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'We have a Common Past, a Common Present and a Common Future' Postcolonial Gendered Memories of the Eritrean Diaspora

Domenica Ghidei Biidu, Barbara De Vivo, Elisabetta Hagos and Sabrina Marchetti

Memories of Italy's colonization of the Horn of Africa, its implications for the processes of identity construction in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the experience of migration to Italy are some of the issues at the heart of the interview presented here, which was conducted in Amsterdam in November 2009.¹ It focuses on the stories of Domenica Ghidei Biidu and Elisabetta Hagos, both of whom belong to the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Europe, though they occupy different positions within that diaspora due to disparities in age and personal trajectories.

Domenica Ghidei Biidu was born in Cheren, in Eritrea, in 1962, and grew up in Asmara. Since the 1980s, she has lived in Amsterdam and is a Dutch citizen. She is a lawyer and at the moment works as an Equal Treatment commissioner on issues of discrimination among others on the basis of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability. After escaping from Eritrea in the midst of the most virulent phase of the conflict with Ethiopia, she lived in Rome from 1978 to 1979, working as a nanny for an Italian family. Over the course of the next twenty years, she regularly returned to the city to visit her mother who was employed there as a domestic worker for 30 years.

¹ The text of this interview was first published in September 2010 in issue 23 of the Italian journal *Zapruder* - *Storie in Movimento* see D. Ghidei Biidu & E. Hagos, 'Io noi voi. Intervista a donne della diaspora eritrea nell'Italia post coloniale', edited by S. Marchetti e B. De Vivo, in: *Zapruder. Storie in movimento*, 23 (2011), pp. 144-152. The authors wish to thank the editors of the issue for giving permission to reprint it along with a new introduction. The interview was conducted in Italian – the common language between the people who took part in it (Elisabetta Hagos, Domenica Ghidei Biidu, Sabrina Marchetti and Barbara De Vivo) – fully recorded and then transcribed and edited by the interviewers. The idea of the interview stemmed out of an ongoing collaboration between the authors and the interviewes on issues of racism, migration and Italian colonial history (see D. Ghidei Biidu & S. Marchetti, 'Abbecedario coloniale. Memorie di donne eritree alle scuole italiane di Asmara', in: *Zapruder. Storie in movimento*, 19 (2009), pp. 90-107; D. Ghidei Biidu & S. Marchetti, 'Eritreans' memories of postcolonial time. Ambivalence and mimicry at the Italian schools in Asmara', in: J. Andall & D. Duncan (eds), *National belongings. Hybridity in Italian colonial and postcolonial culture*, Oxford/Bern, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 107-126). The preparation and confrontation between the authors and the interviewees the making of the interview, and the interviewees themselves.

Elisabetta Hagos, by contrast, is an Italian citizen who was born in Rome in 1978 to an Eritrean mother and an Ethiopian father, both of whom had settled in Italy in the 1970s. Her mother, like Ghidei Biidu's, worked as a housekeeper for an Italian family. At the age of twenty, Hagos decided to move to London to complete her university studies. After graduating she returned to Rome, where she was active in the anti-racist movement. She now lives in Bologna trying to find better job opportunities.

The characteristics shared by the two interviewees are their familiarity not only with Italy and Eritrea, but also with another European country; a family history that includes domestic service in Italian households; and, finally, a critical perspective on Italian society. These elements provide the basis for an insightful interview. Yet, while both women share an Eritrean background, they are from different generations, and consequently their reciprocal self-positioning brings a further layer of complexity to the discussion. Due to their differences in nationality, age and specific positioning within the Eritrean diaspora, their accounts contribute new material to the memory of Italian domination in the Horn of Africa, as they offer greater heterogeneity and multi-dimensionality. Building on the insight of Giulia Barrera, we argue that memories transmitted orally by the women of formerly colonized countries contribute to the process of rewriting histories by contrasting the dominant accounts.² In the light of the above, the following interview offers several lines of reflection, which help illustrate the gendered character of nationalist movements and of postcolonial and diasporic migrations, as well as the processes of memorization that accompany them.

What is the meaning of the term 'Italian postcolonialism' in your view?

EH: I don't know. To be honest, it is only in recent years that I have begun approaching this issue. I hadn't even thought about it before. But over the past years I've heard many people referring to 'Italian postcolonialism' as a topic we have never really dealt with. The point is that there is a lack of memory about Italian colonialism, among young people and among those who are not so young.

DGB: Yes. Just think that when I arrived in Italy in 1978, the Italians I met in Rome didn't know anything about it. I expected to find a country where people knew what they had left behind them [in Eritrea], what they had done, the kind of relationship that existed between us and them... But the Italy I arrived in was unaware of this past. Not only poorly educated people, but intellectuals, employers [of Eritrean domestic workers], and fascist types living in upper class neighborhoods like Parioli were ignorant about the past as well. They had a one-sided view of the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea and thought that the moment they left it was all gone. They knew nothing about the impact of it. They were always surprised that I spoke Italian! I mean, if you know the history of your country, you simply should know that this is the result of your presence in our country.... How could my mother work for you and cook your favorite dishes without having worked for twenty, thirty years for an Italian family [in Eritrea]? That's how she was able to prepare these delicious dinners when she arrived in Rome. But this awareness about history wasn't there. And so, it is not surprising that I was always arguing with people, maybe because I was searching for this shared past. In addition, since there was no recognition of the past that Italy shared with Eritrea, the

² See G. Barrera, 'Memorie del colonialismo italiano fra le donne eritree. La storia di Frewini' in: *Genesis*, 4 (2005), pp. 73-98.

kind of rights that Italians conceded to Eritrean migrants were really minimal. The only kind of job you could find [in Italy] was domestic work.... But I had grown up [in Asmara] thinking that I was going to be a medical doctor!

In any case, at that time, there were two groups of Eritreans [in Rome]: those who decided to stay, and those who decided to leave. I was among those who headed for a different European country, while there were others who went to the United States or Canada. I was one of the young people who understood that Italy could not offer us the protection and space we were looking for, nor the recognition we wanted – at the legal level, as refugees, or at the social and psychological level – and therefore we decided to leave.

Elisabetta mentioned the fact that there is a lack of 'memory' not only among Italians, but also among Eritreans. What kind of memory are we talking about?

EH: When our elders talk about colonialism in Eritrea and about Italians, they just talk about the good things Italians brought to Eritrea, while some forget to speak about the violence, about the negative things that the Italians brought with them. It is true that the violence perpetrated by Italy in its colonies has surely not been recounted much in comparison with the colonial past of the French, the British, and so on. These histories are better known. Italian colonialism, instead, is only described as something positive. Many don't talk about the abuses, about the children whose paternity Italian fathers refused to acknowledge, about the racial laws in Eritrea, and about Italians killing Eritreans and Ethiopians with poison gases. These stories are not told; it's as if there is no memory of them. But the reason for this void is not clear, since the elderly are the very people who lived through that time and they should in fact know about it. I have heard these stories from 'Eritreans and Italians with memory', who believe that the Italian colonialism in Eritrea has to be remembered. I think that a country that does not know its own history, because not properly taught at school and by the elderly, has a very serious lack. I believe the danger here is that Italians will extol virtues that they do not have. That's the point. Its happening today with migrants, when Italians say: 'We give them money, we give them a chance to work, we let them enter the country, we welcome them, we are the best people in Europe because we offer them hospitality'.... I believe this attitude is very similar to the way they talk about the Italian colonization of Eritrea: 'we were good because we built streets, buildings, we brought them roads and highways'. True, but what was the price for all that? Because they didn't do it all for nothing then, and they are not doing it all for nothing today.

In your experience, Domenica, how was the memory of Italian colonization passed along to you and what has it meant to you?

DGB: Let's say that on the one hand there was the Eritrean memory. For example, my mother was in Cheren during the referendum in 1950.³ She was a very beautiful woman and for this reason Italians would tell her: 'Nighisti, we'll buy you a zuriawith

³ In 1950, the United Nations promoted a referendum on the federal unification between Eritrea and Ethiopia that was to follow the British protectorate (1941-1950). The outcome of the referendum favoured the Ethiopian government of Hailè Selassié, who officially started ruling Eritrea in 1952. On the configuration of the different political streams for or against the federation at the time of the referendum, see T. Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia. The federal experience*, Uppsala, Nordinska Afrikainstitutet, 1997.

the Italian flag on it, if you do some campaigning for us'. Men from another group would tell her: 'We'll give you a zuria with the Ethiopian flag on it if you do some campaigning for us'. You have to remember that Cheren was a town where different groups met: there were many Muslims there, and the fight for Independence started precisely in the Cheren region. At the same time my mother had a cousin – who was later killed – and who was in favor of unification with Ethiopia. He was very critical about Italian colonization. When I was a child we used to visit him in the bar he owned, and he would let off steam about the Italians, saying 'these Italians this, these Italians that'. And at that moment you could really feel how people experienced colonization. My father for example was only allowed to go to school till the fourth grade because the local people were not allowed to study further. He was very resentful. He was the son of a district court judge of the Eritrean people. But these were things that I heard as a little girl between the age of five and ten, but that no one explained to me in a way that made any sense. That's how the situation was, since it was the time of the Eritrean resistance against Ethiopia – something that one was not allowed to talk about.... Actually, in that context the real interest [for Eritreans] was not so much 'Italian post-colonialism', but rather their desire for self-determination and independence. That's why – in relation to what you said, EH – on the one hand, some people said that Italians had helped us, based on the opinion of those who used to work with Italians and were happy about that; while on the other, there were those who said: 'They took our land; they forbade us from entering certain areas [of Asmara] and from attending school after the fourth grade; they abused and dishonored our women; they were racists'... But the fact that another political issue was at stake at that moment made the discussion of these two different positions very difficult. On the other hand there are also many experiences on a personal level of Italian individuals like the employers of my mother who treated me like their child and challenged racist attitudes of their surrounding by giving me a position as if I was an Italian too. Just their child. I have a couple of friends who had similar experiences.

If we think instead of the Eritrean resistance to the Italian colonial domination, what kindsof testimonies have been passed on?

DGB: The Eritrean resistance against Italians was not that big...

EH: Yes, there wasn't a real Eritrean movement...

DGB: Yet some Eritreans started a resistance army but later on joined the Ethiopian resistance fighters. These are people like Degyat Abera Hailu, Abubeker Ahmed and Mohammed Nuri. Another famous resistance leader was Degayt Bahta Hagos. But you know what makes this 'history' rather difficult? If these people were seen as heroes, it would make the Eritrean position uneasy. What's at stake here is the 'manipulation of history'.... What should we say about those Eritreans who, in order to fight against Italy, attacked the Italian occupier from Ethiopia or joined the Ethiopian army, the same army that later occupied Eritrea? This is the reason why these events are so ambiguous. The same goes for the question of feudalism. The feudal classes in Eritrea and Ethiopia are interconnected through marriage and in other ways, just as it was in Europe where feudal families married one with the other to gain more power. For this reason, although there has always been conflict between the Tigray and Amahara, there has also been a certain equilibrium. In the past, there was always an

Eritrean political, military presence in Ethiopia, but it is not said in Eritrea, today. It's taboo, especially in light of the history that is now being told, that is to say, the history of independence.

In Italy we hear that the best cappuccino in Africa is made in Asmara, that you have nice Italian style bakeries there, and so on - an inheritance of the Italian enduring presence. In your view, what does Italy mean for Eritreans today?

DGB: The infrastructure that Italians left is still there, still present. This means that those Eritreans who traveled abroad recognize Asmara as an 'Italian-style' city, with a certain taste for elegance and a certain comfort in the way houses are decorated. They say, 'Yes, during the Italian period, Eritrean workers learned the Italian touch'. This is one thing. The other is the sense of Eritrean identity that we inherited from Italian colonialism, according to which Eritreans are different from the other Africans. And this is something so deep that many Eritreans, even those living abroad, find a source of pride in it.... Maybe they don't realize that when one is praised by being compared to someone else, it is not a sign of genuine appreciation... It's like the way people tell you, 'You're beautiful for an African woman'. When they say, 'You are different from other Africans', it means they are leaving something unspoken.... But people find it enough of a compliment to be proud of it. This is something I always found problematic.

EH: Yet I think that in Eritrea today people are disappointed with Italy. In the past, people didn't really know what was happening in Italy – they could only rely on the few stories our parents told them – but more Eritreans now pass through Italy and then move somewhere else because they do not find the working and social condition they seek. I believe that these days there is more information, more first-hand experience and more awareness about the reality in Italy.

DGB: Yes, also because the only ones who have a high opinion of Italy are women like my mother who are happy now because they got their pension after working in the domestic sector in Italy. Even the fact that they gained some rights, by the way, has often been exploited by trade unions and politicians in the context of the Italian class struggle... All the other Eritreans have something negative to say about Italy. I think that ultimately the memory of Italian colonization always has a tinge of bitterness, because there was a lack of human respect, and people felt that the Italians looked down on you.

We were wondering about what it means to come from a country like Eritrea, which experienced colonial domination, and later to find yourself living in the same Western country that was the former colonizer. How is this relevant to you, Elisabetta?

EH: When you go to the British Museum there is a section about Ethiopia and the battle of Adwa. There are very beautiful paintings depicting the Ethiopian resistance against the Italians. It was there that I learned about the poison gases. It touched me. I think at that moment I really felt 'Ethiopian'. And I was hurt by the fact that Italians never came to terms with what they did. They killed thousands of people and they never acknowledged the injustice of those deaths, the wrong they did to a nation that simply deserved respect. It was at that moment that I wondered: 'It's so awkward that my mother, like many others, decided to move to Italy'. The fact is that there was a large number of Italians working in Eritrea and in Ethiopia, and the long Italian presence in the territory had a strong impact, both culturally and linguistically. Some already spoke a perfect Italian when first arrived. However, when I think of the Ethiopian resistance, which was an incredible resistance movement, I feel some kind of pride. I feel proud to be a descendent of such a strong people who had the courage to rise up against the Italians, despite their numerical inadequacy, and especially despite the inadequacy of the weapons at their disposal.

Domenica, you have lived in close contact with Italians, both in Asmara and in Rome. Has your view changed since you moved to the Netherlands?

DGB: Well, when I arrived in Holland I started doing volunteer work with refugees, and I occasionally participated in activities of the Anne Frank Foundation.⁴ I also participated in activities organized by the National Committee for 4 and 5 May responsible for he the annual commemoration of the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the Netherlands. I saw that the Netherlands was doing a lot in relation to its past... I understood how the Second World War, the persecution of Jews and the German occupation were experienced by the Dutch. There was an awareness of history. and for this reason fascism was considered a grave and terrible thing. [...] In the light of these experiences, I asked myself: 'But what do people think about Fascism in Italy?'. Personally, I haven't felt the same kind of awareness in Italy. Maybe it's there, but I haven't experienced it.... In Italy, people are aware of the Resistance; you have the song 'Bella ciao', you have the partisans' songs.... But it's one thing to celebrate the partisans and it's another to criticize Fascism. The fact that some forms of political fascism existed in Italy starting from 1946, and wasnot perceived or problematized as being anti-democratic was astonishing for me.... Before Haider⁵ and the whole issue of neo-fascism became a scandal in other European countries, it was a political and social reality in Italy. It seems that Fascism in Italy is something like folklore, that it is not(auto)criticizedseriously enough like in Germany for example...

In conclusion, if we believe that there's a need to regain the past shared by Italy and Eritrea in different terms, how should we proceed?

DGB: Just last week I was interviewed in Kamp Vught, a Dutch concentration camp during the Second World War where Dutch Jews were assembled before being sent to the death camps. In that camp many children were detained and then transported further. There, in Kamp Vught, they run a project that involves interviewing people who survived conditions of war during their teens. That's the reason they invited me, in

⁴ The Anne Frank Foundation was originally founded in 1957 to prevent the tearing down of the house in Amsterdam in which Anne Frank was hidden in 1942 before being deported to the Nazi concentration camps. The house became a museum in 1960. Since then the Foundation has advocated the fight against racism and anti-Semitism and published the Dutch annual 'Monitor on Racism and Extreme Right' (see www.annefrank.org).

⁵ Jörg Haider was the leader of the Alliance for the Future of Austria. He was a very controversial figure within Austria and abroad for his highly xenophobic and anti-Semitic comments. Despite widespread protests against his policies, he became Governor of the Carinthia Region in 1989 and served two terms (1989-1991 and 1999-2008). He died in a car accident in 2008.

order to share my experience during the war in Eritrea with the experience of a Dutch woman who survived the Nazi occupation when she was a kid. So, in the Netherlands, a country that historically has nothing to do with me, I am asked to tell my story and people have questions about the meaning of such an experience! Their idea is that since we are all Dutch citizens now, we need to be able to share our past memories. I never heard anything like this in Italy.... But it is absolutely necessary to send a message like: 'We have a common past, a common present and a common future'. That's why I believe that stories like ours should still be told.

Conclusions

Through reading excerpts from the interview with Elisabetta Hagos and Domenica Ghidei Biidu, several points can be raised in relation to the current debate on the memory of Italian colonization of the Horn of Africa and postcolonial migrations to Italy. In this perspective, the interview offers an original contribution to the 'making of history', specifically with regard to the role of women in political transition and the connections between Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Italians, their former colonizers. It is extremely important that Hagos and Ghidei Biidu provide relevant historical insights by digging into the unstructured corpus of knowledge constituted by family memory.

More specifically, these women's narratives are important in the first instance for bringing to the fore the gendered aspects of memorization. This is in line with the argument made by Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith regarding the specificity of women's perspective and the feminist standpoint on the processes of memorization and narrativization. Gender is perceived as an 'identity marker' which:

provides a means by which cultural memory is located in a specific contest rather than subsumed into monolithic and essentialist categories. Moreover, gender is an inescapable dimension of differential power relations, and cultural memory is always about the distribution of and contested claim to power. What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender.⁶

Thus, both feminist and postcolonial historians share the goal of dismantling the European (and) male rendering of the past – a process long entrusted to museums and history texts – through recourse to the living testimonies and oral narratives of those who experienced the past from a subaltern perspective. This perspective facilitates the emergence of *micro* gestures and instances that confound the master narratives.⁷ The accounts offered by Elisabetta Hagos and Domenica Ghidei Biidu seem to challenge the dominant gendered script of nationalist ideologies. Such ideologies see women as purely functional to the reinforcement of differences between 'us' and 'them', that is, as the reproducers of the boundaries of national groups, as active transmitters and producers of the national culture, and as the 'symbolic signifiers of ethnic/national differences'.⁸ This instrumental appropriation of women is enacted particularly on their bodies, which become a symbolic battlefield between opposing nationalist stances. Ghidei Biidu provides an example of this mechanism when she describes her mother's experience at the time of the 1950 referendum, when Eritrean people were asked to cast their vote on

⁶ M. Hirsch & V. Smith, 'Feminism and cultural memory: an introduction', in: *Signs*, 28, 1 (2002), p. 6.

⁷ See A. L. Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 94-100.

⁸N. Yuval-Davis & F. Anthias, *Women-Nation-State*, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 7.

the federation with Ethiopia. Her description is critical of the fact that several pro-Italian and pro-Ethiopian men would come to her mother and ask her to support their campaign by wearing a traditional Eritrean dress (*zuria*) decorated in one case with the Italian flag, and with the Ethiopian flag in the other. The story is told in a way that questions the attempt by competing political parties to appropriate the mother's body, and thus refutes the traditional role of women within nationalist discourses and strategies.

Second, the stories told by Domenica Ghidei Biidu and Elisabetta Hagos offer an important example of what Vron Ware defines as 'postcolonial memories', that is, memories that 'recode and re-activate older, deeper structures of feelings' about the experience and legacy of colonial times. While remaining 'memories of the past', they have the possibility of transforming our understanding of current events.9 Bearing in mind Ware's insight, we could say that Hagosand Ghidei Biidu produce important testimonies that contribute to a 'historical memory of empire' 10 and resist the colonizers' hegemony in the narration of the colonial past. At the same time, their accounts also elucidate the cultural and symbolic dimensions underpinning the contemporary articulation of the relationship between the former colonizer and the former colonies. In fact, in the course of discussing the relationship between contemporary migration and the colonial past, Hagos and Ghidei Biidu adopt a critical position toward the dominant ways of describing the mechanisms of memory transmission and identity construction. Hagos offers an example of this at the beginning of the interview when she is asked to explain the meaning of 'postcolonial Italy'. She responds in a way that challenges the very use of the term 'postcolonial' when it is imposed on formerly-colonized subjects by white representatives of Western academia. In the same vein, both interviewees tend to challenge the notion of History as an institution that purports to offer truth and knowledge about reality, explicitly drawing attention to the manipulations of history and the particular interests affecting its construction.

Finally, the interview invites the listener to consider the fluid and intricate combination of individual and collective elements underpinning the narrativization of 'postcolonial memories'. In other words, it calls into question the tension between the individual and collective dimensions of the process by which individuals constitute their 'identities' through memory. This is achieved by recalling a shared past on the basis of common norms, conventions and practices, which are often contested. We find an example of this in the construction of Ethiopian-Eritrean postcolonial memory, which is marked by the historical conflict between the two African countries as well as by the Italian colonial presence, which played a crucial role in the conflict. In Alessandro Triulzi's view, the process of memory construction, for both Eritreans and Ethiopians, is shaped today by the re-creation of barriers between the two populations.¹¹ The interview shows us how Eritrean postcolonial subjects might eventually challenge the ideal of national unity. The two interviewees refuse their gendered role as 'guardians of (official) national memory', and they reject participation, from their own diasporic

⁹ V. Ware, 'Defining Forces: 'Race, Gender and Memories of Empire,' in: I. Chambers & L. Curti (eds) *The Postcolonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London, Sage Publications, 1996, p. 146. ¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ A. Triulzi, 'Displacing the Colonial Event, Hybrid Memories of Postcolonial Italy', in: *Interventions* 8, 3 (2006), pp. 430-443.

locations, in an 'imagined community' that is served by this kind of logic. In other words, they do not aim to inscribe themselves in a history of the Nation, which implies the preservation of a shared knowledge about the past; rather, they move against the grain, gathering, re-activating, and passing on a marginal and 'uncomfortable' memory. Both Hagos and Ghidei Biidu exemplify this, as they reveal continuous shifts in their affiliations and in the recognition of established identities. The process of slippage becomes very evident when Hagos is asked about the meaning of 'being an Eritrean woman in Italy'. She responds by recalling an experience she had in London, when, in a 'moment of identification', she felt closer to her Ethiopian origin. This flexibility is due, in our view, to the diasporic trajectory of the two women, which is marked by a sense of multiple belonging and makes affiliation with any permanent established identity impossible to assert.

Key words

Eritrea, women, memory, oral history, migration

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Elisabetta Hagos was born in October 1978 in Rome to an Eritrean mother and a Tigray father. She spent her early years in a Catholic boarding school in Rome. At the age of 20 she decided to move to U.K., in London, where she worked and studied for six years. Once graduated at Plymouth University, she returned to her first adoptive country, Italy. In Rome, she became actively involved with the antiracist movement. She currently lives in Bologna.

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RIASSUNTO

'Abbiamo un passato, un presente e un futuro in comune'. Memorie postcoloniali di genere della diaspora eritrea

Questo articolo si basa su di un'intervista condotta da Sabrina Marchetti e Barbara De Vivo con Domenica GhideiBiidu e Elisabetta Hagos nel 2009. In quanto componenti della diaspora eritrea in Europa, GhideiBiidu e Hagos contribuiscono con questa intervista alla memoria della dominazione coloniale italiana nel Corno d'Africa sulla base del patrimonio di conoscenze che entrambe hanno ereditato dalle proprie famiglie.

L'intervista si sviluppa lungo delle line di analisi e riflessione che rendono con efficacia l'importanza della dimensione di genere nel movimento nazionalista eritreo e nelle migrazioni di tipo postcoloniale e diasporico, così come nel processo di memorizzazione che le ha accompagnate. S'illustrano inoltre la dimensione culturale e quella simbolica della relazione attuale fra popolazioni ex colonizzate ed ex colonizzatrici. Infine, quest'intervista rappresenta un contributo originale nell'ottica del 'fare storia' rispetto al ruolo particolare che hanno avuto le donne eritree nei periodi di transizione politica e nelle connessioni fra Eritrea, Etiopia e Italia.