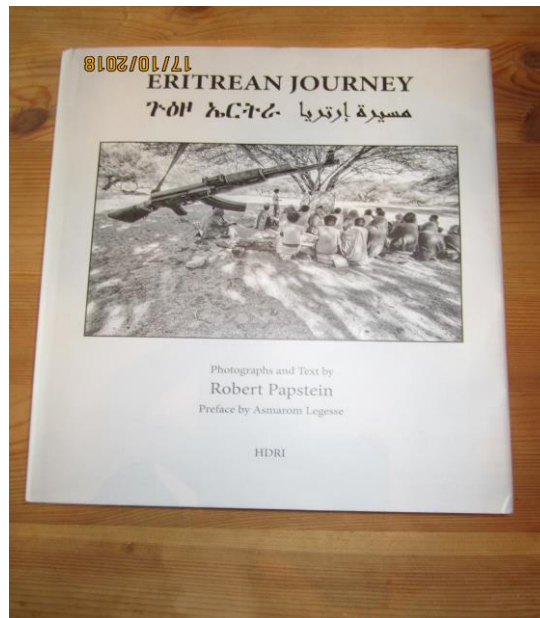


Eritrean Journey

Introduction

By : Robert Papstein



In 1985 I went to Eritrea for the first time to photograph the so-called « Ethiopian famine”, which, in Eritrea, was largely man made by the Ethiopian Government in order to starve the Eritreans into accepting Ethiopian domination. The television and still images provoked an unprecedented world response: creating Live Aid, rock musician Bob Geldof co-founded Band AID? THE Hollywood music elite led by Michael Jackson recorded “We Are The World”.

World-wide outpourings of grief and support were authentic, but the true story of Eritrea remained largely unknown. For 25 years they had been fighting an armed struggle for their independence against Ethiopian colonialization while carrying out a social revolution, creating the beginnings of a modern society in a region bound by centuries of conservative social traditions of inequality and fatalism. One of the most striking social changes was the commitment to gender equality. Women served in every aspect of the armed

struggle from front-line fighters to the myriad of support functions; mechanics, teachers, doctors, electricians-every profession and trade.

Ironically, in the midst of war and famine, Eritrea was actually a positive story showing how people's lives could be substantially improved with extremely limited resources, when concepts of social justice and self-reliance motivated action. The Eritreans refused to consider themselves victims, so common in other former colonies at the time, choosing self-confidence instead. I told the Eritrean story in the photojournalism book *Eritrea: Revolution at Dusk (1991)*. That year I celebrated the end of the war in Asmara, which I had never been able to visit when it was under Ethiopian occupation, and, in 1993, covered the UN supervised Referendum after which the Eritrean State declared its formal Independence and was internationally recognized

In 2013, after an absence of 20 years, I returned to Eritrea to see how the country had changed, look up old friends and explore the possibility of a new photojournalism project centered on how far the goal of gender equality, a core principle during the war, had been generalized throughout the country. As the project went on, it became clear that the issue of the position of women could not be separated from the broader changes in Eritrean approach to these changes could be understood without understanding what Eritrea had experienced during the War of Liberation I tried to tell the larger story of the Eritrean experience of the past 50 years by combining photographs from the long out of print, *Eritrea: Revolution at Dusk*, which few Eritreans, especially inside the country, had ever seen, with new photographs taken between 2013 and 2015, to create *Eritrean Journey*.

During the war of Independence, much of what I saw visually striking, Photographing social change in peacetime was far more challenging; not only to document change but to also make it visually engaging. Readers will have to decide how successful this has been.