

4. Constructing Cultural Identity for the 'Good' Life: The Case of Blin Culture Community in Stockholm

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This chapter treats the identity construction of the Blin-speaking Eritreans in Sweden. In particular it illustrates, as laid out in Chapters 1 and 2, that identity has become a process to be individually and collectively performed and that it is negotiable.

An important Blin community has settled in Stockholm. This story of 'Constructing Cultural Identity for the Good Life' in a new place is an example of adaptation to new contexts of cultural diversity. Identity always has to be negotiated, 'us' with 'them', and the negotiations both affect and enable relationships within the ethnic group and with the host society. The way in which traditional domestic rituals have been adapted to new circumstances demonstrates the dynamic of change and continuity so vital to identity processes. The process is complex. The group must keep its traditions and separate language if it is to maintain an identity distinct from other Eritreans, and if it is to avoid losing that identity by absorption into Swedish culture. Its ritual repertoire is one essential element in the process; another is official Swedish respect of minority cultures. This study is a specific demonstration of three fundamental tensions which appear also in Chapter 2: difference versus sameness; public space versus private space; individual versus group differences. It also shows how legal, political and institutional frameworks affect the way these tensions are resolved.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

When individuals cross physical boundaries, such as national borders, they make sense of their lives by reconstructing the sense of who they are and who they want to be, and this is an ongoing process (Weick, 1995). Simultaneously, people want to ensure a sense of continuity between their past and current identities within the new context. In this case study, the

concept of identity construction will be used to deal with the processes of maintaining and shaping identities. The purpose of the chapter is to describe how 'maintaining' cultural identity is understood and practiced by an Eritrean immigrant community, Blin speakers, in Stockholm, Sweden, when they solemnly perform different cultural practices and child socialization projects such as home language instructions. Blin is one of the nine languages in Eritrea, and the immigrants who are the focus of this case study live in Stockholm, Sweden, forming the Blin Culture Community (BCC). The members believe that forming association will lead them to better integration and 'building of useful social capital' (Ireland, 2004: 11). They also believe that the cultural practices they perform on different occasions may contribute to their unique cultural identity as a group, distinguish them from other Eritrean ethnic groups, but also integrate them with other Eritreans at the national level. This uniqueness also enhances their self-worth vis-à-vis other groups in the host country. They also believe that the cultural identity issue is partly ingrained in the values and norms the rites aspire to ascribe to individual members. The determining role of the community, rather than the individual, is emphasized (Hall, 1990). Yet, the different levels at which they may identify with different groups pose problems of adaptation and adjustment with regard to values and norms prevalent in Swedish society.

Moreover, Blin cultural values and norms that prioritize the community over individual choices often lead to differences from liberal Swedish social policy, which focuses on the role of the individual. Examples include differing focus on egalitarianism, gender equality, the place of the individual in the community, and individualism. This alludes to the experience of Eritrean immigrants to maintain values and norms that may sometimes be in harmony and at other times in conflict with the wider society in which they live. It becomes therefore important to understand how people attempt to construct their identities as individuals, and how the ethnic identity and gender identity interact to form into a new identity, one that the members value for a sense of continuity (Chryssochoou, 2003). For the Blin immigrant community, the new identity is believed to link their past to the present, while also projecting them into the future. This sense of continuity, they believe, provides them with certainty and self-worth in spite of physical crossing of national boundaries.

The implications are relevant both for policymakers in their attempts to facilitate an atmosphere of cultural diversity and also to sustain mutual respect among different groups in the country. The case study also describes how Blin immigrants live, narrate and make sense of their life experiences as a result of their interaction with others, and their own image of being a community within different layers of communities, highlighting the processes of group distinction and self-enhancement (Tajfel, 1978). The case describes

cultural diversity by narrating what is meant to be an immigrant in Stockholm in the 1990s and early 21st century.

This case study is mainly based on participant observation of the practices and other social activities of the BCC between 1991 and 2001 (Hamde, 1996). Other methods include telephone interviews, electronic mails, and correspondence with different 'Blin culture and language development' groups. These methods are augmented by an open-ended questionnaire that was distributed to 20 adult members of the BCC. The names were taken from the register of the BCC, which also showed the level of competence in reading Blin in the Geez script. The goals of the questionnaire were threefold: (1) to explore the domains in which the respondents use Blin, Swedish, or the other Eritrean languages; (2) to examine the extent to which they subjectively identify themselves as Blin, Swedish or both; and (3) to investigate their opinions on the future prospects of maintaining Blin cultural rites and language in the face of several other Eritrean languages and Swedish.

There are two limitations in the study. First, the study does not aim at generalizations, but rather, it is an attempt at making sense of the developments in Blin culture and language in the Swedish context. The paucity of scientific studies on maintenance or change in Blin culture and language makes the current study an exploratory one. Second, the level of study is mainly at the ethnic and community level, and developments in Blin culture and language both at individual and family level are not studied to the same depth. The paper does offer a basis for a more focused study on cultural diversity and sustainability of values and norms among Eritrean immigrants in Western European cities and towns.

In the following sections, I shall describe how members of the BCC have struggled to 'create a community of Blin-Swedish' by capitalizing on its past socio-cultural resources for cultural maintenance. I recount four practices, which the BCC has consciously or spontaneously embarked on in its adjustment to maintain itself as a Blin community, sometime independently and other times using the resources provided by the Swedish social policy for integration. The cases provide comparative viewpoints of the BCC approach and the Swedish liberal social norms and values. The situation of immigrant cultures and languages in Sweden has indeed been an interesting topic in many studies (Boyd, 1993; Dacyl and Westin, 2000; Fägerlind and Ekelöf, 2001).

4.2 RITES FROM BIRTH TO BETROTHAL

In this section, I shall describe practices of child and youth socialization from birth to adolescence, up to the point they are accepted in the Blin society as

adults. The BCC practices some of these rites, always conscious of their appropriateness in the Swedish context. In Eritrea, it is simply taken for granted that different rituals are part of the Eritrean customs that need to be preserved for the coming generations (Blin Language and Culture Development Committee at Keren, 1997; Hailu, 2003; Zeremariam, 1986).

Ululation, Seven Times for a Male, Trice for a Female!

In Blin society, the women who assisted the mother during childbirth ululate once as soon as she gives birth to a baby, regardless of the sex. However, after identifying the sex, the women ululate seven times if the baby is a male and three times if it is a female. The members of BCC almost abandoned the practice of ululating in the event of childbirth, because it is inappropriate in a Swedish hospital setting. In Blin villages, the newly born baby and the mother are protected from the public for around a month. During the first week, no adult male, including the father, is allowed to come into closer contact with the newly born baby and the mother. Even females visiting the mother do not directly come face to face but remain in the foreground and only gradually are allowed to go in to the confined place. The reason may be for health purposes. Among the members of the BCC in Sweden, Blin fathers not only come close to the mother but may also assist her during delivery.

Circumcision of Males is a Norm, of Females has Become a Taboo

In Eritrea, almost all children are circumcised at a young age, usually around age one. In Blin tradition, it was customary to circumcise the child within the first eight years but nowadays circumcision is performed within the first two or three months (Shaker, 1996). Male circumcision is taken for granted and no argument is made against it. However, the way Blin females are circumcised has been a point of discussion among many Blin speakers. Shaker has studied how the procedure may affect the health of Blin girls later on in life. He provides three reasons why Blin girls are circumcised. The first is the resistance thesis. That is, before marriage, rural Blin girls are free to move anywhere they like, engage in social activities, take care of the livestock, look after the family goats and sheep, or join other friends to work elsewhere in the seasonal agro-industrial establishments. There is no control over youngsters in their choice of work and movement as long as the work is neither humiliating nor unsafe. Shaker (1996) also noted the libertarian attitude of Blin girls compared to other Eritrean youngsters of similar age. Under such circumstances, circumcision is believed to lessen a girl's sexual feelings, and thus provide protection from forced loss of virginity. The second is the child development thesis. Some people believe that female

circumcision helps the young girl to grow up properly. But how circumcision may contribute to child development is not studied. The third thesis is on the virtue of virginity. Shaker (1996) holds that circumcision helps the bridegroom to know if his bride is a virgin. On the third day after the wedding, the groom performs a so-called bathing rite in the river with the support of his friends who stay with him for eight days. But nowadays the practice is conducted for its ritual purposes only and it is no longer important for the groom to check his bride's virginity.

Among members of the BCC, male circumcision is commonly practiced but female circumcision has become taboo. It is also forbidden by the Swedish policy.

Blin Hairstyle and Tattooing, at Will in the Diaspora

In addition to wearing different dress, young Blin girls also perform different 'female' making rites in Eritrea, such as different hairstyle. After age three or when a younger sibling is born, the child's head is shaved in a different style, depending upon the sex of the child. Tattooing is typically a female custom. Girls tattoo their cheeks, sometimes also their foreheads with a cross sign if they are Christians and moon sign if Muslims. Tattooing the cheeks with three vertical lines was a prevalent practice until the 1960s. Another practice left is nose-piercing, which denotes readiness for marriage. Married women hang a golden nose-ring to communicate their adult status in that way. But these practices are evolving and they have never been customary among immigrants, or at least, not required as signs for being accepted as an adult by community members. Young Blin girls in the diaspora are free to choose their own individual preferences and they seldom practise hairstyling and tattooing as markers of cultural identity, but older women may wear Blin traditional dress at will.

The Main Actors in Betrothal are the Middleman and Parents

Marriage plans begin early on, as children grow into adolescence: it usually takes several years between betrothal and wedding. In Blin society, it is the boy's parents who take the initiative for engagement but they do not themselves directly contact the girl's family (Hamde, 2002). It is the role of the middleman (*mengora*) to communicate between the two families. The middleman maintains absolute confidentiality until further agreement is reached. Even if the parents do not come into any agreement, it is the responsibility of the middleman not to disclose any part of the proceedings or whose side declined. Otherwise he may risk losing the trust of the community. Of note here is that neither the boy nor the girl are supposed to

know about what is going on. In spite of all the many rapid changes occurring in the whole Eritrean society today, these aspects have remained the rule rather than the exception. Even when a boy and a girl fall in love with each other and decide to marry, the procedure begins with the parents communicating through the middleman who serves as a witness to the entire process of betrothal. The middleman is an accepted actor in formal customary matters. Once all parties are ready, they sit across from one another around a circle. The middleman opens the ceremony by proclaiming his role of communicator between the two families and the fact that they reached an agreement, and that becomes the order of the day. The middleman also announces the amount of marriage wealth (*smey*) as demanded by the girl's family. The amount and form of the marriage wealth is custom-bound. For the sake of formality, the middleman announces both the form of the wealth and the conditions of their exchange. This is followed by the actual contract between the two families. A neutral adult male leads the ceremony (Table 4.1).

The elder asks each party three times and each party responds three times, thereby making the contract formal and binding from that moment onwards. Immediately, all participants whisper 'let this be a good day'. Soon a younger participant mixes pieces of wet grass in a bag full of gifts and a 25 metre white garb out of which an engagement thread is later on given to the girl. The young man carries the grass together with the bag and moves around so

Table 4.1 The Covenant (Meakot) Between Two Families

| A male elder asks: | Girl's family respond | Boy's family respond |
|--|---|--|
| Girl's family: <i>Do you give this Miss X (girl's name) to this Y (boy's name)?</i> | <i>Yes, we do give this X to Y</i> | |
| Boy's family: <i>Do you take this X for Y?</i> | | <i>Yes, we do take this X for Y</i> |
| Girl's family: <i>Should this be a God's covenant for you that you give X to Y?</i> | <i>Yes, let this be God's covenant for us that we give her to him</i> | |
| Boy's family: <i>Should this be God's covenant for you that you take X for Y?</i> | | <i>Yes, let this be God's covenant for us that we take her for him</i> |

Source: Hamde (1990: 21).

each participant blesses it. Then all join in the ensuing ceremonies of wealth exchange (*metlu*) brought by the boy's family and eat their meal. But the two families still keep their separate places, facing each other to show that the contract was not between two individuals (boy and girl) but between two families. Any formal, customary exchange of wealth by the Blin is opened by first recognizing the two prevailing religions in the area, that is, Christianity and Islam. This is an important part in the wealth exchange because it symbolizes equality of Christianity and Islam. Irrespective of the religion of the two families, they give an equal amount of money in the name of the Cross (Christianity), and in the name of the Quran (Islam). The amount is given directly to respective heads of the two religions in the area or village. Although the boy and the girl are absent from the engagement ceremony, they now start preparing for the wedding.

Among the members of the BCC in Stockholm, youngsters are free to choose their mate. Marriage wealth is seldom practised as it is up to the individuals to agree to whatever exchange they deem necessary. The role of the community is minimal. Yet, on three occasions, couples invited Blin elderly to arrange a formal rite of engagement, perhaps solely for symbolic purposes.

4.3 BLIN GROOM BLESSING-RITE: ELDERS' WISH FOR THE 'GOOD LIFE'

Performing different ceremonies during the rites of passage characterizes much of social practices in Eritrean society (Favali and Pateman, 2002; Hamde, 1990, 2003). For the Blin speakers, performing these practices is understood to enhance cultural identity as well as confirming one's *Blinnar* – being a Blin. The individual becomes one among the community and the community becomes the context for providing legitimacy to the expressed identity. For the individual, identity is formed through participation in rites and ceremonies provided by the community as markers of the ethnicity and uniqueness among other Eritreans. The individual expresses his loyalty to the community by allowing himself to be blessed by the elders who have traditional power over him (Hamde, 2004). On the other hand, the community elders accept the individual as an adult with full rights and duties.

These practices are expressions for the Blin community that serves both the individual performing the rites, and the community, which legitimates the performer's role in the community (Ajemel, 2002). In Eritrea, it is the elders who 'bless' the newly initiated boy or the bridegroom, but among the immigrants in Sweden, elders may not be readily available and other adults may perform the rite even if they could not have done so in Eritrea. All future

adult roles and tasks are proclaimed in the blessing. To a certain extent, it can be said that the blessing constitutes an expression of the good life, as the Blin people see it. Right and wrong, the good life and bad, are described in the rite. Thus, the adult member becomes responsible also for 'others', whoever they may be. The rite describes the responsibility of adults even for taking care of the land, mountains, trees, other people from other ethnic groups, etc.

Each of these statements or verses can be deconstructed for a meaning, a meaning whose underlying values and norms may not easily fit those of 'modern' societies in the Western world. In the blessing rite, the number of potential offspring (verse 2) is already expected to be many! Yet, in some 'modern' couples, the number of offspring may not be relevant at all. However, in Eritrea, the hazards of life make it mandatory to have many children. A large number of children signify strength due to the blessing! In

Table 4.2 Groom-Blessing Rite (*gewra*)

| English (Blessing to groom or newly initiated boy) | Blin version (<i>gewra merAwirires weri mendelayisi</i>) |
|--|---|
| 1. Be bestowed with all the good and the riches! | 1. <i>geduxw bekit axi</i> |
| 2. Bear many children and prosper! | 2. <i>uxwari idani</i> |
| 3. Spring as a baobab tree! | 3. <i>gubisena TeTie</i> |
| 4. Sprout as a river tree! | 4. <i>bamba dergunisena fenteti</i> |
| 5. Be one from whom people get nourishment and drinks! | 5. <i>qwanaxw jeanaxw axi</i> |
| 6. Be a rest (station) and a good host to many guests! | 6. <i>geduxw fixwsena bekit haderenaxw axi</i> |
| 7. Be a mountain for a refuge and a plain for relaxation! | 7. <i>teregesenaxwa gira Haderenaxwa shieka axi</i> |
| 8. Bear strong boys and soft girls! | 8. <i>qurdi geldi axi</i> |
| 9. Let you get males in the fore-room and females in the in-room! | 9. <i>kuterengla nesegegi ku wodenlixa usegeri uwunkut</i> |
| 10. Let she (wife) be a good housewife and the only ever first-wife! | 10. <i>kida Hemadi kida Hadaridi axrinkut</i> |
| 11. Let all the chance and good luck of your forefathers' be upon you! | 11. <i>kuxurduxw ku enduxw ged wenternkut</i> |
| 12. Let 'the' good life be upon you | 12. <i>kida menabert uwunkut</i> |
| 13. Let this a good luck day | 13. <i>kida grga axni</i> |

Source: Hamde (1986) (free translation from Blin into English by the author).

the blessing rite, the place and duties of males and females are predetermined, providing the work of men to be outside the home and the place of women inside the home (verses 8, 9). Thus, the roles of boys and girls are predetermined (verses 8, 9), but even in modern societies, gender issues remain controversial. Verse 5 encourages individuals to share what they possess with other members of the community, without thought of gain.

Moreover, the housekeeping and pastoral life that require differing efforts make it mandatory for both sexes to share their respective lot. The expected number of family formations is limited to only one partner (*Hema*), contrasted with the liberal, Western focus of changing a partner or mate at will (verse 10). The comparison of a good life with such things as grass, green plants, sprouting trees, rivers, mountains, plains, etc., equates the good life closely to Mother Nature, and a given, not a life created by the agent (verses 2, 4, 7). Nature is at one with human life, at least in the sense of its constant enjoyment, and is not reserved for one's spare time, as in tourism. Yet, each blessing has contextual functions for the society. The mountains become grazing fields or potential hiding places in times of social instability and war. The plains become arenas for settlement in times of peace and tranquillity, and rest places for cattle. The rivers are symbols of water, which is vital for life in tropical Africa (as elsewhere). Trees and plants do not only provide shade in a tropical climate but also are used for formal and informal community meetings, where adults sit down to discuss community matters, settle disputes and where grooms receive their blessing. Consequently, the role of the individual in the community is already predetermined in the sense of what is expected of him or her: as a host, guest, neighbour, helper, link in tribal lineage (verse 11), and a generous source for the poor (verse 1). Finally, some dimension of the good life – that does not directly flow from the community or nature – is left to chance, or good luck (verse 11).

When Blin immigrants in Sweden perform the rites, what meaning do they give them? And how does the audience view them? One can enquire whether the immigrant behaviour in performing rites of passage means the same thing across the multitude of host communities they find themselves in (Geertz, 1973). Four possible explanations are: (a) a real interest in maintaining and developing cultural identity; (b) nostalgic practices involving community memory and a stage in the inevitable assimilation process (Brown and Humphreys, 2002; Davies, 1979); (c) theatric acts that are loosely coupled with daily life; and finally, (d) symbolic acts representing something other than the literal meaning of the rite itself. In each case, governing cultural diversity means different things. Because cultural identity is also a shifting identity (Gergen, 1991), it is difficult to remain with a fixed definition of the rite, and attribute to it denigrating valuations, such as 'traditional', 'backward', or 'inappropriate'. In so far as these rites validate the group's identity, they

enhance their self-worth, and become symbols of the elder's wish for living 'the good life' for all in the new multicultural cities where elders never get the chance to bless youngsters to the same degree as in Eritrea.

It is a combination of all these alternatives that makes sense of the performance of the rites, and making sense of ones live is part of the adjustment immigrants need when confronted with diverse challenges to their past and present identity. Multiculturalism does not only call for a peaceful coexistence but also competing for visibility, retrospective adjustment, futuristic vision, and current self-enhancement (Simon, 2004), all of which are met by an appropriate identity that enhances their worth. Hence the single verses are not meaningful to them and should not be interpreted literally. It is the whole act or performance of the blessing rite that gives meaning and sense to who the Blin are and why they perform them in a multicultural city such as Stockholm.

4.4 NEW BLIN CHILD NAMES: WHAT TO CALL MY SON, BLINA OR SVENSSON?

A trendy movement prevalent among Blin in the diaspora is the creation of new personal names for their children. Consciously or unconsciously, one way of 'maintaining' and 'living' their cultural identity can be described in terms of their choice of new personal names not common in Eritrea. This adjustment meant creating names peculiar to the new situation, where they signify something important in one's past experience, as well as present conditions, and future wishes (see the English meanings in Table 4.3). The new child names reflect the emotional, physical and immigration experiences of immigrants. Thus, while the pre-emigration generation had personal names that reflected religion, tradition or family-specific names, the new names have become specifically language-based.

Among members of the BCC and other Blin speakers, adapting Blin terms for child names has become an intended strategy to 'maintain' the language in a way that also fosters secure and genuine identity as Blin. It is a way of coping with the uncertain future, as children's names express continuity of the Blin culture and language. The names in the table below are directly adopted from the Blin language and created, adjusted or adopted for this purpose. They were collected from parents through correspondence, personal acquaintance and telephone interviews.

Moreover, an interesting question is the fact that compounds names and long names are becoming unfashionable. Parents also avoid names that have no direct sounds in the Swedish script, such as names with gutturals and labials. Thus, Blin names with sounds as *q*, *ts*, *ch*, *T*, are becoming 'old

Table 4.3 New Child Names [Females (f) and Males (m)]

| Blin name | Meaning in English | Blin name | Meaning in English |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Adam (m) | Person | Mihr (m) | Harvest |
| Amanet | Trust | Mrad (m) | Will, Wish |
| Bext (m) | Chance (good) | Munet (f) | Dinner |
| Benti | Portion/Belonging | Muza (f) | Tasty |
| Blina | Blin | Niyet (f) | Commitment |
| Dan (m) | Brother | Saba (f) | Praise (Verb) |
| Darkier (m) | Good livelihood | Sabina (f) | Praise you (Verb) |
| Deban (m) | Wellbeing | Sabra (f) | Water pond |
| Deheb (f) | Gold | Sabur (m) | Praise (Noun) |
| Djanet (f) | Heaven | Sada (m) | Hope |
| Feden (m) | Seeds | Sana (f) | Water pond |
| Ferhat (f, m) | Happiness | Sendel (f) | Heap, High |
| Gedona (f) | Rejoice | Sergel (m) | Success |
| Gewra (f) | Blessing (f) | Shani (f) | Sister |
| Jaruwun (f) | Gift from God | Somay (m) | Colourful |
| Kiseri (m) | Good news | Somit (f) | Colourful |
| Lannar (m) | Unity | Sura (f) | Ripening grain |
| Mada (m) | Friend | Tamit (f, m) | Taste (good) |
| Medet (m) | Epoch, Good times | Wasé (m) | Enriched |
| Mesuna (f, m) | Pillar | Werena (f) | Harvest ground |
| Merwed (f, m) | Ring (Noun) | Wonda (m) | Relative, kin |
| Merwet (f, m) | Courage | Worka (f) | Silver |

fashioned', due to the desire of immigrant parents to use names easily pronounced in the Swedish society. Yet, BCC members also consciously avoid certain sounds in the Swedish language, such as å, ä, and ö, the adoption of which may mean taking typical Swedish names such as Göran, Hägg, etc.

The names described above show how the Blin language is used in new domains as well as how Blin speakers try to 'revitalize' Blin in connection with their life situation. Through these new child names, Blin language has become a source of symbolic affirmation of Blin identity. It is believed that even if the children born in the diaspora may not speak the language, their names attest to their Blin identity, a permanent mark that gives continuity to who they are, regardless of what they are going to be in the future. However,

parents who wish their children to also be competent in the Blin language also make use of the Swedish policy for home language instruction.

4.5 HOME LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Since the Blin speakers are multilingual to a certain extent, they use different languages in different domains. The question to be investigated is the consequences of multilingualism for the future of the Blin language in Sweden, where Blin speakers interact not only with other Eritreans but also have to master Swedish. Moreover, relative to Blin speakers, the implications of immigration are a bit different than for Tigrinya- and Tigre-speaking Eritreans. If one adds the dimension of religion, the picture becomes more complicated. The Blin immigrants are either Christians or Muslims with a common language that binds them together. While Tigrinya-speaking and Arabic-speaking Eritrean immigrants take it for granted that their children be educated in those languages, the matter is not as straightforward for Blin immigrants. The latter have an additional concern: they need to speak Blin at home, train in Arabic (if they are Muslims) or Tigrinya (if they are Christians or choose so) and also learn Swedish for public purposes. Arabic and Tigrinya have been serving as 'home languages' in the Swedish schools for many immigrant pupils. However, Blin was not provided to the same extent, or was even absent in that domain. The Blin speakers thus faced demanding alternatives. How do they face the situation?

The Blin speakers have made use of three strategies. First, Christian Blin parents may choose Tigrinya as a home language. This strategy is based somewhat on socio-historical grounds. The parents may communicate in Blin with each other and also express their ethnic identity in different other ways. The immediate consequence for the second generation is a shift to Tigrinya and Swedish.

The second strategy consists of those who simply choose Swedish. The parents may be afraid of assimilating into the Arabic/Tigrinya bloc, at the Eritrean societal level. This alternative leads directly to a shift to Swedish but the second-generation is encouraged to identify with Blin at the ethnic level. Parents in both alternatives express their commitment with Blin at the ethnic level or by giving Blin names to children.

The third strategy is intentionally maintaining and revitalizing Blin culture and language, and forming or joining an association such as the BCC. In line with the Swedish free association culture, parents establish a non-political, non-religious community. However, a few assimilation-oriented Eritrean groups among the Arabic/Tigrinya-speaking bloc, usually dislike this alternative

as 'divisive'. There were several occasions when BCC members complained of being stigmatized by some of these groups. The latter would prefer to see Eritrean ethnic groups choosing either Arabic but mainly Tigrinya in their new country. Many Tigrinya speakers take it for granted that all Eritreans should be able to speak the language, so that children can integrate into Eritrean society. But adherents to the third alternative argue that, while they consider themselves Eritreans at the national level, they possess their own language and their own distinct ethnic identity. Therefore, not unlike Tigrinya or Arabic speakers, they prefer maintaining their cultural identity as Blin.

Arabic does function as a common factor for most Muslims. Compared to the tiny Blin community scattered all over Sweden, immigrants speaking Arabic are more organized in terms of home language instruction and this provides a viable choice for a Blin Muslim. For a Christian Blin, the choice of Tigrinya may not be as straightforward. Most Blin Christians increasingly express interest in maintaining, and even revitalizing Blin language and culture, wishing to avoid a shift to Tigrinya. The BCC in Stockholm, the Blin Community in the UK, and the Blin Language and Culture Association in Oslo (Norway), are good examples of this alternative. Mixed marriage families usually follow Arabic (if Muslims), Tigrinya (if Christians), or Swedish, while the Blin-speaking partner may express ethnic identity through joining the association, assembling occasionally for festivities, or just assimilating into any of these alternatives.

In general, the BCC evaluates the Swedish social policy of home language education in public schools (Boyd and Huss, 2001) as a just policy. However, even if it is considered a just policy, it needs to take into consideration the local needs of communities. In Stockholm County, the Blin language was taught to children between 1989 and 1994, but it was discontinued when the conservative bloc took over state power and limited its application in 1993. Since 2003, the Blin community in Umeå also applied for Blin instructions in the public schools. Seven children are benefiting from home language training in the public schools. Although not organized formally as the BCC, parents in Umeå also encourage their children to acquaint themselves with Blin culture and language by arranging monthly Saturday sessions when children train on folk tales and dances. This has been very well accepted both by the parents and the children, who call the meetings 'Blin festivals'. The children, however, communicate in mixed Blin and Swedish.

4.6 CONCLUSIONS

I have described the increased commitment of many individuals and groups to use Blin language in new domains, and that these smaller projects have

been pursued with the conscious purpose of ‘maintaining’ and ‘revitalizing’ the Blin language, which is believed to contribute to enhancing their ethnic identity. In this sense, Blin speakers can be described as agents of their culture, changing it, adopting it to their new context, borrowing or dropping certain usages (such as the sounds typical in Geez but absent in the Swedish alphabet). They tend to change the way they use Blin – rather than bearing a fixed culture that needs to be maintained in its ‘pure essence’. By engaging in different ‘language and culture development’ projects, and by performing socialization rites, BCC members construct an appropriate identity that prepares them to live in a multilingual, multicultural world, and reconstruct ways of living this world. Yet, the extent to which such a ‘multicultural world’ is constructed, lived, and enjoyed is a project that no single ethnic group can dictate to other groups. A multicultural context or space where different peoples wish to have a place and live the ‘good life’ is not one confined for immigrants.

Consequently, the extent to which cultural diverse groups are allowed to create just and equitable human development hinges on actions by all concerned. These actions should promote jointly established projects as well as individual groups’ efforts to maintain their identities. The ‘good life’ is a common project for all involved, and should be understood as a project meant to enrich each other’s culture and language with mutual respect and development. Diversity policies not augmented by appropriate, local definitions of identity may risk being too simplistic or idealistic, with little impact on people’s daily experiences and, overall, on sustainable development.

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