brain uses its mental models to make sense of the world and learn new things.

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<sup>20</sup> Here, values are understood as moral standards for behaviour. Closely connected to the value term are virtues and norms. While values are related to a persons' worldview or philosophy of life, virtues can be explained as qualities or (moral) characteristics and norms as rules which involve penalty if broken (Klausen 1994).

## **Boundaries**

'Boundary' as a term is by many scholars applied to identity (ethnic<sup>21</sup>, national, cultural etc.) demarcation. It distinguishes between 'us' and 'them' – we who are 'insiders' and those who are 'outsiders'. 'Boundary maintenance' implies criteria for determining group membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion. What distinguishes ethnic categories is not the *sum* of 'objective' differences, but only the differences which the actors themselves regard as significant. Boundary maintenance also includes a dichotomization of others as strangers. It implies "a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest" (Barth 1969:14). Crossing cultural boundaries is accordingly a process that includes not only trying to understand the core beliefs and cultural tools of 'others' – language, signs, symbols and rituals. It also implies efforts of interpreting attitudes, behaviour, and reaction patterns, and of finding a common ground for interaction.

## **Cross-overs**

Evan's-Pritchard said already in 1951: "One can only interpret what one sees in terms of one's own experience and of what one is ..." (p.84). Every person's conscience and beliefs are personal and unique but also influenced by and formed within his/her social, cultural and geographical environment. It is important to be aware that even a government official or a union representative speaks from within a personal perspective, often with an implicit – and sometimes unconscious – purpose that may colour the information:

Especially during the first period of the fieldwork, the respondents may be cautious that the researcher understands the situation 'in the right way'. Often, the goal is to counter what they think others have said or what they think is the researchers analysis of what is observed (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996:96).

My informants in Eritrea were ex-fighters and non-fighters, official representatives and private persons, Eritreans and non-Eritreans, women and men. Everyone was interested in what others had said, and what I thought about that. Sometimes information given by one person was corrected by others, but mostly, new information was added. Information offered by ex-fighters would sometimes differ along gender lines, according to age and history with

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<sup>21</sup> Although there is also a territorial component, an ethnic group is by Barth (1969) defined as a form of social organisation. Barth argues that "since belonging to an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person, having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged, and to judge oneself, by those standards that are relevant to that identity" (Barth 1969:14).

the EPLF, or according to their different rank or positions within the EPLF. Information from non-fighters and non-Eritreans was also influenced by the nature of their relationship and history with Eritrean authorities. Among all informants, I noticed a feeling of insecurity and bitterness towards Ethiopians. This was caused by the new war which also influenced, negatively, the relationship between Eritrean families and their Tigrayan maids and nannies.

I used to discuss information gathered outside the MoE with Berhane, since he was a researcher too. In 1998, I read a UNICEF report which suggested that Community Schools built in local material and funded by villagers would be a good way of increasing enrolment of rural children (girls in particular). Berhane disagreed. In Eritrea, he said, villagers would consider lower quality pay-schools an offence<sup>22</sup>: “Brac schools may be good for Bangladesh, but Eritrea is more modern and needs good quality school buildings everywhere”. The MOE administrators were proud that they had convinced UNICEF to divert from their general policy and fund school construction in Eritrea. My discussions with Berhane were always interesting, but one day, I discovered that I had crossed an invisible line (field notes 1998):

Petros encourages me to go anywhere and talk to anyone, and I do, but today Berhane surprised me. He was angry that I have started to visit schools without telling him. (Was I supposed to?) Yesterday, I accompanied a teacher to “his” junior secondary school in Asmara and visited four classes. The compound was beautiful with flower trees planted by parents. The buildings were decorated with maps and illustrations painted directly on the exterior walls. The classrooms were crowded with almost 70 students including deportees from Ethiopia. Many teachers were past retirement age. The school director was friendly, but said that I should have brought a letter of introduction from the MOE. He accompanied me to the Sub-Zoba<sup>23</sup> Education Office nearby. The Education Officer, who recognised me from the summer course at UOA, gave me permission to visit any schools in his sub-Zoba (district). Today, I went to Berhane’s office anyway to talk about and ask for a MOE letter of introduction. I did not expect him to be angry: *First you go and then you ask. It is not OK!* Of course I said I was sorry if I had done something wrong, but added that, *I was told that I could go anywhere, so I did not know ...* Still, I apologised very much. Finally, when I was about to leave, Berhane smiled: *You don’t need to feel **that** guilty!* He gave me separate letters for the Zoba Education Offices I was planning to visit, explaining that there, I would receive introduction letters for any school of my choice. Is Berhane trying to restrict or direct my movements, or is it rather a question of proper procedure?

In his comment on my thesis, Berhane wrote; “Ingunn, look at it this way. How would the Norwegian MoE react if I asked them to make a research in Norway? Primarily, will I be allowed? And don’t they have a procedure? For both the host and the guest letters that accompany researcher to the host are universal. Same here!” It was a question of procedure!

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<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in its Eritrea Report for the World EFA 2000 Assessment, the government/MOE is considering the same idea – for economic reasons.

<sup>23</sup> Zoba is an Eritrean term for Region, while Sub-Zoba means District.

Walking in Asmara is easy and safe. The centre is small, and I used to walk to appointments here and there. This was, I guess, an unusual sight. Since foreigners were few, and those who were residents had cars, this placed me in an unknown category. Many approached me on the street, asking who I was, why I had come, and how I found Eritrea. Thus, for me, walking implied good chances of meeting and talking to new people. However,

I met a friendly, young man one day. He came up behind me as I was walking to the Norwegian Consulate. He said he was on his way home for lunch, but asked me to join him for a coke at the hotel we passed on our way. He told me that he was employed in the President's Protocol Office and responsible for taking care of official visitors to Eritrea. Did I meet him by chance, just like that? I am wondering about this after today's chat with Berhane, who said with a smile, *You know, we know where you have been and who you have seen even when you don't tell us!* (1999)

I could easily interpret Berhane's comment negatively: I was under surveillance. On the positive side, maybe I was taken care of? Asmara has a very small centre, the group of EPLF ex-fighters in the MoE is small too, and they know each other well. It is kind of a family thing. My informants in the MoE told me that some of them who meet frequently had talked among themselves about my research and whom it would be helpful for me to interview. So I continued doing what I had planned and met no restrictions, but I wondered sometimes about certain coincidences. Why did the Head Office at the PFDJ Research and Documentation Centre suddenly need exactly the file with the titles Worku was translating from Tigrigna to English for me? Why did Astir from the same place suddenly appear at Pavoni Library when I was studying EPLF material there? The new war was, of course, a reminder that Eritrea's independence is fragile, and that although the administrators in the Ministries are *ex-fighters*, they still hold military ranks. But I felt safe and secure wherever I moved and whoever I was talking to. I never felt threatened or afraid although I travelled in areas close to the new front.

My return to Eritrea for a second study opened for access to institutes and information I did not know about before. During my first period, when I asked for EPLF documents and other material, I was often told that "You know, we did not write much. There was not much time for writing". Or, "Most of our documents are in Tigrinya<sup>24</sup>". When I came back, I felt I was taken more seriously. The former EPLF educators seemed to appreciate that I was interested in their ideas and wartime educational experiments and told me that since little is published on

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<sup>24</sup> Most EPLF leaders and educators in the field came from the Tigrinya highland population, and all speak English. However, I noticed during my visits to the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) that although its neatly hand written document files include a great number of published and non-published wartime material in English (and a few other languages), the bulk of it is written in Tigrinya. A follow-up study on EPLF and education would require the assistance of a Tigrinya-English translator at the RDC.

EPLF and education, I would have to seek information directly from people's heads. I had arrived at a very busy time; the MOE administrators were preparing for the new academic year and summing up post-war statistics for an EFA report on education in Eritrea. But central EPLF educators from the field took time to sit with me. In fact, every Eritrean I met was very proud to tell about their country, not necessarily conforming to a specific view. There was rather this extreme feeling of nationalism which is the characteristic of new nations but also very noticeable in small countries like, for example, Norway. I was often told that "we know we are poor, but we are all committed to rebuilding our country which was totally destroyed during the war." However, it seemed that Eritreans as inhabitants of a popular research 'object' were used to having their pride and commitment misinterpreted, and they disliked it:

I often discuss cultural issues involved in research with a number of Eritrean colleagues who work, on and off, with foreign consultants as counterparts, interpreters and research assistants. A few are educated abroad. Today, they told me that when Eritreans have better research qualifications than their foreign partners, there are often problems in their work relations. The American social worker who was here a few months ago, drew his conclusions from the wrong data because he did not know research methodology. A European project coordinator had not been familiar with how to write reports but felt humiliated by taking advice from her Eritrean counterpart. The Eritrean researchers tell me that their foreign partners neither knew Eritrea nor tried to understand Eritreans. What do they think about me? Am I different? (Field notes, 1999.)

My colleagues demonstrated boundary demarcation (Barth 1969) by signalling that foreign researchers are *outsiders* with perspectives not relevant to the *insiders*. They *don't belong*:

*They come with their pre-decided problem statements. They 'know' what information to look for. We Eritreans are very polite, so we confirm their assumptions by giving them the answers they want, and they leave happily to produce 'the truth' about the Eritrean society. But they do not. In the government there are people who say that foreign researchers are playing with our data. They draw their conclusions without consulting us, and only occasionally do we see their reports (field notes 1999, emphasis for this purpose).*

The Eritrean complaint about foreign researchers often doing their analysis removed from the field has a parallel in contemporary research literature which calls for a contextualisation of the whole research process and the introduction of culture sensitivity and 'culturalism'<sup>25</sup> in studies of education (Stephens 1994, King 1995, Bruner 1999, Brock-Utne 2000).

When I asked Eritrean researchers to explain the most serious problem they had met in their cooperation with international research teams and agency consultants, it mostly came down to

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<sup>25</sup> According to Bruner, *culturalism* "seeks to bring together insights from psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and the human sciences generally, in order to reformulate a model of mind" (Bruner 1999:4). Culturalism concentrates on how human beings in cultural communities create and transform meanings.

*attitudes*. They had felt inferior due to what they interpreted as a *lack of respect* from their foreign colleagues. Not recognising Eritreans as equal partners, they had not appreciated their advice or taken their suggestions seriously. Data used to be taken out of Eritrea to be analysed by the foreign researchers alone. As a result, their Eritrean counterparts distanced themselves from reports which saw Eritrea through outsider lenses. An Eritrean research assistant told me that “It would have been better if we had been asked to write reports on our findings, so that the coordinator could draw his conclusions from that”. I was told that lack of understanding can always be excused, but lack of respect always limits the outsiders’ access to informants and information and thereby also his or her claim to knowledge and truth (field notes 1999).

## **Creating a Third Culture**

A full and mature sense of self does not stem from a developmental process grounded in individualism but instead arises from a recognition that in one’s relationship with others there resides the possibility of seeing and understanding the world, and therefore one’s self, differently. When I change, the rest of the world changes (Ellen A. Herda 1999:7).

In the beginning of my stay in Eritrea, I often felt that my informants’ previous experiences with foreign researchers were projected on to me. They ‘knew’ me before I had met them. Goffman (1992) argues that if a person is not known by the people he is with, they will find something about his appearance or behaviour that helps them draw conclusions about him on the basis of their previous experiences with persons who remind them of him. Or they make use of stereotypes. This made me reflect on my own attitude and approach: Who am I, and what am I doing here? It is important to be aware that everyone speaks from within a specific tradition, also politically, and that goes for the researcher too. If the words and texts are “not complemented by the life-world of the members of the research population, the research is incomplete” (Herda 1999:2). On the other side, I learned to appreciate my discussions with colleagues and friends who added new dimensions to my interpretation by always pulling my feet back on the ground when I was ‘flying high’ after interesting conversations with my informants. If I said that I thought I had understood something, they asked me in what context the information had been given. If I believed that my research partners had been deeply interested in what I was doing, they said that all Eritreans are friendly. If I thought that my research might be useful to the MOE in Eritrea, I was told that no foreigners would be able to produce any ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ about the Eritrean society, but that my paper might perhaps be interesting and helpful to Norwegian development workers and institutions?

It was fun to discuss with colleagues, but somehow it made me more confused regarding perspectives<sup>26</sup> on right and wrong, true and untrue, good and bad. Eritreans had assumptions about me that were either verified or falsified by what I said and what I did. However, I had also pre-conceptions about Eritreans and Eritrea and possible outcomes of the research. While their perceptions of me were influenced by *their* previous encounters with foreigners, my interpretation and reactions were linked with *my* previous African experiences, which by many Eritreans were found irrelevant to the Eritrean context. This reminded me of an Irish Catholic Father in Kenya. He complained to me about the arrogance of foreign development workers he had met: “Think about it: a guy says, I have 30 years of experience in Africa. It is not 30 years! It is one week’s experience repeated 52 times by 30. That’s what it is. Because he has never sat down to learn”. I thought about that when I ran into a European consultant who felt he knew Eritrea very well after having visited the country one week every year since Independence. To my mind, his views on Eritrean leaders very arrogant:

It depends on whom you are talking to, but they are, in general, stubborn and ungrateful. The biggest challenge is the self-reliance and self-sufficiency of the Eritreans (notes 1999)!

What about my views? I realised that I needed to learn and let Eritreans speak for themselves.

Qualitative research is about trying to understand the perspectives of the research participants – taking the ‘insider’s view’. My dilemma was linked with that challenge. I felt that taking another person’s perspective is impossible. Although participation in National Festivals, religious ceremonies and marriage celebrations gave me some ideas about the importance of culture in Eritrean life, I was always an outsider because I did not share my informants’ core beliefs, mental models, experiences and symbolic repertoire. Doing research was rather a question of speaking on equal terms and *respecting* others. Through my conversations with my research participants, *my own* perspectives and worldview were extended. *My own* frame of reference was enlarged. When I let go of controlling research situations and we discovered common ground between ourselves, our conversations flowed more easily. I discovered that my professional background was helpful to creating a relaxed atmosphere. Bringing my personal experiences into the research situation, I tried to be a teacher among teachers, a development worker among aid administrators, a researcher in the research community, an

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<sup>26</sup> Georg Herbert Mead’s ideas about symbolic interaction and ‘taking the perspective of the other’ are presented in *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932).



adult student among former fighters who struggled with their part-time capacity building programs, and a union member when talking with representatives of associations and unions. Thus, by using myself as a research instrument, I was able to interact with my research participants on the common ground which we shared, although our experiences were different. Our two worlds were mediated through a third (Gilchrist & Williams 1999).

### Third Culture

Establishing a common ground for communication is called creating a Third Culture or a Third Alternative (Högmo 1998). It is different from the insider's First Culture as well as the outsider's Second Culture, but shares characteristics of both cultures while being open to new ideas. The Third Culture is not a formally structured group in a defined territory, but simply people who share a number of experiences and take part in the same activities (Smith 1988):



**Figure 3:4 Third Culture (adapted from D. Smith 1988)**

Establishing a Third Culture on the 'insider's territory' requires a *sponsor*, someone who knows you and can introduce you to people and their activities. He or she must be "firmly part of his or her own culture, accepted among his or her own group and active in the regular activities of that group" (Smith 1988:98). Since I needed access to different groups in order to cross-check information, I needed more than one sponsor. Fortunately, through my earlier mentioned contacts, I met people who gave me interesting reading material and introduced me to colleagues and friends. I also met very helpful informants through more informal private networks. In this way I had friends and sponsors in all the areas that my research covered.

Creating a Third Culture means sharing experiences on equal terms. However, whoever "owns" the territory in which the sharing of experiences are localised, has the right of denying or giving access to information (gate keeper) and to define the codes of appropriateness, and this may influence the flow of communication. The researcher, on the other hand, "owns" the research project. S/he is the one who has come to learn. S/he initiates the conversation by asking questions. 'Sharing' in research therefore implies 'give and take' on both sides. In my case, sharing experiences on The First Culture's ground (as seen from the perspective of my

informants) – in the offices of ‘insiders’, for me meant applying a learner’s attitude. My informants became my teachers. The danger in that situation lies in what Kalleberg (in Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997) terms “going native”. The researcher’s efforts of trying to understand his/her informants’ worldviews and see things from their perspectives may lead to an ‘over-identification’ with the informants which again may lead to the researcher’s down-playing or rejection of his/her own beliefs and experiences. The result is a monologue on the informant’s terms only (Bråten in Thuen/Vaage [eds.] 1989).

In Eritrea, it was very touching to hear the EPLF educators’ stories about conducting an education system and caring for thousands of children during difficult times of war, and that may have influenced my questioning. In my case, encouraging my informants to participate in my research meant allowing them to influence decisions on what questions were relevant to ask or answer. I had to risk that the informal atmosphere of the conversation resulted in our discussion taking its own twists and turns (Gadamer 1999), thus excluding a few issues on my list – while adding others. This procedure left some questions unanswered, such as former EPLF educators’ personal background. Gottesman reflects upon that in his study (1998). His informants did not see their private life stories as relevant to his research and were not willing to talk much about it. I understood why after reading Belaynesh Araya’s book (2001) about Eritrean mentalities. The following extract refers to a situation of foreign counsellors working with Eritrean youth:

[C]ounsellors in Eritrea who practise exclusively with a Western perspective are likely to meet with a considerable amount of resistance from the Eritrean client. For example, some clients may display behaviour that counsellors interpret as resistance. It is important to make a distinction between uncooperative behaviour as manifestation of resistance and as a hesitation to participate fully in the counselling experience. Often, Eritrean clients are not so much resistant as they are reluctant or, in some cases, simply polite and respectful. It is, therefore, important that the counsellor demonstrate understanding or appreciation of these clients’ underlying cultural values. For instance, silence in a group or even individual counselling should not always be interpreted as a refusal to participate. Quiet clients may think that being silent is better than talking excessively or verbalizing without careful thought. Their quietness could reflect their fear of being perceived as seeking attention. They may be waiting to be called on by the group leader, ... or [by] the counsellor whom they view with respect because of his or her status as an authority figure. This hesitation should not necessarily be interpreted as a stubborn refusal to be open and transparent. Instead, such clients may be influenced by taboos against openly discussing personal matters (Belainesh Araya, 2001:14-15).

In Eritrea, I also found it difficult to pry into the private history of my informants the first time I met them. If I had the opportunity of a second or third time conversation, or of informal meetings outside offices, this increased the possibilities of following up on left out issues. Often they had not been intentionally overlooked and were not particularly sensitive.

I noticed that some of my EPLF informants did not feel comfortable looking back at their wartime ideology which had been influenced by Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, socialism and ideas of a world wide revolution. It occurred to me that it is important to contextualise the EPLF educators wartime experiences by placing their ideas and educational philosophy within the socialist and revolutionary paradigm of the 1970s and/or relating the Eritrean struggle for independence to the struggle of similar movements across the world, which the EPLF ideologists did themselves. Another factor that had to be taken into consideration was the age of the fighters when they joined EPLF. EPLF's slogan rich wartime documents lead me to think that they had been written by very young people, and I had my assumption verified by my informants. The average age of EPLF ideologists in the beginning of the 70s was 20-24. A third issue was the collective EPLF soldier – or fighter – identity and solidarity which dominated all spheres of life during the war, including the private. As mentioned in the thesis, even the teachers in the field were fighters who had been assigned to civil tasks as part of their military duties, or because battles had disabled them from serving at the front.

As mentioned earlier, during my second visit, I taped most of my planned conversations, i.e. those where I had an appointment. I had been told by many that Eritreans do not like to be quoted, but most of my informants did not mind. Some even recommended me to use a tape recorder before I had brought the issue up. In most cases, while I took notes, my participants controlled my recorder. They turned it on and off according to the importance, length, complexity or sensitivity of the information they gave. Information given off the record was not taped. This thesis accordingly includes both direct quotations from identified sources as well as composite information from multiple disguised sources.

Sharing experiences with teachers was easy. The atmosphere when talking to colleagues was always relaxed. Since most of the teachers I met had previously been working under the Ethiopian system of education, this was a group of informants who could also help me look at educational development in Eritrea from a different perspective than that of the EPLF. Elise Barth (2001) writes in her thesis that Eritrean civilians even after independence consider ex-fighters different from themselves. This was also my experience. Teachers told me that:

The fighters have a different system. They are, however, interrelated with the society now. In due time they are going to understand us. But still, there are differences in their way of thinking. We were here and they were there. When they came back, they did not have anything. Not even a home. We had a home. In due course of time we will understand each other. I can't say that we understand each other now, but I think we agree that we respect fighters (notes 1999).

Information and viewpoints from teachers were obtained through questionnaires, group discussions and private conversations. Our helpers came from Asmara Teachers Club. Below are my reflections noted after a focus group session organised by members of the Board:

Today's group discussion at Asmara Teachers' Club did not go exactly as planned. Maybe this is why it was successful? Tesfayohannes and Efreem, Board members, had organised everything and participated themselves. In the club office, we met seven male teachers from junior level: a few more members of the Board, a teacher from Gash Barka, another from Decamhare, the others living and teaching in and around Asmara. We (Kathy, Elise and I) had previously explained that, if possible, we would like the participants to represent all school levels and many regions of Eritrea. We had also said that we hoped for more group discussions, knowing, of course, that the assistance and goodwill of our Eritrean friends would be crucial. Today, Tesfayohannes and Efreem really took charge. *Firstly*, they told us that one group session would be enough. Nothing new would come out of more groups (would it perhaps be difficult to gather people for more sessions?). *Secondly*, they did not follow our instructions. A few days earlier, they had volunteered as moderators and the whole procedure had been explained to them. Before today's session, we went through it once more, that the moderator must give everybody a chance to speak, pass the word around the table, and avoid a situation where one or two persons dominate the discussion. But our friends did not listen or mind much. (Maybe they didn't understand or like the procedure?) In the end, Tesfayohannes commented: *Don't worry! We know how to handle these things. We know management!* He gathered all participants around the table, asked us to sit with them (the room was so small that it was impossible for us to observe from a distance), and started the discussion by reading aloud all the questions on the list, even the follow-up questions. This was a surprise to me, since he had been instructed to ask one question at the time, and only add more questions if the participants did not touch the listed subject areas. Tesfayohannes conducted the discussion very independently (without any assistance from Efreem), doing everything his own way (I should have remembered that group discussion is an African tradition, really!). It was soon clear to us that he had prepared a lot for this session. He had even brought the UNESCO general paper on teacher performance and quoted from it at times (did he want to produce "correct" answers according to international ideals and standards?). In the beginning, the atmosphere was a bit tense. Some of the teachers we had not met before appeared very shy. It was not like a "normal" discussion. Everyone seemed to feel that we expected teaching in Eritrean schools to be very different from teaching in Norway (perhaps we did?). The session lasted from six to eight p.m. The researchers are not supposed to participate in a focus group discussion, but the Eritrean teachers wanted us to respond and give our opinions, to exchange views with them. Maybe because we have been in this office many times before, informally sharing experiences with our Eritrean colleagues? I guess this is why today's strict focus group procedure did not feel right! We agreed to relax and let Tesfayohannes have it his way. In the end we all talked, now in a more natural manner. It was more like a conversation where everyone asked questions and told about teaching and teaching problems, in Norway as well as in Eritrea. The Eritrean teachers were obviously enjoying our comparison of experiences, but reminded us that we live in different worlds with different needs and problems. Still trying to recover from the old war, Eritrean education now suffers from lack of teachers because of the new. The teachers we "knew" from before participated most in the discussion, and most active, was Tesfayohannes. What I have learned from this? Trust the competence of your informants! (Field notes, Eritrea 1998)

In the field, the fighters practised gender equality. Today, increased school enrolment of girls' is a priority and principle of the MOE. However, talking about such issues with teachers, I realised that gender equality in the *Western* sense (if that is the goal) is not going to be accepted by Eritrean societies (men?) in the near future. While teachers are supposed to be

creative, innovative spearheads of change, Eritrean male teachers, even in the very urban Asmara, are very conservative with a philosophy of life that reflects and respects the old cultural customs and beliefs. Male teachers' conflicting professional and private identities and loyalties were revealed when discussions about girls' education were related to their private spheres. The following is extracted from the commented group session on the previous page:

**Question:** *What about your daughter? Are you going to educate her?*

**Teacher A:** If she gets a good husband, I will want her to marry earlier. Of course I want a good education for my daughter . . . but that is contrary to what I say (laughter).

**Teacher B:** Our girls are affected by the Europeans. Thank you for that! You have disturbed our culture! (laughs)

**Teacher C:** When a girl goes to school, she loses touch with the society. She goes on learning. She is all alone. But she has to have a friend. She will need a boy. But education makes girls lose the taste of life – now that girls continue their education until they are 25 (Field notes, Eritrea 1999).

Talking about his son's future choice of a wife, another male teacher said that

It has to be a girl who stays at home. Of course we will ask him: does she stay at home? If not, we will not accept her, and the family will talk about her: She is a street girl! If she goes to visit bars, they will say that she is a drunkard (notes 1999)

All teachers agreed that although girls' education is important, there are cultural hindrances to sending girls to school, especially to mixed classes of boys and girls:

- There are three main reasons: 1) early marriage, 2) they help mothers, 3) there is no junior school in the village. In rural areas, girls leave school after grade 3. Parents do not want to send them. They marry after 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They also want to help their mothers. For this reason, there are few girls from rural areas in junior schools, high schools and the university.
- 30% concerning religion – the Rashaida, Muslim areas – do not want to send their girls to mixed schools, but the government is trying to join boys and girls also in these areas. Most are together, even Muslims. A mixed school is better for girls as well as boys. In Asmara, there is St. Anna school. It is an elementary school for girls. When girls are learning alone in elementary schools, they can communicate their ideas freely. But maybe this is wrong, because they will become afraid of boys when they enter the high schools.
- There is also the problem with distance. The problem is junior and secondary schools. Most elementary schools are nearby. But junior schools and high schools are not. Why should a girl finish elementary school when there is not a high school? The parents are not willing to send their girls. – Even the boy, after elementary, he departs from his parents. If the school is 40-50 km away, who is going to support him? With whom will he live?
- On the opposite shift, children support their families: cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood. Children, regardless of sex, help and support their parents – washing, cooking, farming, etc. If they [the parents] send them away, they will lose the support.

But universal basic education is a goal in Eritrea, and the teachers agree to that:

- Most boys and girls should go to school. At least boys learn how to handle girls. A boy who went to schools treats his wife nicely. Boys that are not going to school are aggressive towards the girls and later wives. They should learn that girls are human like boys.

The issue of indigenous education was raised. What and how do children learn, traditionally?

- In rural areas, there are meetings. Even small children go. They learn how to dress and how to speak. Traditionally, children must respect elders and help their family.
- Boys learn ploughing from their fathers, and they learn how to differentiate between the animals – goats and camels. They mark their ears with different symbols. They know their animals. The boys look after the animals, and the animals know the voice of their masters.
- Girls learn from their mothers: cooking, washing, local beer and how to distil the local alcohol.
- Traditional education is used by means of stories, poems, songs. People sit together at night. The children are gaining knowledge from this not to be a fool. Especially in rural areas. It is not only for satisfaction. They get learning from this. Our mothers – “once upon a time” ... the story telling was a lesson. Even the children can catch it automatically if you tell them by means of a song, a poem.
- Some people are gifted. Some people can make a poem automatically. A man can see a beautiful girl carrying water. Immediately, a poem is made. A child can be like his father.

Talking about the future of Eritrea and the role of education and schools, the teachers said that ‘self-reliance’ is the key concept. It seems that all Eritreans, whether they have been EPLF fighters or not, agree that Eritrea must strive to avoid dependency on external donors.

- To be self-reliant and self-sufficient!
- To stand by your own feet. We don’t need that much help from foreigners!
- If someone give’s you a bread, it is no permanent solution. You must learn how to fish, how to be self-sufficient. We must strive – struggle to fulfil our dreams. Otherwise, Eritrea will be like most other African countries.

I decided to focus on the *philosophical-cultural* aspects of education after talks with agency representatives who expressed both frustration and fascination about Eritrean ‘self-reliance:

In Eritrea, they are so determined, so self-conscious! They are very conscious about what they want and what they don’t want. They rule according to their plans. You cannot ask them to see their State Budget. They do not want to be ruled from the outside. Why couldn’t they allow more NGOs in Eritrea? We have the money, we have the competence, we see the needs, and we suggest areas of cooperation. If they had been more open, we could have given more assistance. We could have done so much more. This is why we emphasise institutions building! This is an important question: Is Eritrea in a phase where they can afford being so self-conscious and independent? Take Tanzania – it was wide open. We could do *anything*. We made the priorities for them. There is a *big* difference between Tanzania and Eritrea!

EPLF did not get much external assistance in the beginning of its Struggle to liberate Eritrea. "Self-reliance" was, as mentioned earlier, forced upon the fighters. EPLF organised civil departments and established factories, workshops, hospitals and schools. Local resources were used. This is how "self-reliance" became a goal and a development principle in Eritrea.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have reflected upon cultural dilemmas and challenges involved in doing research. My research experiences from Eritrea may be summarised as follows:

1. When doing research in a context very different from that of the researcher, it is necessary to allow time for reconsidering the project and reformulating research questions. A second research period is recommended.
2. Allowing the research participant to be a partner in the process, means risking that questions are left unanswered and that the study is changed considerably. But it opens for unexpected relevant and thrilling information.
3. It is impossible to fully understand the perspectives of the research participants, but they must be respected. In turn, the researcher's own perspectives and horizon may be widened, which is also helpful.
4. Identifying and establishing a common ground, a 'Third Culture', for sharing experiences may ease the crossing of cultural boundaries between researcher and research participants.
5. *Respect* is a keyword also in research relations.

## **Closing Remarks**

This paper has described my research approach which builds on philosophical hermeneutics and reflected on specific experiences of researching into the context of education in Eritrea. Philosophical hermeneutics implies repeated processes or "circles" of adjusting the research, of reconsidering perspectives, of searching for relevant references for analysing the research material and findings. During all my research activities, I have felt like a research traveller. In Eritrea, my research journey implied processes of going back and forth between different people and written sources, of comparing literature and documents with the first hand stories told me by EPLF educators and others who either participated in or observed their activities. Sharing of experiences was easy when "common ground" was discovered between myself and my research participants. Comments on the draft thesis by a few informants were helpful and provided additional insight into the complexity of doing qualitative research.

The relationship between wartime and present thinking is evident in the following extracts from conversations and the Eritrean EFA 2000 Report. Another paper may return to that.

One thing we learned was that we were very self-reliant. But the most important that we had was the *mind*, I mean the way we are *thinking* (Meheret Iyob, tape, Eritrea 1999).

*The political thinking, structure and development in Eritrea is a result and an achievement gained from the experiences, policies and practice of the national liberation struggle. Tremendous efforts to consolidate national unity and identity, responsible participation of the people in decision making, the promotion of attitudes and culture related to the basic democratic exercises and traditions and the promotion of tolerance are among the achievements of the Liberation Struggle (EFA 2000 Assessment, Eritrea Report, Part I:3, my emphasis).*

The basic lessons that we learned from our experience in the liberation struggle? For instance, if you take the policy of education, this is the lesson that we learned: First, that education has to be very **relevant**, still, to our needs. As I said, the main objective at this time is *reconstruction* and *democratisation*. So, education has to be relevant to this objective. It has to be **secular**. It has to ensure the **equity** of both sexes. The participation of **girls** – in fact, at a higher level this is still very low. But that principle which has been adopted during the liberation struggle, is of course – in fact, we have moved a lot towards this – ensuring the participation of **women** in education. The teaching **method**, and the **relationship between the school and the communities**, these are the basic lessons and tenets that we learned from the experiences in our educational program. These are the basic tenets. But still it's a process. I mean, education has to be very dynamic. It's a process ... it's a process. It has to, usually, be developed – improved – to fulfil the basic needs of Eritrea. In fact, currently, one of the basic needs of our educational program is producing skilled manpower. Skilled manpower as middle level technicians in different areas. That is why the Ministry of Education's main priority is on installing vocational and technical educational centres. In fact, the educational program is to be geared towards producing skilled people in various areas. You shouldn't be .. I mean, the setting during the liberation movement is different from the setting that we are in now. So, in order to fit in the educational program to the existing needs, the improvement of the educational program has to be very dynamic. It has to be taken as a process. And the MOE is conducting that process (Beraki, tape, Eritrea 1999).

*Education in general and the education of women and girls in particular was considered as one of the most **important pre-requisite and a condition for the successful social, political, economic transformations during the long years of war**. In the years **after independence** efforts have been made to consolidate these achievements and gains with **more challenges** being faced in the reality of the society (EFA 2000 Eritrea Report, Part I:6, my emphasis).*

In the area of education of children, you know, a lot of the principles that guide the revolutionary struggle impinge on education. So, the ideas of **self-reliance**, the ideas of instilling a deep sense of **love** for the **country**, for the **people** and for **work**, these are basic values that we want to instil among our children. The issue of making the curriculum **relevant** to the people – including children, that, I think, is a very important issue for us because we do not try to follow the curriculum or educational system of any other country in particular. We try to take lessons from the different educational systems as well as the different schools of thought in education that exists throughout the world. We try to incorporate them into our own systems of education. You know, taking what occur to us to be good ideas and incorporate those, and then do away with ideas, theories and educational systems that do not seem to be relevant or useful to us, so that, you know, we try to **incorporate all the good things throughout the world** that have developed in education throughout the ages in terms of **thinking**, in terms of **systems and organisation**, but then, try to incorporate them in such a way that they become useful and relevant to the immediate needs of the people, be they children or adults (Petros Hailemariam, tape, Eritrea 1999).



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