

**Kiflemariam Hamde, PhD, MSc**

## **Blin Language Maintenance, Shift and Revitalization: A Study on Language, Culture and Identity**

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Kiflemariam Hamde, PhD, MSc  
Assistant Professor  
Umeå School of Business and Economics  
Department of Business Administration  
Umeå University  
901 87 Umeå  
Sweden  
Tel: +46 -90- 786 61 49  
Fax: +46-90-786 66 74  
Email: kifle.hamde@fek.umu.se

### **Abstract**

The paper describes the developments in Blin (also Bilin) language with a special focus on the extent to which the Blin people have maintained their language at the appropriate levels or domains. The study is based mainly on literature reviews, event developments, participant observation and interviews. Blin language maintenance and revitalization are discussed along with ethnic identity in the context of multilingualism in Eritrea and immigrant contexts, with a certain focus in Sweden. The engagement of individuals and groups *to consciously develop* Blin language is discussed. This engagement shows the intricate link between language, identity and ethnicity from a sociolinguistic point of view. A synoptic overview of several 'Blin language development projects' at ethnic and community levels is discussed. The Blin people tend to view themselves as a 'bearer of' and 'agent' for their language, which is the basis of their culture and ethnicity. The paper calls for language rights, rather than numerical superiority, as the criterion for national integration and institutional support, especially in home language education for Blin children who often were left to their fate, or forced to join majority languages as 'home language'. The paper concludes that Blin language shows some positive developments to enhance *pragmatic* and *symbolic* meaning to its speakers, but need more institutional support for increased and appropriate measures that take into account its current status, both in Eritrea and elsewhere.

*Key words:* Blin, Ethno linguistic identity, Eritrea, Immigration, Language maintenance, language revitalization

**NB: This is a Work-in Progress; Pease DO NOT QUOTE!Table of contents**

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## 1. Introduction

Blin (also Bilin, Bilen) is a language spoken in what has traditionally been called Bogos, in and around Keren town, Eritrea. With a total population of four million, Eritrea houses nine different languages and Blin is spoken by around 5%. According to Palmer, ‘Blin is usually regarded as one of the dialects of the Cushitic language of Agau, but it differs considerably from the Agau dialects of Ethiopia proper, and, while undoubtedly to be classified as Cushitic, has much phonological, and a little morphological affiliation with the neighbouring Semitic languages of Tigre and Tigrinya’ (1957: 131). This difference from, and similarity to, Tigre and Tigrinya makes Blin an interesting case to study in terms of language contact. Such a contact may lead to what Fishman (1972, 2001) described as language maintenance, shift or revitalization. Brenzinger (1991) has even extended language shift towards its death. The Blin speakers are to a certain extent intermingled with the Tigre and Tigrinya speakers, and at the same time describe themselves, and are identified as, having a distinct (Blin) ethnic identity. Somehow, the ethnic boundaries with these three language groups are fluid. Yet, Blin speakers express their ethnic distinction mainly through the Blin language. However, for the last few decades when the contact between the three languages intensified, observation shows that the Blin speakers were increasingly aware of the threat of either weakening or ‘gradual death’ of their language in favour of especially Tigrinya, and the possible uncertainty for their ethnic identity ensuing from it (Kiflemariam 1986a).

*Language contact* is also one of the obvious consequences in the context of immigration. Kroon (1990) argues that language shift is unavoidable when immigrants face a policy of integration rather than segregation. Other studies showed that assimilation more than integration is a certain road towards language loss among immigrants. Irrespective of which alternative prevails, there has not been any adequate study of the different languages of Eritrean immigrants in Sweden, as to which Eritrean language group has fairly maintained, shifted or transformed their languages. To fill this gap, *the current study focuses on language maintenance and shift among Blin speakers both in Eritrea (at the ethnic level) and in Sweden.*

I have chosen Blin for my study for several reasons. Firstly, Sweden is a home of many thousand Eritrean who speak several languages, of whom around 300-400 individuals speak Blin, and thus it is interesting to investigate the situation of their language closely. Secondly, I did some elementally work on Blin since the 1980s in Eritrea (Kiflemariam, 1986, 1989, 1990). I also belonged to Blin Language Research Group in Asmara between 1977 and 1990. When I moved to Sweden for higher education in 1990, I established contacts with a Blin community - a language community – called Blin Community (thence, Community) in Stockholm. Its purpose has been ‘to maintain and develop Blin language and culture’ (Blin Community Regulations 1991). The purpose of the Community in Sweden coincided with that of Blin Language Research Group in Asmara, Eritrea, to which I had not only belonged but also worked as its chair between 1977 and 1987. Due to its purpose of ‘maintaining and developing Blin’, the Blin Community in Stockholm became a centre of attention for many Blin immigrants in Europe, especially when it sponsored the publication of the Blin Dictionary that the Blin Language Research Group in Asmara had prepared (Kiflemariam & Paulos 1992). The Community worked as a form of network by establishing contacts and encouraging other Blin immigrants in Europe to work for Blin language development. I have participated in the practices and activities of the Community between 1990 and 2001 at different levels, especially in its ‘Blin

language development projects'. Thus I have sufficient enough observation on Blin language use in several domains in Sweden.

Third, I am interested to understand the central role of Blin language on Blin identity in the context of multilingualism that characterizes the Blin speakers. Within this context, it becomes therefore important to investigate the extent to which adult Blin immigrants and their children identify ethno-linguistically and at same time interact in the Swedish social and cultural life, with multiple identities sometimes not easily integrated.

More specifically, three aims are dealt with in the paper. *First* is to examine whether speakers of Blin in general are undergoing language shift or if they are maintaining their language at the appropriate levels, with a special focus on Blin immigrants in Sweden. However, the multilingual nature of Blin speakers is first treated within the Eritrean socio-historical context. *Second*, to explore whether the first and second generations benefit from the revitalized Blin language in general, or if they may face an identity crisis and are torn between two societies and two cultures. *Third* is to describe the role of 'ethnic' language in the formation of cultural identity, with reference to the Blin language and Blin identity. Hence, the main concern is studying whether Blin language maintenance or shift impact on the cultural and ethnic identity of the Blin, as this phenomenon affects them directly, both individually and collectively. The study has a contribution in the sense of being the first of its kind, and also for exploring the extent to which the immigrants' claimed goals for maintaining and revitalization Blin language enhances host society's policies for integration, assimilation or isolation. Yet, these policy issues are also described as important within the context of other Eritrean immigrants

In the following section, I review the theoretical literature on language maintenance, shift and revitalization, followed by the sociolinguistic situation in Eritrea. I shall then describe shortly previous work on Blin language maintenance and shift. Following this is a section on the methods for the paper. I shall then turn to describing the practices and activities of the Blin Community in Sweden (Stockholm) in its endeavours to achieve its formal purpose of 'maintaining' and 'developing' Blin. The final section consists of further discussion and conclusions with regard to the 'revitalised' nature of Blin since the 1990s. The symbolic role of the language is also noted. The paper concludes by holding that *the Blin language in general is being revitalised but that the immigrants require more focused practices to transmit the language to second generation.*

The methods of the study are based (see also section 5.2) on observations, telephone interviews, electronic mails and correspondence with different 'Blin language development' groups in Eritrea and abroad. The author has participated in Blin community practices and other social activities by Eritrean immigrants in Sweden since 1991. The observation method is augmented by an open-ended questionnaire that was distributed to Blin speakers in Stockholm, December 2000 (See section 5.1). The open-ended questionnaire consisted of twenty questions and was mailed to twenty members of the Blin Community. The main goal of the open-ended questionnaire was to explore the domain in which the respondents use Blin and the different Eritrean language, the extent to which Blin speakers subjectively identify themselves as Blin, and to look for their opinions on the future prospects of maintaining the language in face of language contact in Sweden. Yet, there are two limitations in the study. First, is the study does not have the aim of generalizing but making sense of the developments in

Blin language. The paucity of scientific studies on Blin language maintenance and shift makes it mandatory for any reader that the current exploration is limited to a certain extent. Second, the level of study is mainly at ethnic and community level, and changes in Blin language both at individual and family level are not dealt with to the same degree or depth. The paper is also supposed to be a basis for a more focused study on language maintenance, shift and revitalization among Eritrean immigrants. The study is the first of its kind.

## **2. Language maintenance, revitalization and ethno linguistic identity**

When two or more languages are in contact, three alternatives can occur (Fishman 1989). First, the languages may be maintained without any change. Second, there may be shift of some form in the languages. Third, one of the languages may be leading to a form of non-use, called language loss or language death. A form of shift that leads to increased and better use of the language would also ensue, called language revitalisation.

### **2.1 Language maintenance, shift and revitalization: Theoretical background**

In language maintenance, the languages in contact may have a co-existence of stable relationship. Fishman defines language maintenance as “the process and pursuit of intergenerational linguistic continuity” (1989: 177). Fashe et al (1992) define language maintenance as the retention, use and proficiency in the language. Most often, it is the speakers of the less-prestigious language that enhance a way of retaining it, transmitting it to the next generation, and use it appropriately in all domains. Usually the speakers of non-dominant language wish to keep their ethnic identity through language, religion, or cultural heritage. With respect to demographic features, language maintenance is possible and is enhanced when the speech community has a large number of speakers, or if the community has close-knit social networks, if there are economic incentives (such as social mobility), and if the members of the minority language know their language well (proficiency). Other factors facilitating language maintenance include educational opportunities for the language, use in mass media (electronic, TV, radio broadcasts, daily papers, etc) or new domains. Studies have shown which language groups have maintained their language among the different immigrants in different host countries.

Language shift refers to changes in language use. Researchers then focus on the conditions under which one can predict shift. The extent to which the different factors impact any language may lead to different consequences. Language shift is not necessarily loss of language. It may also be change leading to increased use of the language to new domains. This is called language revitalisation. Language revitalisation is “imparting new vigour to a language still in limited use, most commonly by increased use through the expansion of domains” (Paulston et al. 1993: 276). It may also refer to increased ‘reversal’ of language loss. As Fishman notes, “cross-cultural contact, therefore, is often viewed as a potential source of unmanageable, to at least undesirable, cultural change and of language shift, given that power differentials are to be expected between ethnic groups in interaction” (1989: 177). When the number of speakers of the minority language speakers learn the dominant language well and also use it in all domains of

their lives and make use of only a limited set of phrases from their minority language in restricted situations, then language shift is inevitable (Fishman 1972). If this is combined with a consistent failure of second generation acquiring their parent's language, then the final result is language death. Fasé et al. argue that language "loss occurs when that minority group member cannot do the things he used to be able to do" (1992: 8).

The following factors are taken to determine, in varying degrees, whether a particular language is fairly maintained at the different domains, or whether it changes in favour of some other, more prestigious language, or even leads to non-use, that is, language death. Numerical superiority (majority language) of one language over a minority may lead to maintenance of the former and gradual decline of the latter (Fishman 2001). Inter-ethnic marriages have also been noted to greatly influence the minority language in favour of the majority language. The role of women in language shift has also been explained differently. Some studies show that women have led men in shifting to a status language (Fishman 2001). However, other authors hold that it is in fact women who bear the traditions and transmit them to children because they are more oriented towards home and their language, and cultures are maintained at home through women. The residential spread or concentration of the ethnolinguistic group also affects language use. Concentration in a certain area enhances mother tongue maintenance while geographic distance between them limits it (Fishman 1985). An ethno linguistic group can also resist majority language pressures by establishing close-knit network structures. These network structure may enhance ethno linguistic vitality as the networks increase frequent contact. The generational gap is also related to language maintenance and language shift.

Language maintenance and shift in contexts of immigration has attracted increasing interest. Referring to immigrants, Fishman holds that "what begins as the language of social and economic mobility ends with three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well, even in democratic and pluralism-permitting contexts" (1989: 206). However, in recent studies on language shift, Fishman and his colleagues argued that shift can be 'reversed' (2001). Stein noted that, with respect to the USA, "the usual route of immigrants to the USA is that their children become bilingual – using their first language in the private sphere and their second language in the public – and the grandchildren complete the shift to English, which has by this time entered the home" (1990: 406). Similar patterns have been noted with many immigrant groups in Sweden though the Swedish educational policy allows for home language instruction in schools (Kostoulas-Makrakis 1995; Boyd 1993). Another geographic factor has to do with the frequency of trips to the home country, and those who travel frequently have been able to maintain their mother tongues relative to those who do not. What might be interesting is which immigrant groups get the opportunity to travel back to their original countries, as this may not be a safe or a luxury for many of them. Fragile political situation may be a hinder for adequate language maintenance for many of them, also related with whether the parents intend or not to return to their original home countries.

Although some studies have shown that *economic factors*, such as upward mobility, are associated with language shift or loss, yet, other writers noted that instrumental reason alone might not explain language shift. Other subtler factors such as status may augment the instrumental reason or mobility. Although studies have shown inconsistent results,

socioeconomic status influence language shift. While minority immigrants may put more emphasis on the majority language for apparently labour market reason, the consequences on their own language may be negative (Kostoulas-Makrakis 1995). However, other studies show that immigrants find themselves in lower socioeconomic status and this may mean maintaining their own languages much better than others who have assimilated themselves into the majority through job advancement or education. The particular *socio-historical status* of the ethno-linguistic groups is also said to account for the nature of language use. Kostoulas-Makrakis (1995: 13) argues that “languages do not differ among themselves in their inherent power, but instead, the speakers or nations associated with these languages differ in terms of power which inevitably affects the already existing patterns of language usage”. Thus, the status of the majority language itself will affect the extent to which the immigrants maintain their language.

Another factor to status is the attitude towards a language (Fishman, 1972), which includes the views and belief of an individual or a group about a language or its variety and beliefs about the members of the particular speech community. Language attitudes may not, and often are not – based on linguistic criteria. Linguistics assumes that all languages and their varieties are “equal” but many people also believe that languages can be ranked high or low in importance and status. However the attitudes towards a language may be related to the extent to which the language has institutional support. Use of the language in the mass media, especially the television, radio, electronic media/homepages, written media, the political discourse, religious services and other community practices are believed to enhance language maintenance.

## 2.2 Language and Ethnic identity

In sociological, culture and culture development, and ethnical identification studies, language is awarded a central role as a carrier of values, beliefs, customs and norms. It is also assumed that language and culture mutually shape each other (Gudykunst and Schmidt 1988; Fishman 1999; Hall 1990). Fishman holds that “although language has rarely been equated with the totality of ethnicity, it has, in certain historical, regional and disciplinary contexts, been accorded priority within that totality” (1999: 4). This is perhaps due to the fact that language shapes our cultural orientation to a large extent, since culture is transmitted through language and language is the main tool for the internalization of culture by the individual. When more than one language and culture are in contact in the same society, one should not expect that they be evenly distributed throughout a given speech community. It is possible to find common cultural elements among the speakers of diverse languages who live in the same place (Fishman 1989). Fishman noted that culturally diverse societies could co-exist even if they may share a common language or speech varieties of the same language (2001: 95). This is with referee to differences between linguistic identity and cultural identity. Cultural identity is not the same thing as social identity. For Tajfel (1981), social identity is the psychological structure that links the individual and the group and allows intergroup behaviour. *Social identity* arises from individuals defining themselves in relation to the roles and the social groups in their society, and is defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups), together with the values an emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1978: 63). In this form of identification, social categorization and social comparison processes shape intergroup behaviour. In contrast, *cultural identity* of an individual is usually formed through internalising elements of the culture and individuals become aware of

their cultural identity when experiencing other cultures, either within or outside their own society. Language in the form of oral tradition plays a crucial role in this connection. By oral tradition is meant the unwritten form culture lived by members of a particular ethnic group or interethnic groups.

Fishman (2001) further argues that language is a prominent feature both of an individual's social and cultural identity and becomes an important component of culture. Ethnic identity is determined, among other things, by such factors as language, religion, customs and education but the degree to which each of these affects ethnic identity varies greatly among different societies. Royce (1982: 18) defines ethnic identity as "the sum total of feelings on the part of group members about those values, symbols, and common histories that identify them as a distinct group. Ethnicity is simply ethnic-based action". However, the Blin case shows that ethnic identity need not be transmitted over generations in some fixed form. In this respect, Edwards definition is worthwhile to quote, according to whom "ethnic identity as allegiance to a group ... with which one has ancestral links. There is no necessity for a continuation over generations, of the same socialization or cultural patterns, but some sense of a group boundary must persist (1985: 10). According to Hutchinson and Smith, an ethnies is "a name of human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members" (1996: 6). In this connection, language takes a central position and becomes also a symbol of ethnicity. As Fishman holds:

By its very nature, language is the quintessential symbol, the symbol par excellence. Symbols stand in a part-whole relation to their referents. Their preliminary function is to evoke the whole. All language stands in this very relation to the rest of reality: it refers to, it expresses, it evokes 'something' in addition to itself"... Language is the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology (1989: 32).

According to Obeng and Adebija (1999), "in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, there is a considerable close connection between language and ethnicity. The sense of ethnic self is created and sustained by language. ... Willy-nilly, ethnic identity is preserved through language, and ethnicity has become one of the many tools and strategies for the assertion of superiority and denial, or protest against, being labeled ethno linguistically inferior" (1999: 366). The perceptions of ethnic identity in East Africa are shaped greatly by language, according to authors in an edited work by Salih & Markakis (1998). Further, in immigrant contexts, when the 'whole' ethnic values and norms cannot be lived as in 'home country', language becomes the creator and carrier of ethnicity, as we shall see in the case of Blin speakers in Sweden. The core values of the people are stored in the language, and people attach to it as if it were a sacred part in their existence. In such a view, language becomes more than a means of communication, as it becomes part of the 'self, especially when that 'self' is perceived to be threatened by exterior circumstances, such as immigration, domination, or otherwise uncontrollable factors that individuals or collectivities may be uncertain about.

### 2.3 Studies on language maintenance and shift among immigrants in Sweden

In an edited book on multilingualism in Sweden a couple of authors pointed out the paradoxical relationship between Swedish good reputation internationally and its problematic treatment of multilingual education (Boyd and Huss 2001). Boyd (1993) holds that the biased focus on the

dominant languages in Europe neglected immigrant languages but that there is a growing interest on languages since the establishment of Linguistic Minorities Projects, which included studies on non-indigenous languages in Sweden, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. In Sweden, the situation of immigrant languages has also attracted massive interest among students of language and immigration (Aytar 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Studies on multilingual nature of current Swedish society (Boyd and Huss 2001) underlined the urgency of the topic. Studies from the minority peoples' perspective include, among others, Turkish (Engelbrektsson 1995), Finnish (Eriksson 1994), Persian (Hosseini-Kaladjahi 1997), Bosnians (Gustafson 2004), Assyrians (Aytar 1999), and the other indigenous 'minority' languages, such as the Sami and Rom (Hyltenstam and Strand 1991). Paulston (1992) observed that immigrant children in Sweden 'voluntarily' move towards assimilation, which, according to her, is good for Sweden because "by being allowed to assimilate and incorporate, they will with time become good Swedes, and Sweden will be infinitely the richer for enhanced cultural ties to the rest of Europe" (1992: 79). Boyd (1993) studied the different factors affecting language maintenance and shift among immigrant children in Sweden, concluding that, in spite of the official policy of freedom of choice and provision of home language instruction, language shift in the second-generation is widespread. She also observed that this shift is much more pronounced among immigrants from distant countries relative to those in Europe, (such as Spanish) or Scandinavia (such as Finnish). Kostoulas-Makrakis (1995) noted that there are some signs that support relative language maintenance but the main trend is a process of gradual shift taking place among the second-generation Greek students. Hosseini-Kaladjahi (1997) observed mixed identification of Iranians in Sweden, with the 'elite' identifying more with Swedish values and norms but also some Iranians greatly contributing to better maintenance of Persian language in terms of home language and mass media. Gustafson (2004) studied the situation of Bosnian refugees in Sweden, concluding that paradoxical processes forced the refugees to struggle for meaningful life, including maintaining their language, participating in local activities, and points to the importance of the majority 'opening' its doors for participation in all spheres of life.

However, studying language maintenance and shift among Eritrean immigrants is characterized by its paucity or even absence in spite of their prominence in the society. Typical examples are the lack of studies on the situation of Eritrean immigrants in Sweden in the Centre for Research in International Migration and Ethnic Relations (Ceifo) in Stockholm as well as other similar institutions and centres (Dacyl & Westin 2000). Even in the 'diversity' discourse going on in the country (Gomes et al. 2002), Eritrean immigrants are scarcely represented. In such contexts, it becomes difficult but also interesting to understand the situation of Eritreans with respect to assimilation, segregation, or integration into the Swedish society at large. The paper is expected to fill this gap to some extent

### **3. The Socio-linguistic Situation in Eritrea**

There are different ways through which the population of Eritrea can be described. I shall start describing the nine languages and two major religions, political history, education, mass media, and oral tradition. Oral tradition may be the single major factor in enlivening less written languages.

#### **3.1 Language in Eritrea**

Languages and religion are closely related in Eritrea. In terms of language, Eritrea is a home of nine nationalities (or ethnic groups) that speak nine languages (Tucker and Bryan, 1956). They are grouped by linguistics into three major language families: Cushitic (Afar, Blin, Hidareb, Saho), Semitic (Arabic, Tigre, Tigrinya), and Nilotic (Kunama, Nara). However, Aba Yisaq (1996, 1998) holds that Tigre and Tigrinya can better be retained in the Afro-Asiatic level. He holds that the three-level classification of the nine languages into Semitic, Cushitic and Nilotic may be skipped. The intention may be to look for distinctions between Tigre/Tigrinya on the one hand and Arabic on the other. This point was vividly discussed in the First National Conference on Eritrean Languages in 1996 (Aba Yisaq 1996) and was left to be a matter for linguists to deal, and does not affect in any way the situation of the languages in their current forms. Yet, Aba Yisaq does not provide reasons for why only these two languages should be retained at that level. Linguists make the classifications for studying structural similarities and differences and their socio-cultural significance is limited. No ordinary Blin speaker, for example, knows what it means to be a Cushitic language speaker, or how Blin is said to be related to either Saho, Afar or other so-called Cushitic languages.

Religion wise, the people are equally classified between Islam and Christianity, at least officially, with a small portion of the population practicing traditional beliefs (Alexander 1996). Much of the highland is inhabited by Tigrinya speaking Christians while Muslims and non-Tigrinya speaking Christians dominate in the lowlands, with different other languages. Since the 1940s, Arabic was a uniting factor for the Muslim population in Eritrea. There is no official language in Eritrea but Arabic and Tigrinya serve as working languages. However, the other languages are used as media of instruction in the primary school (Grade 1-5). Tigrinya, Tigre, Blin and Kunama are also used more or less in catechism (Christian teaching) while Arabic dominates in the Islamic teaching and worship. Tigre and Tigrinya have close relationship with the Christian ritual language, Geez, and they adopted its script. In fact, Geez has remained the main liturgical language for the Orthodox Tewahdo Church of Eritrea (and Ethiopia) and the Catholic Church, which share the same Eastern Rite. However, the script of Geez has not remained limited to Tigrinya and Tigre. Since the 19th century, Blin has also been written in the Geez script. Yet after independence in 1991, the Eritrean government has changed the script for Blin into that of Latin in the primary curriculum, in spite of protests from Blin speakers who point out that the Geez script best describes Blin phonetic characters (Fallon 2003; Kiflemariam 1996b; Tekie 1992). The Blin language has two dialects – *taqurblin* and *senHit blin* (Kiflemariam 1986). However, according to a survey conducted by Daniel and Sulus (1997), the speakers of the two dialects can understand each other so much that the current curriculum of the primary school treats Blin as a single, uniform language.

#### Language policy during the colonial period (1889-1991)

The history of Eritrea starts with Italian colonialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Eritrea was created as a geographical entity in 1889 when Italy colonized the Western escarpment of the Red Sea. Italy ruled over Eritrea between 1889 and 1941 (Tekeste 1987). The Italians administered Eritrea on ethnic bases and segregated Italian citizens from the colonized indigenous peoples (Tekeste Negash 1989). A characteristic feature of Italian language policy was glorifying the Italian language and imposing it as a dominant language in all spheres of

lives. This was associated with a stigmatization of all Eritrean languages. Eritreans were allowed to study up to grade four under the Italian assimilation policy (Teklehaimanot 1996); their languages were in no way used in official matters. Yet, individual Italian scholars did not abstain from writing about the history, language, stories and fables on 'indigenous' Eritreans. Typical among such works that dealt with Blin language were Conti Rossini's Blin poems (1907) and Pollera's Eritrean peoples' culture and social life (1938). Therefore it is limiting to just deal with formal use of the languages vis-à-vis state community life. Blin speakers continued to use their language in all aspects of life exclusive of the modern state services by the colonial state. The local actors who could understand Blin conducted judiciary actions in Blin in the local courts. In this case, the role of customary laws should be mentioned as augmenting part of the state role of judiciary work, which the local chiefs administered in local languages. One way of being *Blina* during the colonial period was not by using the language in education or the mass media but in maintaining it in the traditional ceremonies (Amanuel 1996), customary judiciary practices (Favali and Pateman 2002), wedding rites (Woldemariam 1986), seasonal events and practices (Abba Kiflemariam 1984) as well as religious sermons and pastoral care. However, many adults mixed Italian with Blin, especially those who forcibly joined the Italian army during the Second World War.

The British Military Administration, which replaced Italy when it was defeated in 1941, and promoted education in both Tigrinya and Arabic but neglected other Eritrean languages. As depicted by Alexander, "The British policy of indirect rule divided the Eritrean people along religious lines. They categorized the various Eritrean populations into Christian versus Moslem dichotomy. They British developed the idea that Eritrea was divided between highland Christians and lowland Moslems. This idea lingers even today not only in the minds of outsiders, but also among some Eritreans" (1996: 11). When the UN decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia (1950), Arabic and Tigrinya still got official status and became state languages. This policy was the basis through which Eritrean educational, political and social affairs were conducted. The federation lasted only between 1952 and 1961. Although the Eritrean National Assembly was said to have planned to establish a language institute in order to support the development of Eritrean languages, that plan had never been documented nor implemented. It was recounted that one of the candidates who campaigned for the election in the National Assembly from the Blin ethnic group promised to work for a policy to develop Blin, at least until he was elected.

In 1961, the Ethiopian king Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea as the fourteenth province of the state of Ethiopia and abolished the Eritrean government, whose official languages were Arabic and Tigrinya, and replaced them with Amharic. Soon the gradually evolving nationalism was sparked further, instigating the escalation of confrontation, finally leading to the long struggle for self-determination (1961-1991). Both the eras of Haile Sellasie (1961-1974) and that of the Dergue (1974-1991) were characterized by the political strife that devastated peoples' life greatly. Generally speaking, the era of Ethiopian rule (1961-1991) can be characterized as an era of demographic genocide rather than one of language development or language revitalization. Yet, the liberation movement included language development and maintenance as part of its programme.

Language policy and practice of the liberation fronts (1961-1991)

During this period, Arabic and Tigrinya were even more prominently used in political discourse by the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), and later on, by the splintered group called EPLF (Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front. The latter gave priority to Tigrinya whilst the former prioritized Arabic. All practical as well as ideological work of the liberation movements was done in both languages to varying degrees. We witnessed both languages sometimes entailing conflict among their speakers and sometimes being raised as the only relevant media for communication between the two liberation fronts. That again entails putting the other languages at an uneasy situation (Redie 2001). There has been stiff competition, and more often conflict, between the two main liberation organizations (ELF and EPLF), greatly reflecting the political divide according to which language the organization favored and gave priority to - Arabic or Tigrinya. After liberation in 1991, language planning was completely left to the state (Eritrean Department of Education 1991; Hailemariam et al. 1999). The Eritrean state started the business by establishing principles in which the diversity was to give scope for unity that is national in character. Accordingly, all the nine languages were in principle considered to be 'equal' but that Tigrinya and Arabic were taken to constitute 'working languages'. Since Eritrea got its liberation in 1991, a massive socio-cultural transformation has been taking place at least until the border war erupted in 1998. This transformation is based on the situation of the languages well before liberation. As Redie (2001) argues, language has remained one of the crucial and controversial issues among Eritreans for the last half a century. But I will not rest on this controversy even if it is difficult to provide a holistic view of the place of the Blin language without making salient such a controversy. The focus is instead on the development of Blin language.

#### Oral tradition, the basis for cultural identity in Eritrea

The majority of Eritreans live in the countryside where education, modern mass media and other markers of 'modernity' remained too limited, at least until independence. Major life events take place through oral communication, such as in seasonal ceremonies, songs, wedding and initiation rites, proverbs, prayers, ancestral stories, music, etc. Important community 'heritages' are thus transmitted to the next generation through the word of mouth. Major daily or periodical events are communicated orally. For example, traveling to the different villages and shouting three times in a certain frightening style communicates the death of an individual. The listeners understand that somebody has died, and respond by asking 'what happened to you'? The messengers, usually two adult males, tell that Mr. X or Mrs. Y has died and the funereal will take place at this or that period of time. Similarly, folk songs, wedding ceremonies, initiation rites, and other important as well as trivial daily events have been told by the word of mouth but not to the same dramatized degree as in the event of death. Moreover, until the 1990s, Blin videocassettes, tape-recorded music using modern musical instruments, dramatic activities as in urban circles, and poems for sale, were scanty. Shortly put, as in other parts of rural Eritrea, 'the rural Blin are tradition bound. The language used in all these events is also specific to the event. The Blin words used in death events and funeral are while different from those used in other events, and the means through which the event is communicated greatly determine the level of language competence. The written word is used to a limited extent in the state-owned mass

media and is controlled by the government in the capital city. However, this does not wholly apply Tigrinya, which has gradually emerged as a written language not only in the Tigrinya dominated regions and cities, but also in other non-Tigrinya speaking regions of the country. Since WWII, different daily and seasonal events have been communicated through written Tigrinya, especially in the cities and towns.

Since the destruction of the Blin villages in rural areas by the Ethiopian military from 1960s to 1991, many rural Blin – those who did not immigrate abroad - were forced to settle in the towns of Keren, Hagaz and Elabered. This forced urbanization entailed change not only on the use of rural Blin language in activities such as farming and animal husbandry but also less use of the language in communicating daily events. The trend until 1990s has been rural Blin youngsters getting assimilated into the urban life styles and not participating in rural life events, and thus getting less socialized into the values and practices of oral tradition. Even in the rural areas, ‘mental urbanization’ has impacted the significance and prevalence of oral tradition among youngsters who favored urban styles of life and have shown attitudes of distancing themselves from ‘rural practices’ that their parents viewed as bearers of the Blin language. But the trend has been reversed to a certain extent after independence in 1991. Even then, the ‘*urbanization mentality*’ among youngsters follows westernized living styles in dresses, hairstyle, furniture; moreover, the increasing tendency to distancing from farming and animal husbandry ala traditional living conditions tends to weaken use of terms and rituals that gradually get weakened and ‘forgotten by ‘modern educated youths. Blin oral tradition, the bearer of Blin language and culture, is increasingly impinged upon by literate culture that emerges to challenge it albeit with some accommodations.

However, oral tradition has been practiced not only in the Blin language. The three languages Blin, Tigre and Tigrinya have been used to a certain extent in communicating with ‘other’s, showing the multilingual competence of the Blin people. Moreover, since Independence, priority has turned into viewing Blin equal with the other nine languages in ‘modern Eritrea, a position that gradually emerged during the period of the liberation. The prominence of oral tradition in the Eritrean communities may be recognized as the genuine approach to making the languages alive so far.

### 3.5 Multilingualism among the Blin people in Eritrea.

Once outside of the Blin land in Bogos, Blin speakers in general can be characterized living in a multilingual context in the sense that individuals encounter daily communication needs that require the use of Blin, Tigrinya and Tigre, to varying degrees. However, this is not to say that all Blin speakers are subject to such a multilingual context. In the 1850s, Munizinger recounted that the Blin people used Tigre as a language for interethnic communication. Conti Rossini (1907) collected Blin songs and folk poems and one can read mixes of Blin and Tigre in some poems. He also confirmed that the people used Tigre as *lingua franca*. In the 1930s, Pollera observed that the Blin people could communicate in Blin, Tigre and, to a limited extent also Tigrinya. Some of these early foreign authors predicted that Blin would lose ground in favor of Tigre and Tigrinya within the coming few generations (Pollera 1938). But that did not happen.

That many of the Blin people are either bi-or even multilingual can be explained historically. Geographically, the area traditionally known to be the home of the Blin people,

Bogos, is surrounded by Tigre and Tigrinya speakers who constitute almost 70% of the whole Eritrean population. As result of this location, many Blin speakers are also able to understand Tigre, Tigrinya or both (Kiflemariam 1986). In terms of religious membership, the Blin people belong to the two major religions in Eritrea, Christianity and Islam. The church follows the Geez rite, which it shares especially with the Tigrinya speakers who are predominantly Christians in the area. Daily religious services, however, have also partly been used in Tigrinya until the last decade. Blin Muslims also share Arabic with other co-believers but mainly communicate in Tigre who are predominantly Muslims except for the Mensae, who have been writing Tigre in the Geez script. Culturally, the Blin people share many different folk dances and practices with the Tigre speakers, and these are often conducted in a language that both understand, which turns out to be Tigre. Both the Mensa and the Betjuk now practice the famous Blin folk dance called *golya welila*, previously a Blin heritage (Kiflemariam 1986). In the *political field*, Eritrean political activities have greatly enhanced the use of Tigrinya and Arabic as official languages since the British Military Administration and the Federation period. Education was conducted in both of them. Many Blin children – the elites - were educated in either or both of them.

Another socio-historical reason has to do with the period of the liberation war (1961-1991) when Arabic and Tigrinya became the two main languages of the liberation fronts. Thus, a Blin speaker joining the liberation movement or working for the liberation fronts entailed mastering at least Arabic if one joined the pre-1975 ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), but mainly Tigrinya for those who joined the EPLF. Hailemariam et al., make the point that “Indeed, in the long years of struggle for national liberation and self-assertion of national identity, the symbolic function of Tigrinya plays a major role. *The liberation struggle, drawing upon a romantic view of the Eritrean past and appealing to a collective memory of that society, succeeded in pulling together all efforts to develop the language, both in Diaspora and in the areas which were liberated*” (1999: 481, Highlights added). But this ‘romantic’ view applies to written Tigrinya in the period 1940 to 1960s, and not to Blin. Several Tigrinya speaking authors and commentators on the liberation period emphasise how the Tigrinya language was developed and used, but do not refer to what was happening to other languages. The relevant ‘other’ language they were ‘careful’ about was Arabic, which they accept to be a co-working language, if not an official one (Girmay Negash 1999). However, the rural peoples continued to depend upon word of mouth in their respective mother tongues to struggle, sing, amuse and even rebuke the Ethiopian domination. For instance, Blin was used in different unwritten ways to mobilize people for self-emancipation (Kiflemariam, ‘Blin liberation songs’, forthcoming). Although the other Eritrean languages are now used as means of instruction in the primary school and in radio broadcasting every day, albeit in a limited way, especially Tigrinya has become indispensable for any Eritrean to make a living in the official sphere, and even if officially they are ‘working languages’, both Arabic and Tigrinya constitute the role of official languages in practice. The rhetoric of equality between Eritrean languages is overwhelmed by the powerlessness of the speakers of other languages in decisions with regard to their own language in the primary school, radio broadcasting, music etc. The top down political decision to use Latin script for Blin is a case in point (Ministry of Education 1997).

However, being a multilingualist can have a positive experience. There is a widespread understanding among the Blin that ‘if you speak only one language, you are but one person but if you speak two languages, then you are two persons. If you understand three

languages, you are three persons, etc'. Moreover, communicating in Tigre and Tigrinya enabled the Blin speakers to shield their language against both. According to Aron (1996), Tigre was losing ground in favor of Arabic, described as *Tig-Ara*. Similarly, Aron reproached the mixing of the Tigrinya with Amharic in pre-Independence Eritrea, characterizing the mix as *Tig-Haringa*. Some negative consequences of mastering Tigre and Tigrinya are the risk of being identified as belonging to either of them while you subjectively view yourself as a Blin speaker. Many Tigrinya speaking adults have the tendency to ask non-Tigrinya speakers if the latter provide home language instruction to their children in Tigrinya. That is not any surprising but they add that as Eritreans, they need to speak Tigrinya! The non-Tigrinya speakers often take this provocation, holding that not all Eritreans are Tigrinya speakers. This occur much more often in the Diaspora than in the country itself, in which belonging to one of the nine ethnic groups is the norm rather than an exception.

#### **4. Blin language maintenance and revitalization: Projects and developments**

In a survey of language in Ethiopia, Bender et al. (1976) argued that what they called minority languages in Eritrea were used merely informally due to the official place of Amharic. Bender et al. argued that a highly developed language is one which (a) has been reduced to writing and is regularly written, (b) is well standardized, i. e. has widely recognized norms of spoken and written usage, and (c) has the resources of vocabulary and forms of discourse needed for modern nationhood (1976: 13). They also argued that almost all the languages in the country except Amharic, and to a certain extent also Tigrinya, were not standardized. 'Development' and 'standardization' were equivalent in Bender et al (1976). The observations of Bender et al. (1976) applied also to Blin. People took it for granted that Blin was not developed because it was not standardized language, and to be so, it should put into writing. Yet, research on Eritrean languages during the foreign rule, especially the Ethiopian occupation, was rather scarce. It is not surprising that language shift was in favour of Amharic and at the expense of other Eritrean languages. The context was one of assimilation rather than language development (Girmay 1999). The Ethiopian rule was not a period of time one would expect development but domination intended to weaken or abolish whatever was genuinely Eritrean, including languages. However, during the liberation war, people looked upon language development as part and parcel of the process for self-determination, and hoped that one day, they would freely use their languages on relevant domains (Hailemariam et a. 1999). There have been some very limited private initiatives to study the situation of Blin language in Eritrea since mid 1970s. Except for Tigrinya, the lack of research is not limited within Blin. There is no systematic research on other languages particularly with respect to Eritrean immigrants in Europe or North America.

Many educated and non-educated (singers, folk poets) Blin increasingly got interested on their language and started collecting songs (Kiflemariam 1986b), oral tradition, proverbs (Kiflemariam 1989) and also writing Blin in the Geez script. They shared the view prevailing among Eritrean non-Tigrinya speakers that their languages have remained relatively undeveloped due to lack of 'standardized' script and that this led to the limited use in the political, educational, and religious domains. The criteria for 'standard' languages identified by Bender et al. (1976) were rather used as measures of the degree of the development of languages

(Kiflemariam 1986a). The institution in which this interest was increasingly raised was boarding school seminaries of the Catholic Church in Eritrea.

#### 4.1 Blin Language in a religious context: Projects and events

The context in the Catholic seminaries and other religious institutions was a bilingual situation where many Blin speakers had to communicate in Tigrinya, regardless of their numerical size or proficiency in Tigrinya. Moreover, inter-linguistic conflicts and minor clashes have characterized the different orders. 'He spoiled our language' (*abelashiwo*), was a typical Tigrinya expression used to denounce Blin way of speaking it. Although the Catholic seminaries and other religious institutions housed both Blin and Tigrinya speakers, the leadership was not able to formulate a policy for the domains in which the members could use Blin or Tigrinya. There are ample occasions when the religious institution leaders discouraged Blin speakers to communicate in Blin. It was also recounted that speaking Blin in some seminaries resulted in physical punishment or at least negative sanctions. In some seminaries and nunneries, Blin was rather forbidden or the Blin speakers implicitly adopted Tigrinya as the 'norm'. The lack of language use policy in the institutions led to inter-linguistic conflicts between Blin speakers and Tigrinya speakers. Such conflict was rather solved by rule of thumb and hunches. Leaders of the different religious institutions would rather take conflict arising from language contact as a taboo, attributing any deviating behaviour to acts of 'sin' or indiscipline. Blaming the minority speakers had become the norm. Or any voice from them was viewed as deviating behaviour in terms of sin and it became difficult to consider adequate and democratic ways of solving such a conflict. The leaders instead tended to postpone the solution for a conflict rather than solving it.

Consequently, for the last few decades, there have been occasions when Blin and Tigrinya speaking students in the boarding schools of the Catholic Church were exposed to overt conflict on the status and use of Blin language. A female student in a nunnery in Segeneity, and later in Asmara, recounts the story that a group of young Blin girls were denied public attendance of the Holy Mass on Sundays, the only weekly entertainment, because they resisted the orders of the 'mother-sister' not to speak Blin. Some of them did not want to provoke the ever demanding Tigrinya dominant groups and as result self-imposed silence. This author also is a witness of one such serious conflict in April 1970 when a junior student rector, a priest, decided to forbid the use of Blin even in informal communication in the diocesan Catholic seminary at Keren. The Blin speaking seminarians who constituted almost half of 70 young students aged between 13 and 22 not only protested but also rebelled against the decision. However, many of the Tigrinya speakers also disliked the decision but it was difficult for anybody to openly disagree with a priest and also a student rector! The senior rector of the Seminary, the late Rev Abba Ayele Teklehaimanot, later on revoked this wrong decision. Instead, Blin speakers were advised to use their language whatever they want with it, but that they should stop talking Blin when a single Tigrinya speaker joins them. In the long run, one consequence was increased interest among Blin speakers to get their language in writing, and prove that 'God in fact understands not only Geez or Tigrinya but also Blin'. Consequently, the conflict also weakened the level of motivation and ambition of many Blin speakers to study and master Tigrinya as they had done previously, considering it as 'their' language different from 'our' language. Again this sparked increased consciousness on Blin linguistic and ethnic identity. Some urban Blin seminarians who previously mixed Blin and Tigrinya started to take Blin seriously. Informal use

of Blin increased among the students and even led to suspicion of those few Tigrinya speakers who supported, and rejoiced by, the decision. In reality the problem lay neither within individuals nor group of students but lack of multilingual policy in the institution. A common religious identity alone was not sufficient to create order and discipline when the linguistic identity emerged to competing it.

Additional examples of conflict as a result of language contact can be brought from similar institutions. In the mid 1990s, 12 Blin students had to abandon another non-diocesan, religious institution apparently objecting to the decision to forbid Blin language ‘even in informal communication’. I interviewed two close relatives who belonged to those who decided to leave the institution, ‘rather than bicker unnecessarily’, as one of them said (oral communication, Asmara, August 15, 1996). The leaders often give different explanations for such conflicts: bad conduct (behaviour) of the non-Tigrinya speakers (oral communication with a local priest in Keren, August 30, 1995, anonymity kept). My view is these inter-linguistic clashes resulted because the Catholic Church leaders could not formulate an adequate language policy for their multi-linguistic institutions. Upon adulthood, many ex-seminarians realized this lack of leadership and continued their intimate friendship. The endeavours for developing Blin were thus motivated not merely for pragmatic reasons but were also caused by complex inter-ethnic clashes between Tigrinya speaking hegemonic majority and Blin minority groups who were expected to abandon Blin in favour of Tigrinya for reasons of ‘order and discipline’. Many Blin speaking students during those times viewed such decisions and demands as measures towards assimilation. The young seminarians viewed these efforts as a way for raising Blin to the level that could be used in many domains, increase its status, and thereby enhancing their own ethno-linguistic identity. Since the mid-1970s, to face the lack of language policy in different Catholic religious institutions, Blin students joined hands to work on what united them most: the Blin language.

The first ever Blin author who endeavoured to look for written form of Blin for use in religious circles was Abba Woldeyohannes (1939), followed by Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1984). Abba Kiflemariam Fadega belonged to those few young priests who were highly inspired by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which encouraged use of local languages in pastoral care and teaching. He had a PhD in Moral Philosophy and literature from the Urbanian University, Rome (1966). He taught English language and literature, moral philology, moral theology, and was involved in the development of the Philosophico-Theologicum Centre at the Senior Catholic Seminary in Asmara, Eritrea between 1971 and 1977. He argued that Blin had a written tradition that stretched back to the 1880s and re-iterated the work of Leo Reinisch to his students, a work that was unknown for many Blin speakers. Abba Kiflemariam then encouraged Blin students to translate many Geez and Tigrinya documents into Blin (Kiflemariam 1996a). Young Blin students were both challenged and also engaged in answering the question of why this scanty Blin writing had remained obscure to Blin and other language speakers in Eritrea. Together with his students at the Seminary and other religious institutions such as the Cistercians, Lasaleans, Combonians and the Capuchins, Abba Kiflemariam prepared a Prayer book (*werena jar musixw*) in 1976, translated the Geez Mass (*qdase blind*) into Blin for the first time in 1977. The former work was collected from elderly Blin who could not read and write but who still prayed daily prayers orally. Some priests undermined the role and legitimacy of such traditional prayers as not authentic, or even ‘non-prayers’. Instead, Geez and to a certain extent

Tigrinya prayers were perceived to be genuine. The content of the traditional prayers differed a bit from the Geez and Tigrinya written prayers provided by the Catholic Church in Eritrea. However, Abba Woldeyohans had translated the primary catechism into Blin in 1944, a work that was widely used in daily prayers in the parishes. Abba Kiflemariam Fadega's *werena jar musixw* supplemented this work greatly. This further sparked interest by seminarians who then started collecting oral tradition during summer vacations.

However, many other individuals have also contributed to the work of making Blin a 'religious' language. A typical work is the translation of the Four Gospels by a Capuchin monk, Abba Jacob Zeru (1993). It is true that Leo Reinisch had published the Gospel According to Mark in 1882, but that work remained anonymous to the Blin Catholics due to several reasons, first among which was that the translator was taken to be a Protestant and, consequently, the work could not be practised. Since the 1850s, when Catholicism was introduced in Bogos, the Church was working for the adoption of the Geez rite that the people were using until that time when they remained in the *Tewahdo* (Orthodox) belief. Thus, any translation of the Bible into local languages was suspect.

Another event that sparked more interest on Blin language was the establishment of the new Keren Eparchy in 1995. Keren town is the centre of Blin history and ancestral mythology. By 1850s, Keren became the centre of the Catholic Church, which was established by the French Lazarist missionaries. The Capuchins, who replaced the French Lazarists, changed their centre from Keren to Asmara in 1914 (*Kiseri* 1996, No 1). After the formation of the Eritrean indigenous administration of the Church in 1930, the liturgical language of the Catholic Church was Geez, which was gradually being replaced by Tigrinya. But similar adoption of Blin in broader work of the Church was not appreciated. The Catholic Bishop of Asmara, who headed the Church, had neglected use of Blin language in daily religious services, a practice much disliked by the Blin speaking believers. However, catechetical instructions in Blin were widespread in the parishes. A typical neglect of the Blin language could be illustrated by the fact that many Tigrinya speaking priests resisted learning Blin or Tigre in the pastoral work of their mission, but when sent to central Ethiopia as missionaries, they could begin, justifiably, to learn different Ethiopian languages such as Wolayta, Kambata, Oromo, etc. Yet, in Eritrea, they both dominated the leadership of the Church and actively promoted for an assimilative policy rather than a multi-lingual Church. Consequently, the priests and believers in Keren sub-diocese were working for an independent diocese since the 1940s. Although differences in language and culture were the two main reasons for forming an independent diocese, the contact with Muslims in the Blin area was another related problem that the Blin speaking priests complained about. The Blin ethnic group consists of both Christians and Muslims and the attitude towards each other has been one of respect and tolerance, especially compared to the highland situation. Both Christians and Muslims share common ethnic identity expressed in many different ways and practices that bind them together. Thus, the dichotomy that the Highland is Christian and the lowland is Moslem, which was developed since the British Administration in the 1940s, does not fit exactly in the situation of the Blin speakers. The Highland-based (Asmara) diocesan leadership was either ignorant about the mutual respect Blin Muslims and Christians have for each other, or intentionally neglected it, thereby sparking a disagreement between the ways the Church should relate itself with the peoples in the lowlands.

The project to establish an independent eparchy (diocese) was revived in the 1980s and the applicants argued that a Blin or Tigre speaking Bishop would sustain good inter-religious relationship with the Moslems (KISERI 1996, No 2). The Vatican accepted the proposal to establish Keren and Barnetu as separate dioceses in December 1995, and two new Bishops were appointed. The new Bishop of Keren endorsed Blin, Tigre and Tigrinya as official languages, raising the status and prestige of Blin language to a higher level. Blin could be used in pastoral work unhindered. Several works in the form of prayer books, songs and catechetical practices have appeared in Blin. The bi-monthly Journal of the Keren Eparchy – KISERI- has been published both in Blin and Tigrinya. Moreover, a senior leader of the Catholic Church speaking Blin language in official and other activities meant enhancing the symbolic importance of the language, and not merely among its speakers. Thus, with respect to the domain of religion, Blin finds itself in the stage of *revitalisation*.

#### 4.2 Blin language and literary developments since the 1980s

The Blin Language Research Group was established by seminarians, young nunnery students and other interested Blin speakers in the city of Asmara in 1978. Some of the members were students of Abba Kiflemariam Fadega. The Group prepared a Blin Dictionary which the Blin Community in Stockholm sponsored its publication (Kiflemariam and Paulos 1992). Some members prepared individual-based work. Other translated the New Testament and other prayer books from Geez and Tigrinya into Blin (Kidane Yebio 1992). Mekonen prepared the first ever primary of Blin for Tigrinya speakers (1983).

A seminal work by a Blin speaker on the language use and maintenance was an a Conference article, also by Abba Kiflemariam (1984). In that paper, the author asked not why did Blin remain ‘obscure’ to other language speakers in the country but why *Blin could survive for so long*. His answer was that *‘Bilin language persists to survive in an island-like area by means of its in season and out of season folk-songs, poems an tales’* (1984: i, Italics added). He then goes on to discuss four poems and a tale in Blin, and believed that these illustrate why an unwritten Blin language could survive through these folk songs and tales. He argues: “such linguistic tools are still the major means whereby Bilin language is kept alive”. According to Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1984), Blin language is maintained through the oral tradition. The author hoped that “the following four poems and a tale in Bilin be a stimulus to others for further efforts”. He also pointed out for any possible past links between Blin and Tigrinya by selecting a poem by Mekonen Amanuel who recounts the traces of Blin place names in the former Hamasien and Serae regions, the home of modern Tigrinya (Abba Kiflemariam 1984: 2-6).

The Conference paper showed the lively way through which Blin speakers use and maintain their language. The Conference paper was still an eye-opener for young Blin writers who saw the possibility of extending their efforts on the role of oral traditional folk poems. Until that time, many elders and educated Blin individuals considered Blin folk poems, tales, and ‘rural’ living styles as old fashioned, only to be abandoned as people gradually adopt modern values, such as modern music, shift to Tigrinya/Arabic language, and other markers of modernity, including hair style and dress (Abrehe Amar, Dafla Itman, folksingers). For example, folk poems and songs during the 1960s and 1970s depicted playing traditional Blin dances and folk poems as ‘irreligious’, ‘uncivilized’, uneducated, or otherwise symbols of an illiterate whose

fate was dancing and enjoying life but not advancing modernity and societal development. This note is based on my collection of Blin poems and folksongs where the ideas of modernity are linked to education but away from traditional dances and poems (Kiflemariam 1986b). Hence educated and urban Blin started imitating other urban inhabitants, and the Blin ethnicity 'markers' of identity were gradually losing ground, and with them the special words and terms. Abba Kiflemraim Fadega encouraged use of Blin in all contexts. Because he taught many Blin seminarians in the 1970s who later followed his steps in writing and conducting several projects on the Blin language, I dare call Abba Kiflemraim as *the modern father of Blin language*.

In the 1980s, there was again another project sponsored by the now defunct Institute of African Studies at Asmara University. Kiflemariam (1986a, b) carried out one of these projects in 1985. The project was titled 'Blin language, origin and development', and described the situation of Blin language and its contact with Tigre, Tigrinya and Arabic (Kiflemraim 1986a). The domains in which these languages were used in Bogos are described. The project was based on both a field study in Bogos and interviews with Blin elders and folk-poets like the famous Abrehe Ammar. The author confirmed that songs, poems, tales and the oral tradition in fact enhanced the maintenance of Blin in spite of pressures from mainly Tigrinya (Kiflemariam 1986a: 76). The author concluded that the future of Blin greatly depended upon the individual and group projects that were undertaken in that decade (1986a: 88-89), hoping that written Blin could greatly broaden the domains of use of the language, and hence ascertain its survival.

The next stage was preparing a workshop on the situation of Blin. Within that context, the Institute of African Studies, Asmara University, organised the *First Blin Language and Culture Workshop* (June 1986). Specific contributions on Blin language situation include the role of poems and folk songs in Blin society (Kiflemariam 1986b), the role of initiation rites and youth talk in maintaining Blin language (Paulos 1986), customary Blin marriage practices and terminology (Woldemariam 1986), and a translation from the work of Munzinger on a certain Blin customary law (Abba Hailemariam 1986). The latter article, however, instigated a certain controversy over the legitimacy of the translation and the 'truth' of some assertions as held by Munzinger (1857). However, no one can deny positive contribution of the above developments as they sparked a vivid interest among students in towns and later on also in the Diaspora. Two minor articles on Blin were published in late 1980s. The first, an analysis of some Blin proverbs, was published in the now defunct Ethiopian Journal of African Studies (Kiflemariam (1989). The second article dealt with the language use, and the logic behind preparing a family meal when they celebrate the feast of the Assumption of Mary, *Mariam* (Kiflemariam 1990).

Although much of the work remains unpublished, their significance for Blin language maintenance and development cannot be questioned. These works, directly or indirectly, influenced many of the current authors in Blin. Blin authors attempted to explain the factors that enabled Blin to be maintained in spite of its limited use in the formal domains. Efforts were then turned into just into developing Blin literary works. The work of the Ministry of Education for mother language education was later to be somehow influenced by the literary works by individuals and groups, as some of the staff at the Curriculum Department acknowledged using them. In spite of the emphasis on oral tradition, and also the simultaneous interest by many Blin students to write the language, the pros and cons of language

documentation have not been systematically assessed. According to scholars, documentation may result in paradoxical consequences. Orthography may lose the rich oral ways through which a language gets its survival.

#### 4.3 Blin Language and education: Blin in primary school curriculum since 1997

The 1990s was again to see a different form of development, which was in writing and preparing teaching materials. In July 1991, the EPLF formally endorsed the use of all nine Eritrean languages in primary education (mother tongue education) although it was as late as in 1997 that Blin could be used in this domain. The EPLF changed the script for Blin from Geez to Latin, which created a controversy among the proponents of Geez script and those who supported the EPLF policy of Latin script. The former group mainly consisted of all educated Blin, especially in the non-combatants who were involved in writing Blin since the 1970s. The latter group's support of Latin script was based scarcely on pedagogical grounds but ideological reasons. One immediate consequence was the limited practical application of the works on Blin for the previous 20 years. (For the developments in Blin writing between 1975 and 1995, see Kiflemariam 1996b). Although it was those who were actively 'developing' Blin since the 1970s who first translated the Primary school curriculum from Tigrinya into Blin in 1991-1993, the provisional government soon ignored the translation, due to unknown reasons; some hold that this was because the translation of the curriculum was done in the Geez script (Kiflemariam 1996b). The curriculum, as translated by the interested Blin speakers, was later on used by the Ministry of Education but never acknowledged or thanked the original translators. This was paradoxical because the Ministry approved and acknowledged the translation as genuine in 1992.

The Blin Language and Development Committee was formed in 1993 under the then Sehit Provincial Administration in Keren town. The Blin people, in a meeting called by the Provincial Administrator at that time, directly elected the members. The mandate was preparing and collecting Blin poems, fables, stories, languages, and other traditional events important for 'developing' Blin. It prepared a major project depicting the situation of the language in the 1990s, the different oral traditions bearing the language, and some suggestions for reforming customary rites and traditions that the authors evaluated some as 'outdated' (Blin language and Culture Committee 1997). The Committee urged the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information to implement the policy for mother tongue education and radio broadcasting, respectively. There was a widespread dissatisfaction among the Blin people that even extended to the Diaspora. The dissatisfaction was about perceived neglect by the government, which intentionally neglected Blin language, and discouraged Blin educated individuals not contribute to the development of their own language. Allegedly, political background issues lay on the claim. The Blin people strongly supported the ELF but also later on the EPLF, now forming the Eritrean government.

However, if there were any people who patiently and trustfully served the EPLF, it was the Blin people. In the early 1990s, the Blin people expressed their dissatisfaction with, and their cooperation as well as sacrifice to the cause of self-determination through songs, poems, recounting of sacrificial events during the 1980s when the EPLF was the only liberation front in the field. They expressed their concerns that the government intentionally endorsing Tigrinya in schools and mass media. The committee also challenged the government take its responsibility in

implementing own policy of language equality. The Committee requested the Ministry of Education for advisory and financial support, but the latter declined. Mr Dafla Ithman, a traditional poet, vividly enquired where the place of Blin was among the nine Eritrean languages (Blin language and Culture Committee 1997: 37-40). In the last day of the First National Conference on Eritrean Languages, some of the Committee members openly expressed their complaints that Blin language was neglected and that the work they were mandated to conduct by the provincial administrator and the people was forbidden by the Ministry of Education for publication. One of the officials of the political party, the EPRDF, soon promised them to finance the publication, which appeared in 1997 with the title of *Gerbasha*, under the Hidri publishers. The text is full of Mr Dafla's poems and sayings that show how the people were committed to develop their language and their culture but faced unexpected forces irresistible to them. Moreover, the Committee urged the Ministry of Education to take seriously translation of the primary school curriculum in 1991-92 by the aforementioned voluntary Group.

Within the contexts discussed above, the Ministry of Education started Blin language education in one primary school in November 1997, the Adjerbeb School. The villagers and the school administrators called the school *birksna*- the Dawn- referring to its being the first of its kind in Blin history. The people both outside and inside the country expressed their reactions, mostly positive. However, those who worked for the development of Blin writing since the late 1970s were seriously concerned about the Latin script. Contrary to the recommendations of Conference participants of many Blin speakers in 1996, in spite of the translation by a voluntary group of the curriculum into Blin in the Ge'ez script, and the practical work of the Blin Language and Culture Committee in Keren (1997) in Ge'ez script, the Ministry of Education one-sidedly implemented Blin mother tongue education in the Latin script. Some argued that the Blin Moslems disliked Ge'ez script but that is not tenable because Ge'ez script is used by the Tigre speakers who are predominantly Moslems. The same script cannot be good for some Moslems and bad for others, especially if one considers the close relationship between the Blin and Tigre Moslems in the former Senhit province, now part of the *zoba* Anseba

Yet, the idea that the Blin speaking Moslems preferred Arabic script and the Christians preferred Tigrinya (Ge'ez script) but the EPLF took a neutral position by opting for Latin script is misleading. Unfortunately, that idea was quoted in many post-independence works as a truth (Favali and Pateman 2002, 260, footnote 58). Favali and Pateman argue "the adoption of Ge'ez or of Arabic would have created conflicts between Islamic and Christian communities. Bilein Muslims wished to use the Arabic alphabet, and Christians the Ge'ez alphabet. So the decision of the Ministry of Education to use Latin diction, phonetics, and grammar is both neutral and political" (ibid). The fact is that, as far as I know, no Muslim Blin has asked writing Blin in the Arabic script but that many demanded Arabic language. Some writers viewed the decision of the Ministry to be politically motivated, in the sense of isolating Blin elite from the development going on with their own language (Workshop on Blin language, Stockholm, February 7, 2001). They were concerned about the misleading attitude of the Ministry in attempting to 'appear' supporting the Muslims. Many Blin authors supported the mother tongue education but feared that the Latin script would cripple or isolate those who write in Ge'ez and those new pupils, thus limiting communicating between the two groups. And that is one of the immediate consequences of the mother tongue education so far. This lack of communication between those who wrote, read and work in Ge'ez and the government-endorsed writers

employed in the Ministry of Education who follow the Latin script have lead to leaving Blin language to its fate - in the hands of the Ministry of Education, and those who feel powerless to do any thing about it (See Paul Fallon (2003) on the fate of Blin pressed as it is between two scripts).

Nevertheless, in spite of the disagreement on script, Blin now serves in the primary education 'as mother tongue' in all subjects and is used to a limited degree in the daily radio broadcasting, officially fulfilling the policy of 'all Eritrean languages are equal'. However, the future will show the extent to which this policy leads to language maintenance or language assimilation, as some critic's hold. The teachers who get pedagogical training in the Asmara and other Teacher Training Centres may have good opportunity for future development of the language. According to Sulus (2003), the preparation of new terms and meanings in the different subjects is a positive development since this policy was implemented (2003). Publishing school textbooks for the mother tongue education is a good example of using Blin in formal writing. Pedagogically also, there may not be a better alternative to mother tongue education, but it also depends on the process through which it being implemented. The Minister of Education, Mr Osman Saleh, argued in a TV interview (2000) that 'all those Eritrean students who learn in their mother tongues and who use Latin script have performed far better than those who used Geez in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade general examination for the last three years". However, informal reports admitted that this was far from the truth. Wishful script-performance equation is simplistic thinking. In a response debate to the Minister's view, Kiflemariam (2000) responded to the Minister's posed Latin script-better performance propaganda in the same TV channel and alluded that the Minister's position was more of propaganda than fact. One of the gaps was discouragement of the Latin script by local and regional governmental structure that requires all communication in Tigrinya and Arabic. Another gap lies in the total control of government work by Tigrinya speaking personnel who are unable or do not appreciate reading Blin in the Latin script.

A typical event that was widespread in July 2002 in the Keren area was about the disappointment of young mother who endeavoured to become literate by joining the adult education system in her village. Her husband had been forced to join the military during the border conflict with Ethiopia in 1999 and she used to sign in her figures - which she abhorred greatly - upon receiving the salary he sends. She was so committed to the training sessions while her own mother supported her by looking after the children. When the trainee could write and read in Blin (Latin script) she was rejoiced to her own success, invited neighbours for recreational coffee, and started practising signing in Blin. But she was stopped to sign in Latin script and when the secretary insisted that she continue signing through her fingers because, it is held, 'this is an unknown script'. The poor women confirmed that she was asked by the local government officials to join the adult education session and that it was the officials who supported her to be literate. However, in the domain of education, the Ministry of Education should find ways of engaging families, the Blin community at large, and especially those have been engaged in developing appropriate literary forms of Blin since the 1970s. The latter group has been engaged in revitalising the language and isolating them only leads to weakening of, at least, the symbolic value of collaboration and participation and in language development. But the top down political decision-making process has so far overwhelmed that form of participation that hampers long looking development of any kind, a phenomenon tied to a democratisation process of the whole Eritrean society. In the words of Posey, one can argue "continued research

into language and cultural diversity requires a more collaborative approach in which equitable partnerships evolve from mutual interest between researchers and local communities” (2001: 395).

The decision to use Blin in the Eritrean school curriculum may lead people to engage less on their language, assuming that the language is ‘developing’, and thus, the ‘only in school’ strategy may in fact weaken Blin language development. However ‘developed’ it may tend to appear, mother tongue education should have been complemented by other institutional support, such as using the language and writing in local administrative work, etc. The developments to support Blin institutionally, at least in the military and other military training centres, are, however, weak. What happens to a Blin speaker who joins the military service in Sawa? In an oral communication in August 1995, and July 1996, relatives close to this author who had joined the Sawa military service, recounted that they were forbidden to talk Blin in all circumstances. One of them even told the story that the very first day when they arrived to the training centre, the military leaders asked all others to regroup in their respective ethnic sub-groupings in order to get instructions in their own ethnic languages assuming that they could not understand Tigrinya, with the exception of the Blin speakers. The Blin recruits were asked to join either the Tigrinya or the Tigre speakers. One day, she recounts, they refused joining any one of them, arguing that ‘Blin youngsters, both brothers and sisters, had also struggled for the maintenance and development of the all Eritrean languages but also of Blin language’, and that ‘the right to get instructions in their own Blin language was only an appropriate question’. But that was not done and the recruits were forced to join ‘other’ language groups. The storyteller herself was illiterate and wondered why Blin was neglected in the administrative sphere, ‘even when people have equally contributed to the liberation of Eritrea’.

#### 4.4 Blin Language in the First National Conference on Eritrean Languages (1996)

In the First National Conference on Eritrean Languages, Kiflemariam (1996b, 8-9) and Adhana (1996) supported the policy on mother tongue education but they also insisted that the Ministry of Education was too late in implementing it in the case of Blin. They both argued against Latin script. Reiterating an argument previously developed by four Blin authors from Stockholm on the advantages of Geez script over Latin (Letter 1992), they argued that Geez best represents Blin due to the following reasons. First, Certain phonetic features in Blin are best represented in Geez script such as the sounds *q*, *che*, *ts*, *ng*, etc. It is to these features that Palmer referred to when he writes ‘Blin is usually regarded as one of the dialects of the Cushitic language of Agau, but it differs considerably from the Agau dialects of Ethiopia proper, and, while undoubtedly to be classified as Cushitic, has much phonological, and a little morphological affiliation with the neighboring Semitic languages of Tigre and Tigrinya’ (1957: 131). Second, Blin has almost a century of writing tradition in Geez script since the work of Leo Reinisch in 1880s. Third, the Geez script has sufficient letters for the sounds that are not easily available in the Latin script (except for linguists) and Blin would best be developed if the Geez script were followed. Fourth, the socio-historical context of Blin makes it easier to continue the Geez script, because, he continued, community wise, the Blin people live peacefully together with Tigre and Tigrinya speakers, and writing it in the Latin script would only create unnecessary perceptions and practices of division, leading to the mentality of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Related to this is that choosing

the Geez script for people who live in the same province (zoba) would facilitate rapid literary and administrative development, as a result, would lead to more unity of the three ethnic groups. Fifth, the majority of Blin authors have written in the Gez script, and they would contribute readily to the further development if given the chance. Changing Geez to Latin would only isolate them from the needed development of the language. Finally, children in the administrative region would easily change school (Tigre, Tigrinya, Blin) without much ado for a script. A final argument was use of Latin script for research purposes as well as international standardization purposes, which was the same for all languages.

Almost all those who expressed their views during the discussion session supported the arguments for Geez script. The Blin speaking participants also called a quick meeting during the break and enquired why the Ministry of education has remained reluctant to the implementing Blin in schools. One participant from the HalHal region (mostly Muslim dominated area) wondered why they should be asked if they wanted Blin in schools while the government has a policy for it. He further maintained that, in the sub-region of HalHal belonged to those who opposed tot Blin language instruction because; ‘we asked for Arabic but if Blin is treated as equally as other languages in the policy why should we asked about it? We opposed adoption of Tigrinya but never Blin’. Let them (the government) have our own Blin in schools, in any script, but also reassure how our children could understand and read Arabic. That is our demand’. This was a relief to those who were told that the Halhal region refused Blin language instruction, which was not true.

Moreover, the Conference leaders promised to revise the policy of Latin script but that was the end of the story. Instead, Latin script was defended as the sole and best solution worked out during the liberation war by the EPLF, and that there was no reason to use Geez script, ‘which belongs to Tigre and Tigrinya’ (Tesfamichale Gerahtu 1996). In the publications the Ministry of Education, all other languages except Tigre and Tigrinya were defined to lack any script, which was an a misleading information and perhaps intentional displacement of policy at least with respect to Blin. Previously, in 1992, some of the cadres of EPLF who, understandably, supported the Latin script called a workshop in order to discuss the fate of the script. But the then Senhit administrator cancelled the workshop. Later on, he defended his decision was for ‘security reasons’ (personal communication with one of the arrangers: August 15 1995,Asmara, anonymity kept).

#### 4.5 Blin Language projects and development in the Diaspora

Since late 1970s, Blin immigrants to the Middle East and other European capital cities were again increasingly interested on ‘who they were’ and how to maintain their languages. According to some observers, this question was specially discussed and debated among ELF ex-fighters who forcibly immigrated but who had to define themselves not only in terms of nationalism but also in ethnic terms. After the decline of ELF in early 1980s, many former fighters faced a situation where they had to be both members of their ethnic groups and at the same time identify with the political organisation which served them with a ready made identity since the early 1960s. The question of ‘language maintenance’ was at the centre for this concern. The different Eritrean immigrants, including the Blin speakers, had to define themselves not only within the wider host society but also their place among the different Ethno linguistic groups from Eritrea.

The interest on ‘maintains Blin’ thus extended to writing it, or forming Communities with specific purpose of maintaining Blin language and culture.

During and after the Eritrean independence, there were some publications with specific purpose of ‘revitalizing and developing Blin language’. The projects were going on the previous decade (1980s). Several of these works were especially in Switzerland (Goitom, 1991), Sweden (Tekie et al. 1994; Bogos 1992; Fessahatsion 1993; Kiflemariam and Paulos 1992; Tekleghiorghis 1992) and in Norway (Tekie 1992). Bogos prepared love poems (1992) and Blin-Tigrinya primary, which shows this youngster’s increased interest and commitment on Blin language development. Similarly, Mowes (2003) prepared an instruction manual for children, which has been used by different Blin communities in Europe for their supplementary schools (London), and Saturday schools (at Umeå in Sweden and Oslo in Norway).

Again, the Blin Community in Stockholm was directly or indirectly contributing to these works. It sponsored, financed and finally published the Blin Dictionary prepared by the Blin Language Research Group in Asmara (Kiflemariam and Paulos 1992). Some members of the Community and another writer from Norway prepared a ‘Some standardization of Blin writing in the Geez script’ (1994) a suggested common usage for grammar, phonetics. The group also suggested how Blin communities in the Diaspora could put previous works into use. But the work was overshadowed by the controversy over whether Geez or Latin script best suited Blin. In spite of this, the Stockholm-based Blin Community was involved, in what it believed be, ‘maintaining ‘ and to ‘developing’ Blin in other different ways. Blin speakers in the Diaspora have shown more commitment in writing and standardising the language scrip than those who were in the country. However, the revitalized status and process of Blin requires more organized approach to make sense to the coming generation.

The above development show that Blin now has several written documents, a dictionary, a few grammar textbooks written by original speakers of the language, a point that alludes to the revitalized nature of the language. But the language has also become extended to other domains that were not apparently used until the 1990s.

#### 4. 6 Blin language in new domains: Modern music, songs and drama

Traditionally, Blin singers use to sing for an active audience, and would never think of recording to sell their products. This domain is mainly dominant in Eritrea, where many singers express their feelings, viewpoints, criticisms, and even disappointments with recent events in the country. However, since the 1990s, the language also started to be used in what is considered to be ‘modern’ domain: music, songs and drama. The contents of the songs reflect the importance of maintaining Blin language and enhancing Blin identity. It seems that there is a fear among the Blin not to be assimilated in the mix of ‘other’ language groups, and each singer urges parents to teach their children Blin, instruct them how to behave, tell stories about the prestigious traditions, hair style, clothing, initiation and wedding rites, women rituals, etc. Moreover, with many Blin immigrating to Europe, North America and the Middle East since the 1970s, a new market has also flourished for these singers. The Stockholm-based Blin community actively contributed to the distribution of such products, showing its solidarity with other actors in developing Blin music and songs. In this connection, several individuals and groups can illustrate the vigour and commitment on Blin music, songs and drama.

Since the mid 1980s, a famous singer by the name Hadjait Mendal conducted Blin songs and music under the auspices of the EPLF. The music group of the EPLF used to amuse its ranks and files and the public in the liberated areas; the different liberation songs were also sung through radio broadcasting for the public under the Ethiopian rule. It also travelled every year to Western European capital cities and the USA and Canada. All nine ethnic groups were represented in the music group. Although the Blin people had used nationalistic songs since the very establishment of ELF in 1961, Hadjait initiated the use of Blin songs in nationalist domain within and by a liberation front (EPLF), and that was exemplary in several senses. Her songs became practical as well as symbolic representations of the Blin people's role in the liberation movement. However, soemher the songs were not liked by the people. Yet, Hadjait's daring and pioneering role in representing the Blin people's desire to listen her *other* traditional songs can never be questioned. The use of Blin language in political mobilisation purposes by a liberation front was new experience in Blin language history. Moreover, Hadjait and Teages Frezghi also acted in the group's theatrical and drama activities, showing Blin rituals and youth roles. The EPLF tended to believe that mere show of ethnic songs and poems could spark interest among different peoples and get support from them. However, participation of different language groups in the decision making process was an issue that could be discussed. That is why the script issue of many languages was one-sidedly decided in Sahel, never open for better alternatives and never allowed to for a reform.

After independence, when people were celebrating their freedom through different practices, several groups started working on the development of Blin music and songs. One prominent group, called *Genda deban*, was established in the Halibmentel village in the summer of 1991. The Group perceives Blin language to be in a weaker position compared to the other eight Eritrean languages, urges for solidarity among Blin speakers to work for the 'development of Blin culture and language' (*Genda deban* 1992). Most of the members were refugee returnees from the Sudan who had substantial exposure to language contacts there. The Group used modern musical instruments, tape records and a videocassette to distribute its products, for the first time in Blin language history. It conducted drama and theatrical shows in different villages and urged Blin youngsters to 'be proud of being 'Blin', instead of looking for some 'other' identities among other Eritreans'. The 'other' refers here to Tigrinya. In its drama shows, the Group rebuked how mixing Tigrinya words in Blin dances and songs would lead to the advantage of the former at the expense of the latter. Although such 'ethno-nationalistic' ideas were prevalent since the 1970s, they were not recorded or distributed to the same extent. The Blin Community in Sweden started to work closely with this Group until it was dissolved in 1994, apparently due to lack of institutional support. The Provincial Administration consistently prohibited or limited meetings by Blin speakers interested to discuss the situation of Blin language, due to 'security reasons', it was held. Some of the young ladies who acted in the dramas got married and soon discontinued membership; some other male members lacked jobs and re-immigrated to the Sudan, while still others joined the compulsory Military services in Sawa, where Tigrinya takes over as the language of the military.

The traditional singers also re-focused their message to the development of language. Typical examples are Abrehe Ammar (2002) and Dafla Itman (Blin Language and Culture Development Committee at Senhit Province, 1997). They abhorred moral decadence, language mixing, and called Blin speakers to be conscious of their identity and place among the

different Eritrean peoples. They highlighted the significance of moral values such as endurance (*sebr*), patience (*aql*), carefulness (*jemal*). They attributed the worsening living conditions partly due to moral decadence, and requested young Blin speakers to not abandon their language, traditional values of solidarity (*teklib*) and mores (*mrwet*). The terms for these values were later on adopted as new child names in Sweden and elsewhere (See Table 1). Singers focused their attention to the situation of Blin language and culture, comparing the stage of its development to the other Eritrean languages. A singer from Sweden, Alamin Hasebela (1996), pioneered recording cassettes in Blin. His message is “we are still Blin even if we find ourselves scattered all over in the world”. From the USA, Medhanie Habte (1998) became the first Blin singer to synchronize Blin sounds in modern musical instruments, such as the guitar. Letemhret Woldehans (2001, 2003), also from the USA, emerged as a strong proponent of ‘modern’ Blin songs and music. The Halibmental Drama Group re-emerged as a strong proponent of Blin songs and drama by preparing videocassettes and tape-recorded cassettes. In one of their pioneering drama - *gerda gebignna* (2003, Don’t deny us our due’), they epitomize the newly project of Blin language revival, recount the contribution of Blin people during the liberation war, express their readiness to work in solidarity with others, and encourage youngsters to learn and commit to Blin culture and language, ‘as any other ethnic group is doing after independence’. The message carried with the assumption that now after Independence, people need to turn their attention to the development of culture and language, and leave alone conflict-laden policies and strategies.

Other emerging figures in traditional and modern Blin songs and poems are Habtat Zerezghi of Deroqw (Eritrea), Melekin, Elias Mesmer, the two sisters Yirgalem and Elsa Teklesenbet, Habtat. They all established different projects on songs, plays Blin drama, and calls for engagement in Blin language development, echoing the richness of the language in this field. They play and dramatize Blin rituals, youth life, wedding ceremonies, evaluates life after independence and regrets the lack of stability and peace in the region – in vivid Blin expression that, he holds, were told to him ‘by the elders – *the purses of Blin culture*’. The title of his songs and drama are more expressive and allude to the commitment of the young generation in reviving, energising, and maintaining Blin culture and language. He maintains: “We have rites and traditions that are markers of our identity”, and continue listing different varieties of them. His call is: ‘If we maintain our Blin identity through the language, rituals, hair style, clothing, etc., we remain people; but if we lose them, then we get lost, scattered among the different ethnic groups, with no name, place or identity’. From the above developments, it can fairly be said that younger Blin generations are getting more interest in Blin and try to use it in newer domains that have never been thought of a decade ago. The conclusion here is: *Blin is getting revitalized in the new domains of modern music, drama, theatre and songs through tape-recorded cassette, CD and videocassettes.*

In the meantime, sporadic works on Eritrean languages which referred to Blin culture have not been lacking. Most of such works were done on Tigrinya (Girmay 1999) or Tigre (Musa 1996) but mentioned the other Eritrean languages, including Blin, as if they were only losing ground. The supporters of the mother tongue education, however, rhetorically endorsed the ‘equality of all Eritrean languages’, even if the main formal discourse in Eritrean politics takes place either in Tigrinya, Arabic, or in English if one includes the electronic media as part of that discourse. Based on what he calls an ‘anthropological’ field study in Bogos, Kifleyesus concluded that “Bilin is at present a language with enough positive symbolism to

justify a lot of optimism for its survival” (2000: 86). However, his methodology is suspect (1). The work can be classified as the type of ‘anthropological’ work where the author shamelessly attempts to ‘force his theory to fit a reality’, a reality which he shaped to exist. This is due to his neglect of the domains that Abba Kiflemariam and others have observed that Blin got its nourishment to survival: tales, poems, narrative rituals, traditional practices, and initiation rites that has kept Blin alive for centuries. Although Kifleyesus notes in his conclusion that Blin may maintain its position as provider of ethnic Blin identity, he fails to look for hegemonic forces that have pressured the language to rather low status compared to the now growing Tigrinya as this is formally and hegemonic ally endorsed by the institutional and politician actors. Moreover, Kifleyesus misspells Blin authors by inserting unknown signs while he respects the spelling of non-Blin authors like himself (2) .

Concern on Blin customary practices that deal with the language also have appeared recently. Kifle Ajemel (2001/2, 59-60) describes about ‘one of the famous customs in the Blin culture, which is *Shngale* (Initiation)’ (2001/2, 58) and shows how the use of the language of initiation applies differently to different age groups, with special poems underlying the importance of the rite and the linguistic features of the rite. In a similar fashion, Yemanu Hailu (2002/3) explores the significance of traditional way of engagement and marriage in the Blin ethnic group, holding that conducting traditional Blin marriage is characterized by use of special language that it may be viewed as *the* carrier of that language. He also points out that abandonment of the customs and traditions in the society would lead to the loss of special forms of the Blin language. Both Yemanu and Kifl underline the intimate correlation between linguistic and cultural identities. The last two articles are rather based on the works by Paulos Zeremariam and Woldemariam Ikit (1986), respectively. Yet, the Blin language also constitutes a rich resource for another trend in the society – new child names.

#### 4.7 Blin language as a source of new child names

Personal names in any culture are a potential gold mine of information about social relationships, identity, history, and linguistic processes. Another trendy movement prevalent among many Eritreans, especially in the Diaspora, is the creation of new personal names for their children. Consciously or unconsciously, one way of the project of ‘maintaining’ and ‘transforming Blin identity’ can be described in terms of personal names. One way the Eritrean immigrants ‘live’ their identity in the Diaspora has been by calling their children Eritrean names, names that have not been common in Eritrea itself. This adjustment meant creating names peculiar to the new situation and where the names signified something important to the past experience, present conditions, and future wishes. Such names reflect the emotional, physical and immigration experiences of immigrant parents. Creating child-names, which reflect the culture, was not new for the Blin people, but the names were dominated by religion in the past. The pre-emigration generation had personal names that reflect either *religion* (Christian and Muslim names), *tradition* (ethnicity-based) or *family-specific names* (peculiar to the history or wishes of the parents). Religion-based names are still usual but they are not as innovative as the specifically language-based ones have become. Common Christian names are either Biblical like Betros (Peter), Michael, Gabriel and compound names that have an adjective expressing parent’s wishes in search of the support of a religious figure, like *Wolde-Mikael* (Mikael’s Son), *Welete-Mikael*

(Mikael's daughter), etc. Similarly, common Blin Muslim names follow Quranic names such as Mohammed, Ahmed, Zahra, etc.

Blin names based on tradition and family are also common. Family names are those which parents give a child from a deceased relative, believing the child and other concerned would always remember what happened to the former carriers of the name'. Examples include such names as *Afiet* (Health), *Anebi* (Save), *Berih* (Light), *Dafla* (Mature), *Dalyet* (Green), *Dar* (Livelihood), *Midiget* (Stable), *Nawd* (Our own), etc. Although both religious names and traditional, family names are still common, since the 1970s, new child names based simply on the language have become a trend. One can say that adapting Blin terms for personal, child names has become an *intended* strategy to 'maintain' the language. It is a way of coping with the uncertain future, as children names express continuity of the language (Bourdieu 1991). The names in the table below are directly adopted from the Blin language and created, adjusted or adopted for this purpose. The meaning of each name is given in parenthesis, but this does not mean that parents are limited to this definition. They were collected from parents through correspondence, personal acquaintance and telephone interviews. Moreover, these data collecting methods were gradual, and not administered at one specific time.

Table I. New child-names. (females (f) and males(m))

<i>Blin name</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>	<i>Blin name</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>
Adam (m)	Person	Mesuna (f, m)	Pillar
Amanet	Trust	Merwet (f, m)	Courage
Bekhit (m)	Chance (good)	Mihr (m)	Harvest
Benti	Portion/Belonging	Mrad (m)	Will, Wish
Blina	Blin	Munet (f)	Dinner
Dan (m)	Brother	Muza (f)	Tasty
Darkier (m)	Good livelihood	Niyet (f)	Commitment
Deheb	Gold		
Djanet	Heaven	Saba	Praise (verb)
Feden (m)	Seeds	Sabra (f)	Water pond
		Sada (m)	Hope
Ferhat (f,m)	Happiness	Sana (f)	Heap, High
Gedona (f)	Rejoice	Sendel (f)	Sweet (Smell)
Gowra (f)		Sergo (f)	Jewels, Beauty
Jaruwun (f)	God's Gift		
Kiseri (m)	Good news	Somit (f)	Colourful
Lannar (m)	Unity	Somay (m)	Colourful
Mada (m)	Friend	Tamit (f, m)	Taste (good)
Medet (m)	Epoch	Werena (f)	Harvest ground
Gowra (f),	Blessing		
Genja (f),	Tranuill, Sleep, Rest		

The names in the table show how the language is used in new domains and how Blin speakers try to 'revitalize' Blin in connection with their life situation. I have interviewed ten parents as to why they chose those names, and their straightforward answers were 'because we are Blin'. The trend is prevalent also among mixed marriage parents. In five mixed parent families, in London and Stockholm, seven of the 10 children bear new Blin names (Telephone interviews, September 20 2003). *Through these new child names, Blin language has become a source of symbolic affirmation of Blin identity.*

Which Blin names are getting out of fashion? Compound names and long names are getting unfashionable. Another trend among Blin immigrants is avoidance of names that have no direct sounds in the Latin script. Names that use gutturals and labials are losing ground. Thus, Blin names that carried such sounds as *q* (Qdsti), *ts* (Tsehaye), *ch* (Chebae), *T* (Timqetu), are becoming 'old fashioned'. This may be due to the desire of immigrants to use names that non-Blin can easily pronounce.

In the section above, I have described the increased commitment by many individuals and groups to use their language in new domains, and that these smaller projects have been made with conscious project to 'maintain' and 'revitalize' the Blin language. In this sense, Blin speakers can be described as agents of their culture, rather than bearing a culture that need not be maintained as if it were a thing out there. By engaging in different 'language and culture development' projects, Community members just construct the way the world looks for them and their children, which is a multilingual world, and reconstruct appropriate ways of living in this world. In the following section, I shall describe how the Blin speaking immigrants in Sweden constituted part of the movement for maintaining and revitalizing Blin.

## 5. The multilingual Blin in Sweden: Language and immigrants' coping strategies

I shall now discuss Blin immigrants' coping strategies as they face multilingual context. Then I shall describe the empirical method used to collect the information. This is followed by the Blin Community practices that constitute the centre for discussion in this section.

### 5.1 Blin immigrants' language coping strategies

The number of Eritreans in Sweden is difficult to know partly due to many Eritrean refugees and immigrants have been registered as Ethiopians in the 1980s and early 1990s. Eritrean community leaders estimate the number of Eritrean immigrants in Sweden to be around 10 000. They live scattered around the country. However, the trend has been many of them moving to the three bigger cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. There is also substantial number living in other smaller cities such as Båros, Vesterås, Jönköping, Uppsala, Umeå, and Karlstad. The trend for the last few years was that many Eritreans moved to the Stockholm area for obviously labour market reasons as well as other personal reasons. In the Stockholm area only, there are several thousands, scattered in the different communities of the city, and many of whom belong to Communities based on district. However, as far as I know, there has not been any systematic study about housing and residential distribution of Eritrean immigrants in Stockholm. There are no specific residential communities dominated by Eritreans, but the Husby/Kista district in Stockholm is a home of many Eritreans who lacked housing in other areas or who willingly moved to live along their original country people.

It is also difficult to know the exact number of different Eritrean ethno linguistic groups and this applies particularly to the Blin speakers. The picture gets complicated when one realizes that many Blin also use Tigre, Tigrinya and Arabic in their communication. It makes clear linguistic identification a bit difficult. Yet it does not mean that individuals, for instance those speaking Tigre or Tigrinya, do not identify with the Blin ethnic group. One way to know about the size of different ethnic groups is by looking for ethnically organized communities. There are many Eritrean Communities in almost all towns and cities but they are dominated either by Tigrinya speakers or Arabic favoring Eritreans. The two national level Eritrean Associations follow this dualistic pattern, exhibiting some historical tendencies among Eritrean liberation movement fronts (Redie 2002). In between these two nation level associations, with their corresponding local community members, one finds the case of Blin speakers organized in the Stockholm-based *Blin Community*. This is the focus of the paper as far as Blin language maintenance and revitalization is concerned. However, we shall also discuss inter-ethnic interactions, which necessitated the use of Tigrinya language (See below)

Wherever they are, multilingualism enables the Blin speakers to use the different languages in different domains. The pattern of multilingualism described above can also be observed in the Diaspora (Kiflemariam 2000). The question to be investigated is the consequences of multilingualism for the future of their language. In the Diaspora the Blin speakers interact not only with other Eritreans but also have to master another 'official' language

prevailing in the host country. Moreover, relative to Blin speakers, the implications of immigration are a bit different for a Tigrinya and Tigre speakers Eritrean. If one adds the dimension of religion, the picture gets 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, it is quite complicated for Blin immigrants. The latter have an additional concern: they need to speak Blin at home, train 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 immigrants pupils while Blin was not provided to the same extent, or even absent in that domain. The Blin speakers thus faced demanding alternatives. How have the Blin immigrants faced the situation?

From observations of the behavior of immigrants, three strategic responses a characterize many Blin speakers. The first strategy is when Christian Blin parents chose Tigrinya as a home language for their children. This strategy somehow is based on the socio-historical grounds when the Eritrean Federal government in the 1950s posed Tigrinya as the best official language for Christians and perhaps also reflected the liberation movement emphasis on the significance of Tigrinya for an independent Eritrea. This leads to the direct loss of Blin for children who learn Tigrinya as their first language. 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 *shift* to Tigrinya and Swedish.

The second strategy consists of those who choose neither Arabic nor Tigrinya and never attempted to work for Blin either. Instead they have left their children follow the majority by letting them learn and study Swedish. Swedish takes over both in all informal as it does in the formal domains. The parents may be afraid of assimilation at several levels and the difficulties posed by it. This has especially to do with fearing assimilating into the Arabic/Tigrinya bloc, and also at the host country level. The parents let their children excel in Swedish and leave alone Arabic or Tigrinya, as these are not considered ‘home languages’. They are afraid of the assimilation posed at the Eritrean societal level, the domain where politics and religion predominate. This alternative leads directly to a shift to Swedish but the second-generation is encouraged to identify with Blin at ethnic level. Parents in both alternatives express their commitment with Blin at the Ethnic level, but the extent to which shifted language may not also lead to shifted ethnicity is remains an open question.

The third alternative is that of both maintaining and revitalizing Blin language. To meet the demands for *maintaining* their language and culture as well as *transfer* them to their children, parents establish a non-political, non-religious community, which is also encouraged by the Swedish free association culture. However the assimilation-oriented ‘other’ groups, especially the Arabic/Tigrinya speaking bloc dislike this alternative as ‘divisive’. There were several occasions when Community members complained about stigmatizing individuals from majority groups members. They would like to see Eritrean ethnic groups choosing either Arabic but mainly Tigrinya in their new country. Many Tigrinya speakers take it for granted that all Eritrean should be able to speak the language, teach their children Tigrinya and thus integrate to the Eritrean society. But adherents to the third alternative argue that they are already Eritreans,

with their own language and their own distinct ethnic identity. As most Blin Muslims identify at religion level, Arabic functions a common factor that unites them. For a Blin speaking Muslim, the Arabic alternative is an easier one because the language is one of those highly accessible in the Swedish school system as a mother tongue. Compared to the tiny Blin community scattered all over Sweden, immigrants speaking Arabic are more organized in terms of home tongue education and this constitutes a choice for a Blin Muslim. For a Christian Blin, the choice of Tigrinya may not be as straightforward as is the case for a Muslim Blin. The consequences may be different for both groups. The second generation is exposed to a shift to Arabic but the Christians increasingly express interest in maintaining, even revitalizing, Blin, with a shift to Tigrinya avoided, in principle. The Stockholm-based community, the Blin Community in the UK, and the Blin Language and Culture Association in Oslo are good examples of this alternative. .

These strategies do not include responses by Blin immigrants who live in mixed marriages with any of the two ethnic groups mentioned above. Most mixed marriage families follow either Arabic (Muslims) or Tigrinya (Christians) while the Blin speaking partner lives or expresses ones ethnic identity through joining the association at least symbolically, assembling occasionally on festivities, or simply living in one's private life. In the following paragraph, I shall focus mainly on the Community practices.

## 5.2 Method

In addition to the observation method, a survey consisting of twenty questions was mailed to twenty Blin speakers in Stockholm in December 2000, with a response rate of seventeen. Out of the questions, I have selected the following issues: when, with whom, where respondents speak Blin (Kiflemariam 2000). The multilingual character of Blin speakers is reflected both in the way the questions have been structured as well as in the responses. I shall describe the shift between, or mix, with other relevant Eritrean languages - Arabic, Tigrinya and Tigre. Swedish does not compete with other Eritrean languages but it comes into picture at the family level, education and, for adults, work. The respondents are between 30 and 50 years of age. Fifteen of the seventeen respondents understand Arabic, Tigre and Tigrinya. Two understand both Tigre and Tigrinya but not Arabic. Seven out of 15 hold that they speak Blin only when they meet somebody who understands Blin. Six practice Blin at home, while two speak Blin only with their friends. Twelve of the respondents, however, have never spoken Blin on daily basis, that is they speak Blin occasionally. The figure for parents who speak Blin to their children is 8 of 15. One communicates with children in Tigrinya while one parent mixes Blin with Tigrinya. Three of the respondents are not parents. With children, one parent exclusively communicates in Swedish. Almost all the respondents hold that they use Arabic, Tigrinya or Blin in Eritrean politics. This is also similar for religious services. Politics and religion are not domains that Blin immigrants practice alone. Ten of fifteen listen Tigrinya and Tigre music, almost all listen Blin Music, and two Tigre and Arabic music.

The respondents also listen to Tigre, Tigrinya or Arabic music. Music in Arabic can be explained for the periodic stay in the Sudan of these respondents before they traveled to Europe. However some aspects of Blin music is related to other aspects of Tigre music. Fifteen of the 18 respondents are from Christian families and use Geez, Tigrinya and Blin as their

religious languages. One of the questions dealt with some 'psychological issues that can be less affected by the outside world, that is, dream. The language in which respondents dream often is Blin or mixed with Arabic, Tigre or Tigrinya. One dreams in Arabic, 8 mixed, six in only Blin. Another question that was directed to home language training asks respondents if they wish to send their children to Blin training sessions (home language). Almost all respondents said that this could be an ideal achievement for their children. Such sessions were provided in the early years in Stockholm (1989-1994) but were discontinued when the regulation of five children in each commune was introduced in 1993. However, since October 2003, another Blin Community in Umeå started home language instruction for six children. Almost all respondents hold that a lot is being done nowadays to develop Blin.

### 5.3 The Role of Blin Community on Blin language revitalization

The formal and main objective of the Blin Community is to maintain and develop the Blin language. The by-laws of the Community put both the ethnic dimension and linguistic place Blin among the other Eritrean languages. The main goal of the Community reads as follows.

The aim of the community is to *preserve* (maintain, keep) and *develop* the language and culture, as well as *transmit* them to our children. The community is neither politics- nor religion-bound (that is free from politics and religion) (Community Rules 1999: 1).

Both language and culture are understood to underlie Blin identity and no attempt is made to define what a culture is. Culture is simply taken to constitute the different oral, written, and ritual practices that give meaning to the people who perform them. The two goals of language and culture (or ethnic identity) *maintenance* and *development* (*revitalization, revival*) are central in the Rules. Even if the regulation of the Community is not so much important in daily contacts, it is important in symbolic ways: membership entails engagement in language and culture development. Formally, membership in the Community is open to all interested applicants who accept its regulations, and this is regardless of ethnic or linguistic adherence. Yet, the official languages of the Community are Blin and Swedish for legal matters. Inter-ethnic communication is sometimes possible by distributing flyers or informing about meeting sessions in Tigrinya. This is a very flexible approach because it takes into consideration the character of language integration and language competence of members. While other activities related to Eritrea are jointly performed with other Eritreans, mainly in Tigrinya and to a certain extent in Arabic, the language issue has constituted an important factor of identification for the Blin. The type of identification is one based on language competence to varying degrees, and commitment to develop or even practice Blin culture. By culture, the Community connotes periodical and seasonal events, such as festivities, folk songs, showing Blin dress styles, telling stories and fables, and also instructing children why they are Blin. In this context, the Blin language constitutes a means of communicating and a symbol of identifying at the level of Blin ethnicity. The Community members thus engage in many different practices to achieve the goal, using their language.

## 5.4 Blin as a language of the Community

The following are some of the intentional strategies that the Community encourages as part of its project for maintaining Blin.

### Speaking Blin

When one immigrates to a different region or country, the immediate need for the individual is speaking one's own language. Language in such a situation serves not only a tool of communication but also a 'need' to be satisfied. Speaking your own mother tongue is most associated with partly living a similar life before the migration took place. It may also be one way of 'living your identity'. Thus, Blin immigrants usually keep their language in the priority, and usually associate with people who can speak it. Although it is difficult to relate this need to forming an association, most often than not, associations established by a similar language group have emphasized language as a unique heritage but one that needs continuous development and nourishment to survive. Speaking Blin with colleagues is an exciting experience, both for instrumental reasons as well as symbolic purposes: It is a means of communication but mainly a mark of identity. Blin serves in satisfying psychological needs for expressing one's ideas without stress or uncertainty – a situation that adult immigrants are exposed to daily. In the monthly meetings, members use to joke, smile, and tell stories, proverbs, new child names, and even comment on the level of the proficiency of different individual speakers. For the community members, conversations and dialogue in Blin, that is speaking the Blin language, is itself valued in its own right.

### Language maintenance through literary efforts

One of the radical changes in the literary history of the Community was that its 'Community rules', activities, plans and performance reports were written in Blin using the Geez script. Writing 'Community rules' in Blin means having recourse to the institutional vocabulary of traditional organizing principles in Eritrea (Kiflemariam 2002). The formal terms for organized activities and units such as a leader, board, member, annual meeting, festivity, etc are all taken from the oral tradition in the society, unwritten previously. However, this language was closely infused with Swedish practice and other relevant influences members have borne through their journey towards their current context. The senior members especially are viewed as resources (knowledge, material things, creating commitment and feelings of solidarity) as if they were living their lives in Eritrea (Kiflemariam 2003). Yet the process entailed creating new terms in Swedish such as '*förening*' (Community), *stadgaar* (Rules). This exercise involved a certain form of adopting or 'transmitting' practices from the memories of members to the current context. This is reminiscent of the purpose of the Community where it holds the twin goals of the 'identity maintaining' role as well as identity transforming role' of the Blin language and culture.

### Blin language revitalization workshops

The Blin Community organized two types of Workshops in 2001 and 2002. In 2001, the Community invited two writers who were involved in the efforts of writing the language by preparing grammatical and other material. The third workshop dealt with adaptation conditions of Eritrean women in Swedish society, with special reference to Blin women. The workshops were 'tightly coupled' with the 'Blin Community goal of 'maintaining' and 'developing' Blin

language. The language in the workshops was Blin, which was intentionally done to encourage use of the language in discussion and workshops. The Culture and Community branch of the Municipality of Stockholm financed one of the workshops.

#### Home language education and Saturday schools

The Swedish social policy provides mother tongue education in public schools. This was found to be a just policy and many immigrant communities make use of this policy as one of their main 'language' maintenance' and transmission' measures. In the Stockholm County, Blin language was taught to children for around four years between 1989 and 1994. It would be interesting to evaluate the impact of mother tongue instruction for those groups who have participated in the programme, and compare them with those who didn't. Since 2003, the Blin community in Umeå also has applied for home language education in the public schools, and at least seven children are benefiting from this programme. Moreover, four Blin families have been arranging Saturday Blin lessons, music and folk tales for the children since November 2001. This has been liked both by the parents and the children who call the meetings as 'Blin festival'. In the Saturday Blin instruction session prepared by four families since 2001 in Umeå, Sweden, the children mastered the names of wild and domestic animals, parts of the body, week days, months and seasons, family relationships, as well as movement words such as running, going, etc. All these are available in Blin but not terms for modern technology and these are borrowed from Swedish and to some extent, also English.

#### Language maintenance through folk music and traditional dances

In addition to the daily use of the language in family or in the private sphere, it also serves its speakers in formal occasions such as wedding, and most often in other communicative encounters. Yet, the annual formal festivities have the purpose of using 'Blin' in communication. Singing the songs in one's own language is viewed most often as making the language living, satisfying individual's need for expression and emotional well being as well as joining with the ingroup in the event of joy and festivity.

#### Blin as a symbol of ethnic identity

Regardless of the level of language proficiency in the language, Blin represents a symbolic identity marker for urbanised Blin who speak the language in varying degrees, and those who were raised in the Sudan and elsewhere. Most often both groups are multilingual with multiple identifications. The symbolic function of the language is expressed through positive attitudes to it and also through readiness to learn the language. This helps them to identify with the mother tongue speakers at the ethnic level. It is surprising to see that Blin parents who have chosen a different home language instruction for their children have increasingly committed to the identity project. As Fishman puts it, 'The link between ethnicities and the especial languages that have traditionally associated with them will always be associated with some of the most positive attributions and achievements of human life'. Symbolically, identifying with the Blin ethnic group functions a form of living the 'best of being Blin' in Sweden. So, it is not merely a matter of speaking the language but also expressing one's ethnic identity that is associated with it.

#### Blin in wedding ceremonies

In Eritrea, urban Blin speaking people write wedding invitation cards in Tigrinya. In 1991-1992 Annual meeting, the members of the Community intentionally encouraged each other to conduct wedding ceremonies in the Blin language. Thus, the immigrants in Sweden, Norway and the UK have intentionally started writing invitation cards and wedding programs in Blin. Since 1991, this author participated in 10 wedding ceremonies when they were conducted in Blin to varying degrees but the very groom blessing had to be done in Blin because ‘that is how to bless a Blin bride groom’, as one of elders held it. In one case, the invitation cards were written in Blin and English. In six cases, they were in Blin, Tigrinya, and Swedish. In the context of mixed audiences, the use of Blin wedding ceremonies has become a strong marker of ethnicity (Kiflemariam 2003). In the wedding ceremonies, such as the groom blessing, the language has to be used without mixing it with Tigre or Tigrinya.

### 5.5 Inter-ethnic interaction with other Eritrean Associations in Sweden (read: Tigrinya)

The Blin Community also approaches other Eritrean associations by making use of its language as the marker of difference; by doing this, it simultaneously claims and confirms belonging to the national Eritrean society. I shall narrate how the Blin Community has been engaged in certain practices as it encountered other Eritrean communities, which constitutes its immediate environment. This does not mean that all the members who participated in the following ‘practices’ were actively organised as members of the Community, but the Community was the background for being engaged uniquely with ‘other’ Eritrean associations. The practices that single individuals have been engaged in (political organisations or neighbourhood associations) together with other Eritreans are not discussed here, as they do not directly deal with language issues. The discussed encounters with ‘other’ Eritrean associations are: discussions to joining in the Stockholm county-level Eritrean Association forum (1993-1994) and participation to performing Blin dances (1993) and literary work (1998) on the occasion of Eritrean Independence celebration.

#### *Project to join the county of Stockholm Eritrean Association forum (1993-1994)*

The Blin Community faced other 36 Eritrean associations to discuss common forum, or even to merger in some form. The project was whether other associations could register under the existing confederation or form a new one. The Blin Community was not invited at first, but it later on joined the discussions, but withdrew from the on going discussion due to several reasons, one of which was that it considered the other associations as having a political agenda and also dominate by one-language. The Community also presented itself as one providing ‘ethnic and social identity’ to its members and also ready work for multilingual and multicultural aspect of Eritrean immigrants in Sweden. However, after a year of debates and discussions, the majority of the associations agreed to work for projects which would enhance an ‘Eritrean identity’, challenging the Blin Community to join them if it abandons its emphasize on ‘Blin language and culture’ but opt for ‘Eritrean language and Culture’. . For the Community, the metaphor ‘Eritrean languages’ supported by the majority of the associations was rather the same as if Blin was not one of those languages. Although talking about nine ethnic groups was and is common in Eritrea itself, the Tigrinya dominated associations tended to towards assimilating

other ethnic groups in the Diaspora. The final decision to organize geographical, district-based joint association was rejected also by the Blin Community speakers because they were afraid that the bigger Tigrinya membership could overwhelm Blin interests and language. However, the social structure, especially the history of Eritrean immigrants in this country, had both facilitating and constraining effects on this effort.

#### *Independence celebration in Stockholm (1993 and 1998)*

Perhaps, this was the second formal presentation of the Blin speakers' as a group, amongst other Eritreans. The stage was the First Independence Celebration, after Eritrean people successfully voted for independence in the 1993 referendum. The Celebration was formally organised by the Eritrean festival committee in cooperation with representatives of the then Provisional Government or the (former) EPLF. Although dancing, showing the typical Blin dance *golya*, was the main identity-expressing act in front of the festivity participants, the group action had more significance than the mere music or dance. The 'golya' dance had a symbolic meaning to all Eritreans. The songs and music of other Eritrean ethnic groups was performed by a youngster group called 'Youngsters' Culture Group' (*bahli Hdri*) but the Blin Community members got the opportunity to appear as 'Blin' in the first formal Independence celebration. They presented themselves, and constructed a social identity that was also recognised as such by other Eritrean ethnic group members as well as the participants of the celebration festivity.

In spring 1998, the committee for Eritrean festivities invited interested writers to compete on the occasion of the Independence in that year. Unfortunately, the month of May 1998 was not good one for Eritreans. The border war with Ethiopia had already broken out between the two belligerent countries, and Independence was very much influenced by that sad event. Yet, the preparations to write papers in Eritrean languages had already been going on for over two months. Including the children's writings (one Blin poem), 14 papers (poems and verses) were reported for reading, ten in Tigrinya and four in Blin and none in other languages. After three Tigrinya and one Blin writers read their papers, the festival arrangers did not see it feasible to allow the three Blin writers read their papers. Instead, all writers were evaluated to have equally contributed to the success of the competition, and all were rewarded with awards, leading to mixed feelings and reactions from many of the writers. This again was an expressive moment for re-defining Blin ethnicity as well as Eritrean nationalism. Blin writers viewed this as an opportunity to express their language in writing among other Eritreans. The negotiated social identity was one that could be said to have worked for them. However, such inter-ethnic practices have been discontinued due to political reasons. However, the attempts for joint projects between the Community and the other Eritrean associations show that both language groups have diverging views on both nationalism and ethnicity.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

The situation of Blin is an interesting case of language contact and its implications. This contact was explored in the context of multilingualism among the Blin speakers, with special reference to the immigrants in Sweden. It was argued that Blin language provides a meaning to its speakers as they encounter other Eritreans who speak different languages, and communicating in Blin enhances their Blin-ness (*blinnar*) as well as their Eritrean-ness (*ertrinnar*) – double identity.

This is in addition to the identity on formation in the host country, that is, Swedish-ness (*swedinnar*). Thus, for the majority Blin speaking immigrants in Sweden, Blin serves at home and at the Community level; Tigre and Tigrinya serve in inter-ethnic interaction with speakers of both languages, and Arabic and Tigrinya also serve both religious and political purposes. Swedish serves in official domains such as education, the labor market and daily interaction with ‘other’ non-Eritreans. Observation has shown that that, in a single day, a Blin speaking individual shifts language between Blin, Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic and Swedish. With youngsters and children, parents may be limited to few of these languages. The question then, is: *What are the prospects of the Blin language for coming (or second?) generations in Sweden?* The answer depends upon whether the parents are both Blin speakers or not; it also depends upon the strategies followed by parents in choosing Blin or one of the other Eritrean languages as a ‘home language’.

The paper dealt with those who choose Blin as home language and also those who try to maintain their ethnic identity regardless of home language instruction. The paper did not deal with those who chose Tigrinya or Arabic as their ‘home language’. Yet, even in cases where the second-generation of Blin immigrant have already shifted to Tigrinya, Arabic or Swedish, one can still witness first generation adults actively engaging themselves in Blin local communities, especially in Umeå and Stockholm. Moreover, the engagement to Blin language and culture cannot be seen only in instrumental or pragmatic terms - the committed individuals are promoting the development and progress of their language - but also due to the paradoxical nature of multiple identification with ‘other’ Eritrean communities, which eagerly invite non-Tigrinya speakers as members but demand assimilation of the Blin into either Tigrinya or Arabic, or both. Instead, the first generation Blin speakers actively identify with the Blin ethnic group at the same time they identify more or less with other Eritreans. The paradox lies in the processes involved in social identification and cultural identification. Culturally, Blin speakers in Sweden do identify at least symbolically with Blin Community. Socially, they also belong to different religious, political or even cultural groups but they identify with the Blin ethnic group by showing a positive attitude to their ethnicity. There is a widespread saying among the Blin immigrants in Europe: ‘One who understands Blin but avoids speaking it is but a disappointment’ (*blina aku blin gabegaxw mrwet shaxla*). This disappointment is equated with minimizing one’s identity. Considering themselves Blin provides a distinct identity from those groupings to which they belong. They show some markers of this ethnic identification by giving their children Blin names, or even subjectively express that they are Blin regardless of whether they are active or not. The question as to whether what the Blin immigrants do leads to Blin language maintenance, shift, or even its death in this country, can thus have several implications. However, that the Community engages itself with different ‘language and culture development’ projects attests to some positive pointers towards maintenance and, to a certain extent, revitalization of Blin, at least for the first generation. The consciously organized projects by Community members to work for Blin language and culture maintenance show encouraging measures but not sufficient enough to curtail gradual weakening of the language.

The Community members primarily emphasize speaking the language. Yet, Blin is more than a language. In the words of Kifleyesus, one can hold that “‘being Blin’ ultimately involves the use of cultural markers in the everyday life of a Bilin community’ (2000: 87). By emphasizing on speaking the language, Community members do not exclude other markers of

Blin identity. Being able to speak and use the language in several domains objectifies the *distinctiveness* as being a *Blina* among ‘other’ Eritrean ethnic groups. This poses additional challenges to those adults who identify themselves as Blin but did not get the opportunity to learn it due to diverse reasons. This challenge, however, is easily managed by letting members communicate in any language but be patient when official annual meeting takes place in Blin. More challenging, and an issue that many Blin speakers work for, is how to teach young children Blin, and how to also associate with other Eritreans without losing Blin. Shortly put, the challenge implies shift between multiple identities: Blin identity through the Blin language and culture, and an Eritrean identity by associating themselves with other Eritreans whose language the Blin speakers are afraid dominating them. There is an also third identity, the Swedish language, which is indispensable at formal domains, and also one that the younger generation claims ‘to be’.

For the Blin Community, flexibility in using other language shows one’s competence and qualification to communicate widely and across ethnic groups. Yet, there is an understanding among non-Tigrinya immigrants that the Tigrinya-dominated Associations in the Diaspora do not allow for a multilingual context because the level and room for respect for ‘others’ are low (For instance, see the Kunama website, Eritrean-kunama.net). Participation in many Eritrean meetings proves that non-use of Tigrinya is viewed as betraying one’s identity. As a result, many Blin speakers have tended to avoid membership in mainly Tigrinya dominated associations because they risk communicating only in Tigrinya. These issues have been reported in several Blin Community annual meetings in the 1990s. Thus, the emphasis of the Blin Community on distinction in terms of language and culture, and at the same time underlying one’s national position as Eritreans, originates from such dissatisfying experiences. Blin language serves psychological, social, and symbolic purposes, especially when one takes into consideration the sparse number of Blin speakers – the minority among the minority. Yet, competence on Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic to a certain extent compensates the possible isolation from limiting oneself into a Blin enclave. What is required is a broader multilingual context where different Eritrean immigrants get forum for development in their respective interests without excluding each other.

The paper examined how the Blin language is undergoing some developments in terms of orthography ((Tekie 1992; Tekleghioghis 1992), use in new domains such as cassette and dramas, education and other literary works (Bogos 1992, 2001). It also explored the gradual but promising steps taken by the Blin Community in Sweden to transmit the language to second generations. The role of the Community was especially important here. The paper reveals that only a few Blin children in Sweden at the moment get instruction on the home language, sandwiched as they are between Tigrinya and Arabic speaking Eritreans. The pressure to follow either of the two is such pressing that Blin speakers are forced to send their children to one of them. As Blin speakers identify themselves greatly with their language, the implication - of not getting instruction (for children) - means shaping an identity that fits neither the Swedish community because they lack home support, nor the Eritrean majority community for they do not speak Tigrinya or Arabic. Although the adult Blin immigrants are aware of being torn between two societies and two cultures, the emphasis on home language education, new child names, living the oral tradition in terms of music etc facilitate the difficult but useful project of language maintenance. The Community also worked as a form of expressing Blin ethnic identity. For the

Community, Blin, in the words of Kifleysus, 'is ... cultural and political identity which is both ascribed and achieved' (2000: 86). The Community emphasizes the *distinctiveness* in having one's own language, which constitutes a marker of ethnic identity among the different Eritrean groups in Sweden. Blin speakers in Sweden put heavy emphasis on their language as it expresses 'who they are' which needs to be addressed in the social policy of the local communities. Local social policy needs to take into consideration the literature, traditions and cultural artifacts that the Community fosters as its background material for development. In addition, projects that promote the Blin children's 'Eritrean'-ness' as well as Swedish-ness' need to be studied further – both academically and practically. After all, language is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of status and distinctiveness for its speakers. In this connection, I concur with Fishman when he holds that "language maintenance and language shift are not just topics that constitute the sociolinguistic enterprise; they are processes that are part and parcel of the very agony and the very joy of individual and collective life itself" (1992: 403).

Although the paper dealt with how language could become an identity maintaining and identity-constructing tool for the Blin immigrant community, an alternative framework would be a focus on the organization level. Different organizational aspects could be raised and analyzed about 'immigrant communities', such as their leadership structure, organizational culture, handling of conflict, etc., and examine the extent to which these affect language maintenance. The most interesting study would take the path of leadership and decision-making practices of and by immigrant organizations, how ideology (political) shapes views on reality and knowledge formation as well as the pressing issues of multilingualism. The political nature of Eritrean Associations, regardless of their formal position that they are neutral from religion and politics, is an interesting factor to understand ethnic identity in an immigrant context. The mutual influence of political identification and cultural identification is an important topic having implications for integration even in the Swedish society. As for the Blin, integration implies a multidimensional approach.

The Blin immigrants are exposed to multi-dimensional demands for integration as their competence in different languages allows them. This shows the extent to which integration at one level (Eritrean level) affects differentiation at ethnic group level. The Blin immigrants are also aware of the strength of Tigrinya and consequently borrow or use certain Tigrinya words in politics and to a certain extent in religion (Christianity). Although many Blin parents express their attitude to such borrowing as a necessary adaptation to the situation they find themselves in, they are also ambivalent towards it. They are afraid of this similar 'other' gradually leading to weakening or abandoning of Blin language. This is to conclude that multilingualism among the Blin provides a simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. As Eritreans in Sweden, they identify with others, and say 'we'. As Blin speakers, they identify as such and say 'we', which also means excluding non-Blin speaking Eritreans as 'they'. Yet, it is not always clear where the boundary between 'we' and 'they' lies. Belonging to a certain social group, or defining oneself as such, may not connote any clear-cut boundaries that would include some and exclude others. Drawing such simplistic boundaries, although inevitable in the context of inter-ethnic interactions, needs to be taken seriously, and not at too generalised, institutionalised level. Moreover, the institutional support one of these languages gets makes inter-ethnic competition and differentiation a necessity. For instance, the institutional support Tigrinya gets in modern Eritrean political life and in host countries

should not inhibit development of other ‘minority’ languages such as Blin. In this sense, the Swedish policy should be extended to creating forum for development of smaller language groups such as the Blin Community, rather than being confined to the regional majority language, such as Tigrinya. Although the Blin Community is smaller in terms of size than the two dominating Eritrean Associations, the Tigrinya-based (*emash*) and the religion-based Association of Eritrean Moslems in Sweden, the identity it provides to members is no less more than any other one. Language rights rather than numerical superiority should be the criterion for integration and institutional support, such as home language education for immigrant children. A just policy would take this into consideration and provide support for Blin parents with appropriate measures so that the Blin community would ease the multiple, undesirable influences it so far has faced in its current world, and the author believes that integration should not simply be viewed at the Swedish society level. Intermediate integration among speakers of different languages from the same country should be given proper attention.

At the level of Swedish society, Blin immigrants increasingly use Swedish terms on travel, domestic appliances, television, and in working life such as absenteeism, employment issues, unemployment, etc. They also increasingly use Swedish terms for technological and modern aspects of lives, education, etc. There are no direct correspondents in Blin for the Swedish terms in mass media, such as used in debates, music festivals, parliamentarian activities, legal terms etc. The terms are directly being borrowed into Blin, and to be a Blina in Sweden is rather to mix Blin and Swedish to varying degrees. This alludes to the fact that many Blin children are in fact getting to be bilinguals in both Swedish and Blin. The case of Blin speakers have shown that the burden to assimilation is so pressing that not only the parents but also their children are forced to learning several languages at the same time: Blin, Tigrinya or Arabic, and Swedish. In this sense, parent should be provided support to help children integrate at all levels, for instance by financing Saturday forums where children and parents gather as ‘community members’ and where different families exchange their experience in being integrated (or perhaps isolated).

It is concluded that the conditions under which Blin language is being revitalized in Sweden may not pose sufficient grounds for its survival but, regardless of whether parents are actively contributing to its development or not, the language enhances Blin (ethnic) identity both for first generation and second generation individuals. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear for Blin speakers that commitment and engagement are crucial for the survival of Blin language in the second generation. The language helps them to see themselves as one people. Towards that goal, different projects are being devised. However, engagement by parents and Community requires enhanced institutional support, such as well planned home language instruction, and an adequate forum for workshops and seminars where the Blin speakers would be able to discuss and develop ideas for language and culture development. Because the Blin speakers in general, Blin Community members in Sweden, believe that the language is being threatened to a certain extent, they tend to engage more in its development.

Finally, the paper has a contribution in the sense of putting the ground for deeper analysis of the extent to which the Blin speaking immigrants’ claimed goals for maintaining and

developing Blin language enhance host society's policies for integration, or perhaps dilutes integration.

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## Notes

- 1) Kifleyesu falsely claims 'Some Blin are employed as herders by the Tigrä pastoralists', Footnote 19, and page 77. In fact the reverse was true at least until the 1970s. The Blin People's social organisation did not allow them to be employed as herders of other Ethnic groups in Eritrea.
- 2) Kifleysus keeps the spelling of his own name right while he misquotes, intentionally or by negligence, all Blin authors, such as Abba Kiflä Maryam, inserting an unknown letter, instead of Kiflemariam. If he were following certain commonly agreed upon usage, he would have written his own name as Kiflä Yasus, or simply respect the way Blin authors write theirs – yet another experiment with names.

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## **Appendix 1. Other sources and data collecting methods**

### Correspondence letters

- Abba Kidane Yebio. Letter from the Blin Language Group who translated the Primary School curriculum into Blin, Asmara, addressed to Blin Community in Stockholm. 'On the situation of Blin in education'. February 13, 1992
- Genda Deban, Drama and Theatre Group in Halibmentl. Letter addressed to Blin Community in Stockholm, January 15, 1992
- Letter to the Blin Language Group who translated the Primary School curriculum into Blin, Asmara by four authors from Stockholm, February 1992.
- Letter to the head newly formed state of Eritrea, from Mr Kiflemariam Hamde and Mr Fessahatsion Zemichael, students at the Stockholm University, July 16, 1991
- Letter from Mr Beraki Gebreselassie, head of the Department of Education, Asmara, dated September 16 1991.
- Letter to the head of the newly formed state of Eritrea, from Mr Kiflemariam Hamde and Mr Fessahatsion Zemichael, students at the Stockholm University, July 16, 1991

### CD, Tape-recorded cassettes, Videocassettes

- Abrehe Ammar (1985). Poems and music, tape-recorded cassette. By different recorders, Keren, Eritrea
- Abrehe Ammar (2002) A Videocassette on Blin Ethnic Group's musical show in Annual Eritrean Festival, Asmara, Eritrea
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- Elias Mesmer (2003) Tape-recorded cassettes, Keren
- Habtat Zerezghi (2002, 2003) Tape-recorded cassettes and a videocassette, *yina awadi*, Keren, Eritrea
- Hadjait Mendal (Since 1980s) Diverse tape-recorded cassettes by the EPLF Music group
- Gebremariam Woldemichael (1993). 'Selam Blen'. Tape-recorded cassette, Germany
- Genda Deban* (1992) Drama, music and dances. A Video cassette by the group
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- Lelekin (2002), Tape-recorded cassettes, Keren, Eritrea
- Letemhret Woldehans (2001, 2003) Tape-recorded cassettes and CD, Asmara and USA
- Medhanie Habte (1997), Tape-recorded cassettes, USA
- Melekin (2002) Tape-recorded cassette, Keren, Eritrea

Selim Debesay (1994) A Video Cassette of Blin alphabets for children. Lidköping, Sweden  
Yirgalem and Elsa Teklesenbet. Tape-recorded cassettes, Video cassettes, and a CD, Keren,  
2003.

Television debate on mother tongue education in Eritrea

Mr Osman Saleh, Eritrean Minister of Education, TV Rahwa, Interview by Kiros Frewoldu,  
Stockholm, November 15 2000,  
Kiflemariam Hamde, Interview and debate on script and language, TV Rahwa, Interview by  
Kiros Frewoldu. Stockholm, November 22, 2000

**Interviews**

Oral Interviews: Sawa recruits (two anonymous), September 20, 1995, Keren, Eritrea, and  
August 21, 1996, Asmara, Eritrea,  
Telephone interviews: On new child names (in different times).

\*Eritrean, single authors are entered in the first names, followed by father's name