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## Folk-fairs and Festivals

Cultural Conservation and National Identity Formation in Eritrea

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# Folk-fairs and Festivals

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- 1 Festival *Érətra*<sup>2</sup> is an annual event that in some form traces its origins from the days of Eritrea's struggle for liberation. In recent times, *zoba* or regional administrations have used it as a political and economic forum to publicise local interests *vis-à-vis* the center, while the state seeks to bring its "unity in diversity" policy closer to the regional administrations. These ceremonial congregations which in different forms on and off was held in liberated areas (*hara māréṭ*) during the war with Ethiopia now forms a fixed part of Eritrea's political culture. At present, Festival *Érətra*'s cultural shows of diverse ethnic groups stand as an interface between local political and economic demands and national policy matters, facilitate the internal relationships between community leaders, local and national festival organisers, and Festival *Érətra* participants, and are always documented by state television networks and by radio and newspaper journalists, as well as by private video cameras and cassette recorders of Eritrean diasporic populations, and, therefore, represent local culture as reported and recorded by the national media and provide platforms for cultural conservation and arenas where the presentation of local popular culture and policy of national integration confront one another.
- 2 Folk-fairs and festivals<sup>3</sup>, unlike museum exhibitions, are often temporary, set up for special purposes and disbanded after the event. If they perpetuate themselves they do so not continuously but periodically. Secondly, the curatorial hand is less evident in "displays" produced for folk-fair and festival settings. Thirdly, and more importantly, since the "objects" on display are usually not objects but mostly live performances, folk-fairs and festivals frequently act as primary agents of cultural conservation, and stages for the construction and consolidation of national identity formation. Featuring Festival *Érətra* as a case in point, this article looks at the political and cultural dynamics of Festival *Érətra* in liberated lands (*hara māréṭ*) during the years of war with Ethiopia, in Bologna, and in Asmara and different *zobas* after independence, and how they contributed to the construction of national unity while tolerating cultural diversity. It analyses how folk-fairs and festivals become settings in which cultural conservation is experienced

through live cultural stage presentations, costume displays and body adornments, examines how folk-fairs and festivals present a public forum in which cultural “objects” produce different meanings, describes how issues of culture and representation emerge not only within the confines of the museum, but also in those self-conscious, anti-museum settings called folk-fairs and festivals, discusses the interconnections among social and political structures and the contingent histories that constitute a sense of Eritrean national identity across local and regional affiliations, and investigates how live stage performances are directed at increasing the cultural representation of ethnic groups, and how folk-fairs and festivals go beyond these cultural events and legitimise processes of cultural conservation, and enact and extend those cultures to the formation of identity of a nation.

- 3 Anthropological research about folk-fairs and festivals involves the study of cultural conservation, national identity formation, and the economic and political dimensions of cultural representation. Precisely because these folk-fairs and festivals invoke tradition and modernity as sources of legitimacy, the significance of political strategies and cultural creativity becomes an important aspect of inquiry (Hannerz 1989: 21; Appadurai 1990: 43). Binsbergen (1994) discusses this problem in detail in his study of the Kazanga festival in Zambia, in which he also shows how local cultural forms are transformed through commodification and folklorisation of stage events within the framework of global conventions. The theme is also taken up in the works on newly created national or continental festivals, as in Apter’s study of FESTAC in Nigeria (1996) and Valsecchi’s (1999) recently published article on the creation of new festivals and the transformation of old ones, a theme hardly examined until now in the African context, despite the great interest in *The Invention of Tradition* by Ranger (1983). The historical perspective and the attention Valsecchi gives to the political context of festivals enrich our understanding of the flexibility of cultural forms. However, Valsecchi’s restriction of the material to urban festivals and their demarcation from rural festivals is less useful. It is precisely the interaction between town, country and capital city, and regional or *zoba* resource demands and national integration objectives that shapes the cultural and political dynamics of Festival *Érətra*.
- 4 Karp (1991: 23-25) argues that the specific “display” of cultural traditions presented in folk-fairs and festivals, unlike museum exhibitions, are settings for unrestrained and sensually unrestricted experience, since they do not limit interaction between audience and objects<sup>4</sup>. Hence in folk-fairs and festivals, there is no physical barrier between the audience and the “display” or warning about violating space (Ames 1986: 186-187; Alpers 1990: 68-69). Instead, folk-fairs and festivals invoke pleasurable, sensual experiences that more totally involve the person. As Lavine (1987: 106) puts it, this totalising participation encourages involvement in live cultural presentations and makes folkfairs and festivals vibrant, active and full of interaction. This means that folk-fairs and festivals allow complete sharing of stage experiences among artists and spectators (Cohen 1982: 29). Similarly, folk-fairs and festivals do not emphasise differences in taste or ownership among participants. Instead, as Boon (1986: 102) and Duncan (1987: 35) mention, folk-fairs and festivals provide their audience with a more nonjudgmental, participatory and sensory aesthetics of the occasion, and offer cultural knowledge, but such knowledge derives from non elite settings and is available to everyone who comes to the folk-fair or festival (Kaplan 1984: 56). The central issue that is implicitly contested between museum exhibitions and folk-fairs and festivals is then “ownership” of culture. According to

Clifford (1986: 213) and Horne (1984: 148) museums arise out of and are mechanisms for the production of elite culture, while folk-fairs and festivals largely present live stage performances that ignore the universalising themes of elite culture, and, unlike museum exhibitions, are not tidy events and neat packages, instead they are disorderly and messy incidents.

- 5 In other words, standard folk-fair and festival operations such as tightly scheduled stage presentations are routinely disregarded as are, at times, the stages themselves. For the various folk artists the festival is a living event that has its own dynamic, rhythm and flow, different from a preset and prescribed order, and, unlike a museum exhibition, a folk-fair or festival is not rationally planned or statically ordered, and does not involve predictable set of activities. Indeed, folk-fairs and festivals obfuscated the boundaries that define museum exhibitions and as organic events called for creativity and improvisation as a means of cultural conservation. It is this very essence of folk-fair and festival formats or the inclusive, celebratory nature of live stage performances that makes them an attractive public forum for the conservation of cultural traditions through the provision of live cultural knowledge and education.
- 6 In addition, folk-fairs and festivals are a series of carefully orchestrated, partial glimpses into the artists' traditional and cultural lives. In the words of Ebron (1999: 910), "culture can be produced as a commodified object and, in the process, made available for identity formation". Folk-fairs and festivals "stage culture" to indicate indigality and identity through live performances (Stocking 1985: 102). In this regard, this article also addresses an issue about Eritrean national identity (Pool 1982; Markakis 1988; Cliffe 1988; Mesfin 1990) in order to look at Festival *Érətra* as a focus of identity formation, but my aim is broader. This is because the question of how to think about Eritrean national identity has never been a vexing one, and, in some measure, because the historical and contemporary experiences of the region do accord readily with classic conceptions of the nation-state as a bounded and territorially based unit known as *hagār*. In thinking about and discussing the representational and expressive aspects of Eritrean identity, I found Anderson's original conceptualisation of the nation as an "imagined community" useful. However, a key problem for nations emerging out of the colonial experience is how to imagine forms of community that are not, as Anderson (1983: 427) puts it, simply "modular forms of the national society propagated by Western modernity". Again I reject the underlying assumption that nation and identity are given, fixed and coherent. Instead, I take both the nation and the histories that impart meaning to it as contingent artifacts of the interplay of social experiences, political policies, historical circumstances, and the meanings accorded to them in daily discourse and interaction (Kapferer 1988: 36; Appadurai 2000: 9).
- 7 Indeed one of the defining characteristics of the region is the prevailing presence of an ideology of national identity that serves as a goal for mass acculturation. The genesis of this national identity is conventionally attributed to the early and long-standing domination of the region by forces of European imperialism and African colonialism (*māgza'əti*) and to the repeated—and frequently forced—occupations that resulted in the multi-ethnic migrations (*səddāt*) of Eritrean populations. Efforts of members of these diverse populations to consolidate national identities and affiliations draw on just such experiences of political domination and cultural discontinuation as the symbolic grounding for the struggle for national liberation (*hagārawi* or *harənmātawi qalsi*). Eritreans strive to impart meaning to their struggles for national identity by invoking a

distinct society and hegemonic colonial history. Therefore my goals in illuminating the processes and practices of national identity formation in Eritrea converge with events of Festival *Ērətra* as coherent constituents of distinct history and cultural memory navigated by the performing arts.

- 8 Here I follow a tradition in anthropology that approaches festivals as key sites for explaining issues of identity formation (Manning 1977: 268, 1978: 200; Abrahams 1983: 43; Stewart 1986: 293; Miller 1994: 58). Such sorts of studies on festivals and national identity formation have a functionalist position where in large measure they yield explanations about festivals either as events that showcase key symbols and commonly held values, thereby strengthening group cohesion and national consciousness or as daily breaks—a “time out of time” (Falassi 1987: 13)—that serve as a safety valve to relieve daily tensions associated with human interaction in multi-ethnic societies (Stewart 1986: 303). This analytical position underscores the dynamic complexities of Eritrean national experiences, and as Foster (1999: 251-252) has pointed out in reference to national identity formation in a world characterised by the increasing permeability of national festivals, it defines festivals as “emanations of the national essence”, elucidates broader questions about identity formations in a transactional context, and contributes to contemporary scholarship concerned with understanding national identity in terms of “staging culture” through live performances (Fine 1984: 231).
  
- 9 Similarly, Handler (1988: 141) and Williams (1993: 161) point to the importance of festivals in “turning a cultural history into a national identity”. This condition constructs Eritrea as a self-contained, discrete, national entity, and thus traces the cultural identity of Eritreans within a framework of ethnic diversity and memories of a lengthy and painful but successful war of liberation. For Eritrea before 1991, then, a national culture was constituted, not merely by the circumstances by which the nation as an imagined community came into being, but also by the experiences of liberation struggle for sovereignty. Even as I work from within a scholarship that conceives the national community as “imagined” (Anderson 1983), Eritreans draw continually on a classical notion of the nation to assess and assert their position locally, regionally and internationally<sup>5</sup>. This understanding of the nation shifts our attention away from a festival’s revitalisation functions toward the expressive opportunities opened up in festival events (Stoeltje 1988: 225; Miller 1994: 19). Second, rather than approaching a festival as a mirror of some fixed reality, I examine it as a lens through which we might look closely and critically at the practices and processes constituting “nation” and “national identity”. The long-standing and complex history of the liberation struggle provides one basis for the constitution of a generalised Eritrean identity that stresses pan-national affiliations. The fact that the ostensibly different ethnic groups are linked through a shared history of colonial domination and forced migration has made Eritrea a bounded entity with a distinct identity, and collective cultural memory.
  
- 10 Possessing and participating in national cultures are means by which heterogeneous collections of people constitute themselves as homogeneous nations “of own kind” (Williams 1993: 153). Indeed, identity assumes such importance, in part, because what one can claim— and legitimate—as an identity is closely related to the cultural and political resources to which one can claim (Papanek 1994: 42). Thus the concept of *Eritreanity* that is such a source of pride to many is also a key factor in the need to consolidate further the cultural history of the pannational identity. For Appadurai (1987: 13, 1993: 420) the ability of any group to assume control over those local practices and interactions in which

constructions of identity are most likely to be constituted and authenticated is in many respects a factor of differential access to the arenas in which national culture is produced and enacted through, among other things, festivals. Using a different ethnographic experience, Qureshi (2000: 805) makes similar observations when he most systematically illustrates that traditional musical shows and dance performances are icons of intense affect for enacting national cultural memories. I deal with these forms of interaction, cultural presentation, heritage preservation and identity formation: a) by outlining the historical roots of Festival *Érətra*, b) by discussing its forms of cultural representation in contrast with museum exhibitions, and c) by describing it as a cultural and political arena for national resource competition.

#### Featuring Festival *Érətra*

- 11 Festival *Érətra*, a yearly folk-fair whose season opens up in Asmara around the first two weeks of August (*Nāhasā*) and founded in 1984 during the years of the struggle for liberation, has had an enormous impact on Eritrean heritage conservation and national identity formation, and has become a model influence for similar cultural stage productions in several other regions of the country. The history of the founding of Festival *Érətra* is read as a cultural-political counterpart of the “unity in diversity” policy of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, and its strategy of political and cultural representation. During the period of the liberation struggle, especially after the 1970s, there was no public space that could be used for festival purposes, although many Eritreans came together from near and far places in order to attend musical and dance shows in liberated areas (*hara māréṭ*). The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front introduced the idea of “cultural troupe” (*bahli*) in the mid 1970s as a form of entertainment for fighters and combatants and, more importantly, as a way of energizing nationalist feelings and thereby adding vigor and rigor to the struggle for independence. Musical and dance shows with all the costume wearing and hair-dressing that goes with them, theatrical scenes (*tāwasə’o*), camel races, and soccer games consisted of some of the festival events. At these cultural shows the participation of military commanders, rank and file fighters, and local community members ascertained support for the national liberation movement through an environment of entertainment.
- 12 The portrayal of cultural traditions of the various ethnic groups and the presentation of local cultural material in a larger, national festival long before and after independence promoted the political praxis of homogenisation of the different Eritrean polities and created a frame of reference that de-emphasised local difference. In this political culture, new types of music and dance developed, and cultural traditions were reevaluated in order to attach them to the form of national representation associated with the “unity in diversity” policy of the struggle for liberation and strong belief in an indivisible nation later depicted as one “people, one heart” (*“hadā həzbi hadā ləbbi”*). Since 1984, Eritreans in the diaspora in Europe gathered annually in Bologna, Italy, in order to take part in a “national” festival consisting principally of live musical and dance shows, drama presentations, cash contributions, and sale of native cooking and cuisines, and to listen to the latest in liberation struggle developments<sup>6</sup>. Eritreans who were unable to join the liberation struggle for all kinds of reasons and who then and now resided in the Near East, Europe, North America, and Australia contributed to the struggle for independence by lobbying foreign governments, collecting and donating funds either in the form of lump-sum cash resources or an overhead two percent income tax payments or still by mobilising meetings, rallies, and campaigns in support of the nationalist struggle and by

sending remittances to kin and friends in enemy occupied lands. Festival *Érətra* in Bologna was but an annual folk-fair where all these social, economic, and political resources were mobilised and negotiated and put together mainly in the form of live stage shows in the presence of liberation struggle representatives, exiles, refugees, and other categories of diasporic Eritrean peoples. Indeed *hagār* or nation was and still is made to matter to the Eritrean public through stage presentations of traditional songs and dances that cut across ethnic and religious divisions.

- 13 The innovative appropriation of local cultural traditions by new versions of public presentations did not begin with Festival *Érətra* in Bologna, or Asmara for that matter. *Gāḍli* or liberation-style *Təgrəñña* dancing, drumbeating, hand clapping transforming typical traditional highland *Təgrəñña* dance like *kudda 'arrāza* were, for example, danced even during *tāgadəlo harənnāt* or the struggle for liberation times. This gave a twist or new dimension to *Təgrəñña* dance that is even common today outside festival circles, in weddings and other cultural ceremonies and identified as the unmistakable genre of *Təgrəñña* dance danced throughout the country not only by adults but also by growing-up children who increased its popularity enormously by dancing it on every possible occasion. After independence, the Bureau of Cultural Affairs (*bét ṣəhfāt bahlawi guddayat*) within the Ministry of Education and now the National Celebrations Organising Committee (*haqārawi awwāhahadi šəmaqəllā bā'álat*) have through Festival *Érətra* striven to promote national unity and cultural diversity by encouraging points of contact and exchange between the different cultural traditions in the country. Thus, Festival *Érətra* in Asmara is an annual event recreated in 1993 out of which evolved *zoba* or region-based folk-fairs involving all the different ethnic groups, thereby contributing to the formation of a national culture from the multi-cultural make-up of Eritrea.
- 14 At present there are two types of festivals in which cultural traditions are presented: a) the annual folk-fairs of the local regions or *zobas*, and b) the annual national festival held in the capital, Asmara, and known officially and popularly as Festival *Érətra*. The state used Festival *Érətra* as a political platform for bringing together musicians and dancers with their costumes and bodily ornaments representing the diverse Eritrean ethnic groups in order to forge a new sense of national consciousness and togetherness and as a forum for explaining policies of government and presenting issues of national development. In this regard, the state's cultural policy, in line with the six regional or *zoba*-based demarcation process of decentralisation, sees the preservation and reform of the country's multicultural traditions as decisively opposed to any foreign cultural imperialisms, and emphasises that local and regional folk-fairs and festivals are allowed to flourish if "unity in diversity" is the goal they cherish. This means that the *zoba* need for financial and organisational support becomes possible if local folk-fairs promote the development of interethnic interaction, national economic reconstruction and, as I show in what follows, the founding of new folk-fairs and festivals is not only thus motivated by local and regional political and economic interests, but the production and presentation of these live stage performances and material culture objects also enhances the political representation of local communities in the national political centre.
- 15 Festival *Érətra* is a traditional cultural event. From the early years of its inception it involved the presentation of traditional songs and dances of all the peoples of Eritrea and acted as a platform for ethnocultural affirmation. The only change now is that these traditional representations are interspersed with modern songs of professional artists accompanied by modern musical instruments. There is thus now more of commercial

competition and concern for audience consumption satisfaction through the sale of market produced goods and services within the festival *Expo* grounds than there was ever before when Eritreans from within and outside Asmara celebrated the festival by taking part in only the public presentation of traditional music and dances. In recent years, the festival ground has also featured *zoba*-based regional cuisines and privately operated business booths such as local restaurants, bars and *cafés* who rented mini spots on the festival grounds, advertised their consumable products in order to attract customers, and offered foods and beverages as well as some industrial products. During festival days, some stalls or booths in the festival grounds are thus devoted to the demonstration of various crafts. This gives visitors a sense of economic functioning involving a bazaar setting through the haggling or bargaining, and selling and buying of merchandise, leads to a better appreciation of the overall event, and adds colour to the incident rather than causing a detraction of spectators' attention from the festival operations.

- 16 The consumer component of the presentational foci of the festival has thus evolved to include material culture demonstrations and the preparation and consumption of ethnic foods in various restaurant stations. Apart from the music and dance presentations, and display of national costumes and bodily adornments, the culinary sections of the festival then included the smell of regional foods, and coffee brewing and incense burning indicating particular places of making and ritualistic setting. For example, a flesh food dish is made throughout Eritrea, but the way it is prepared and the spices used to season it vary from place to place; hence a competition in serving this dish in the festival ground determines not just the best recipe, but by extension, the best place where it is made and by whom it is made. Indeed, as noted by Mullaney (1983: 96), bazaars are part of a festival where the ethnography of commerce and entrepreneurial exchange is embedded in the sociology of a folk-fair event. Festival *Érətra* is therefore a composite folk-fair presentation of music and dances, foods, crafts and rituals, and other ceremonial traditions from a variety of Eritrean regions, and, by extension, an occasion that enhances national sentiments and cohesion. The Eritrean flag of varying sizes is posted throughout the festival grounds indicating that the symbols of the nation-state are a focus of the festival and not politically and culturally neutral.
- 17 Over the years Festival *Érətra* has been successful in terms of attraction and participation of artists and spectators. On the average the event is visited by no less than 500,000 guests per year. The admission price for the festival village is very nominal and that is perhaps one of the reasons why Festival *Érətra* draws thousands of spectators every year. The high rate of spectator attendance is also a commentary not only on local perceptions of the importance of national cultural shows but also on the relevance of the historic, symbolic and touristic content of the event. Moreover, the regional folk-fairs take place at randomly selected days outside the month of August in order to avoid potential competition with Festival *Érətra* for visitors from the capital and its surroundings, and since there is no co-occurrence of other major celebrations during the Festival *Érətra* season, festival visitors do not find themselves choosing or splitting their time between several events.
- 18 The members of the cultural troupes that are scheduled to perform at Festival *Érətra* are carefully selected at the *zoba* level by the office of regional administration based on their exemplary expertise in a particular cultural tradition presentation genre and recognition by community elders, and on the basis of a balance in geographic, ethnic, and linguistic representation of the Eritrean peoples. *Zoba* festival organisers tour about their region in



order to deepen their knowledge concerning local traditions, to ensure that root forms of cultural traditions are usually preferred to derived or evolved formats, but to also appeal to the local people to have a high regard for their own culture including commitment to the use of traditional musical instruments and to show cultural troupes how to perform on stages of city surroundings. Yet artists are given little systematic guidance on how to transform their everyday cultural traditions into a re-contextualised stage presentation. For example, musicians and dancers are simply asked to perform without prior preparation. From the very beginning there is potential for confusion, enculturation, and modernisation because artists are commissioned to represent their cultural traditions by relatively educated “experts” who have some set standards for cultural stage presentations.

- 19 The arrival of artists in Asmara is carefully planned in terms of lodging and habits of cooking and cuisine. Buses carrying festival participants come to the capital some three days ahead of the opening day. The marching into the *Expo* festival grounds displays a mix of traditional libations and modern accouterments. The *zoba* cultural troupe representatives and their members then paraded past government officials, diplomats, religious leaders, and the general public and stopped for a moment at the performers’ platform in a gesture of greeting the spectators on the day of the festival opening. In accordance with the usual tradition of the local ceremony of welcome, the chairperson of the National Celebrations Organising Committee (*haḡārawi awwāhahadi šəmagəllā bā’álat*) then gave the introductory speech and reiterated about the traditional meaning of Festival *Érətra*, partly to root the festival in the “unity in diversity” mentality of the Eritrean public in general and the people in attendance in particular, and to emphasise that Festival *Érətra* bridges cultural and linguistic differences between Eritreans and enhances their pride as a nation free from foreign cultural and linguistic domination.
- 20 In the *Expo* grounds in Asmara, these festive sequences of events are largely structured and accompanied by artistic contests leading to national *Raymoc* awards. The search for a share of the national resources through *Raymoc* proceeds imbibes encouragement principles by way of state redistribution practices and promotes peaceful relations in local politics *vis-à-vis* the central government. The articulation of cultural traditions thus lent emphasis on political and economic resources in which representatives upheld local and regional interests with the central government, and spectators from a particular ethnic group rallied behind their own *zoba* shows in search of such awards. It is now, for example, public knowledge that Festival *Érətra Gaš Barka* has become the best known regional folk-fair because of its vast agricultural resourcefulness, ethnic diverseness, and *zoba* leadership effectiveness. This has without coincidence increased its representation in government circles and encouraged several other *zobas* to open their own annual folk-fairs in order to score political points and claim economic resources from state treasures through presentation of cultural traditions and participation in national development projects. The success of such shows, types of prizes, nature of hospitality for artists and so on depend greatly on state resource allocations. Festival *Érətra* is not therefore only a means of making the local cultural traditions known to the local and diasporic Eritrean public, but it is also a form of local competition for political prestige, influence and economic resources emanating from state circles. For this reason, Festival *Érətra*’s preparation, the selection of the organising committee, and the program planning as a whole can become a ground for power contestation and tension between prospective

candidates who have their own ideas about the most desirable course of the festival events.

- 21 Festival *Érətra*, in a subtle but powerful way, also dramatises the relationship between festival organisers and the local cultural troupe representatives. The representatives are placed upfront with the music and dance artists in the background. They are charged with the task of introducing and contextualising the various cultural shows and serve as intermediaries between artists and spectators. The spectators' conclusions about what they are doing and what they are supposed to be doing in this novel situation, and the resulting stage performances emerge out of the spectators' own expectations, and past festival experiences, and are influenced by input from festival organisers and by the unfolding of the festival itself at the *Expo* grounds. Although there is public jubilation and enthusiasm about all these developments, and an overall excitement and assessment about material culture products remunerated through *Raymoc* proceeds, there is no jury that judges traditional regional musical compositions or dance steps. Instead choreography and popularity of music and dance shows are judged by the rise and fall of applause during stage presentations. Indeed, the success of such live performances is determined by the smoothness of the presentation from the standpoint of an audience reaction because many traditional artists are impressed with the tenacity of people who come to watch them, and try to come up with creative means to encourage and facilitate prolonged attention. At the same time, however, artists involved in continuous presentations soon became bored with repeated stage shows.
- 22 All aspects of Festival *Érətra*, ranging from the opening ceremonies and display of costumes to music and dance shows of different ethnic groups, are matters of controversy, subject to various interpretations and numerous innuendo of rumor mongers. Festival organisers, elite festival artists and spectators, businessmen, government officials, diplomats and tourists—all comment extensively during the days of the festival events and for weeks afterward and make comparisons with Festival *Érətra* in other years. The stage performances are all the time followed by aftermath dialogues, some supportive, others critically negative. It is these commentaries that actually influence the stage acts, but because not everyone sees the same performances, there are different comments on various cultural presentations. One of the primary reasons for going to the festival village is then to see the various indigenous cultural shows of the different Eritrean ethnic groups and to engage in the lively conversations about them that take place at various eating and drinking locations within the festival grounds. Artists, spectators, and other people in their festival finery come from inside and outside Asmara or Eritrea in anticipation of meeting family, friends and strangers and speaking to them in different languages. In a way, the festival village is the logistic, linguistic, touristic, acoustic, kinesthetic, dietetic, and symbolic centre of Festival *Érətra*. Part of my knowledge about the political dimensions of this very festival comes from such commentaries.
- 23 The specific programmes vary from year to year, but typically consist of the live musical and dance presentations accompanied by portrayal of traditional costumes and bodily adornments of the various Eritrean cultural groups. The ethno-musical presentations and dance performances are the most eagerly anticipated events of Festival *Érətra*. Because of their central place in the festival calendar and their status as the most important events, they attract the attention and participation of a large number of individual or crowd supporters among spectators so much so that festival organizers not only always believed

that without traditional live musical presentations the spirit of the festival would decline and that visitor participation and by extension revenues would be low, but that most Eritreans also considered them as the legitimate forums for national identity formation. Apart from the selected song and dance performances, oral poetry readings and theatrical presentations, Festival *Érətra*, as noted earlier, is also articulated and complemented through the traditional costumes and bodily adornments of artist and spectator participants. These consist of the woven cotton clothes (*kədan habāša*) of the Təgrəñña, the cotton cloth shorts and shelled anklets of the Kunama, the long robes (*jallabiya*) and colourful waist coats of the Muslim Saho, Təgrā, Rashaayda, Hədarəb, and the Nara, the brightly colored wraparound skirts of the 'Affar, and the richly decorated and embroidered head-dresses, and nose and ear rings of the Bilin. Within the general public, men come around in European style casuals while women's clothing varies from Victorian-like dresses to colourful assortment of traditional costumes ranging from cotton loincloth (*zurəya*) to wraparounds (*ləwəyāt*). In contrast, many members of the government appear in the popular 'political suit', namely the short-sleeved *sarəyan* safari shirt and trousers, reminiscent of army fatigues or military uniforms. Although festival artists and participants can wear things of their liking, ethnic group and religious affiliations or loyalties are sometimes expressed through cultural clothing.

- 24 Presentation plans of the festival called for participation and collaboration of both performers and organisers and both developed an appreciation of each other's artistic contributions and perspectives on their own crafts. During rest periods, festival artists took snack breaks, moved around and did errands, changed clothing for different presentations and left for and came back from lavatories while spectators wandered and drifted in and around live stage performance places. The general public milled about everywhere in the festival grounds and many a times encroached the circles occupied by traditional artists. Musicians and dancers from diverse Eritrean ethnic groups offered their various talents to bring to life not only the festival but also their status as an ethnic and linguistic community within a national Eritrean society<sup>7</sup>. These traditional artists usually give three to four formal presentations per day during the festival weeks. While most main-stage musical presentations are highly amplified and can often be heard all over and beyond the festival fences at the *Expo* grounds, they all articulated the national sentiments of Eritreans and their catchy chorus sometimes tempted audience members to sing and dance along. Eritreans thus signaled their sense of national affiliation by taking part in Festival *Érətra*'s presentation of regional cultural songs and dances.
- 25 In general, the festival village is a live microcosm presentation and a cross-current glimpse on the cultural traditions of all Eritrean ethnic groups. In such a festival environment, Hədarəb singers, for example, sang about heroic hunts, Bilin or Təgrəñña couples depicted courtship dances, Saho women gathered in preparation for marital relations, Rashaayda men displayed competitive lance dances, Təgrā musicians sang birth rite songs welcoming newborns while Kunama and Nara dancers demonstrated the importance of the harvest season. In a way, then, this annual festival provides Asmarinos, other Eritrean residents, overseas Eritreans, and foreign tourists the chance to know and learn about the larger social and cultural foundations of the various Eritrean ethnic groups, educates the culturally illiterate Eritrean diasporic and touristic audiences, and calls upon the concepts of cultural diversity and national unity across regions and continents. The live performances themselves present a comparative perspective by bringing together Eritreans from different cultural groups who wear different costumes,

display varied bodily decorations, speak different languages, profess different religions, and play similar or different string, wind and percussion musical instruments. This reveals that Festival *Érətra* is significant because it is an event deployed in cultural, economic, religious, and political negotiations pertaining to regional resource allocation, cultural conservation, and national identity formation.

#### Festival *Érətra* As Cultural Conservation

- 26 Festival *Érətra* is a political arena but it is also a site for the production and conservation of ethno-cultural traditions. Although these two aspects are closely intertwined, the official publicised face of the festival is cultural, not political. In this respect, questions pertaining to ethnicity, linguistic identity, and religious affinity that make its voice heard in the national political arena are mediated by the creation and conservation of a common culture. The conservation of this commonly shared cultural heritage includes the invention of Eritrean traditions by way of museums and folk-fairs and festivals. In Eritrea, as elsewhere I am sure, museum material culture objects find their way into walls and shelves removed from makers and viewers. Usually the people who make or made these material culture objects are not included in exhibitions, instead such objects are frozen representations of people disarticulated from their cultural contexts. Festival *Érətra* is distinguished from these museum exhibitions in its unification of object and context, pleasure and utility, meaning and audience, and more importantly, in terms of presentation and preservation of live cultures. It provides a dynamic environment that is at odds with generic museum exhibitions because Festival *Érətra* is more participatory and oriented towards action and live presentation. This makes Festival *Érətra* a “living museum” without walls that symbolically constructs popular images of the Eritrean national culture by legitimating selected aspects of vernacular culture drawn from the different Eritrean ethnic groups, and by serving as an instrument of cultural preservation through the aesthetic transmission of messages of tradition via stage presentations.
- 27 For both artists and spectators, Festival *Érətra*'s activities meant cultural demonstration, instruction, exhibition, conservation, identity formation, and enjoyment<sup>8</sup>. Indeed stage performances are framed as cultural demonstrations because the presenters introduce the performances by talking about the culture the traditional artists come from, which is precisely the sort of information that would lead to the promotion of cultural conservation. Thus live cultural presentations demand communicative competence subject to evaluation well and beyond their informational content because stage artists talk, sing, and act in front of an audience. For the most part, both artists and spectators enjoy their involvement, get increasingly caught up in the mood and spirit of the event, and demonstrate pride in their heritage by taking part in the music and dance stage presentations. For artists, Festival *Érətra* is conceptualised in a way different from that in which it is perceived by spectators and organisers because for them the very existence of the stage presentations, rather than the texts, constituted their most compelling political content. For organisers, festival semantics, rather than pragmatics, are fore-grounded with attention focused on stage preparation and audio installation, while for spectators it is a show and entertainment that taught them about Eritrean cultural traditions. In general, cultural troupes coming from the different regions of Eritrea perceived themselves as keeping alive valued traditions and felt proud of their status as representatives of their own cultural heritage which they expressed through stage song and dance presentations, and display of costumes and bodily adornments.

- 28 Festival *Érətra* operates on an underlying philosophy of respect for and cooperation between diverse cultural groups. Several artists who come back to the festival year after year do so because they strive on forming close bonds among themselves and with others. In some cases, this created a reunion of old friends both within and across ethnic groups. If there were perceived embarrassments and infelicities, they faded away with the passing of time. Many talked about the cultural education received from the different Eritrean ethnic groups. Others reiterated the vicarious enjoyment they received from the validation of the importance of their cultural traditions, and that they felt very good about being able to make fellow Eritreans and foreigners alike happy through live performances, not to speak about the prestige artists felt due to their invitation to the festival itself. Still others had gotten used to each other so well that they felt comfortable to articulate their views on the differences between their real rural songs and dances and the stage presentations at the festival grounds. Overall the greater in-depth cultural knowledge derived from the festival and the long-term acquaintance created among artists and spectators contributed to the positive experiences of the festival and thereby led to the preservation of cultural traditions.
- 29 In some respects, Festival *Érətra* represents the whole by the part<sup>9</sup> because it offers a unique social platform that gives a glimpse of the larger Eritrean cultures. The curatorial or conservatorial concern is directed toward these larger living cultural traditions from which the stage performances are generated. This empowers Festival *Érətra* as an institution that publicly confers legitimacy to cultural values and in the festival context enacts their cultural curation or preservation in the various regions of Eritrea. It is in this regard that Festival *Érətra* is considered as an experience of cultural conservation and a moment that offers all participants both visual and sensual events within which knowledge about diverse Eritrean cultures and the pleasure of play are interwoven and arguably more appropriately understood in completion than when considered in isolation. In this event, many spectators discovered artistic traditions and life-ways unknown to them, and led some of them to join hands with folk artists in folk dances and other intimate personal involvements through gift exchanges. Similarly, younger Eritrean spectators became more interested in their cultural traditions, traditions about which they new little while experienced Eritrean diasporic community members carried over their observations and reminiscences to overseas fellow Eritreans who have never been exposed to the festival before.
- 30 State encouragement of festival song and dance presentations gave value to the aesthetic and cultural production of folk artists, and acted as a counter-balance to the tremendous weight of commercial forms, exogenous influences, and other factors that by and large devalue and de-legitimate the skills and knowledge of traditional artists. Festival *Érətra* is thus dictated by acrimonious dialogues and debates about commitment to cultural conservation and crafted as an event within which Eritrea's cultural traditions come to the forefront, and where, as Halton (1981: 49) argues, people and their cultural expressions are contained by a type of symbolic representation, and where musical narratives and dance compositions are abstracted from their usual local cultural text and injected into a national context. A dance, for example, becomes a symbol of a larger performance, in itself a symbol of a larger community, culture or country. It is in this very sense that Festival *Érətra* provides space and facilities for the expression of symbols and demonstration of the arts, and extends them far beyond these spaces where traditional artists from diverse ethnic groups became symbols of themselves, other

Eritrean cultures or Eritrea itself. Their representation of other members of the Eritrean community, and community culture more generally was understood as a representation of larger traditions, larger communities, or larger cultural and national bodies. These representations and the events and actions they engendered are exciting, rich and memorable because it is in and through them that a “national culture” (*bahələna*) is being created in a way that gave value to the local or regional traditions.

- 31 In sum, Festival *Érətra* provides cultural products, legitimates beliefs and cultural practices, generates and articulates symbols and statements by which communities represent themselves, averts the problems of paying too little attention to any other Eritrean ethnic group unless it is one that one already knows, highlights the care needed for cultures other than one’s own, and eliminates the understanding that everyone in the world thinks and acts in the same way thereby increasing awareness of and tolerance to each other’s cultures. Festival *Érətra* is therefore a concentrated and carefully choreographed and directed reproduction and representation of diverse cultural practices projected through a national forum for the performing arts. These are then some of Festival *Érətra*’s ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the ways in which folk artists, organisers and spectators define the festival event in terms of preservation of local cultural traditions and contextualisation of identity formation of a nation.

#### Local Culture in The National Context

- 32 Regional or *zoba* cultural troupes appear at the festival as communities representing Eritrean national groups where each cultural troupe is seen in terms of a relatively wide ranging repertoire that generates national entities from local identities. Each local performance genre is therefore reinterpreted and redefined by national concerns, and the public presentation of songs and dances does have an impact on local cultural awareness creation and on ideas about the formation of a “national culture” (Neve 2000: 511). In other words, the musical and dance stage presentations and the display of diverse ethnic costumes and bodily adornments are not only consistent with local and regional cultural features that Festival *Érətra* seeks to represent, but they are also a cultural amplification of an Eritrean national identity formation that draws upon the building blocks and dynamics of local traditions in which scheduled, heightened and participatory events as well as symbolically resonant local cultural goods are placed on public display in order to underscore the political and economic meanings and social underpinnings of “unity in diversity” and national identity.
- 33 Festival *Érətra* is a temporary stage presentation place for the formulation and reflection of Eritrea’s national cultural space. The complexity and contingency of the contemporary and historical experiences that ground Eritrean identity and the need to use a term such as *Eritreans* then refer to the enactments and negotiations of national identity that take place within the symbolic and expressive milieus of festival presentation, competitions, and the links of politics and economics that construct the Eritrean nation from local cultural traditions. As traditional artists and spectators negotiate their positions in relation to the representational content of Festival *Érətra* events, they compare them with the positions of other participants. For example, allowing all the *zoba* music and dance presentations to take place at prominent locations within the festival grounds is a strategy to counter the suspicion of cultural superiority of some music and dance groups, and by the same explanation of some ethnic and linguistic groups. In this sense, Festival *Érətra* conjoins a representational cultural politics that consolidates national power positions.

- 34 If Festival *Érətra* is about what it means to be Eritrean, then the themes of unity and diversity constitute a sense of what Eritrea is and means to the context of the historical developments of the liberation struggle, and what it stood and still stands for as a local appeal for unity in a society that has experienced social and political upheavals and economic transformations. The participation of all the nine ethnic groups reflects the “unity in diversity” strategy adopted by the state of Eritrea and serves to consolidate a sense of membership and pride in a pan-Eritrean identity (*mānnənnātəna hadənnātəna*). More generally, festival-induced experiences of unity enhance every individual’s sense of personal civility within a given community (Errington 1987: 63) where the image of Eritreans as a colourful people puts into play ethnic and national harmony. Festival *Érətra* is thus influenced by the presence of a real and an imagined national audience embodied by local and diasporic Eritreans, and that is perhaps why cultural differences between the various ethnic groups emerge in a national framework, even when the expressive and material culture is of local and regional origin.
- 35 Festival *Érətra* is also an occasion that allows the different Eritrean peoples to come together for a fortnight of partying and merry-making, and hence a time-out from the tensions of negotiating people’s positions in a society of multi-ethnic setting. In fact, Festival *Érətra* provides a ground for the expression and negotiation of regional, national, and international concerns of Eritreans residing within and outside the country, and serves as a platform for the interaction of individuals with different opinions about state “unity in diversity” policy matters. Since these themes of “unity in diversity” are invoked in the cultural spheres of symbols and meanings through political negotiations and competition among regional cultural presentations, and because the cultural and political spheres are always intersecting, Festival *Érətra* is also an occasion for political commentary on the notion of “unity in diversity” in relation to nation or country. This notion of a unified national identity not only therefore transcended regional cultural traditions, but also drew on the idea of a fundamental tie to a native land embedded in Eritrea as a nation.
- 36 Finally, the massive media focus on these stage events, and on crowds consisting of local and diaspora Eritreans, diplomats and foreign tourists, and government and non-government personages all entailed recognition of the richness of Eritrea’s traditional heritage and cultural achievements, gave rise to a great deal of cultural creativity, and lent legitimacy to a magnified sense of national identity and unity. Festival *Érətra* thus provided occasions for artists and spectators to both ethnically and nationally express themselves as Eritreans. But each presentation is also assessed largely in terms of its success as a form of entertainment in which people participated directly, watched and judged the presentations, and interacted with the formally staged cultural enactments. As a venue for national representation Festival *Érətra* also illuminated official notions of political and cultural legitimacy by emphasising the national images of Eritreans as festive and friendly, by pointing out the ethnic and cultural attributes that made Eritrea a plural society, by providing occasions for the expression of social and political positions of artists and spectators, and by challenging the notion of singular or parochial portrayals of ethnic affinities and religio-linguistic loyalties in favour of “national” ideals.
- 37 Festival *Érətra* constitutes the complexities of Eritrean national identity and cultural continuity inherent in folk-fairs and festivals. It disseminates cultural understanding in popular form, promotes the artistic and aesthetic values of the various Eritrean ethnic groups, creates a public forum for cultural criticism, and provides raw materials for stage

presentations of Eritrean cultural traditions through musical and dance shows, and portrayal of regional costumes and bodily adornments that are rapidly receding in public memory. In other words, Festival *Érətra* is, among other things, a live cultural collection and documentation of these memories in the wake of increasing globalisation. Given the gradual destruction of various Eritrean traditional ways of life, including those of minorities, the Festival *Érətra* folk-fair strategy is all the more important and relevant in the conservation of cultural traditions and construction of national identity perspectives. Festival *Érətra* is not therefore only about government attempts to popularise official policy enshrined in “unity in diversity” while regional or *zoba* representatives claim economic projects for their communities, but it is also a public place and a symbolic space in which local and regional cultural identities are negotiated and given national colour by the country. The ways in which ethnic group cultural distinctions are expressed at Festival *Érətra* thus always have national and international dimensions, even if the material and expressive culture is of local and regional origin. These cultural and political representations facilitate the continuation of local and regional traditions and the construction of the identity of the Eritrean nation.

- 38 Festival *Érətra* brings attention to cultural conservation because it generates useful rhetoric and discussion about heritage management and elicits promises of support for the preservation of cultural “objects”. It is these sorts of developments that have led to the formation of plans for the establishment of folk-fairs and festivals at the regional and community levels. At present, Festival *Érətra* is a mammoth annual affair everywhere, and folk-fairs of the various regions or *zobas* are scaled-down versions of it. Its success in Asmara has, for example, given rise to its beginning in *Gaš Barka* and elsewhere. The yearly *Fānqəl* Festival in Massawa and now the much more recent 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of *Naqfa* and the National Youth Festival in *Sawwa* too appear to have a folk-fair character. The fact that Festival *Érətra* also takes place in various Near Eastern, European, North American, and, as of late, Australian cities is indicative of the conceptualisation of a diasporic national identity, at least in some circumstances, and points to one of the many ways in which post-colonial Eritreans analyse their place and space in the world.
- 39 Today, Festival *Érətra* is a vastly different event than the Bologna-based annual festivity from which it does emanate. One notes, for example, a shift from the captivating and moving stage introductions by artist-combatants like *wāddi Fāraday* and *Lingo* that during the struggle for liberation gave Eritrean spectators in Bologna rushes of joy by providing the latest information about battle-ground (*méda*) military victory over enemy lines, or moments of mourning and lamentation through drama presentations and folk songs such as *sāssənu sāssənu šəhən waltan kunu atta z’addəna kayy’atwo gwana* “flourish and become a thousand and a shield so strangers won’t come into our ‘country’” or *wārhi wāšāt sālāl n’addāyā sālāl n’addāy wārhi wāšāt sālāl n’addāyā sālāl n’addāy* “the moon is coming out and I shall smoothly step into my ‘country’, the moon is coming out and I shall smoothly step into my ‘country’” to a now more Asmara-based centralised stage presentations involving local songs, dances, regional material culture exhibits, ethnic cuisine sales, expressive and popular culture competitions, and industrial product fairs. The contemporary celebration of Festival *Érətra* therefore points to the contingency of local cultural activity within the larger project of constructing national identity and the “unity in diversity” ideologies that have shaped and continue to shape it in a modern commercial setting.



- 40 The traditional artists not only in some literal way recreated regional cultural life in this annual national folk-fair, and events and actions then engendered are rich, exciting and memorable, but also it is in and through them that festival culture is being created in away that gives value to regional culture and national character. Traditional artists are not thus acting out some ethnographic script created by festival organisers. Rather, regional cultural ideas assume national symbolic positions in light of varied social interactions occasioned by festival events (Basch *et al.* 1994: 83). In a way the festival encouraged artists to speak for themselves and other community members, and as such it extended their cultural repertoire far beyond the terrain of the festival grounds. Therefore, Festival *Érətra* emblematises the feeling of nationalism with which Eritreans live, legitimates local values, customs, traditions, and beliefs, and generates symbols and articulates statements by which communities represent themselves in a national context. Festival *Érətra* thus links Eritreans to not only kin and friends within and outside ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries but to also state structures that reach out to them in order to create some sense of national identity by de-emphasising ethnicity while respecting cultural diversity. This emanates from the character of the Eritrean state as a nationalist institution, the continuation of its “will to have a nation” (Cliffe 1988: 91), and from its use of folk-fairs and festivals as a political strategy for promoting national identity and down-playing ethnicity, regional territory, linguistic affinity and religious loyalty. In a way then the Eritrean nation exists not just because there is a political institution called government but also because of social arrangements and cultural occasions such as Festival *Érətra* that construct the nation across ethnicities and regional boundaries by re-configuring differences and reimagining identities.
- 41 The very idea of having Festival *Érətra* is also important because it brings attention to the need for cultural production, generates useful rhetoric about multiculturalism and multilingualism among different Eritrean ethnic and linguistic groups, and stimulates promises of support for the upkeep of “dying” or threatened national cultures. For this reason festival participants expressed their pleasure and pride about having a yearly festival whose success has led to the establishment of various regional folk-fairs. The festival is not thus a diversion from the regional reality but a tool for the presentation and preservation of cultural diversity within an Eritrean national entity. The high volume acclaim of the festival may convince the Eritrean state of the viability of such cultural presentations in international marketing, and I am thinking of, for example, Hədarəb or ‘Affar high jump dancing. The verbal, musical, kinesthetic, and material artistry of these two ethnic groups is exemplary and grounded in the indigenous livelihoods of Eritrean societies. The attempt to establish such regional folk-fairs and the heightened awareness of the worth of festivals as cultural conservation and national identity formation in Eritrea is a step forward in the realisation of these directions and speaks loudly to the possible fulfilment of these aspirations.
- 42 If Eritrean cultures are to be conserved, they must live. They can be frozen in time and preserved by museums, anthropologists, folklorists or historians. For Eritrean cultures to live, however, their bearers must be empowered to practice those cultures. In this respect, Festival *Érətra* is a microcosmical curatorial course for the preservation and conservation of Eritrean cultural practices through indigenous live performances. In a way, local and regional cultural traditions are brought to Festival *Érətra* to take on national metaphors and symbols emanating from social interactions and contacts of participants occasioned by live cultural presentations of the festival itself. The indigenous

live stage performances themselves become a field for the practice of cultural conservation where the cultures of the traditional artists and the communities they represent are played out in multicultural and multilingual ways and the reality of their stage presentations is continually negotiated through actions and events bringing local and regional cultural juxtapositions and identity formation at the level of the nation.

- 43 In a world of growing globalisation and the drive toward cultural homogenisation (Appadurai 1990: 53), Eritrean folk-fairs and festivals, including the folk-fair nature of Christian and Muslim saintly pilgrimages<sup>10</sup>, need to stand somewhere. There are good reasons for Eritrean folk-fairs and festivals to be advocates of “unity in diversity” and promoters of cultural continuity. But even for no other reason than insuring against the day when all festival presentations will of necessity look alike (Corr 2003: 46), Eritrean folk-fairs and festivals would be important and relevant in perpetuating the country’s cultural heritage and in serving as a vehicle for the construction and preservation of national identity. The complexities revealed in constitutions of Eritrean national identity although resolved by live stage cultural presentations are continually challenged by the forces of unity and difference and shifting possibilities of affiliation and transformation where questions of formation of identity of the nation move between the effects of ethnographic description and the multiple meanings residing in cultural representations, and in the connections and contradictions between these representations and ongoing social, political and economic developments in Eritrea.
- 44 Why, then have Festival *Érətra*? First and foremost, Festival *Érətra* increases awareness of and tolerance to the existence of other cultures, languages, and religions, encourages tourism and building up of new markets or business opportunities for cultural products, and creates a forum for dialogue between rural and urban, regional and national, and foreign and local cultural constituencies. Since local development, tourism and heritage management are very closely interconnected, the desire for cultural conservation and national identity formation may be increasingly influential in shaping the ways in which Eritreans represent themselves. In order to perpetuate the indigenous character of Eritrean cultures through the performing arts it may be important to involve the private sector, non-government outlets and community organisations. Financial support received from these sources would make Eritrean cultures better known both among strangers and familiars and indeed among Eritreans themselves. It is too early to say what will develop, but, as indicated previously, there are signs of expansion in the direction of at least regional folk-fairs and international festivals.
- 45 Eritrea is frequently been reported in the world media as a wartorn and drought-stricken country. Folk-fairs and festivals here or overseas may but be one of the ways to change this imagery. Since there is a widespread but largely latent interest of foreigners in Eritrea based on their experience with the large number of Eritreans in the Near East, Europe, North America, and Australia, future folk-fairs and festivals may exploit serendipitous stage circumstances to enhance national cultural development projects. The growth of the many programmes of Festival *Érətra* has created public relations opportunities that may increase the impact on a number and variety of events around the live cultural stage shows and other material culture presentations and provide an occasion to attract a great many visitors or spectators. Finally, it may not be possible to resolve the many misunderstandings that exist among the different Eritrean peoples, but it is possible to ask for more cultural tolerance to and awareness of one another through folk-fairs and festivals.

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## NOTES

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1. Eritrea, a multicultural society consisting of nine ethnic groups, has an estimated population of 4,000,000 people ninety percent of whom are rural peasants and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. Here, the 'Affar, who are a Muslim Cushitic speaking semi-nomadic pastoralists practicing some fishing and trading, inhabit the Red Sea coastal lands that stretch from ṭi'ó to 'Asāb in the south-eastern region of Eritrea now administratively called *zoba Dābubawi Qāyyəḥ Bahri*. While the Saho, a predominantly Muslim Cushitic speaking people inhabiting some coastal lands in *zoba Dobubawi Qāyyəḥ Bahri* and the southern highlands in *zoba Dābub* of Eritrea, engage in nomadic pastoralism, the Rashaayda, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Arab Muslim migrants from the other side of the Red Sea and the least integrated Eritrean ethnic group because of Arab origin and Islamic religion, practice nomadic pastoralism and engage in trade and commerce in the northern coastal plateaux region of Eritrea now called *zoba Sāmənawi Qāyyəḥ Bahri*. The north-western Eritreo-Sudanese frontier highlands of *zoba Gaš Barka* are occupied by the Cushitic speaking nomadic pastoralists known as Hədarəb while the *Gaš-Barka-Sātīt* River region of western and south-western Eritrea is settled by the Nilotic hoe-based agriculturalists called Kunama and Nara. The former are predominantly Christian while the latter are exclusively Muslim. The Bilin, a Cushitic speaking agriculturalists living in the *zoba 'Ansāba* region of south-central Eritrea, consist of both Christians and Muslims. More than seventy-five percent of Eritrea's population is made up of the Təgrəñña and the Təgra. The former, who live in the central (*zoba Ma'əkāl*) and southern (*zoba Dābub*) regions of Eritrea, are mostly sedentary agriculturalists raising some livestock during the rainy season in the highlands (*kābāsa*) and during the dry season in the lowlands (*qolla or bahri*). They are mainly Christians with a trader and weaver Muslim minority known as Jābārti. The Təgra are partly Christian and partly Muslim semi-nomadic pastoralists who practice

some agriculture in the northern (*zoba Sāménawi Qāyyəh Bahri*) and western (*zoba Gaš Barka* and *zoba 'Ansāba*) hills of Eritrea.

2. Although my principal focus is the yearly events of Festival *Érətra* at the Expo grounds in Asmara, I also draw on fieldwork done in Bologna and *Gaš Barka*. The analysis of this research is therefore based on data collected at and in connection with Festival *Érətra* 1990 and 1991 (Bologna), Festival *Érətra* 1995, 1997, 1999 and 2000 (Asmara) and the regional folk-fair that took place in 2001 in *Gaš Barka*. The selection of consultants—a core group of 36 male and female festival participants including artists, festival organisers and spectators—with whom I worked was a systematic sample that involved key and ordinary consultants. I met them formally and informally during the actual celebrations. In Asmara, I documented the live cultural presentations of the various Eritrean ethnic groups, interacted with artists, their representatives, and spectators on a daily basis, and conducted interviews with them about their impressions of the festival. This article represents an anthropological analysis of these field notes, and in line with the critical casts and theoretical underpinnings of LAVINE (1987), KARP (1991) and many others, it examines festivals as forms of cultural representation and national identity formation. The only study on Festival *Érətra* (TABACCO *et al.* 2001) is not a classic ethnographic account of the festival that took place in Bologna during the years of the liberation struggle and nor is it a report of its various rituals and native interpretation of the oral genres and narratives that were produced for stage performances. It doesn't, for example, show how local and national identity and the politics of it is constructed through participation in folkfairs and festivals. It is hoped that the article will modestly bridge these canyons in Eritrean studies of folk-fairs and festivals.

3. In the context of this article, a folk-fair or festival is a programme that primarily brings together a people's past and present cultural traditions and concentrates them around a given ground of stage shows and material culture presentations.

4. Ivan KARP (1991) is perhaps the first anthropologist to assert that museums and folk-fairs or festivals are contested fields. I have used this conceptualisation extensively and benefited from it immensely in understanding visual displays of cultural traditions through live stage performances. I am particularly indebted to the provocative formulations and insights in his ground breaking study about the role of festivals in cultural representation and identity formation.

5. This is most evident and apparent in current responses to “border” conflicts with Ethiopia, political problems with the Sudan, and claims to rights over some islands in the Red Sea with Yemen.

6. From its inception in 1984, Festival *Érətra* was the only forum for cultural representation of all the nine Eritrean ethnic groups. Organised under the aegis of the National Celebrations Organising Committee (*hagārawi awwāhahadi šəmagəllā bā'álat*), the Asmara Festival *Érətra*, as a continuation of Festival *Érətra* in Bologna during the liberation struggle, has been in the making at the Expo grounds since 1993. Until the introduction of artistic contests and material culture presentations into the festival calendar of events in the same year, the musical, dance and drama shows reflecting the national independence struggle were the premier social events of the Bologna-based Festival *Érətra* stages. These days, the Bologna festival tradition continues to be carried out in cities like Riyadh, Rome, Stuttgart, Amsterdam, Stockholm, London, Washington D.C., Seattle, Toronto, and Sydney where there are Eritrean diasporic populations. Many envision that Festival *Érətra* will very soon also have continental visibility at NAFAF, PANAFEST, FESPAC or FESTAC in Africa.

7. Many argued that regional musical shows attracted the large majority of the visitors and that therefore cultural troupes deserved a share of the festival profits. So far only selected *zoba* material culture presentations receive encouragement awards in the form of government grants.

8. But a festival is, in its very essence, also set apart from the workaday world because it is a form of play or an “everyday holiday”, to use the phrase of KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT (1990: 146).

9. Stage shows cut across geographic, ethnic, and religious boundaries, and hence they favoured cultural holism over particularism.

10. There is an urgent need to study the folk-fair and festival character of Christian and Muslim saintly holidays and their associated pilgrimage celebrations. See, for example, L OEW (2003).

## ABSTRACTS

The state of Eritrea<sup>1</sup> promotes folk-fairs and festivals in order to facilitate its “unity in diversity” policy, and create communal interaction and cohesion among its peoples. These regional and national folk-fairs and festivals provide a ground for interaction between local communities and the state in which local communities expect economic benefits from the state and, conversely, the state attempts to popularise its policies of cultural pluralism or tolerance to multiculturalism by encouraging the articulation of local cultural traditions in terms of national integration. The staging of local culture therefore always has a national dimension, even when the expressive and material culture is of local origin, and can be an important factor in cultural conservation and national identity formation. The article looks at how state policy fosters national unity while respecting cultural diversity using the annual Festival *Ératra* as a case in point.

*Fêtes populaires et festivals. Préservation culturelle et formation de l'identité nationale en Érythrée.*

– L'État d'Érythrée promeut les fêtes populaires et les festivals afin de mettre en œuvre sa politique d'« unité dans la diversité » et de créer l'interaction et la cohésion dans la population. Ces manifestations régionales et nationales offrent un terrain d'interaction entre les communautés locales et l'État où celles-là attendent des bénéfices économiques de celui-ci et, inversement, où l'État tente de rendre populaires ses politiques de pluralisme culturel et de tolérance en encourageant l'articulation de traditions culturelles locales pour réaliser l'intégration nationale. La mise en scène de la culture locale a donc toujours une dimension nationale et peut avoir un impact important sur la préservation culturelle et la formation d'une identité nationale. Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont l'État promeut l'unité nationale en s'appuyant sur l'exemple du festival Eratra.

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**Mots-clés:** identité nationale, national identity, Érythrée, préservation culturelle, fêtes populaires, festival

**Keywords:** Eritrea, conservation cultural, folk-fairs



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