

Haile – Adapting and Integrating

By Erlend Paasche

Born in Central Ethiopia, in ‘the same town as the famous runner Haile Gebrselassie’, Haile has only lived in Norway for four years after immigrating to Norway through family reunification with his mother. At the day of the first interview he was standing inside the railway station with a couple of young, male friends when the EUMARGINS researchers approached to ask if he would be willing to be interviewed. The railway station is a social hub for socially disadvantaged people, and also one of Oslo’s hotspots for drug dealing. For Haile and his friends, however, it is not usual to come here. Though today, they say they came to ‘chill out’, but also to look for a bag they had lost the previous day. As Haile describes his life and explains the hurdles he has overcome since migrating to Norway, it becomes increasingly clear that the accomplished young man has not spent his life drifting aimlessly.

After only four years in Norway, Haile has learned enough Norwegian to communicate well, and has successfully completed three years of upper secondary school in spite of the turmoil prior to his emigration. Haile’s stepfather was the head of school in Ethiopia and was forced to join the governmental political party. When he refused he was imprisoned, a fate shared by Haile’s biological parents for a shorter time – though repeatedly in his mother’s case – and even by himself, for one month. Haile’s stepfather first fled to Kenya, then to Norway as a quota refugee. Haile wanted to finish his education in auto-technology, which would give him competence in newer technologies for advanced electronic, hydraulic and automotive systems. Then he followed in the steps of his three brothers and his sister to join his mother, three years after her arrival in Norway.

Although Haile finds Norwegians a bit taut and introvert, he does have Norwegian friends. Through a friend from Norwegian classes he was introduced to people with immigrant background from different countries, and he does not only mingle with Ethiopians. Nor does he have any problem having Muslim friends although he himself is Christian orthodox and belongs to a very conservative congregation. Seemingly embodying cosmopolitanism, the great diversity of religious and country backgrounds among his friends, be they Chinese, Polish, Russian, Nigerian, etc, does not bother him.

‘Foreigners are freer, like. So... when you call them, they’re like ‘where are you? Should we be together?’ [Norwegians], when we meet, we just talk about stuff. But they are not entirely open, they are... but it’s fine. One needs to accept them as they are. It’s no problem.’

Just as Haile came to see that Norwegians are not entirely open to social interaction, neither were the doors to the Norwegian labour market. In fact, Haile applied for a number of jobs in the field of auto-mechanics, including car repair shops, without any luck. In his opinion this was in part due to his imperfect grasp of the Norwegian language, but also having a foreign name and being deemed untrustworthy by employers who favoured ethnic Norwegians. Haile found it difficult to find a job, and although he was invited for several job interviews he never made it further. In the end, when he had given up, a friend of his at a nursing home helped him get a job there. Taking care of the elderly is a challenging job and Haile signs up for the night shifts. Good cooperation with the other staff members helps to make work easier. Although some of the residents are initially not all that friendly, once he gets to know them it gets better and he likes all of them.

Taking up a job that does not match one's educational qualifications would seem a blow to almost anyone pursuing an education. For Haile and his family, education seems to be held in especially high esteem. His entire family in Ethiopia have had good sources of income by pursuing education. His mother was a teacher in Ethiopia, and now pursues an adult learning programme after her rib broke, and his father who was a head teacher in Ethiopia, now works as a bus driver. Haile scored 88 out of 100 points in an auto-technology exam. Coming to Norway he had to face major hurdles in terms of studying among younger peers who mastered the language, whereas he only had seven months of Norwegian language courses. There was no formalized follow-up either, so Haile was left to himself to acquire the vocabulary he needed to understand the subjects taught at school. It would take years of studying for the Norwegian authorities to verify his educational qualifications, however, Haile preferred to start from scratch. He may have been lucky to be able to enrol at the particular school that he ended up at, which he finds 'fantastic' and ranks among Oslo's best schools, with a lot of very good pupils. On the other hand, this period was also one of hardship. He was the only pupil who had recently immigrated to Norway, and his lack of Norwegian language skills meant that none of the other pupils wanted to do group work with him or help him out in class, making it hard to practice his Norwegian and improve. Neither was anyone keen on conversing in English with him.

'Yeah it went on like that for a long time, really. But I don't care because if I don't understand I ask the teachers. And if I can't manage, I can't manage. When we have assignments and that kind of stuff, I try to write. I show what I write to teachers, they assess, then I say I can't do anymore, this is it.'

His peers were not favourably inclined to what they saw as favouritism by the teachers towards Haile. Once an ethnic Norwegian classmate called him 'negro,' leading him unwillingly into his first fight. He says, he is not that kind of person. The conflict with this class mate lasted for months and drove both this pupil and their common teacher to seek transfer to another class. Over time his Norwegian improved spectacularly. What seemed arduous the first year were less intimidating the second year, and in the end he was able to successfully complete upper secondary school with generally good grades (not so good in

chemistry and biology, good in the rest of the subjects, and best in music) within three years, the average amount of time. Although this teacher had indeed supported Haile it was another teacher who would prove crucial in his personal development, by offering support way beyond the parameters of professional involvement. This teacher was always willing to answer his questions and even met Haile after school hours, sometimes accompanied by family members, so Haile got to know both his children – ‘very cute’ – and the parents of his teacher. At times, Haile would come to his place, other times the teacher would come to his place, and they would spend hours talking together. This teacher is also Christian, like Haile, and has travelled repeatedly to Ethiopia because of his fondness for the Ethiopian people. This may have partly formed the basis for their friendship, which also outlasted Haile’s schooldays. When the teacher heard that he had got a job as a nurse and was contemplating taking up nursing studies, the teacher continued to support him.

‘So yeah, I didn’t really know. My teacher called and asked several places, and he got in touch with a friend of his who had specialized as a nurse, to ask him for all kinds of information. Then he said ‘Haile, you must choose nursing. It’s a secure job and it’s multicultural. So that’s no problem.’

This was confirmed by Haile’s own enquiries at the nursing home where he worked, so he opted for this line of study. He will not take a gap year and has chosen to not work alongside his studies, but instead plans to dedicate himself fully to them. If his grades are good he plans to continue with neurology. Some of his patients from the nursing home have neurological problems, and he thinks this is an interesting field of specialization. This is another thing that he likes better about Norway, namely that you have different career options and possibilities. Here, Haile says, if you set goals for yourself you can make a good future. On the other hand, he has full of respect for the Ethiopian people; who build mosques and churches next to each other without quarrelling, and who cultivate a great sense of community. The extended family eats and celebrates together, everyone goes to church together, people help by any means they have even if they are poor. People share more with each other in Ethiopia, whereas here each person is more left to his/her own. Haile keeps close contact with his own family in Norway, and attributes his relative success to his family. He goes to his parents’ house three to four times a week, and lives with his brother and two girls in a collective supported by the municipal authorities. Being the only student at this collective, his study routines are disrupted by noisy music from his flatmates and the social events they organize, so he is considering moving out. As for making a family of his own, that is not yet on the short term agenda, as he first needs to establish himself professionally. He did have a girlfriend at school but found it stressful as he did not have much time to spare. He believes he has spent maybe two to three times more than his native peers on school-related work, and will need even more time during higher education.

His friends with immigrant background, some of whom come from Gambia and Somalia, are similarly hard-working and ambitious, and they sometimes study together. Still, Haile states, there is a special cultural disposition for education in Ethiopia. Ethiopians, more than most

people, are concerned with education and want more of it. Exceedingly few do drugs, he says. This cultural trait is something Haile thinks emigrants bring with them.

'Yeah, you know, in the homeland, there's just one way. You have to study, finish your degree, like that you improve your economic situation and other things. That line of thought is still there with us here. Here there are jobs, you can earn money. But it doesn't matter, we still think like that. It helps a lot. One has to be strong, physically and mentally.'

It may be added in a concluding note that Haile works out on a regular basis. Given his ability to undergo hardship and make extra efforts to get what he wants, that hardly comes as a great surprise.