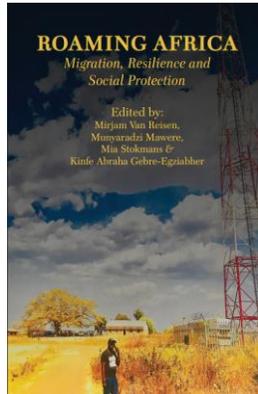


# Standing in Two Worlds: Mobility and the Connectivity of Diaspora Communities

*Antony Otieno Ong'ayo*

## Chapter in: Roaming Africa: Migration, Resilience and Social Protection

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## Chapter 7

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# Standing in Two Worlds: Mobility and the Connectivity of Diaspora Communities

*Antony Otieno Ong'ayo*

### Introduction

Global diaspora communities have changed rapidly over the past decades with expanding digital connectivity, although access remains varied in different parts of the world. As stated in Castells' (1996) seminal work on *The Rise of the Network Society*, information and communication technology (ICT) has had a major impact on migration. International migration has generated what Vertovec calls "super-diversity", which describes "new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024), and is influenced by both global and local social processes. The result has been the emergence of diaspora communities in various destination countries, whose ties to their country of origin remain,

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*Diaspora communities live in an online/offline world of between their places of origin in Europe and Africa – the 'here' and 'there'. This chapter looks at this connectivity and how it affects their mobility and transnational engagement. It finds that the online platforms established by diasporas enable them to transfer money and skills (financial and social remittances), with significant socio-economic and political impact in both places. The chapter points to the reality of diaspora communities in the digital world, where they take part in life in different spaces. The cyber-presence of diasporas in more than one world drives mobility through connectivity and needs to be recognised in migration studies.*

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despite the disconnection that migrants may feel from family and friends left behind.

In the Netherlands, Ethiopians, Eritreans and Ghanaians make up some of the most visible diasporas of African background, whose immigration has been largely driven by conflict and regime-conditions (refugees), family union/reunion and formation (De Valk, Liefbroer, Esveldt & Henkens, 2004), and human trafficking (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Gerrima, Kidane, Rijken & Van Stam, 2017; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Others have been motivated by study and the search for employment opportunities. As for groups from the Horn of Africa, such as Ethiopians and Eritreans, political conditions at home, especially in Eritrea, have provided sufficient grounds for applying for asylum in the Netherlands. In contrast, Ghanaian migrants are considered ‘economic migrants’, due to the relative economic and political stability in Ghana. Among all groups, the need to stay in touch is influenced by direct relations (next of kin), cultural ties, and efforts to maintain the identities that diasporas possess through their multiple layers of belonging (Madsen & Van Naerssen, 2003; Castles & Davidson, 2000). Links to the country of origin also influence collective organising, which diasporas use to mobilise for transnational activities (Ong’ayo, 2019).

Regardless of their migration status, members of the three African diaspora communities (Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian) often engage in community activities influenced by identity (national or ethnic), cultural practices, the need for safety nets and solidarity in the ‘new’ society. These activities are also influenced by attachment to the country of origin in terms of socio-economic and political developments, which influence their involvement from a distance (see Conversi, 2012). For instance, with some differences, members of the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas in the Netherlands travel back and forth between the Netherlands and their countries of origin, where they implement various charity projects, visit family members or establish projects and enterprises in preparation for their return (Ong’ayo, 2016). This entails regular contact via telephone, email, Skype, video, social media and other forms of ICT and digital

technology, characterising their simultaneous engagement 'here and there' (see Ong'ayo, 2019).

However, not all diasporas from these communities, especially Ethiopian and Eritreans, can return home or undertake transnational activities freely (see Ong'ayo, 2010). This is due to the nature of their relationship with the government in their country of origin (see Ong'ayo, 2014b; 2017), as well as immigration and integration conditions in the country of residence. Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diaspora communities face interrupted circular migration options, because of the migration regime in the Netherlands, which has become more restrictive in the last decade.

While technology presents opportunities that facilitate diaspora linkages with the country of origin, it can also have a disruptive effect on life and society (Van Oortmerssen, 2015), especially in relation to its influence on local populations in the region of origin, where people generally have limited access to the Internet and are sometimes faced with government censure. From a migration control perspective, technology is increasingly being used in the form of biometrics, thermal imaging and radar, while traffickers and smugglers also use some of these advanced technologies to track migrants and trade in refugees on migration routes (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Diasporas also encounter ICT and digital technology-related control measures by governments in their countries of origin. This can be in the form of the surveillance of refugees and diaspora communities in host countries, while others use these tools to construct and impart identities of nationhood (see Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016). The use of ICT by states (particularly countries of origin) to control diaspora communities also applies to the politics of information, which can be linked to the control of cyberspace through regulation (Glen, 2017) or disruption and even shutdown. These conditions have effects on the connection of diaspora communities to their country of origin, but also on their interactions within the host country.

ICT also influences how diaspora communities reconstruct their identities, because of the influence of contextual conditions (structural and streams) in the host societies and in their countries of

origin. The cultural, religious, and social networks that diasporas bring with them further influence the relationship between diaspora communities and natives of the host country, other migrant communities, and with institutions in the host society.

## Research questions

This chapter looks at the online/offline dimensions of migration in Africa. It seeks to answer the following research question: *What is the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities, and how does this connectivity affect their mobility and transnational engagement between the country of residence and origin?*

To answer this question, the chapter looks at the following sub-questions:

- *What are the 'here and there' manifestations of the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities in their transnational practices?*
- *What is the role of agency in how diaspora communities deal with multi-layered structural conditions through offline/online connectivity?*
- *What are the effects of interactions between communities with ICT and digital technology?*
- *What tensions are generated by the increased cyber-based connectivity of diaspora communities?*
- *What are the similarities and differences between the various diaspora communities in terms of how they interact with technology (online/offline connectivity) based on their immigration, integration and transnational engagement experiences?*

This chapter attempts to answer these questions using the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas in the Netherlands as a case study. Understanding the online/offline dimensions of migration from Africa to Europe (and circular migration back to Africa) is essential from the perspective of diaspora engagement in the digital era and the social change that this generates in the countries of residence and origin. Within this context, ICT and digital technology serve as instruments through which members of diasporas create connected

spaces and function within transnational spaces through their virtual presence – their embedded and disembodied presence (Van Stam, 2017). Giving such social processes a ‘here and there’ perspective offers us an opportunity to explore the social capital that accrues through diaspora online/offline connectivity and its implications for the integration of diasporas and their transnational practices.

### **Online/offline diaspora connectivity in a transnational context**

The conditions that influence the formation of diaspora communities are important for the analysis of their online/offline connectivity and the intersection between the ICTs and digital technologies they use to maintain connections from a distance. Linked to the various migratory patterns is the rapid expansion of connectivity, which has generated various opportunities for diasporas to maintain connections with family and friends in their countries of origin. Manifestations of these dynamics can be observed in the remittances (financial, social and material) that diasporas make to their countries of residence (Ong’ayo, 2019, 2016, 2014a, 2014b; Faist, 2008; Sørensen, 2007). ICTs and digital technologies have also increased the simultaneity of diaspora transnational practices and reduced the time and space needed for these practices. These technologies have influenced how groups construct or reconstruct their identities in relation to their country of origin and the host society (see Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016) in ways that profoundly shape relationships between physical space and cyberspace (Hiller & Franz, 2004). This is reflected in the use of the Internet, email, satellite television, mobile phones, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and social media (e.g., Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter) for various purposes (social, cultural and political), within and across borders (see Warnier, 2007; Hiller & Franz, 2004).

Notwithstanding the policy debates and measures introduced for return migration (voluntary and involuntary return), there are many temporary and permanent migrants in destination countries. Stringent immigration policies can interrupt circular migration and push migrants into permanent settlement. Despite restrictions on mobility,

many migrants have settled in destination countries, leading to the formation of diaspora communities. In the context of policy discussions about how to deal with migration, some propose that members of diasporas be enabled to return to their countries of origin (and again to the host country) within the framework of circular migration (Vertovec, 2008b).

## **Conceptual framework**

The transnational practices of diasporas are composed of cross-border connections that are characterised by continued, fluid and frequent contact between members of diaspora communities and people in their country of origin. Because diasporas lead “multi-sited transnational lives” (Collyer & King, 2016, p. 168), the simultaneous nature of their activities and the effects of these activities can be seen in both the country of residence and the country of origin, from a ‘here and there’ perspective (Ong’ayo, 2019). The social fields that diasporas build across geographic and political borders through their mobility between their country of residence and origin provide a basis for understanding how online/offline diaspora connectivity influences migration dynamics between Africa and Europe, and vice versa. This section looks at two concepts – ‘here and there’ and agency – that are essential to understand the connectivity of diaspora communities and how this connectivity affects their mobility and transnational engagement.

### ***‘Here and there’***

In this chapter, I deploy the theoretical concept of ‘here and there’ (Ong’ayo, 2019; Waldinger, 2008) to refer to the contexts in which diaspora communities emerge and interact with local social structures and the transnational practices that they engage in from an online/offline perspective. This perspective helps to understand the connections, attachments and loyalties that members of diasporas have with their country of residence and origin and how these connections and attachments impact on their movement and exchanges between the two contexts (see Ong’ayo, 2019). Thus, the notion of ‘here and there’ highlights the lifestyle and practices of members of diasporas, which entail “sustained ties of persons,

networks and organisations across the borders of multiple nation-states” (Faist, 2000 p. 2). The diasporas build these social fields across geographic and political borders through their mobility between their country of residence and country of origin; however, these social fields can be challenged by migration regimes that hinder mobility, especially from Africa. Consequently, these social conditions provide a relevant basis for investigating the implications of the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities.

The notion of ‘here and there’ further contributes to our understanding of the ties that members of diasporas have with their country of residence and origin. For instance, frequent and dense contact with Ghana does not imply that Ghanaians who actively participate in these processes are less integrated into Dutch society. On the contrary, such collective undertakings are mainly possible for members of the diaspora who are well established in the Netherlands, but who still have enduring ties to those left behind (Vertovec, 2004). This view ties in with the noted link between integration and transnationalism (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013).

To explain how diaspora communities function within the framework of online/offline connectivity, it is important to look at the role of context. Framed within the notion of ‘here and there’ about the country of residence and the country of origin, context often denotes a more deterministic or static form of factors that influence diaspora community formation and transnational engagement. According to Exworthy, context refers to the “milieu within which interventions are mediated but also shapes and is shaped simultaneously by external stimuli like policy” (Exworthy, 2008, p. 319). However, in this chapter, I seek an alternative conceptualisation that sees context as a set of conditions that are fluid and can be characterised as streams (Kingdon, 2014). The analytical value of this conception is recognition of the fact that a more static conception of context does not capture dynamics and processes that are not time bound. Even though context informs the kind of political opportunity structures that influence some of the developments in diaspora communities, context never remains static due to interactions with the agency of

diasporas. These social processes become more relevant when looking at the intersection between migration and the rapid expansion of ICT and digital technology.

### ***Agency***

Behind diaspora transnational practices, and the social processes they generate, lies an agentic component that shapes, and is shaped by, the actions that members of diasporas take (see Ong'ayo, 2019). The term 'agency' is used here to refer to the individual ability to make choices and take decisions within a particular social structure and culture. Studies that focus on empowerment describe agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). In diaspora studies, agency relates to "the meanings held, and practices conducted, by social actors" (Vertovec, 1997, p. 24). When applied to how diaspora communities function within a nation-state, agency has an analytical value in terms of the value that diasporas attach to activities between and within the country of residence and the country origin and the agendas that they have. Drawing on Vertovec's view, agency can be used to characterise the ability of diasporas to construct and reconstruct narratives around identity and create negotiations about the various aspects of diasporic experiences (see Ong'ayo, 2019). Examples, include narratives about belonging as well as demands for space and recognition (Kleist, 2008), in response to the socioeconomic, political, institutional and policy contexts that diasporas encounter (see Ong'ayo, 2019).

The above description of agency is aligned with Giddens' view that agency affects structure, as individuals are "the only moving objects in social relations" (Giddens, 1984, p. 181). In line with this understanding, Lacroix highlights several characteristics that enable agents to act, including:

*...their transformative power (i.e. the capacity to act upon structures), their knowledgeability (the stock of knowledge they rely on to undertake action), their rationality (the capacity to assess their situation and establish priorities) and their reflexivity (i.e. the consciousness, as a social actor, of their transformative capacity and the capacity to monitor one another's actions).* (Lacroix, 2013, p. 13)

The agentic responsibility that exists in diaspora communities can also be linked to the organisations they have established in the country of residence to manage living conditions in the host country and facilitate their transnational engagement. This function has led to the recognition of diasporas as agents of change (Kleist, 2014). Paying attention to the agency of diasporas, therefore, aids understanding of the various initiatives that diasporas undertake in response to contextual conditions, such as the need to stay connected in the context of the immobility caused by migration regimes.

As noted in the various literature on migration (Vertovec, 2008a; Faist, 2000), the conditions under which diasporas engage transnationally is largely influenced by migration networks, linked to social ties, rapid developments in digital technology, and access to different types of ICTs. In relation to this, it is important to examine the intersections involved and tensions generated by migration and connectivity-linked social processes in terms of how diasporas function within an online/offline framework to maintain ties and remain connected. This is crucial for understanding how agency is exercised within diasporas, especially when mobility is curtailed by strict migration regimes and digital technology is used by states to control their diasporas, construct identities of nationhood, or redefine the identity of citizens abroad (see Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016). The embeddedness of migration dynamics and networks within specific, as well as dispersed (or deterritorialised), contexts (see Ong'ayo, 2019; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999) necessitate the in-depth examination of how ICT and digital technology influence diaspora connections and practices and the positionality of diasporas in relation to the different contexts to which they have an affinity. These concerns are the focus of the main research question in this chapter, as outlined earlier.

## **Research method**

The research on which this chapter is based was carried out in three periods, 2009–2010, 2013–2014 and 2016, as part of different

research projects.<sup>1</sup> The analysis is based on 60 in-depth interviews with respondents from the three diaspora communities studied: 14 from Ethiopia (all first-generation migrants), 30 from Eritrea (5 first generation, 24 new arrivals, and 1 second generation migrant) and 16 from Ghana (all first-generation migrants). The respondents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, as access to some communities (Eritrean and Ethiopian) was only possible through introductions, owing to sensitivities around connections with the country of origin. A similar approach was adopted in the case of the Ghanaian community to overcome trust issues. All the interviews were conducted face-to face, with follow-ups done by telephone and Skype. Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and handwritten notes. These were then transcribed and analysed using thematic coding to determine broad patterns.

The study took an ethnographic approach involving field work within the three diaspora communities in the Netherlands and in the countries of origin (except Eritrea), to verify linkages and the nature of their transnational engagement. This entailed an exploratory and multi-sited case study research design and the use of mixed methods to maximise the strengths of the different data collection tools (Bryman, 2012). The ethnographic approach was useful in investigating the dynamics within the three communities studied, as it facilitated an in-depth examination and ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1983) of networks, social interconnectedness and relationships (Mawere, 2015). An ethnographic approach also pays attention to the historical and political context influencing online/offline diaspora connectivity as part of their transnational practices. An ethnographic approach allows for involvement with the respondents and their

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<sup>1</sup> The data used was derived from studies that were part of the DIASPEACE project ‘Diaspora for Peace: Patterns, Trends and Potentials of Long-distance Diaspora Involvement in Conflict Settings. Case Studies from the Horn of Africa 2009–2010’; from fieldwork for the research project ‘Migration Corridors between the Netherlands and Horn of Africa (Ethiopia)’ (2013–2014); a PhD research project ‘Diaspora Organisations, Transnational Practices and Development: Ghanaians in the Netherlands’ (2011–2014); and a study on the Eritrean community in the Netherlands, their organisations and the influence of the Eritrean government (2016).

communities in ways that help to overcome norms and values that are expressed in (social) expectations and reactions (cognitive, emotional and behavioural). This was important considering the sensitivities that members of these diasporas (especially Ethiopians and Eritreans) attach to information related to their migration experience and transnational activities between the Netherlands and their countries of origin.

During the interviews, I asked the respondents how the use of ICT and digital technology influences their connectedness within the diaspora community and with the country of origin, both at the individual and collective levels. Questions also covered their experiences with dynamics within the two distinct structural contexts and what role their own agency plays in dealing with these conditions. Questions around agency also touched on how respondents interact with various technologies and the choice of these technologies. The interviews were conducted in private homes, and secure office spaces at refugee reception locations to ensure privacy, confidentiality and openness. Direct information was also collected through focus group discussions, which were held in places convenient for the groups. Interviews were mainly conducted in English, but where the respondents, especially refugees, could not speak English, a person fluent in Amharic and several Eritrean languages provided translations. These were later verified by a second person to minimise information lost during translation.

Besides the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, data collection also included direct observations during community cultural events in the municipalities of The Hague, Ede, Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Rotterdam, Utrecht and Almere. These events provided opportunities to observe interactions and the kind of mobilisation taking place within these communities. This information was supplemented by a review of the relevant literature on the three communities in the Netherlands in terms of their online/offline connectivity and transnational practices.

Although the data used in this chapter is derived from different research projects and periods (2009–2016), these variations have proved useful for observing developments and changes in online/offline diaspora connectivity. This is important in verifying the use of ICT and digital technology in terms of new and old ties (Hiller & Franz, 2004) across the various categories of migrants (first generation, second generation and newcomers) within their migration networks and engagement with their countries of origin.

## **Results of the study**

The aim of this study was to provide an understanding of the various dimensions of the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities and how these dynamics intersect with their transnational practices in the context of mobility. The results are presented in this section structured according to the five-sub research questions.

### ***‘Here and there’ manifestations of online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities in their transnational practices***

The online connectivity of members of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diaspora communities in the Netherlands plays an important role in their transnational practices, some of which transcend the barriers to circularity and create direct linkages with those left behind and networks elsewhere. ICT and digital technology inform the diaspora connectivity that lies behind collective organising in different spaces, as well as individual functioning within distinct, yet interconnected, contexts. The implications of this multiplicity of contexts and layers of belonging and being is captured in the following reaction to a question on the relevance of online/offline connectivity in the lives of members of diasporas:

*As a refugee, I live here and care somewhere else. I am exposed to dual forces, which are competing for my attention and action. Both socio-economic dynamics here in the host society and back home have a profound impact on my identity and thinking. Life in the diaspora is split between your country of residence and your country of origin. This condition demands constant contact and communication, which is only made*

*possible through technology, since none of us can physical return home in the foreseeable future. (GT, interview, face-to-face, 14 September 2016)*

In line with this, members of the three diaspora communities studied use a combination of ICTs and digital technologies, including regular telephones, recorded video tapes, mobile phones, and Internet-based communications such as email, Yahoo messenger, Skype calling and messaging, Viber calling and messaging, WhatsApp calling and messaging, Facetime, VoIP, and YouTube recordings. Digital technology has enhanced the interactions, networking and collective organising of diasporas with new innovations enabling instant communication and the sharing of information, which can be accessed repeatedly over time.

Members of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas whose legal status is precarious rely on networks of co-ethnic and diaspora organisations (hometown associations, umbrella organisations and migrant development NGOs), which conduct activities in the various municipalities in the Netherlands, for social support (also see Ong'ayo, 2019, 2016). This has led to the establishment of both physical and online connections as a source of information for migrants who fail to access services provided by host country institutions.

***Role of agency in how diasporas deal with multi-layered structural conditions through offline/online connectivity***

Based on their agency, some diasporas with more capacity (high-level education or previous work experience) take initiatives that bring newcomers together using ICTs. They reach out to large numbers of newcomers (refugees and migrants) who are challenged by integration. A respondent who has been taking the lead in online/offline mobilisation had this to say:

*Through simple efforts, upon finishing my Dutch language course, I have been organising newcomers in the Eindhoven area – organising groups of 30 people directly and online through a chat house of 700 people. [...] The goal is to facilitate participation in sports (football and volley ball) and coordinate information meetings.*

*So now I am seeking to register the group as an organisation. (BG, interview, face-to-face, 18 October 2016)*

Online/offline connectivity among the diaspora communities studied demonstrates the critical intersection between technology and agency, especially during emergencies. While members of diasporas may have limited resources, the connections that newcomers establish with ‘pioneers’ or early arrivals with experience on how Dutch public services function, their ability to reach out and take initiative, and the instant exchange of information facilitate quick resource mobilisation. An illustration is provided by the following emergency that needed urgent attention:

*A young girl recently delivered a baby at the HMC Westeinde Hospital in The Hague and was discharged, but upon arrival at home she had [high] blood pressure. [...] because of lack of confidence and the language barrier, she could not negotiate with service providers. The chairperson of the organisation took her to the house doctor and brought her back to the hospital by his own means. In such cases, the organisation intervenes where members are in bad health situations and asked to wait for a long time. (GG, interview, face-to-face, 11 October 2016)*

Most of the information on integration issues is in Dutch, which poses problems for new refugees. Consequently, they rely on social media and other sources to access the relevant information from individuals within their networks who have mastered the Dutch language or who have had experience with the system and know their way around. As described by one leader of the Eritrean community in The Hague:

*Our community is a kind of network for support to each other, especially the newcomers who need help with settlement, housing, and acquiring house materials. We also help with finding prayer places and public services. We give advice on the way of life here to individuals [...] how to fit within Dutch society. The network that people establish here plays a major role [...] and this is made possible through mobile phones and social media, combined with face-to-face meetings. (GG, interview, face-to-face, 21 October 2016)*

The online/offline activities of the diasporas also focus on collective organising, particularly socio-cultural events targeting the respective communities, natives and other diaspora communities. The main technologies used for mobilisation include social media, email, telephone calls, Skype and Paltalk. Besides face-to-face communication during community meetings, members of the three diaspora communities also use community radio and television programmes to create awareness and stay informed about developments in their country of origin. Examples include Radio RECOGIN (run by the Representative Council of Ghanaian Organisations in the Netherlands), Ghanatta Radio, Radio Erena,<sup>2</sup> Stichting Eritrea TV Amsterdam, Shekortet (an Eritrean government news website),<sup>3</sup> Stichting Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), and Oromia Media Network.<sup>4</sup>

During the *Irreecha* festival (the Oromo Thanksgiving) in Gaasperplas, Amsterdam, one of the respondents involved in the coordination of the event emphasised the added value of ICTs as follows:

*You can see that the participation in this event is very diverse. People came from many parts of Europe, in buses and private cars. They are being hosted by others (friends and families) in the Netherlands. It is a huge logistical job involving mailing, calling directly with mobile phones, and the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to inform people of the activities and how to reach the locations, since the event takes place in two phases: One near the water in Diemen and a reception with an evening event in this big hall. (AG, interview, face-to-face, 14 September 2014)*

The ties that members of diaspora communities have with their country of origin are also highly political, as many, especially those from Eritrea and Ethiopia, were driven to migrate by regime

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<sup>2</sup> Radio Erena (<http://erena.org/>) is based in France and accessible across the globe via satellite, on the Internet, and calls to listen to the mobile phone service.

<sup>3</sup> Shekortet (<https://shekortet.com>).

<sup>4</sup> The Oromia Media Network is described on its Facebook page ([https://www.facebook.com/pg/OromiaMedia/community/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/OromiaMedia/community/?ref=page_internal)) as an independent, nonpartisan and non-profit news enterprise whose mission is to produce original and citizen-driven reporting on Oromia, Ethiopia.

conditions and conflict during the Eritrea-Ethiopia war (the 30-year independence war till 1991 and the second war from May 1998 to June 2000). Likewise, the Ghanaians who came to the Netherlands in the late 1980s and early 1990s were driven by political conditions, instability and mass expulsion from Nigeria. Political connections to these migration experiences inform the relationship between members of the diaspora community and the government in the country of origin, as well as the nature of diaspora politics in the country of residence towards the country of origin. For political mobilisation, online/offline activities involve the use of websites and blogs targeting specific groups and audiences 'here and there', especially in the expression of political opinions and agitation. Home country governments and their supporters in the diaspora also use these technologies to counter diaspora activities.

Online/offline diaspora activities target countries of origin at different levels; they can be focused on the immediate family or community at the local level, or target political conditions at the national level. As one respondent noted:

*Every now and then your mood is affected by what happened or what is happening six or seven thousand miles away. On your Facebook page, you might see the picture of a wounded or dead family member, a relative or a friend. You see it just a few minutes after it happened. The problem does not end in knowing what happened somewhere else. You must involve yourself in what happened or what is happening. You may be asked to contribute something, to give ideas, to help make decisions, and to give guidance's or leadership. This is an everyday challenge for refugees in the diaspora. (GT, interview, face-to-face, 28 March 2011)*

### ***Effects of interaction of diasporas with ICTs and digital technology***

Members of the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas in the Netherlands make use of ICT and digital technology to stay connected and interact in a variety of ways, which include both embodied and disembodied presence (Van Stam, 2017). Digital technology facilitates telepresence, online interactions and access to disembodied information. The relational and emotional connections

and the need to share personal experiences inform the use of ICT and the choice of which type of technology serves the purpose best (cheap, instant, flexible and quality).

*Life in the diaspora is split between your country of residence and your country of origin. As someone who has lived in exile for the last 13 years, this is my daily reality. I lived in Nairobi Kenya and I have memories and connections from there. I have things to remember, I miss people I care about [...] people I know from that time. I have experiences that I share with them. I have stories to tell, agonies that linger in my mind. I am here now, but I am virtually everywhere else. (GT, interview, face-to-face, 14 September 2016)*

Although members of the diasporas from the three communities studied make use of their online connectivity differently in terms how they relate to the government in their country of origin, from an associational perspective the use of online connectivity includes lobbying and advocacy. Digital technology provides possibilities for visibility and anonymity at the same time. At the associational level, online visibility serves as a way of conveying a message to target audiences in the diaspora and at home. Individuals also use these spaces (personal and group websites, blogs and Facebook) to present a wide variety of information to different audiences. For instance, images of Oromo youth behind the recent revolution in Ethiopia broadcast live and images of ongoing events such as police brutality have been rapidly and widely shared online and through social media.<sup>5</sup> Using their agency, these exchanges were done in a manner that successfully established a strong link between those in the diaspora and back home in what could be described as ICT-enabled politics (Miller, 2011). Despite the disruption of connectivity under emergency conditions (between 2014 and 2018), members of the Ethiopian diaspora were able to link up with activists on the ground using mobile phones and digital technologies that bypassed the

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2014, several protests took place in the two main regions of Ethiopia, namely, Oromia and Amhara. In reaction, the government declared a state of emergency from October 2016 till August 2017 and again on 16 February 2018 (see Human Rights Watch, 2018).

government block. As narrated by one respondent among the early generation:

*Access to mobile technology enables many of us to stay connected and follow the political developments on the ground in our regions of origin. The smart phones that diasporas sent to next of kin and various connections enabled local activists to communicate locally and share images of police brutality with those in the diaspora and international community. This is how news on the ground reached international media and organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch among others. (LA, interview, face-to-face, 10 May 2018)*

The respondent identified a strong ‘here and there’ life, which involved a mental presence in his country of origin through digital communication.

### ***Tensions generated by the increased cyber-based connectivity of diaspora communities***

Contextual factors both ‘here and there’ are a major influence on the evolution of diaspora communities and how they function in terms of their multiple layers of belonging. Firstly, they affect diaspora communities because the activities of diasporas are context bound, while at the same time transcending single nation-state borders. This duality of context, belonging and positionality in terms how diasporas function creates tension between these two contexts in terms of the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities. These tensions emanate from the context of nations serving as locations for the networks to which members of these diasporas belong in cyberspace (see Bernal, 2005).

Secondly, diaspora connectivity is a conduit of influences (identity, sense of belonging, loyalty and practices), which might escape state control or be controlled by states that attempt to control members of their diaspora in other states, for example, by surveillance, intimidation and other forms of control (DSP-Groep & Tilburg University, 2016), or by shaping the identities of diasporas (Van

Reisen & Gerrima, 2016), as in the case of Eritrea. For example, a recent newcomer noted:

*The regime uses social media to reach out to people who listen and watch Eritrean TV stations via satellite. This is because many newcomers like us can access this information online – YouTube and Facebook – where the Eritrean regime and its agents in the diaspora place propaganda videos. (JA, interview, face-to-face, 21 October 2016)*

Thirdly, members of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas also seek to influence developments in their countries of origin through ICT-enabled politics (see Bernal, 2006). This includes information politics, digital disobedience and political activism, as demonstrated on various Eritrean Facebook sites.<sup>6</sup> These discursive spaces (Internet and social media) have several dimensions and their use varies between the three communities in terms of how they engage in homeland politics in the country of residence. Mobilisation for political activities is linked to party politics in the country of origin and in the diaspora. This mainly applies to Ghanaians and Ethiopians. In the case of Ghanaians, many of the online discussions take place on websites,<sup>7</sup> as well as on radio and television.<sup>8</sup> For members of the Ghanaian diaspora, political activities include petitions to the government through the Ghanaian Embassy in the Netherlands or debating forums organised by the diaspora and visiting ministers and party leaders (see Ong'ayo, 2019). As for the Ethiopian diaspora, these mobilisations take on a confrontational dimension, as diasporas belonging to different ethnic groups and political parties take

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include <https://www.facebook.com/ERTREA/> and <https://nl-nl.facebook.com/EritreanPress/>.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include 'Ethiopian: Union of Ethiopians in the Netherlands' (Vereniging voor Ethiopiërs in Nederland), see <http://www.ethioamsterdam.nl/>; 'Ghanaian: Modern Ghana', see <https://www.modernghana.com/section/DiasporaNetherlands>; and 'GhanaWeb', see <https://www.ghanaweb.com>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Adom TV (Amsterdam), AFAPAC Radio, Ghana Today Media, Ghanatta (radio & TV), Godiya Radio, Radio Akasanoma, Radio RECOGIN, Radio Voice of Africa, Sankofa TV, Spirit FM and Soul Hour Radio (Amsterdam), Quayson K. Media Ministries, and Word FM (Den Haag).

radicalised stances on the political situation in Ethiopia. In the case of Eritreans, their political mobilisation in cyberspace take two forms: in support of the government or in support of the various opposition groups. Mobilisation in support of the government by the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YFPDJ), for example, focuses on recruitment, promoting the 2% tax of the diaspora by the Eritrea government, and organising festivals and demonstrations in defence of the image and position of the Eritrean government abroad (DSP-Groep & Tilburg University, 2016). An illustration of the Eritrean regime and use of ICT for surveillance and intimidation of its diasporas is provided by a recent arrival:

*In the middle of August 2016, I was called by YFPDJ using an anonymous telephone number at midday. I was told to stop my activities about change in Eritrea or else I will be killed. The call was made in Tigrinya, by a male voice, who said, "We advise you to stop".* (DG, Interview, face-to-face, 13 October 2016)

In contrast, Eritrean opposition groups use ICT tools to engage in lobbying and advocacy targeting host country institutions on their policies towards the Eritrean government. For example, Eritrean opposition parties, NGOs and diaspora organisations based in the Netherlands used ICT within their networks to organise a protest in 2002 against Dutch aid to Eritrea (Chairman of Eritreans for Justice and Democracy-Benelux, interview, face-to-face, Utrecht, 2 December 2008). At the same time, among the newcomers within the Eritrean community, ICT has become an important tool for mobilisation through Eritrean Youth for Change. A respondent observed: "ICT offers alternative tools that enable our group to pursue freedom in Eritrea, rule of law, and constitutional change, providing those oppressed in Eritrea with a voice" (HZ, interview, face-to-face, 13 October 2016). Mobilisation around these activities takes on an online dimension and is influenced by the continued focus of these diaspora communities on the homeland, an aspect that affects their positionality (belonging and citizenship), both 'here and there'.

***Similarities and differences in how the various diaspora communities interact with technology (online/offline connectivity)***

The use of ICT and digital technology by Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas in the Netherlands further reveals both similarities and differences, which can be partly ascribed to contextual factors (i.e., the social, cultural and institutional environment in which these diasporas function) and partly to the characteristics of the diasporas (i.e., migration experiences, resources and capacities). Commonly shaping online/offline connectivity within the three communities are political factors, which are also a major driver of migration. This mostly applies to the first generation of Ethiopian, Ghanaian and Eritrean migrants, but can also be observed in contemporary migration out of Eritrea and Ethiopia (newcomers). These early arrivals play a connecting role for new migrants in the Netherlands through existing networks and families through offline connectivity. However, with the expansion of access to ICT and digital technology over the last two decades, these diaspora connections have become much more diverse, but still thick. For instance, mobile phone technology has been a critical factor in the migration journey, including the provision of information about routes and destination countries. Eritrean diasporas have been much more engaged with information technology than the other two diasporas studied, as this is the only way they can stay connected to family and friends left behind due to the political situation in Eritrea. In recent years, mobilisation by different Eritrean diaspora groups has been characterised by either loyalty to the government or opposition to the government.

Nonetheless, there are some differences in the online/offline connectivity of the diasporas from the three communities. Variations in the availability of digital technology emanate from contextual factors (socio-economic and political) and technical conditions (connectivity, availability, access, affordable, flexibility and safety). A second determinant is the political context, which either gives space for the use of ICT or not. For example, members of the Ghanaian diaspora can experiment with and deploy a wide variety of emerging

technologies due to the availability of political space in Ghana. The relative political and economic stability in their country of origin enables them to transcend the online/offline demarcations due to the possibilities of returning and helping those left behind (and even sending communication gadgets to those left behind, thus speeding up connectivity and bridging the digital and communication divide). In contrast, Eritreans and Ethiopians have limited possibilities of physical return or bringing back items that could enhance connectivity. These contextual and technological factors have an impact on online/offline connectivity and how diasporas continue to stay in touch with their next of kin and others in their country of origin.

## **Discussion**

This chapter examined online/offline diaspora connectivity within the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diaspora communities in the Netherlands and its effect on mobility and transnational engagement between the country of residence and origin. This called for the adoption of a 'here and there' perspective (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Waldinger, 2008, Ong'ayo, 2019) and the notion of agency to understand the intersection between context-related factors, technology and the agency of members of diasporas. This is examined using the theoretical notion of diaspora transnationalism (Vertovec & Cohen, 1999; Vertovec, 2008a; Faist, 2008; Erdal & Oeppen, 2013), which captures the 'here and there' linkages and diaspora practices influenced by technology. Notable within the notion of 'here and there' is the positionality of diasporas in terms of their multiple layers of belonging (Madsen & Van Naerssen, 2003), as well as transnational citizenship or trans-state loyalty (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2000; Waldinger, 2008).

How diasporas interact with technology and function within an online/offline connectivity framework further links to the idea of a network society (Castells, 1996) and the changing social relations, identities, spaces and networks (Miller, 2011). Technology, as used by the diasporas in the three communities studied, can be argued to

facilitate cultural forms and immersive experiences (Miller, 2011), leading to new forms of communities and expressions of nationalism (Anderson, 1991). These social processes inform diaspora-state relations in terms of the politics of Internet governance and regulation (Glen, 2017) in the countries of residence and origin and effect the diaspora transnational practices undertaken through online/offline connectivity.

The observed online/offline connectivity within the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diaspora communities in the Netherlands points to the relevance of agency. This agency in diasporas (Lacroix, 2013; Ong'ayo, 2019) relates to their intersection with ICT and digital technology (Vertovec, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Hiller & Franz, 2004; Conversi, 2012). While how diaspora communities function within this framework may suggest technological determinism (Miller, 2011), the agency of diasporas (Ong'ayo, 2019; Lacroix, 2013), in combination with the social and economic conditions, influence the creative use of technology during transnational practices. As argued by Miller in his treatise on base, superstructure and infrastructure, technology not only affects society and culture directly, but is “enabling infrastructures, which are part of the ‘base’ in the base-superstructure relationship between economy and culture” (Miller, 2011, p. 224). Miller’s perspective confirms the agentic responsibility of diasporas in the creative use of technology in transnational practices that overcome disruptions to mobility by migration regimes or government surveillance, as well as facilitating digital disobedience and political activism (Miller, 2011).

This chapter also demonstrates that while some online diaspora connectivity through digital technology is useful for staying connected and maintaining identities, it also influences offline interpersonal interactions and relationships, especially the use of social media. The observed online/offline connectivity of members of diasporas confirms the role of technology in the emergence of an information society (Castells, 1996), in which digital identity, networked society and collective virtual culture influence both the individual and collective identities that members of diasporas build

through the narratives they share online. These narratives contribute to community building, but also reconfigure identities (religious, ethnic and political). The dynamics generated by ICT and digital technology, as illustrated in the diaspora media, lead to changes in relations. These effects have been noted in the impact of telepresence and embodied presence (Miller, 2011; Van Stam, 2017) on interactions and connections from a distance in the context of fragmented families (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). These new realities in communication and interaction over long distances support Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), linked to the discursive construction and reconstruction of identity because of mobility and dispersion across different geographical locations.

Linked to the findings of previous studies on Eritrean refugees in the digital era (Miller, 2011; Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017), I argue that ICT and digital technology is not only used by diasporas to their advantage (staying in touch, remittances, digital disobedience and political activism), but that governments also use the same tools to control and shape the identities of diasporas, through narratives and discourses (Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016). The online data trail and disembodied personal information recorded during online activities enables the government to exert control over members of the diaspora (see Miller, 2011; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017). Respondents from the Eritrea community, especially those in the second wave (newcomers), and the majority from the Ethiopian community (mostly in the opposition) cited experiences with surveillance, control and intimidation by the government in their country of origin, while in the Netherlands. Others narrated the role of ICT in their migration trajectory, which included their use by traffickers and kidnapers. These findings corroborate studies on ICT-facilitated criminal activities, such as human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2017). While useful for sharing information, staying connected, and helping to memorise events, diasporas can also experience traumatic events, through chatrooms and Facebook. As described by

various respondents, such experiences with staying connected through technology confirm observations about the increase in trauma through repeated sharing of images and stories of suffering (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017) and the viewing of websites established by Eritreans during the war with Ethiopia to count or remember the dead (Bernal, 2013).

This chapter highlights some significant features of online/offline diaspora connectivity and its implications for transnational engagement. Nonetheless, missing are the perspectives of the next of kin and governments in the countries of origin, which would strengthen more in-depth analysis of how governments engage with diasporas through ICT and digital technology (identity, imagined communities). Equally, more in-depth comparative analysis based on multi-sited studies on the link between online/offline diaspora connectivity and the reconfiguration of identities and transnational loyalties within a deterritorialised context could shed light on the impact of these dynamics from a 'here and there' perspective. This would contribute to a better understanding of how diaspora connectivity reconfigures the interactions and relationship between those who are mobile (migrants) and those who are immobile (in the country of origin). As circumstances vary depending on the context and over time, observing these processes in different places at different times could be useful, as the impact of online/offline diaspora connectivity was greater in Ghana and, to lesser extent, in Ethiopia, and unknown in Eritrea due to regime conditions (hence, this study relied mainly on information provided by Eritreans in the diaspora).

## **Conclusion**

This research sought to answer the question: What is the online/offline connectivity of diaspora communities, and how does this connectivity affect their mobility and transnational engagement? This question was answered by looking at five sub-research questions. The first sub-research question looked at the 'here and there' manifestations of online/offline connectivity. Looking at how the

Ethiopian, Eritrean and Ghanaian diasporas in the Netherlands engage transnationally, the three diaspora communities can be described as highly involved in the use of ICT and digital technology in their interactions, which involve both online and offline connectivity. Diasporas from the three communities use ICT and digital technology in activities linked to identity formation and the maintenance of cultural ties, both 'here and there'. The use of ICT and digital technology can be seen in the organisation of cultural and religious events. Such events are manifestations of the multiple layers of belonging of diasporas, which influence the nature of their engagement and the kinds of interactions they are involved in. Consequently, ICT and digital technology, in the form of telepresence and embodied presence, bring about changes in social relations among members of the diasporas and with their countries of origin (family ties, culture and traditions). These developments have led to the possibility of creating virtual communities, as families have become fragmented through migration.

In relation to the second sub-research question, on the role of agency in how diasporas deal with multi-layered structural conditions through offline/online connectivity, the networks and connections that diasporas from the three communities maintain through online/offline connectivity also serve as mediums for the exchange of information about developments in the region of origin and globally. These exchanges between people and places, which focus on social, cultural and political developments, as well as remittances, have increased due to new communication technologies.

Tensions arose among diasporas from the three communities, mediated by both access to ICTs and digital technology, as well as their use by the state to control diasporas or promote their engagement. Conversely, restrictive conditions on the use of ICTs and digital technologies affect mobility between the countries of origin and the Netherlands, even if diasporas maintain online connectivity. Diasporas from the three countries respond differently to the prevailing conditions (restrictive and open) in ways that create tensions (for the conflict-generated and regime-driven diasporas –

Ethiopia and Eritrea) and opportunities (for the diasporas from states that are stable – Ghana) at the same time. This is more so in cases where diasporas are in pursuit of maintaining connections with those left behind (immobile/offline) by countering state restrictions and control, surveillance and intimidation or through friendly engagement policies.

This research revealed similarities and differences in how the various diaspora communities interact with technology. For example, direct engagement (offline participation) by Ethiopians and Eritreans has been hindered by repressive government policies. The diasporas from these two countries creatively use ICTs and digital technology and political/civic space in the country of residence, especially in opposition to the regimes in Ethiopian and Eritrea, to bypass the constraints put in place by the governments in the countries of origin and surveillance by the agents of these governments in the country of residence. In contrast, for members of the Ghanaian diaspora, their relatively open engagement has been facilitated by non-interference by the government in diaspora transnational activities.

ICTs and digital technology enable diasporas to transcend the online/offline dichotomy as they maintain ties and links with those left behind and those in the diaspora. While the online/offline connectivity among diasporas may create tensions linked to the static conditions of those left behind or those not allowed to return or circulate, the close ties that diasporas maintain with multiple places and people inform their ingenuity in terms of platforms and tools for mobilisation, as part of their transnational engagement. These online platforms established by diasporas enable them to undertake transfers (financial and social remittances) with significant socio-economic and political impact, both in the country of residence and origin.

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