

# When Migration Becomes the Norm

## *Ingredients of an Ordinary Crisis*

Refugee flows do not always originate in areas of violent crisis. They are sometimes, indeed frequently, rooted in countries marked by decades of social, political, and economic deprivation. In these contexts, migration is rarely a traumatic novelty, but rather a multigenerational experience and an everyday reality. Geographic mobility is the norm, not only because it is recurrent in people's lives, but also because it assumes a crucial symbolic, moral, and socioeconomic role in the organization of society. Eritrea is one of these cases.

The study of voluntary migration has usually documented the socioeconomic and cultural transformation produced by long-term migration under the heading of "culture of migration." However, scholars have rarely considered how migration can become a normalized experience even in areas from which refugees originate. By "normalized," I do not mean to say that it is not tragic or problematic. Instead, I want to point to the abilities of individuals, groups, and communities living in chronic crisis to reorganize their living by imagining and pursuing a possibility of life elsewhere. Following Henrik Vigh's definition of "crisis as a context"—that is to say "a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration,"<sup>1</sup> I describe the process of routinization of suffering, hardships, and risks among my informants. At the same time, I account for their ongoing efforts to make sense of their everyday lives by imagining the outside world as a place of hope and achievements.

In contexts such as the Eritrean one, marked by a stagnant economy, political stasis, it is crucial not only to account for the everyday violence experienced by different individuals in the past and in the present, but also for their dreams, desires, and aspirations for the future. Since the lack of positive motivations to leave the homeland has been considered one of the defining features of refugees compared with voluntary migrants, the cultural and moral mechanisms underpinning their migration have typically been neglected by scholars. However, these aspects, I argue, are crucial for understanding mobility from areas of protracted crisis. Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork in Eritrea, this chapter shows how conventional push factors are tangled with social, moral, and symbolic features that encourage and direct emigration. Here I develop the idea of cosmologies of destinations, not only as socially shared geographic imaginaries, but also as a set of moral obligations and expectations that tie migrants to their immobile kinship circles.

#### A LAND OF MARTYRS AND MIGRANTS

When I visited Eritrea in 2013, the visual references to war were still omnipresent in the landscape. Rusty old tanks lay overturned on the side of the road or in the middle of dry, stony fields. The massive deforestation carried out in the 1980s has left hills naked, with a few sporadic trees. People in the countryside still were holding old Kalashnikovs to shoot hyenas or to fire a few shots during marriage celebrations. As a reminder of the defeat of the *Derg* and the magnitude of the struggle, old Ethiopian warplanes were parked in the middle of Asmara's public gardens.

Thirty years of war have had a huge impact on the country and its inhabitants. Not only has Eritrea arguably never fully recovered, but its people still painfully feel their private losses. All the families I met during my fieldwork had to face the death of at least one beloved family member during the struggle, as well as the absence abroad of many others. "In every Eritrean family, there has been at least one martyr and one migrant," Eritreans told me whenever I asked if they had relatives elsewhere in the world. The Eritrean family who welcomed me for over two months in Asmara was no exception.

When I decided to move to Eritrea after having conducted research in Italy for several months, I asked to my Eritrean friends and informants if they could give me contacts among their families or friends there. Some of them were reluctant to do so,<sup>2</sup> but others did not hesitate to help me. Twenty-eight-year-old Gabriel was incredulous—likely thinking *why does this girl want to go to a place from which I did my best to escape?*—but suggested that I could be his family's guest in Asmara. Gabriel had been my guide for a few months in Porta Venezia, the neighborhood historically inhabited by Eritreans in Milan. When Gabriel phoned Ester, his aunt in Eritrea from a call center in Porta Venezia, she seemed initially worried to have a stranger in her place, but I was ultimately welcomed.



FIGURE 1. Mixed traffic in Asmara (photo by the author, 2013)



FIGURE 2. Road in Asmara (photo by the author, 2013)

Asmara is not one of the chaotic capitals typical of developing countries today. It has around three-quarters of a million inhabitants. Cars are not very numerous and streets are not very noisy. Old red buses run alongside well-dressed people walking along the tidy central avenue of the city center—Godena Harnet (or Freedom Avenue)—and drink *macchiato* in the famous cafés around the majestic cathedral built during Italian colonization. Little of the everyday hardship of the country and its people can be guessed at first sight. Moving to the peripheries of the city where Ester's house was located, however, those material and inner hardships were more evident. As in many other neighborhoods, our district of Petrosia was experiencing continuous power cuts and water shortages. Early in the morning, a long queue of women wrapped in their *nezelas* (traditional cotton shawls) and young boys and girls would stand with big bright blue barrels and rusty metal ones waiting for the municipal water truck.

Five residents occupied the house where I spent almost three months: Ester, the fifty-year-old head of the family; her late husband's father, Baba; her younger sister, Saba; her twenty-four-year-old daughter, Salam; and Lwam, Gabriel's sister, who had come to Asmara to do the compulsory military training of Ministry of Agriculture employees. My everyday life in Asmara was divided between the time I spent at home chatting with Baba, Saba, and Ester, and home visits to other informants' families. The rest of day I hung out with Salam, Lwam, their friends, and other young Eritreans. Getting to know them and their stories, I soon realized the extent of the impact of war and displacement on their intimate family history.

Ester had moved to Ethiopia to attend school as a teenager, but after twenty years there, she, her husband, their three kids, and the grandfather were forcibly returned to Eritrea at the start of the 1998–2000 war.<sup>3</sup> Most of Ester's siblings had also been migrants. Her older brother had gone to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s; Saba had worked in the Gulf for ten years before returning in the late 1990s to take care of Ester and her displaced family. Ester's older sister had migrated to Ethiopia and from there to Germany, where she still lived with her children. Some among Ester's siblings had instead remained to fight for national independence. "We were so hungry and our bare feet were bleeding, but we had to walk across the mountain to escape our enemies!" Candle, Ester's sister, and ex-*tegadelit* (female partisan), told us once during a visit. Their eldest brother had died in the war.

Displacement due to war characterized not only the family's past—it was an ordinary aspect of my hosts' present as well. Ester's son had escaped a few years before to Angola. Her nephew, my friend Gabriel, was already in Milan. Salam and Lwam were constantly planning their departures. This was common among the families I met in Asmara and in villages. Their sons aged twenty and older were often outside the country.

The ghost of war was an omnipresent feature of my informants' daily lives. The whole population is often required to engage in periodic military training, like the

course Lwam was doing during my stay in the country. Rifles had been distributed to all able-bodied citizens a month before I arrived. Elderly people were also required to take up arms again, triggering a sense of endless war, lack of prospects, and continuous repetition of past struggles. “They gave me a rifle at my age! Can you imagine?” a sixty-five-year-old refugee in Addis Ababa told me. “I was in the independence struggle in the 1970s, and now I have to carry a rifle again. There is no peace in our country.”

The identity of Eritreans as a people and as a nation is built around war and displacement.<sup>4</sup> Martyrs and migrants are national symbols, publicly celebrated in memorial days, popular songs, and governmental pronouncements. In propaganda, Eritrea as a nation was made possible through the sacrifices of the Eritrean freedom fighters who gave their lives for independence—the martyrs—and the sacrifices of Eritreans in diaspora who selflessly supported the struggle from afar.<sup>5</sup>

But not all migrants are good ones in the public narrative. Whereas the government celebrates previous generations of refugees as national heroes, current refugees have generally been defined by national media, the president and his supporters, as “economic migrants,” “traitors,” and “deserters.” From the perspective of the regime, most refugees nowadays are evading their duty to serve the nation (i.e., do national service), and if caught, they are severely punished as traitors.<sup>6</sup> Fugitives picked up by the army may be jailed, sent to a training center, or even executed, much depending on whether one is a civilian, student, or soldier.<sup>7</sup> There can also be consequences for the families, who often have to pay a very high fine for every child who leaves the country.<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone who left did so without permission, but at the time of my research, exit from Eritrea was mostly achievable through irregular means. Leaving the country illegally was a political act, “voting with one’s feet” against the policies of the government and evading one’s duty to defend the homeland. Although people might not have migrated because they were political opponents of the regime, the very reason of having escaped made them such. Moreover, crossing the border into Ethiopia and seeking asylum there amounted to siding with the nation’s historical enemy. Returning to Eritrea was and still is extremely unsafe for all of them.

This is why the current exodus is publicly sanctioned and references to it are largely absent from public space and popular culture in spite of its magnitude and relevance. In past many famous songs, such as “Zemen”—“time,” in Tigrinya—by the widely celebrated singer Yemanie Baria, evoked the experience of exile and migration, but today’s songs rarely address these issues, unless they are released by musicians who already live abroad. The same goes for novels, movies, and plays.<sup>9</sup>

In the Eritrean “culture of migration,” the regime ambivalently promotes migration and, at the same time, forbids it.<sup>10</sup> Emigration is pervasive and systematic, as in other regions of intense out-migration, but the professionals who facilitated it are hidden. The migration industry and desire for mobility, which in other contexts are manifest and widely marketed, remain underground in Eritrea. Most of



my informants in Eritrea, especially the young ones, knew the escape routes, how much money was needed, and sometimes the names of the smugglers, but this information remained highly confidential.

### SACRIFICE AND OPPORTUNITY: THE TWO FACES OF MIGRATION

In the ambivalent symbolic, social, and economic organization of Eritrean society, migration is both a sacrifice and an opportunity. The two faces of migration, are manifest in both the external and domestic landscape of Eritrea. Desirable houses in well-to-do areas of Asmara like Tiravolo and Indabonda are known to belong to wealthy Eritreans who have been living abroad since the 1970s. Other residential areas, built in the past twenty years are called Endo German (Germans' houses) and Enda America (Americans' houses), referring to the country of residence of the Eritrean owners. In Massawa, a popular beach holiday destination for returnees, imposing villas, originally built by Italian colonialists, lie deserted for most of the year except for the black crows cawing loudly on the rooftops, until their owners come back for the summer break. Even in villages, *hudmos*—traditional huts made of stones—stand alongside more modern-looking constructions owned by the families of those who have emigrated. The village of Barur, which I visited in May 2013, is an example of how migration abroad has changed the traditional landscape of some rural areas.

Located thirty kilometers away from Asmara, more than 2,500 meters above sea level, Barur has traditionally survived on subsistence farming. In the past decade, many inhabitants of the village have migrated to Israel. Since then, families known by other villagers to be *mesakin*—unfortunate and poor—have been able to build houses, indicating their new social status. A woman from the village noted, for example, “There was a family in the village that had nothing, absolutely nothing. Two twins were even brought up by the nuns because they could not feed them. Then the eldest son was able to migrate to Israel. Now they have built a house that is worth at least two million nakfa [about 33,000 euros, or U.S.\$37,000]!”<sup>11</sup>

While walking on the streets of Barur, the distinction between those families who had members abroad and those who did not was evident. The former had houses with corrugated iron roofs and whitewashed cinder block walls; the latter had traditional stone houses with thatched roofs. The cinder block houses were looked upon as a demonstration of wealth and success due to emigration and were objects of desire for neighbors and relatives.<sup>12</sup> The subtext of this landscape of “remittance architecture” is, however, deeply ambivalent.<sup>13</sup> The newly built houses not only indicate success, relative wealth, and ongoing transnational connections between migrants and their families, but also absence and family fragmentation.<sup>14</sup>

Photographs in the houses also told an ambivalent tale: the celebration of the migrant and the mourning of his/her absence. The sitting rooms of the Eritreans families I visited were a mosaic of colorful religious images, certificates of military distinction, and family pictures. Often many of those portrayed there had left the country.<sup>15</sup> The triumphant pictures of the young graduate son with his black mortarboard and new diploma before emigrating would be side by side with framed official acknowledgements of those who died during or bravely participated in the independence struggle. Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or St. Michael with his sword unsheathed against the devil would surround the images of the absent ones, watching over them. These decorations certainly tell intimate tales of separation, and also suggest how migration has become a legitimate—at times encouraged—way to achieve respect from one's own family and the community at large.

Migration has historically been a well-established, socially legitimated strategy for support of those left behind. Uncles, aunts, or other relatives who lived abroad helped kin when things were going wrong in Eritrea during the war. For many of my informants, “the uncle abroad” was almost a legendary character, to whom they had addressed letters during their childhood asking for dolls or toys. Often “the uncle abroad” was more educated and seen as someone who had experience of the world. When he came back to visit the family, big parties were organized in his honor. This is the cultural environment in which young Eritreans grew up learning the value of migration.

With the current lack of economic opportunities in the country, having or not having relatives abroad is a critical element in the socioeconomic stratification of the Eritrean population. Sometimes, it is the only defense against starvation. As locals told me in Barur, malnourished children receiving assistance from a humanitarian program mostly came from local families who did not have any close relatives abroad. Even when families are better equipped to survive, remittances are extremely valuable, given the gap between the average salary and the increasingly high cost of living owing to inflation and the weakness of Eritrean economy.<sup>16</sup> Although scarce and not detailed, the available data show the Eritrean economy to be heavily dependent on private transfers.<sup>17</sup> At the national as well as household levels, emigration provides the basic resources for the survival of families and of the country itself.

Engraved in the landscape as well as in domestic space, emigration in its positive and tragic aspects is not only *normalized* as an everyday reality and crucial resource of Eritreans' daily lives. It has also become normative. As widely documented in other regions characterized by protracted political stagnation and economic uncertainties,<sup>18</sup> emigration may become the norm, that is to say, *expected* by families and the community at large. This was illustrated for me by my encounter with Alazar's mother, Minia, and the other members of his family.

## THE LAST SON LEFT BEHIND

Minia's family was a prime example of the diasporic engagement of Eritreans. Most of her siblings were scattered around Europe and the Middle East. Two of her sons were in Israel, one was in Italy, and another in Sweden. When I met Minia, she still her twenty-five-year-old son Robel and her sixteen-year-old daughter Lula living at home with her and her husband, but by the time I left the country, the two had already fled to Ethiopia. Minia and Alem followed them two months later.

Sitting on the small stool in front of the stove preparing traditional coffee, Minia asked me how Alazar was doing. I was glad to tell her that he had finally found a good job as a barman in Rome; he had many friends, and was generous with everyone. Minia's big brown eyes lit up with pride:

I have no words to describe what Alazar is for me. When he was a child he used to ask me for some food from the doorstep of the house. But often there was not enough food. Then a gesture of my hand was sufficient, and he would run off without saying anything. Alazar has always been strong, but he was not good at school. He was only sixteen when he went to defend our country. He was wounded then and imprisoned in a camp in Ethiopia for years. We thought he was dead . . . but then he came back to us.

Looking at Robel sitting on the sofa, she exclaimed: "Alazar is different from this one . . . that has no salary and is still at home with us!" Robel laughed, a bit embarrassed.

Compared to Alazar, who had had to cope with poverty since he was a little boy and had been a soldier and a prisoner of war, Robel was still a bit spoiled. Later, when Lwam, my translator for the occasion, and I were walking away from the house, she commented that Robel must have felt very ashamed for being the only one left in the house, unable to help his family.

As Robel's subtle stigmatization illustrates, migration has become especially expected of young men, since the ability to support one's parents and provide for one's wife and children is the most basic element of Eritrean masculinity and adulthood.<sup>19</sup> However, young women may also feel the pressure to leave Eritrea so as to provide for their families. Lwam, for example, felt extremely responsible for her parents, who were farmers in the south of Eritrea and had suffered through recurring droughts. Since her brother in Italy had been unable to support the family back home, she was determined to take his place and make her father's dream to see Massawa come true. "My father has never even seen the sea," she said. "Can you imagine? Everyone comes from abroad to see Massawa, but my family has never been there. When I have some money, I'll take him there. You can be sure of that."

Mainly due to the constraints produced by the indeterminate national service, which I describe in detail in the next section, achieving a recognized social status



becomes impossible for most young men and women unless they leave the country. As widely highlighted by scholars of Eritrea, abiding by the government rules not only implies economic dependency on others, but also a life of “social liminality.”<sup>20</sup> Since national service, which is intended to be a sort of initiation period necessary to join the national community and reach adulthood, has been indefinitely prolonged, young people are prevented from becoming adults in both symbolic and practical ways. Most of them are trapped in a state of perennial adolescence.<sup>21</sup>

Their forced permanent adolescence can also be negatively sanctioned as a failure by families and peers and turns into a condition of “social death.” Conventionally used to define the status of slaves as those who do not belong to a community,<sup>22</sup> the descriptive “social death” is also the condition of those individuals who break a taboo and are therefore condemned to social exclusion, sometimes even to physical death.<sup>23</sup> In migration studies, it more generally refers to those who are excluded/or who risk being excluded because of the impossibility of fulfilling the social expectations—concerning remittances<sup>24</sup> or the passage to adulthood<sup>25</sup>—of their community back home. Migration thus becomes a necessary passage to overcome this condition of social liminality and to gain the appreciation of one’s own family and friends. As I show in the following chapters, the desire for positive social status with the family and community left behind is also crucial for understanding my informants’ motivation to keep moving after having reached Ethiopia, Sudan, or Italy, and for those who had arrived to support the migration of their kin.

Family expectations certainly mirror an economic strategy of survival,<sup>26</sup> but it would not be correct to reduce them to economic interests. Parents’ encouragement to migrate are also animated by the desire to see their children settled in a better and safer place. Eritrea is perceived as a place without a future, and the outside world is represented one of happiness and stability. Families share with their young members hierarchies of possible destinations—*cosmologies of destinations*—classified according to the deemed availability of economic and educational opportunities and freedom. At the time I met Minia, for example, she did not really need more money. Three of her sons were already abroad and regularly remitting enough to ensure a good standard of life to those left behind. However, Minia firmly believed that Eritrea could not guarantee a future to young people. In particular, she did not want her only daughter to go through the challenging experience of training in the Sa’wa military camp (see later).

Although parents usually believed that life abroad would be good for their children, they were also aware that migration can have tragic consequences.<sup>27</sup> Given this tension, the decision to flee or to stay was mostly left to their sons and daughters. Indeed, families were often unaware of their sons’ and daughters’ migratory plans. Most of them come to know about their children’s flight after it has already happened, by receiving a call from their son/daughter or from a relative abroad.<sup>28</sup> Except in a few cases, migration from Eritrea is young people’s business. As

UNHCR data show, most part of those who leave the country today are young (sometimes very young) men and, to a lesser extent, women.<sup>29</sup> This is because the young are those of whom the Eritrean state has demanded the most sacrifices over the past twenty years.

### CONSCRIPTED FOREVER

Self-sufficiency, defending Eritrea against Ethiopian invasion, and making it a modern country are among the main official justifications for the mass mobilization of the population aged over eighteen in the military and in the execution of public tasks.<sup>30</sup> This mobilization has mainly been enacted by modifying the original terms of national service. According to 1995 proclamation, national service was to be for eighteen months in all: six months of military training and one year of “active military service and development tasks in military forces for a total of 18 months” (Proclamation of National Service No. 82/1995, art. 8).<sup>31</sup> All citizens had to serve, except for people with serious disabilities and those who fought in the liberation struggle.

From 1994 to 1998, this was the case, but when the 1998–2000 border conflict started, the population was massively drafted into the army. At this point, the draft was often voluntary, since many Eritreans, animated by patriotic feelings, were willing to fight to defend the country. However, when the war ended, the expected demobilization never occurred. On the contrary, in 2002, the so-called Warsay-Yekealo campaign was launched. This campaign targeted young people on the basis that they (the inheritors, or *warsay*) should learn the attributes of self-sacrifice and resistance of older generations of freedom fighters (*yekealo*) to use them in the development of the country. In practice this meant that national service became open-ended, and that education has been increasingly militarized.

Since 2002, in fact, after having reached eleventh grade, all boys and girls have had to do their last year of school in the Sa’wa military camp. Although its infrastructure has been improved over the years, Sa’wa is known for being a hard place. My young informants told me about the harsh climate, the strict training sessions, and the inadequate food and facilities.<sup>32</sup> During this year, they both attend regular classes and undergo military training.<sup>33</sup> At the end of this last year, all students take a matriculation exam. If they pass, they are allowed into a university or professional curriculum, according to the marks they obtained during the exam; if they do not pass, they start their national service. Located in the dry hot region of Sahel, the traditional stronghold of the EPLF during the struggle, Sa’wa has been developed, not only to provide military training, but also to teach younger generations the values of national companionship in spite of ethnic and religious differences.<sup>34</sup>



FIGURE 3. Students celebrating Independence day (May 24) before their departure for Sa'wa (photo by the author, 2013)

In the early 2000s, following student protests, the internationally recognized University of Asmara was closed down and regional colleges were established in which students have to observe strict military discipline under soldiers' control.<sup>35</sup> Successful matriculants are admitted to one of these.

Those who do not pass the matriculation exam usually become soldiers or join specific ministries to carry out lower tasks. As soldiers, young men, and to a lesser extent women, are sent to Barentu, Assab, Tsorona, and other more remote areas, usually to patrol the border or to build roads, dams, and other infrastructure of public interest for little remuneration: a common soldier used to earn 400 nakfa a month—about U.S.\$8.

Once college students finish their education, they are assigned to a specific ministry and start their year of “community service,” for which they used to receive 175 nakfa (less than \$4) per month. After that year, they start working for a salary in the ministry to which they have been assigned. Salaries used to range from 450 to 800 nakfa per month (–\$9-16). Doctors exceptionally earn 1,500 nakfa a month (about \$30). Given that rents and food and commodity prices are increasing exponentially, it was extremely hard for people to survive on such low salaries. Although educated Eritreans are mostly employed in administration, education, and the health sector and other services, the majority have never been released from military duties.<sup>36</sup>



FIGURE 4. Young conscripts headed for the Independence Day parade (photo by the author, 2013)



FIGURE 5. Independence Day parade in Asmara (photo by the author, 2013)

The indefinite extension of national service has now been in force for almost two decades. Among the many social and economic pitfalls, this measure has produced generations of young men and women who do not have the freedom to work, to earn a decent salary, or to enjoy a family life.

TRAPPED AT HOME: THE LIVES OF YOUNG  
ERITREANS BETWEEN NATIONAL SERVICE  
AND SOCIAL IMMOBILITY

In the house I lived in, twenty-four-year-old Salam and I shared a double bed, and I often lay there writing up my notes, waiting for her to finish her prayers or to come back home from a date with her boyfriend, Gaim. Once, it was already late at night and I was dozing on the bed when Salam walked into our bedroom in tears:

Me: "What happened, Salam *sukhor*? Are you okay?"

Salam: "It was so bad, Milena. The police took Gaim."

Me: "They took him?"

Salam: "Yes. We were waiting for the taxi . . . you know there, on the way to the *shouq*. The police came and asked for his papers. He did not have them . . . they took him away."

When Salam's boyfriend got caught, she started calling people who might be able to help get Gaim out of prison. She was worried he was going to be sent back to his military placement, very far away from Asmara. "If you have contacts, you can pay and then they will set him free," Salam told me. "If you don't have contacts, you cannot do anything. . . . They are too stupid. . . . There is no freedom in this country. It is not possible to live here."

Gaim was a deserter. Like many other young people in Eritrea, he had decided to stay away from his assigned employment in a faraway military location in the north of the country. Since he did not have his *menqasaqasi* (documents), the police had arrested him, but he came from a wealthy family and had some good contacts in the right places. Not long after the above-mentioned episode, he was let out of jail and apparently released from national service too.

Obtaining a release not only means freedom from indefinite national service but also has many other implications. Unreleased citizens cannot obtain passports and thus cannot travel; their salaries are (even) lower than those of released citizens; they cannot obtain a license and open a private business; finally, graduates are not given their official transcripts, which would allow them to use their qualifications abroad. Holding or not holding a release paper is one of the main factors (together with remittances from abroad) influencing the socioeconomic stratification of the Eritrean population.<sup>37</sup>

Obtaining a release is not easy. Rules are not clear and often change. In general, one can obtain this document only if one can be shown to be suffering from a



severe sickness. The chances of release were significantly higher for a woman than for a man. Women can obtain a release if they get married, have children, or have extremely worrying family problems. But some ministries are known for being stricter than others. Young women who worked for the ministries of Health or Education, like our neighbor and friend Johanna, were extremely unlucky. The chronic shortage of teachers and health professionals in the country has made release mostly unattainable for women working in these fields. During one of the many evenings that Lwam, Johanna and I spent chatting in the darkness of the house (there were regular electrical blackouts), they explained that each case could be different depending on the supervisors and the ministry. For example, Lwam, who had worked for the Ministry of Agriculture for three years, was applying for a military release from her regional administration. She was planning to claim that her free work outside the ministry was vital for her family's survival. The claim seemed a bit weak to me, since this condition was shared by most Eritreans I knew. Lwam was confident, however, and a year later, she actually obtained her papers and legally left the country.

For men, a release is so difficult to obtain that it had become the subject of much sarcasm among my informants.<sup>38</sup> In the villages that I visited in the southern highlands, I was told that some sixty-five-year-old men were still serving in the military. In Asmara, I met only two young men who had been released from national service: one suffered from a serious form of mental retardation; the other was Salam's boyfriend, who, after having been incarcerated, was released from the military owing to high-level contacts in the army. "Nothing is impossible if people have good contacts and money," one of our common friends commented when I reported what happened to Salam's boyfriend. I was told many stories of young men who managed to avoid the military service because the parents had close contacts within the PFDJ party, or because they had a relative with an important position in a ministry. All the others had to take informal jobs while dodging the draft.

Since the cost of living is extremely high in relation to the average government salary, the young people I met in Asmara had second, and sometimes third, more profitable jobs. Our neighbor Johanna taught in a public school, for example, but also privately tutored children on the side in order to make some money. Her younger brother, Paolos, should have been teaching in a technical school far from Asmara, but he was working as a truck driver while keeping an informal agreement with his supervisor at the school.

Johanna and Paolos are good examples of those who remain stuck at home despite their desire to leave it. In spite of long years of service and a difficult family situation—their mother had died and they rarely saw their distant father—they could not get a release from the Ministry of Education. Neither could they leave the country, given their limited economic resources. Johanna dreamt of pursuing her passion for painting in an art school in Italy, but could not get her relatives to



pay for her. Her brother was also desperately trying to leave the country, but could not afford a safe and reliable getaway. He had already tried to escape the country three times. As a result, he had been caught and imprisoned for more than a year—an experience he did not want to talk about with anyone. As they did not have any other option, Johanna and Paolos did their best to put up with their everyday economic constraints and public duties as *agelgalitat* (conscripts), by playing small tricks on the system, or simply by working very hard.

Johanna and Paolos are “displaced in place.” As Stephen C. Lubkemann observes,<sup>39</sup> the ability to move is stratified according to individuals’ and families’ socioeconomic resources, educational background, and physical capabilities. Johanna and her brother were well informed and fit enough to cross the border, but could not afford a safe way to do it (see “The Cost of Safety” text box at the end of this chapter). Conventional categories of refugee studies are overturned here: refugees are usually defined by their lack of choices, but cases like Johanna’s illustrate that the ones who have no choice are those who stay behind. From this perspective, becoming a refugee is not an involuntary act, but a demonstration of individual possibilities.

However, staying can also be a matter of choice. Loyalty to the political project of the government and the strong commitment to develop their country have certainly led some Eritreans, even those who had been serving the nation for decades in return for insignificant salaries, to stay put. In fact, the tension between their migration and their duties to the nation was often present in the narratives of the young Eritreans I met. Brought up as patriots, young Eritreans often view migration through the same categories as government discourse.<sup>40</sup> In a way, my interlocutors often felt that migration was a sort of treason. Even for Johanna, migrating would have conflicted with the patriotic values that her father and her mother, both ex-guerrilla, had taught her.

No matter the reason for which young Eritreans I met were still in the country, their life was full of hardships. Johanna and her brother were lucky enough, like many of those living in urban areas, educated and employed as civilians by the ministries, to find time and space for other income-generating activities. Other conscripts especially those who serve as soldiers in remote areas, can only choose between corvée labor for the state or a life on the run.

#### EVERYDAY FUGITIVES

Desertion is extremely widespread in Eritrea.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes individuals decide to evade their assigned job out of necessity. Married men, who have the responsibility to support their families, may desert to earn more. Others, usually young men and women, often choose to desert hoping to find a way out of the country, even if this may take years. Still others, especially young women, decide to hide from the system—dropping out of school, Sa’wa military camp, and national service

all together—until they are automatically released by getting married and having children. It goes without saying that these tactics of evasion have an impact on wider societal dynamics, such as the rate of female education and the availability of labor, as well as on the everyday world of families and individuals constantly living in a state of existential suspension and anxiety.

Deserters have a hard time dealing with continual controls and round-ups (*geffas* in Tigrinya). As often reported, the ordinary quiet of Godena Harnet, the main central avenue in Asmara, was often shaken by the tumult of soldiers checking the documents of all young people sitting in cafés or walking in the streets.<sup>42</sup> Those found without papers could go to prison, as in the case of Salam's boyfriend, or were sent back to their military placement to be punished there.

*Geffas* were also common in the villages I visited in 2013. "Last time soldiers came to our village, they could not find the young people," one of my informants in Mai Nefas reported. "So they took the elders and made them march in bare feet to punish their connivance with their draft-dodging sons." According to my informants there, villagers had a complex system of information sharing via contacts in the police, which gave them notice that soldiers were coming.

Like the young black drug dealers studied by Alice Goffman in a Philadelphia ghetto,<sup>43</sup> Eritrean *koblali* (a negative word referring to draft-dodgers in Tigrinya) develop "an art of running." They learn how to live unpredictable lives always on the run, periodically escaping *geffas*, avoiding soldiers, not sleeping at home, suspecting neighbors and fellow villagers of being spies for the government. For many, this becomes a way of life. Some draft-dodge only for a few months, but others do it for years, and evasion becomes the norm. While dodging soldiers, many deserters date their girlfriends, work, get married, bring up their children, and start new businesses. One of my informants had been a draft-dodger for more than seven years before being caught while trying to escape the country.

Eritrean draft-dodgers live in constant fear of being caught, David Bozzini emphasizes,<sup>44</sup> but it was the normality of living as a deserter that amazed me. By "normality," I do not mean to say that their lives were simple. The very possibility to feel at home was crumbling due to the fact that they often had to sleep outside their home, and that their families were covering for them. However, many young people I met seemed to see living their lives as fugitives as something "normal," and as Salam put it once, "people can get used to the most terrible things." For example, Robel, Alazar's brother, had been absent from his teaching post for over five months, yet he often risked meeting me in the center of the city, walking with me through streets frequented by police. Likewise, Salam's boyfriend used to hang out with her in city center and go out almost every evening in busy bars. The night Salam came home in tears, they had, in fact, been close to the center. What appeared to me as a situation of extreme risk, crisis and hardship had become the normal background for their daily activities. *Aren't they worried about going to jail?* I always used to wonder to myself. When I asked people, they usually answered

with a bitter smile and no clear explanation, but once Salam replied in a way that threw some light on my question:

They [young people] have no other way. They escape for a while, then the police catch them and they go to prison. Then, when they are out, they will once again try to escape from the military. What can they do? Anyway, to be in this country is like being in a prison. We call it “free prison” because it is like a big prison from which nobody can easily leave.

Salam’s representation of Eritrea as a big prison symbolizes well the different aspects of immobility experienced by young Eritreans. First, her words suggest that staying in or out of prison was not so different from young Eritreans’ point of view: neither prisoners in a jail nor young Eritreans outside the prison have a future. Both are condemned to live in an eternal present where the past is continuously reproduced without any significant prospect of change. This was not only because the whole country was stuck in an endless repetition of the past and its tokens—the struggle for independence, its martyrs and its heroes—but also because young Eritreans are stuck in a condition of generational and social liminality.<sup>45</sup>

The whole country was perceived as a huge prison: it is hard to escape, and individuals have no control over their lives. Young people felt locked away from the outside world, seen as the site of happiness and possibilities. The risk of being sent to prison was thus no scarier than the certainty of remaining stuck in a temporal, geographic, social, economic, and existential state of immobility. Against the risk of being “the living dead,” a person had no other alternative than to try to escape as many times as possible. Desertion is in fact one of the tactics to resist the forced stasis and try to advance one’s life, to reinstate a kind of normal course of “social becoming” even in a context of chronic uncertainties.

#### EVEN DESERTERS MARRY: ORDINARY STORIES FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE

This forced social and existential immobility is even more striking for Eritreans in the countryside. While many young men in the city manage to keep their formal employment while also having more profitable jobs, individuals from rural backgrounds are usually sent far away from their villages to remote military outposts. This prevents them from accomplishing their familiar duties, ranging from plowing the land to providing for their elders and forming new families. This was the case for many young men I met in a group of villages in the southern highlands. Many of my friends and informants in Italy—mostly the Catholic ones in Rome and Genoa—were originally from that area. Ogbazgi, in particular, a twenty-five-year-old refugee living in Sicily at the time, was from Mai Nefas.

Like most other families in the village, Ogbazgi’s family were farmers. Their *hudmo*—a typical stone house—was set in a landscape of huge, smooth, round

rocks, surrounded by tall cactuses half-eaten by local camels put out to pasture. When I went to visit them, Ogbazgi's seventy-eight-year-old father, Abraha, welcomed me with a toothless smile. Although thin as a matchstick, he was strong and agile, and still able to work in the fields for an entire day. Ogbazgi's youngest sister was sitting in front of the coal stove preparing coffee and eggs. The other members of the family were not around: Abraha's sons were abroad and his daughters had married and were living elsewhere in the country. The eldest brother, Tewodoros, was the only one left, but he was out in the fields. That was the period of transhumance and plowing in the nearby lowlands, where it is rainy between November and March, while the highlands remain dry and dusty. Abraha told me that Tewodoros had been a soldier for more than seven years. The ministry sent him to Assab, "a very bad place" according to Abraha. It was too hot there, and soldiers were not given enough food and water. They did not hear from Tewodoros for five years, but finally he had recently managed to return home and had married a young woman from a nearby village.

In the evening, Tewodoros came to see me to give me the video recording of his marriage to pass on to Ogbazgi. After congratulating him on his wedding, I asked him about his plans for the future. Smiling like a child who has just done something naughty, he told me he would not go back to the army any time soon. Being the eldest son and the only one left in the country, he bore the responsibility to help his old father with the crops and to support his new family. At the age of thirty-two, national service having delayed him in all main steps toward male adulthood, draft-dodging was his only way to become a respected son and a husband.

However, perpetual desertion does not free young Eritreans from a stressful life of suspicion and unpredictability. Many men whom I met in Mai Nefas did not sleep at home, fearing that soldiers would come at night to capture them. While deserting might allow them to get married and meet some of the traditional expectations, life would remain a matter of subsistence—a life "without future" as my informants put it. This "lack of future" in my informants' view not only stems from the limitations to their personal freedom and the lack of long-term prospects in the country, but also from the perception that a better life is possible elsewhere. Not unlike many other young Africans, most boys and girls I met during my fieldwork expressed the desire to leave the country in order to be part of "modernity"—which they see as a bundle of freedom, possibilities, and consumeristic wealth, seemingly so far from daily life in Eritrea.

#### STRIVING FOR MODERNITY

Most explanations of Eritrean migration have mainly focused on conditions of structural oppression hindering the ability of young people to fulfil traditional sociocultural expectations.<sup>46</sup> The complexity of Eritreans' aspirations to migration has remained hidden by the static portrait of a closed traditional society. However,

this image is far from reality on the ground. The appeal of “modernity” is, here as elsewhere, crucial in understanding how young Eritrean men and women perceive their own situation and how they project their futures into specific destinations in the “outside world.” Eritrea is often compared with North Korea in journalistic accounts, and people themselves feel locked away from the real flow of life, but contacts and interactions with the outside world are numerous. Social remittances, cultural products from abroad and images spread through the media shape young Eritreans’ “global subjectivities”.<sup>47</sup>

As widely highlighted in the literature on the topic, modernity is far from being a clearly defined concept, but it may mean different things for different actors in different places. The many dimensions of modernity—colonial, postcolonial, neoliberal, developmental, consumeristic, gender progressive, democratic—are often mixed in social imaginaries and personal aspirations.<sup>48</sup> The modernity inspiring my informants’ dreams reflected an intricate bundle of colonial stereotypes, postcolonial development ambitions, consumeristic images, gender models, and democratic aspirations, locally experienced, imagined, and reinterpreted. In my informants’ eyes, the possibility of belonging to a modern world meant many different things. It not only represented the chance to access material development and the availability of more or less technological, luxurious or basic consumer products. “Modernity” for them also meant living in a place where they could enjoy personal freedom, social rights, and enhanced status in their families. The pursuit of the “modern world” in its material, social, and moral attributes was one of the important ingredients in my informants’ hierarchical categorization of their most desired migration destinations.

Concerned as I was about rendering an accurate image of my informants as legitimate refugees, I often wondered whether portraying their desires for “modernity” might have undermined their claims for safe refuge in Europe. Finally, dissatisfied with simplistic accounts reducing refugee flows to their structural factors, I decided that there was no reason to deny prospective refugees’ “capacity to aspire.” Although oppressed, my Eritrean informants could envisage better futures outside their home country—unlike “the poor” portrayed in Arjun Appadurai’s book *The Future as Cultural Fact*.<sup>49</sup> Aspirations to modernity (conventionally considered pull factors) are, I argue, crucial not only for the study of voluntary migration but also for understanding of the trajectories of those who come to be labeled refugees.<sup>50</sup>

As a matter of fact, Eritreans are immersed in global modern culture as much as most other peoples in the world. “Global modern culture” here does not necessarily mean capitalist Western culture, even if consumerism is a big part of it.<sup>51</sup> It rather consists of a plurality of mediascapes from different parts of the world that are received, absorbed, and manipulated in a variety of ways.<sup>52</sup> Mobile phones, international TV channels, and the internet (widely uncensored) are available to Eritreans, although information and communications technology infrastructure is often poor. Almost all the houses I visited had a television set. Even in the poorest

neighborhoods, satellite dishes spring up like mushrooms from the roofs of the houses. Bollywood movies, Arabic shows, and American and Turkish TV series are among the most popular cultural products, along with the national news and local music. In Ester's house, for instance, whenever electricity was available in the evening, the women would gather in the living room to watch a Turkish family saga called *Jemilah*. Later at night, Salam would follow some American series, and Ester, if free in the afternoon, would watch news on ERITV or other international channels, such as MMC (Dubai), Al Jazeera (Qatar), or the BBC (UK).<sup>53</sup>

Salam, as well as most my other young informants in the country, was active on the internet and social networks. While sitting close to Salam in busy internet cafés in the center, I could glance at her friends' Facebook profiles. The pictures of her male friends in the United States and Europe showed them in suits or fashionable clothes, leaning on flashy cars; her female friends would be smiling in their bikinis from swimming pools, while others hugged their new friends in luxurious shopping malls in Dubai. Along with religious representations, spiritual proverbs, and family images from their past, what Eritreans abroad mostly share are sanitized images of their new life. These widespread images of the outside world were a constant reminder to those still stuck in Eritrea of the life they could have if they left.

Often the many dimensions of my young informants' unsatisfied desire for modernity were crystallized in a lack of "things". Issues like the lack of fuel, electricity, technological facilities, good clothes continually came up whenever my informants described why life in Eritrea was unbearable. These "things" were much more than material objects; they symbolized their feeling of being trapped. My informants' lives in Eritrea were continually compared with lives outside the country as depicted by returnees and in electronic images. Eritrea was perceived as an unchanging land, stuck in the past. The First World was the future.

#### PRICKLY PEARS AND ROOTED TREES: MOVERS AND THEIR LEFT-BEHIND COUNTERPARTS

It was a beautiful, starlit night, made all the more noticeable by the complete electrical blackout in Asmara. Lwam, Johanna, and I were sitting in a taxi going to a bar in town. The taxi driver was keen to chat with us and explained to me: "Eritrean people can be divided into *beles* and *shibaha*: *beles* [prickly pears] are those from abroad who come to Eritrea on holiday, spend their money in clubs and hook up with beautiful Eritrean girls; *shibaha* [a kind of tree] are those who have never left; they are always here no matter what." The taxi driver was laughing but Johanna did not find his explanation funny: "I get very angry if someone calls me *shibaha*," she commented. "It is not my fault if I am stuck here and I can't leave this country!"

The Eritrean rainy season lasts from July to September. The land, usually arid, deserted and stony, becomes covered with shiny, green grass. Thorny cactuses pro-



duce glossy red prickly pears—the *beles*—blanketing the valleys with red, to the delight of children and the elderly. The rainy season is not only the period of the year when the country revives, but also the time when Eritreans from abroad come back to their home country. Their presence represents a moment of rebirth for Eritrean society. Families can embrace their sons who live abroad; old friends who live in different parts of the world can meet again; girls wear their best dresses, hoping to meet the love of their lives. Their presence also shakes the stagnant local economy: emigrants import foreign currency, spend their money in clubs and restaurants, and bring gifts to their families and friends.<sup>54</sup>

In the eyes of the locals, *beles* are rich, well dressed, and free to travel. Girls like to imagine what their lives would look like if they married a *beles*. Mothers keep the best picture of their daughter in case a *beles* asks about the possibility of marriage. Boys dream about the cars they will be able to buy if they manage to work abroad.<sup>55</sup> “When my friends come back from abroad, they invite everyone to dinner and spend more money than I earn in a month,” Salam once told me while we were sitting in our pajamas in front of an episode of *Pretty Little Liars*. “I’m twenty-five and I still live at home with my mom. I can’t even help her as I would like to. I have to leave.” Most of Salam’s friends had already left the country; some of them were in Dubai, others in Kampala, Uganda, and still others in Europe. She could not wait to join them, even though she knew that it would be difficult at first. Her friends had told her that she would be lonely and have to work hard. However, her life had to change; staying put was not an option.

Yet, migration was not a leap into the void for Salam, or for most of my informants. Many young women and men I spoke to had quite a clear idea about their desired final destination. This is not to say that everyone who leaves Eritrea knows where he/she will end up and may not change his/her mind.<sup>56</sup> However, as a result of TV news, transnational contacts with friends and family connections, young Eritreans commonly imagine different destinations as hierarchically ordered along more or less objective assumptions about work possibilities, social and political freedom and attractiveness of their inhabitants. Their cosmologies of destinations were subjective, since they reflected personal aspirations, but, at the same time, they were fairly standard across young people and their families. They represent the shared imaginary and moral contexts in which migration is fostered and pursued.

#### THE FIRST AND FIFTH WORLDS: COSMOLOGIES

I heard one of the clearest cosmological formulations from a taxi driver in Asmara. While he was driving me, he started complaining about the situation in Eritrea, saying:

Italy, Europe, and America are the First World. India and South Africa are the second world; the Middle East is the Third World. . . . Eritrea is the Fifth World! In the First

World people are brilliant. It does not happen that there is shortage of electricity, or no water supply. They have good public management. Here in Eritrea we do not have fuel, no water, no electricity, even though we have the resources! . . . but the government is corrupt and there is no positive result for the people. . . . It's so bad. But if I go to Switzerland, Sweden, Norway—they even give me money to support myself. . . . That is First World!

Although this hierarchy of countries was the taxi driver's own categorization, his words express ideas widely shared among Eritreans. There are good, developed, civilized countries and bad, underdeveloped, corrupt countries. Most notably, desires and aspirations of freedom and self-realization are typically related to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe (Italy was probably included in the First World by the taxi driver only out of respect for me). Eritrea belongs to the group of hopeless countries. These worlds are inhabited by people who are given specific, essentialized attributes (the inhabitants of the First World are "brilliant"), and each of them presents well-known opportunities and difficulties as regards the climate, legal context, labor market, and so on.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, this hierarchy entails a temporal dimension, which is crucial for interpreting the way Eritreans see migration. The First World represents the future, while the Fifth World represents the past.

Other scholars have noticed how migration aspirations are often associated with a hierarchical vision of the world. Erind Pajo's work on Albanian international migration, for instance, documents his informants' hierarchical world visions and their aspirations to migrate to certain places.<sup>58</sup> In his investigation of urban youth in Bissau, Henrik Vigh also talks about "an understanding of a world order consisting of societies with different technological capacities and levels of mastery over physical and social environment, as well as the spaces and social options which are open or closed to persons of different social categories within it."<sup>59</sup> Not unlike young Eritreans whom I encountered, Vigh's informants constantly felt "humiliated" in what they perceive as a developmental void of their home and imagine the positive prospects awaiting them in certain destinations imagined as more developed, more technological, more modern. As James Ferguson noticed, these categorizations reflect the developmental model, which since the 1970s has distinguished among so-called First, Second, Third, and Fourth worlds, in a sort of spatial and temporal scale of progress.<sup>60</sup>

But there is more to it. Eritreans' hierarchical cosmology includes cultural assumptions and moral norms about places and people inhabiting these worlds. While people in the First World are perceived as progressive, free, and responsible,<sup>61</sup> there is general distrust and suspicion of Ethiopians and Sudanese. These assumptions about different nationalities indicate that cosmological views are not only the result of the developmental discourse. Rather, they stem from historically stratified conceptions, which have been variably documented in the literature on Eritrea,<sup>62</sup> and ongoing cultural circulation among left-behind Eritreans and those

living in different parts of the world. Precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experiences, such as deep-rooted interethnic relations, Italian racial discrimination,<sup>63</sup> and the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia feed into common stereotypes about places and their inhabitants. Besides these collectively stratified historical experiences, information, images, and values absorbed through the media and continually exchanged with friends abroad, as noted above, contributed to shaping my informants' expectations of suitable future destinations.

Cosmologies of destinations, thus, could be considered as simultaneously long-standing and flexible constructions. Although some assumptions may be resistant to reality checks due to the unparalleled nature of transnational communication and its related moral obligations, they can also shift due to changes in the objective structure of opportunity or to the power of media images and rumors. For example, Salam thought that migration to Europe was not such a good idea anymore: "Now everyone knows that Europe is finished. It is better to go to Dubai, where there is a good international community and you do not need a visa to enter. If you know somebody who can find work for you, you are fine. In Africa, there is work, in Europe, there is crisis, they also said it on TV." Salam portrayed Eritrea as the bottom of possible choices, and Canada as the most desirable final destination; but other African countries were described as possible good places to live. Through her friends, Salam had gathered a very specific idea of alternative destinations, together with their pros and cons: "In Juba [the capital of South Sudan], if you have some money to start an activity, you can make a lot of money. A friend of mine has opened a supermarket there . . . but it is not safe there and it is too hot. In Kampala, instead, the climate is good and the people look beautiful with their dark and shiny skin—men look also handsome—you can enroll as a refugee there and wait for resettlement to Canada."

Salam's words represent an interesting instance of how imaginaries of possible destinations can quickly shift and over the long term produce a change in the moral expectations shared by migrants and families. However, I would argue that if ideas about destinations may be easily transformed by rumors and widespread images, it takes longer to influence the moral expectations connected to these destinations. To put it differently, potential and current migrants may be relatively fast to pick new information up and adapt to new obstacles and opportunities, but societal and family expectations of what migration to certain countries entails in terms of family status are more resistant to change. I return to this point in following chapters. This is where the concept of cosmologies may be more suitable than imaginaries, as it encompasses not only the symbolic, but also the deep-rooted moral aspects that produce and reproduce migration.

The combination of different memories, images, and rumors has produced multifaceted hierarchies of destinations, which cannot be reduced to one single dimension. The most salient axes for analyzing my informants' cosmological beliefs

### THE COST OF SAFETY: HOW TO ESCAPE ERITREA

The safest way to leave Eritrea is by obtaining release from national service. Passports and exit visas can be bought for 400,000 nakfa (around U.S.\$7,000), with half of the money going to the broker and half to a Ministry of Emigration official. However, money is not enough. According to Valentina (May 2013), it was crucial to good strong contacts in the Ministry of the Emigration and perhaps to know someone able to facilitate departure from the airport.

The second safest way to leave the country costs 300,000/200,000 nakfa (about U.S.\$5,500–3,500). This is a direct journey. Escapees are picked up in Asmara by ministerial land cruisers and are directly dropped off in Khartoum. These kinds of journeys are managed by people who work in security, who have all the permits to cross freely to Sudan without anyone asking them for further explanations. This was considered a comfortable journey, but, according to Valentina, there had been frauds.

For 150,000/180,000 nakfa (around U.S.\$3,000), it is possible to exit the country by car, but the journey is not direct. From Asmara customers are driven to Tesseney; from Tesseney a second vehicle takes them to Kassala in eastern Sudan (see map 1). For this kind of journey, it is necessary to bribe the general at the check point with 60,000 nakfa per car, while 60,000 goes to the driver and the remainder to the smuggler. From Kassala, customers are driven to Khartoum. This was the option that Valentina considered most convenient for her. Michael, who arranged this service, told me that it included a seven-hour walk across the Eritrean-Sudanese border.

Tsegay was able to provide passage from Eritrea to Ethiopia for U.S.\$1,800, plus a commission of U.S.\$300 for himself. The customer has to get from Asmara to Mendefera, where he/she is met by the pilot (guide). Some pilots can drive customers to Adi Quala, others accompany them by bus. From the town of Adi Quala, it takes about half a day's walk to cross the border. Pilots usually leave from Tigrayan camps and pick up the customers in Mendefera.

The price from a border town, such as Tesseney, Sa'wa—on the Sudanese border—or Adi Quala, Tsorona—on the Ethiopian side, is significantly lower. However, prices vary significantly depending on the route, the origin, the destination, the relationship between the customer and the pilot, the size of the group led over the border, the season, the specific agreement with the middleman, and so on. Michael told me that for 60,000 nakfa (about \$1,200), he could facilitate border crossing on foot from Tesseney to the Wodi Sherife or Shegerab refugee camps in Sudan. This usually took a full day's walking. Sister Leterberhan had heard that the trip on foot from Adi Quala cost around 70,000 nakfa. Another man I interviewed in Ethiopia told me he paid 80,000 nakfa from Adi Quala. Sister Leterberhan told me that she could have got a good deal from Decamhare for her nephew for 10,000 nakfa (about \$200). To get to border towns is not easy, since there is no free movement inside the country and there are many checkpoints,

especially on some roads and at some times of the year, and doing so without documents can imply higher risks.

Rashaida smugglers in Massawa charged 70,000 nakfa (about \$1,400) to convey migrants along the coast into Sudan. According to Sister Leterberhan, this kind of journey had been dramatically cheaper in 2010—45,000 nakfa, she said—and was very popular until the government started patrolling that side of the border more closely.

Finally, it is possible to travel by sea from Massawa or Assab to the coast of Yemen for 30,000/40,000 nakfa (about \$700) per person.

Would-be migrants can also cross the border by themselves provided they know the way, but this was less common among my informants.

NOTE: These prices are highly volatile and continuously change according to the demand of movement, the offer of services and the circumstances of the journey (more or less control, more or less danger). These prices are updated to 2015. I collected this information all along my research, but my main informants on this topic were: (a) Valentina, a 25-year-old woman who had been trying to leave the country for long time; (b) Sister Leterberhan who was closely in touch with young people in different parts of Eritrea; (c) Michael, the smuggler I met in Khartoum; and (d) Tsegay, the smuggler I met in Addis Ababa. While in Ethiopia and Sudan, I also collected private accounts from escapees.

might be the following: freedom/lack of it; access to resources/lack of resources; social fairness/corruption; moral righteousness/moral decay. These dimensions were variously reproduced by my informants, depending on their gender, political attitudes, and age, to mention only the most important factors. I encountered several other parallel and related dichotomies such as clean/dirty, personal freedom/social and religious restrictions. For instance, reaching Europe did not have the same value for my young male and female informants. By accessing freedom and a better-paid job through migration, young men mostly aspired to become breadwinners, get married, and help their families back home. My young female informants—mostly highly educated and from urban backgrounds—did not only want to migrate to Europe to support their families. They were also searching for the social freedom to pursue their dreams. Not satisfied with the traditional conception of women as wives and mothers and rejecting the model of female freedom fighters promoted by government propaganda, they were looking for new ways of realizing their modern womanhood.<sup>64</sup>

The above considerations show that shared hierarchies of destinations assume different subjective meanings, gender implications, and generational values. What is crucial to highlight now is that these symbolic and moral structures deeply influence the way in which Eritreans understand migration and their efforts to reach specific countries.