LESSONS FOR LIFE: 
TWO MIGRATORY PORTRAITS FROM ERITREA

Magnus Treiber

The captain of the fishing boat described what he said was a terrifying scene. “What we saw was incredible: heads were coming in and out [of the water] and people were screaming,” Francesco Rifiortito told Italy’s Ansa news agency. “We did all we could” (BBC-News, 06.04.2011).

“I feel really sorry, among those victims I know someone named Andeberhan” (Daniel, E-Mail, 10.4.2011).

INTRODUCTION

After more than 200 migrants drowned in Maltese waters some 70km from the small Italian island Lampedusa in early April 2011, the European parliament held a minute’s silence. The death toll, including mothers and children, was too high to be ignored or reacted upon with the usual calls to upgrade the European border-security agency Frontex. According to BBC the overcrowded boat apparently started its unlucky journey from Zuwara in Western Libya. It was carrying people from Chad, Ivory Coast and Sudan, and even some people from Bangladesh, but most passengers originated from Eritrea and Somalia. Since the beginning of revolutionary turmoil in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya more than 23,000 boat-people had already reached the Italian island Lampedusa and Malta by sea and thus renewed irregular migration via the Mediterranean. Since the signing of the scandalous Libyan-Italian “Treaty of Friendship” in June 2009 and the coming of intensified cooperation between the EU and its North-African neighbours, this route had been disrupted to secure the Schengen-borders. The inhuman conditions of Libyan prisons were well-known (the country has neither signed the 1951 Geneva Convention, nor its amending 1967 Protocol), but the principle of non-refoulement was obviously and repeatedly

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1 BBC News: Scores of migrants missing as boat capsizes off Italy. 06.04.2011 (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12982923).
violated in the last years. However, after NATO started to attack Kaddafi’s troops, the Libyan leader re-opened the Mediterranean route to migrants. Already a mere few days after this latest maritime catastrophe, the political discussions in Italy, France and Germany came back to normal: the focus was once again on how to deal with these “economic migrants” from Africa, their allocation, possible deportation and costs. Refugees from the war in Libya and from Eritrea and Somalia, eligible for protection, already disappeared from the headlines—probably to prevent further arrivals.

This chapter seeks to provide a deeper understanding of migration from Eritrea, a small country at the shores of the Red Sea, by following two young men, Biniam and Daniel, through parts of their difficult journey and giving an insight into their migration’s context. Since 2007 I have met them and their respective friends and co-migrants in Khartoum and Addis Ababa or Cairo and Jerusalem respectively. The outmigration from Eritrea in the last decade has reached figures of several hundred thousand people. The latest UNHCR statistical yearbook gives a figure of 236,059 unsettled cases in the category “total population of concern.” So Biniam’s and Daniel’s experiences can be taken as examples for many, many people in similar situations. Field research has been done in situ, in different migratory stages in various places, hubs and intersections of their trajectories—following concepts of multi-sited, transnational research (cf. Marcus 1995; Hannerz 1998).

As part of a research network on migration and knowledge (ForMig), I will pay special attention to the acquisition and transformation of knowledge during migration. The sociology of knowledge—in the tradition of Schütz, Berger and Luckmann (e.g., 1972)—considers knowledge as a dynamic process constituting human and therefore meaningful action (Knoblauch 2005: 142). Concerning migration from Africa it has been shown that the journey to Europe (or Northern America) may demand constant re-navigation, considerable detours, informal solutions and

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4 Since 09/2009 the research project is located at the Chair of Anthropology, University of Bayreuth, and part of the “ForMig” research network on “Migration and Knowledge”, funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts, Germany (“Dynamic Worlds of Imagination—Learning processes, knowledge and communication among young urban migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia”, Kurt Beck, Magnus Treiber, Délia Nicoué; www.formig.net). The project evolved from a doctoral thesis on young urbanites’ dreams and life-worlds in Asmara/Eritrea (Treiber 2005).