

MUCH MORE THAN JUST MONEY: INVESTIGATING REMITTANCES ACROSS TIME AND PLACE IN THE ERITREAN CONTEXT*

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Abstract: Remittances have played crucial and shifting roles in Eritrea and its diaspora. They were fundamental to the achievement of national independence and are a resource with which the current government strengthens its power. Households have been reliant on remittances for survival, while for migrants they have been crucial to reinforce their sense of national belonging. Drawing from fieldwork, this article analyses remittances as a powerful tool to assess the ongoing (dis)connection between segments of the Eritrean diaspora and their homeland. The article firstly addresses financial remittances and shows how (in)formal flows play differing functions in relation to the government, communities, and families. After highlighting how social remittances are contributing to current transformations within Eritrean society, it reflects on the potential role remittances may play in the future of the country.

Keywords: *social remittances, cultural circulation, homeland, diaspora, Eritrea, agents of transformation*

Introduction

Eritrea has a long tradition of financial, social and cultural remittances to, from and through its territory. *Banyans*, Indian merchants on the Red Sea coast during the time of the Ottoman Empire, used to send money back to India, as they did under European colonial rule (Miran 2009). Eritrean *askari*,¹ fighting in Libya during the First World War, sent their salaries home to

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1 Indigenous soldiers, police officers, and guards in the service of European colonial rulers.

their families in Eritrea (Zaccaria 2012), while women from the Ethiopian region of 'Agamä who moved to Eritrea for seasonal or menial jobs (Locatelli 2009) sent money home to support their families in Ethiopia. More recently, the 30-year liberation struggle fought against Ethiopia (1961–1991) resulted in increasing Eritrean diasporic communities worldwide, for example in Sudan, the Gulf states, Europe, and North America. There is evidence that some of these communities were committed to supporting the Eritrean independence struggle (Tekle and Goldring 2013; for Italy, see Caputo 1983; for the USA, see Weldemichael 2013). At the same time, they also supported their kinfolk at home, as in the case of Eritrean domestic workers in Italy and in the Arab Near East (Ghidei Bidu and Hagos 2010; Kifleyesus 2012). Such examples of past mobilities that engendered remittances are part of a broad financial and socio-cultural phenomenon that affects all Africa. In the Eritrean case, over time, these different mobilities have contributed to the emergence of practices that ease the rapid circulation of money, objects and knowledge among an increasingly geographically extended network. Due to the new waves of emigration since the 2000s, remittances have become a structural ingredient of government survival, given the anomie created by the open-ended national service (Hirt and Mohammad 2018).

The flows that connect Eritrea with other spatial and social scapes are thus rooted in the past and move in different directions, with diverging objectives and recipients, and with varying social, political, and economic effects. In this article, we refer to these multiple and diverse groups of Eritreans that are living abroad but are also emotionally and materially connected to the home country as a diaspora. We thus apply a wider notion of diaspora to include many cohorts of migrants living outside today's Eritrea. They are scattered worldwide and have differing political views as well as socio-economic statuses. This article aims at retracing the different roles that remittances play between the Eritrean diaspora and their homeland. Although remittances are not a new topic in the field of Eritrean studies, the available literature has mostly focused on their financial and political role (e.g. Poole 2013; Hirt and Mohammad 2021). However, remittances, here, are not simply seen as financial transfers.

We investigate the multiple social, cultural and political values linked to the circulation of money, as well as of items, services and ideas within the Eritrean transnational space during the last thirty years. Drawing on the work of Peggy Levitt (1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2010), Valentina Mazzucato (2011) and scholars who have worked on the moral economy of transnational families (Baldassar and Merla 2013; Boccagni and Decimo 2013), we

show the multiple trajectories, symbolic value and emotional meanings of a varied flow of information, objects, images, practices, in addition to money, which connect, in multiple directions, and/or disconnect the diaspora and the homeland at different levels (institutional, community, and family level). Furthermore, while scholars have often considered Eritrea as a recipient, in this article we will show through ethnography that Eritrea is an important source of financial, material and symbolic remittances.

This article draws on the decade-long ethnographic experience of the three authors, in the study of Eritrean mobility. The authors have conducted extended fieldwork in Eritrea and with migrant communities in Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Italy, Israel, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, between 2008 and 2021. Through the analysis of “remittance stories” gathered during fieldwork, and the mapping of the channels and directions of these remittances, we aim to shed light on the contrasting and ambivalent attitudes of the diaspora towards their government, on solidarities, fractures and conflicts within transnational families and diasporic communities, on the negotiation around the social boundaries of the Eritrean national body, and on the transformation of tastes, health practices and the materiality of everyday life.

From this vantage point, we intend to contribute to the debate on Eritrea’s future transition addressed in this Special Issue of *Modern Africa* by highlighting the importance of financial, cultural and social remittances in it. As Sabine Mohamed, David O’Kane and Magnus Treiber state in the introduction of this Special Issue, political, social and economic transitions cannot be thought of in abstract terms, as they are always rooted in the peculiarities of the contexts in which they occur. An analysis of the role of remittances suggests that in the Eritrean case, remittances are an important element to take into consideration for any process of change. Remittances are agents of transformation (e.g. Hassan 2017) and act at different levels of social life even when political, economic and social transitions appear to be stalling, as in the case of today’s Eritrea. An analysis of the choices and practices of individuals and families, as well as of the attitudes of the government to remittances shows that they are a flexible resource which people resort to in times of crisis and may be a crucial asset for any social and political transition in the future.

After presenting our theoretical framework, we focus on meanings, roles and practices of remittances in the Eritrean past, showing continuity and discontinuity with the present. Then, we address the issue of financial re-

mittances, to show how formal and informal flows – flows of money which are transferred to and from Eritrea through formal channels, such as taxes or development projects, and informal channels, such as the *hawala* system or undeclared physical cash transfers across borders – have different, and opposing, functions in relation to the government. Then we highlight the diverse roles played by social and cultural remittances to show how they contributed to various transformations within Eritrean society. Finally, we reflect on the potential role of remittances for the future of the country.

The International Debate on Remittances and its Relevance for the Eritrean Case

Remittances have been at the top of the international development agenda for the last thirty years, becoming a sort of “development mantra” (Kapur 2003; de Haas 2012). The realisation that money sent by migrants back to their homeland often accounts for a significant section of the GDP of these countries has led a growing number of researchers to study the potential effects of these financial flows for development and the capacity of states to harness and channel this potential (de Haas 2012). Much scholarship has focused on how remittances impact family survival, communities and local and national economies (Maimbo and Ratha 2005). Other studies have focused on the emergence of “emigration states,” defined as political and legal arrangements which allow states with a large diaspora to involve their non-resident citizens in their economic development (Collyer 2013; Délano and Gamlen 2014). In relation to these debates the Eritrean context has proven to be an interesting case, helping us to understand not only the potential development of remittances, but also their role in strengthening authoritarian regimes (Glasius 2018; Hirt and Mohammad 2018).

Over time, scholarship on remittances has been progressively broadened and enlarged to include not only the financial flows, but also the “the ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities” (Levitt 1998: 926). These ideas, practices and identities have been defined as “social remittances.” Although this concept has often been considered as slippery and too “all-encompassing” to be analytically useful (Boccagni and Decimo 2013), it has had the merit of shedding light on key aspects of the connection between the diaspora and their homeland. Decimo and Boccagni (2013: 2–3) summarise these aspects as follows:

the tensions between individualization pressures and family- (or community-) based obligations [...]; the need to further explore the inextricable links between economic and social remittances; the conceptual commonalities, as well as the discontinuities, between the notions of social remittances and social capital; the implications of physical presence or absence between ‘senders’ and ‘recipients’, as a background to the circulation of social remittances.

These four aspects, with the exception of the discussion on the distinction between social remittance and social capital, cut across the analysis of the material on Eritrea that we present in this article. We show the tensions between individuals and families which arise from expectations of remittances, as well as the inevitable divides emerging between stayers and movers over time, in terms of political positioning and attitudes. While providing the available estimates of financial remittances, we embed these economic flows within a political, moral and social context which shapes not only the way they are supplied, but also the target, the motivations and the different functions of these resources. Finally, we show how prolonged absence is the precondition for providing remittances as a form of caregiving when day-to-day contacts cannot be performed (Baldassar and Merla 2013). Remittances in their various forms – flows of money and support, regular holidays, remittance houses, phone calls, and internet communication – acquire a key symbolic value as they replace physical presence.

Another aspect that runs across our article is the idea that Eritrea is not only a recipient, but also a source of financial, material and symbolic remittances. As highlighted by Mazzucato (2011), countries of origin not only receive money from their diaspora abroad. Families and communities in the country of origin may perform important roles of economic, emotional, and social support for migrants abroad, by providing care for left-behind kin, by financing migrants in times of crisis, by providing important documents which allow migrants to regularise their legal status. Following the work of Mazzucato (2011), we analyse remittances as a way of reinforcing reciprocal social relationships through exchanges, although often unbalanced. In this perspective, it is important to underline the services, objects and values that circulate back from Eritrea to the diaspora – what Mazzucato calls “reverse remittances.” Before delving into a discussion of these aspects, however, we provide an overview of the available scholarship about Eritrea and the specificities of this context.

A Glance at the Literature on Eritrea and Remittances

In the early 2000s, because of its “culture of war and culture of exile” (Conrad 2006), around 89% of the Eritrean population had at least one family member in the diaspora (Tewelde 2008). Nowadays, it is conceivable that these numbers have increased, by virtue of the strong emigration flows from Eritrea during the 2000s and the weakness of circular and return migrations. Scholarship has widely investigated the financial remittances transferred to Eritrea by its large diasporic population, especially with regard to the relation with the role played by the government in controlling these flows of money. Indeed, with Proclamation 67/1995,² the government imposed on people living in the diaspora a tax of 2% of their annual income (the so-called diaspora tax). Eritrea is not the only country to impose taxation on nationals resident abroad (see for instance the USA). Yet, the Eritrean case is peculiar because of the state control over almost all aspects of economic affairs, the government’s transnational authoritarian system, and the strong impact of remittances on national GDP. The “diaspora tax” was introduced two years after independence, which was formally achieved in 1993 following a thirty-year struggle against Ethiopia. Money and resources sent from people living abroad were the backbone of the success of a war waged by a poor and isolated country against the huge Ethiopian army. In the 1970s and 1980s, these resources were collected through transnational mass associations and festivals organised by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF); the latter led the country to independence and was able to mobilise Eritreans abroad in the name of national liberation, ideals of unity and freedom, and values of sacrifice and self-reliance. Samia Tekle and Luin Goldring (2013) noted that the struggle set the conditions for a long-distance nationalism characterised by a strong involvement of diasporic communities in internal affairs and by feelings of obligation towards the nation.

During those years, the EPLF started to regard the diaspora as a positive resource contributing to national interests, and it did the same after 1994, when the Front became the ruling party of independent Eritrea under the name of People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Thus, paying the 2% tax after independence was seen as a patriotic way to support the country. However, the growing dissatisfaction with the government’s authoritarian drift has led even older supporters to reconsider their position regarding

2 According to Proclamation 17/1991, the 2% tax on annual income is mandatory also for people living in Eritrea. Since, as per the (never implemented) Eritrean Constitution, only the National Assembly has the authority to impose taxes, the 2% tax has an uncertain legal basis.

this taxation. Several scholars (Redeker Hepner 2008; Poole 2013; Bozzini 2015) have described how this taxation became increasingly an imposition, rather than a voluntary contribution. Through a system of transnational surveillance, Eritrean diplomatic offices in various countries apply more or less direct strategies to impose this tax on their citizens, who are in fear of possible repercussions for them and their properties in Eritrea if they refuse to comply (Human Rights Watch 2009). Moreover, those who do not pay the 2% tax lose their citizenship rights, which means they no longer have the right to renew their passports, purchase property in Eritrea, or request government services.

The attitude towards this tax is more complex if we include the younger generations of refugees who left Eritrea after 2000, who are more reluctant to pay it to the government they have escaped from. Nonetheless, sometimes they feel obliged to pay this tax, in order to access benefits attached to Eritrean citizenship. At other times, their compliance can be the expression of an ambivalence that characterises their position towards the government (Belloni 2019b; Cole 2019). Indeed, a few belong to the opposition movements, and nationalistic sentiments are often strong among them. Likewise, the government has an ambivalent position towards them: while considering them to be “traitors,” it is willing to accept their “apology letters”³ and their taxes and to include them in the diaspora (Riggan 2016).

Scholars (Poole 2013; Tekle and Goldring 2013; Hirt and Mohammad 2018) have discussed how, unlike in other contexts where diaspora resources have led to social and political transformation, remittances in Eritrea have been used to reinforce the authoritarian power of the government and its state-driven economy, thus fuelling people’s desire to leave the country. In this regard, Hirt and Mohammad (2021: 15) speak of a “remittance paradox,” to indicate how the interplay between the government and diaspora communities “has stabilized an unsound economy built on systematic forced labor, while at the same time preventing economic development and the improvement of living conditions.” By supporting their kin, Eritreans abroad indirectly support the national economy and stabilise an inequitable and oppressive system.

3 Eritreans who left the country irregularly, that is without a government permit and after the 1998-2000 war, have the possibility to sign an apology letter once abroad to express their regret for their offensive and anti-nationalistic behaviour. By signing this form, they can regularise their situation towards the Eritrean government, thus accessing consular services, paying the 2% tax and so on. Together with the 2% tax, the regret form is one of the tools used to control Eritrean diaspora communities.

This is particularly relevant if we consider that, although there is no official estimate, exploratory studies (Amahazion 2019) indicate that the vast majority of remittances in the first decades of the 2000s have been transferred informally. Such remittances should be seen as expressions of the moral and emotional ties connecting transnational families and communities (Belloni 2020; Massa 2020a). However, in recent years it appears that “the gatekeeper state,” as Amanda Poole (2013; see Cooper 2002) defines it, has progressively succeeded in gaining total control over the ability of migrants to renew their connections with their communities and families: by controlling informal remittances, the government controls the source of people’s identity and prevents refugees from expressing their belonging unless they also contribute to the national project (Belloni 2021).

Finally, within the Eritrean transnational social space too, the circulation of social remittances is particularly intense. According to the Eritrean People’s Democratic Party (2019), around 2 million people, including asylum seekers, refugees, and Eritreans naturalised by host countries, are living in the diaspora, compared to about 3.2 million living in the country, according to the 2010 Eritrean Population and Health Survey. Given this ratio, it is no wonder that remittances have had a huge effect on the everyday lives of people in Eritrea and abroad, on their imaginations as well as on popular culture and the country’s built environment. As scholars have illustrated in other contexts (Levitt 1998; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017), objects, values, and lifestyles travelling within diasporic networks play a vital role in shaping people’s social imaginaries, models of success, tastes, and also in influencing their desires to migrate. How this takes place in relation to Eritrea will be further examined in later sections of this article.

Financial Remittances: Formal and Informal Circulations of Money and their Ambivalences

Guesstimating Financial Remittances: Amount and Features

In order to outline the amount and use of financial remittances from a historical perspective, it is important to guesstimate remittances in timeframes referring to Eritrean independent history. We here identify three periods, namely the peaceful phase right after independence; the years between the outbreak of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war (1998–2000) and, in its aftermath, the implementation of the Warsay Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC) in 2004; and the more recent years, with the weakening of the

black market (2015), the peace agreement with Ethiopia (2018), and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020). All these phases have been characterised by disparate typologies of remittances, which have then been invested at different levels, at the households or community level, at the level of associations, such as those legally registered as non-governmental organisations (e.g. the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students) or in development projects, either national or international.

In more detail, around the time of Eritrea's independence, Fegley Randall (1995) estimated that nearly 85% of the Eritrean population survived either from foreign aid or from international remittances. Despite the peace in the mid-1990s, the ELF's defeat, combined with the policy of exclusion promoted by the EPLF, negatively affected the inflow of remittances through the official channels: financial remittances through informal channels and sent to family members and communities were reported but not quantified. Shortly after independence, annual remittances were estimated to be greater than \$70 million, thus exceeding Eritrea's annual official development assistance and foreign investment (Connell 1997). From 1993 to 2003, the International Monetary Fund (2003) estimated that the Eritrean ratio of remittances to GDP averaged around 37%.

In the second period, the government again called on citizens in the diaspora to make efforts to support the country in the Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict that broke out in 1998 and its subsequent recovery, through large-scale fundraising campaigns (organised for example in Germany, Italy and in the USA). The distribution of construction land in Asmara was also seen as a way to reward patriotic citizens living in the diaspora (Belloni 2021). Indeed, according to government sources, remittance trends showed a strong increase coinciding with the outbreak of the border war, then a decline in 2000 (\$4.1 million) and a stall in 2001–2002, followed by a new increase in 2003 (\$10.3 million). At that time, Tekie Fessehatzion (2005) estimated that informal remittances could be about three times as high as formal ones. With the implementation of the WYDC, the burden of post-war reconstruction was also shared by Eritrean citizens at home and, particularly, by conscripts to the Eritrean National Service⁴ who were required to serve indefinitely. Since 2004, conscripts are assigned to the Eritrean Defence Forces, allocated to ministries or to private firms, and participate in productive activities in order to facilitate national socio-economic development, despite all being paid the same

4 Proclamation No. 82/1995 introduced the Eritrean National Service, namely the recruitment of adult Eritreans (excluding only veterans of the independence struggle and the physically or mentally impaired) to serve the government for three years.

pocket money (Kibreab 2017). The constant mobilisation of Eritreans cemented the population's dependency on remittances. Guesstimates suggest that by the early 2000s remittances to Eritrea constituted up to 80% of household incomes on average and kept families above the poverty line. Although the access to remittances of each household varies along several criteria, such as numbers of family members in the diaspora, their legal status and their place of residence, and is often volatile due to the precarious conditions of many senders, these guesstimates reveal high dependence on remittance per capita. Likewise, the nation building and recovery process relied heavily on formal remittances.

Today, remittance figures remain difficult to estimate because many transfers take place through unofficial channels, and data about the amounts transferred through formal mechanisms have not been available since 2003. Some authors (Hirt and Mohammad 2018) suggest that remittances are decreasing together with the diaspora's support to the government; however, in 2016, the African Development Bank (2016) reported that remittances were "rising" in Eritrea.⁵ From our fieldwork, it is clear that they continue to be a key tool for household survival.

The measures taken to control the currency black market rampant in the country can help explain the recent rise in remittances. In 2015, the Bank of Eritrea announced (Legal Notice 124/2015) a nationwide currency replacement programme to take place over a six-week period, aimed at introducing new banking instruments such as checks on transactions above 20,000 Nakfa (the currency of Eritrea), the redemption of old currency, and controls on illicit businesses. This decision aimed to tackle the hoarding of undeposited cash attributable to the *hawala* system (Woldemikael 2013; Amahazion 2019), and to Eritreans who have been involved in illicit foreign exchange and trade with the help of some legitimate entities.

Since early 2016, the government has reduced the amount of money people can withdraw from banks in one month to 5,000 Nakfa (around \$300). Ostensibly, this was intended to tackle the currency black market, but it also further hindered private initiatives and entrepreneurialism, which were flourishing after the peace agreement with Ethiopia.

In conjunction with these financial restrictions, the Covid-19 pandemic has also affected the availability of remittances, and their accessibility. In Eritrea, the increase in public spending due to the alignment with the World Heal-

5 According to the latest guesstimate, remittances accounted for 12% of GDP in 2020, thanks to the trade surplus driven by the mining sector (25% of GDP).

th Organization (WHO) guidelines and the decrease in revenues, led the government to expect further donations from the diaspora for the National Pandemic Fund, to meet the most urgent health needs and assist the most vulnerable households (Coface 2021). In late March 2020, the closing of all institutions of learning, restaurants, and cafés, the shutting down of all public and private transport as well as a prohibition on intercity travel, followed the implementation of the National Preparedness and Response Plan designed in collaboration with the WHO and other international organisations. A total nationwide lockdown was declared in early April 2020 and then extended, becoming one of the most stringent in the world (Amahazion 2021). Although the consequences of this lockdown are still unexplored, it is logical to assume that the lockdown must have had adverse effects on income-generation activities such as petty trade, but also agricultural and pastoral activities, thus increasing dependency on private remittances. Nevertheless, although the pandemic potentially conveyed remittances from the diaspora to Eritrea, it also limited the circulation of people, narrowing their opportunities to resort to formal remittance channels. The reduced internal mobility restricted people's ability to access agents of Himbol – the PFDJ-owned money exchange service – (e.g. Western Union, Dahabshiil, Hidmona Money Transfer) in the main cities thus jeopardising households' survival, especially in rural areas. To remedy this problem, in late December 2020 Himbol launched a mobile money system across Eritrea.

Although remittances have always played a crucial role in the Eritrean economy throughout its recent history, their impact on poverty reduction is far from unambiguous. As highlighted by international literature (e.g. de Haas 2012), remittances can, on the one hand, contribute to poverty reduction by improving human capital, economic growth, credit constraints, household income, savings, investment and household expenditure on health and education in receiving countries. On the other hand, international remittances can contribute to increased income inequality, especially when the inflow is informal and not taxed (Anyanwu 2011; Azizi 2021). The conflicting theoretical arguments about the effect of remittances has inspired the government attempt to choke the currency black market in order to avoid increasing inequalities among households, as explained by Hagos⁶ – an aged bank employee – to Valentina Fusari in January 2016: “[...] very poor families have nobody to help them from abroad. Richer families, instead, have one or more members that send money back home or that help them in starting business.” And he added that “remittances that go straight to the people on the ground increase inequalities.”

6 Personal names are pseudonyms.

Sending Money Officially: Beyond Binary Generational and Political Divides

As we have already shown, the 2% diaspora tax is the most crucial part of the official remittances flowing from the diaspora to the government. This issue has been discussed at length in the literature, and is also highly debated among Eritrean people abroad. The act of paying - or not paying - the 2% tax is one that has several meanings and deep implications for an individual's ability to access certain rights and services both in Eritrea and in their countries of destination, and in terms of their position within the transnational social sphere. According to Hirt and Mohammad (2021), the percentage of people who believe that the tax is used for the benefit of the population has been decreasing in recent years, as the dysfunctional aspects of the PFDJ's authoritarian system have become more evident. Yet, there are still people who approve of the diaspora tax, both among the so-called "generation nationalism" and, to a lesser extent, in the "generation asylum" (Redeker Hepner 2015). For some of them, paying the 2% is part of a wider political position in support of the government, its policies and ideologies, and of a constellation of practices, such as attending Eritrean Festivals, which reflect the nationalistic values of unity and sacrifice, the pride of contributing to the nation, and the official doctrine of economic self-reliance. While for those who left Eritrea before independence, this practice is sometimes in continuity with past commitments to send money in order to support the liberation fronts, for younger generations of migrants it expresses their contradictory attitudes and feelings towards their country of origin. For both groups, paying the 2% is also a way in which they can feel part of a diasporic community at the local and the transnational level, and can develop and express feelings of belonging.

However, even among those who have a pro-government position, the act of paying the diaspora tax can acquire several meanings according to one's biographical trajectory, as in the case of Semhar. She arrived in Italy with her family at the end of the 1970s and, as a child, was a member of the Red Flowers (ቀይሎች ፅንባባ, *qeyihiti 'inbaba* in Tigrinya), a revolutionary children's organisation that existed in both Eritrea and the diaspora during the liberation war. While talking about her past with author Aurora Massa on a cold afternoon of April 2018 in Rome, Semhar defined those years as "the best of her life" and admitted that she still remembered the songs and plays she performed with the other members of the organisation in support of the freedom fighters (ትጋደልቲ, *tegadelti*) back home. However, that period ended tragically when her mother died in the 1980s and Semhar, who was 17 at that time, decided to take a break from the Eritrean community, a break that lasted almost 30 years. It was only after divorcing her Italian husband

that she started to get closer to her past, old friends and the country where she was born. As she told Aurora, visiting Eritrea, participating in national celebrations and other meetings, and paying the 2% tax are all ways for her to mourn in a way she was not able to for thirty years.

The case of Semhar also shows how the same people can change their attitudes over time, thus suggesting the need to take a longitudinal approach when examining remittance practices. Indeed, generational transmission plays a pivotal role in the view of remittances as an integral part of belonging to the Eritrean diaspora (Hirt 2021). This can follow two main paths: first, within families, from parents to children; second, by the meetings regularly organised by the overseas branches of the ruling PFDJ (Graf 2018). Over time, however, it may happen that people who have never supported the nationalist cause start paying the 2% (as Semhar did) or, vice versa that those who have always supported this cause find themselves in the position of no longer being able to contribute. For example, when Solomon, a 32-year-old health worker got married in Sweden in 2015 –where he arrived in 2007– and the year after he became a parent of twin babies, in order to support his grown family had to cut the remittances he used to send home and decided to apply for Swedish citizenship in order to avoid paying the 2% tax. Similarly, Rahwa – who arrived in Rome in 2002 as a student worker but dropped out before graduating and moved to Milan in 2004 – experienced difficulties due to the post-2008 economic crisis. She lost her job in mid-2009 and consequently her capacity to send remittances decreased, showing how purely material reasons can influence remittance practices.

Some people have decided to cease supporting the government as a form of protest against its authoritarian drift. In this way, they have joined the cohort of migrants, both among the established diaspora and the newcomers, who have decided not to pay the 2% despite the high costs of such a choice. The narratives that we collected disclosed different attitudes, ranging from a strong refusal to pay (or continue to pay) the 2% tax, to family strategies designed to safeguard properties in Eritrea. For example, after the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war, Saba – interviewed near Perugia by Valentina Fusari in March 2008 – decided to financially support her family in Eritrea, with the help of her Italian husband, but refused to continue paying the 2% tax. In a contrasting case, Ammanuel and his two sisters tried to find a compromise between their political positions and their family interests. Having escaped from Eritrea in the 2000s, the three siblings now live in, respectively, Italy, Canada and Norway and share an anti-government position, strengthened by the fact that some of their relatives were (and still are) members of the

ELF. However, as Ammanuel told Aurora Massa in Rome, after the death of their parents in Eritrea, they decided that one of them would pay the 2% in order to secure their ownership rights on their family home.

Furthermore, other forms of regular remittances are systematically used by the government to harness the resources of the diaspora. Over the past twenty years, housing projects have been a key strategy here (Fusari 2017; Belloni 2021). The desire to own a house back home, widespread in all migration flows, has been appealed to by the Eritrean state in specific moments of need, such as during the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict in 1998-2000. In this context, Eritreans who economically supported the country's war efforts were often given valuable pieces of land in Asmara and its surroundings to build their houses. Although these private building projects have often been frustrated by subsequent regulations on construction, this strategy has been successfully used again in more recent times. Current development projects in Asmara have mostly been sold to the diaspora in order to gain foreign currency.

In addition to these flows of money, which directly connect people in the diaspora with the government, other kinds of remittances are aimed at supporting community development projects or specific associations. These remittances have permitted the construction of village halls and places of worship, or the sustainability of national associations, such as the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) or the Eritrean National War Disabled Veterans' Association (ENWDVA). Although the government controls the uses of money collected during PFDJ-organised festivals and other fundraising occasions, and usually strongly opposes local and parochial sentiments, we argue that these remittances express the multiple and scalar connections, memberships and feelings of belonging that people in diaspora have with their homeland. For example, Yodit, a 50-year old woman, almost burst into tears while talking about her commitment and sacrifice in contributing to the NUEW as a member of the Italian branch of this association. In Italy since 1985, in the past few years Yodit has devoted a part of her free time to knitting scarves to be sold, together with handwork from Eritrea, at Eritrean Festivals and other national celebrations across Italy, in order to collect money for building a new health clinic in Keren. Describing the clinic she visited in 2017, she was extremely proud of what women were able to achieve for the benefit of their sisters in Eritrea.

Interestingly, participants in this kind of remittance activity include not only those who, like Yodit, explicitly support the government's political projects and share its rhetoric, but also those who have a different political position,

such as Filmon – a refugee who does not pay the 2%, but is part of an association called *Harnet* which annually sends money to the Martyrs Trust Fund of his home village – and Alem and her husband Dawit. Both children of *tegadelti*, Alem and Dawit arrived in Germany in 2018, after they obtained their MAs respectively in Tanzania and Turkey. Dawit is now working on his PhD and despite his father having been imprisoned for the past twenty years, as soon as he became a parent (in June 2020), he organised a fundraising event to support the disabled veteran freedom fighters, on the grounds that June is the “month when Eritreans show gratitude to those who sacrificed their lives and limbs for Eritrea.”⁷ Although they overtly criticise the current ruling party, they decided to support the ENWDVA, which aims to rehabilitate and reintegrate disabled war veterans into society. The cases of Filmon, Alem and Dawit show once again how, regardless of one’s position regarding the current government, values such as unity, self-sacrifice, and courage, as well as the celebration of fighters and martyrs, are frequently shared within the diaspora, even among those who escaped from and oppose the current government. More generally, the feeling of belonging to Eritrea is never questioned and constitutes a strong bond that is interlaced with other forms of attachment and identification (for example, those based on gender or shared locality of origin), and made deeper by the fusion of national and family genealogy (Massa 2017, 2020b).

Avoiding the Gatekeeper State? The Multidirectional Flow of Informal Remittances

The dual nature of the financial market in Eritrea (a thriving black money market vs. an official market regulated by the government) has led to the burgeoning of “informal remittances.” Given the huge difference between the black market currency exchange rate and the official rate, informal remittances have been dominant for decades, until recently. As long as there was the opportunity of a dual market, the official rate of 1 Euro was around 20 Eritrean Nakfa. On the black market it was between 55 and 70 Nakfa, depending on the season, the amount of money being changed and the broker.

These informal remittances have, for generations of refugees, been a way to support their families at home without directly contributing to the same system that has pushed them out into the diaspora. For those refugees who explicitly positioned themselves against the government, rejection of the 2%

7 Eritrean Martyrs’ Day is celebrated on June 20th each year.

tax represents an important political standpoint. However, helping family members who remain in Eritrea as well as larger village communities is a heartfelt ethical obligation that renews migrants' ties with home. Although remittances have often been considered an exclusively economic phenomenon, it is essential to look at remittances within a larger moral and emotional context (Baldassar and Merla 2013; Belloni 2019a, 2020): by sending gifts or money home emigrants show to their dear ones that they have not forgotten them, strengthen their ties with the community of origin, and reproduce a community connection which distance and time threaten to erase. Thus, informal remittances have allowed those who have been labelled political "outsiders" by the government – such as refugees and deserters (Redeker Hepner 2015) – to contribute to the social, cultural and political development of their families and communities, and to the wider nation. This has produced a somehow alternative political belonging, parallel to that recognised by the Eritrean authorities. These remittances include individual remittances to support the livelihood of families, and small entrepreneurial projects by family members. Informal flows of money have also been used to support the partial renovation of housing and living environments of families in urban and rural contexts, despite the strict regulations.

Nevertheless, like the formal remittances, informal remittances fluctuate, depending on personal as well as contextual issues. Over time, migrant remittances shift depending on household structure in the hosting country, or on migrants' working and economic conditions. Moreover, some "remittance stories" we collected exemplify how money flows can be interrupted (or restored) due to tensions within family or community networks.

While much has been said about Eritrea as a recipient of remittances, much less is known about the contributions that families in Eritrea send abroad, outside the country. Certainly, many of the escape journeys from the country are paid for by people in the diaspora, but our empirical research reveals that there are less well-known stories of families saving for years in order to support their children's flight. And even when refugees are experiencing times of crisis, it is often families back home who must find the resources to get them out of trouble. "Many times, I have seen mothers begging in Gode-na Harnet when their children were kidnapped in the Sinai," one informant told Milena Belloni while walking on the main street of Asmara in 2013. She then went on to say that these women "had already sold all their gold and are indebting themselves in order to pay for the ransom." Again in 2018, Milena met several families who had children abroad, but complained about the lack of support they were receiving from these distant sons: "My family

paid 10,000 dollars for my brother to reach Germany,” Girmay, a 27-year-old recently married teacher in Asmara explained to Milena: “I also made some debts... I counted on my brother to pay those back, but he has been there for over five years and still we have not seen any money yet.” Connections, disconnections and ambivalences also characterise the circulation of objects; we address these in the next section.

Gifts and the Moral Economy of Exchange: Investigating the Social Dynamics of Circulating Objects and Practices

Besides financial support, goods and items also circulate within transnational families. People in Eritrea often receive consumer goods such as clothes, shoes and cosmetics from their relatives abroad, as well as therapeutic drugs. In exchange, they send them cultural objects that play a crucial role in marriage celebrations, baptisms or other key cultural events. Wedding dresses, traditional *gabi* (ጋቢ),⁸ musical instruments are often imported from Eritrea and constitute an important resource for those in the diaspora who wish to assert their identity in exile. Cooking materials, *rekeboti* (ሬኬቦት, traditional coffee tables),⁹ *jebena* (ጃቤና, traditional coffee jugs), homemade *širo* (ሻሮ, a traditional spicy chickpea flour) are commonly requested by Eritreans in the diaspora from their families back home. Documents, such as ID cards, birth and marriage certificates, are also among the valuable objects that are sent from Eritrea to the diaspora, as they are often needed for asylum applications or family reunion requests.

Given the difficulties in sending products from and to Eritrea, many of these objects are carried by third parties who regularly travel to Eritrea or have a chance to go there. Milena Belloni has often played this role in her journeys. She has transported money, branded shoes, coats and other clothes to Eritrea, and has often travelled back to Europe with 20 kg bags full of *širo*. On one occasion, due to a misunderstanding with her departure time, she failed to bring back to the Netherlands a 2 kg bag of *širo*. This caused a major break in the relationship with a 28-year-old woman, whom she had known for over five years. This episode is interesting, in that it shows the symbolic and emotional value that receiving food from home bears in the eyes of refugees far away from their families for years.

8 A handmade cotton cloth of four layers that is worn over the shoulders and upper body by men and women, especially the elderly.

9 The coffee ceremony is a key ingredient of Eritrean and Ethiopian culture and is a crucial way to re-enact migrants' belonging and identity in exile (Palmer 2010).

Finally, it is important to note that within Eritrea, the receipt of goods also helps to reinforce the “remittance paradox” that Hirt and Mohammad (2021) discuss in relation to financial remittances. Goods received from relatives abroad play an ambiguous role with regard to the stability of the government. While they make it clear, by their very presence, how many items are easily accessible in other countries and not available in Eritrea, they partially compensate for the absence of those items in the market. In fact, by improving household livelihoods and satisfying the desire for things not available locally, these items help to conceal the limits of the state-driven economy and consequently defuse the risk of social tensions.

The Multidirectional and Diverse Flow of Social Remittances

Like financial remittances, social remittances pass through both peer-to-peer and kinship networks; but they may even be attracted by the government. Indeed, the appeals listed on the Ministry of Information website between 2010 and 2013 for diaspora contributions for specific development causes, as well as the recent speeches made by President Isayas Afewerki to encourage and ensure the participation and contribution of the diaspora in short-term developmental programmes suggest the importance of government-driven social remittances. Samson Maekele Tsegay (2021), for example, has analysed how the engagement of Eritrean diaspora academics can foster the transfer of knowledge, skills and experience acquired abroad, and promote higher education in the country (Weldemichael 2017). However, in the following passages we mostly focus on social remittances which have circulated between families and peers across borders.

Like financial remittances, social remittances have undergone variations, both over time and according to the changing cohorts of Eritreans abroad and beneficiaries at home. Moreover, the means to shape and share these remittances have continually changed, especially considering the shifting availability of flights to access the country, the affordability of transportation prices and border controls with neighbouring countries. For example, people from worldwide diasporic communities have been going to Eritrea during the summer holidays (Arnone 2011), easing the exchange of experiences, ideas, mindsets, as well as goods. Other ways to remain constantly in contact with friends and relatives are becoming popular, especially among the younger generations. More extended and stable landline telephone connections, enhanced mobile telephone coverage, as well as internet connections, are all powerful means through which people in the diaspora perform relatedness and remit lifestyles,

habits and other information, including dissent against the ruling party, even if these connections are not equally distributed nationally and still depend on electricity. Smartphones themselves have become a status symbol in Eritrea, even though suitable data connections are not yet available in the country.

When observed in Eritrea, these remittances are embodied in the increasing desire for “modernity,”¹⁰ the symbolic values attached to certain goods (such as fashion shoes, technological items, or medicinal drugs), and the innovative ways through which women and men shape their subjectivities and self-representations. However, in order to better understand these flows of aesthetic tastes and social practices, it is appropriate to unpack them and observe how they take shape in social groups differentiated in terms of gender, religion, and urban or rural settings. In this regard, a gender and religious oriented example of social remittances comes from Muslims in Asmara and their exchanges with people who migrated, after independence, to Arab countries (Thiollet 2007). In fact, in the last decade, alongside the increase in shops (minimarkets) owned and run by Muslims, it is more common to see women wearing the *niqāb* in the capital. Imported products from the Arab world are sold, in brand new shops, at prices higher than those charged in other shops or through the “coupon system.”¹¹ Thus, by shopping at such places, customers reveal their higher economic and social status, like the Muslim women wearing *niqāb*. Eritrean Muslim girls did not, in the past, wear a Gulf-style *niqāb*, but in the last decade, there has been an increase in this practice, above all in the capital. The government implemented measures to avert religious radicalisation and jihadism by controlling education, promoting secular institutions, and limiting new forms of Christianity and Islām. Nevertheless, it never put a limit on wearing *hijāb* or *niqāb*, as Ahmed, an undergraduate medical student whose roots are in the western lowlands but who was based in Asmara, explained to Valentina Fusari while sipping tea in the market area of Asmara in January 2014: women were wearing what their relatives brought from the Gulf states. Thus, “Wearing black *niqāb* is more about your people in diaspora than your religious opinion. It says something about your household’s socio-economic status.”

10 As scholars have highlighted, modernity is far from being an unequivocal concept: it includes several dimensions (material, symbolic, moral, social) and is interpreted by different actors in different ways. Moreover, the idea of what is modern can shift according to the exposure to different cultural models (Ferguson 2005; Vigh 2006). In the context of Eritrea, modernity – as a crystallisation of the possibility of change and having a future – is often perceived by young people as something that can be achieved only by leaving the country.

11 The Government used its reserves and imported some additional food to ensure food availability, accessibility, and affordability. The Hidri Food Programme subsidises food supply through a controlled coupon-based distribution system for all residents.

The spread of a new mode of dress, one that is gender-, religiously- and even spatially-oriented, can be considered a cultural remittance. The change in dress code seems to be rooted in the new environment which Eritrea's Muslim diaspora is experiencing abroad. If it has spread to diaspora members' Muslim female relatives back home, this is due to its symbolic value and the aura of prestige attached to it.

Besides introducing new fashion styles, social and cultural remittances may also act at a deeper level, influencing the ways in which Eritrean women manage their reproductive health. In this regard, an important clue to the role of such remittances lies in the transfer of knowledge about and the use of modern contraceptive methods. The Demographic and Health Surveys (1995, 2002) and the Population and Health Survey (2010) registered an increase in knowledge and use of modern contraception methods, especially among married women aged 25-44 living in urban areas. Such awareness depends both on national campaigns about reproductive health, and on gendered remittances that led women to seek enhanced preventative treatments, contraceptive use, and prenatal care. As Freweini's experience shows, having a migrant cousin in Stockholm helped to dispel her doubts about the effectiveness and side effects of contraceptive methods, especially the contraceptive pill and injection, as she told Valentina Fusari in November 2013 over an afternoon coffee in Asmara. When Freweini got married in 2010, she was 23 and immediately became pregnant, but her husband was living near Keren as a civil servant. Once delivered and alone with the new-born, she was worried about getting pregnant again because they could not afford it. It was the advice and support of her cousin from the diaspora then on holiday in Eritrea which removed any doubt about contraceptive use.

Thus, social ties to international migrants may be associated with increased knowledge and use of modern contraception among married women. From this perspective, we can say that remittances become embodied knowledge shaping intimate spheres of one's life. Moreover, awareness of modern contraceptive methods was also important in perilous travels by land and sea across borders. In order to avoid pregnancy in case of rape during their trip, some young women started to use contraceptive injections before leaving Eritrea or looked for them in Sudan before the hardest land leg (Abebe 2019). This practice seems to be rooted in the experiences of women who had previously made the perilous journey, as shared through social media, and it became part and parcel of new female migration projects.

We have tried here to trace how, over time, Eritrea has experienced multi-channelled and multidimensional social and cultural remittances involving multiple actors and beneficiaries. Such diverse flows – related to money circulation, but not reducible to it – have acted at multiple levels, affecting individuals, households, communities, and the government. The entanglement of all these remittances together with their overlaid – and even opposite – trajectories make the role of remittances in future transitions complex to predict.

Conclusion

In this article we have traced different kinds of remittances that have circulated between Eritrea and its diasporic communities over the past thirty years, since the independence of Eritrea in 1991. Moving across periods and following the personal trajectories of migrants and their kinfolk at home, we explored continuities and changes in the attitudes towards and practices related to remittances at different levels. This approach has been helpful in exploring remittance choices and practices looking beyond the mere financial aspects. In this regard, an examination of the past thirty years has allowed us to evaluate changes in the diaspora's relations with the government, but also to appreciate the influence of diverse kinds of remittances on Eritrean society, communities and families, despite the limitations imposed by the political framework.

In more detail, we showed how payment of the 2% diaspora tax acquires different meanings among those who emigrated before and after independence. While some have sought to nurture a sense of belonging, others have personal reasons to support formal relations with the Eritrean state: we pointed out how remittances have played several roles at the same time, allowing people in Eritrea and abroad to achieve a certain social status in their homeland, to support individual migration projects, or to show their loyalty to the nation and the family; and, finally, we focused on the multiple strategies that people have adopted to negotiate their personal interests, their family obligations, and their political positioning. The transnational ethnographic material collected during a decade of research in Eritrea and beyond enabled us to investigate the social, moral, symbolic, and political dynamics that are brought into play by sending and receiving money and goods, by circulating lifestyles and knowledge. From this vantage point, we observed how Eritrea has not only been a recipient, but also a sender of remittances – money, goods, and ideas. By combining an analysis of (for-

mal and informal, state, community and family) financial remittances with the study of social and cultural ones we show that remittances have always been much more than just financial, since they are complex social practices conveying affection and reciprocity as well as a sense of duty and obligation, towards one's nation, community, family and peers.

This article has illustrated that remittances are historically sedimented and socially significant practices with a high degree of plasticity and flexibility. This adaptability to shifting circumstances makes them an important pivot in a process of transition, which is a key concept in this Special Issue (see general introduction). Information about the types and trajectories of remittances, as well as the motivations behind them, provides a promising basis from which to speculate about how remittances will help configure potential future political transitions in the country. The intense networks of relations between those living abroad, their homeland and their families in Eritrea will probably be reconfigured once again by a (more or less) peaceful transition, but are unlikely to be weakened. Of course, the trajectories and the role of remittances are hard to predict, but the present article suggests that their effects might be contradictory. We might expect that not only households, for their survival, but even those responsible for the building of public infrastructure, economic enterprises and development projects will resort to all forms of remittances from abroad. Likewise, future – and maybe contrasting – political projects may raise thanks to the circulation of ideas in the transnational social space (e.g. #yakil; #nomore, see Bernal 2014; Tewelde 2020; Berhane 2021).

These political movements may smooth a peaceful transition in Eritrea and beyond. However, they may also exacerbate divisions within the population. It may well be that, not unlike the case of neighbouring Ethiopia, the fragmentation of Eritrea's diaspora will produce divisions rather than unity in any future scenario. This may well hinder the formation of a successful transition programme. Moreover, as we showed in these pages, they can increase inequalities between households, triggering social tensions. Finally, due to the "remittance paradox" (Hirt and Mohammad 2021), remittances play an ambivalent role in the process of transition. Indeed, remittances not only contribute to stabilising the political *status quo*, but, by fuelling youth emigration and improving the living conditions of many households, they also reduce room for social and political contestation.

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