CHAPTER 2

Differences and Similarities in History

When thinking about the profile of my interviewees, one might at first be puzzled by the great difference between them: the period and the character of the colonial domination, together with differences in culture, language and religion make Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese two very different social groups. We know for example that while the Dutch domination lasted for several centuries in Suriname (1667–1975), the domination of Eritrea by Italy lasted only for a few decades (1869–1941), with less economic and cultural impact than the Dutch had in Suriname. Also, as I will later illustrate, the Eritrean and Surinamese presences today in their former colonizer countries are very differently characterized. Yet, the more I explored the background of the two groups, in particular in relation to the history of their decolonisation and of their migration towards western countries, the more I became convinced that one could find interesting points of comparison between them.

In making this comparison, I found that a particular moment in time had been a crucial turning point, for both groups, concerning their migration and decolonization. This is the year 1975, a moment in which Surinamese people in Paramaribo declared their Independence from the Dutch Kingdom, while in Asmara the Eritrean-Ethiopian war exploded. In both cases, the year 1975 did not mark the end of an historical phase, but it actually inaugurated decades of political tensions, civil war and economic impoverishment.

Moreover, one will notice that the migrations from those two countries also have some similarities: in both cases one can observe that a first, small but significant, number of people, both men and women, already started to leave their country in the 1960s. This number increased during the 1970s, in particular in the years 1974/1975 in which one could see a peak in the amount of departures, with a clear correspondence with the above mentioned political events which took place in 1975. Again, the number of departures increased around 1979/1980, in correspondence with other changes in the national political situation. 1

In the case of Eritreans and Surinamese alike, the people leaving from the 1960s until 1972 seem to have been pushed by a general desire to improve their lives and to travel abroad, maybe for a short time; while those who left around

1 While in the case of Surinamese people I had ample disposal of statistical data, in the case of Eritreans I am suggesting estimations based on the rhythm of the departures – arrivals on the basis of interviewees' profiles and their memories.

For the years 1974/1975 have in common the fact of having been in a sense forced to migrate by the fear of the political events taking place. These people did not really know what the future held for them, nor did they know exactly what they were leaving behind, because of the speed of change in their home countries. For the people leaving from 1978 on, however, one can observe a clearer consciousness in the decision to leave: war and impoverishment in their countries were already a matter of fact, while the conditions of entrance, work and settlement in the destination country had, by then, been tested by many co-nationals before.

Another similarity can be seen in the choice of the former coloniser as first country of destination, a choice which was not (or not only) based on some bureaucratic explanation (as visa and employment regulations), but it was rather based on the ‘bond’ which existed with these countries in the light of decades (even centuries in the case of Surinamese) of cultural and economic predominance in their lands.

Yet, the migration of these people is to be contextualised in a wider movement of black people from Africa and the Caribbean towards Europe and North-America especially, which started during the 1950s/1960s, and, as I explained in chapter one, brought about the formation of what I called ‘Black Europe’. This global movement was accompanied by the spreading phenomenon of anti-black xenophobic sentiments in western Europe. From this point of view, Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese arriving in the 1960s and 1970s were pioneers in facing the anti-black racism and the discrimination against non-EU migrants which has characterised the last decades of European history.

In light of these considerations, one may find in this chapter an historical overview of the migratory movement of people from Suriname towards the Netherlands and from Eritrea towards Italy. In the following pages, I will illustrate the colonial and migratory history of each country; the conditions of settlement in the Netherlands/Italy, with a special focus on Rome and Rotterdam; and the conditions of the women’s integration in the domestic work sector.

**Suriname**

*Colonialism and Slavery*\(^2\)

In the seventeenth century, after a long time during which only native groups inhabited its territories, what is today Suriname became an object of interest

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