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Language, Culture and Citizenship Among Amharic-Speaking Eritreans and Changing Conditions for Eritreans in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This briefing paper explains why many Eritreans speak Amharic and why it is plausible that, under certain circumstances, an Eritreans might not speak Tigrinya or another Eritrean language. In order to explore these circumstances, the paper provides an explanation of the intertwined social and linguistic histories of Eritrea and Ethiopia prior to the 1998 border war, discusses language and educational policy in Eritrea both before and after independence, explains the history of Amiches (Eritreans born in Ethiopia) and movements of this population between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and explores the circumstances of the town of Assab. The paper concludes with comments on conditions for Eritreans in Ethiopia from the mid-2000s until the present with a particular focus on the extremely dangerous conditions created by the recent war in Northern Ethiopia. The paper draws on an extensive review of the literature and the author's previously published work.

Keywords Eritrea, Ethiopia, Refugees, Asylum, Migration, Amiche, Assab, Amharic, Eritrean Language Policy

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1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, a concern when deciding on asylum cases is Ethiopians pretending to be Eritreans. This is also a concern for Eritreans themselves who are aware of cases in which Ethiopians have stolen Eritrean identities for the purposes of refugee resettlement or asylum. It can be difficult to ascertain whether an individual is Eritrean or Ethiopian given overlapping cultures and languages, histories of forced and voluntary migration between the two countries, and the diversity of cultural and linguistic experiences within the Eritrean population, including the Amharic-speaking Eritrean population in Ethiopia. For reasons that I detail in this paper, it is almost impossible to determine whether an individual is Eritrean or Ethiopian based solely on their inability to speak an Eritrean language because there are many circumstances in which an Eritrean may not speak an Eritrean language; however, many Eritreans are denied asylum on this basis. Given that condaitions for Eritreans in Ethiopia have been steadily worsening over the past five years, this is a concerning issue.

Both Eritrea and Ethiopia are ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse and the two countries have a shared history, particularly in the central-southern highlands of Eritrea and the central-northern highlands of Ethiopia where Eritrea's and Ethiopia's Tigrinya speakers are clustered. Due to this shared history and long border, there are a number of ethnic groups that span the boundaries of the two countries including Tigrinya speakers, Afar speakers, and Saho speakers. Additionally, many Eritreans lived most of their life in Ethiopia, may never have learned Tigrinya, and may have lived for only few years in Eritrea before returning to Ethiopia.

The purpose of this briefing paper is explain why many Eritreans speak Amharic and why it is plausible under certain circumstances that an Eritrean might not speak Tigrinya or another Eritrean language. In order to explain these circumstances, this paper is organized as follows. First, I will begin with a brief explanation of the intertwined history of Eritrea and Ethiopia prior to the 1998 border war, to explain why many Eritreans have historically spoken Amharic. Second, I will discuss the identity politics as well as language and educational policy in Eritrea after independence in order to explain why Amharic is *not* regarded as an Eritrean language. Third, I will explain the history of the Amiche (Eritreans born in Ethiopia) population despite the fact that large numbers of Eritreans spoke it at the time of independence. Fourth, I will detail the particular circumstances of the town of Assab, an Eritrean town in which Amharic was the commonly spoken language prior to the border war. The use of Amharic only began to decline in the mid-2000's. Fifth, I will explain the situation that resulted in the deportations of Eritreans and people of Eritrean parentage from Ethiopia to Eritrea during the border war and the subsequent removal of their citizenship in Ethiopia regardless of whether they had any ties in Eritrea; the deportations presented Eritrea with yet another influx of Amharic speakers and also serve as evidence of the volatility of Ethiopia's policies towards its Eritrean residents. Sixth, to further explore Ethiopia's rapidly changing policies towards Eritreans, which render the situation in Ethiopia very precarious for Eritreans, I will explain post-war conditions in Eritrea and the changing Ethiopian refugee policies towards Eritreans which led to a mass flight of Eritreans to Ethiopia, including many of those who had been previously deported. Finally, I will discuss developments from the mid-2000s up to the present with a focus on the recent war in Northern Ethiopia to explain why the situation for Eritreans in Ethiopia is, at present, unsafe.

In preparing this briefing paper, I draw on an extensive review of the literature and two decades of research on Eritrea and Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. I began research in the town of Assab in 2003 and on the basis of this research later published my first book, *The Struggling State: Nationalism, Mass Militarization and the Education of Eritrea* (Temple University Press 2016) as well as numerous other publications. Two of my publications that are most relevant to this paper are: "In Between Nations: Ethiopian-Born Eritreans, Liminality and War"[1] and "Oscillating Imaginaries: War, Peace, and the Precarious Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia."[2]

1 Riggan, Jennifer. 2011. "In Between Nations: Ethiopian-Born Eritreans, Liminality and War." Political and Legal Anthropology Review 34(1): 85-106.

2 Poole, Amanda, and Jennifer Riggan. 2022. "Oscillating Imaginaries: War, Peace, and the Precarious Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia." *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 10, no. 1: 33-60.

2. Historical Background on Eritrea and Ethiopia

Although successive Ethiopian governments have claimed that Eritrea is an historic and integral part of the Ethiopian, nation state, the veracity of this claim is highly debatable and hinges on what the definition of the nation-state is. While it is clear that the entirety of Eritrea was not a part of Ethiopia until after it was annexed by Haile Selassie in the aftermath of World War II, it is also clear that the central highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia were intermittently and variably linked—culturally, economically and politically—dating back to the 4th century Axumite empire.[3] Prior to the early 1900s the boundaries of these polities that occupied the territory on which both Eritrea and Ethiopia now sit, ebbed and flowed.[4] Eritrea took on its current shape only with Italian colonialism and Ethiopia under the reign of Emperor Menelik II roughly around the same time period.[5] A full history of the ebbs and flows of these linkages is far beyond the scope of this paper. Here I wish to emphasize two things: Eritrea is a distinct, sovereign, independent nation-state, *and* there is a centuries-long history of cultural and linguistic exchange between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The nation-state of Eritrea emerged from late 19th-century colonialism. Italy began its conquest of Eritrea with the purchase of the territory around Assab from the Sultan at Aussa in 1869 and then expanded control, establishing the colony of Eritrea in 1882. Italy planned to take over Ethiopia and therefore unify Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia into greater Italian East Africa. However, Italy lost the battle of Adwa to Ethiopia's emperor, Menelik II. After that, in 1889, the Treaty of Wuchale secured independence for Ethiopia and awarded the territory that later became Eritrea to Italy. Eritrea remained an Italian colony until Italy was pushed out of Eritrea by Britain in 1941.[6]

During the period at the end of World War II, from 1941 to 1952, Britain administered Eritrea. The British Military Administration (BMA) was a complex political time. Ethiopia, then under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie, thought of Eritrea as one of its own provinces. Ethiopia began negotiating for "reunion" with Eritrea almost immediately, citing deep historical ties with Eritrea's Christian highlands. Meanwhile, Britain favored partition of Eritrea, giving the Christian highlands to Ethiopia and the lowlands and northern highlands to Sudan. That plan ultimately failed.[7]

Following the BMA period, despite growing sentiments that Eritrea should be independent, the United Nations agreed to federate Ethiopia and Eritrea, allowing Eritrea to retain its autonomy but also be returned to Ethiopia. It quickly became clear that Ethiopia did not intend to honor the spirit of the loose federation with Eritrea. Ethiopia almost immediately began to undermine the federal agreement and ultimately disbanded the federation and formally annexed Eritrea. Ethiopia's forcible and illegal annexation of Eritrea was almost immediately unacceptable to Eritreans.[8]

Through this period, the language of the Ethiopian state—Amharic— was widely forced on Eritreans. As a nation-building strategy, Emperor Haile Selassie promoted a policy of *Amharization* in Eritrea as he did throughout the non-Amharic speaking populations Ethiopia. *Amharization* consisted of making the Amharic language the language of state, spoken in government offices and schools.[9] In Eritrea, under Italian colonialism, Tigrinya and Arabic had been the working languages and the languages of education. Thus, this shift in emphasis to Amharic represented a stark departure of previous language policies.[10]

Following its annexation by Ethiopia, Eritrea's 30-year war for independence began. From 1961 to 1991, Eritrea was engaged in a protracted war for independence from Ethiopia. In 1961, a guerilla movement by the name of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) began fighting for Eritrea's independence. In 1970, a competing guerilla movement, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) emerged, spreading the influ-

3 Gebremedhin, Jordan. 1989. *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea.* Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press.

4 Sorenson, J., 1993. *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for history and identity in the Horn of Africa.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

5 Riggan, Jennifer. 2016. *The Struggling State: Mass Militarization and the Education of Eritrea.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

6 Ibid.

7 Pool, David. 2001. *From Guerillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front.* Oxford: James Curry.

8 Ibid.

9 Abbay, Alemseged. 1998. *Identity Jilted, Or, Re-imagining Identity?: The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press.

10 Woldemikael, Tekle. 2003. Language, Education, and Public Policy in Eritrea. *African Studies Review.* 46(1): 117-136.

ence of the independence movement into cities and central highlands. By this time, Eritrea's struggle for independence had gained widespread popularity among Eritreans throughout the country and in all walks of life.[11]

In 1974 Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in a communist revolution. Ethiopia was governed by a leftist military committee referred to as the *Derg* and was under the rule of long-time dictator Mengistu Hailemariam. The communist takeover of Ethiopia gave new support to Ethiopia's repression of Eritrea's independence movement. Additionally, the EPLF had splintered off from the ELF and later, in 1981, defeated the ELF in a civil war. The EPLF had a much stronger cultural and political program than the ELF did, emphasizing education and the development of social services and state institutions in the liberated areas. One of the programs of the EPLF was to promote linguistic and cultural development of Eritrean languages. Meanwhile, in the non-liberated areas, Mengistu Hailemariam extended Haile Selassie's policies of *Amharization*, meaning that any Eritrean attending school or living in a major metropolitan area between the late fifties and 1991, when Mengistu was deposed, would likely speak Amharic. Thus, even while the teaching of Amharic became more widespread for Eritreans, the speaking of Amharic became highly politicized and undesirable.[12] The stigma against Eritrean Amharic speakers in Eritrea continues to this day.

The EPLF liberated the country in 1991, and Eritrea gained its *de facto* independence. That same year Mengistu was in Ethiopia. Following a 1993 referendum on independence, Eritreans voted in favor of independence and Eritrea as awarded *de jure* independence. The EPLF took power and has remained in power since then. After Eritrea's official independence, the EPLF changed its name to the PFDJ (People's Front For Democracy and Justice), which is currently the sole ruling party in Eritrea.

At the time of Eritrea's independence, due to thirty years of Amharization policies, a large percentage of Eritreans and likely all educated Eritreans and residents of major towns and cities would have spoken Amharic.[13] However, this was never a popular language in the highlands of Eritrea and speaking Amharic had begun to have a negative political stigma.[14] In the next section, I provide a brief overview of Eritrean government language and education policies post-independence to explain how Eritrean languages, and particularly Tigrinya, came to have even more dominance and created the perception that all Eritreans speak one or more Eritrean languages.

11 Iyob, Ruth. 1995. *Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941-1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12 Riggan 2011.

13 Hailemariam, Chefena, Sjaak Kroon, and Joel Walters. 1999. "Multilingualism and Nation-Building: Language and Education in Eritrea." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 20(6): 475-493.

14 Riggan 2011.

3. Zonal Structure, Language and Education Policy in Independent Eritrea

When the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) took power in 1991, they developed a series of policies and practices that effectively accomplished two political objectives: 1) distinguishing Eritrea culturally and politically from Ethiopia; 2) breaking down ethnic and regional political identifications that would challenge the power of the centralized state.[15] Language policy, zonal structure, and education policies kept a focus on Eritrean languages, but decoupled ethnicity from political identity attempting to forge a centralized Eritrean identity.[16]

Eritrea is approximately 50% Muslim and 50% Christian. The Christian population is predominantly Orthodox Christian, a form of Christianity encompassing Ethiopia and Eritrea and linked to the Coptic Church in Egypt; however, since Eritrea's independence the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches have split. Eritrean Christians mainly reside in the central and southern highlands of Eritrea where the capital, Asmara, is located and are traditionally settled agriculturalists. This part of the country has been historically attached to the Abyssinian Orthodox Church as well as successive Ethiopian empires and kingdoms at various times, although these villages have always had strong local forms of governance and, in many respects, remained quite autonomous from Ethiopian empires. Christian highlanders typically hail from the Tigrinya-speaking ethnic group, also approximately 50% of the population and roughly equivalent to the Orthodox Christian population, although some Tigrinya are Muslim, Catholic and, increasingly, Evangelical Christians. The predominantly Muslim Tigre ethnic group resides for the most part in the Northern highlands, Northeastern lowlands and Western lowlands of Eritrea and comprises approximately 30% of the population. The remaining 20% of the population is made up of seven other ethnic groups—Afar, Saho, Nara, Kunama, Rashaida, Bilen and Hedareb. With the exception of the Kunama who are Christian and Animists, and the Bilen and Saho, some of whom are Christian, these groups are Muslim and reside in the Coastal and Western lowlands as well as the Northern highlands. Geographic, religious and ethnic differences frame different experiences of nationalism and the state among different populations.

Eritrea has nine recognized languages and related ethnic groups (Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic/ Rashaida, Saho, Bilen, Afar, Hedareb, Kunama). Unlike Ethiopia, where ethnic groups often have a name that is different than their language (for example, those who speak Tigrinya are referred to as "Tigrayan") in Eritrea ethnicity is not referenced and distinct groups are referred to by their language (for example, those who speak Tigrinya as a mother tongue are referred to as "Tigrinya"). This is important as it both de-emphasizes ethnic identity and instead focusses on language-use and also is an important way to distinguish Eritrean Tigrinya speakers from Ethiopian. Only the Rashaida ethnic group, who speak Arabic, are referred to by name. While some of these languages are spoken in neighboring countries (for example Tigrinya and Afar, which are spoken in both Ethiopia and Eritrea) others are spoken only in Eritrea (for example Tigre). Prior to independence Eritrea was divided in sub-regions loosely based on ethno-linguistic groupings. After independence, the PFDJ intentionally reworked these regions into six zones that cut across ethnic groups in order to depoliticize ethnicity.

Eritrea has no national language, but Tigrinya and Arabic serve as working languages. English is the medium of instruction in Secondary Schools (grades 6 through 12). Schooling is mandated in students' mother tongue, but curriculum and instruction in all mother tongues is not always available and teachers often default to whatever the *lingua franca* of the area is, or the language with which they are most comfortable (assuming they speak a common language with students). In the central highlands and elsewhere in the country, this *lingua franca* is often Tigrinya although in predominantly Muslim parts of the country, parents may prefer that their children are taught in Arabic.[17] Prior to the border war, in the town of Assab, Amharic was the *lingua franca* and the language of instruction in the junior and senior secondary school often defaulted to Amharic.

Because of the many years of forced Amharization, in Eritrea there is a good deal of negative feeling and stigma regarding the speaking of Amharic. Amharic, the mostly widely spoken language of Ethiopia and

15 Woldemikael 2003, Woldemikael, Tekle. 2009. Pitfalls of Nationalism in Eritrea. In *Biopolitics, Militarism and the Developmentalist State: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century,* edited by David O'Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner, 1-16. New York: Berghan Books.

16 Hepner Tricia. 2009. *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

17 Hailemariam, Chefena et. al. 1999.

the indigenous language of the Amhara ethnic group in Ethiopia, is not recognized as an official language in Eritrea, but this does not mean that it is not spoken by Eritreans. In Asmara and other parts of the central highlands, there has been stigma and animosity towards those who do speak it, particularly after the border war. For this reason, there is a perception that all Eritreans must speak Tigrinya or another Eritrean language; however, despite this stigma, an unknown, but extremely large number of Eritreans (likely numbering in the tens, perhaps hundreds of the thousands) speak Amharic. At the time of independence, a large number of Eritreans were born, grew up and raised in Ethiopia and spoke Amharic as their first language. This population, nicknamed *Amiches,* are Eritreans but speak Amharic. Due to its unique history, Amharic was also widely spoken in the town of Assab.[18]

18 Riggan, Jennifer. 2011. In Between Nations: Ethiopian-Born Eritreans, Liminality and War. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review.* 34(1): 131-154.

4. Amiches: Eritreans Born in Ethiopia

Following Eritrea's independence in 1991, a large but unknown number of people of Eritrean descent continued to reside in Ethiopia. Those who were born in Ethiopia, but of Eritrean parentage are commonly known as "Amiches." This term might also apply to someone of Eritrean parentage who moved to Ethiopia when they were very young.

The term Amiche comes from the AMCE company (Automotive Manufacturing Company of Ethiopia), a company whose vehicle parts were manufactured in Italy and assembled in Ethiopia. Like AMCE vehicles, Amiches had parts (parents) that came from one country (Eritrea) and were assembled in another (Ethiopia). Amiches typically grew up in Ethiopia, were educated in Ethiopian schools, indoctrinated into Ethiopian discourses of nationalism, and required to participate in Ethiopian nationalist projects, such as literacy campaigns.[19] And yet, my fieldwork with Amiches suggests that many equated being Amiche as synonymous with being Eritrean. According to Eritrean citizenship law, they are eligible for Eritrean citizenship, regardless of where they live because they have one Eritrean parent. . According to the Eritrean government, they are Eritrean if they have an Eritrean parent, even if they do not possess an Eritrean ID card or speak Tigrinya.

Amiches who I interviewed typically referred to Tigrinya as their "mother tongue" (literally, the language their mother spoke) but Amharic as their "first language" or the language that they spoke first and continue to speak best. The capacity to speak Tigrinya varies greatly among Amiches. If their parents chose to speak Tigrinya at home, their capacity might range from fluent to capable of hearing the language, but not speaking it. This dynamic is typical of immigrant children around the home who listen to one language at home, but communicate in another language outside the home. If their parents spoke Amharic in the home or if one parent was an Amharic speaker, they might understand even less Tigrinya. It is therefore completely plausible that an Eritrean growing up in Ethiopia might not have ever learned to speak Tigrinya.

Some of these Eritreans who grew up in Ethiopia are fully bilingual, typically with Tigrinya. Others understand Tigrinya, but cannot speak it well. Still others have no knowledge of Tigrinya. There has never been a systematic study of language use and acquisition among Eritreans who grew up in Ethiopia so it is impossible to know what percentage of Eritreans are fully bilingual, are partially bilingual or do not speak the language at all. In my time in Assab, elsewhere in Eritrea and in Ethiopia I have become aware that it is not abnormal for Eritreans to fall into all three categories.

19 Ibid.

5. Amharic as Lingua Franca: The Case of Assab

As noted above, many Eritreans have historically had a working knowledge of Amharic even if speaking it was frowned on in much of the country. But before the border war, there were places where Amharic was commonly spoken and, in one town—Assab— it was the *lingua franca* up to the time of the border war (1998) and, although use of Amharic became somewhat politicized after the outbreak of war, it was still commonly spoken throughout the town through the mid-late 2000s and it would have been possible to live in Assab without speaking Tigrinya.

There is little scholarly writing on the town of Assab, Eritrea. Therefore, what I base my comments here on is the result of my own interviews and ethnographic research conducted between 2000 and 2005. I resided in Assab to conduct fieldwork from 2000-2005 and Amharic was still frequently spoken in daily life in Assab and at that time it would have been possible to shop, socialize, take public transportation and move through one's daily life with little to no knowledge of Tigrinya. In addition to being one of the only researchers who has conducted in-depth ethnographic field work in Assab, I resided in Assab and worked there as a Peace Corps English teacher from 1995-1997.

Assab is located at the far southern tip of Eritrea on the coast of the Red Sea. Its close proximity to Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and the Bab al Mandaab strait make it strategically located at the crossroads of several countries. The colonization of Eritrea began with the purchase of Assab from the local Sultan in the mid 1800s. Assab was under Italian rule until 1941. As with the rest of Eritrea, Assab came under British rule in 1941 and Ethiopian rule in 1952. One of Ethiopia's main motivations in annexing Eritrea was to secure permanent access to the port of Assab.

The Afar ethnic group are indigenous to Assab. Historically, the Afar are a largely self-governing, independent, pastoralist group that straddles the Denakil desert region of Eritrea and Ethiopia and inhabits the southern half of the red sea coast into Djibouti. Their social and political structure is divided into clans which are structured similarly to Somali clans, but not connected to them. Historically they have been involved in herding, fishing and salt mining. Afar living on the coast are also traders and because of trade and cultural links with Djibouti and Ethiopia, and because Amharic had served as *lingua franca* in Assab for decades, the Afar community in Assab spoke Amharic (along with Afar and, sometimes, Arabic). Some Afar in Assab spoke Tigrinya, but it was less common.

Although an integral part of Eritrea, the geographical isolation of Assab has set it apart from the rest of the country culturally and, at times, politically. Prior to Haile Selassie's rule, there was little political interest in Assab. Located approximately 900 km from Addis Ababa and across almost 500 kilometers of sparsely populated coastal desert from Asmara, it was extremely hard to reach. The Italians gave it little attention following their purchase, preferring Eritrea's northern port of Massawa.

Under Haile Selassie, and later Mengistu Haile Mariam, Assab developed a great deal, making Assab an important town for Ethiopia. The port was modernized. Roads and infrastructure, the modern port and an oil refinery were built in the 1960s. Assab effectively served as Ethiopia's main port and continued to do so until the border war broke out in 1998, processing as much as two thirds of Ethiopia's exports. The road between Assab and the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, was well travelled and maintained in reasonably good condition. Following Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia continued to utilize the Assab port and Assab continued to serve as Ethiopia's main port.

The Ethiopian population vastly outnumbered the Eritrean population prior to the border war. Even after the border war, it was only after the evacuation of the town in 2000 that the entire Ethiopian population left. After Eritrean independence, much of Assab's labor continued to come from the Ethiopian highlands. The town was relatively affluent due to the port and oil refinery. Jobs across all sectors were abundant and relatively well paying.

Meanwhile, Eritrea was, ironically, somewhat cut off from Assab. Eritrea primarily utilized its northern port, Massawa. It was not until after the border war, that the roads between Assab and Massawa (on route to Eritrea's capital, Asmara) were developed. Prior to that they were unpaved, unmaintained and of extremely poor quality. Travelers to Eritrea flew to Asmara if they could afford it, and sometimes chose the far longer

route via Ethiopia.

Many young Amiches, including young professionals, flocked to Assab in search of jobs. Assab was an attractive place for these Eritreans from Ethiopia for several reasons. Even after Eritrea's independence, it remained Ethiopia's main port, and for this reason the town had a sizable Ethiopian population. For Eritreans who came from Ethiopia this meant that Assab was culturally more comfortable for them because they were well assimilated to Ethiopian culture. Much of this sense of familiarity related to the fact that Amharic was the most commonly spoken language in Assab and Amharic was also the language of choice for most Eritreans who had come from Ethiopia. Additionally, many of these Amiches hailed from the Ethiopian capital city, Addis Ababa nd were looking for a more liberal, cosmopolitan place to live (in contrast to the Eritrean highlands which were known to be more conservative). Additionally, as early as the 1990s, the ruling EPLF in Eritrea began restricting movement out of Eritrea and requiring exit visas to leave. Amiches were concerned that they would not be allowed to return to Ethiopia to visit family and, indeed, those who relocated to Asmara were often denied permission to return to Ethiopia. Policies regarding exit visas in Assab were more relaxed due to the large amount of traffic between Assab and Addis Ababa and the large number.

Because of this Amharic was widely spoken in Assab and was the most frequent language used between the towns' residents. Amharic was even used in Eritrean schools and government offices. A separate school for the Ethiopian community, which closed in 2000, enrolled more students than the Eritrean government school and several Eritreans attended that school. During my time teaching in the Senior Secondary School (1995-1997) English was the language of instruction; however, teachers tended to default to Amharic with their students. Later, when I was doing field work in both the Senior Secondary School and the Junior Secondary School (2003-2005) teachers would sometimes slip into Amharic when speaking with a student, although Tigrinya had become much more common by this point.

After the beginning of the border war, the use of Amharic in Assab began to decline, but did so gradually. When the border war began, the port, which had served as Ethiopia's main access to the sea, closed. With the port and the refinery closed, there were fewer jobs available and the Ethiopian population began to decline. Those who had grown up in Ethiopia speaking Amharic still spoke it informally among friends but after 1998, it was no longer appropriate to speak it in schools or government offices. In 1998 one teacher told me that they would no longer be speaking with their students in Amharic because of the war, but Amharic was still frequently heard in restaurants, shops and on the street. I remember sitting in a staff meeting at the Senior Secondary School in 1999 and hearing a teacher chastise another teacher who had attempted to make his remarks in Amharic. The teacher who spoke in Amharic apologized but insisted that this was the language he could best express himself in.

Throughout the border war, Assab, which was in close proximity to the Burie front was increasingly militarized and served as a base for a number of military units. Additionally, any Eritreans deported from Ethiopia via the southern border were processed in welcome centers located in Assab. In May 2000, fearing an imminent Ethiopian invasion (which never happened) the town was evacuated. Eritrean residents were taken by boat to Massawa and any remaining Ethiopians who had not left when the war broke out in 1998, fled the town.

Even after the war ended, Ethiopians who had been living in Assab did not return, making Assab a ghost town after 2000. The town was slowly declining economically. The border with Ethiopia remained closed. Ethiopia began using the port in neighboring Djibouti. There was little information about developments in Assab until 2015 when the United Arab Emirates signed a lease for thirty-year use of the port which it is utilizing to support its military operations in the war in Yemen.

Despite the fact that Amharic is not a designated Eritrean language, it was widely spoken in Assab, making Assab something of an anomaly (and a pariah) in Eritrea. Prior to the border war, Amharic was far more commonly spoken than Tigrinya and many residents—Ethiopians, Afar and Amiches— did not speak Tigrinya or spoke it poorly. Even after the border war, Amharic remained a commonly spoken language although its use has gradually declined over the years.

6. Border War (1998-2000): War, Deportations, Removal of Ethiopian Citizenship from Eritreans in Ethiopia

When Eritrea separated from Ethiopia following a thirty-year long war in 1991, the Tigrayan-led Ethiopian People's Democratic Party (EPRDF) took power in Ethiopia. Eritrea and Ethiopia enjoyed amicable relations up to 1998. During that time, a large number of Eritreans remained in Ethiopia. The Eritrean embassy in Ethiopia enumerated the Eritreans living throughout Ethiopia and placed the number at 160,000.[20]

In 1998, a border war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Although the war was officially fought over a disputed border, differences in approaches to managing the economy and personal animosities between Eritrean president, Isaias Afewerki, and Tigrayan Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, were complicating factors in the conflict.

In July 2000, a cessation of hostilities agreement was signed, followed by a comprehensive peace agreement in December 2000. The peace agreement provided for the placement of a UN peacekeeping force in a buffer zone along the entirety of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. It also provided for a delineation and demarcation of Eritrea and Ethiopia's shared border based on colonial treaties. The international community, the government of Eritrea and the Eritrean population had every reason to believe that this signaled the end of the war. Consequently, around that time there was a period of brief stability and general optimism within Eritrea and among the Eritrean diaspora.

Despite the delineation of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border, the removal of UN peace-keeping forces in 2008, and the fact that there has been no fighting since 2000, the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was not fully resolved until 2018. Eritrea considered itself to be facing constant threats from its larger neighbor, leading to the development of a "siege" mentality that is largely exaggerated. This siege mentality gives rise to the ongoing mass militarization of a large proportion of the Eritrean population who remain in military service.[21]

In contrast, Ethiopian citizenship law never fully addressed the question of whether Eritreans who had been residing in Ethiopia prior to independence would be regarded as Eritreans, Ethiopians or both. During the war, between 1998 and 2000, 77,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent were deported from Ethiopia.[22] The vast majority of them believed themselves to be Ethiopian citizens at that time.[23] In August 1999 the Ethiopian government ordered all Eritreans above the age of 18 who had voted in the referendum for independence to register and obtain an alien residence permit. They were given a residence card which stated that they were Eritrean even if they were born in Ethiopia.[24]

Deportations led to a larger number of Amharic speakers throughout Eritrea. Many of these deportees were sent through Assab, particularly in 1999 and 2000 populating Assab with a large number of Amharic speakers at a time when the Ethiopian population had declined.

20 Kibreab, Gaim. 1999. "Mass Expulsion from Ethiopia of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean Origin and Human Rights Violations." *Eritrean Studies Review* 3, no. 2: 107-137.

21 International Crisis Group. 2010. Eritrea: The Siege State. 21 September 2010.; Muller, Tanja. 2012. Beyond the Siege State- Tracing Hybridity During a Recent Visit to Eritrea. *Review of African Political Economy* 39: 133, 451-464; Muller, Tanja. 2012b. From rebel governance to state consolidation—Dynamics of loyalty and the securitization of the state in Eritrea. *Geoforum* 43: 793-803.

22 Byrne, Hugh. 2002. Eritrea and Ethiopia: Large Scale Expulsions of Population Groups and Other Human Rights Violations in Connection with the Ethiopian- Eritrean Conflict, 1998-2000. Question and Answer Series, Washington, DC: INS Resource Information Center

23 Legasse, Asmerom. 1998. *The Uprooted: Case Material on Ethnic Eritrean Deportees from Ethiopia Concerning Human Rights Violations*. Eritrea Human Rights Task Force.; Human Rights Watch. 2003. The Horn of Africa War: Mass Expulsions and the Nationality Issue (June 1998-April 2002). January 29, 15(3)A. http://www.hrw.org/en/node/12364/section1

24 Campbell, John. 2014. *Nationalism, Law and Statelessness: Grand Illusions in the Horn of Africa.* London and New York: Routledge.

7. Oscillating Policies Towards Eritreans in Ethiopia: 2000-2020

Peace was officially declared at the end of 2000 with the signing of the Algiers agreement; however, when the key town of Badme, the flashpoint for the war, was allocated to Eritrea, Ethiopia refused to allow the border to be demarcated. The two countries remained in a state of stasis, or cold war, during which there was no fighting, but also no peace.

The two decades between the end of the border war and 2020, when Northern Ethiopia saw a new outbreak of war, saw increased refugee flows of Eritreans out of the Eritrea as Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki introduced a stringent form of authoritarian rule that denied people basic civil liberties, was intolerant of dissent (broadly defined) and required everyone to undergo an indefinite term of national servitude, often in the military. Many of these Eritreans went to Ethiopia which began welcoming them as refugees. However, Ethiopia has been politically volatile during these decades meaning that Eritreans status in Ethiopia has shifted many times over.

Meles Zenawi, who liberated Ethiopia from communist rule the same year Eritrea became independent, became Prime Minister. He remained in power in Ethiopia until his death in 2012. Although he began as a progressive, reform-oriented, democratic leader, he quickly solidified power and his Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ruled even after his death. Although initially heralded as a promising leader, who would usher in democracy and development after centuries of autocratic rule and economic stagnation, Prime Minister Meles, came to be regarded as a dictator who allocated political power and its economic spoils to elites in his own ethnic group. He repeatedly thwarted attempts at broadening political power to other ethnic groups or political parties. The 2005 parliamentary elections (1997 in the Ethiopian calendar) were particularly pivotal. Opposition parties enjoyed unprecedented support, threatening the ruling EPRDF and Meles' position as Prime Minister, and leading to a crackdown on political openness. 2005 is typically regarded as the year the ruling party firmly staunched political opposition, consolidated its rule and began the country's progress towards authoritarianism. After Prime Minister Meles' death, Hailemariam Desalegn was appointed as Prime Minister, but was regarded as a tool of the Tigrayans despite the fact that he was not Tigrayan. He failed to wrest power from the Tigrayan party.

Beginning around 2002, Eritreans began fleeing repressive policies in Eritrea. The regime's policies of mandatory, endless military service and severe state repression have led to grave human rights abuses and the flight of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans over the last two decades. In 2003, Ethiopia began to open up to Eritrean refugees, granting them *prima facie* status and eventually setting up four camps in the Tigray region. The numbers of Eritrean refugees fleeing to Ethiopia gradually began to increase, and Ethiopia established the first camp (Shimelba) to house Eritrean refugees in 2004. In the absence of normalized relations between the countries, Ethiopia arguably established a relationship of hospitality with Eritrean citizens in an attempt to win over the 'hearts and minds' of its neighbors.[25]

Most refugees in Ethiopia were required to reside in refugee camps in the regions close to the borders of the countries where these refugees came from. In the camps, they received food aid and other support services. Camp conditions were difficult. Refugees were not allowed to work legally in Ethiopia or to own businesses outside the camps. In numerous interviews and focus groups that I conducted with Eritreans in Ethiopia between 2016 and 2019, these refugees commented that they did not believe they could rely long-term on the stability of Ethiopia or the willingness of the host population to extend a welcome to them.

Even as Ethiopia pledged support for refugees, Eritrean refugees stated that Ethiopia was not a reliably safe place for them. Refugees often cited the deportations during the border war as evidence that their status in Ethiopia was not stable. Since the 1960s Ethiopia's refugee hosting has been attached to the country's security apparatus. The Association for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) was created by the communist Derg regime in 1988 and attached to the security apparatus under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When the Ministry of Internal Affairs was disbanded, a new security entity—the Security, Immigration and Refugee Affairs Authority (SIRAA) was created and ARRA became a semi-autonomous entity under SIRAA. In 2013 SIRAA was repealed and ARRA was placed under the newly created National Intelligence and Security Ser-

25 Connell, Dan. 2012. Escaping Eritrea Why They Flee and What They Face. *Middle East Report* (264): 2-9.

vices (NISS). While ARRA itself has always remained a semi-autonomous unit responsible for refugee and returnee affairs, its linkage with the security apparatus has remained unchanged.[26]

Despite the mistrust of Eritrean refugees to their Ethiopian hosts, Ethiopia has attempted to be welcoming for Eritrean refugees. In 2010 Ethiopia established the Out of Camp program (OCP) for Eritrean refugees. Recognizing the longstanding familial and communal connections that many Eritreans had in Ethiopia, Ethiopia allowed Eritreans who could show that they had a sponsoring relative who was a citizen in Ethiopia to move out of the camp. In order to take advantage of the OCP program, refugees would have to forfeit any aid from UNHCR. Eritrean refugees who had close family members in Ethiopia who did actually support them appreciated this program; however, a large number of refugees who did not have close family members also took advantage of this program. In the absence of aid and relatives to support them, many refugees in the OCP program struggled to survive. Many refugees who initially participated in the OCP program, have returned to the camps because they find they cannot survive without assistance.

During the 2016 Refugee Summit, Ethiopia made nine pledges oriented towards greater local integration and improving the livelihoods of refugees. These pledges promised to increase opportunities for refugees to engage in legal work, education and land ownership. They also promised to expand opportunities to live out of camp and, for some, a path to citizenship.

A political overhaul and ouster of the long-time ruling party, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a horrifying war in Northern Ethiopia has shifted conditions for Eritreans in Ethiopia yet again. Although the pledges were voted into law in 2018, there was little change for refugees. Refugees were still primarily housed in camps. They were still legally prohibited from working or owning a business meaning that the only work available to them is in the informal economy where pay is low and protections from abuse, such as having wages stolen, is common. Urban refugees in particular face discrimination, prejudice which may lead to and may be exploited.

In 2018, following what has been called a peaceful coup, a shake-up in the EPRDF resulted in the Tigrayans being ousted from power and the first member of the historically marginalized Oromo ethnic group becoming Prime Minister. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power with promises of peace, unity and equality for all Ethiopian ethnic groups. He also came to power amidst tremendous instability in Ethiopia.

In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed agreed to the terms of the Algiers Agreement signed in 2000 making peace with Eritrea. On 26 June, Eritrea sent a delegation to Addis Ababa and on 11 July Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Asmara, the first Ethiopian leader to do so since the war broke out in 1997.[27] On 18 July 2018 the first Ethiopia-Eritrea direct flight in 20 years took off.[28] On 20 July, Eritrean troops withdrew from the border.[29]

In late June and early July, I conducted fieldwork in the refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia. Following this surprising declaration of peace, many refugees felt fearful that they would no longer be safe in Ethiopia. During interviews conducted in the camps in summer 2018, refugees expressed their concerns about the border being opened as a result of peace. They said that they would feel exposed if the border was open and that they questioned the ability of the Ethiopian government to protect them once the border was open.[30] In an interview with a regional protection officer with UNHCR during the same time period, we were assured that the border opening would be a slow process and protections for refugees would be taken into consideration when opening the border.

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26 Kemisso, Alebachew Haybano. 2016. *Integration and Identity among Refugee Children in Ethiopia: Dilemmas of Eritrean and Somali Students in Selected Primary Schools of Addis Ababa.* PhD Dissertation. Addis Ababa University. April 2016. Accessed December 3, 2020 from http://etd.aau.edu.et/bitstream/handle/123456789/3499/Alebachew%20Kemisso.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

27 Schemm, Paul. 2018. "After 20-year military standoff, Ethiopia and Eritrea agree to normalize ties in historic breakthrough." Washington Post, July 8 2018. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-leader-arrives-in-eritrea-for-unprecedented-summit-between-former-enemies/2018/07/08/a1144f96-826b-11e8-b9a5-7e1c013f8c33_story.html, accessed 28 November 2019.

28 Al Jazeera. 2018. "First direct Ethiopia-Eritrea flight in 20 years takes off." Al Jazeera, July 18 2018. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/direct-ethiopia-eritrea-flight-20-years-takes-180718073307105.html, accessed 28 November 2019.

29 Al Jazeera. 2018. "Eritrea withdraws troops from border with former foe Ethiopia." Al Jazeera, 20 July 2018. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-withdraws-troops-border-foe-ethiopia-180720071708251.html, accessed 28 November 2019.

30 https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2018/08/16/fear-dampens-hope-among-eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia, https://africanarguments.org/2018/08/cant-go-home-peace-eritrea-refugees/

The border was opened quickly, approximately two months later, and there were no considerations given to refugee protection in doing so. In September 2018, a somewhat mysterious declaration of peace was signed which reportedly included plans for much more expansive economic cooperation,[31] and the presidents of both countries attended the openings of two border crossing points, symbolically held on the Ethiopian New Year.[32]

In the first month after the border opened, an estimated 15,000 Eritreans crossed the border. Both sides enjoyed family reunions and widespread trade.[33] For Eritreans in Eritrea, the border opening meant that, for the first time since the border war, they could leave the country without undergoing a grueling (and seldom successful) process of acquiring a passport and exit visa to leave the country legally, or risking prison and torture or death at the border if they crossed the border illegally. Border patrols (and Eritrea's shoot-to-kill practice at the border) disappeared abruptly.[34] The opening of the border also led to the influx of refugees into Ethiopia. In the first two weeks that the border was open, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 10,000 Eritrean refugees were either registered or awaiting registration.[35]

The peace plans stopped quite abruptly without much explanation. Even as cross-border trade was thriving and communities on both sides of the border were planning for renewed cooperation, there were rumors that border crossings were about to become more restrictive as of January 2019. By March 2019, only the remote Assab-Burie border crossing was open and even that closed in April.[36] According to interlocutors whose friends and relatives crossed the border at this time, people could still do so but only unofficially. At check points, they were instructed to go around and cross informally. Trade mostly stopped except for trade in goods that could be carried or transported by donkey. Some sources reported that a porter business at the border was thriving. Others recounted stories of Eritrean relatives who had flown from abroad to Ethiopia and driven into Eritrea, having to leave vehicles on the Eritrean side and cross on foot when the border crossings became more restrictive. The border was thus more porous than it had been prior to September 2019, but far from open. Despite restrictions, the UNHCR estimated that around 6,000 Eritreans arrived in Ethiopia every month in 2019.[37]

In late 2019 Ethiopia announced the planned closure of one of the four camps in Tigray (Hitsats) without announcing an adequate plan for where those refugees would be housed. In that same year, they announced an end of *prima facie* status for Eritrean refugees. The end of *prima facie* status for Eritrean refugees reverses decades of refugee policy towards Eritreans. Many Eritrean refugees took this policy change coupled with the announcement of the closure of the Hitsats camp as evidence of a shifting stance of the Ethiopian government hospitality towards Eritreans. Refugees continued to express concerns about whether an Ethiopian government now allied with the Eritrean government would continue to extend the same protections to them.

31 Plaut, Martin. 2019. "How glow of the historic accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea has faded." The Conversation, July 7 2019. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/how-glow-of-the-historic-accord-between-ethiopia-and-eritrea-has-faded-119931, accessed 28 November 2019.

32 Ahmed, Hadra. 2018. "Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Opens for First Time in 20 Years." The New York Times, 11 September 2018. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-border-opens.html, accessed 25 July 2017.

33 BBC News. 2019. "Ethiopia-Eritrea border boom as peace takes hold." BBC News, January 9 2019. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46794296, accessed 28 November 2019.

34 Gardner, Tom. 2018. "'I was euphoric': Eritrea's joy becomes Ethiopia's burden amid huge Exodus." The Guardian, 12 October 2018. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/oct/12/eritrea-joy-becomes-ethiopia-burden-huge-exodus-refugees, accessed 28 November 2019.

35 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2018. "Update #2 on new arrivals from Eritrea." UNHCR, 5 October 2018. Retrieved from https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/66202.pdf, accessed 28 November 2019.

36 Belloni, Milena and Jeffrey, James. 2019. "Eritrea: amid border wrangles, Eritreans wrestle with staying or going." AllAfrica, April 30 2019. Retrieved from https://allafrica.com/stories/201905010448.html, accessed 28 November 2019.

37 UNHCR. 2019. "Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia: Tigray and Afar regions situational update."

8. The Tigray War: November 2020 to the Present

The situation in Ethiopia has grown more volatile and less hospitable for Eritreans particularly with the outbreak of war in Northern Ethiopia in November 2020. Because Eritrea has been involved in the war, this has made the situation for Eritreans in Ethiopia extremely vulnerable as they are attacked on all sides.

With the whole world focused on the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, little attention was paid to Ethiopia. Tensions between Tigrayan leadership and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government continued to worsen, escalating sharply when Abiy postponed elections slated to be held in summer 2020 and Tigray held its own elections.[38] In October of that year, the federal government withheld funding from Tigray leading to both sides issuing "dueling statements of denunciation and derecognition".[39]

In early November war broke out and escalated quickly. Each side differed in their interpretation of events that triggered the war. The federal government cited a Tigrayan attack on federal military installations in Tigray (the so-called Northern Command), and Tigrayan leadership claimed the attack was self-defense against an operation launched by the federal government that same day.[40]

A media and internet blackout made it close to impossible to know what was happening in Tigray. It was well known that Eritrea was almost immediately embroiled in the war, although they denied involvement repeatedly. In retaliation for Eritrea's involvement, Tigray launched missiles at Asmara in mid-November. In late November 2020, Ethiopian federal forces captured Mekele and declared victory, but the war was far from over.[41]

There was little information available about what was happening in refugee camps during the blackout. Accounts of atrocious violence against civilians and refugees, including attacks in the historic town of Axum, ethnic massacres, and the use of rape as a weapon of war began to trickle out, although these would not be fully reported on until early 2021.[42] Anthropologist Natalia Paszkiewicz, who had worked with an NGO in the Hitsats camp, began receiving phone calls with details of atrocities occurring in the camps which she published on social media and later assembled into one of the first reports on what happened in Hitsats.[43] It became clear that refugees were being brutalized by all sides, first by the Eritrean forces, and later by Tigrayans. Amanda and I also received calls from an interlocutor in the Adi Harush camp who was desperately trying to get his family away from what had become a frontline in the fighting. Along with atrocities committed against the civilian population in Tigray, there were horror stories in the camps of forced return to Eritrea, rape, indiscriminate killing, and torture, but a full picture did not emerge until the blackout was lifted in late January 2021.

Eventually, published reports assembled and detailed an account of what had transpired in the camps during the early months of the war, and satellite images showed that the Hitsats and Shimelba camps had been destroyed.[44] UNHCR staff left the camps as soon as the war began. After that refugees were repeat-

38 Paravicini, Giulia. 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray holds regional election in defiance of federal government. Reuters. 8 September 2020. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopias-tigray-holds-regional-election-in-defiance-of-federal-government-idUSKBN25Z35S

39 Tronvoll, 2022.The Anatomy of Ethiopia's Civil War. *Current History* 121:835 (163-169). Available at: https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article/121/835/163/124577/The-Anatomy-of-Ethiopia-s-Civil-War

40 Ibid; Weldemichael, Awet; Yohannes, Yibeyin Hagos; Estefanos, Meron & Anonymous. 2022. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray and the Ethiopian Civil War. International Peace Research Association. Available at: https://martinplaut.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/between_a_rock_and_a_hard_place-eritrean_refugees_in_tigray_and_ethiopian_civil_war_weldemichael_et._al._2022.pdf

41 Anna, Cara. 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray leader confirms firing missiles at Eritrea. *Associate Press.* 15 November 2020. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/international-news-eritrea-ethiopia-asmara-kenya-33b9aea59b4c984562eaa86d8547c6dd

42 Human Rights Watch. 2021. Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians. *Human Rights Watch.* 5 March 2021. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians

43 Paszkiewicz, Natalia. 2021. 'The whole world has left us': Eritrean refugees caught in Tigray crossfire. *TRT World.* 26 July 2021. Available at: https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/the-whole-world-has-left-us-eritrean-refugees-caught-in-tigray-crossfire-48675

44 (Human Rights Watch. 2021b. Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. *Human Rights Watch.* 16 September 2021. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray; Miller, Sarah. 2022. Nowhere to Run: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray: Brief, March 2022. *Refugees International.* 3 March 2022. Available at: https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/1/nowhere-to-run-eritrean-refugees-in-tigray; Weldemichael, Awet; Yohannes, Yibeyin Hagos; Estefanos, Meron & Anonymous. 2022. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray and the Ethiopian Civil War. International Peace Research Association. Available at: https://martinplaut.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/between_a_rock_and_a_hard_place-eritrean_refugees_in_tigray_and_ethiopian_civil_war_weldemichael_et._al._2022.pdf

edly targeted by several different actors in the conflict – Eritreans, Tigrayan militia (and possibly Tigrayan government forces and Ethiopian federal forces). Between November 2020 and January 2021, the Eritrean army and Tigrayan militia alternately occupied the Hitsats and Shimelba camps, which housed approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees at the start of the conflict. Eritrean forces were targeting refugees, many of whom were regarded as political dissidents. By many accounts, the Eritrean forces had lists of particular names of people in both Hitsats and Shimelba. People who were able to escape told stories of forced return to Eritrea and destruction of houses and humanitarian infrastructure in the two camps.

When Eritrean forces withdrew from the camps, Tigrayan militias forcibly returned refugees who had fled Hitsats back to the camp. In the process, refugees reported killings, sexual assault, looting, and arbitrary detention without food during the occupation of the area by Tigrayan militias, who also sought out and punished refugees, possibly because they suspected them of participating in looting the local town, and likely also because they were Eritreans and, ironically, blamed for the atrocities committed against the civilian population by the Eritrean army in Tigray.

Similar to refugees in Hitsats, those in Shimelba, many of whom are ethnic Kunama, were forced to flee due to heavy fighting around the camp, intimidation by both sides, and concerns about possible revenge attacks by the host community for the reportedly widespread killings and rapes of Tigrayan civilians committed by Eritrean forces.[45] When UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies were finally able to visit the camps in late March 2021, after a protracted news blackout, they found them empty and destroyed, with many of the shelters and aid offices burned to the ground.[46]

Because of these dangers, many refugees struggled to find somewhere to go. Some of the refugees displaced from Hitsats and Shimelba arrived at the older camps of Mai Aini and Adi Harush, facing crowded conditions, dwindling water supplies, a lack of health services, and reports of violence and looting from armed militias. Some refugees fled to Addis Ababa early in the war, but they faced hardships there as well. Assistance from UNHCR and ARRA was initially not forthcoming for refugees who self-relocated to Addis Ababa meaning that refugees who had fled to the capital city had no way to live. There were accounts of refugees being returned to the camps by ARRA officials who told them it was safe. In December 2020, for example, Reuters reported that a busload of Eritreans were forcibly returned to Tigray from Addis with military escort.[47] A handful of diaspora-sponsored go-fund-me initiatives cropped up to fill the gap that the humanitarian apparatus left open, but the reach of these initiatives was limited to the immediate networks of those sponsoring them, and refugees who were not connected with these particular networks still lacked resources to live. Refugees staged a protest supported by a twitterstorm to demand assistance,[48] which they eventually received from UNHCR.[49]

Impeding the flow of aid to both refugee and civilian populations has been a tactic deployed primarily by the Ethiopian government throughout the war, leaving refugees with no good options. Refugees who have tried to escape the region on foot through the mountains do not fare much better, as they have found themselves caught in the crossfire between warring sides. They are targeted by Tigrayans because they are Eritrean (and therefore associated with the invading Eritrean army) *and* by Amharic and Oromo-speaking troops who associate anyone who speaks Tigrinya with Tigrayans.[50]

The war may have altered course several times, but one consistency has been the extreme vulnerability of both refugees and the civilian population, particularly given limited and fluctuating access to the region by both reporters and the humanitarian community. Aid agencies reported being repeatedly blocked from

45 EHCR/OHCHR 2021. Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission/ Office of the United Nations High Commisioner for Human Rights Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties. *Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights.* 3 November 2021. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/OHCHR-EHRC-Tigray-Report.pdf

46 Human Rights Watch 2021a

47 Reuters. 2020. Ethiopia returning Eritrean refugees to Tigray camps; U.N. concerned over move. 11 December 2020. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUKKBN28L0X8

48 Endeshaw, Dawit. 2021. Eritrean refugees in Ethiopian capital protest insecurity at Tigray camps. Reuters. 30 July 2021. Available at: https://www.euronews.com/2021/07/30/us-ethiopia-conflict

49 UNHCR. 2021a.UNHCR Ethiopia Operational Update (December 2021). *Relief Web* 21 December 2021. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-ethiopia-operational-update-december-2021

50 Rudolf, Markus. 2022. We live in a state of fear: Eritrean refugees keep bearing the brunt of the Ethiopian crisis. *Ammodi: African migration, mobility, and displacement.* 19 September 2022. Available at: https://ammodi.com/2022/09/19/we-live-in-a-state-of-fear-eritrean-refugees-keep-bearing-the-brunt-of-the-ethiopian-crisis/

accessing camps.[51] There were accounts of Eritreans trapped in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps in Tigray as fighting escalated in June 2021,[52] and food shortages and overall animosities created by the war may have created tensions between refugees and local populations. In July 2021, UNHCR issued a statement of concern that refugees were being intimidated in the camps.[53] In June 2021 the Alemwach camp for Eritreans was set up in the Amhara region. It has been similarly difficult to ascertain the status of refugees there, but personal communications with interlocutors and social media have reported atrocious conditions, attacks on refugees, and profound insecurity in Alemwach. Additionally, the camp was located close to the front lines and is likely unsafe.[54]

The government declared an indefinite humanitarian truce in March 2022, and the first international aid convoy to arrive by land since December arrived in Mekele on April 1st.[55] The humanitarian truce broke down in late August 2022 when all parties to the conflict moved to solid war footing. On 2 November a Peace Agreement was signed in South Africa, but the situation for Eritrean refugees remains precarious. Many have been relocated to Alemwach while others remain in Tigray. Many have relocated themselves to Addis Ababa.

Refugees in Addis are struggling. Prejudices and animosities from Ethiopians is on the rise as Eri refugees are blamed for increases in rent and for political problems. As the Ethiopian economy falters, crime is on the rise, particularly in areas where refugees are and refugees are blamed. There have been arrests of refugees along with other Tigrinya speakers. And there are rumors of collaboration between Ethiopian and Eritrean security actors in Addis Ababa.

Since March 2020, Eritreans have had to undergo status determination and very few (if any) get refugee status. There are problems getting documentation which is a problem for any refugees with a family reunification or resettlement process. So that drives migration. But even many Eritreans with status are leaving Ethiopia.

Ethiopia seems to be moving back to an encampment model of refugee management. Because of difficulties getting services and documents, it seems to be a less and less hospitable place for Eritrean refugees. Additionally, there are concerns for safety. For this reason, many Eritreans may be moving on from Ethiopia, but finding difficult circumstances elsewhere.

51 Miller, Sarah. 2022. Nowhere to Run: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray: Brief, March 2022. *Refugees International.* 3 March 2022. Available at: https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/1/nowhere-to-run-eritrean-refugees-in-tigray

52 Schlein, Lisa. 2021. UN Says Armed Groups Threaten Thousands of Eritrean Refugees in Tigray. *Voice of America.* 27 July 2021. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_un-says-armed-groups-threaten-thousands-eritrean-refugees-tigray/6208795.html

53 UNHCR. 2021b. Eritrean Refugees in Tigray caught up in conflict. 27 July 2021. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2021/7/60ffc4d44/eritrean-refugees-tigray-caught-conflict.html

54 Weldemichael et. al. 2022

55 Al Jazeera. 2022. Ethiopia declares unilateral truce to allow aid into Tigray. *Al Jazeera.* 24 March 2022. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/24/ethiopia-declares-truce-to-allow-aid-into-tigray

9. Conclusion

In this briefing paper I have explained several things. My main objective is to explain the conditions under which an Eritrean would not speak an Eritrean language and would instead speak Amharic. It is plausible that an Amiche Eritrean who grew up in Addis Ababa, was deported to Eritrea in the late 1990s or early 2000s, and returned to Ethiopia as a refugee in the mid-2000s might not have learned to speak Tigrinya during their time in Eritrea. This is particularly plausible if this individual lived in the town of Assab where Amharic has historically been commonly spoken and was still the most common language spoken, serving as the lingua franca, when I lived there in 2005.

Eritrea and Ethiopia have a long shared history. This combined with policies of Amharization have meant that older generations of Eritreans throughout the country are likely to speak Amharic. Additionally, there have always been large numbers of Eritreans who lived most of their lives in Ethiopia who speak Amharic as their first language (Amiches). The deportations of Eritreans during the border war brought another, younger, wave of Amharic speakers into Eritrea, increasing the number of Eritrean Amharic speakers in Eritrea.

Eritrea is a multilingual country that has tried to give equal weight to all Eritrean languages through its mother-tongue education policy. However, despite the large number of Eritrean Amharic speakers, many of whom speak Amharic as their first language, Eritrea does not acknowledge Amharic as an Eritrean language for two reasons. First, because has long been associated with Ethiopia and served as the national language under Haile Selassie and the Derg, Eritrea does not acknowledge Amharic as an Eritrean language in an effort to distinguish itself from Ethiopia. Second, the history of linguistic repression, particularly policies of forced Amharization, created a negative association with the Amharic language for many Eritreans, particularly those in the central highlands. The decision to not regard Amharic as an Eritrean language is reflective of politics rather than whether Eritreans speak Amharic as their native tongue.

Eritreans who grew up and lived in Ethiopia would have been fluent in Amharic and, depending on their family's language choices and background, might not have had reason to learn Tigrinya. Even if they returned to Eritrea, they likely would have continued to speak Amharic among family and close friends. Depending on how long they stayed in Eritrea and where they lived, they may never have had need of learning Tigrinya. Additionally, Assab was an exceptional case, an Eritrean town where Amharic was spoken commonly. When Ethiopia began to open up to Eritrean refugees, many of these Amharic speaking deportees returned to Ethiopia. More recently, however, with the onset of the war in 2020 and changing Ethiopian refugee policies, Ethiopia is no longer a hospitable place for Eritreans, even those who speak Amharic.