Geoforum 92 (2018) 117–124

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Politics of belonging and the Eritrean diaspora youth: Generational transmission of the decisive past

Samuel Graf

Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Belonging
Diaspora
Eritrea
Second generation
Identity
Chosen trauma

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the generational transmission of the decisive Eritrean past and illustrates its influence on the reinforcement and maintenance of Eritrean identity and sense of belonging to Eritrea on young Eritreans grown up in the diaspora. It argues that the transmission and preservation of narratives and knowledge about the decisive Eritrean past makes the Eritrean history a "chosen trauma", which constitutes an important aspect of the formation of a collective identity. Thereby, the article focuses on two particular modes of transmissions: first, within families from parents to children and second, by the international conferences of the YPFDJ, the exile youth branch of the country's ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice PFDJ. The generational transmission of a decisive past helps to understand the formation of identity and belonging of second-generation Eritreans and further contributes to the broader debate on post-migrant generations constituting belonging in a transnational field.

1. Introduction

In the last years, a vast amount of studies has emerged that describe how individuals living in transnational contexts establish and maintain relations across national boundaries. A majority of these studies has been addressing the transnational lives of actual migrants, while research on transnationalism in terms of their children, the so-called second generation, has been widely neglected (King and Christou, 2011, 452). Furthermore, scholars then are rather divided when it comes to the debate about transnationalism of the second generation (see Levitt and Waters, 2002). Irrespective of the actual transnational engagement of the second generation, children of migrants are often raised and socialized in transnational settings involving various cross-border networks and thus relate to more than one country (Levitt, 2009, 1231). As a result, descendants of immigrants find themselves faced by questions of who they are and where they belong. Besides, the ambiguous term 'second generation' itself already indicates that growing up to immigrant parents may affect the constitution of belonging. It involves the implicit assumption of being native to another place of origin and thus ascribes a certain belonging to the individuals (Toivanen, 2014, 23). Then, the process of developing their sense of self is influenced by their manifold personal, organisational, institutional or economical connections as well as by political projects relating to race, ethnicity, and nation (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2002, 171/194).

In the context of Eritrea, several studies on identity formation of young diaspora Eritreans reveal how second-generation Eritreans constitute and maintain their Eritrean national identity in the transnational field (Arnone, 2010; Conrad, 2010; Nolting von, 2002; Tecle, 2012; Zerat, 2009). Thereby, scholars point to the crucial role of parents in shaping their children's identity by teaching them Eritrean values and Eritrean culture and socializing them accordingly (Conrad, 2006, 7; Zerat, 2009, 67). Although mentioned, the Eritrean history as well as its effects on the second-generation Eritreans' identity and their sense of belonging, however is hardly referred to. The aim of this paper is to draw specific attention on the cross-generational transmission of the Eritrean decisive past and to reveal its influence on the promotion and preservation of national consciousness, identity and belonging within the diaspora youth. It points out two specific ways, through which this may take place: First, the role of parents and second, the annual international conferences of the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice YPFDJ, which is the exile youth branch of the Eritrean People's Front for Democracy and Justice PFDJ. Applying the concept of chosen trauma enables the consideration of the decisive Eritrean past and its influence on second-generation Eritreans' negotiation of identity and belonging. This has received only little attention in recent studies despite it appears to be particularly crucial in the Eritrean case. The paper thus focuses on the process of the transmission of the decisive Eritrean past as a means of maintaining Eritrean identity rather than its actual outcome since the effects vary individually. By shedding light on the transmission of the decisive Eritrean past onto the second-generation

E-mail address: samuel.graf@geo.uzh.ch.
URL: http://www.geo.uzh.ch/de/lehrstuehle-und-abteilungen/humangeographie/ueber-uns/staff/samuel-graf.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.04.009
Received 27 January 2017; Received in revised form 27 November 2017; Accepted 8 April 2018
Available online 17 April 2018
0016-7185/

Eritreans, this paper reveals the importance of decisive pasts of ancestral home countries to post-migrant generations regarding their negotiation of identity and belonging towards their origins. Thereby, the article contributes to the broader debate on second generation individuals constituting belonging in a transnational field.

With the focus on generational transmission, this paper conveys an image of sense of belonging of the second generation as being some kind of top-down process. However, second-generation Eritreans are not just passive individuals lacking the capacity to negotiate belonging by themselves. They also actively engage in constructing and shaping their identity and their sense of belonging (see Conrad, 2010; Tecle, 2012). Furthermore, the formation of identity and belonging involves a vast range of influencing factors. The article thus addresses just one particular aspect that, however, plays an important part in contributing to understand the formation of identity and belonging of second-generation Eritreans.

2. Methodology

I gathered the empirical material by using different methods. From end of 2013 to mid-2015 I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten female and six male Eritreans, born and/or grown up and undergone the major part of their socialization in the diaspora. Due to the overall focus of this research project, all of the interviewed second-generation Eritreans[1] currently are living in Switzerland. In order to select 'information-rich' interview participants, I adopted a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990, 169–186). In terms of the YPFDJ respectively its conferences, interviewees consist of both individuals with personal experiences as well as of individuals, to whom the YPFDJ does not mean anything. In addition to interviews, I accompanied a group of second-generation Eritreans travelling to Eritrea in 2014. Thereby, I was able to experience conversations and discussions amongst second-generation Eritreans. These provided further insights about both the overall research topic and the question concerned in this paper. Additionally, an expert interview (Bogner and Menz, 2009, 46–53) with the honorary consul of Eritrea in Switzerland in 2014, who has in-depth knowledge about Eritrea and its diaspora due to his long-standing relationship with the country, served as a further source of information. Finally, another data source constitute documents of the 10th annual Euro YPFDJ conference hold in Switzerland in 2014. Besides a document that reads as a kind of conference program, I was able to see different documents of presentation or seminaries of the conference.

However, in the course of my data collection I realized that many second-generation Eritreans did not want to participate in the study. An Eritrean man, whom I approached with the request for helping me to find eligible study participants, replied:

> 'I am still trying to find people who consent to be interviewed. But to tell you the truth, it proves very difficult. Because people are sceptical and reluctant.'
>
> Statement of an Eritrean parent, 2014

In the event of real or perceived contradictions or inconsistencies between individuals or groups, people are rather suspicious of outsiders and thus may not be willing to talk to them (Cohen and Arieli, 2011, 424–425). In terms of the Eritrean diaspora, the fragmentation based on divergent political opinions creates such a climate of mutual distrust and mistrust of unknown outsiders (Glatthard, 2012, 21; Conrad, 2010, 14). In the present case, those who describe themselves as apolitical as well as individuals participating in the YPFDJ and therefore are understood to have a government-friendly attitude seemed to be especially restrained and were difficult to access. It proved often impossible to even take up contact. Therefore, I can only speculate about their reasons for not participating. On the basis of my field experiences, however, possible motives might be the perceived omnipresence of politics in discussions about Eritrea or the individuals' perception that international reports and studies portray only critical, negative or undifferentiated pictures of Eritrea. As a result of this limitation, online platforms constitute a further important data source. Besides the homepages 'dehay.com', 'shaebia.org' and 'meadna.com', from which I will cite below, webpages such as 'tesfanews.net', 'awate.com' or also YouTube clips have provided insights about the YPFDJ conferences and revealed personal experiences of conference participants. YPFDJ websites were not available to access, and the YPFDJ currently seems to be chiefly active via social media platforms. These, however, revealed rather irrelevant content in terms of this article's topic and thus were of less relevance to this study. The combination of these different data sources and methods ensured to gain a broader picture of the research topic.

All interviews except one were conducted in German and have been translated to English as accurately as possible by myself. In order to protect the privacy of study participants, I replaced the participants' names with pseudonyms. To ensure their anonymity, I further do not provide more details, as this could make participants easier to identify.

3. Analytical frame: Politics of belonging and the chosen trauma

Questions about identity and belonging present central issues for people with migration background and much research in the field of migration, diaspora, transnationalism and youth addresses this topic (see Anthias, 2009; Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2002). Nevertheless, the two concepts are both overused and under-theorized. Belonging and (collective) identities are often used, confusingly, interchangeably (as was just done above) and thereby seem to be put often on a same level. Further, they are not mutually exclusive but rather interrelated and overlap (Anthias, 2006, 19–22; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin, 2011, xv–xviii). In simplified terms, both concepts deal with questions about the self and who we are as a person, about inclusion and exclusion and about processes of constructing boundaries and hierarchies. Nonetheless, the two concepts certainly cannot be completely equated:

> 'Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not). Not all of these stories are about belonging to particular groupings and collectivities; they can be, for instance, about individual attributes, body images, vocational aspirations or sexual prowess.'
>
> Yuval-Davis, 2006, 202

Further, one may belong to a collective without fully identify with it or one may identify with a group without fully belong to it (Anthias, 2009, 9–10). Pfaff-Czarnecka & Toffin then argue that belonging includes more aspects than collective identity that rather narrows down the complex process of constructing shared characteristics (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin, 2011, xvi). Drawing upon this, I understand belonging as encompassing identity and treat identity and collective identity – collective here mainly refers to nationality and/or culture – as an integral part of belonging. In order to study the mechanisms of promoting and maintaining a sense of national identity and belonging to Eritrea amongst the diaspora Eritrean youths, I adopt an analytical frame linking debates on belonging and the politics of belonging with the nation respectively nationalism and the concept of chosen trauma. But what exactly is belonging and how does it come into being?

Belonging is a dynamic process, in which people negotiate their relationships to a range of different subjects and objects. It comprises the connection and ties to 'other people, places or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by learning rather

[1] The term second generation labels children of immigrants, who are born in the diaspora, while other categories were introduced for those who are born in their parents' home country but raised abroad (Andall, 2002, 391). Several interviewees have left the country only during their early childhood. Nevertheless, since all but one migrated before the age of 12 and therefore underwent their primary socialization in the diaspora (Aparicio, 2007, 1170), I will refer to them as second-generation Eritrean.