

First Conference on Blin Language & Culture

London, 14 - 16 July 2005

Held at: Yaa Asantewaa, Arts Centre,
Chippenham Mews, London W9 2AN.

Organised by

Debanma
Heritage Forum



P O BOX: 43872
London NW6 1UQ

In association with

Blin Community Association in Sweden

Compiled by

Mowes G Adem

Pre-Conference Working Notes

Welcome

**To the First Conference on Blin Language and Culture in London,
July 2005.**

Thank you very much indeed for accepting our invitation and coming to attend this conference. It is such a great pleasure to have you here in this conference, which is first of its kind here in UK and all over the world. With your participation, we are committed to make it entraining and more importantly educational.

Debanma Heritage Forum (a registered Charity based in London which is non-political and non-religious Association) in association with the Blin Community Association in Sweden (MeqriH) and in partnership with some prominent members of our community spearheaded this conference. We hope this Conference will be a success and pave a way for future endeavours.

There are some good programmes including the music & dance, exhibition and some Eritrean cuisine. Regarding the themes and workshops, initially, we had four themes planned for the workshops, but after looking at all the papers sent to us by the presenters, we had to reshape the themes and now there are only three themes. If this change meant that what you wanted is not there, please let us know. Enjoy the conference and please give us your feedback regardless how small or big. It will help us to make future programmes better.

Background

Blin is one of the nine languages spoken in Eritrea. The Blin speaking people inhabit in the central areas of the country, in and around Keren, 90 km north of Asmara, the capital. Despite, their being surrounded by other languages, the Blin people have kept their language and culture intact. However, the inhabitants of Keren and environs have experienced some of the devastating experiences during the war of liberation (1961-1991). Consequently, there has been a massive displacement and migration. Today, like the rest of the people of Eritrea, Blin speaking people find themselves scattered all over the world. They effectively have migrated to the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia. Tens of thousands still live in refugee camps, the cities and towns in the Sudan. The displacement and migration has resulted in enormous challenges in their settlement and keeping their language and culture alive.

The first generation migrants feel that they bear the responsibility of keeping the language, traditions and the folktales of the Blin Speaking

people alive and also passing it to the younger generation. The efforts of the Blin speaking immigrants in realising this responsibility vary from direct assimilation into different societies to one of actively developing and transmitting the language to their children.

The main purpose of the conference is therefore, to share experiences in the Diaspora and in keeping the language, traditions and culture, explore ways of writing Blin language in Europe, explore how best children could learn Blin and emerge with some valuable recommendations or reference material.

Themes to explore include:

- The condition of Blin language - general features and background.
- Blin literature in the last 150+ years.
- Mother tongue education in the Diaspora.
- Being a Blin in Europe- Blin culture as a form of keeping Blin and Eritrean Identity.
- Towards standardisation of Blin writing
- The Role of Blin songs as a medium of history, a political tool during the war of liberation.

For more details see the conference schedule. However, there will be more information on the themes once all conference presentation papers and contributors are finalised. So far, there are seven professional contributors who have already committed with great passion and who have decided what to present. They include: scholars, writers, educators and artists. Details will be released shortly.

Please note that this conference is more than just a conference. It is also a festival because it comprises: not only the workshops, but also two evenings of cultural music, dance, and other activities. We encourage those coming from overseas to bring their families. So let's make London feel the Blin vibrations during this summer. Especially those from Europe, it's a good opportunity for summer holidays.

Participations

There will be invited guests in the conference. Participants will be from all over Europe, the USA, Canada and hopefully Australia. All the Blin speaking people and others with interest in the Blin people's history and/or culture are encouraged to attend. Papers will be presented by people of various backgrounds including experienced, scholars and others who are working in the subject.

Participants from all backgrounds are welcome. A criterion for participation is having interest and commitment to positively contribute in any way you can.

Presentations

- If you wish to present please refer to the workshop themes or the above bullet points and let us know your preferred theme and how you wish to deliver your presentation.
- We welcome presentations in Blin and/or English but we would like to know in advance your preferred language so we can arrange interpreters and translators.
- All presenters: we will need your biography so, please send us a brief biography before 1 May 2005
- For Presentations please remember to check (√) equipments you require in the Registration Form

Dress Code

It is essential that all participants wear Blin traditional clothes throughout the conference and cultural evenings. This is simply to reflect part of the Blin culture through what we wear. Those participants who are not Blin are also encouraged to wear their own traditional clothes, which will reflect the diversity and supportive interests amongst traditions and cultures.

Conference Costs/charges

The conference is not funded by any organisation therefore it is self-financing. For those travelling from Europe, Canada, the USA, Australia and other parts of the world, the total cost of the conference if registered in advance is £30.00 and £40.00 at the time of the conference. This cost covers, Tea, coffee and lunch during the day of the workshops on Friday 15th and opening day Thursday evening 14th July.

For Londoners and the UK residents the cost of the Conference is the same as above and there will be further in kind contributions.

Confirming Attendance:

The above dates are set for all participants and presenters to confirm their attendance early to ensure that we make the necessary arrangements. Therefore, we would be extremely grateful if, upon receiving this message you could immediately e-mail me back confirming your attendance. In doing so you will be helping us to organise things as early as possible.

Contact Details:

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Website: www.debanma.com

Entertainment:

Guess who is going to entertain us at this historic Blin Conference? They are the stars of our culture, the voice of our traditions, history, and are the living legends at home and in the Diaspora:

- The top female singer the one and only: **Mihret Derehans** from the USA.
- 1. The maestro of Europe: **Alamin Hasabala** from Sweden
- 2. The young and dynamic singer: **Meharzghi Menadr** from Germany.
- 3. The young hotshot, the first ever U.K. Blin artist: **Solomon Yohannes** from the United Kingdom
- 4. The future potential young lady - **Mihret Arbed** from London
- 5. Musicians: the master **Salah Omar** accompanied by the young dynamics - **Kalate Raki & Henok Tesfalidet**.

There will also be small exhibition and Blin resources stalls of books, leaflets and bulletins.

Food & Dietary requirements

There will be variety of Eritrean dishes available throughout the Conference and the cultural evenings. Participants are asked to inform the organisers if there are any special dietary requirements. Most of Eritrean food does not consider special vegetarian food for instance. However, there are vegetable portions made along with meat dishes. We hope to have **kala** (type of porridge) the main Blin food for breakfast on Friday or Saturday.

Food costs;

- Thursday Evening dinner, Saturday morning breakfast, lunch and break time refreshments are included in the Conference fees.
- Thursday evening and Saturday evening will be separate charges for food

Contributors to the conference

1. Administration team

Habtezion Tewelday-Lijam	Chairman
Mowes Ghebre Adem	Vice chair
Abdulrahman Yassin Mohamed Ali	Secretary
Yohannes Medin Ghemit	Treasurer
Hamid Omar Izaz	Education head
Ismail Hadgay	Arts & Culture
Salah Jankara	Member
Alawia Nour	Member
Zakia Hineet	Member
Meryam Osman	Member

2. Support Team:

Idris Daud Omer- Adviser

Mohamed Tahir Debesay- with tremendous Multimedia equipment provision, technical support and photography.

3. In-Kind contributors:

Haysi Sofia Hamde

Haysi Libabet Ukubansie

Haysi Amete Tesfasion

Haysi Letenegus

Haysi Senait Adem

Family of Abdu Jimie

Haysi Tsige

Haysi Amete Habte

Haysi Amete Ghebrai

Haysi Medhnu Gaim

4. Biographies:

(i) Fessehazion Nair Zemicael examines the difficulties and opportunities that confront teaching mother tongue in Sweden and in order to promote such initiative, the school is not enough but need the support of the parents and institution if available. He discusses the teaching process from three roles: the parent, the institution, and the school. Although his examples were taken from Sweden, his findings are of general phenomenon nowadays in the Blin society regarding teaching in their mother tongue.

Fessehazion Nair born in Ashera (Senhit Provence) completed his elementary school in Ashera Parish School and his junior school at the Catholic Seminary Keren and Asmara. He completed his secondary

school in Keren. He earned his teaching certificate in 1973 from Teacher's Training Institute in Asmara. He worked three years as a teacher in Barentu and Agordat from 1973-1975. When he came to Sweden, he continued his studies at Stockholm University and earned his diploma in economics in 1997 and in 1999 he earned his BA in economics and specialised in trade policies in 1999.

(ii) Dr. Paul D. Fallon received his PH.D. from the Ohio State University (USA) in 1998, and his dissertation, *The synchronic and diachronic phonology of ejectives*, was published by Routledge in 2002. As assistant professor at Howard University in Washington DC, USA, Dr. Fallon developed an interest in Blin by first working with Blin speakers in Washington, later, by conducting fieldwork in Asmara and Keren in 2002. He has published academic articles on Blin Phonology (its sound system) and role of Blin in contributing to Linguistic theory. He has also presented papers at national and international conferences on Blin writing system, frequentative verbs, and noun plurals. He is working on one project to collect oral narratives in Blin, originally funded by the (U.S.) national Endowment for the Humanities, and another to conduct the first Phonetic study of Blin speech Sounds. In August 2005 he will join the faculty at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, USA.

(iii) Rita Cainri: presenter of oral history and a facilitator. Lives in the United States of America and she is very much interested to discover more about the Blin culture as is her mother's background.

(iv) Dr Kiflemariam Hamde was born in Eritrea and taught management and organisation studies at the university of Asmara (1984-1990) Kiflemariam Hamde hold a PHD in organisation theory from Stockholm University, Sweden (2000). His doctoral thesis, "Shifting identities" examines the changing nature of work life. He is currently an assistant professor at the department of Business Administration. Umea University, Sweden. Dr Kiflemariam Lectures both at the postgraduate and undergraduate level programmes, with special focus on the human side of organising that includes issues on identity, diversity, gender, power, ethics, and emotions.

Another stream of research Kiflemariam Hamd has been interested in is sociolinguistics, with special focus on Blin language and culture. He has produced several works in this stream of research, these include 'The origin and development of Blin language' (1986), Blin proverbs (1989), traditional customs (1990), production member of 'Blin Dictionary', published by Stockholm-based Blin L&C in 1992, 'Recent developments in Blin writing (1995), the role of education on societal development with a special focus on situation of Blin language- First National conference on Eritrean languages, Asmara 1996, co-author of 'some

standardization of Blin writing (1994). Amongst other research papers he presented: language, identity and ethnicity among immigrants in Sweden, cultural diversity for the 'good life': four ways of 'making' identity among the Blin Culture community in Stockholm (forthcoming as a book chapter), 'The hypocrisy of a tradition: making women in the hard way in Blin society, (2004), 'Mind in Africa, Body in Europe-Stockholm (2003), 'Being and becoming 'Eritrean in Sweden: the case of Blin language speakers' (2002).

(v) Mowes Ghebre Adem: an artist, playwright, writer, a poet, storyteller and a modest performer. At present, he is the managing and artistic director of Horn Reflections Ltd - Arts Company, promoting African arts, especially of the horn of Africa. He is also a part time lecturer at Kensington & Chelsea College, in London. As a practicing artist and educator, he has written and produced plays and documentary films depicting lives of people in exile and the challenges of integration. He has now extended his interest in contributing to develop the Blin language and culture. In 2004, he published his first book titled 'Learning Blin' to assist parents and children in mother tongue education.

Although unpublished he has accumulated a number of poems through the years. He was also instrumental in establishing a charitable Blin Association, Debanma Heritage Forum, that has organised this conference. Prior to this Conference, he assisted in organising two cultural events in London.

(vi) Hewit Hagos Nashih: discusses the usefulness of organisation for preserving and promoting your ethnic rights. She argues that cultural development needs planning and programme of activities that can increase participation of all Blin natives in that area of their residence. She also draws attention to the problems that can hinder development and opportunities that favour the survival of your culture.

Hewit Hagos, was born in Glas, Senhit province in Eritrea. She has completed her elementary and secondary studies in Keren. She has studied nursing and worked as assistant nurse in Swedish Medicare in Stockholm. She later studied business economics and now is employed as an economic assistant in the municipality of Stockholm's suburb. She is also head of the Blin Culture Association in Sweden.

(vii) Leon Beachy: was born into a traditional Amish family. Along with Pennsylvania German being his first language, Leon grew up aware of the culture and language differences between his Amish community and the surrounding English-speaking Americans.

In 1987 Leon and his wife Robyn went to Kenya for inter-cultural training. While there they came into contact with the Eritrean community for the first time and soon began plans for moving their family to Eritrea. Leon and his family lived in Eritrea from 1994 –1996 and

again from 1998-2000. from 1997-1998 Leon lived in England where he gained a masters degree in Social Anthropology.

Leon and his wife have four children. They lived in Thame, England since leaving Eritrea in 2000. Leon is currently the coordinator for anthropology and inter-cultural communication at the European training programme near High Wycombe. His current plans are to begin a research programme on Blin identity formation, negotiation and change in the Diaspora.

(viii) Selim Debasy: is a dedicated individual in promoting Blin language and culture. He is the first person who developed an interactive – video-learning tape for teaching and learning Blin mother tongue for children. He relentlessly worked to develop a beginner's book and has been contributing in various occasions in organisational and culture development for Blin community organisations.

(ix) Tekie Albekit: many years of teaching experience. Now he lives in Norway. He is an enthusiastic collector of Blin literature and arts, poems, reference books and publications.

Tekie, is a published author of one of the first ever Blin grammar books 'Blin language introductory phonetics & grammar', now found in every Blin house hold and a consistent producer of Blin learning materials to support parents and children in mother tongue education.

He is also a co-author with Daniel Yacob for the design and application to register 'Blin language in to the Unicode standard system. Tekie also supported Daniel Yacob in the development of the Blin software in Geez.

(x) Daniel Yacob: a member of the Geez foundation is an enthusiastic and committed in the development of Geez. He has designed and produced Blin software in Geez and is also a co-author with Tekie Albekit for the design and application to register 'Blin Language in to the Unicode Standard System'.

(xii) Mihret Derehans: at her early ages (in her teens), her talent in singing was recognised at national level and she joined the national music group during the war of liberation. She continued her singing and soon became a professional singer. During these years, Mihret took the Blin culture right into the heart of Eritrea and neighbouring countries. As an artist and now at her peak, she tours the whole world. She is a committed promoter of Blin culture and language. She is the voice of the Blin culture. She has CDs and tapes, which already exist in every Blin household.

(xiii) Idris Hassan was born in Keren and studied in Sudan. He was a refugee in Sudan for several years. He came to Sweden in 1992.he studied Swedish language and studied political science- peace and

conflict. Idris speaks Blin, Tigre, Tigrinia, Amharic, Arabic, English and Swedish.

He studied the history of ideas in the University of Umea in Umea, Sweden and he is still a student of political science at the university of Umea. He is also a teacher of Blin language in Umea, Sweden and some times works in prehistoric museum in Umea.

(xiv) Mike and Keturah Maurice are aged 58 and live in Newcastle On Tyne North Eastern UK. In June 2004 we began to look after asylum seekers who had been removed from state hostels. My grandparents on both sides were refugees fled from prosecution in Lithuania and Poland; those of our people not fleeing prosecution from the Russians were entirely wiped out by the nazis. Our first houseguest was a young Blin lady with a very Hebraic name and in the course of her stay with us, which was about twelve months we discussed many aspects of Blin culture, which we realised, had their origins in the Hebrew people.

We developed friendships with the Blin friends our guest, both Christian and Muslim. We have written a few minor booklets on spiritual topics such as: Israel replaced or restored a meeting with the Elohim of Israel, The lost Highway and also are in a minor way singer songwriters and practice Hebrew circle dancing. We support Muslims as well as Christian asylum seekers in our home and have built strong links with them.

Other Contributors:

(xv) Musie Amar from Norway is a community leader and active member in the Blin community in Norway and especially in teaching Blin language to children.

(xvi) Mohammed Mesoker from London is a practising contributor of articles to various Arabic newspapers and magazines which are printed and spread worldwide.

(xvi) Letai Raki from Sweden is educator and promoter of Blin culture in her country of residence, Sweden. She is an excellent Blin story teller.

(xvii) Frenzghi Woldemicheal from London is an educator in Blin language to Blin children in London and active supporting member in the Blin community in the U.K and was the main administrative support person to the Conference.

CONFERENCE ON BLIN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
14-16 July 2005

Please note that there were rumours going round leading to the conference that it was a politically and/or religiously motivated. We would like to inform all our readers that neither Debanma nor the Conference has any relation or affiliation to any political or religious group. We would like to reiterate that Debanma is a registered charity governed by the laws of the Charity Commissions of England and Wales. It is a non-political and non-religious and non-profit making Organisation. For details, please see our constitution and refer to our activities reports reflected in our websites. Therefore, we do not appreciate of those people (very few) who spend sleepless nights to divert the purpose and objective of our genuine and charitable activities and the Conference, to fit their ill-equipped campaigns of all sorts.

London has recorded a historic moment by holding the first Conference on Blin language and culture in 14-16 July 2005. The event was overwhelmed by scholarly contributions accompanied by vibrant cultural activities. It opened on **Thursday 14th** July 2005 in the afternoon. Following an opening speech by *Habtezion Tewelday -Lijam*, chairman of Debanma Heritage Forum, The Conference kicked off with a panel discussion, comprising: *Mihret Derehans* (Singer), *Rita Cairnri* and *Dr Kiflemariam Hamde*. Panel members introduced themselves and spoke of their experiences and their contributions to the Blin language and culture followed by questions from the audience and the other conference members. Then dinner and networking continued until 21:00 hours and the opening of the conference was concluded looking forward to the next big day, 15th Friday.

Day 2, the main day of the conference was packed with high-level presentations on language and culture. It was a long and quite lively event seeing details of presenters and topics on the table on the following pages. It explored the Blin language and culture in all dimensions, historically (past and present state in comparison), resources, language use, learning, poetry, lyrics, literature, narrations and so forth. The presentations were extremely informative, educational and inspiring.

Although, everyone was tired, people were excited about the scheduled cultural evening, which followed dinner. It started with dancing (*ses'it*), *goliya*, *chefera* and *wesomiya*. Although everyone sang, danced and jumped up, down and leaned in all four directions, it was *Miret*, *Solomon* and *Kiflemariam* who stole the show. They shined throughout and especially *Solomon* rocked the hall with his lyrics. There was also another quite man broke loose earlier in the afternoon. That was *Tekie Albekit* who hit the stage with his absolutely nostalgic,

sensational and thought-provoking poems. With his poems the audience wandered back and forth in time travel.

Day 3, Saturday the 16th, was focussed on conclusion, recommendations and recognition, which are listed at the end of this report and the highlight of the conference ending, cultural music and dance.

Artists lined up to entertain were: Singers: *Mihret Derehans, Solomon Yohannes* and *Mihret Arbed* and unscheduled entry *Yohannes Solomon*. Musicians: *Salah Omar, Kalat Raki* and *Henok Tesfalidet* and the Sound system: *Tesfalidet Kidane*.

We had Alamin Hasabala and Merharzghi Menadr whom were scheduled to take part in the conference but unfortunately could not make it due to change in personal circumstances, both theses did apologise and wished the conference success, especially Merharzghi who had to cancel his trip having his bought his ticket.

What was done in the Conference?	
THURSDay 14 July 2005	
	Arrivals and Registration (Tea & Coffee)
<i>(Habtezion Tewelday-Lijam Debanma</i> <i>Chairman</i>	Welcome and Introductions to Objective of Conference and programmes
Mihret Derehans (USA)	Panel member - I use ARTS to Promote my Culture
Rita Cairnri (USA)	Panel member - My Experience of Blinar - Oral Family History
Dr Kiflemariam Hamde	Panel member - Social identity- yn awni?
Mowes G Adem - facilitator	Question & Answer
Frezghi Woldemichael	A welcome poem in Blin
<i>Mowes G Adem - Facilitator</i>	
Friday 16 July 2005	
	Themes & topics
THEME 1	Language at home & Diaspora: the impact of alphabets, Language Maintenance
PRESENTERS	
Dr Kiflemariam Hamde (Sweden)	<u>The Situation of Blin Language Maintenance, Shift or Revitalisation</u>
Idris Hassan (Sweden)	<u>Blin Mother Tongue Education in Umea, Sweden</u>
Fesseha Nair (Sweden)	Teaching Language Experience from Sweden
Musie Amar (Norway)	Blin Mother Tongue Education in Norway
Mowes Ghebre Adem (London)	Introduction to Learning Blin - Blin mehersna
Tekie Alibekit (Norway & Daniel Yacob (the USA)	Blin Language Registered in the Unicode Standard Blin Language Registered in the Unicode Standard
<i>Rita Cairnri (USA) - Facilitator</i>	Discussions, Q & A
Friday 16 July 2005	

THEME 2	Cultural Heritage and History and how it is transmitted
Dr. Paul D. Fallon, (USA)	Writing down and recording Blin oral narratives
Mowes Ghebre Adem (London)	The Role of Culture and the contemporary Arts in Preservation of Blin Identity
Leon Beachy -Anthropologist (UK)	General Introduction to Being Blin.
Saadia Hassanen (Sweden)	The Impact of Immigration on Blin Identity, especially Women
Idris Abubeker (London)	Book review of 'The Blin of Bogos' by Michael Ghaber
<i>Mohammed Mesokar (London)</i>	Experience of Blin society in the last 150 Years
Dr Kiflemariam Hamde (Sweden)	<u>Blin yesterday, Today and Tomorrow</u>
Mike and Keturah Maurice (UK)	Comparison of Blin culture with the Biblical culture
<i>Fesseha Nair - Facilitator</i>	Discussions, Q & A
	Friday 16 July 2005
THEME 3	<u>Blin Community organisations and the way forward</u>
Hiwet Hagos (Sweden)	Experience of the Blin Community Association (MeqriH) in Sweden
<i>Selim Debesay (Sweden)</i>	The way forward for Blin community organisations - Blina meqrih entera wektl.
	<i>Facilitators of workshop 3</i>
<i>Rita Cairnri - facilitator</i>	Discussions, Q & A
<i>Letai Raki (Sweden)</i>	Story
Tekie Alibekit (Norway)	Poetry
Frezghi woldemichael (London)	Poetry
Letai Raki (Sweden)	Story
Hiwet Hagos (Sweden)	Poetry
Solomon Yohannes (London)	Story
Saturday 16 July 2005	
Organiser's Meeting	
Briefing and Recommendations, Agree Action Points	
Conclusion and Acknowledgement	
Dinner/Recognitions	

The venue

The venue was heaving in and out and it is hard to describe the talent and professionalism of the artists and the mood they created in the audience. People danced all evening and it all concluded at about 1am Sunday.

Attendance

In total the conference participants were around 50 people of the expected minimum of 40 and maximum of 60 people. In the view of the Conference organisers that was a great success.

Conclusion

The remarkable achievement and memorable moments of this conference was bringing together almost all the scholars, artists and community leaders who actively work in the development and preservation of Blin language and culture from all over the world. This unique experience highlighted the beginning of the creation of a platform of network, exchange of experiences and sharing work for all those committed in the subject of Blin language and culture. For many scholars who knew each other via e-mail and other means of correspondence it meant meeting face to face. The beginning of partnerships between individuals and organisations was established.

Has the conference met its objectives? The overall theme of the Conference was ' To share experiences in the Diaspora in keeping the language, traditions and culture, to explore ways of writing Blin language in Europe, explore how best children could learn Blin and emerge with some valuable recommendations or reference material.

The conference has played a vital role in teaching us about why it is extremely important to keep our Blin heritage alive for our future generation. This has been a learning and mind opening experience for everybody from the speakers to the audience.

One and the most teacher and reminder of our culture and language is education. Through this conference we were trying to pass our background and culture to the future generation. Therefore, research and presentations are the most useful way in which one can discuss and get the best out of. The Conference negotiated with various issues including: culture, traditions, history, heritage language and all of the arts forms and has certainly accomplished a great deal and has also paved a way for future endeavours.

Concluding Comments

- Let's create a platform of working together
- *Kiflemariam Hamde*: Things started working and should continue doing better.
- *Selim Debesay*: to accomplish what has started, the organisers should work to develop a network.
- *Idris Omer*: This is a successful and excellent event, enriching and focus on language and culture preservation Academic work, we have learnt a new various things excellent for future of our language and culture
- *Hassabela Hadgay*: 'nebras kelelewa esenekulu geriwa qanekulu' ' Translation food is prepared by a few but consumed by many'. Excellent job has been done and we should continue preparing Blin events.
- *Idris Abubeker*: We need to focus on three things: social development, historical & cultural development and research on Blin laws and customs.
- *Mihret Derehans*: I had a lot to say but short time. I thank the organisers and everyone who is here. To further our objectives, we need to work very hard. I like to stress that we need to work together, encourage and respect one another instead of demeaning each other and becoming tools of others. It does not

- matter who is who. Let's keep our culture and that can be achieved at a required level only by working together and by cooperating respectfully.
- *Daniel Yacob*: Use technology to develop new things to keep culture. Culture and language will decay if it does not compete well. These are good initiatives. March forward.
 - *Hiwet Hagos*: Let's bring all brothers and sisters on board and work to preserve our language and culture. What makes someone going home scary? Why are people making nonsense claims that if you entertain your cultural events that you can't go home.
 - *Mohamed Sheifield*: So far so good. We need to go on. I believe there is enough ignorance within the community. We are no less than anyone. Let's continue the good work and move forward.
 - *Musie Amar*: Our Association in Norway is doing well. We teach our children but need to improve it more and all Blin organisations has to work hard to face the language and culture challenges with our younger generation.
 - *Ismail Hadgay*: Thank you for coming and invigorating this event '*entet shaĕ lari bala*'. Translation: '*since we have you, there is nothing that we don't possess*'. We are a small community but we are diverse in religion, politics and somehow in our up bringing. We need to set the differences aside and work together to create a strong community that can keep its language and culture for generations to come.
 - *M Mesoker*: We have a rich culture born from old kingdoms and is a it's a diverse and able o form compromises. I felt proud by *Mihret's* contribution to the Blin culture and arts. Those born in exile need to keep our culture, and the community has developed a system to enable us to maintain our culture. This a great opportunity and we must continue doing so.
 - *Mohamed Nor*: Welcome and congratulations to all Blin Moslems and Christians. We have a culture and quite a rich heritage. We always worked together and should continue working together.
 - *Suleiman*: I thank all our guests from the USA, Sweden and Norway and all that are present here today. Blin have never worked for themselves, so many people get a bit concerned when we come together but let's assure people our brothers and sisters that we are here to develop our culture and that is useful for Eritrea. . Let us continue this good work
 - *Abu Nadir*; We can ask people working together to disintegrate abut encourage their work and unity. Let us put our children as our main priority. Let us debate on how better to bring them up, educate them. But make no mistake that we are responsible for their future. Let us draw action plans and enter into some commitment to realise bringing up our children in the best possible way we know and we can.
 - *Tekie Alibekit*: We are here to see what to do what to think. I think it is important to form groups of people interested in literature, language and culture, artists and take things forward.
 - *M Debesay*: I would like to thank *Mowes, Yohanes, Hamid, Ismail, Habtezion* and *Abdulrahman*, for working very hard to make this conference possible. They brought us here all together. To be someone you have to do something. We also need to work with others. We need to learn the good culture of our fathers. May I also take this opportunity to propose that *Mihret Derehans* – the voice of our culture to become our culture Ambassadress. The recommendation was put to the members and members agreed for *Mihret* to

nominate the ambassadress. And those present at the conference elected Mihret as the ambassadress of Blin culture. Please note that this was an expression of our appreciation of her contribution for the Blin culture by those who were in the conference and does not include or exclude views of others who were not in the Conference. Although we have no doubt that all Blin people will confirm her contribution, we do not want this to be seen as this conference had the powers to give such titles on behalf of everybody else.

- *Kifle Hamde*: Thank you Debanma group particularly Mowes. In 1999, Mowes, Selus, Demsas and me discussed about holding such a conference which has not taken place until this moment.
- *Mohamed*: Transparency is important for this to work and the Blin should work together to move forward. More research should commence, there is no a way in which we can fail because at least it will mean we tried.
- *Frezghi*: The website needs to be developed because it is one of our main lines of communication. The more information our website contains, the more useful it is. It is also crucial for the website to always be up to date and include the latest issues.
- *Gemena*: I am pleased to be with you. This is the birth of the conference, as we did not know what this conference was going to bring or what to expect from it. Now we know what to look forward to in the future and how to prepare for the next conference.
- *Frezghi*: Blin, lets be together, when you work as few it can encourage others to follow you. I wish you all the best and we will be behind you all the way.
- *Tekie*: We have not seen all Londoners here today and I am concerned as to why there are not more people attending this conference.

Recommendations

1. Community organisations

- Blin Community organisations need to understand the reasons of their establishment very clearly. They must clearly define their Objects and adhere to the Objects they set to achieve.
- Community organisations need not confuse their powers of serving provisions with presentation of people.
- There is an understanding of representing people, which is not in line with the aims and objectives recorded in their constitutions.
- Blin Community organisations must be able to establish a network of working together to further their Objects and support their communities they set to assist in a wider sphere.
- There are visible community groups in Europe and have done well so far and should be able to progress and learn how to work together to benefit the Blin people, and especially the younger generation.
- Organisations forming CONSORTIUMS will help them to be able to compete in raising funds and also forming transactional projects, which can attract more funding including from the European Union. This type of projects can benefit groups and more importantly the communities spread across Europe.
- Important recommendation was made to conduct a research on how best to run organisations and learn not fail as past experiences of creating sustainable organisations had been quite a challenge.

2. Mother Tongue Education

- There was much debate on how best to teach children about their culture and the Blin language. It seemed that most of the organisations teaching Blin are using Geez alphabets, however, point was also raised the use of Latin alphabets at the ministry of education in a primary education/back home and how using different alphabets in exile might affect the education system.
- It recommended that groups or mother tongue education groups do agree on how best to teach the children following their circumstances.
- Majority in the conference favoured use of Geez as most groups are already using it. Language Standard Unicode Standard additional help for
- It was also recommended that children learn traditions and to keep culture and has to be practised in various forms: artistically and also traditions has to be celebrated as when they occur. For instance, children can rehearse how traditions are demonstrated at pre and post weddings ceremonies.
- There were recommendations that children can learn culture even if they miss the opportunity leaning to speak the language.
- It was strongly recommended to develop teaching materials for children, as there were limited resources at the moment.
- Recommendations were made for all people wherever they are to teach children Blin and also practice speaking Blin in their own homes. Exile...diaspora not easy
- Work network with other Eritrean organisations

3. Network of writers, artists and educators

- It was recommended that the above and anyone interested in enhancing the Blin language and culture should connect effectively and support one another to produce more relevant and useful documents in the field of their work.
- Teaching materials are in a great demand and it is of a paramount importance to have to develop more learning materials in the area.
- Use of Blin artists and especially singers for our weddings and parties was found to be enormously important. It encourages the artists and above all it helps in keeping the culture alive.
- The Blin community has appreciated the established and emerging artists and especially the singers. We have also started inviting them in our weddings and celebrations. It was emphasized to continue using their talents as they remain as important figures in transmitting our culture and language development and maintenance. The accomplished artists such as Mihret Derehans, Alamin Hasaballa, Habtat Zerezghi and young talents, in the Diaspora can now be reached quite easily.

4. Young people

- The Conference noted the young people born here and those coming from newly arriving and recommended a proper platform be created that they can connect with each other and also be assisted develop to inherit their identity.
- Newsletter publication, use of the internet (websites) and meetings were suggested as ways forward.

- Involvement of young people in the Community organisations to the highest level was recommended.
- Deeper research should be done on the younger generation and observe the way they live their lives. A youth report could be produced from this so it will help us understand our youth and their needs. We need to have meetings for young people. There are many young people in and outside London.
- I would also like to see an active Debanma website. It would be good to have a team to work together on these points. (*Fesum*)

5. Other Recommendations

- *Selim*: A newsletter should be published by Debanma to inform the Blin community of the different activities that are taking place and keep everyone up to date.
- *Hasabala*; More people should be informed of the conference next time. The event should be promoted harder so that more people know about it and in a way that will encourage people to come.
- *Selim*: We are happy to be here. We should form a committee from the USA, UK, Sweden, and Norway to plan for the future.
- *Idris*: let's not forget the reality. The Blin have an organisational problem due to lack understanding reasons of setting up organisations. We lack to understand the sole purpose as to why we establish organisations. Let us make sure that organisations are established to serve the Blin people as defined in their constitutions as service users or beneficiaries. There is no way that these organisations claim that they represent people. I strongly advice those interested in establishing organisations clearly understand the purpose of the organisations they are forming. I also feel that it is important to work together to solve this problem. In order to move forward, we must form consortiums between Blin organisations in the Diaspora and encourage people to work for the future development.
- Individual people who actively work in the field of Blin culture and language to network and assist and also encourage one another to be able to produce and be more effective.
- Teaching Blin to Blin children is so important and parents and those interested must continue doing so. Language is the most important factor in keeping culture alive. Loosing language would mean loosing Blin culture. Teach Blin regardless what characters are used until some kind of consensus is reached.
- We must keep using our traditions such in weddings, birth, and many other relevant rituals, which remind us of the culture and Blinar (being Blin).

Rita Cairnri's Blin mother told her of all the spoken stories which she shares with the audience. Rita is born in Asmara but Residing in the USA. Her main concern was the Blin identity Crisis, which she bases her topic on. She tells us that **'identity is like a river', because you pass it down to the next generation.** 'Socially, I do not identify myself, someone else identifies me'.

Dr Kiflemariam Hamde's big issue was the question of "who we are". The main subject under discussion was Blin language and the effect of the Blin in exile. Kiflemariam's interest started only in the language but gradually widened to other areas. He talks of his experience and how he got interested in Blin, starting from his

early days in Eritrea. He explores whether the blin are holding to their language or shifting and whether there is a crisis for the second generation to maintain their identity. There is also a discussion on Immigration, integration, assimilation and isolation and it's influence that forces us to learn a completely alien language e.g. Arabic, English, etc.

Dr Kiflemariam also speaks about his experience in Seminary and the two conflicting communities: Blin and Tigrigna. 'We are afraid of being overwhelmed by others, but we must strive to keep our language alive'. Although Blin are a minority, we have the right to be respected in terms of our culture, language and feelings.

The Big moments:

Some of the striking and defining phrases in the Conference:

'Unless we shout about our language, culture etc. we will be patronized by others to tell us about "us". It is my responsibility to speak Blin, teach Blin, let others know that I am Blin'. *Kiflemariam*

'Identity is like a river, because you pass it down to the next generation'. *Rita Cairnri*

'The challenge of being Blin at home is the same as in exile'. *Fesseha Nair*

'This is the birth of the conference' *Leon Beachy (Gemena)*

'Blin is still viable. It all depends on what this generation does to keep the language alive'. *Dr. Fallon*

'Culture is a distinctive awareness of one's self engulfed by own understanding, feelings and interpretation of life in all aspects and reflecting on one's surroundings. It is the passion that drives an identity and it is the maintenance of the values, heritages and history as a family, or group of people, a nation or nations or even as a continent.' *Mowes Adem*

'It is imperative that the language is spoken at home, the classroom is not enough'. *Idris Hassenen*

'We should be optimistic and not fight about the choice of alphabet as improvements and amendments can come gradually'. *Ali*

'I like to stress that we need to work together, encourage and respect one another instead of demeaning each other and becoming tools of others'. *Mihret Derehans*

'We need to learn the good culture of corporation from our fathers'. *M Debesay*

'It does not matter who is who'. *Mihret Derehans*

'Thank you for coming and invigorating this event 'entet shak lari bala'. Translation: 'since we have you, there is nothing that we don't possess'. *Ismail Hadgay*

Kiflemariam insisted that the difficulty is that unless we put aside our being, from different parts of (blina beledil), and speak about our identity no one else is going to do it for us. **'Unless we shout about our language, culture etc. we will be patronized by others to tell us about "us". It is my responsibility to speak Blin,**

teach Blin, let others know that I am Blin’. The change of residence and going out of your zone to another and the shifting in time should not mean that one must lose or change their language identity.

The main priority is education and this is the only way in which the Blin can expand on their knowledge and be able to pass it on to the younger generation. We can only develop and go far if we work together. We must start from small villages to the rest of area including region and the whole tribe. There should not be a border as long as there is understanding and cooperation

It may appear that we the Blin are weak; however, this is not true as our language is much livelier now than it has been from 20 years ago and our awareness of our culture is expanding all the time. Our Blin speakers from all over the world gave their experiences of teaching Blin and they have shown that there has been massive progress.

Fesseha Nair tells us that the challenge of being Blin at home is the same in as in exile. He has collected materials to fight back the derogatory attitude from other Eritrean communities. There are many difficulties faced including the political constraints, the organisation of teaching and the lack of teaching materials.

Fesseha Nair shares his experience of trying to teach Blin for the first time in Sweden. He comments that ‘it made us look like fools and the Tigrigna speaker’s could not believe it, they thought we were taking our children backwards’. The difficulty was mainly due to the shortage of teaching material. Thus we should cooperate to form and produce proper teaching material. It does not matter if it is written, in Latin, Gheez, or Arabic; the purpose should be to maintain our language identity.

Musie Amar also shares his experience of teaching Blin in Norway. There was a big movement at the time of independence and an air of excitement about mother languages. This is when they started to teach Blin to children. Since children of different ages were mixed in one group, it became quiet difficult to hold on to the elder children but many have been convinced to stay and learn. Now they organise social events twice a year and celebrate their achievements and teach their children more about the culture.

There is the opportunity to translate and interpret Blin language through software. Ali discusses the implications of Blin software and the disadvantages of Latin characters that the authorities have introduced. He feels that ideally Gheez alphabet should have been used however, we should be optimistic and not fight about the choice of alphabet as improvements and amendments can come gradually.

Daniel Yacob argues ‘that the use of letters is simply to write words, period!’ He also adds that international attention is only given to major languages, like English and Spanish, hence, if others do not move by themselves nobody is going to revive them.

Blin intellectuals come from two schools that may teach in either Arabic or Gheez alphabet. This has caused a conflict triangle as the education department, believe if Blin is written in Gheez Moslems might not accept it. So we ask; is Latin a compromise without asking the people? Ali believes that if we want to be complete we have to learn both Gheez and Arabic.

As an intellectual *Dr. Fallon* suggests that ‘to revitalize Blin language, we as a community must keep going and at least try to maintain it’. We can encourage the younger generation by introducing video games, recordings and speaking Blin at home. ‘Keep it alive; Blin is still viable. It all depends on what this generation does to keep the language alive’.

Idris Hassen says that ‘it is imperative that the language is spoken at home, the classroom is not enough’. Talking from his experience in Sweden, he also recognises that the children must as well be enthusiastic and have the willingness to learn. It is also complicated for the children as they are raised fighting between two societies, Blin and Swedish.

There were many recommendations that came forward from the conference, which shows that these discussions were valuable. It has been recommended that the Blin conferences should rotate every year instead of always being in one country. Furthermore, a facilitating committee should be formed and more should be done to expand the Blin activities. Activities can only expand through organising the youngsters and keeping a high standard of communication throughout. There has been a suggestion by **Mihret Derehans that the young can develop their culture by means of participating in arts and entertainment**, for example, if the our young entertainers were sponsored it would push them to take this more seriously.

To communicate well there must also be transparency to assure that we all understand one another clearly, which will build a solid relationship in our Blin community. We must be tolerant with each other and sympathetic to each other’s needs

Furthermore, research is a crucial factor as it is the only way to move forward and learn more. Organisation is vital and it has been recognised as one of our weaknesses therefore, and more will be done improve it. In general we are doing well and we should be proud of ourselves.

Final action plan

ACTION PLANS;

- 1. SELECTED COMMITTEE ‘Dildil’:** The committee will include representatives including, Hiwet from Sweden, Musie from Norway and Mowes and Demsas from London. They will be responsible for deciding where and when the next conference will take place. The facilitating committee will also study the heading of the next conference and will look into expanding the activities of the Blin. In addition, they will look for ways to solve the problems that we face in constituting organisations.

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Mowes Ghebre Adem

THE END