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Mind in Africa, Body in Europe: The Struggle for Maintaining and Transforming Cultural Identity - A Note from the Experience of Eritrean Immigrants in Stockholm

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A Note from the Experience of  
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Kiflemariam Hamde

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# **Mind in Africa, Body in Europe: The Struggle for Maintaining and Transforming Cultural Identity - A Note from the Experience of Eritrean Immigrants in Stockholm**

## **Summary**

This paper describes how individuals and groups who had crossed ‘physical, national boundaries’, and who live in a different social context make sense of their lives make sense of their lives by re-constructing their identities - of the sense of who they are, and who they want to be, which is an ongoing process. This is done by narrating the experiences of African men and women who live in Sweden and who struggle to both maintain their cultural identity and at the same time change aspects in their culture due to the context in which they find themselves. Maintaining cultural identity and transforming aspects of that identity therefore constitute the main thrust of the paper. Some of the ways through which immigrants claim to maintain their identity are practices and routines that they repeatedly and consistently perform as if these were uniform both in the host country and in the country of origin. But it is exactly within this premise that ‘maintaining’ an identity is defined in this paper. However, the routines, or practices may have different meanings or significance to different actors, different audience, and especially for the main beneficiaries, in a particular context. In this paper, I will narrate how ‘maintaining’ cultural identity is understood and practiced by Blin (Eritrean) immigrants in Stockholm, Sweden, when they solemnly perform a *cultural rite* called *blessing (gewra)* in weddings. The paper is based on a participant observation of weddings from 1992 to 2001 in Stockholm, Sweden, when the Blin speaking people perform the blessing rite, enjoy doing it, show to the audience how they maintain ‘who they are’, and perhaps symbolically confirm their unity with the Blin community. The main actors are the elderly and the bridegroom, both *sine qua non* if the rite is to get its legitimacy. Thus, the blessing rite is an example of being Eritrean in Sweden for its performers. The concept of *identity* and *identity construction* has become an important concept to deal with such demands for ‘maintaining’ and ‘transforming’ identities. Even though maintaining identity is encouraged in the Swedish social policy, transformation of that identity comes through demands that are widely accepted as modern values, such as egalitarianism, gender equality and individualism – leading to issues of diversity at different levels. If one strictly defines the meaning of the blessing rite, one can find that the meaning sometimes may not be consonant with the so-called modern values but that the people then provide symbolic significance to the rite.

**Keywords:** Blessing rite, Blin community, Culture maintenance, Identity construction, Immigrant

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## Introduction

When individuals cross boundaries, they may make sense of their lives by re-constructing their identities - of the sense of who they are, and who they want to be, which is an ongoing process. The concept of *identity* and *identity construction* has become an important concept to deal with such demands for 'maintaining' and 'transforming' identities. The purpose of the paper is to describe how individuals and groups who have crossed 'physical, national boundaries', and who live in a different social context make sense of their lives. This is done by narrating the experiences of African men and women who live in Sweden and who struggle to both maintain their cultural identity and at the same time change aspects in their culture due to the context in which they find themselves<sup>1</sup>. Maintaining cultural identity and transforming aspects of that identity therefore constitute the main thrust of the paper. In this paper, I will narrate how 'maintaining' cultural identity is understood and practiced by Eritrean immigrants in Stockholm, Sweden, when they solemnly perform a *cultural rite* in wedding.

Among the Blin speakers who reside in Sweden, the rites they perform on different occasions are understood to contribute to cultural identity of the group, both among other Eritrean ethnic groups and non-Eritreans. This does not mean that the identity issue is deeply ingrained in the values and norms constituting the rites. In fact, some of the values and norms that the rites aspire to ascribe to members may not easily be integrated with the Swedish values and norms, especially such issues as equality of sexes, roles for males and females and the place of the individual in the community. Even though maintaining identity is encouraged in the Swedish social policy, transformation of that identity comes through demands that are widely accepted as modern values (Meyer and Jepperson 2000), such as egalitarianism, gender equality and individualism – leading to issues of diversity at different levels. This alludes to the experience of Eritrean immigrants to maintain values and norms that may sometimes be in harmony and at other times in conflict with the wider society in which they find themselves. It becomes therefore important to understand how - and to what extent - people construct their identities as individuals, and how the ethnic identity and gender identity interact to form into new identity that may or may not lead to integration into the host society which often constitutes the context where people make sense of 'who they are' and 'who they want to be'. Institutionalised identities such as ethnicity and gender have important

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<sup>1</sup> This work is part of an ongoing research project on the experiences of Eritrean immigrants in Sweden (Hamde 2002a, b).

implications for people, either for joining together with the larger societal demands and values (and hence *integration*) or struggling to make sense of their lives by isolating themselves from the wider, societal values and norms (hence *discrimination*). In both cases, people narrate different stories on their life-experiences and the processes of sense making may lead to constructing of multiple identities that sometimes may not be easily integrated together.

The implication of such investigation would be relevant both for policymakers in their attempts to describe the process of integration or discrimination as a result of ethnicity and gender in the labour market and also to researchers who want to understand what it means to be an immigrant and how the latter groups tell different stories in their interaction with others. This is to study closely and describe how being African, and ‘women’ or ‘men’ affect them in their surrounding to be integrated to the macro level – Swedish society. Implications abound, for example in labour market participation, and whether that also means participating in the gendered system of work organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges 1994), or if it is one leading to emancipation and meaningful life experience in terms of individualistic terms of actor hood (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). Broader questions that may be investigated as part of the study are:

- To what extent do immigrants experience gendered work, for example, in Umeå?
- How do immigrant men and women from Africa make sense of their identity and construct appropriate identities at the appropriate moments in their social encounter and interaction with ‘others’?
- What are the implications of labour market participation for integration?

The paper is mainly based on *participant observation* by the author among Eritrean immigrants in Sweden, especially when the latter conduct certain ceremonies they believe facilitate identity maintaining and identity transforming (Trice and Meyer 1991). The method consists of retroactive sense making on social events and rites performed by the Eritrean immigrants in Sweden, with a special focus on the Blin speakers (Hamde 2002b).

In the following pages, I will first discuss the interaction of individual and social identity. Then I will describe about the Blin ethnic group and their encounter with ‘others’. This is followed by a description of the Blin ethnic group and how they attach a great value to the rite of how an adult individual becomes a member of the Blin community through the *Groom blessing-rite*<sup>2</sup>. For newly married couples, this event is

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<sup>2</sup> For an original study of the same rite and other rites of passage, see Zeremariam (1986)

performed as part of the wedding ceremony. It is also commonly used to integrate newly initiated boys to the adult community, before or after marriage. The practice is common both in Eritrea and in the various Blin immigrant communities in Europe. The event I have described are based on the practices of Blin immigrants in Stockholm city since the early 1990s. Possible explanations of the 'rite' are then discussed, with concluding remarks.

## **Identity and identity construction**

This section shortly discusses the concept of identity and identity construction and how it may be related to identity through cultural practices. One can start by identifying two approaches to the study of identity – the *essentialist view* and the *social constructionist view*. The essentialist view focuses on the assumption that identity is a 'fixed' phenomenon – that the individual, personality, motivation and attitudes are *constant* regardless of time and place (Tajfel, 1982). In this view, 'social and structural factors are tacitly acknowledged as having some effects, but these are seldom treated in an explicit fashion. They are generally reduced to the status of intervening variables that complicate the action of the individually based mechanism and determinations of behaviour', according to Thompson and McHugh (2002: 220). The second approach, the social constructionist one, focuses mainly on *the experiences of people through subjectivity and identity*. Thompson and McHugh (2002: 220) hold that the concepts of subjectivity and identity overlap. They define subjectivity to be the condition of being subject, in the sense that, the way in which individual is acted upon, and made subject to the structural and interpersonal processes at work in organisational life' (highlights in the original). The concept of the 'individual' suggests the individual has a fixed personality of characters that need to be 'watched' and kept regardless of changes in time and place.

The authors also describe the second meaning of subjectivity as 'the condition of being a subject', possessing individuality and self-awareness. Thus the term encompasses the fundamentally contradictory experiences of work and the subject development and regulation of peoples 'emotions, fantasies, a sense of self' (ibid, references omitted). Both concepts focus on the need to 'maintain' certain valued aspects of the individual and group identity as well as develop proper identity, thereby alluding to the transformation process. 'Individuals are not the *passive recipients* or *objects* of structural processes but are constructively engaged in the securing of identities and the development of capacities. These, although influenced and shaped by organisational contexts and practices, are at the same time the *unique products of*

*each person's history* (ibid, 221). However, I do not wholly subscribe to the 'materialist' basis of the authors because the subject at issue is not merely based on economic organisation where the division of labour is at stake. Rather, I am concerned more with the social capital (hence, culture, language, values, norms), which cannot be limited to the materialist view of identity formation.

The literature on identity has also identified differences on whether *personal identity* and *social identity* is the prime determinant of behaviour and motivation. The point tends to capture the main issue in 'who we are' and 'what we want to be'. As Weigert et al. (1986: 31) hold, 'at the everyday empirical level, identity is available through language systems or codes by which humans define self and other' (1986: 31). Weigert et al. also argue that '*Identity is a definition that transforms a mere biological individual into a human person. It is a definition that emerges from and is sustained by the cultural meanings of social relationships activated in interaction*' (highlights added). Identity is here understood to be a *social product*, which is both bestowed on individuals by others and appropriated by individuals for themselves. It takes the form of a typified self, in that it is any of a number of self-produced categorizations out of what is available to the individual within the various situations in which they participate' (Thompson and McHugh 2002).

In linking individual and social identity, Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) argue that 'the identity construction of the individual can be perceived as a process of self-reflexion that arises as a person moves through time and space, and through different organisational and institutional environments. This reflexively constructed identity unfolds in the conscious interaction between the self and its social context' (2001, 359). Some authors, for example Weigert et al (1986) hold that the way people represent themselves in their social environment takes place through the medium of social identity, which usually is not a single defining characteristic of the individual. For the symbolic interactionist Goffman (1959), 'the image presented is not necessarily the 'real' self of the person, but is *a situationally appropriate image sustained both by the 'actor' and by those observing and (or interacting with the performer*'. We present an appropriate image of ourselves in each context, '*depending upon whom we are dealing with at the time*, we can present an image which is intended both to appear appropriate to the situation and to appear consistent with the expectations of the other' (Thompson and McHugh 2002: 335). Thus identity is not merely a project an individual or a group just shows, but need be accepted – negotiated – by those with whom we interact at the time. The others involved collaborate with the actor to enable him or her to present a consistent performance and hence a social identity consistent with the situation. Yet, this



reformulation of identity neglects the mechanism of power and domination from different sources and puts the thrust merely on the individual.

A social identity does not simply spring fully formed from the demands of the situation, but requires effort and practice from the individual and appropriate feedback from others. Thus the contexts from which we are able to construct a unique subjective identities for ourselves consist mainly of 'rationalised' performances where we construct our personal identity out of the strategies and responses we devise to deal with contingencies (Thompson and McHugh 2002: 335).

The description above makes it clear that the tension between '*keeping*' a fixed personality and trying to continually represent oneself in the changing environment can best be met if one embraces the *social constructionist* view of reality (that is, identity, in this case). This view helps to understand better why individual immigrants need the support of the immigrant community to conduct certain rites that may or may not be supported by the wider host society. According to Thompson and McHugh (2002): 335), 'The problem which many people find in discovering their 'own' identity may in part arise from the consequences of trying to be consistent over time and from the wide range of images they have had to present to survive in a complex and changing social environment'. The link between 'who am I?' and 'who we are?' is therefore one of not merely consensual but also conflict-laden forum if not handled properly. Personal, subjective identity consists of the meanings and images we have found accurately to represent us in the past, and social identity consists of the negotiated position between our personal identity and the meanings and images demanded of us in our current context (ibid, 2002). I shall now turn to the description of the Blin ethnic group before discussing the Groom Blessing rite.

### **The Blin ethnic group**

There are nine ethnic groups in Eritrea, classified into three language groups: Cushitic, Semitic and Nilo-Saharan (Tucker and Bryan (1966). Blin is a Cushitic language spoken by around 5% of the total population (Killion 1998)<sup>3</sup>. However, there has not been a formal census on the Eritrean population during the war of Independence (1991-1999) or even after independence in 1991. As a result of this, different figures appear in the literature on Eritrean population, but always assuring that the Tigringa speakers kept at 50% of the total population.

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<sup>3</sup> For works on Blin language and culture, refer [www.blina.net](http://www.blina.net)

Thus figures for the Blin speakers are variously estimated to be between 2,5% to 5% (Bereketeab 2000, Kifleyesus 2000, Killion 1998, Negash 1999).

It is also difficult to get figures for the total number of immigrants from Eritrea in Sweden. The Swedish National Statistics estimates that 3465 immigrants (aged 16-64) originating from Eritrea lived in Sweden in year 2001. Yet, many Eriteans who have immigrated to Sweden were registered as Ethiopians and the exact figure is difficult to know. The Association of Eritreans in Sweden estimates the number to be around 10, 000 in their gatherings and the mass media. This estimate puts Sweden the second largest home for Eritreans (after Italy). This uncertainty also applies to the Blin speakers. The Blin Language and Culture Association in Sweden estimates that there are around 200 families in Sweden who identify themselves as Blin. The members of the Association range between 30-40 families even though the events prepared by it are open to everybody, including non-Blin speakers. The following table provides figures for the population and different language groups of the country.

Table 1 Eritrea Ethnic and language groups (in alphabetic order)

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Approximate %</b>	<b>Ethnic language</b>	<b>Language family</b>
Afar	3%	Afar	Cushitic
Blin	5%	Blin	Cushitic
Hedareb	<1%	Tobedawe	Cushitic
Kunama	3%	Kunama	Nilo-Saharan
Nara	<1%	Nara	Nilo-Saharan
Rashaida	<1%	Arabic	Semitic
Saho	7%	Saho	Cushitic
Tigre	30%	Tigre	Semitic
Tigrinya	50%	Tigrinya	Semitic

Source: Killion 1998

In this study, the figures are not of much importance because the paper deals with the practice or rite the Bin speakers commonly value and use in wedding, which is not bound with membership in any association. The practices people use in wedding are those that they believe constitute *central markers of their identity*, and the Blin speakers also actively advance their language and culture as important markers of their cultural identity (Hamde 2002b). I now turn to the description of that Groom blessing-rite and the construction of the language in it.

### **Blin Wedding rite: The Blessing-rite (*gewra*)**

Performing different ceremonies during the rites of passage characterizes much of social practices in Eritrean society (Hamde 1990). Blin speakers also perform special ceremonies for different rites of passage<sup>4</sup> both in Eritrea and in the Diaspora. Performing these practices is understood to enhance cultural identity as well as confirming of ones *Blinnar* - being a Blin. The individual becomes one among the community and the community becomes the context of providing legitimacy to the expressed and desired identity. The individual Blin identity is formed through participation of the individual in rites and ceremonies that are provided by the community as markers of the ethnicity or uniqueness among other Eritreans. The individual expresses his loyalty to the community by allowing to be blessed by the elders who have traditional power him. On the other hand, the community elders accept the individual as an adult with full rights and duties within the community, and one who can participate fully in all types of social encounters legitimated by the community.

Along with the use of the Blin language (Hamde 2002b), these practices, or rites, are expressions for the Blin community that it is serving the individual who perform the rites and the community, legitimating the performer's role in the community. In Blin society, it is the elders who 'bless' the newly-initiated boy or the bride-groom but among the immigrants elders may not be readily available and other adults may perform the rite even if they could not have done so in Eritrea. . All roles and expected activities are included in the blessing. To a certain extent, it can be said that the blessing constitutes an expression for the **GOOD LIFE**, as the Blin people see it. What is right and wrong, and what is a good life or a bad life are described in the rite. Thus, the adult member become responsible not only for himself but also for others, guests as well as permanent members of the community. The rite describes the responsibility of adults even for taking care of the land, mountains, trees, other people from other ethnic groups etc. The following blessing rite is performed both for newly initiated boys who had remained minors and also grooms on their wedding day (Hamde 1986). This is a free translation into English by the author.

1. Be bestowed with all the good and the riches!
2. Bear many children and prosper!

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent account of these rites, see Committee for Blin Language and Culture in Keren (1997, in Blin)

3. Spring as a baobab tree!
4. Sprout as river tree!
5. Be one from whom people get nourishment and drinks!
6. Be a rest (station) and a good host to many guests!
7. Be a mountain for a refuge and a plain for relaxation!
8. Bear strong boys and soft girls!
9. Let you get males in the fore-room and females in the inn-room!
10. Let she she (wife) be a good housewife and a the only ever first-wife!
11. Let all the chance and good luck of your forefathers' be upon you!

### **Live the good life!**

In the blessing rite, the role of boys and girls in Blin community are predetermined. The place of women and men also are predetermined, providing the work of men to be outside the home and the place of women inside the home and house. The question is when immigrants perform the rite in the same way as it is practiced, for example, in Eritrea, what *meaning* do the actors give to the rites? And how do the audience view them? These are issues that can be related to the main theme of this conference - *governing cultural diversity*. The questions are: *whose diversity has to be governed? Who defines diversity and identity? What are the meaning Blin speakers provide to the practices they perform as markers of identity and issues that they give special significance? The idea that immigrants perform practices that they believe are significant in their daily lives need special study and care whether this is governing them, managing them or simply 'redefining them by 'others'. Yet, some of the ideas in the Blessing-rite might signify that the values and norms expressed lead to conflict with the host country values and norms! That is, maintaining a culture where sex roles are predetermined and where the gender issues are taken for granted may not be met with open hands in Europe. The literal meaning might signify a conflict with Swedish social norms and values but the main purpose why people perform rites of passage and rites of blessings are much more than that – they have *symbolic* purpose. They mean membership in the community as well by getting legitimacy from the community.*

### **Four possible interpretations and future research projects!**

In this paper, I shortly discuss four possible interpretation of the rite of blessing that may be taken as discussion points for the meaning of ‘*governing cultural diversity*’, the main theme of the conference.

### 1) **Blessing-rite as maintenance and transformation of culture?**

The Blin speakers believe that performing cultural practices in the host countries means maintaining their own culture among the many ethnic groups of Eritreans as well as developing *these practices in the way the deem them fit the context*. In this view, governing cultural diversity would mean supporting the immigrants in their endeavours to maintain and develop their respective cultures! But host countries support cultures that they judge do fit their own norms and values. In that aspect, the blessing rite needs to be interpreted broadly and not as signifying gender inequality of predetermination of sex roles. Even though sex roles are predetermined in Blin society<sup>5</sup> – from birth the grave – there have also been change in the roles. Equality between men and women has been a subject of discussion since the liberation war in Eritrea (1996-1991) and the movement for equality between men and women has intensified after liberation in 1991. But this does not mean that the rites of passage are greatly changed even in the Diaspora.

### 2) **Blessing-rite as Nostalgia?**

Some writers, for example Schipper (1999), argue that performance of such cultural practices as the Blessing-rite serve the community to link the past and the future- through nostalgia and that host societies need not bother much about them as they are limited to those individuals who perform them. In this case, it can be argued that the rites constitute split between what people do today and what they done before in different context, that is to say, their *minds are in Africa but their bodies are in Europe*. What does *governing cultural identity* mean for such nostalgic actors?

### 3) **Blessing-rite as a Theatrical act?**

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<sup>5</sup> Amanuel Shaker (1996) has described succinctly how s Blin girl’s role in her whole life is already predetermined by performing different rites of passage on her body starting from the very minuet she is born .

One can also imagine immigrants performing traditional rites simply wearing masks the same way theatrical actors do, and that the ideas signified and the actual practice are loosely coupled from each other. What does governing cultural diversity' mean in that case? The actors are serious in performing the rites and it is rather difficult to assert that they simply perform for entertainment purposes. People who can bless the groom are for example invited to perform that ceremony, and they make special preparation to do that. However, for the youngsters who are the target of this, they may sometimes enjoy performing the rites or even encourage the main actors to do it in the most enjoyable ways by shouting the words used in blessing or motivating younger generations that they had to undergo the rite if they are to be counted as adults. The rite has both entertaining as well as communal role for different generations.

#### **4) Blessing –rite as a symbol for community**

Some immigrants performing cultural practices informally argue that attitudes and opinion about their own culture are most often *disconnected* from actual behavior. It is very difficult for Blin immigrant individuals to transform themselves from the cultural values that are taken as 'carriers' of Blin values and norms, to an individualistic perception where the agent chooses freely what is right and wrong, and still get legitimacy from the community he or she belongs to conduct an appropriate Blin wedding ceremony. There are two choices: either claiming that one's ethnicity matters less, and thus prepare a wedding ceremony that he or she gives a different meaning than the traditional one, or just to conduct a symbolic use of the practices that provide legitimacy and thus identity to them. Regardless of whether the individual believes in these practices or not, the practices serve symbolic benefits: individuals become *agentic actors*, and at the same time conform to the traditional practices that give them identification with the 'imagined' communities that are neither Western in the proper sense of the term nor 'African' ones. According to Meyer and Jepperson, "Modern social participants wear masks, too, now carrying the developed authority of a high god. The modern mask is actor hood itself, and in wearing it modern participants acquire their agentic authority for themselves, each other, and the moral (and natural) universe. (Meyer & Jepperson 2000: 116-117).

## Concluding reflections

Concluding the paper, one can enquire whether the immigrant behavior in performing cultural rites mean the same thing all over in different host communities they find themselves in. Four possible explanations are (1) a *real interest* to maintaining and developing their identity, (2) *nostalgic* practices involving community memory and a stage in the inevitable *assimilation* process, (3) *theatric acts* that are loosely coupled from daily life, or a *symbolic act* representing something other than for which it can be literally taken? In each case, *governing cultural diversity* means different things, and requires deeper study and investigation in the future both by interested researchers in the field and the immigrants themselves who know well what they are interested in and why! I think these questions have implications for integration, assimilation or isolation, issues that need to be governed, if not managed! Because identities are shifting (Hamde 2000) it is difficult to remain with a fixed definition of these rites. Consequently, *governing cultural diversity* also needs to be defined broadly. One interpretation of performing such rites might be serving *imagined communities* in the usage of the phrase by Andersen (1991). If the above questions have triggered further thoughts and reflections among the readers and researchers, then the purpose of the paper has been fairly reached. The actors can be understood to behave reflectively on the rites of passage (Schön 1983) and programmes for *governing cultural diversity* need also reflective approach. If the rites are performed by immigrants and if the definitions for governing them are done by European researchers and policy makers, then what Campbell holds may turn to be a true reflection: *Western primitivism and African ethnicity* (1994). These conclusions require further study and careful methodology that look longer than fashion-type theorizing.

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- (lix) This paper was presented at the ENGIME Workshop on “Mapping Diversity”, Leuven, May 16-17, 2002
- (lx) This paper was presented at the EuroConference on “Auctions and Market Design: Theory, Evidence and Applications”, organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Milan, September 26-28, 2002
- (lxi) This paper was presented at the Eighth Meeting of the Coalition Theory Network organised by the GREQAM, Aix-en-Provence, France, January 24-25, 2003
- (lxii) This paper was presented at the ENGIME Workshop on “Communication across Cultures in Multicultural Cities”, The Hague, November 7-8, 2002
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- (lxv) This paper was presented at the EuroConference on “Auctions and Market Design: Theory, Evidence and Applications” organised by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei and sponsored by the EU, Milan, September 25-27, 2003
- (lxvi) This paper has been presented at the 4th BioEcon Workshop on “Economic Analysis of Policies for Biodiversity Conservation” organised on behalf of the BIOECON Network by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Venice International University (VIU) and University College London (UCL), Venice, August 28-29, 2003
- (lxvii) This paper has been presented at the international conference on “Tourism and Sustainable Economic Development – Macro and Micro Economic Issues” jointly organised by CRENoS (Università di Cagliari e Sassari, Italy) and Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, and supported by the World Bank, Sardinia, September 19-20, 2003
- (lxviii) This paper was presented at the ENGIME Workshop on “Governance and Policies in Multicultural Cities”, Rome, June 5-6, 2003

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