Chapter 8
Informality and Informalization among Eritrean Refugees:
Why Migration Does Not Provide a Lesson in Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Transnational migration has important implications on the respective country of departure and its political dynamics. This article addresses informal practices and processes of informalization during migration from dictatorially ruled Eritrea in North-East-Africa. On the base of dense ethnography among refugees and migrants in neighboring Ethiopia the article discusses migration's cultural and social effects and sheds a light on the potential role of migrants in Eritrea's expected political transition. It will be argued that refugees and migrants are unable to fully liberate themselves from Eritrea's authoritarian political culture while seeking prosperity, democracy and human rights elsewhere. Instead they blunder into informal practices such as deceit, exploitation and denial of solidarity, which inevitably backfire on social and political life.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on findings and conclusions that result from anthropological research on informality and informalization in migration from Eritrea in North-East Africa. Respective research aimed at studying, conceptualizing and evaluating informal practices among Eritrean refugees in various stations and stages of their transnational migration. It attempts to grasp refugees' informal praxis in detail, then to conceptualize informality and survival practices within the broader context of migration from Eritrea and finally to elucidate social, political and cultural implications the emergence of informality in migration will have on Eritrea's imminent transition. Theoretical reflections combine the viewpoint of existentialist anthropology with an anthropological concept of informality and are based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the migratory milieu. This article focuses on Shimelba Refugee Camp in Northern Ethiopia and on the Ethiopian capital

Addis Ababa. On the basis of ethnographic examples and stories it will be discussed if Eritrea's refugee generation should be regarded as a critical mass to bring democracy and a new political culture and society.

BACKGROUND

Migration from Eritrea

Eritrea, a small African country at the shores of the Red Sea, reached formal independence only in 1993, after the *Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (EPLF) had finally won a war of 30 years against neighboring Ethiopia. Eritrea has a total population of roughly six million people, plus a global Diaspora abroad that may make up another million people at best. This Diaspora originates from emigration during the 1980s and again after 2002. In the 1990s, however, Eritrea was widely considered a promising example for Africa's progress towards development, peace and democracy. Such hopes did not come true. During the last decade the country has become internationally known for its harsh and brutal dictatorship.

Since its fall-back into undisguised dictatorship in September 2001, Eritrea has experienced enduring political and economic crises. The historic struggle for national unity – considered to be still and always under threat – has become a political cult of Eritrea's guerilla-government under President Isaias Afewerki and justified to mute and persecute all critique and opposition. In this sense literally everything in Eritrea has become political – including the country's coercive and practically open-ended national-service in administration or the military. This national service does not allow following individual life projects, but subjects its members for long years (women up to their mid-twenties, men up to their forties) to inadequate symbolic pay and the arbitrariness of mistrustful superiors. Certainly, Eritrea's record of human rights violations is

extraordinary – even measured by the rather low standard of comparable Third World countries. Refugees are indeed Eritrea's main export good. Desertions from national service as well as emigration have become mass phenomena, despite draconic punishment and a shoot-to-kill-policy at the country's borders (Hirt, & Mohammad 2013, Kibreab 2009, Hepner 2009, Treiber 2007, Treiber 2005). The *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR) currently lists almost 306.000 people in its statistical category "total population of concern" and tens of thousands of refugees in both of Eritrea's neighboring countries, Ethiopia and Sudan.[1] From here refugees seek formal and informal ways into a better world that guarantees the rule of law and human rights as well as the opportunity to build up a more promising existence. Northern America and Europe are imagined to be the most attractive goals Eritrean refugees aspire to reach. Continuous catastrophes near Lampedusa Island in the Mediterranean Sea, where many Eritreans have perished, show again and again which risks refugees take to make these dreams come true (Treiber 2013a).[2]

In order to develop an anthropological understanding of these risks and hopes, the subsequently emerging culture of migration and its potential consequences for a political future of the country, theoretical concepts such as informality and existence will be discussed.

Informality and Existential Anthropology

The notion of informality originates from economic and political anthropology (Lindell 2010; AlSayyad 2004, Tickamyer & Bohon 2000). In African studies the term first illustrated the urban economic sphere (Hart 1973); it was later also used to describe African politics in general and the African state in particular (Chabal 2009, Mbembe 2001, Chabal & Daloz 1999, Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 1993). In this sense, Africa is perceived as the 'informal continent', with regard

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