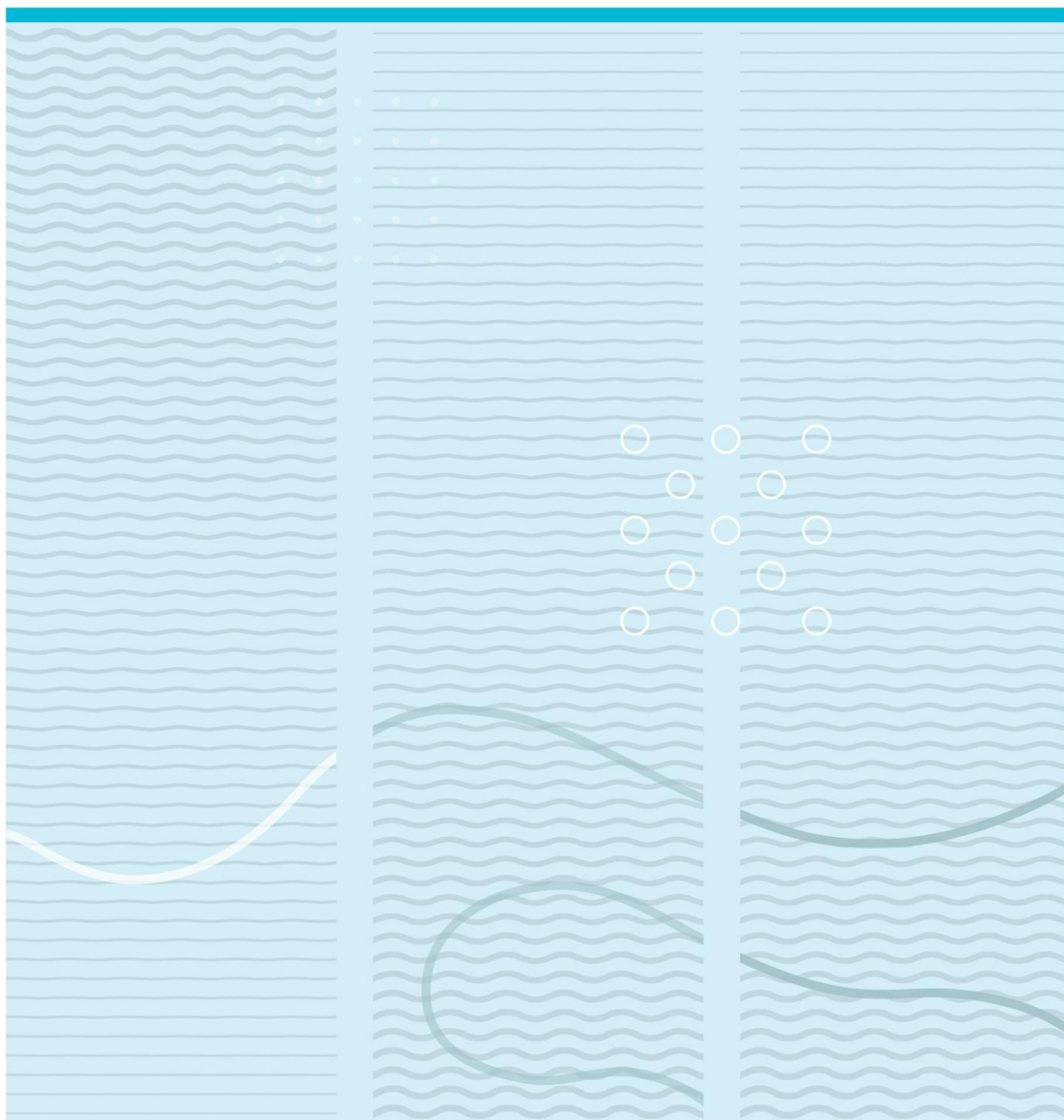


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# Language Diversity and Transnational Political Engagement

The Case of Eritrean Muslim Diaspora in Norway



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This thesis is worth 120 study points

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role of language diversity in the diasporic political engagement of Eritrean Muslim non-Tigrigna speakers and Tigrigna speakers in Norway. It attempts to explore the interplay of language in the realization of collective transnational political movement that seeks democratization and political reform in Eritrea. To grasp a broader understanding of the influence of language in the diaspora Eritrean politics, the thesis seeks to critically analyze the post-independence language policy that was adopted by the Eritrean government and highlight its implications in the inter-Eritrean diaspora socio-political engagement. As a methodology, a qualitative strategy with semi-structured interviewing was used. The results indicate that the post-independence language policy in Eritrea was designed to legitimize Tigrigna language domination and conversely, to promote the fragmentation of Eritrean Muslims along linguistic lines. The homeland-originated language policy also has cross-border implications for the non-Tigrigna speakers which have neither learned in Tigrigna nor the Arabic language – the political debate in the diaspora is mainly conducted in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English. Hence, the policy has perpetuated their disengagement and exclusion from collective political engagement in Norway. Having said that, linguistic barriers that exist among the Eritrean diaspora are not the sole factors that undermine the possibility of a united transnational political engagement. There are other multifaceted underlying elements, including the behavior of the Eritrean government towards the minorities; mistrust; lack of solidarity and democratic culture; non-recognitions of other's rights; intolerance; and long-distance surveillance undertaken by the agents of the Eritrean regime in the diaspora.

**Key Words:** Language diversity, language policy, diaspora, political engagement, Eritrean Muslims, minority rights

**Number of words:** 30827

# Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Contents.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Abbreviations.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Statement of the Problem.....	10
1.2 Objectives of the Study.....	12
1.3 Rationale and Relevance of the Study.....	13
1.4 Thesis Outline.....	13
<b>2. Methodology.....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Research Design.....	15
2.1.1 Sampling.....	17
2.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews.....	18
2.1.3 Data Analysis.....	19
2.2 Validity and Reliability.....	21
2.3 Positionality and Being an Insider in a Research.....	22
2.4 Ethical Considerations.....	23
2.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study.....	24
<b>3. Literature Review.....</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 The State of Human Rights in Eritrea.....	26
3.1.1 Minority Rights.....	27
3.1.2 Language Rights.....	28
3.2 Dynamics of Diaspora Eritreans and their Political Engagement.....	30
3.2.1 Pre-independence Diaspora and Political Engagement.....	31
3.2.2 Post-independence Diaspora.....	32
3.2.2.1 Forced Migration from Eritrea.....	32
3.2.2.2 The Dangerous Journey Seeking Protection.....	32
3.2.2.3 Political Engagement of Post-independence Diaspora.....	34
3.2.3 Eritrean Diaspora Community in Norway.....	36
<b>4. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 The Concept of Diaspora.....	39
4.1.1 Transnational Political Practices.....	42

4.1.2 Social Movements.....	45
4.2 Concepts on Language and Society.....	48
4.2.1 Language and Society.....	48
4.2.2 Linguistic Pluralism and Critical Socio-linguistics.....	49
<b>5. Understanding a Multilingual Country: Legislation, Policy, and Perceptions of the Role of Language in Eritrea.....</b>	<b>51</b>
5.1 Language, Culture, Religion, and Power Relations in Eritrea.....	51
5.2 Perceptions about the Language and its Policy in Eritrea.....	56
5.2.1 Consequences of the Language Policy to Eritrean Muslims in Eritrea.....	59
5.3 Implications of the Language Policy in the Diaspora.....	63
<b>6. Language Diversity and Transnational Socio-political Practices.....</b>	<b>66</b>
6.1 Transnational Socio-political Practices.....	66
6.2 Language, Social Engagement and exclusion.....	69
6.3 Language and Culture as a Barrier to Political Engagement.....	72
6.4 Language and the Detached Diaspora Media.....	73
6.5 The Impact of Homeland Experiences on Diaspora Engagement.....	76
6.6 Transnational Practices and the Obstacles Beyond Language.....	78
6.6.1 Weaknesses of Diaspora Eritrean Community.....	78
6.6.2 Government's Long-distance Grip over the Diaspora.....	80
<b>7. Conclusion and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>83</b>
7.1 Recommendations and Suggestion for Future Research.....	85
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Annex1: Request for Participation in the Research Project.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Annex 2: Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Annex 3: Participants' Overview.....</b>	<b>100</b>

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Beshir Abdurahman Ismail

## **Abbreviations**

ELF.....	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF.....	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EU.....	European Union
HRW.....	Human Rights Watch
IMDI .....	Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet
LHR.....	Linguistic Human Rights
MSF.....	Medecins Sans Frontieres
NTS.....	Non-Tigrigna speakers
PFDJ.....	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
SSB.....	Statistisk Sentralbyrå
TPLF.....	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TS.....	Tigrigna Speakers
UDHR.....	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UDI .....	Utlendingsdirektoratet
UK.....	United Kingdom
UN.....	United Nations
UNESCO.....	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR.....	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC.....	United Nations Human Rights Council
US.....	United States
WWII.....	World War II

## 1. Introduction

*‘Language informs the way we think, the way we experience, and the way we interact with each other. Language provides the basis of community, but also the grounds for division’ (Montgomery, 1995, p.251)*

The significance of language to a group of people is not merely limited to its utility in communication, but also its decisive role on getting access to power and resources, identity, unity, dignity and social justice. The Eritrean society is multilingual, composed of diverse ethnolinguistic groups and nine different languages. However, the most commonly used languages in the transnational political engagement of Eritrean diasporas are Tigrigna, Arabic, and to a lesser extent, English.

My research topic intends to analyze and explain the diasporic political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in relation to the Christian Tigrigna speakers (TS) in Norway considering their linguistic diversity. I will emphasize the role of language in their unity and transnational political movements that seek political reform and democratization in Eritrea.

In the literature of Eritrean diaspora, various studies describe the nature of Eritrean diaspora community as divided along ethnoreligious, regional and ideological lines (Bereketeab, 2007; Kibreab, 2007; Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015; Conrad, 2010). The studies acknowledge that Eritrean diaspora communities are not united in their transnational struggle for human rights and democratization. Nevertheless, what remains to be explored in the debate of political engagement of diaspora Eritreans is the significance of language as an important element in the unity and integrity of their transnational socio-political engagement. So far, the interplay of language in the inter-Eritrean diaspora engagement regarding the politics of their homeland has not been elucidated. Moreover, the behavior of the Eritrean government and its impact on exacerbating the ethnoreligious, regional and ideological divides among the Eritrean diaspora is not sufficiently elaborated. To date, the debate seems to overlook the underlying factors behind the divided Eritrean diaspora; their diasporic political engagement cannot be analyzed in isolation from the policies and practices of the Eritrean government within the country. The Eritrean diaspora harbors different grievances and demands as a response to the differential oppression by the ruling regime in Eritrea towards the diverse ethnolinguistic groups.

To broadly understand the role of linguistic diversity in the transnational political practices of diaspora Eritreans, it is quite necessary to draw on the post-independence language policy



adopted by the Eritrean government and contextualize its impacts in the marginalization and alienation of Eritrean Muslims, both inside Eritrea and the diaspora. The language policy in the homeland seems to exclude some sections of the Eritrean society from participating in the diasporic political practices in Norway. Debates addressing the suppression of minority rights and language rights in Eritrea are few (Tronvoll, 2009; Mohammad, 2016; AbaArre, 2001; Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014), and studies that examine the links between the suppression of minorities in the homeland and the disunity in the diaspora remain under-researched. A critical review of the language policy in Eritrea aims at the understanding of how it has impacted the cross-border socio-political engagement of Eritrean diaspora in Norway.

Transnational political practices by the Eritrean diaspora seeking political reform in the homeland is growing. Diaspora opposition movements, largely settled in the US, Europe, and Australia include various human rights activists, civil society organizations, political parties and unorganized grassroots movements at the individual level. They are mainly engaged in the documentation of the government's human rights violations; mobilisation of the diaspora to participate in anti-government activities such as demonstrations, and make use of the cyberspace as a platform for their diasporic political engagement for human rights and democratization in Eritrea (Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015; Hepner, 2007; Bernal, 2013). One of the most remarkable rallies against the Eritrean government was held in Geneva<sup>1</sup>, in June 2016, where thousands of Eritreans from all parts of the world showed up to demonstrate against the human rights abuses committed by the Eritrean government. These transnational political practices are aimed to lobby the international community to exert pressure on the Eritrean government to respect human rights and implement the Eritrean Constitution. The country's most important legal document that was ratified in 1997 has not yet been implemented (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014, p.39).

Similarly, in Norway, the Eritrean diaspora is engaged in the politics of their homeland. Media reports show that Eritreans residing in different parts of Norway protest the widespread human rights infringements of the Eritrean regime against its citizens<sup>2</sup>. The demonstrations

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<sup>1</sup> For a broader report on the demonstration of Eritreans in the diaspora condemning human rights abuse in Eritrea see <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/diaspora-eritreans-protest-regime-human-rights-abuses-160623210503792.html>

<sup>2</sup> A report about the demonstration against the Eritrean regime in Oslo in September 2016 is available here <http://www.utrop.no/Nyheter/Utenriks/30754>

are not only undertaken to protest dictatorship in the homeland, but also target the institutions and activities of pro-government circles in Norway<sup>3</sup>.

Diasporas, despite their common identity, they do not share the same views and experiences; therefore, they cannot be seen as a homogenous unit where its members share similar political agenda (Vertovec, 2005, p.4; Banki, 2013, p.4). With this in mind, I am delimiting the scope of the study by focusing on one section of the Eritrean society; my informants are only constituted of Eritrean Muslim non-Tigrigna speakers (NTS) in Norway. Moreover, for analytical purposes, I am not doing my research based at the level of diaspora organizations and political parties, but at a bottom-up individual level. This strategy, as Portes et al. suggest, will help me shed light on the history and networks of individuals for a better understanding of their transnationalism (1999, p.220).

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The research problem I am addressing is based on the reflections of my personal observation on the socio-cultural and political milieu of Eritrean diaspora in Norway. Since entering Norway as a refugee, I have been participating in different transnational political practices against the dictatorship in Eritrea. Therefore, the choice of the research topic was driven by my curiosity to highlight the existent relationships between language diversity, unity, and transnational political practices among the Eritrean diaspora in Norway.

As outlined by many scholars, divisions along religion, ethnicity, region and political ideology are characteristic features of the Eritrean diaspora (Bereketeab, 2007; Kibreab, 2007; Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015); the Eritrean diaspora community in Norway is not an exception. They tend to be mainly divided by the attitude of their allegiance to the Eritrean regime as opponents and supporters, but there are also linguistic, religious and ethnic divisions. I will draw on the attitudes that are prevalent in the inter-Eritrean transnational socio-political engagement in Norway – and emphasize on language and its impact in their unity and mobilization for political transformation in Eritrea.

The impact of language on the diasporic practices of Eritreans seems to be underestimated. The language policy in Eritrea favors the consolidation of power within the TS, while the Muslim NTS speakers in the rural areas are neither offered education in the Tigrigna

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<sup>3</sup> Eritreans in Stavanger protesting music festival arranged by the sympathizers of the Eritrean regime  
<https://www.aftenbladet.no/meninger/debatt/i/A1Avz/Diktaturets-undertrykking-av-eritreiske-flyktninger-i-Stavanger-fortsetter>

language, nor in the language of their choice, the Arabic language. The impacts of the language policy in the homeland are reflected in the diaspora socio-political engagement. Thus, the lack of a common language of communication among Eritrean diasporas seems, in part, to restrain their collective political engagement. This phenomenon is clearly visible among the TS and the NTS in the transnational political field. NTS are predominantly Muslims who primarily use Arabic as the language of communication in their diasporic political mobilization. For instance, there are plenty of opposition websites in the diaspora that publishes articles and commentaries separately in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English. But, if you go through the perspectives and the substances of those who either write in Tigrigna or Arabic, it is not difficult to identify the broader gaps of understanding the status quo in Eritrea – in most cases, there is little intersection among people's insights about the history, socio-political conditions in post-independent Eritrea, and the prospective visions on establishing a democratic country in the future. Lack of a common language of communication, and thereby, the lack of a common denominator seems to undermine the convergence of interests and ideas in the milieu of Eritrean diaspora – and this is what will be investigated here.

Besides, among the Christian TS, there seem to be tendencies of equating the Tigrigna language with the Eritrean identity and thereby – consciously or unconsciously – subordinating the significance of other languages. This phenomenon is manifested in the inter-Eritrean socio-political dialogue in the diaspora while demanding political reforms in the homeland. As an insider and average participant in the transnational political activism of Eritreans, sometimes I observe the reproduction of pre-existing power asymmetries between TS and NTS in the diaspora. This is displayed on their social and political engagement; in the social media, mobilization meetings, mass media, demonstrations appealing for regime change and human rights; and in their everyday interaction as fellow Eritreans in the diaspora. This linguistic intolerance, perhaps results in the outburst of latent grievances among some of the Muslim NTS, thereby, exacerbating the level of mistrust and exclusion within the wider Eritrean diasporas in Norway.

To acquire a broader understanding of the suggested observations, my main research question reads as follows:

***How does language diversity among Eritreans shape the transnational political engagement of diaspora Eritrean Muslims in Norway?***

To frame the focus of my research, I have prepared two sub-questions that could guide the main course of the investigation. All the sub-question relates to the main question but address specific issues in the parameters of the whole research inquiry.

- i) *How does language diversity impact the unity of diaspora Eritreans in Norway to form a transnational collective movement for political change in Eritrea? How do Eritrean Muslims in Norway relate the language issue with the Christian Tigrigna speakers?*
- ii) *How do Eritrean Muslims in Norway perceive and interpret the language policy and practice in the homeland? In what way has the prevailing language legislation in Eritrea possibly influenced the transnational socio-political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway?*

The first sub-question shall explore the impact of linguistic diversity in the general unity of Eritrean diasporas in Norway. It seeks to discover the role played by language in their transnational collective political activism in the politics of their homeland. Eritrean Muslim NTS will relate the issue of language in their interaction with the Christian TS. In addition to this, it will examine if there are incidences of language-based exclusion in the diaspora.

The second sub-question investigates the memories and lived experiences of Eritrean Muslims in Norway regarding the post-independence language policy in Eritrea and its effect on the marginalization and exclusion of minorities. It addresses whether the policies of the Eritrean government in the homeland are affecting the political mobilization and mistrust among the wider Eritrean diaspora. Transnational political practices can be prompted as a response to the political behaviour of homeland governments (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.762); therefore, to acquire a broader understanding of language in the politics of Eritrean diaspora, it is important to reflect on the differential status of languages in Eritrea and critically analyse the post-independence educational language policy adopted by the Eritrean government.

## **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the research are as follows:

- To discover the impact of language in the diasporic political practices of Eritrean Muslims in Norway
- To analyze the influence of language in the unity of Eritreans in Norway in establishing a collective transnational political engagement that seeks political transformation in Eritrea. Here, the intent is to shed light on the insights of Eritrean Muslims and the way they relate the language issue with the Tigrigna speakers.

Moreover, incidences of linguistic exclusion and tensions arising from it will be investigated

- To investigate the perceptions of Eritrean Muslims in Norway about the educational language policy that was adopted by the current Eritrean government in Eritrea, and identify if the existing language policy could have shaped the political mobilization of Eritrean Muslims in Norway
- To explore if language diversity is functioning as an impediment or as a catalyst for transnational political participation among Eritreans in Norway.

### **1.3 Rationale and Relevance of the Study**

My research topic is relevant to the field of human rights and multiculturalism in two ways. Firstly, Eritrea is a dictatorship, and multiple sources confirm the state of human rights is severely deteriorating (UNHRC, 2015; Amnesty International, 2017; HRW, 2017, Reporters without Borders, 2017). Due to this deplorable situation of human rights, Eritreans are fleeing the country at an alarming rate of 5000 individuals<sup>4</sup> each month (UNHRC, 2015, p.451). Consequently, in the diaspora, Eritreans are increasingly being engaged in different transnational social movements calling for the respect of human rights and democratization in the homeland. Therefore, studying the nature of their transnational practices would contribute to the existing body of knowledge of Eritrean diaspora and transnationalism.

Secondly, the Eritrean diaspora is multicultural with various religions, languages and ethnic groups. Previous studies underline that diaspora Eritreans are divided, but little emphasis is given to the underlying causes for their disunity. To examine this, I am focusing on the role of language in the development of collective transnational political engagement of diaspora Eritreans. The originality of this study can be attested by the lack of references regarding language diversity and its relationship with transnational political practices among Eritrean diaspora. Moreover, I am trying to present a minority perspective in the existing debate of transnationalism and Eritrean diaspora.

### **1.4 Thesis Outline**

The thesis is divided into seven Chapters. Preceded by the introductory Chapter, Chapter two introduces the methodology I used to guide my research process.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from World Population Dashboard in 2017 estimates the total population of Eritrea as 5.1 Million , for details, check: <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/ER>.

Chapter three entails the literature review. Here I shed light on the general context of human rights in Eritrea with a specific focus on minority and language rights. Further, I elaborate on forced migration of Eritreans and the transnational political practices before and after the independence of Eritrea. Moreover, I briefly present some important facts about the Eritrean diaspora community in Norway.

In Chapter four, I explain the theoretical framework of the thesis. Firstly, I introduce the concept of diaspora. While briefly describing some of the general practices of the diaspora, I specifically emphasize on transnational political practices. In light of this, I incorporate the concept of social movements to acquire a broader understanding of how the diaspora organize and practice transnational activities. Secondly, I highlight some concepts of language, linguistic pluralism, and critical socio-linguistics. The idea of including concepts of language is to understand and interpret the language policy in Eritrea and its cross-border impacts to the transnational socio-political practices of Eritrean NTS in the diaspora.

The findings and discussion section of my thesis is divided into two chapters. In Chapter five, I present and analyze the interview data regarding the perception of my informants on the language policy in Eritrea and its implication in the unity and political engagement in the diaspora. As an extension of Chapter five, in Chapter six, I discuss the transnational socio-political practices of my informants in relation to their linguistic diversity.

Finally, I set forth my conclusions and recommendations in Chapter Seven

## **2. Methodology**

Prior research regarding transnational political practices has often employed a qualitative approach where data was collected from different sources including qualitative interviews, observation, documents and relevant literature (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.137-9). Guided by the nature and suitability of my research project, I am using qualitative research with a multidisciplinary approach to acquiring and analyzing data. Hence, the use of texts, observations and stories are important in doing qualitative research (Verhoeven, 2001, p.32). I will reflect on the voices of participants of the study and their life experiences, as many researchers agree that a qualitative research should emphasize on understanding the social phenomena through the eyes of people being researched (Bryman, 2012, p. 399). In addition, using a historical perspective to review past experiences and memories of the diaspora in the homeland, before they left their country of origin will help me in explaining the perception of the Eritrean diaspora on government policies and its impact on the transnational political engagement.

### **2.1 Research Design**

Research design refers to ‘the plan or proposal to conduct a research’ including the interconnection of philosophy, research strategies, and methods (Creswell, 2009, p.5)

With a qualitative approach, the researcher tries to develop the meaning of a phenomenon from the viewpoint of the research participants (Creswell, 2009, p.16). This approach draws on the philosophical worldview of social constructivism, also called interpretivism – a philosophical worldview common among qualitative research. Social constructivism is a worldview that says ‘meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting’; hence, humans interact and make sense of their world considering their historical and social viewpoints – thus meaning is generated by social interaction (Crotty, 1998 in Creswell, 2009, p.8-9). Unlike quantitative research that primarily emphasizes testing theories deductively, qualitative research focuses on an inductive approach where the connection between theory and research is aimed at theory generation (Bryman, 2012, p.36). Therefore, while conducting my research I have not used a predetermined theory, but I have incorporated relevant theories after reviewing the interview data.

In qualitative research, there are different strategies of inquiry that guide the researcher ‘in a specific direction for procedures in research design’ (Creswell, 2009, p.11-2). Eritrean diaspora community members in Norway are diverse regarding their political affiliation,

religion, ethnicity and regional identity in Eritrea. In my research, I am using case study as a specific strategy of inquiry by delimiting my informants to Eritrean Muslim NTS in Norway. Case study research focuses on the detailed and intensive analysis of a particular case (Bryman, 2012, p.66). It is a strategy of inquiry where the researcher investigates ‘in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals,’ and addresses “how” and “why” questions (Creswell, 2009, p.13; Yin, 2014, p.29). Hence my main unit of analysis is Eritrean Muslim NTS in Norway.

Additionally, I have collected relevant information from different sources related to the complex transnational practices of diaspora Eritreans and their connection with their homeland. In doing case study research, it is recommended to use triangulation as a strategy for the usage of different sources of evidence (Yin, 2014, p.119). Triangulation is a process where multiple methods and sources of data are employed to cross-check the findings of a social phenomenon (Bryman, 2012, p.717). By employing different sources of data, we can strengthen the validity and see if the data produced from multiple sources lead to the same research findings (Yin, 2011, p.152). To obtain a comprehensive input about my research topic, therefore, I reviewed relevant texts, documents, and reports.

In qualitative research, it is not possible to conduct research that includes the entire target population or area; instead, researchers must choose the site and the people in the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p.107). In my research, I have selected specific sites: Troms district in Northern Norway, Drammen, and Oslo in South-Eastern Norway. The rationale behind the selection of these specific sites is my established network with the Eritrean community, familiarity with the research sites, and the availability of relevant people to the topic of my research.

Generally, a strength of qualitative research is that it gives people the opportunity to attribute meaning to their environment and provides detailed information about the social phenomena under investigation. In addition to this, it is flexible as it does not require a predetermined design of the social world; it allows participants to shape the research process (Bryman, 2012, p. 399-406). However, qualitative research is critiqued for being too subjective, difficult to replicate and somehow characterized by generalizations (Bryman, 2012, p.405-6).



### 2.1.1 Sampling

The target population of this research is Eritrean Muslims<sup>5</sup> who have migrated from Eritrea to Norway and are engaged in different transnational socio-political practices. All of them are critics to the Eritrean government. Government supporters are not relevant to my thesis, because the emphasis of my research question is on diasporic political practices that seek political change in Eritrea. As I am doing a case study research, my group of interest is the Muslim community members in Norway. The reason behind choosing their religious identity and not ethnic identity is driven by the nature of my topic and research question. In the Eritrean politics, language is often associated with religion. Thus, analyzing the impact of language in the diasporic political practices is better explained by referring to their religious designation.

In my research, I am applying non-probability purposive sampling where research participants are selected in a strategic way to meet their relevance to the research questions and objectives (Bryman, 2012 p. 418). Research subjects were initially selected in a deliberate manner to obtain those individuals that will reflect on the most relevant and plentiful data to my project (Yin, 2011, p.88). Due to my prior network and familiarity with some Eritrean Muslims in Norway, I have kept in touch with them and conducted the first couple of interviews. Later, they have helped me in proposing another interview candidates that would reflect on their knowledge about the topic by applying snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012, p.424). Snowball sampling refers to selecting new informants based on hints from the existing ones, provided that the snowballing is purposeful and not applied for the sake of convenience. Before I decided to include the recommended interviewees by the initial subjects, I have assessed if they might contribute additional and relevant information to my topic (Yin, 2011, p.89). Nevertheless, if not carefully applied, snowball sampling is not devoid of drawbacks. There is a possibility that the first sample of informants would recommend another informant who shares similar viewpoints, ethnicity, and political position as their own. I have tried to minimize that by diversifying interviewees considering their ethnic background, age, gender, education, and the procedure they followed to enter Norway as asylum seekers, quota refugees<sup>6</sup> or family reunification. For instance, I have experienced that most of the people I interviewed referred me to people who were highly educated; they hold the perception that

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<sup>5</sup> Eritrean Muslims are mostly non-Tigrigna speakers which constitute various ethno-linguistic groups, with the exception of the Jeberti, a minority Muslim Tigrigna speakers.

<sup>6</sup> Quota refugees are those who were living in refugee camps in neighbouring countries for a longer time, and later, came to Norway by the United Nations programme of resettlement.

those with higher educational background would reflect best. This may generally seem true, but it also alienates the insights of other sects of the society and could result in biased findings. I was thoughtful to such challenges, and as much as possible, I tried to include interviewees from different ethnic groups and backgrounds to maximize variation in my sample (Flick, 2009, p.122). Within the Eritrean Muslims, there are different ethnic groups; therefore, it is important to be sensitive to their ethnolinguistic origins to generate various perspectives. For this reason, I was able to include participants that belong to three of the nine ethnolinguistic groups of Eritrea, namely, Saho, Tigre, and Blin. I tried to include more ethnolinguistic groups, but without success; I was unable to find interviewees that belonged to the rest of the Eritrean ethnolinguistic groups in the given research sites.

In qualitative research, there is no a standard formula that determines the number of interviewees (Yin, 2011, p.89), but the purpose of the study can guide us to identify the possible number of the sample (Kvale, 1996, p.102). Since the purpose of the research findings is not to produce generalizations, a small sample of participants was selected. The sample of the research is comprised of eight participants, six men, and two women. Their age ranges between early 20 and 70, and their educational background varies from middle school to postgraduate level. Women are underrepresented in the sample; this could be due to the cultural factors, and/or that men are more engaged in the realm of political practices. All of them either work or study.

### **2.1.2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

As a strategy of data collection, I have used semi-structured interviews to allow participants the opportunity to describe the social reality based on their own understanding. The motive behind using semi-structured interviews is ‘to obtain descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’ (Kvale, 1996, p.5). In other words, I have prepared an interview guide with a list of more general questions or topics to allow informants more freedom and flexibility when they answer the questions – thus I was more adaptive to the flow of the discussion (Verhoven, 2011, p.143). The interview guide helped me to structure the course of the interview in a more focused manner (Kvale and Flick, 2007, p.57), and I followed the hints recommended by Bryman (2012, p.473) in preparation of the interview guide. For instance, I organized the questions in the interview guide in a way that would answer my main research question based on the viewpoint of participants; avoided leading questions and used a proper and clear language. Before going directly through the main questions, I tried to establish a rapport with my

informants by asking ice-breaker questions to stimulate a comfortable interview environment (Creswell, 2009, p.183). Further, to safeguard the quality of the interview, I have interacted with my informants accordingly, by posing follow-up questions, providing them a pause to elaborate more on the subject, probing for getting additional information and trying to confirm the given answers (Kvale and Flick, 2007, p.65).

Regarding the setting of the interview, I gave the opportunity to my informants to decide where to conduct the interview. I did so to ensure their comfortability, safety, and privacy. Some participants chose their residence, while others agreed to meet up in public libraries. In some cases, where participants were not quite sure about where to do the interview, I used to suggest doing it either in the library or in another quiet place that suits their needs and permits a better quality of the recording (Bryman, 2012, p.473).

Most of my informants were multilingual, speaking Arabic, English, Tigrigna, Tigre, Saho, and Blin. However, they communicate in these languages in a varied degree of fluency – their language skills relied on their educational background, ethnicity and the country of stay before migration to Norway. I can speak all the languages mentioned except for the Saho language. Fortunately, my Saho informants speak Arabic, and we used Arabic as a common language instead of Saho. With the rest of the informants, I conducted the interview in the language of their choice. I was allowed to record the interview by all participants, except for one, who preferred not to be recorded; in that case, I took only notes.

Nonetheless, qualitative interviews are criticized for being less scientific, subjective, too person-dependent and biased (Kvale, and Flick, 2007, p.84-5).

### **2.1.3 Data Analysis**

Data analysis encompasses several flexible procedures that vary from data preparation, data interpretation, and writing up the final report of the research (Creswell, 2009, p.183-4). Qualitative data analysis is not a one-way restricted strategy; it does not follow a linear fashion, rather, it takes a more generic strategy that involves different kinds of analytic procedures (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p.214; Creswell, 2009, p.184).

As some authors recommend, I have started the process of data analysis during the interviewing process by probing for additional details and adapting my interview guide for new revelations (Yin, 2011, p.139). Further, I have used some of the steps and guidelines stated in Creswell (2009, p.185-190) and Tesch (1990, p.142-5) for the whole organizing,

structuring, and analysis of the data. Both authors propose a clear six step summary that shows how to analyze qualitative data. But before proceeding with the steps, let me begin with the issue of translation in my research. My interviewees have used various languages during the interview including Arabic, Tigre, Blin, and English. Translating the words and phrases from one language into another is a complicated process and might influence the finding of the research. If not done carefully, there is a risk of losing the meaning of the original language. Moreover, there is the lack of words that could exactly explain the message of the interviewee in another language. All the translations made in the research are mine – being a multilingual, coupled with my career experience as interpreter in Norway, was an extra advantage. Nonetheless, I was aware of the challenges ahead of translation – it is not possible to translate with absolute accuracy; rather, I have translated the contents of the recordings based on ‘a reasonable approximation of the interview partner’s words and intent’ (Verhoven, 2011, p.210).

After recording the interviews by a digital audio recorder, I transferred the files into a software application; then I used my computer on listening and typing the contents (Verhoven, 2011, p.208). The software application I used was very helpful in many aspects; I was able to save, playback, and retrieve the data efficiently – especially the playback system facilitated the process of translation and transcription. But, transcription is also problematic; sometimes interviewees may offer incomplete ideas or irrelevant answers – what to do then? Research participants do not speak in a logical organized paragraphs, nor do they indicate punctuation as we communicate (Verhoven, 2011, p.208). I was conscious about that and firstly, transcribed the interviews ‘verbatim’ – here I do not mean that the transcribed document contains the exact words of the interviewee but as much as possible I made the transcriptions very close to the original words of the interviewees. After all, translation by itself can intervene in impacting precise transcription.

Secondly, I read thoroughly through the transcriptions, noting down themes that emerge in the data on the margins of each page. Themes that are worth extracting are those repeatedly expressed by the informants in relation to my research question; by so doing, I could generate some theoretical concepts about the data (Bryman, 2012, p.581).

Thirdly, I categorized the data into segments and labeled them by inserting indexes at the end of each theme or category, a process referred to as coding. I clustered similar topics together and used appropriate wording for classifying them into major categories. I then assembled the data belonging to each category in one place and made an initial analysis. The limitation with

coding is that, when you disassemble the data, you are detaching the specific fragment from the whole and there is a possibility of missing the general idea of the interviewee if the whole passage is not read thoroughly. The fourth step is to establish a ‘description of the setting or people as well as the categories or themes for analysis’; I coded the descriptions to generate few themes or categories. I have used these themes as headings in my main findings. Next, I presented the findings of the analysis by discussing various themes and perspectives from individuals in a descriptive manner. Finally, I interpreted the data based on my own experience of the research, by comparing the findings with the existing literature and relevant theory. (Creswell, 2009, p.185-190; Tesch, 1990, p.142-5)

## **2.2 Validity and Reliability**

According to Yin, a study is considered valid if the researcher had ‘properly collected and interpreted its data, so that the conclusions accurately reflect and represent the real world (or laboratory) that was studied’ (2011, p.78). This can be attained through a variety of ways, including triangulation, respondent validation, and bringing rival explanations to your arguments.

To strengthen the validity of my research, I have reviewed relevant data from different sources to establish a coherent justification for the research, a strategy termed as triangulation (Creswell, 2009, p.191). I have checked and analyzed different kinds of secondary data, such as journal articles, books, reports, and internet sources to obtain a broader glimpse of the subject area. Nevertheless, I could not find prior studies specific to transnational practices of Eritreans in Norway. While I depended mainly on the interview data to explain the context in Norway, I have reviewed some Eritrean diaspora studies conducted elsewhere to garner general concepts relevant to my topic.

Another crucial issue in reinforcing validity is self-reflection and being critical to your own interpretations. A failure to look at perspectives from different angles might result in weaker assertions; hence, I was continuously reviewing and cross-checking if my findings are to be perceived true from the standpoint of my interviewees, myself and the intended audience.

To avoid misinterpretation and to ensure that the findings are congruent with the perspectives of the participants, I have shared some of my findings and interpretations with research participants to get their reflections and feedback (Bryman, 2012, p.391). Due to distance and time limitations, I was not able to meet them all once again in person; however, I was in touch

with some of them through their emails and cell phones to get their comments and confirm respondent validation.

During the study, the researcher may encounter rival explanations that are different or inconsistent with his/her previous preconceptions. The contradictory information gained from informants reinforces the strength of the interview process to garner a varied view from different people and, in turn, manifests the different conceptions of the controversial human world (Kvale, 1996, p.7). Contradictory explanations also strengthen the findings of the given research (Yin, 2011, p.80). Thus, I incorporated and discussed rival perspectives with my informants during the interview by probing and asking follow-up questions, and I brought these divergent responses to the findings of the study.

The issue of reliability is also vital in the assessment of quality research; it demonstrates if the approach the researcher employed is consistent across different researchers and if the research design reflects the primary elements of a good research. Yin (2011, p.19-21) proposes some useful elements to consider in building trustworthiness and credibility of a research: transparency, methodic-ness (clear research procedures and design) and adherence to evidence. In line with that, I made all data available and explained all the documents and procedures used in my research. Besides, I have acknowledged the biases that could have possibly influenced the research, and I examined the findings in relation to my own positionality and the conceptions of the research participants.

### **2.3 Positionality and Being an Insider in a Research**

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher in shaping the whole process of the investigation is not trivial – indeed, the researcher is the instrument (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p.118). In this regard, my decision to formulate the topic and research questions have not emerged in a vacuum. I have a minority background and still hold memories of injustice and marginalization by the ruling regime in Eritrea. These grievances have stimulated my engagement in the diasporic campaign for political awareness and criticism of the widespread human rights abuses in Eritrea. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that, in present-day Eritrea, the suffering is not unique to minorities; indeed, the majority are also subjected to the common oppression perpetrated by the government. Yet, in some areas, the suffering of the minorities is much worse. I am declaring this in line with the warnings that Yin (2014, p.72) offers with respect to how to deal with our intellect, emotions, and ego in the process of data collection. Indeed, it was quite challenging to control my biases and preconceptions.

Since I am delivering a minority perspective on issues of human rights in Eritrea and their consequences in exile, my audiences should notice that I do not intend to be neutral (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p.118), but as much as possible objective.

I am an insider to the research participants because I share a language, identity and perhaps common life experience with most of them, and this was advantageous in establishing, acceptance, trust, and openness (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 58). It helped me gain access to the population and strengthened their willingness to share their perceptions. Conversely, being an insider has its own drawbacks:

‘being an insider has the potential to impede the research process as it progresses. It is possible that the participant will make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully. It is also possible that the researcher’s perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants.’ (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p.58)

I was always facing the challenges outlined by Dwyer and Buckle (2009); sometimes, during the interview process, I felt that interviewees were not fully elaborating their experiences due to their anticipation that I know the reality in Eritrea and their life experiences in Norway. When I asked participants questions, they often started by saying ‘As you know what is happening there...as you know the situation’ etc. As a strategy to avoid such preconceptions, before the interview starts, I informed the interviewees that I am only interested in their perspective, and my role as a researcher is not to intrude with their conceptions. In this regard, follow-up and probing questions were used to get more details and elaborations about certain doubts (Kvale, and Flick, 2007, p.57). Another challenge of being an insider is to avoid bias and subjectivity; sometimes, it becomes difficult to separate yourself from the research (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p.107). To minimize bias, I was always reminding myself to be critical to my own judgments and the judgments of the informants by viewing the arguments from different perspectives.

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to data collection, I have read the guidelines provided by The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH)<sup>7</sup> to upgrade my awareness of

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<sup>7</sup> Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Law and Humanities. Oslo: National Committee for Research Ethics in Norway. Available at: <https://www.etikkom.no/en/>

the fundamentals of ethics in research. Then I notified The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) about my project, and I was granted permission to do the research.

Before conducting the interviews, I explained the general objectives of the study, possible risks associated with it, advantages from taking part in the research, and the procedures of the interview (Kvale, and Flick, 2007, p.27). I prepared the informed consent sheet in English and Arabic so that participants could read and sign after they have understood its contents. I made it clear to my informants that it is voluntary to participate, and they maintain the absolute right to withdraw from the interview process at any stages of the research (Kvale, and Flick, 2007, p.27; Yin, 2001, p.46). Moreover, I have provided the necessary information about confidentiality and the people who will have access to the interview; the right of the researcher to publish the entire or parts of the interview; and that they have the right to access the transcribed and analyzed data (Kvale and Flick, 2007, p.27). I have also asked for permission if I could use the recorder and notified the interviewees that I will delete the data when the research project is completed.

Elaborating more on confidentiality, I have not only secured the identities and records of my research participants in a safe place but also anonymized the recordings and used pseudonyms when the findings were published (Bryman, 2012, p.136). Therefore, identities of informants are represented as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. in the final report.

When I finished the transcriptions of the first couple of interviews, I felt that I have asked longer questions and sometimes, I was repeating or defining the questions to make sure that my informants have understood them. Despite the good intentions, this unintended way of asking may confuse informants, or they may fail to fully answer the questions. Consequently, with the rest of interviews, I have addressed this issue and tried to ask shorter questions as much as possible. Before conducting the interview, I was aware that asking simple and short questions gives good and complete answers, but, as I am not an experienced researcher, it was not easy to adapt in the beginning.

## **2.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study**

Generally, Eritreans maintain multiple overlapping identities, and often people use them in an interchangeable manner. For instance: religious identity as Muslims and Christians; topographic identity as Lowlanders and Highlanders; regional identity as Seraye, Hamasien, Akeleguzay, etc.; and ethnolinguistic identity as Kunama, Nara, Blin, Tigrigna, Saho, Afar, Hidareb, Tigre, Rashaida. These various identities intersect and as a researcher, extracting



only a single identity for analytical purposes is not immune from limitations. Similarly, resorting to a single comprehensive national identity as ‘Eritreans’ may also undermine the different interests and reflections of various groups who may wish to be heard as a distinct entity.

As I am doing a case study research, my subjects of interest are Eritrean Muslims in Norway, which are also NTS. The rationale behind choosing the religious identity is grounded on the assumption that language, religion, and transnational political practices are interconnected in the Eritrean milieu. Thus, detaching language from religion may not fully contribute to understanding the complex process of their socio-political engagement. One of my informants proposed that my topic would resonate more if I replace the designation ‘Eritrean Muslims’ and instead use ‘Eritrean non-Tigrigna speakers,’ referring to the interchangeability of both designations. Yet, I was not sure to use the latter characterization, because, firstly, I would risk reducing their established identity into something artificial. Secondly, some informants may not accept to be categorized as ‘non-Tigrigna speakers’; they might consider this as belittling their identity. To counterbalance this challenge was not an easy task and I was constantly asking myself if I made the right choice.

Another limitation is that, Eritrean Muslims constitute different ethnolinguistic groups, and I was only able to gain access to the speakers of Tigrayt, Saho, and Blin; I was not successful in including the other ethnolinguistic groups in my study, despite the attempts to be more inclusive.

### **3. Literature Review**

This Chapter includes relevant background information about the general situation of human rights in Eritrea, forced migration, and an overview of the dynamics of Eritrean diaspora.

#### **3.1 The State of Human Rights in Eritrea**

The situation of human rights in Eritrea is deplorable and the country has been consistently condemned by various international organizations for violating human rights, causing the mass influx of its population to flee to neighboring countries and beyond, and creating a situation where its citizens are stripped of their very basic civil, political, economic, and cultural rights. Eritrea is one of the major per capita generators of asylum seekers in the world (UNHCR, 2015, p.16), and the number of people leaving the country each month reaches around 5000 people (UNHRC, 2015, p.451).

The UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea<sup>8</sup> conducted its investigation about the state of human rights in Eritrea and reported that the ruling government had committed gross human rights violations. It is noteworthy to cite an excerpt of the conclusion given by the Commission of inquiry:

‘The Commission finds that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that there is no accountability for them. The enjoyment of rights and freedoms are severely curtailed in an overall context of a total lack of the rule of law. The Commission also finds that the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour may constitute crimes against humanity’ (UNHRC, 2015, p.449).

The commission of inquiry also describes that the Eritrean constitution drafted in 1997 has never been implemented. Rather, the country has been governed by the self-appointed People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party; the sole political party ruling Eritrea for more than two decades. In Eritrea, the judiciary is not independent – judges are continuously appointed and terminated by the president. National elections have never been held, and the government rules the country by temporary laws or “proclamations” pronounced through the state-controlled media channels (UNHRC, 2015, p.449). Freedom of movement,

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<sup>8</sup>The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea was established by the UN Human Rights Council through its resolution 26/24 of 27 June 2014. Further information is available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIEritrea/Pages/commissioninquiryonhrrinEritrea.aspx>.

worship, and expression remained highly restricted. National service<sup>9</sup> conscripts are deemed to serve indefinitely – some were mobilized for as much as 20 years since the Proclamation of National Service was passed by the Eritrean Government in 1994 (Amnesty International, 2017, p.153-4).

The Eritrean president has unrestricted powers, and the legislature has been absent since 2002; the people have no space to question the behavior and the laws made by the government (HRW, 2017). Arbitrary detention and torture are widespread, and detainees have no rights to due protection of the law; the military and officials of the ruling party constantly abuse power and confiscate the land of the helpless population. Women conscripted to the army are mistreated and exposed to torture and rape (UNHRC, 2015, p.450-1). In the 2017 world press rankings, Reporters Without Borders listed Eritrea on the 179<sup>th</sup> place out of 180 countries, monopolizing the bad record on World Press Freedom Index next to North Korea, and the Eritrean Government has been arbitrarily detaining political opponents and journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2017).

### **3.1.1 Minority Rights**

The term ‘minority’ in the Eritrean context generally denotes to the NTS. The Blin, the Afar, the Kunama, the Nara, the Tigre, the Beni Amer, and the Saho constitute minorities in the country (UNHRC, 2013, p.15). What is missing from the list of the UNHRC report about the minorities of Eritrea is Hidareb and Rashaida; they are also minorities, and the literature should have included them. Government sources estimate that the TS constitute 50% of the total population of Eritrea (Woldemikael, 2003, p.120), which are predominantly Christians. The other 50% are NTS who are predominantly Muslims. However, it is not possible to get exact figures due to the lack of credible and trustworthy demographic data (UNHRC, 2015, p.451), where an independent and transparent population census has never been carried out so far.

The field of minority rights in Eritrea remain under-researched and under-reported; it is possibly eclipsed by either the tremendous focus of international organizations on the alarming general situation of human rights in Eritrea (Tronvoll, 2009, p.410) or the lack of influential actors who could bring the case to the attention of international community.

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<sup>9</sup> Every Eritrean between 18 and 40 years of age is demanded to participate in active national service (Kibreab, 2009a, p.43). For details about the National Service Proclamation of 1995, check: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/SERIAL/79562/85681/F2067220900/ERI79562.pdf>

Traditionally, to consider ethnic, religious or linguistic minority claims was not accommodated by the government – in reality, mentioning such topics was perceived as a political taboo that might allegedly lead to divisive and destructive ideologies that endanger national unity (PFDJ, 1994). Before the independence of Eritrea, The EPLF, the precursor of the present ruling government, followed a strict nationalist ideology that undermined the interests of minorities and their collective rights (Tronvoll, 2009, p.409). Also, after the independence of Eritrea, the culture of intolerance against ethnic and religious groups sustained; nationals addressing such issues were labeled as narrow-minded, regressive, sectarian and contra-nationalistic.

When we look at the status of representation of the diverse Eritrean nationalities in the current government, the public and state affairs are predominantly controlled by the Tigrigna ethno-linguistic group, while the rest of the population remained under-represented (Tronvoll, 2009, p.409). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to mention that human rights violations against the minorities are not uniquely experienced by the minorities per se; even the dominant group, the Tigrigna, suffer from such infringements; nevertheless, the violations have differential impacts on the minorities (UNHRC, 2013, p.15). In general, minorities in Eritrea are subjected to extensive human rights violations (Tronvoll, 2009, p.410).

### **3.1.2 Language Rights**

Linguistic rights are linked to fundamental human rights – especially, with non-discrimination – a principle that draws on several international standards<sup>10</sup> (De Varennes, 1999, p.311). For instance, elaborating on the meaning of non-discrimination, Article (2) in the UDHR<sup>11</sup> states that: ‘Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as... language, religion...’ Therefore, States should protect its citizens against all forms of discrimination, including language.

In Eritrea, there are nine different languages: Afar, Arabic, Blin, Bidawet, Kunama, Nara, Saho, Tigrayt, and Tigrigna. These languages belong to three distinct language family groups; namely, Semitic, Nilo-Saharan, and Cushitic (Naty, 2000, p. 272). Language is a delicate issue in Eritrea, and the process of deciding on language policy has complex socio-economic,

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<sup>10</sup> For instance the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities*; the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*; and *The Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* (De Varennes, 1999, p.311 ).

<sup>11</sup> The entire Declaration can be accessed here: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html> .

cultural and political consequences on the population (Hailemariam, Kroon, and Walters, 1999, p.491). Historically, during the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia in the 1950s, the Eritrean people had the opportunity to establish their own constitution through the then Eritrean National Assembly. Despite the multilingual nature of Eritrean society, Arabic and Tigrinya were widely accepted as official languages until the dissolution of the federation with Ethiopia in 1962. Thus, Article 38(1) of the Eritrean Constitution that was adopted by the Eritrean General Assembly in 1952 states, “Tigrigna and Arabic should be the official languages of Eritrea” (Negash, 1997, p.195). The adoption of the bilingual model in the federal constitution of 1952 was meant to accommodate the socio-religious composition of the Eritrean society. Eritrean Muslims have been using Arabic as a medium of instruction and communication a long time; children learn about Islam in Arabic, and it is considered as a lingua franca among the diverse Eritrean Muslims (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014, p.141)

After the independence of Eritrea, the Government of Eritrea, under the pretext of ‘Linguistic Human Rights’ endorsed a multilingual model and declared that all Eritrean languages are equal; minority languages should be protected and developed (Mohammad, 2016, p.527; The Constitution of Eritrea of 1997: Article 4 (3). In other words, Eritrean minority groups were obliged to accept mother tongue education in primary public schooling in most parts of Eritrea. The Eritrean government has shut down most Arabic schools which have existed even during the Ethiopian colonization and replaced them with the mother tongue schools (Mohammad, 2016, p.532). In principle, the protection and development of minority languages is a noble idea that should be praised and promoted. However, it should be implemented contextually and consider the preferences of the minorities themselves. In this regard, in post-independent Eritrea, Eritrean Muslims largely chose the Arabic language as a medium of instruction in public primary schools, but the government disregarded their appeal and adopted a top-down mother tongue education policy (Mohammad, 2016, p.527). Additionally, Mohammad summarizes the aims of the post-independence language policy that was endorsed by the government as follows:

- ‘ (1) to strengthen the domination of the Tigrinya language by suppressing the use of Arabic;
- (2) to prevent the non-Tigrinya ethno-linguistic communities from acting as a cohesive group and to cut them off from cross-border ethnic networks by creating artificial language barriers;
- (3) to widen the gap between Tigrinya and non-Tigrinya groups by preventing the latter from access to higher education, training and employment, and (4) to alienate the Muslim

community from the use of the Arabic language and to isolate them by weakening their social and cultural affiliations with the neighbouring Muslim countries' (Mohammad, 2016, p. 532)

The unimplemented constitution of Eritrea marginally mentions the rights of the diverse Eritrean ethnic groups regarding culture, language, and non-discrimination. However, the statements given in the constitution remain ambiguous. For instance, Article 4(3) of the constitution notes that “the equality of all Eritrean languages is guaranteed,” but there are no further explanations given as to how these proclamations should be implemented in real life situations. Moreover, the constitution remains silent on the issue of which of the nine Eritrean languages should be recognized as official languages. In practice, the Tigrigna language has been the working language of the State of Eritrea; it dominates the civil service, the courts, the arts, and the literati, besides being the only language of military training and the command of the Eritrean army (Tronvoll, 2009, p.424).

### **3.2 Dynamics of Diaspora Eritreans and their Political Engagement**

Before proceeding to the emergence and political role of the Eritrean diaspora in the making of contemporary Eritrea, it is important to present a short review of Eritrean history. The present territorial form of Eritrea was created by the Italian colonization in 1890. During the WWII, Italy was defeated by the British in 1941 and Eritrea was put under the British Administration (Bereketeab, 2010, p.156). The British rule in Eritrea was ended in 1952 when Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia through a decision made by the UN General Assembly (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014, p.6). The Federal Act states that Eritrea should be an autonomous region under the sovereignty of Ethiopia. By invalidating the premises of the federation, Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia in 1962 (Bereketeab, 2010, p.165). The forced annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia was a breach of the federal resolution. Consequently, the 30-year long Eritrean war of independence against Ethiopian colonization was commenced in 1961 by the pro-independence rebel group ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), who were predominantly Muslims (Hirt and Mohammad, 2017, p.4). But in the following years, Christian highlanders also joined their Muslim compatriots, envisioning an independent and sovereign Eritrea. Due to the war of independence, many Eritreans fled to neighboring countries. Hence, along the period of the armed struggle that took place between 1961-1991, the Eritrean diaspora had played a major role in the political consciousness and activism for the independence of their country. A backdrop of the political trajectory of pre-independence diaspora and the nature and challenges of the post-independence Eritrean diaspora will be highlighted in the following sections.

### **3.2.1 Pre-Independence Diaspora and Political Engagement**

The Eritrean armed struggle is the outcome of the endeavors made by diaspora Eritreans in Sudan and Cairo (Kibreab 2007, p.98). Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, the Eritrean war of independence witnessed an unfortunate sectarian division among its members. A new splinter group, EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) was created as a rival rebel faction to the mother organization, the ELF. Thus, the ELF and EPLF were immersed into a bloody civil war that took the lives of many Eritrean combatants from both sides. Historical conflicts between the EPLF and ELF, most notably the civil war between 1972-1981 during the war of independence, have deeply influenced Eritrean diaspora communities around the globe (Hepner, 2007, p.4). In 1981, ELF was pushed away from Eritrea by the joint military action of EPLF and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)<sup>12</sup> and moved to Sudan, where they were disarmed by the Sudanese forces (Markakis, 1988, p.67). The years that followed the collapse of the ELF, EPLF monopolized the Eritrean revolution in the fields of military, political and organizational structure, inside Eritrea and abroad. In the diaspora, the EPLF created mass associations to reinforce the links between the organization and Eritrean exiles by organizing festivals and cultural events (Hirt, 2014, p.122).

The war between the Eritrean rebel groups and Ethiopia caused the internal displacement and outflow of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to neighboring countries. The Eritrean diaspora constituted at least a third of the entire Eritrean population (Hirt, 2014, p.122); from the estimated 3 to 3.5 million, more than one million were forced to leave their homeland and seek protection, largely in Sudan (World Bank, 1994, p.ii).

Eritrean refugees in Sudan created transnational communities in different cities and towns, and they were connected by social networks to facilitate the transfer of remittances, ideas, information and consumer goods (Kibreab, 2007, p.98-9). The migration of Eritreans was not restricted to Sudan; many have migrated further to Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Their diasporic flights underlie their cultural backdrop; Muslim lowlanders migrated to the Middle East, while the Christian highlanders migrated to the West (Bereketeab, 2007, p.79). Throughout the war of independence, the Eritrean diasporas have contributed to exacerbating the splits of the liberation fronts – their aggregate support was fed through a sectarian way, showing allegiance to either the ELF or the EPLF. While the EPLF was mainly

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<sup>12</sup> TPLF, a revolutionary rebel group that was fighting for independence of Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, was founded in 1975.

supported by the Eritrean Christian diaspora, the ELF was supported by the Muslims (Bereketeab, 2007, p.80-3). After a bitter and prolonged armed struggle under the leadership of the EPLF, finally, Eritrea became independent in 1991 and attained recognition by the UN in 1993.

In sum, the pre-independence diaspora was characterized by lack of unity and varied political affiliation; each sect had shown loyalty and commitment to their perceived representatives, either EPLF or the ELF. The divisions that were displayed during the armed struggle are still visible among the Eritrean diaspora.

### **3.2.2 Post-Independence Diaspora**

Post-independent diaspora refers to those who have fled Eritrea due to the ‘border’ war with Ethiopia between 1998-2000, and those who were displaced due to the dire human rights violations in Eritrea. In the following sub-headings, I will shed light on the post-independence forced migration and the harrowing journey Eritrean refugees are forced to take to escape from persecution and the gross violations of human rights. Moreover, I will elaborate on the general political engagement of post-independence Eritrean diaspora and provide a brief overview of Eritrean diaspora community in Norway.

#### **3.2.2.1 Forced Migration from Eritrea**

Nowadays, as previously addressed, the general situation in Eritrea is characterized by extreme human rights infringements, where its youth are regularly compelled to ‘emptying’ the country. The youth are forced to leave due to the serious human rights abuses, fear of arrest and indefinite, open-ended national service (Connell, 2016, p.220; UNHRC, 2015, p.42). According to the law, every Eritrean who has reached 18 years should complete 18 months of national service; however, in practice, conscripts are enslaved to unlimited duration – much of them are subjected to forced labor for over a decade (HRW, 2017). Different reports made by NGOs and scholarly contributions reaffirm the principal driver of forced migration from Eritrea, among others, is the perpetuation of the indefinite national service.

#### **3.2.2.2 The Dangerous Journey Seeking Protection**

Eritreans escaping from human rights violations in their country are exposed to life-threatening conditions while attempting to seek protection in third countries (UNHRC, 2017, p.9). While crossing the borders to neighboring countries, they take the risk of being subjected



to the shoot-to-kill policy<sup>13</sup> of the Eritrean government (Van Reisen, Estefanos, and Rijken, 2013, p.59), and those fleeing to Ethiopia and Sudan risk being shot by Eritrean border patrols (MSF, 2017, p.7).

Fig.1 Migration Routes of Eritrean Asylum Seekers



Source: UNHCR, Cited in Laub, Zachary (2016)<sup>14</sup>

Fig.1 demonstrates the routes followed by Eritrean refugees from Eritrea to different parts of the world, where Sudan and Ethiopia are used as transit destinations. Further, some of them take the way to Libya-Mediterranean Sea- Europe, while others follow the Egypt-Israel route (across the Sinai Peninsula).

In sum, it is estimated that every month, 5000 Eritreans cross the borders to neighboring countries (UNHRC, 2015, p.42). By June 2017, the registered Eritrean refugee population in Ethiopia was 161,398 (UNHCR, 2017), while in Sudan, as of May 2016, it reached 101,751<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Eritrean border patrols can shoot at individuals trying to cross the border, see UNHRC (2015, p.112). A report by Amnesty International also confirms that the shoot to kill policy is still in place, see <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>14</sup> The image can be accessed at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/authoritarianism-eritrea-and-migrant-crisis>

<sup>15</sup> See [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Eritrea%20Country%20Profile\\_Final.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Eritrea%20Country%20Profile_Final.pdf).

The misfortune befalling Eritrean migrants is not limited to the Eritrean jurisdiction per se – it goes further beyond the borders, portraying a frequent vulnerability to human and environmental threats. While in transit and destination countries, Eritrean refugees are subjected to dire human rights abuses. There is a considerable risk of arbitrary detention, torture, sexual abuse, and ill-treatment en route to Europe (Amnesty International, 2017, p. 155).

For many Eritrean refugees, Sudan is used as a transit destination before heading to other countries. They hire smugglers to continue their journey to Libya or Egypt aiming to reach either Europe or Israel. The onward journeys entail high risks: crossing thousands of kilometers of the dreadful Sahara Desert, where temperatures reach 50 degrees Celsius during the day and fall below freezing point at night (MSF, 2017, p.25). By the time Eritreans arrive in Libya, they are confronted with another episode of torture and suffering by smugglers, traffickers, armed groups, militias and security personnel (MSF, 2017, p.7).

The ordeal of Eritrean refugees never ends in Libya; as Libya is regarded a transit country, they take the next and most dangerous sea crossing to Europe across the Mediterranean. The route to Italy is particularly risky, many have lost their lives in the high seas of the Mediterranean, in 2016, the number of deaths was higher than ever before (UNHCR, 2017a). One of the tragic accidents that captured the attention of international community happened in October 2013, when a boat packed with hundreds of refugees, most of them from Eritrea sank close to the Italian island of Lampedusa, where 360 people died (Hirt, 2014, p.119). It is also reported that Eritreans constituted the largest refugee population crossing the Central Mediterranean to Europe in 2015, and the second largest preceded by Nigerians in 2016 (UNHCR data cited in MSF, 2017, p.7)

### **3.2.2.3 Political Engagement of Post-Independence Diaspora**

The present-day diaspora Eritreans can be loosely categorized into four groups: ELF veterans who have not returned to Eritrea after independence; EPLF supporters who were recently turned to dissidents; the large group of the younger generation; and people with either loose or no political connection (Hirt, 2014, p.128; Conrad, 2010, p.22). Sometimes, these groups overlap and constitute a dichotomy of pro-and-anti-government blocs, each projecting a different story about the prevailing situation inside Eritrea. At the middle of the two opposing blocs, stands the silent majority that includes passive government supporters, passive critics and those who are detached from Eritrean nationalism entirely (Hirt, 2014, p.128). The

diaspora opposition camp calls for democracy, justice, and human rights in Eritrea, while the pro-government bloc portrays Ethiopia and the US administration as a potential ‘threat’ to the Eritrean sovereignty.

Eritrea fought a bloody war with neighboring Ethiopia between 1998-2000; a war that was widely portrayed as a “border conflict,” though the latent causes of the war remain ambiguous to many Eritreans. The 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia was conceived by many diaspora Eritreans as a violation of the sovereignty of Eritrea, creating a kneejerk reaction of support to the Eritrean government (Conrad, 2010, p.108). Supporters of Eritrean government in the diaspora do not differentiate between Eritrea as a nation, the State of Eritrea as a political entity, and the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice – the PFDJ<sup>16</sup>, as a ruling political party (Conrad, 2010, p.166). Besides, they regard disobedience to the government as treason to the nation and people of Eritrea (Hirt, 2014, p.126). The characteristic feature of the diaspora pro-government bloc is predominated by the Christian Tigrigna, who conceive Eritrea as a ‘besieged miracle land’ (Hirt, 2014, p.128).

On the other hand, anti-government diaspora opposition groups are characterized by internal divisions along fault lines of ethnic, religious and regional courses (Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015, p.1). Added to the historical political fissures that originated during the armed struggle, they may have been infiltrated and weakened by covert diaspora agents of the Eritrean government, instigating fragmentation and mistrust among the various groups. In the diaspora, there are many civil society groups, largely in the US, Europe, and Australia. Their activities include the documentation of the regime’s human rights violations and mobilization of the diaspora to participate in anti-government activities such as demonstrations and boycotts of government-led seminars and festivals (Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015, p.3)

The Eritrean diaspora has been the most important source of funding for the Eritrean regime (Hirt and Mohammad, 2017, p.3). It collects 2% diaspora income tax from its nationals in the diaspora, regardless of their citizenship. For instance, on average, US 5.9 million per annum was channeled to the government between 1997 and 2003 (Kibreab, 2007, p.106). Since the time of the armed struggle, the EPLF, and later the PFDJ created transnational institutions and have been able to control the diaspora population ‘by methods of coercion, legitimation, and co-optation in a transnational space’ (Hirt and Mohammad, 2017, p.13). The Eritrean

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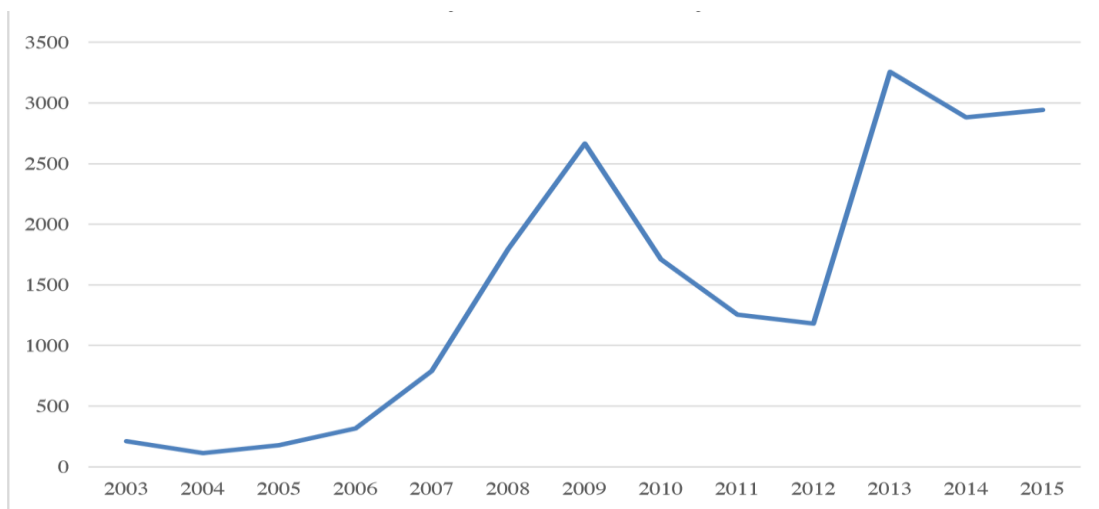
<sup>16</sup> PFDJ was the new name given to the former EPLF in 1994, which remain the only party formed after the independence of Eritrea. The party has been headed by the running president, Isayas Afewerki.

government also has a surveillance apparatus in the diaspora. Diaspora collaborates of the regime spy on people by ‘maintaining watchlist, photographing or videotaping dissidents at protests or in opposition meetings’ and deliver their findings to embassies and consulates of Eritrea (Hepner, 2008, p.486-7)

### 3.2.3 Eritrean Diaspora Community in Norway

Eritreans have migrated to Norway since the period of the Eritrean armed struggle, but before the de jure independence of Eritrea in 1993, they were regarded as Ethiopian citizens (SSB, 2007, p.210). Eritrean refugees arriving to Norway are comprised of different categories: asylum seekers who have directly lodged their asylum applications to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) in Norway; quota refugees who entered to Norway through UNHCR resettlement programme from neighbouring countries, such as Sudan and Ethiopia; and those who have arrived later by family reunification. In 2017, the total number of Eritrean immigrants in Norway has reached 19957 (IMDI, 2017).

Fig. 2. Total Eritrean Asylum Seekers to Norway 2003-2015



*Figure based on data provided by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration – Unit for Statistics and Analysis.*

Source: UDI data cited in Røsberg and Tronvoll (2017, p.45)

The general trend above, though with some fluctuations, shows a rising number of Eritrean asylum seekers that sought protection in Norway between 2003-2015. The reasons behind the fall of arrivals between 2009-2012 are not known, whether it is due to the asylum policy of Norway or other impeding factors along the way to their destination (Røsberg and Tronvoll, 2017, p.45). Not included in the figure above are quota refugees and those who have reunited with their family members later. Eritrean immigrants who have arrived in Norway through

family reunification cases – also known as secondary immigrants – have reached 3000 family immigrants between 1990-2015 (SSB, 2016, p.46).

The figure below projects the percentile of asylums seekers by their spoken language. The data shows a clear asymmetry between the TS compared to NTS.

Fig.3 Total Eritrean asylum seekers to Norway, 2003-2015 by language

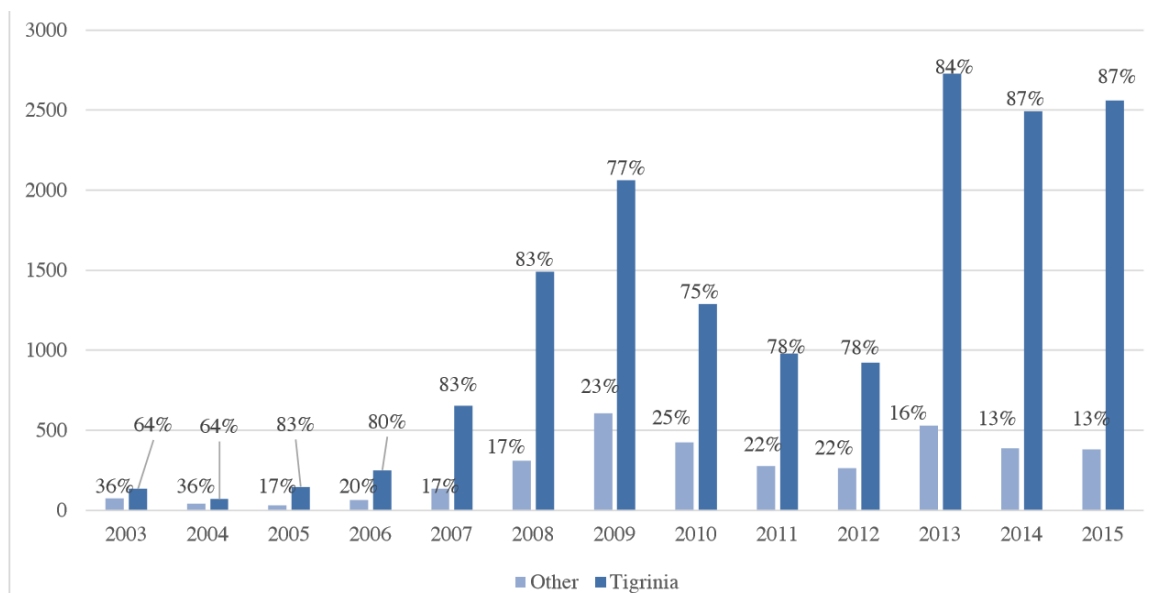


Figure based on data provided by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration – Unit for Statistics and Analysis. Annual percentages in parenthesis. The other category includes a large number of different languages including Tigre, Bilin/Bilen, Amharic, Arabic, Saho, and Afar.

Source: UDI data cited in Røsberg and Tronvoll 2017, p.48

The trend in Fig.3 reveals that TS have always been the majority that has sought asylum between 2003-2015. The dominant trend of the Tigrigna speakers could be firstly explained by familial links they possess in Norway, which possibly pulls them to this part of the world. Secondly, religion is seemingly another important factor that may have influenced their preference for Western countries as host countries. Tigrigna speakers are all Christians (except the *Jeberti*)<sup>17</sup>, and this fact may be the reason behind their preference of Western countries to countries of the Middle East (Røsberg and Tronvoll, 2017, p.48-9). On the other hand, most Eritreans Muslims, based on their socio-cultural orientation, tend to migrate to countries of the Middle East (see Bereketeab, 2007, p.79).

Local immigrant organizations are mainly set up to keep a common identity among immigrant populations, based on different kinds of activities: sports, cultural evenings, mother

<sup>17</sup> The *Jeberti* are minority Muslim Tigrigna speakers who are mostly settled in the Eritrean Highlands.

tongue training courses, and national day celebrations (Bråten, Jahreie, and Lillevik, 2017, p.10). Apart from the available statistical data, it appears to be hard to find a comprehensive and well-researched literature about the organization and behavior of Eritrean diaspora community in Norway. However, like their counterparts in many other countries, Eritreans in Norway also tend to be organized in the dimensions of culture, religion, language, political attitude, and civic society orientation. The most visible operations of diaspora Eritreans in Norway could be reflected by their political stance towards the Eritrean government, roughly divided into two categories – the opposition bloc, also referred to as ‘justice seekers’ and the supporters of the Eritrean government. Though non-frequent, diaspora opponents of the Eritrean government organize demonstrations condemning the state of human rights violations in Eritrea and the illegal practices of government-affiliated agents in Norway (Moum, 2016).

Some Eritreans who have granted protection in Norway on the alleged grounds of “fear of persecution” in the homeland, clandestinely support the Eritrean government. They attend regular meetings and festivals of the Eritrean government in the diaspora, spying on Eritreans living in Norway and creating fear and insecurity in their lives and weakening the diaspora opposition<sup>18</sup>. They are believed to be agents of the Eritrean government that are possibly sent to suppress and report anti-government activities made by diaspora Eritreans. Diaspora Eritrean religious institutions in Norway, especially the Churches have close ties with the Eritrean government (Moum, 2016), possibly being manipulated by the Eritrean government to curb overseas resistance.

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<sup>18</sup> See the comments made by Eritrea expert on the Norwegian Television Channel (Nrk), Kjetil Tronvoll, on how the supporters of the Government could misuse the asylum process in Norway, available at: <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/dagsrevyen/NNFA03031515/15-03-2015#t=29m27s>. To have a glimpse of how Eritreans in Norway are exposed to surveillance by the diaspora agents of the Eritrean regime, see <https://www.dagsavisen.no/rogalandsavis/kronikk-stavanger-kommune-tar-grep-1.861803>.

#### **4.Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I am presenting the main theoretical concepts of my thesis. Firstly, I will present a general overview of the theoretical development of the concept of diaspora by describing its origin, characteristics, and the practices it entails. Due to its relevance to the research topic, I am elaborating on the meaning and description of the concept of transnational political practices and explain their impacts to the country of settlement, country of origin and the transnational community at large. Moreover, to understand the process of mobilization and organization of transnational political practices, I am discussing the concept of social movements.

Secondly, I am explaining the paradigm of critical socio-linguistics, a view that critically elaborates on language rights and the concerns about upward social mobility for minority language speakers. I am particularly incorporating this view to interpret the conceptions of Eritrean Muslims in Norway about the language policy in their country of origin and its impact in the homeland and the diaspora. The way of combining different theories is based on the nature of my topic where triangulation of data and theory is required to illuminate and interpret the findings (Patton in Yin, 2014, p.120).

##### **4.1. The Concept of Diaspora**

The term ‘diaspora’ has Greek origins, meaning to “sow over or scatter,” and it is believed the ancient Greeks use of the concept of diaspora was closely connected to migration and colonization (Cohen, 1997, IX; Vertovec, 2005, p.1).Traditionally the concept of diaspora was exclusively used to denote the displacement of the Jews from their homeland to different countries and the suffering associated with that dispersion (Safran, 1991, p.83; Wahlbeck, 2002, p.229). Nowadays, however, the concept is being used in a broader sense to explain the complex relationship that exists between exiled communities, their host polities and the polities of origin. Notable scholars have also contributed to the theoretical development of the concept of diaspora (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1997; Clifford 1994; Demmers, 2002; and Wahlbeck, 2002). Safran defines diaspora as:

‘expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and

therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship' (Safran,1991, p.83-4)

Though largely much of the same, Cohen (1997, p.26) supplemented Safran's definition with some additional input that could explicitly stress on the causal factors that force people from their ancestral land, among others, traumatic conditions and economic motives. Additionally, Cohen suggests that diasporas could possibly consider living in the host countries under the condition of tolerance for pluralism. Other academics have also warned to be careful when suggesting a restricted definitional checklist ascribed to the concept of diaspora (Clifford, 1994, p.306). Clifford (1994) notes that the definition offered by Safran is too strict and does not consider all the attributes of the diaspora. Firstly, diasporas do not necessarily need any center, nor do all members of the diaspora desire to return to their places of origin, argues (Clifford cited in Wahlbeck, 2002, p.231). Secondly, it is not all the time that diasporas can exclusively contribute to the safety and prosperity of their homeland. Diaspora can also influence violent conflicts in the homeland by transferring army, money, and opinions (Demmers, 2002, p.89). Despite the various arguments about the typologies of diaspora, generally, they are referred to as imagined transnational communities that connect groups of people residing in different places (Sökefeld, 2006, p.267).

Regarding the ontological origins of the concept of diaspora, many scholars argue that it is a socially constructed term formulated by the interaction of people and their social environment. The constructivists' conception differs from that of the essentialists, in a sense that the latter views diaspora as something that simply emerges out of border-crossing phenomena like migration, exile and dispersal (Adamson, 2008, p.4). In contrast, many scholars argue that the concept is dynamic and contextual; for instance, constructivists regard diaspora not as something automatically emerging from migration, but as an outcome of discursive constructions of the community (Demmers, 2007, p.8; Sökefeld, 2006, p.270; Adamson, 2008, p. 4). Also, diasporas, like ethnic groups, are imagined (transnational) communities created by an interactive process of identification and ascription (Demmers, 2007, p.8). Therefore, the concept of diaspora identity is not just a natural and inevitable



outcome of migration but has to be viewed as a phenomenon that emerges out of mobilization process (Sökefeld, 2006, p.280).

Among the most common characteristics of the diaspora is that they retain a “triadic relationship” between a) forcibly dispersed communities with common identification; b) host states; c) the countries of origin (Vertovec, 1999 cited in Demmers, 2002, p.89; Wahlbeck, 2002, p.229). This triadic relationship is maintained by globalization, a term referring to the fast improvement in transport and communication technology, that enabled the connectivity of migrants with their places of origin (Castles and Miller, 2009, p.30). Globalization has also facilitated the creation of transnational networks where people settling in different parts of the world sustain their social relations (Wahlbeck, 2002, p.230).

When establishing a conceptual definition of the diaspora, it is important to note that the diaspora is not a unitary entity; it is comprised of various interest groups that may diverge in terms of their identity, organization, objectives, etc. Thus, despite their ideologies of purity, it is not possible to label diasporic cultural forms as solely nationalists (Clifford, 1994, p.307); they may maintain conflicting interests and purposes. In other words, diasporas should not be seen as a homogenous unit where its members share similar political agendas (Banki, 2013, p.4). Despite their common identity, they do not share the same views and experiences. This disparity is clearly visible in the inter-diaspora conflicts between the new and old generation of migrants, where the latter holds older conceptions of circumstances [in the country of origin] (Vertovec, 2005, p.4).

Diaspora does not emerge in a vacuum; there are underlying causes that contribute to their establishment. Partially, the practices of the diaspora communities could emanate from the behavior of host countries and their values – they tend to resist assimilation into the nation-state and reclaim another nation that has been lost elsewhere (Clifford, 1994, p.307). Their diasporic formulation could also be triggered by the structural discrimination and exclusion from the host societies that might diminish their sense of belongingness to the settlement society. In this regard, Wahlbeck warns in the diaspora discourse, researchers should avoid disregarding the relationship that exists between the diaspora and the host society in terms of power structures in the form of majority-minority relations (2002, p. 232). On the other hand, the behavior manifested by the countries of origin also shape how the diaspora is organized and remotely engaged in the politics of their homeland.

Though I am broadly discussing the various networks and activities of the diaspora in my next section, describing some diasporic practices here would stimulate the succeeding discussion. To mention some, diaspora activities include political lobbying, fund-raising, establishing social networks, religious groups, national holiday celebrations and rituals (Demmers, 2007, p.9-11).

#### **4.1.1 Transnational Political Practices**

Before I proceed on defining the concept of transnational political practices, it is helpful to elucidate the basic integral structures that facilitate the functioning of those practices. In other words, we need frames that consolidate the operation of transnational communities; this could be their identity, for instance. Hence, for the sustainability and efficacy of transnational practices, a common identity should be socially constructed, and this shared identity and interest could take different forms such as national, religious, ethnic, etc. Therefore, as a point of departure, it is important to formulate and delineate the transnational identity. In political practices, identities are constructed discursively and organized by elites to be applicable to a wider group of individuals (Bauböck and Faist, 2010, p.20). A social constructivist viewpoint suggests ‘a shift from focusing on transnational communities to transnational practices in order to avoid essentialized conceptions of migrant groups as being, for example, inherently national or transnational’ (Bauböck and Faist, 2010, p.19). This reality confirms that identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed within the transnational environment, and they are not fixed ascriptions.

After I have discussed how identity formation is vital for organizing transnational political practices, I will briefly elaborate on transnationalism and the constituents it entails. Transnationalism sometimes tends to be confused with the term ‘diaspora’ despite the existence of distinct attributes that differentiate their meaning.

Generally, transnationalism is defined as ‘activities that function across borders’ (Banki, 2013, p.3-4), that could emanate from two sources – those initiated and performed by strong institutional actors, such as multinational corporations and states, and those that emerge from the grass-roots efforts by immigrants and their counterparts at homeland (Portes, Guranizo and Landolt, 1999, p.221). In short, the concept of transnationalism denotes ‘a relation over and beyond rather than between or in, the nation-states’; hence, these social relations are no more restricted to specific borders (Wahlbeck, 2002, p.223). The actors of transnationalism are constituted of ‘individuals, their network of social relations, their communities and

broader institutionalized structures such as local and national governments' (Portes et al., 1999, p.220). The participation and effectiveness of the transnational engagement of migrants vary primarily with their age, social capital, and human capital. There is a tendency that migrants with good educational background and social status actively participate in transnational practices, compared to their less-educated fellow migrants (Castles and Miller, 2009, p.32). This phenomenon is justified because diasporas with high human capital have a privileged access to the platform that makes their transnational activities real (Portes et al., 1999, p. 224). Additionally, globalization has also played a significant role in the development of transnationalism – it enhanced the earlier face to face communication of people into a far-flung virtual group of people that could communicate from longer distances (Castles and Miller, 2009, p.30).

For the benefit of this thesis, while I introduce the common transnational practices of the diasporas briefly, emphasis will be specifically given to the transnational political practices. Over the last three decades, diasporas have largely become notable players in the international political stage. Vibrant examples of diasporas who are engaged in political practices are the 'Jews-, Greek-, Cuban-, and Armenian-American Associations in Washington, DC' (Vertovec, 2005, p.1). Having said that, transnational diaspora activism is not solely restricted to the abovementioned societies; indeed, the phenomena has flourished among societies located in different corners of the world. Østergaard-Nielsen points out that transnational political practices could be patterned as 'narrow' and 'broad,' the former denoting real membership to parties or hometown associations, while the latter refers to the casual engagement in meetings or events (2003, p.761). Transnational political practices operated in a 'core' or 'narrow' level is not so recurrent in comparison with the 'wider' and more occasional practices that are triggered by political situations in the homeland (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003b cited in Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p761-2).

Migrants are engaged in an array of transnational practices; they participate in election campaigns, cross-border voting, demonstrations for or against the political situation in the sending country or formulate associations to take part in hometown tasks in their places of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.761). Besides, diaspora communities may lobby countries of settlement to influence policies in benefit of, or protest homeland regimes that might impact the course of politics in the country of origin (Vertovec, 2005, p.5). Østergaard-Nielsen defines transnational political practices as:

‘various forms of direct cross-border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees (such as voting and other support to political parties, participating in debates in the press), as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country (or international organizations)’ (2003, p.762).

Contemporary transnational activism is linked to the current wave of globalization and its connection with the changing structures of international politics – people take part in contentious collective actions not only resisting the global economic injustice but also struggle against dictatorship, domination, quest for human rights and democracy (Tarrow, 2005, p.5). The impact of the political weight of the diaspora could be linked with the rise of new forms of conflict; increase in war refugees; development in communication and mobility; and the rise in the creation of political and cultural boundaries (Demmers, 2002, p.86). As a segment of the broader diaspora, ignited with the discontent with home governments, refugees engage in a collective action seeking change in the country of origin, a phenomenon termed to as homeland activism (Banki, 2013, p.2). They mobilize with respect to different cases of interest; for instance, they might engage in homeland politics as a response to the political behavior of homeland government by either supporting or opposing the political system in their country of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.762)

In recent times, diasporas can easily maintain political mobilization through the internet, satellite television, phone calls and social media. The growth and spread of websites confirm the potential of “digital diasporas” engaging for common interests and identity (Vertovec, 2005, p.4). They establish diaspora community networks that engage in wider protests and mobilize for consciousness-raising about the situation of their countries of origin (Vertovec, 2005, p.5).

Furthermore, it is important to have a glimpse of the impacts of transnational political practices in the countries of origin and countries of settlement. By so doing, we avoid underestimating the role played by the diaspora in perpetuating conflicts in their homeland, and the challenges they cause to the host countries. Diaspora communities could be overwhelmed by the politics of their homelands – sometimes, such engagements could turn violent. Moreover, diasporic practices might influence the relationship between host countries and the countries of origin (Cohen, 1996, p.519). Thus, they engage in long-distance intervention in the conflicts of their homeland, thereby, involved into a sort of “virtual conflict” eased by modern communication systems, without direct suffering, risks or accountability (Demmers, 2002, p.94). In sum, it is important to analyze the impacts of the

transnational political practices of the diaspora in a multidimensional way and demonstrate the positive and negative consequences of their actions. Diasporic political activities, in some cases, may exacerbate and prolong the conflict in question, while in other cases, their voices and initiatives can influence reconciliation and demobilization (Demmers, 2002, p.86).

Transnational political practices might also function in excluding some migrant communities with majority/minority cases – some associations might not work together due to their varied political, religious, and ethnic background in the country of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.778). Therefore, in the debate of diasporic identities and views, we should not only focus on the structural differences that exist between the diaspora communities and the settlement societies, but also notice the different interests and structures existing within the various groups – that could consequently lead into inter-diasporic oppression (Wahlbeck, 2002, p.234).

For analytical reasons to define transnationalism, Portes et al. proposes that, before considering communities, economic businesses and political parties, to start from the bottom – with the individual and relate with his/her networks. Considering the history and experiences of individuals, we can develop an effective approach to learning about the institutional foundation of transnationalism and its effects (Portes et al., 1999, p.220). In line with this, I am addressing the transnational practices of individuals that share a common religious identity – Eritrean Muslims in Norway, but I am not conducting my research targeting a specific organization. In short, all of my research subjects are Muslims, they share a sense of solidarity and communion among each other, but they are not organized based on religion.

#### **4.1.2 Social Movements**

Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century French Revolution, the conceptualization of the social movements theory has undergone significant development to adapt the changing dynamics of world politics and globalization. The way people mobilize and organize to achieve the realization of their claims has been revolutionized with time. As a result, scholars of social movements have contributed accordingly on the modification and framing of the theory from its inception to its modern application. In this section, I do not intend to present a detailed philosophical and historical account of social movements; rather, I will emphasize on its contemporary operation and its relevance to the concepts of diaspora and transnational political practices. Firstly, I am using Tilly (1978) to introduce a general framework about the

operation of social movements; his classic model of *collective action* offers a fundamental concept to understand the ingredients of social movements. Secondly, to specifically employ the concept of social movements in the context of diaspora and transnationalism, I am elaborating on the concepts described by Sökefeld (2006); he recommends a relevant framework that emboldens the contextual application of the theory with the topic I am addressing.

Social movement refers to ‘a group of people identified by their attachment to some particular set of beliefs’ (Tilly, 1978, p.9), and they elaborate on the kinds of collective actions against the prevailing social and political structures; in other words, they seek change (Sökefeld, 2006, p.268). To establish a theoretical framework for social movements, it is essential to understand the concept and constituents of *collective action*. Tilly (1978), has developed a classic model related to the idea of collective action and its main characteristic features and core elements. The *collective action* model, presented by Tilly is comprised of five principal components: ‘*interest, organization, mobilization, opportunity and collective action itself*’ (1978, p.7). In this context, *interests* mean the gains and losses produced when two groups interact; *organization* refers to a group’s structure that directly influences their ability to act on its interests; *mobilization* refers to the collective control a group possesses over the important resources for action; *opportunity* deals with how a group maintains a relationship with the surrounding environment – any change in relationship might risk the interests of the group; *collective action* denotes people’s working together for the shared interest. Further, regarding the functioning of collective action frames, Benford and Snow’s point is worth citing at length:

‘Collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to effect change’ (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.615)

In later years, social movement scholars have elaborated on explaining the major concepts of collective action in a broader manner. Contemporary works on social movements have expanded and contextualized the main framework with additional clarifications. Social movements do not grow immediately of social grievances, but they need certain structural and contextual platform for mobilization (Sökefeld, 2006, p.269). Social movements also need networks of people that share the same case organized for making particular demands; and

these are termed as *mobilization structures* – for instance, movement organizations and the social chains of daily life (Sökefeld, 2006, p.269; McAdam et al., 2001, p.14-15). Another main element of social movements is the *collective action frames*, denoting both to the cultural constants that instruct participants and those they themselves construct. In other words, frames are certain ideas that shape the common understanding for social movement – they help to define grievances and demands and legitimize and mobilize action (Sökefeld, 2006, p.269-270; McAdam et al., 2001, p.14-15). Master frames, such as issues of human rights, environment and identity are vital for the functioning of social movements (Sökefeld, 2006, p.270). The master frames described by Sökefeld, (2006) are relevant in explaining the transnational political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway aimed at political reforms and democratization in the homeland.

But how do these frames emerge at the very beginning? To identify the formation of different frames, it is essential to understand the interplay of people and their social environment in creating those frames – social constructivism. When people migrate, they become situated in a new social and political environment and form new identities and discourses, thereby, re-interpret past experiences that might have been naturalized. This phenomenon can be explained by illuminating on the ‘strategic social construction of transnational identity communities through processes of framing and political mobilization by diasporic entrepreneurs’ (Adamson, 2008, p.11-3). Adamson (2008) draws on the framework of social movements to understand the way in which political entrepreneurs participate in constructing the “diaspora”, for instance. In identifying the specific features of ‘diasporic politics’, political entrepreneurs try to demonstrate and reproduce politicized form of identity types – ‘national, ethnic, sectarian, or religious’ (Adamson, 2008, p.3). Despite the dispersion of diasporas in different polities, the presence of symbolic links of common faith, ethnicity and homeland nationality promote the opportunities of social cohesion and strong solidarity (Ogden, 2008, p.4), and thereby, construct their common identities.

As I have stated earlier, the theory of social movements is very broad, and has been employed differently in various contexts and periods. Political environments change with time, and so does the development of globalization and people’s demands. Therefore, in the context of transnational political practices, Sökefeld’s explanatory social movements framework is more relevant to my project. Sökefeld interprets and summarizes the application of social movements theory to the context of diaspora mobilization. To analyze the diasporic

mobilization of transnationally dispersed communities, then, we need to consider the available *political opportunities, mobilizing structures and practices, and frames*.

- Examples of *opportunities* entail communication, media, transport and legal and institutional frameworks available.
- Examples of *mobilizing structures* include networks and associations that act as a ‘platform for community’ discourses. These networks produce mobilizing *practices* such as demonstrations and different community conventions of a national and transnational character. Kinship affiliation ties could be a good transnational mobilizing structure
- Examples of *frames* entail identity, roots, and importance of history. Frames include ‘all the ideas from which an imagination of a community is composed’; ideas that are attributed to explain migrants as a member of a transnational group or the connection related to their belonging (Søkefeld, 2006, p.70)

In this way, it becomes easier to incorporate the concepts of social movements into the context of processes and structures of diasporic transnational political practices and contextualize their analytic utility.

## **4.2 Concepts on Language and Society**

In this section, I am shedding light to the role of language in the functioning of a given society, especially, in a multilingual and multicultural setting where groups of the nation-state speak different languages, and where they are situated in a differential status and power relations. Moreover, I am drawing on the concept of critical socio-linguistics to analyze the conceptions of my informants regarding the language policy in Eritrea.

### **4.2.1 Language and Society**

Apart from its instrumental utility as a mode of communication, language constitutes multifaceted elements that impact people’s life. Language plays a major role on the domination of some people by others (Fairclough, 2001, p.3); this phenomenon is particularly evident in many African countries where their constituent population speak not only multiple languages but also maintain unequal majority-minority power disparities. Language, as a vital marker that separates people into different groups, may constitute a double function; it is not only used as a tool of classification but also as a tool of exclusion (Bamgbose, 2000, p.9).



Among multilingual societies, lack of a common language can result in language-based exclusion for the disadvantaged; for instance, language-based prejudice is a case in point. Consequently, people could be vulnerable to discrimination and prejudice due to the type of languages they use, such as dialects, minority languages and non-standard forms (Bamgbose, 2000, p.4). In a multicultural and multilingual society, the case of language and communication is vital for their effective coexistence. Thus, if not properly managed, language could act as a barrier to individual social mobility and even it could even result in the disintegration of the society (Opeibi, 2000, p.191).

The use of language can influence the way people organize themselves, their joint interrelationships and peaceful coexistence. Language can either function as a social bond or as a barrier, because it comprises cultures and identities of its users (Opeibi, 2000, p.190). But identities are also fluid and can take different forms; some languages do not necessarily define our ethnic identity; hence they are not so important element in the construction of our identities (May, 2005, p 328-9).

#### **4.2.2 Linguistic Pluralism and Critical Socio-Linguistics**

In multilingual societies, the issue of language could be a controversial subject; questions such as which language should be promoted as an official language, or which language should citizens use in schooling their children are widely debated. In the literature of educational language policies, there are two competing views on how language policy and practice might yield a better outcome for its users. The first view, the linguistic human rights (LHRs) view, suggests that individuals should obtain education by the mother tongue and ‘use their mother tongue in most official situations (including day-care, schools, courts, emergency situations of all kinds, health care, including hospitals, and many governmental and other offices)’ (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998, p.22). The UNESCO justifies this view by arguing that ‘learners learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to, and complement of bilingual education approaches’ (UNESCO, 2003). The arguments on minority and language rights draw on the declarations and conventions of the UNESCO<sup>19</sup> and the United Nations<sup>20</sup>. In sum, the

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education (Article 5); the 1976 Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (Article 22); and the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (Article 6), source: (UNESCO, 2003, p.22-5).

<sup>20</sup> For example, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 2); the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 27); and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Article 4), source: (UNESCO, 2003, p.22-5).

advocates of LHRs approach, concerned by the broader political and social processes that have largely led to language loss, appeal for first language preservation. In other words, they argue that likewise the privileges enjoyed by majority languages, minority languages and their users also should be provided protection and institutional assistance (May, 2012, 8).

In contrast, critical socio-linguistics provides an alternative view about language rights that vary from the LHRs paradigm. The arguments of critical socio-linguistics point out that, even if language rights are accorded to minority language speakers, this neither necessarily guarantee their broader social and political participation, nor minimizes inequalities (May, 2012, p.10.). In theory, there is no problem on advocating for linguistic human rights; however, in practice, this approach does not work, or can backfire (Blommaert, 2004, p.55). In fact, there are instances where multilingualism has resulted in the marginalization and discrimination of minority language speakers. In most African countries, language policies entail problems of marginalization and pervasive exclusion that could emerge from different factors; for instance, 'exclusion through an official language, exclusion through illiteracy, and exclusion arising from lack of a shared medium' (Bamgbose, 2000, p.1-2). A case in point, in Nigeria, one of the consequences of linguistic pluralism is: 'a gap in communication giving rise to mistrust, suspicion and conflict' (Opeibi, 2000, p.190). Generally, learning a majority language provides people with a broader economic and social mobility, while minority languages, on the other hand, restrict an individual's mobility and progress (May, 2005, p.333).

Hence, a theoretical backdrop on concepts in language policy would serve to interpret and analyze the existing language policy in Eritrea through the eyes of Eritrean Muslim NTS in Norway. Especially, addressing issues on language and its connection to marginalization and exclusion in the homeland would contribute to our understanding of the cross-border implications in the social relations of the Eritrean diaspora as well.

## **5. Understanding a Multilingual Country: Legislation, Policy, and Perceptions of the Role of Language in Eritrea**

As I have mentioned in the thesis outline, analysis and discussion of the interview data is presented in this Chapter (Chapter five), and the subsequent Chapter (Chapter six).

As outlined in the introduction of the research, to gain a broader understanding about language diversity and its role in the diasporic political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway, it is crucial to obtain an overview about the existing language policy in Eritrea seen through the eyes of the informants. In so doing, I would be able to link the attitude of the Eritrean government toward the Muslim NTS inside Eritrea in terms of language and equal citizenship rights – and further, discuss how the long-standing structured inequalities and differential grievances in the homeland are impacting their transnational socio-political practices in the diaspora. Therefore, in this section I try to answer the sub-question:

*How do Eritrean Muslims in Norway perceive and interpret the language policy and practice in the homeland? In what way the prevailing language legislation in Eritrea might have influenced the transnational socio-political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway?*

Let me note that the case of languages in Eritrea is a complicated subject – it is tied up with religion, culture and power relations. A deeper analysis of these issues in a master's thesis is overambitious; therefore, I have only discussed some general insights about how religion, culture, and language are intertwined in the Eritrean context before I address the abovementioned sub-question.

### **5.1 Language, Culture, Religion, and Power Relations in Eritrea**

Most of the participants I interviewed are multilingual<sup>21</sup>, and they mention they have learned different languages because of their attitudes towards other languages and the contact they had with people from different linguistic groups. Thus, attitudes remain central to the motivation to learn a particular language as well as to tolerate people that speak a different language. Attitudes towards language are crucial for its 'restoration, preservation, decay or death' (Baker, 1992, p.9). One of my informants speaks eight languages, and he emphasizes his attitudes about languages as follows:

'Everywhere, learning a language is a resource – the more you speak- the more you get an opportunity or anything. Languages, whatever they are, I like languages. Because I have a

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<sup>21</sup> Check annex 3 to grasp an overview of research participants.

positive attitude towards the languages, (...) and because I had a contact with the societies  
(Participant 1)

There is no doubt that the attitudes towards languages remain decisive to either accept or reject a particular language. Nevertheless, when someone is a member of minority language group, it is not always true to assume that people learn other languages because they like them. Minorities can also be forced to learn other languages to adapt life situations with the powerful majorities, and sometimes are compelled to surrender their own languages.

The language issue in the politics of Eritrea has always been contentious since the inception of Eritrean nationalism and political awareness of the 1940s, and still, it remains an unresolved central issue. In line with this, another informant describes the interrelationship of language with other dimensions of the society:

‘... the treatment of Eritreans regarding languages has yet a problem. Because language is understood as according to the thing [need]. Language is a tool for communication - but in the Eritrean society – [the lens] you observe language from, is much more than that. Language is power; language is related to religion, history. Therefore, the language issue is a bit complicated in Eritrea’ (Participant 2)

If there are tendencies of linguistic intolerance and exclusion among the members of a multilingual society, this could not only broaden the gap of mistrust but also endanger their harmony and coexistence. Participant 3 describes the attitude of the TS towards other Eritrean languages as follows:

‘The Tigrigna have a target, as I understand it – they don’t want to learn the Arabic language; they don’t want to learn the Tigre language; they don’t want to learn Blin language. If you are a Blin, then you must speak Tigrigna; if you are a Tigre, then you must speak in Tigrigna – [and] if you are unable to speak, then, it is your problem. [If] I am a Tigrigna – I don’t respond to you in your language – if you wish to communicate, then speak in my language’  
(Participant 3)

However, one cannot overlook the imbalance of power relations existing between the TS and NTS to analyze the desire and incentives of learning other languages. Out of the nine Eritrean ethnic-linguistic groups, the political and cultural dominance of the Tigrigna is quite visible (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2015). Their language is also the *de facto* working language in Eritrea. Therefore, the Tigrigna may view learning minority languages as a non-

attractive investment; their language is dominant and speaking other languages could perhaps be deemed as less rewarding.

It is also important to bear in mind that in Eritrea, the discourse about language primarily revolves around the status of the Arabic language. The endless cycle of debates seem to stem from two conflicting views: Eritrean Muslims predominantly argue that Arabic should be the language of instruction in primary public schooling and should be advanced to the status of a formal language of Eritrea, alongside the Tigrigna language. On the other hand, many Christian TS seem to show resistance to the promotion of the Arabic language – perhaps, they consider it as a threat to their power and Christian identity.

The history of Arabic language in the Horn of Africa, and particularly, in Eritrea is not new. It predates the emergence of Christianity and Islam (Mohammad, 2016, p.524). Thus, the Arabic language has been utilized as a cornerstone for the construction of shared cultural and religious identity among the diverse Muslim communities of Eritrea. The religious and communal life of Eritrean Muslims is influenced by the Arabic language (Woldemikael, 2003, p. 127). In addition, due to its instrumental value as a language of commerce and communication that covers many nations, the Arabic language retains significant economic importance.

The findings in my research confirm that all informants displayed a positive attitude towards Arabic. Among the Eritrean Muslims in Norway, the Arabic language is used as a common language of communication strengthening their unity. For instance, Participant 7 says: ‘If we consider the Muslims, their language is Arabic; although they have their specific languages – we get united in the Arabic language.’ Moreover, the Arabic language serves as an inter-ethnic communicative element among the Eritrean Muslim community. Therefore, mother language is neither desired nor sufficient for the formation of collective identity (Bereketeab, 2010, p.166) among the Muslim NTS.

In contrast, many Tigrigna elites implicitly or explicitly pronounce that Arabic is an alien language to Eritrea. The claim that the Arabic language is an alien language to Eritrea is not a recently invented perception. Even during the British rule, Protestant intellectuals plead the British authorities to approve Tigrigna as the sole official language of Eritrea, to remove Arabic by claiming it was an alien language to Eritrea (Mohammad, 2016, p.525). Participant 4 outlines two reasons for the rationale behind the disapproval of the Arabic language by the TS:

‘Arabic language of course – language is a means of economic and political power – if you have a language [you have power] and maybe they see that their language might not compete with Arabic. Arabic is an international language, and they will be at a disadvantage if Arabic comes. There are also other historical reasons; there is enmity towards Islam and Muslims – they consider them as invaders. And the Christians perceive themselves as an isolated island [surrounded by Muslim neighbors] – and have protected [this island] for thousands of years; (...) they connect Arabic with Islam’ (Participant 4)

The view provided by Participant 4 neatly fits with the assertions of Woldemikael in which he outlines: ‘the government is fully aware that Arabic, as an international language and the language of countries surrounding Eritrea, may eclipse Tigrinya, which is only a regional language at best’ (2003, p.134). These statements uncover the fears of the Tigrigna speakers from endorsing Arabic as an official language beside Tigrigna. The assumption that Arabic is a language of Islam, and hence not desired, also resonates well with the observations of Bereketeab: ‘Arabic is also considered by the Christians as embodying Islamic values, norms and belief system’ (2010, p.179).

Further, Participant 2 and Participant 3 share similar views about the attitudes of the TS in their association of Arabic language with religion. But, Participant 2 blames the Eritrean Government for creating this kind of mentality among the TS.

One informant who cannot speak Tigrigna shared his day-to-day experiences with the TS. He acknowledges the existing communication gap:

‘there is a communication problem. For instance, perhaps, only 1% of the Tigrigna speak the Arabic language; the majority, they do not speak Arabic – they even don’t like to learn Arabic – this is a problem. The problem is that they don’t know Arabic – and they don’t want to know Arabic’ (Participant 7)

The expression offered by Participant 7 indicates not only the communication gaps between the TS and NTS, but it also demonstrates how attitudes toward a specific language can influence their integrity as well.

Positive attitudes towards a language can enhance the motivation and commitment of individuals to learn that language, regardless of the difficult environment they might face. A case in point is what Participant 4 used to learn about Islam and Arabic language in Eritrea during his childhood. He notes: ‘In the morning, we used to go to the public school, and after

14:00 o'clock we used to go to the Ma'ahad<sup>22</sup>; it was a private school' (Participant 4).

Imagine, a child that dedicates his entire day commuting from public school to private school, and spends his time attending two school shifts! It manifests the unmatched desire that existed among his parents in learning Arabic language and Islamic teachings.

Regarding power relations, Eritrea is demographically comprised of an equal proportion of Christians and Muslims, but Christians have dominated the political economy of Eritrea (Bernal, 2004, p.8). In line with this, Participant 4 and Participant 3 also confirm the power of the Christian TS; they argue that marginalizing Arabic language weakens the unity of the Muslims, and thereby, ensures the domination of the Tigrigna speakers. Participant 2 elaborates how language is manipulated to sustain the differential power relations between the Christian TS and Muslim NTS:

‘what I see in the Christians is that they have power; they dominate the economy; the administrative domain; the military and the like. Definitely, they would like to maintain this power. They want to keep their hegemony and domination in the politics and generally in the nation. The unity of Muslims – or if the Arabic language secures its position in Eritrea, definitely, the Muslims would mostly be active. The Arabic language is their language, (...) and the power of Christians gets affected. (Participant 2)

In support to the comments of Participant 2, Mohammad also outlines that the suppression of the Arabic language was intended to reinforce the domination of the Tigrigna language and conversely, the fragmentation of NTS (2016, p.532). The Arabic language has been portrayed as a threat, not only by the political elite of the TS but also by academics who loudly pronounce their fears of a united Muslim community in one language. For instance, Bereketeab outlines his doubts in this manner: ‘The project of packaging the various ethnolinguistic groups into a pan-Islamic identity cluster, with the intended aim of creating social equilibrium, probably, also need to be avoided’ (Bereketeab, 2010, p.176). In contrast to Bereketeab’s warnings, one can also argue that demonizing religious identity and dismissing collective group rights can also endanger social cohesion.

Regarding the cultural and religious affiliations, like many African nations, the Eritrean society is constituted of diverse religions and cultures. Islam and Christianity are the main religions, but there are also adherents to traditional African beliefs. Similarly, the cultural

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<sup>22</sup> Ma'ahad is a local private institution where Eritrean Muslims send their children to learn Arabic and Islamic teachings.

differences are also tied up with religion and geographic location of the ethnolinguistic groups. Eritrea is bordered with the Red Sea to the east; with Sudan to the north and west; with Ethiopia to the South, and with Djibouti to the south-east. Hence, societies that are territorially settled along the borders intersect and share cultures with their kin from neighboring countries. For instance, the Tigrigna speakers who are settled in the highlands of Eritrea are culturally affiliated to the Christian Abyssinian culture of Ethiopia, while those who are settled in the Eritrean western and Eastern lowlands are culturally affiliated to the Arabic-Islamic culture with the Sudan, and other countries bordering the Red Sea, such as Yemen (Participant 1, 2, and 4).

## **5.2 Perceptions about Language and its Policy in Eritrea**

As I outlined in the literature review, following Eritrea's independence, the government introduced a new educational language policy. It shut down most Arabic schools which have existed during the Ethiopian colonization and replaced them with the mother tongue schools (Mohammad, 2016, p.532). Moreover, the legislation about the status of languages in Eritrea, article 4(3) notes that 'the equality of all Eritrean languages is guaranteed.' However, the sheer declaration of languages as equal does not guarantee the equality of the speakers in the real world; because there are other underlying factors at play (Blommaert, 2001, p.138), in practice; some languages are privileged over others.

In this part, the perceptions of Eritrean Muslim NTS on the Eritrean constitution and the language policy will be discussed.

All the participants I interviewed questioned the double standardization of the Post-independence educational language policy adopted by the Eritrean government. They are suspicious about the real intentions of the policy and argue that the replacement of the Arabic language by the mother tongue in primary schooling in the rural areas of Eritrea have resulted in the marginalization of NTS in all domains. Regarding the 'equality of all Eritrean languages is guaranteed' clause, declared in the Constitution, all participants outlined this is not translated into practice. In reality, the Tigrigna language is the dominant language in Eritrea. For instance, Participant 4 argues that the strategy of declaring 'all Eritrean languages as equal' was in fact arranged to legitimize the domination of the Tigrigna. Moreover, Participant 3 clarifies how the constitution was deceptive when we look at its practical implications:



‘(...) this is deception – it is a deception. If we are going to say that the [languages] are equal, everywhere, people should get an opportunity by their language – for everything. An opportunity for the job, education, and the like. And they must practice and speak by their language whatever they wish everywhere (...) when you go to the offices – they use Tigrigna; if you attend a meeting – speech is in Tigrigna. If you look at the public posts in areas inhabited by the other ethnic groups – they are the Tigrigna who are appointed to that position’ (Participant 3)

The lessons we learn from the experience of Participant 3 is that language legislation is meaningless if it is not followed by the practical implementation (Bamgbose, 2000, p. 20). In this regard, the findings of my study show there is a discrepancy between the promises made in the Eritrean constitution and the reality on the ground. In the Eritrean context, Mohammad points out that the government’s claim that ‘all vernacular languages are equal’ is, in fact, a paradox, as in practice, government officials use Tigrigna when they communicate with ethnic minority groups (2016, p.530). Additionally, it is highly idealistic to proclaim that all Eritrean languages are equal; there are nine languages and to guarantee justice to all of them without favoring one or two languages as official languages is a difficult task to achieve. Therefore, in the case of Eritrea, due to the lack of resources and political will, granting institutional equality to all languages regarding media, politics, and education is impossible.

Regarding the mother language policy, the central point on planning and legislating of language policies is to consider the benefit to its users and let them decide the fate of their future. When community members are not engaged in the decision-making process about language legislation, then it is possible that this would aggravate language exclusion (Bamgbose, 2000, p. 5). In the case of Eritrea, the literature and my research participants outline that the Eritrean government has applied a top-down strategy that has excluded the members of the communities from the decision-making process regarding the language policy (Mohammad, 2016, p.532; Bereketeab, 2010, p.172). In line with this, Participant 2 describes the top-down approach of endorsing the language policy as follows:

‘(...) people should be given the right to say or to choose. The government or the politicians should not simply impose their policy on people without consulting them – without giving them a chance to participate in policy-making, especially, regarding language. So, the representatives of the people – or people should give their opinion and (...) choose their language of communication – whether it is mother language or Arabic or Tigrigna language. (Participant 2)

The comments provided by Participant 2 indicate the absolute importance of people's freedom of choice concerning language policy legislation and criticizes the top-down imposition of the government.

When Participant 4 was asked about the legitimacy of the language policy, he replied: ' it is not legitimate – there are some (...) studies that show that most Muslims don't accept their [mother] languages; they don't want to learn in their mother languages – so it is something that was imposed to them'. Similarly, Participant 1 confirms not only the imposition of the language policy by the government but also the attempts made by the non-Tigrigna speakers to oppose the removal of the Arabic language and imposition of the mother language policy. He outlines: ' (...) if you educate people by a new language, if the people say “ no, we don't need it” [and if you say] “no, you must use your mother language for schooling in that way, when it is imposed on you and without your desire (...)’. The unilateral strategy of deciding on the language policy proves the domination and power of the Tigrigna elites on repressing the NTS to accept government policies without their consent.

Further, Participant 4 provides an example that illustrates how NTS are subjected to language discrimination:

'For example, they tell you that the Blin should learn by the Blin, the Tigre should learn by the Tigre language, but when he goes to the court, the court is in Tigrigna, so you must go back to Tigrigna. If we look at the military training – the language of the military is in Tigrigna; the whole government works in Tigrigna' (Participant 4)

In agreement with Participant 4, the literature also describes that the Tigrigna language has been the working language of the State of Eritrea. It dominates the civil service, the courts, the arts, and the literati, besides being the only language of military training and the command of the Eritrean army (Tronvoll, 2009, p.424).

Regarding the status of the Arabic language, the literature has some inconsistencies. For instance, Hailemariam, Kroon, and Walters note that both Tigrigna and Arabic 'function as working languages, or *de facto* official languages' of Eritrea (1999, p.480). Contrary to this claim, all my informants pointed out that, in practice, Tigrigna is the working language of Eritrea. Tronvoll and Mekonnen (2014, p.139) also expressed their doubts if Arabic is a working language in Eritrea in practice. The Arabic language is not used in government institutions apart from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Arab Desk and by the Arabic branch of the Ministry of Information (Mohammad, 2016, p. 528). Based on these facts, it is

misguiding to proclaim the status of the Arabic language is equal to the Tigrigna language when it is evident that the latter is the dominant working language in Eritrea.

In sum, the legitimacy of the language policy in Eritrea loses credibility when it disregards the voice and desire of the people. Therefore, it was crafted to legitimize the Tigrigna language domination and marginalize the non-Tigrigna speakers, which are predominantly Muslims.

### **5.2.1 Consequences of the Language Policy to Eritrean Muslims in Eritrea**

In multilingual societies, it is natural to observe majority-minority divide, in other words, the number of people speaking that particular language and its geographical coverage is not always the same. Thereby, minorities are exposed to exclusion through suppressive policy-making (Bamgbose, 2000, p.14). This exclusion is true for Eritrean NTS, where they remain excluded from socio-economic and political matters of their country. The top-down adoption of the mother tongue policy has significant political and practical consequences as it divides the society across linguistic lines and worsens the socio-economic inequalities (Mohammad, 2016, p.532).

The findings of this research reveal numerous negative consequences of the post-independence mother language policy adopted by the Eritrean government. One of the recurrent problems mentioned during the interviews was the challenges related to exclusion due to communication barriers – all informants described that the NTS could face communication obstacles. For instance, Participant 8 puts it this way:

‘(...) it is a big problem for the people living in Eritrea. Because, for example, if you live in rural areas, let us say, in a place where only one linguistic group resides, for instance, if you live in areas where the Blin resides, you will only learn in Blin. And if you move to other places, especially in public offices, they use Tigrigna. So when you come, it becomes difficult for you to demand your rights, you cannot get the service you deserve because you have a language problem’ (Participant 8)

Minority groups such as the Blin, as Participant 8 stated could face communication challenges; they could face exclusion when they move outside their territory and interact with other communities. Restricting people to solely learn their mother languages, without supplementing them with the majority language has serious consequence regarding access to public services and overall participation in the nation-building process. Language-based exclusion can indeed result in a category of people who are deemed to be second-class citizens, due to being unable to participate in the public domain ‘or because they can only do

so imperfectly through intermediaries' (Bamgbose, 2000, p.2). By implication, a Blin speaker may need an interpreter (and in countries like Eritrea, it is highly unlikely to secure such services) to communicate with the TS in the public domain, hence, treated as a guest in his/her own homeland. One of my participants describes the situation of NTS as follows:

'If you are not fluent in Tigrigna, sometimes it becomes impossible to [deal with people] in some offices – it gets difficult. Even the government has not reached the level of providing interpreters or accommodate minorities in administrative spheres. This thing is non-existent' (Participant 2).

Offering interpreters for the facilitation of communication is a characteristic feature of the developed world and not common in countries like Eritrea. Another participant also states the communication problem NTS face in their daily life in Eritrea:

'for instance, if you approach a certain [public] office, in a certain district, if you write by the language of Saho, Afar or Blin, at the office, who is going to receive your letter that has been written by your language? How can your services go further? How can your work be facilitated? You need another language other than the schooling language that you have obtained' (Participant 1)

By 'another language,' Participant 1 denotes the Tigrigna language, and his explanations are nothing but elaborations on the tremendous burden caused by linguistic exclusion over the NTS.

On the contrary, members of the dominant language are situated at an advantage in accessing and benefiting from the civic realm. They control the main positions in the domains of 'administration, politics, education and the economy' (May, 2005, p.322), and the TS in Eritrea are privileged in all those aspects.

Previously, we have seen that in practice, Tigrigna is the dominant working language in Eritrea. Therefore, depriving non-Tigrigna minority language speakers of learning Tigrigna is also an apparent strategy of perpetuating their marginalization. Moreover, marginalizing the Arabic language from the public domain, and thereby depriving the NTS of learning in Arabic is understood as a disregard to their will.

Another disadvantage of the NTS in learning by the mother tongue is driven by their desire to upward social mobility; in other words, they want to learn a language that would guarantee their economic prosperity. They do not want to be ghettoized within the boundaries of a language that lacks a broader use (May, 2005, p.333). The input reflected by Participants 1, 2,

3, and 9 emphasizes the mother language policy excludes the NTS from employment opportunities. One of the participants best summarize their expressions:

‘If I cannot read and write in a certain place, who is going to be employed? If you cannot master the Tigrigna language – for sure you will not. [For example] here, I am living in Norway, and if I cannot speak the language, no one is going to offer a job for me. Also, in Eritrea, it is the same if you cannot speak Tigrigna’ (Participant 1)

The statement given by Participant 1, which was also shared by Participants, 2, 3, and 9 affirms how the NTS are exposed to economic marginalization due to their incapability to speak the Tigrigna language. If minority languages hinder their users from ‘getting ahead’ in the world of today, then it becomes questionable about why we should maintain them. Many minority languages are reinforcing the socio-political and economic marginalization of their members (May, 2012, p.11). This worldview fits with the situation of the Eritrean minorities, where their mother language is only restricted to the areas of culture and locality and bear no significance to their upward social mobility. When people make choices about the use of languages, they consider the economic rationality behind their decision, especially when people understand the ‘benefits’ of shifting to a more ‘modern’ language’ (Edwards, 1985, cited in May, 2005, p.328). The viewpoints of Eritrean NTS, therefore, tend to correspond with this logic; they don’t want to subscribe to a policy that would downgrade their economic status.

In addition to the economic marginalization, in the Eritrean context, mother language policy has also been used as a divisive tool among the NTS. The aim of the language policy was meant to weaken the cohesion of the NTS by establishing artificial language barriers (Mohammad, 2016, p.532), and promote an easy control by exploiting their linguistic fragmentation. The presence of many languages in a particular polity has been viewed ‘as a condition that does not normally conduce to peaceful coexistence, and the socio-economic and political advancement of the different peoples’; it can impede the social and political solidarity for creating a unified and cohesive nation (Opeibi, 2000, p.190). Similar to the points mentioned by Opeibi, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 8 have reflected on the damage caused by the mother language policy and noted that it had weakened their power and integrity. Authoritarian regimes, like the one in Eritrea, consider the unity of people as an existential threat, and hence, divide the people to sustain their grip on power. This reality is described by Participant 3 in this manner:

‘The problem with the so-called mother language, especially for the other ethnic groups [non – Tigrigna speakers], the current politicians or the ruling regime, don’t want a language that unites [people] – a single language that makes them communicate. What they do is that they let them learn by the mother language, and yet they have to learn Tigrigna on their own’  
(Participant 3)

What Participant 3 is denoting here is not only the detrimental intentions of the government on weakening the integrity of the NTS but also showing their inevitable responsibility to learn the Tigrigna by their own efforts. This reality indicates that NTS are subjected to linguistic discrimination and marginalization, that is why they insist on rejecting the linguistic compartmentalization made by the Eritrean government.

However, it is important to note that the existence of a homogenous common language cannot always guarantee unity among societies. Language similarity is not necessarily a precondition for the attainment of unity and coexistence. Some of my research participants brought a rival view that challenges the assumption that having a single language of communication facilitates the stability of a nation. Though they do not doubt the intentions of the government on the mother language policy for impacting their sense of unity and solidarity, they acknowledge that language alone is not sufficient on creating unity among peoples of a given nation. Participants 1, 2, 4, and 7 pronounced that coexistence can be achieved when there is acceptance of diversity and respect, and not essentially a common language of communication. The following comment underlines that in some cases, language homogeneity is not a pre-requisite for the stability of a given society:

‘(...) but there are people who speak the same language, and they are divided. We have the Somalis, and others – so if there is coexistence; if there is acceptance of diversity, all the problems could have been solved’ (Participant 4)

The message of Participant 4 offers a typical example – Somalia – a country not located far from Eritrea where its people share a common language but, unfortunately, is characterized by prolonged political instability. Therefore, factors beyond language similarity are also crucial for the reinforcement of unity and integrity of a certain group of people. Even among Eritreans, if we take the Tigrigna speakers in the diaspora, they have differences – despite their common language, it is not uncommon to witness divisions along regional lines of

Akeleguzay, Seraye, and Hamasien<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, they could also be divided along their allegiance to ideological lines such as ELF and EPLF, or simply may maintain different opinions.

To sum up the consequences of the language policy to the non-Tigrigna speakers, it is evident that it has resulted in their exclusion and marginalization from the socio-political and economic life in Eritrea. The policy can also be viewed as an attempt to disintegrate the potential of their unity, though, having a common language of communication is not always the most important element for the establishment of a functioning united society.

### **5.3 Implications of the Language Policy in the Diaspora**

In this section, an attempt is made to answer whether the language policy in the homeland has impacted the cross-border socio-political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway. As I have stated earlier in the introduction, it is essential to analyze the policies and practices of the Eritrean government inside Eritrea to better understand the transnational political engagement of diaspora Eritreans. This is because transnational political practices can be prompted as a response to the political attitude of homeland governments (Østegaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.762), or constrained by the long-standing oppressive policies of homeland governments. In the case of Eritrean diaspora, regardless of their negative or positive impact in the politics of their homelands is to a larger degree ‘a function of the nature of the government in place’ (Kibreab, 2007, p111). Kibreab’s observation is helpful to illustrate the relationship between the behavior of the Eritrean government and diaspora political engagement.

The findings of this research reveal that homeland-originated policies can cross borders and perpetuate exclusion and alienation among some members of the diaspora community. Four of my informants disclose that the mother language policy in Eritrea has shaped the political disengagement of those who are largely unilingual, where their ability to understand the dominant languages of the political mobilization is either limited or absent. Participant 1 says:

‘(...) there is no existence of languages in the social media. There is no one who writes by the mother language in the social media. I only observe that people communicate in two languages. People may either write in Arabic or Tigrigna – or someone might write in English – according to the language he studied in schools’ (Participant 1)

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<sup>23</sup> These three regions are located in the Eritrean highlands, they are predominantly inhabited by the Tigrigna speakers. After independence of Eritrea, the government has changed the names of the regions into two regions, Debub and Ma’ekel.

The comments of Participant 1 show that the NTS who have obtained their education by their mother tongue could be compelled to disengage from transnational political practices due to language barriers. The languages that are predominantly used for political mobilization in the diaspora are Tigrigna, Arabic, and English; this could be in the websites, political forums, and the social media. The rest of the Eritrean languages have not yet appeared in the political sphere, and even if they emerge in the media, they will be restricted to their respective linguistic groups<sup>24</sup>. In agreement with this, Participant 2 points out:

‘Some people cannot be motivated or engaged; their engagement is limited because of their language. Maybe, some people can be unilingual. Also, the policy back in Eritrea still reflects in the diaspora also’ (Participant 2)

It is no surprise that unilingual people are the ones who face most exclusion from the diasporic socio-political life. Thus, the communication gap between those who are multilingual and the unilingual becomes bigger, and ideas would not intersect. Consequently, the possibility of collective mobilization narrows, and people might engage in a dissected manner, as Participant 4 outlines:

‘(...) when they come here, I have been following [activism] of the youth, I have also been involved in the activities of the youth, when I see it, people are divided – mainly they are divided along linguistic lines (...)’ (Participant 4)

The linguistic divisions in the diaspora can be in one hand interpreted as the outcome of the language policy in the homeland. However, linguistic divisions could also be established deliberately due to the rejection of the Tigrigna language by the NTS, points out Participant 4. Their rejection of the Tigrigna language in the diaspora could be due to the oppression and grievances they may have experienced while they were in Eritrea. As a result, they may disassociate themselves from the Tigrigna speakers in the diaspora to avoid further domination.

Another interesting issue that many informants share is the reaction they get from some of the TS in their diasporic socio-political engagement in Norway. Participant 4 puts it this way:

‘(...) those people who have arrived from Eritrea, they are dominantly Tigrigna, and they say to you “why don’t you speak in Tigrigna?” If you cannot speak Tigrigna, you are not

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<sup>24</sup> For a list of some Eritrean websites of opposition parties, civic organizations and others, see Mohammad and Tronvoll (2015, p.5), and <http://awate.com/links-welcome-page/>. The websites predominantly use Arabic, Tigrigna and English for publication.



considered as Eritrean by their eyes. Because the entire mobilization is in Tigrigna; and they never imagine that there are people who cannot speak Tigrigna, hence, this has certainly reflections on the [activism]. [This kind of approach] distances people' (Participant 4)

Interestingly, Participant 4 has mentioned one of the core issues related to the problem statement of this research – namely, the equation of the Tigrigna language with Eritrean identity. The assumption that every Eritrean speaks Tigrigna, if not, 'he/she is not Eritrean,' reflects not only the dominance of the Tigrigna language in Eritrea but also signals subordination and linguistic intolerance toward the NTS. As a result, it fosters mistrust and exclusion; it could be self-exclusion of the NTS or exclusion prompted by the TS. This attitude is the product of the language policy in Eritrea that allowed institutionalized Tigrigna language supremacy and domination at the cost of the diverse Eritrean languages.

## **6. Language Diversity and Transnational Socio-Political Practices**

In this section of the thesis, I will address the main research question:

- 1) *How does language diversity among Eritreans shape the transnational political engagement of diaspora Eritrean Muslims in Norway?*

And the sub-questions:

- 2) *How does language diversity impact the unity of diaspora Eritreans in Norway in the formation of a transnational collective movement for political change in Eritrea? How do Eritrean Muslims in Norway relate the language issue with the Tigrigna speakers?*

But first, I will discuss the scale and types of transnational socio-political activities of Eritrean Muslims in Norway, before analyzing the stake of language in their transnational engagement. Then, I will incorporate the stake of language in shaping their transnational socio-political practices. Specifically, I will investigate whether language diversity is influencing their unity and integrity in their diasporic activism and whether there are incidents of linguistic exclusion and intolerance in the broader Eritrean diasporic political field. Further, based on the findings, I will highlight the role of non-linguistic factors that may have influenced the diasporic collective political mobilization of Eritrean Muslims.

### **6.1 Transnational Socio-Political Practices**

In transnational activism, people take part in contentious collective action struggling against dictatorship, domination, quest for human rights and democracy (Tarrow, 2005, p.5). In the diaspora, Eritrean rights-based initiatives include the resistance of the policies, practices, and ideologies of the Eritrean government on issues related to human rights and call for the implementation of the Eritrean constitution (Hepner, 2007, p.5). The efficiency of these practices is based on how the transnational social movements are organized. Social movements need collective action frames, and these frames denote certain ideas that shape the common understanding for social movement – they help to define grievances and demands, at the same time, legitimize and mobilize action (Sökefeld, 2006, p.269-270; McAdam *et al.*, 2001, p.14-15). Examples of master frames include issues of human rights, environment, and identity (Sökefeld, 2006, p.270). In the case of diaspora Eritreans, identities are constructed and reconstructed according to their attitude toward the Eritrean government. For instance, those who show their allegiance to the Eritrean government are identified as ‘government supporters,’ while those who stand against the Eritrean government are identified as

‘opposition’ or ‘justice-seekers.’ Furthermore, government opponents may maintain multiple overlapping identities as religious, ethnic or regional identity.

Even though they are not organized based on religion, participants of this research share a sense of communion and solidarity as Eritrean Muslims. They are also engaged in various transnational social movements by constructing their demands in different *action frames*, such as the appeal for human rights and the rule of law; democracy; regime change; justice; and equality in their homeland. Their transnational political practices are often prompted as a response to the attitude of their homeland government regarding the widespread injustice and suffering of the Eritrean people. Most participants stated that they are engaged in various socio-political activities, including demonstrations against homeland government (Participants 8, 6, 4, and 2); digital mobilization, such as Facebook or Paltalk<sup>25</sup> (almost all of the Participants do); and advocacy meetings and participation in social events (Participants 6, 1, 8, 9). Some of them also have connections to organized diaspora opposition movements, but not all of them wanted to disclose which group they show allegiance to (Participant 1).

However, it is important to note that the demands of the Muslim NTS may not always coalesce with the demands of the Christian TS. Participant 4 describes the divergence of interests in this manner:

‘If we take the demands of the Tigrigna, they say we generally demand democracy, and a centralized system of governance and [want to maintain] all the privileges regarding the expansion of their language and possession of land. But for the others – the Muslims demand federalism. They argue that [only] democracy is not a solution; they argue that a system must assure the rights of their language; culture; identity and Arabic language are important. The Tigrigna rejects Arabic language and considers it as an alien language. These are some of the reasons that create problems among them’ (Participant 4)

Diasporas should not be seen as a homogenous unit where its members share similar political agendas (Banki, 2013, p.4). The points mentioned by Participant 4 illustrates some of the main domains of conflict among the Tigrigna and the Muslim NTS. Thus, some Muslims often raise issues of language, land and minority rights. But the political elites among some of the Christian TS are not interested in those claims – they only demand regime change without acknowledging the differential marginalization of the NTS. In contrast to the views of Participant 4, participant 1 and 2 recommend the prioritization of regime change, before

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Paltalk is a proprietary video group chat service that enables users to communicate via video, internet chat and voice’. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paltalk>

addressing language rights in the diaspora. For practical reasons, the perceptions of Participant 1 and 2 may seem appropriate; however, if aggrieved groups are not reassured that their claims will be taken seriously in the future, they might suspect the trustworthiness of any call for unity. Consequently, mistrust and polarization would grow among the Tigrigna and NTS, impeding the prospects of collective mobilization.

Social movements need access to *opportunities*, for instance, communication, media, transport and legal and institutional frameworks (Søkefeld, 2006, p.70). Not to mention, in Norway all the opportunities are available, and participants have not mentioned any obstacle that could hinder their mobilization process. Their networks are facilitated by the internet, and they utilize various communication technologies to mobilize and practice political engagement.

Some practices performed by social movement activists include campaigns of claims-making, demonstrations, public meetings, chanting slogans, and the establishment of associations (Tilly, 2014, p.183-4). In line with this, Participant 4 outlines some of the most common diasporic practices in Norway:

‘They make demonstrations; and in the demonstrations, they hold slogans. This is the most common activism. Other activities include the virtual world such as Paltalk – where people join and discuss issues or mobilize. For those who have linguistic limitations, I would say, the Paltalk have helped them because they speak their minds (...)’ (Participant 4)

Demonstrations are common incidents of social movements (Tilly, 2014, p.188).

Demonstrations against the Eritrean government and the engagement through the digital media constitute the most recurrent activities in which research interviewees practice in a varied degree of participation. The literature also describes that transnational social spaces among the Eritrean diaspora opposition are interconnected mainly by the digital media – websites, social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Paltalk (Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015, p.4). Globalization has facilitated the linkage of Eritreans to their homeland (Bernal, 2004, p.10), and nowadays, diaspora voices could be heard by the people inside Eritrea.

Diasporas undertake different practices such as establishing social networks, religious groups, national holiday celebrations and rituals (Demmers, 2007, p.9-11). Concerning the engagement in social activities, Participants outline that they have social networks and associations where they gather to take part in social and religious events. Cultural and religious associations that serve as social platforms for diaspora communities may reflect a

politicized dimension (Adamson, 2002, p.162). Similarly, the Participants that engage in social practices often initiate and address the politics of their homeland. Therefore, the social networks and associations are helpful in mobilizing for political activism in the context of Eritrean diaspora in Norway.

## **6.2 Language, Social Engagement, and Exclusion**

Through language, we express our ideas and experiences, and language offers the foundation of a community; at the same time, it can also promote divisions (Montgomery, 1995, p.251). Transnational communities might function in excluding some of their members along majority/minority lines, and they might not work together due to their political, ethnic and religious variations (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.778). The findings of the research show that language has to some extent impacted the inter-Eritrean social life and integrity within the diaspora. There are also incidents of language-based exclusion from the side of some TS towards the NTS. Most of the participants use the Arabic language as a common language of communication, but also to a lesser extent; they use Tigrayt<sup>26</sup>. They perceive that the TS consider Arabic as an alien language and express their rejection and intolerance towards it. Moreover, among the TS, there is a widespread assumption that if someone is Eritrean, he/she should speak the Tigrigna language. Participants 7, 6, 4, 3, 1, and 8 mentioned incidents of language-based exclusion, and the social tension between the TS and NTS is evident. For instance, Participant 3 notes:

‘(...) some people have asked me a question in Tigrigna - and I have responded in Tigre because they are Tigrigna and I am a Tigre; all of us are Eritreans. They asked me ‘don’t you know Tigrigna?’ Why don’t you speak in Tigrigna? I have replied, ‘I don’t know Tigrigna.’ Then they told me that I am not Eritrean, as a result, we were involved in a confrontation. To that extent, my Eritrean nationality was put under suspicion because I couldn’t speak Tigrigna. This is of course discrimination – or racism’ (Participant 3)

Normally, individuals ‘associate more with others whose language or linguistic codes they can understand or interpret’ (Opeibi, 2000, p.191), but when some languages are accepted, while others rejected, the outcome could be language-based exclusion. What Participant 3 described shows how linguistic intolerance among societies could turn into real conflict with serious implications for their integrity. Besides, the notion of equating the Eritrean identity with the Tigrigna language implies the relegation of the other eight Eritrean languages into a

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<sup>26</sup> The second largest language in Eritrea, next to the Tigrigna language.

subordinate status, and thereby, exacerbates the level of mistrust. This implies that homeland-originated conceptions of domination between those two groups are also reflected in the diaspora. Participant 2, who is a Saho speaker, shares his experiences as follows:

‘ (...) to that extent – some people even they don’t accept greetings. When I say something to a Saho speaker, when we communicate [or exchange] greetings in our language, there are people [among the Tigrigna] who don’t like that, and they get astonished. Because there are conceptions that are constructed in Eritrea (...) they might consider your language as uncivilized. This issue cannot encourage you to sit with those people again (...) there is no trust’ (Participant 2)

This quote portrays how homeland originated practices of linguistic dominance and exclusion could be reproduced in the diaspora and discourage people from establishing a harmonious diaspora community. Moreover, several interviewees stated that there is mistrust among the Eritrean diaspora community in general– but this phenomenon is not necessarily caused by language; there are other multifaceted reasons that will be discussed in another section.

Discrimination of a particular language could be practiced by non-recognition, suppression or proscription, and this may well amount to indirect discrimination against its speakers too (Bangbose, 2000, p.4). Participant 7 narrates a story that signifies how linguistic discrimination is practiced among the Eritrean diaspora:

‘Before two months, I came to the barber shop, and I met one of the Tigrigna. We greeted and introduced ourselves to each other, and he talked to me in Tigrigna. I told him that I could not speak Tigrigna; I can understand the language a bit, but I cannot communicate with it. And then he told me that “you must learn the Tigrigna language” and I was not impressed by his talk and we disagreed; I have told him not to talk to me anymore (...)’ (Participant 7)

Participant 7 cannot speak Tigrigna, and the reaction he encountered from his Tigrigna countryman consciously or unconsciously is hardly accommodating. This kind of attitude can lead to unnecessary polarization among the community members. Nevertheless, Participant 7 does not intend to generalize and label all the TS as language-intolerant people; he points out that, among the Tigrigna, some of them are nice and they try to use the Norwegian language as a common platform for communication.

Likewise, Participant 6 describes the consequences of not speaking the Tigrigna language with the Tigrigna speakers:

‘(...) when you meet a Tigrigna speaker for the first time, the first question he poses after you tell him that you are Eritrean is ‘Do you speak Tigrigna?’ (...) and if you cannot speak Tigrigna, for him, you are not considered as Eritrean. This creates hatred among people; they keep away from each other (Participant 6)

Language intolerance and the equation of Eritrean identity with the Tigrigna language espouses resentment among the NTS, thereby, undermines mutual respect and integrity of both societies.

Polarization among Eritrean communities in Norway is not only limited to the individual level but is also manifested at the association level. The Muslim-Christian divide is evident even within publicly funded social associations. In this case, Participant 1 narrates one incident:

‘(...) for example, you can see Eritrean mothers that have an association, they might get a fund from the municipality; maybe they have activities in leisure time for their kids. I know a woman – she is responsible for these activities. All those that come to the leisure activities are Christian families. Perhaps Muslim families know about the [association], but regardless of their knowledge, they don’t even go (...). Firstly, there is a linguistic problem. There is also discomfort and other things (...) (Participant 2)

Such situations can be interpreted in different dimensions. Firstly, majority of Eritreans in Norway are TS, constituting more than 85% of the total number of Eritreans in Norway (see Røsberg and Tronvoll 2017, p.48). The demographic predominance may have enabled them to dominate in all aspects of community funded activities and associations. Secondly, the Muslims tend to reject the dominance of the TS, thereby, relinquish their rights of involvement and may prefer self-exclusion as a strategy to avoid potential conflicts. In line with this, Al-Ali, Black, and Koser, in their study of Eritrean diaspora in the UK, note ‘...many Muslim respondents perceived the Eritrean community structure in the UK as being dominated by Christians. Their feeling of exclusion has limited their desire to participate in community-level activities’... (2001, p.631).

In sum, the social relationship between the TS and Muslim NTS is unfortunately characterized by mistrust and polarization. This condition fits with the observations of Wahlbeck when he points out that various groups within the diaspora community maintain different structures, and sometimes, these groups might oppress each other (2002, p.234). The role of language diversity on shaping such relations is not negligible; however, the lack of acceptance of difference and absence of solidarity among the two groups is also fuelling polarization and impeding the realization of a robust social organization.

### **6.3 Language and Culture as a Barrier to Political Engagement**

The existing literature about the Eritrean diaspora community notes that it is characterized by divisions along ethnoreligious, regional and ideological lines (Bereketeab, 2007; Kibreab, 2007; Mohammad and Tronvoll, 2015; Conrad, 2010). Nevertheless, those studies have not addressed the stake of language in the unity and integrity of the transnational political engagement of diaspora Eritreans. The findings of this research reveal that the lack of a common language of communication and the polemic discourse about the acceptance and rejection of the Arabic language has also widened the gap between the TS and the Muslim NTS in Norway.

Several interviewees described that language diversity and intolerance, though not unilaterally responsible, both act as a barrier for the realization of collective political engagement (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6). The lack of a common language of communication also obstructs the possibility of narrowing the gaps between the Tigrigna and non-Tigrigna speakers. Participant 2 explains the situation as follows:

‘Those who speak Arabic mostly can’t speak Tigrigna. Those who also speak Tigrigna they can’t speak Arabic or understand Arabic (...) to bring these two sides together into a political discussion, sometimes has negative impacts. Or we can say it slows down the political movement in the Eritrean diaspora (...)’ (Participant 2)

As they say, ‘if there is a will, there is away,’ one could also ask: Why don’t they use interpreters? Participant 2 is a multilingual person, and for him, language is not a problem, but he is mostly worried for those who are unilingual. Though having a shared language is an advantage, the success of unified political engagement is contingent on other underlying elements, namely the desire, tolerance, and mutual spirit of working together.

Alongside the language issue, many Tigrigna and non-Tigrigna speakers seem to agree that the Eritrean regime should be changed, but their interests about why they need the political transformation in Eritrea does not always conflate:

‘(...) the Tigrigna speakers don’t consider the need and interest of other groups [non-Tigrigna speakers] That’s why we have two political groups, with the same goal. The goal could be changing the regime. But the means, the way they use to struggle against the regime is sometimes different. Also, in the future, maybe, how one group envisions the future of Eritrea is quite different. Maybe one side looks no place for the Arabic language in the future (Participant 2)



Diaspora communities, despite their common identity, they do not share the same views and experiences (Vertovec, 2005, p.4). In line with this, Participant 2 underlines that TS and NTS envisage different interests after the yet-to-come political transformation in Eritrea.

In addition to language barriers, there are also cultural and religious barriers that could contribute to shaping the prospects of collective political participation. Largely, the political debate is impacted by the Arabic-Islamic culture and the Coptic-Christian culture that extends across neighboring Ethiopia. These two predominant cultures are also reflected in the diasporic practices of Eritreans in Norway – people tend to associate and build social networks along with their religious and cultural affiliations. Normally, it is not a problem when people engage based on their cultural and religious homogeneity – it is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. However, in a polarized society, like that of the Eritrean society, it may render negative implications for the possibility of creating a stable and unified transnational movement. Participant 2 offers a relevant example of how culture and language shape the relationship of the youth in their city, sometimes even escalating to the level of conflict:

‘There are people with the Arabic culture, there are also people with the Tigrigna culture (...) the youth with the Arabic culture, they are a group, and they sit together. If they have an occasion or a ceremony or invitation, they are separate (...) there is absolutely no proximity among [the two cultures] (...) you can witness language conflicts also here in our city (...) you cannot see a shared thing between them’ (Participant 2)

The above statement made by Participant 2 confirms the divided nature of the Eritrean diaspora described in the literature. It manifests the cultural gaps existing among the different groups and the level of polarization that could not only result in widening the gaps but also create possible conflicts. However, it is noteworthy to indicate that the linguistic and cultural barriers alone are not sufficient in explaining the transnational political engagement of Eritrean diaspora community in Norway. Further research is needed to explore the reasons behind peoples’ engagement or disengagement in the diaspora activism, excluding language diversity.

#### **6.4 Language and the Detached Diaspora Media**

Members of the transnational community make endeavors to appeal for change in the homeland by bringing alternative sources of information regarding the political conditions in their homeland (Adamson, 2002, 163). By alternative sources, Adamson refers to the information that is either underreported or suppressed by the homeland government or the host country. Due to modern globalization, the making of transnational networks is much

easier. For instance, modern technology is connecting people settling in different parts of the world, thereby, sustaining their social relationships (Wahlbeck, 2002, p.230). Previously, I have described that the transnational communities can easily maintain political mobilization through the internet and other various kinds of communications. For instance, the growth of the websites confirms the potential of “digital diasporas” that engage for a common interest and identity (Vertovec, 2005, p.4).

Diaspora Eritreans have developed new transnational activities in the cyberspace – websites such as Awate, Asmarino, and Dehai<sup>27</sup> have been some of the main hubs where Eritreans debate, analyze and influence homeland politics (Bernal, 2013, p.248). Hence, their transnational political activism is largely facilitated by the internet and satellite radio. However, in the diaspora media, lack of a common language of communication partially restrains their collective engagement in the transnational political field. Besides the websites mentioned by Bernal, numerous opposition websites mainly publish in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English. But the questions that could arise are: Who is reading what? To what extent the substance published in the websites is being shared and understood among the diverse linguistic groups in the diaspora? Is there any intersection of ideas among those who contribute in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English?

The findings of the interview portray that most of the participants follow the cyberspace media; they read news articles in different Eritrean websites, participate in the social media, use Paltalk, watch relevant materials in YouTube, etc. Not all of them, however, can read, write and understand the common languages used in the cyberspace media – English, Arabic, and Tigrigna. Only 3 of them could read, write and participate in the described languages, while others face linguistic limitations. Firstly, participants state that there are instances where people remain excluded from participating in the wider electronic media due to language limitations – especially, those who lack multilingual skills in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English. Secondly, those who contribute in either Arabic or Tigrigna language seem to be articulating their political demands in a parallel fashion, where their worldviews neither conflate nor intersect. In other words, the issues that are addressed in the Arabic websites vary from those addressed in the Tigrigna websites and the ideas do not intertwine. Furthermore, the websites that publish in the English language exclusively target the elites – their reach to a broader audience is restricted due to the limited number of people that could interact in English

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<sup>27</sup> Links of the websites can be accessed here: <http://awate.com/>; <http://www.asmarino.com/>; <http://dehai.org/dehai/>

language (Participants 1, 3, 4, 7, 8). Additionally, so far, Tigrigna language is not yet enlisted among the languages in the Google translation system, which makes it impossible for others to understand its contents.

Participant 8 cannot read and write in Tigrigna, but she can read Arabic and English. She describes the challenges in the social media in this way:

‘(...) there is a language barrier, for instance in Facebook groups, if someone posts something in Tigrigna language, those who cannot speak Tigrigna cannot understand the contents of the message and cannot contribute, so the message only targets the Tigrigna. And if it is in Arabic, only those who speak Arabic can follow the debate, and the Tigrigna cannot follow it. Also, it is difficult for other languages such as Blin and Tigre’ (Participant 8)

Nowadays, the social media is one of the most important tools used by social movement activists (see Harlow, 2012, p.238), and in the context of Eritrean diaspora, Facebook has become instrumental in the organization of demonstrations and dissemination of political awareness. But as Participant 8 pointed out, there is a communication gap between the TS and NTS that could have possibly affected their collective engagement. Similarly, Participant 3, whose knowledge about the Tigrigna language is limited, narrates the language restraints as follows:

‘If we look at the mass media or the Facebook, nowadays, everyone is using it. Concerning Eritreans, to utilize it [the mass media] or communicate collectively, those who can engage are few. Even they are unable to engage – Why? Let us say someone is in live [Facebook Live<sup>28</sup>], or in Paltalk or the like, and if he is speaking in Tigrigna, I cannot understand him 100% (...)’ (Participant 3)

Language diversity and the lack of a shared medium of communication restricts people’s integrated political participation. As noted by Participant 3, those who engage in the collective political discourse are mainly those who possess the privilege of speaking the main languages employed in the cyberspace media. Their transnational engagement could be related to their social capital, as Castles and Miller argues – migrants with good educational background and social status actively participate on transnational practices compared to their low-educated fellow migrants (2009, p.32). Moreover, the language problem is not only restricted to the

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<sup>28</sup> Is an online live-streaming service provided by Facebook, where people can appear in an online video streaming system and interact with followers. For further information, see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2016/04/26/facebook-live-everything-you-need-to-know/#582e4b1355f2>

social media but also generally reflected in the virtual media in terms of reading online articles and newspapers. Participant 1, while acknowledging the communication fences existing between the various linguistic groups of diaspora Eritreans, tries to minimize the problem by using Google translation (only Arabic to English and vice-versa).

As I have described in the theoretical framework, in collective action, people may have different *interests*; hence, when two groups interact, they calculate the gains and losses of their collective action (Tilly, 1978, p.7). In the case of Eritrean diaspora, in addition to the linguistic barriers, research participants outline the divergence of interests between the TS and NTS in their diasporic claims-making process. Participant 4 puts it this way:

‘(...) there is a problem of lack of communication among them. For example, the topics [issues] written in the Arabic websites and their interests are different from those who write in Tigrigna. The elites also have a problem because they write in English, and English is only understood by few people (...). Even in Facebook, mostly people use English and [other] people don’t understand its substance (...) so, there is a significant lack of interaction and intermingling of ideas. This is a big problem that hinders people from working together (...) the issues they address and the perspectives are different (...) (Participant 4)

The source of the divergent interests described by Participant 4 could be interpreted in many ways, but it is fair to assume that the grievances are articulated as a response to the attitudes of the Eritrean government. For instance, issues of minority rights, including language, land, and representation are often published in Arabic websites, where its contributors are predominantly Muslims that harbor grievances of exclusion and marginalization. Whereas in the Tigrigna websites, such issues are not commonly debated; the emphasis of those who contribute in Tigrigna seem to represent a majority perspective. Hence, it is not surprising to witness the disparities of their interests.

In sum, the divided nature of diaspora Eritreans is not restricted in the physical world where collective engagement is infrequent but extends further to the virtual world where divergence in interests and language use remain the characteristic features. In a political process, it is not strange that different stakeholders may hold different perspectives and interests, but the problem is when they are unable to share a common platform and exchange different ideas.

### **6.5 The Impact of Homeland Experiences on Diaspora Engagement**

As noted in the theory section, the diaspora might engage in homeland politics as a response to the political behavior of homeland government by either supporting or opposing the

political system in their country of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p.762). It is also vital to note that diaspora communities share a past of war and violence in their countries of origin (Demmers, 2007, p.15), or oppression and harassment due to authoritarian governments, like that of Eritrea.

Several interviewees mentioned that they had past stories and memories of structured inequalities and domination while they were in Eritrea. For instance, referring to the status of representation of the diverse Eritrean ethnolinguistic groups in the current government of Eritrea, the public and state affairs are predominantly controlled by the Tigrigna ethnolinguistic group, while the rest of the population remained under-represented (Tronvoll, 2009, p.409). Further, there are also issues related to identity and land rights. In this regard, participant 4 notes:

‘(...) That one [the Muslim] feels that he is stripped off his identity in Eritrea; has become *Tigrignanized*, and his land confiscated. These are the main issues of interest for him. He is not much focused on democracy (...) democracy is good, but it is not a solution for him.’  
(Participant 4)

Participant 4 draws on the attitudes of the ruling regime in Eritrea in terms of cultural suppression and the unjust land policy proclaimed by the Eritrean government, and its consequences on the Muslim community. The macro-policy of the government that was adopted in 1994 notes: ‘ownership of land in Eritrea is the exclusive right of the government. All other rights accruing to land must be recognized and specifically permitted by the government’ (Government of Eritrea 1994, cited in Kibreab, 2009, p.40-1). This policy ignores pastoral and nomadic rights (the common mode of life of most *lowlanders*<sup>29</sup>) and fails to consider the grazing and mobility rights of the herds belonging to the lowland population (Tronvoll, 2009, p.421).

Participant 2 also narrates memories of injustice and exclusion in the homeland in this manner:

‘there is an injustice. Sometimes you cannot find yourself in the society. You could be named as a citizen, but [citizenship belongingness] should be in practice (...) all my memories in Eritrea are bad (...) even from the society, the society is oppressive as well. As a Saho

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<sup>29</sup> *Lowlanders* is a term used to denote non-Tigrigna speakers which are settled in the western and eastern lowlands of Eritrea and they are predominantly Muslims, with few Christians and others practicing traditional beliefs.

speaker, no one considers you as a citizen – or [they consider] you as a second-class citizen for simple cases. The society has taken this as part of its culture ‘ (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 1 describes that the suffering of Eritreans in the homeland has crossed the borders and influenced the diaspora opposition movements against the Eritrean government – people are divided, and the source of this fragmentation is the Eritrean government. Participant 2 also points out that the firmly established feeling of marginalization of the minorities in Eritrea could discourage them from fully engaging with the TS in the diaspora:

‘let us take someone who has raised up in Eritrea, especially from the minorities, when they come to Europe, they see freedoms, see rights, see the value of human beings. Their first option is to distance himself from the majority that has dominated or controlled the politics or other things [in Eritrea] (...) (Participant 2)

We can learn from the comment that was given by Participant 2 that the source of exclusion is not always coming from the side of the TS, but the Muslim NTS also can ‘prefer’ self-exclusion as a strategy to avoid the reproduction of diasporic domination from the side of the TS. As a result, prospects of forming a further unified and integrated collective engagement seems hard to achieve. Tronvoll also outlines that due to human rights abuses and disregard to minority concerns, opponents to the Eritrean government are generally organized along ethnoreligious lines (2009, p.426).

## **6.6 Transnational Practices and the Obstacles Beyond Language**

I previously alluded that language diversity and the exclusion related to it are not the sole elements influencing the diasporic political engagement of Eritreans in Norway. Indeed, the findings reveal that other multifaceted factors have also impacted the formation of a cohesive transnational movement. In the following sections, I am presenting and analyzing some of the non-linguistic barriers that may have acted as a disincentive against a common diasporic political engagement of diaspora Eritreans.

### **6.6.1 Weaknesses of Diaspora Eritrean Community**

As I have noted earlier, many prior studies on Eritrean diaspora have underlined that it is characterized by fragmentation and inefficiency. For instance, Kibreab outlined that the opponents of the Eritrean government are not only characterized by weaknesses and fragmentations, ‘but also some of them are fighting for unachievable and sectarian ends’

(2007, p.111). Similarly, Mohammad and Tronvoll underline that the Eritrean diasporic opposition bloc 'is adversely affected by individual competition for power, and lack of transparency and democratic organizational culture, as well as by a lack of consensus on a comprehensive political roadmap for change' (2015, p.4). However, much of the literature seems to overlook the underlying causes behind the divisions existing in the Eritrean diaspora. In other words, the role played by the Eritrean government on creating and fuelling the fragmentation of the Eritrean society in exile is not sufficiently elaborated.

In agreement with the literature, the findings extracted from several interviewees demonstrate that they are disappointed by the divided and ineffective nature of the Eritrean diaspora opposition bloc. Thus, the diasporic social movements have failed to attract the hearts and minds of the larger Eritrean diaspora community. Hence, the lack of unity among the various opposition movements has partially acted as a discouragement to the collective political engagement of Eritrean Muslims in Norway. The weaknesses of the Eritrean diaspora, summarized from the findings include: lack of unity; mistrust and lack of mutual respect; lack of solidarity and democratic culture; intolerance; non-recognition of other's rights; deficiency of ideas and clarity of vision; and the failure to focus on the priorities (for instance, regime change) etc.(Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8). In this regard, Bereketieb also asserts that the Eritrean diaspora has apparently played a negative role in widening the ethnoreligious, regional and linguistic gaps among the constituents of the Eritrean society (2007, p.79). Nevertheless, in contrast to Bereketieb's argument, many interviewees blame the Eritrean government for penetrating into the transnational political practices of Eritreans and causing the ethnic, regional and religious splits in the diaspora. They outline that the attitude and practices of the Eritrean government inside Eritrea and in the diaspora cannot be ignored in the compartmentalization of the Eritrean society at large. In the diaspora, members of the ruling party (PFDJ) used to influence community associations to channel diaspora funding and political backing for the Eritrean government (Hepner, 2007, p.7), moreover, their diaspora agents work relentlessly to disrupt any possible dissidence. On the other hand, the internal problems of the diaspora Eritreans regarding the mistrust and struggle for power have also influenced their collective anti-government political engagement. Participant 4 underlines some of the challenges facing the diasporic opposition movements:

'The problem now is that there is a deficiency of ideas, there is a deficiency in the clarity of vision. People consider the regime as a bad regime, but among the Tiggrina, some people say,

if this regime collapses, the Tigrigna might lose, and maybe the Muslims might take over. It is like the proverb that goes “better the devil you know than the angel you do not (Participant 4)

The observation of participant 4 manifests the mistrust that exists between Muslims and Christians in the diaspora in establishing a united movement. Historically, the Tigrigna speakers have mostly migrated to Western countries, including Norway. The characteristic feature of the diaspora pro-government bloc is predominated by the Christian Tigrigna, who conceive Eritrea as a ‘besieged miracle land’ (Hirt, 2014, p.128). Nevertheless, in Europe and North America, opponents of the Eritrean government are also dominated by the TS. Therefore, it is important to note that the Tigrigna speakers are also divided into supporters and opponents of the Eritrean government.

In sum, the failure to establish a united and strong diaspora movement have negatively affected the ambitions of people to participate in the diasporic political engagement. Many argue that a divided opposition is less likely to succeed in ousting the Eritrean regime from the helm of power, let alone to establish a stable functioning system of governance afterward. The divided nature of the Eritrean diaspora is not only the product of their internal problems, but also the outcome of the practices of the Eritrean government, both in the homeland and in the diaspora.

### **6.6.2 Government’s Long-Distance Grip Over the Diaspora**

Homeland governments can take reactive measures to suppress diasporic political opposition; for instance, they can harass relatives remaining in the homeland (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003a, p.18). In line with this, many interviewees expressed the risks associated with the anti-government transnational political engagement, the Eritrean government control and blackmail the diaspora communities from afar. As a result, members of the diaspora community remain fearful from possible repercussions by the Eritrean government on their family members and their property in Eritrea (Participants, 1, 2, 4, 6, 8). For instance, Participant 8 describes the consequences of being involved in diasporic political engagement as follows: ‘if I participate in demonstrations here and if I speak against the government and criticize their deeds in public – and if I have a family member in Eritrea, he/she gets hurt. So, this could be mentioned as one challenge’ (Participant 8).

Similarly, Participant 2, in which his family members are living in Eritrea acknowledges that he has reduced his diasporic activism to avoid putting his family at the risk of being persecuted by the Eritrean government:



‘I have a brother, a sister, and father in Eritrea. When I see, sometimes, in order not put their life at risk, perhaps I have lessened or withdrew from writing or something like that (...) I think the regime is cruel. We know those people around us; sometimes I even become fearful about my family in the homeland’ (Participant 2)

This quote indicates that the oppression practiced by the Eritrean government against the Eritrean people is not limited to its borders, but it extends further to the diaspora and restricts their freedom of expression and organization in the countries of settlement<sup>30</sup>. Often, anti-government diaspora practices are closely watched and reported to the intelligence apparatus in the homeland. Diaspora collaborates of the regime spy on people by ‘maintaining watchlist, photographing or videotaping dissidents at protests or in opposition meetings’ and deliver their findings to embassies and consulates of Eritrea (Hepner, 2008, p.486-7). For instance, in Norway, there are several reports from the media and police security services that confirm the occurrence of surveillance by the agents of the Eritrean regime against diaspora Eritreans (Paulsen and Mossige, 2016; VG, 2010; Bjåen, 2014). In agreement with this, participant 6 confirms the existence of regime agents in the diaspora:

‘if someone wants to be an opponent [to the Eritrean government] there is a fear from the government; they have spies here (...) I keep silent so that the government would not hurt my family [in Eritrea]; this also could be a reason that divides people (...) I cannot trust my brother who is with me, there is mistrust, and this mistrust is also a cause for the divisions in the diaspora’ (Participant 6)

Interestingly, the comment provided by Participant 6 offers a hint about why there is widespread mistrust among diaspora Eritrean community. If the level of mistrust is high, it is quite challenging to engage in any collective political movement without really identifying ‘who is who.’ Consequently, people would prefer to work with whom they trust very well; maybe different parallel groups claim the same objective but couldn’t work together because there is no mutual trust.

Additionally, the long-distance grip over the Eritrean diaspora by the government is also practiced by threatening people’s material possessions inside Eritrea. Many diaspora Eritreans own property inside Eritrea; it could be a house, a business or the like – thus, engagement in diaspora anti-government activities may result in the confiscation of their property in Eritrea. To obtain property rights and public services inside Eritrea, Eritrean nationals in the diaspora

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<sup>30</sup> To obtain a broader overview about how fear is prevalent among the Eritrean diaspora, note: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/20/eritrea-diaspora-divided-your-stories>

are expected to not only abstain from anti-government activism but also pay 2% income tax to the government if they wish to avail themselves from the services provided in the embassies and foreign missions of the Eritrean government. The failure to pay 2% diaspora income tax leads to the deprivation of an array of rights in the homeland, such as obtaining land plot, passport, documentation (marriage, birth), inheritance of property (including selling and buying), etc. (Kibreab, 2007, p.106-7). By implication, people may not involve in anti-government transnational practices to protect their interest in the homeland. In this regard, Participant 2 outlines:

‘Some people are linked with the regime with benefits -and some people perceive the regime like theirs, (...) [it could be] a religious, ethnic or regional affiliation. (...) This thing mostly discourages Eritreans to take part in politics or oppose the regime. And you can observe them that they are not active or effective in politics. This [fact] is due to fear that their family could be exposed to danger or other things’ (Participant 2)

Diaspora communities could be manipulated by homeland governments for their own benefit (Safran, 1991, p.93). What Participant 2 described indicates that the Eritrean government has supporters in the diaspora that are affiliated to the ruling elite in Eritrea. Moreover, fear of retaliation in the homeland could be taken as a disincentive to participate in anti-government diasporic political engagement. A UN Security Council Resolution in 2011 called upon Eritrea that it should ‘cease using extortion, threats of violence, fraud and other illicit means to collect taxes outside of Eritrea from its nationals or other individuals of Eritrean descent’ (UN Security Council, 2011, p.3). But the Eritrean government has not yet refrained from manipulating the Eritrean diaspora.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this thesis I have explored the impact of language in the transnational socio-political practices of Eritrean Muslims in Norway; mainly practices that seek political change in the homeland. Thereby, to investigate the influence of language in the unity of Eritreans in Norway in establishing a collective transnational political movement. I have divided the findings and discussion section into two chapters. In chapter five I have discussed the perceptions of Eritrean Muslims regarding the language policy and practice in Eritrea, and its implications to their diasporic socio-political engagement; in Chapter six I have presented the findings and discussion on language diversity and transnational socio-political practices of Eritrean Muslims in Norway. In doing so, I have presented the perspective of Eritrean Muslims on the issue of language and its linkage with their integrity and exclusion in relation to the TS.

Concerning the perception of Eritrean Muslims in Norway on the language policy in Eritrea, the findings indicate the mother tongue policy was designed to legitimize Tigrigna language domination and conversely, promote the fragmentation of Eritrean Muslims along linguistic lines. The findings refute the proclamations stated in the Eritrean constitution: “All Eritrean languages are equal” and support the notion that the Tigrigna language is the de facto working language in Eritrea. In post-independence Eritrea, therefore, lack of competency in the Tigrigna language could fully exclude the NTS from the socio-political and economic affairs of their country. Besides, the results indicate that the elimination of Arabic language from primary public schooling and its marginalization from the public domain played a significant role in the overall exclusion and marginalization of Eritrean Muslims. In this regard, the results of my research are also confirmed by Mohammad (2016, p.532). When the policy-makers imposed the mother language on NTS, which are predominantly Muslims, they left no alternative opportunity for them to receive their education in Tigrigna. This phenomenon is especially evident in the rural areas of Eritrea, where mother tongue education is not supplemented by the Tigrigna, the language of the majority. Consequently, the NTS are burdened with economic and political exclusion from the process of nation-building and equal citizenship rights.

In regard to the cross-border impacts of the language policy, the findings show that it has partially fostered the depoliticization and deprivation of the unilingual from participating in transnational political engagement. It has perpetuated the diasporic exclusion and disengagement of NTS – who have neither learned in Tigrigna nor in the Arabic language

from the collective political debate which is mainly conducted in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English. The language policy also deepened the differential grievances among the Muslim NTS towards the Eritrean government – they perceive the policy as discriminatory compared to the TS. Therefore, such sentiments could be reflected in the mistrust that exists between the Tigrigna and non-Tigrigna speakers in the diaspora. The challenges facing the unity of Eritrean diaspora could also be partly explained as a consequence of the attitude of the Eritrean government in promoting divisiveness among the broader Eritrean society inside Eritrea and in the diaspora. Hence, in the Eritrean case, the relationship between State behavior and diasporic political engagement is manifested in the way the diaspora is organized. Disregard of minority rights and differential repression in the homeland has largely resulted in the fragmentation of opposition groups, mainly divided along religious, ethnic, territorial and linguistic lines.

Most of the interviewees described that they are engaged in various transnational socio-political practices appealing for democratization and political change in Eritrea, though their activism is not recurrent. Their political mobilization is often prompted as a response to the attitude of their homeland government related to the widespread infringements of human rights and lack of justice in Eritrea. Examples of diasporic political practices include demonstrations against homeland government, engaging in the social media and Paltalk and participation in anti-government advocacy meetings.

In terms of language, social engagement and exclusion in the diaspora, the social relationship between the TS and Muslim NTS is characterized by divisiveness, intolerance, mistrust, and a social struggle of acceptance and rejection. Even though language diversity, to some extent impacts the social relations, the lack of acceptance of difference and absence of solidarity among the two groups is also fuelling polarization and impeding the realization of a robust social organization.

Regarding the account of language in the diasporic political engagement, the findings indicate that language diversity, coupled with intolerance, has a significant role in hindering the realization of transnational collective political movement. The lack of a common language of communication partially hinders the likelihood of narrowing the gaps between the TS and NTS. In the diaspora cyberspace media, for instance, many people are excluded due to their linguistic limitations – those who lack multilingual skills in Arabic, Tigrigna and English remain unable to participate in the political discourse. In addition, those who contribute in either Arabic or Tigrigna have different interests and divergent perspectives where their ideas

and worldviews not always intertwine. Hence, the Eritrean diaspora media is a detached media where there is little or no intersection in the substance of the material published in the websites or in the social media. The absence of a common platform to share and debate issues of their interest undermines the proximity of thoughts, and thereby, nurtures mistrust and polarization.

Apart from language diversity, the findings show that there are many other underlying factors that could have shaped the transnational political engagement of Eritrean Muslims with the Christian TS in Norway. Although language diversity and lack of common language of communication have – to some extent – undermined the possibility of collective political engagement, there are other pivotal elements that obstruct the realization of a united work. The divided nature of the Eritrean diaspora is also the outcome of a multi-layered non-linguistic elements that have acted as a disincentive from participating in a collective transnational social movement: there is lack of unity; mistrust; lack of solidarity and democratic culture; intolerance; non-recognition of other's rights; and the failure to focus on the priorities. Nevertheless, the internal problems of the diaspora cannot be explained in isolation from the behavior and practices of the Eritrean government on perpetuating the divisions and mistrust among its members. It is important to bear in mind that the Eritrean regime is engaged with a long-distance grip and surveillance over the diaspora where clandestine sympathizers of the Eritrean regime penetrate the opposition groups and strive for spying and divisiveness. As a result, diaspora Eritreans live in a situation of fear of reprisal from the intelligence agents of the Eritrean regime – they fear persecution of their families in the homeland. Diaspora espionage creates mistrust among the broader Eritrean diaspora, in turn, the mistrust becomes a deterrence to diasporic political engagement.

Furthermore, structural inequalities and differential grievances in the homeland have implications in the social relations of the diaspora between NTS and TS. Both groups remain disassociated from each other, and the spirit of cooperation and partnership is little.

### **7.1 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Currently, there is no rule of law in Eritrea. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the Eritrean regime would consider any recommendations for improving policy in Eritrea. However, for the benefit of the Eritrean people, it is crucial to bear in mind that coexistence and unity are achieved through mutual respect and solidarity. The language policy in Eritrea should consider the voice of the NTS and meet their socio-economic and political demands.

Similarly, the marginalization of NTS should be acknowledged by the TS to build trust and assure coexistence in future Eritrea. When it comes to language and political engagement nexus in the diaspora, I recommend that diaspora Eritreans in Norway raise political consciousness and learn from the democratic values that are embedded in the country of settlement. When diaspora Eritreans plea for democracy and political change in the homeland, and at the same time fail to practice democracy among themselves, it is hard to realize a transnational collective movement. Thus, acceptance of difference and tolerance toward the various languages of Eritrea would contribute positively to narrowing the gaps among the constituents of the Eritrean society.

Regarding the long-distance surveillance of the Eritrean regime towards diaspora Eritreans, I call for the concerned authorities in Norway to closely observe the activities of the Eritrean regime in threatening people's freedom of expression and organization and take the necessary measures to stop the oppression and intimidation of diaspora Eritreans in Norway. People's rights should not be constrained due to the infiltration of external espionage apparatus of the ruling regime in Eritrea.

Minority rights in Eritrea are underreported, possibly overshadowed by the general miserable state of human rights in Eritrea. The human rights community including the concerned organs of the UN should consider the ignored plight of the minorities in Eritrea and specifically address their differential marginalization. The EU also has a responsibility to halt feeding the Eritrean regime with generous cash<sup>31</sup> under the pretext of 'development'. The so-called 'development' funds, could be an EU's strategy to stem<sup>32</sup> the flow of migrants from Eritrea to Europe.

To prevent potential post-dictatorship political instability and ensure sustainable peace, democratization, and justice in Eritrea, it is advisable to adapt mechanisms that build a constructive dialogue to reverse the divided Eritrean diaspora to agents of peace-building process. More efforts are needed from regional and international organizations and governments to take initiatives that engage and evaluate the potential of Eritrean diaspora on contributing to a better future for Eritrea.

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, by the end of 2015, the EU had a plan to fund the Eritrean government by 200 million Euros, check: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-6298\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6298_en.htm)

<sup>32</sup> A report by the Financial times discloses the rationale behind EU's fund of the Eritrea government: <https://www.ft.com/content/4bdf3a4a-5d2f-11e5-a28b-50226830d644>

For further research, I suggest a content analysis on opposition Eritrean diaspora websites – those which publish in Arabic, Tigrigna, and English – and identify where the discourses of the contributors converge and diverge, and how they contribute in the unity or polarization of the Eritrean society. Moreover, a study that explores the potential of the social media in the transnational political activism of Eritreans and its effect on the homeland would be interesting. Nowadays, the social media, particularly Facebook, is being widely used by diaspora Eritreans in their social and political engagement. Many individuals could easily express their minds and disseminate images, documents, and videos on Facebook and YouTube. However, some of the contents entail divisive and destructive rhetoric that further stirs the polarization of the Eritrean diaspora community, mainly through religious lines. Understanding the merits and demerits of the diaspora media in the social cohesion of Eritreans in the diaspora and its implication in the homeland may offer a different angle on analyzing diaspora politics.

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### **List of Figures**

- Fig. 1 .....Migration Routes of Eritrean Asylum seekers
- Fig. 2. ....Total Eritrean Asylum seekers to Norway 2003-2015
- Fig. 3 .....Total Eritrean asylum seekers to Norway, 2003-2015 by language



## **Annex 1: Request for Participation in the Research Project**

### **Topic: Language Diversity and transnational political engagement: The Case of Eritrean Muslim diaspora in Norway**

#### **Background and Purpose**

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. This Information Sheet explains what the study is about and how you are going to take part in it.

This research is a master's project in Human Rights and Multiculturalism at the University College of Southeast Norway. It is a student research with no connection to any other institutions other than the mentioned university college and it is not funded from any external donor. The purpose of the project is to explore how Language diversity shapes the transnational political Engagement of diaspora Eritrean Muslims in Norway. It investigates the role of language on their diasporic political mobilization for the possibility of homeland political transformation. Moreover, it sheds light on how Eritreans Muslims in Norway perceive and interpret the language policy endorsed by the Eritrean Government in post-independent Eritrea and tries to explore the connection between the prevailing language legislation in the homeland and the diasporic political practices of Eritrean Muslims to bring about political change in Eritrea. Hence the general aim of the research is:

- To understand the perspective of Eritrean Muslims in Norway about the effect of language on their diasporic political engagement aimed at political transformation in the homeland
- To explore if language diversity is functioning as an impediment or as a catalyst for transnational inter-Eritrean political integration in Norway.
- To investigate the perceptions of Eritrean Muslims in Norway on the language policy that was adopted by the current Eritrean government in Eritrea, and identify if the existing language policy could have shaped the political mobilization of Eritrean Muslims in Norway

I am selecting my samples purposely considering their relevance to answering the research question of the project, hence, initially I contacted some members of the Eritrean Muslim community in Norway, and afterward, they have suggested a number of informant candidates due to their possible knowledge and relevance to the subject matter. That is why you have been selected to participate in this research.

#### **What does participation in the project imply?**

The interview will approximately take around 1 hour. If it is okay with you, I will record our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will also take notes during the interview whenever it deems necessary.

#### **What will happen to the information about you?**

All personal data will be treated confidentially. Only me and my supervisor will have access to personal data and to ensure confidentiality, recordings and notes will be stored in a safe



place (locked cabinet) during the research process. Any summary of interview content, or direct quotations from the interview that are made available through academic publication or academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified. Neither your name or other identifying information will be associated with the audio or the transcript. Your name will always be stored separately from the data.

The project is scheduled for completion by May 2018. After I have checked the data for accuracy and the project is ended, I will erase the transcriptions immediately and shred the notes.

### **Voluntary participation**

It is voluntary to participate in the project, and you can, at any time choose to withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions concerning the project, please contact:

**Student:** Beshir Abdurahman Ismail, phone: +47 94739736.

**Supervisor:** Gabriela Mezzanotti, phone: 5551981165846, Gabriela.Mezzanotti@usn.no

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

### **Consent for participation in the study**

I have received information about the project and am willing to participate

-----  
(Signed by participant, date)

## **Annex 2: Interview Guide**

### **Personal history Information**

- Age, linguistic (ethnic) group, how did you come to Norway, asylum seeker or quota refugee? Citizenship status?
- Background, how many languages you speak (Written and/or spoken), place of residence before arriving to Norway, education (outside Norway and in Norway)

### **Political Engagement in Norway**

- Do you participate in diaspora activism for possible regime change in Eritrea? For instance, in Organizations, meetings, demonstrations, cyber-activism (websites, Facebook, paltalk, radio)
- Understanding the role of language in diaspora political participation
- Why change? What are your political demands? Is there any focus on political/linguistic rights as a Muslim?
- Language preferences (language use among Eritrean Muslims), are there linguistic barriers while communicating with fellow Muslim or non-Muslim Eritreans or in the cyberspace media?
- How does language diversity affect your political integration? Difficulties in communication with other individuals, or groups that speak a different language than yours? *Follow up questions*
- The relationship between language and religion among Eritreans and its impact in political engagement in the diaspora
- How does culture and religion influence the participation of Eritreans on mobilizing for change?

### **Language legislation in Eritrea**

- Understanding of language policy in Eritrea? How do you perceive and interpret the language policy and practice decreed by the Eritrean Government?
- Its impact on Eritrean Muslims in aspects of identity, participation, education, work, economy, unity etc...
- Do you or members of your family have ever faced linguistic oppression/discrimination in Eritrea, in public services, military training sessions, seminars and conferences....
- Relationship between the language policy/rights in Eritrea and diaspora political activism?

- The Eritrean constitution states that all Eritrean languages are equal and there is no official language.... what is your comment on that

### **The possibility of political change in Eritrea and challenges in Norway**

- Motivation behind political engagement...how diaspora activism could be effective to bring about change in Eritrea. The role of language
- Challenges in Norway? Risks associated with diaspora political engagement
- Recommendations to make the political participation effective, particularly in issues related to language as a medium of communication and collective mobilization
- Do you experience any linguistic discrimination in Norway, while engaging with other Eritrean linguistic groups? How does it influence the socio-political dialogue?

### **Identity and the search for ‘home’**

- Where is ‘home’? Ambitions to return home? Why?
- Socio-cultural, religious and identity pressure from destination country

How did you experience the interview; do you have any comments or suggestions?

Then I would like to finish my interview by saying thank you very much for your collaboration.

### Annex 3: Participants' Overview

Participant	Ethno-linguistic group	sex	Date of interview	Age	Language skills in numbers*	Education
Participant 1	Saho	Male	24.11.2017	30-40	5	Primary Ed.*
Participant 2	Saho	Male	24.11.2017	30-40	5	Higher Ed.
Participant 3	Tigre	Male	24.11.2017	30-40	3	Higher Ed.
Participant 4	Tigre	Male	21.12.2017	60-70	3	Higher Ed.
Participant 6	Saho	Male	23.12.2017	20-30	3	Secondary Ed.
Participant 7	Blin	Male	24.12.2017	20-30	2	Secondary Ed.
Participant 8	Blin	Female	07.03.2018	20-30	4	Secondary Ed.
Participant 9	Tigre	Female	09.03.2017	30-40	3	Primary Ed.

Language skills in numbers\* = excluding non-Eritrean languages

Ed.\* = Education