

BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Riggan. *The Struggling State: Nationalism, Mass Militarization and the Education of Eritrea*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016. 258 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$69.50. Cloth, ISBN: 9781439912706. eBook, ISBN: 9781439912720.

Jennifer Riggan's engaging and compassionate ethnography *The Struggling State: Nationalism, Mass Militarization and the Education of Eritrea* provides a fascinating insight into the role of Eritrean teachers following the 2000–2002 war with Ethiopia. Tasked with hyphenating the nation to the state in the context of everyday authoritarianism and dramatic educational reform, teachers constructed an imaginary of the state for themselves, students, and parents. Riggan's research centers on Assab, a port city in Eritrea's south-eastern periphery with strong historical links to Ethiopia. Using long-term, intimate fieldwork and scholarly research that is both broad and meticulous, Riggan presents Eritrean schools as a space in which the state narrative was vulnerable to subversion.

The author carried out fieldwork from 2003 to 2005, after the violent suppression of political critics and the expansion and indefinite extension of national service. *The Struggling State* is set in the context of growing disillusionment, as Eritreans ceased to view the state as essentially benevolent, but rather punitive and coercive, a transformation ultimately responsible for the departure of over 12 percent of its citizens.

The governing People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has neutralized critics, expelled NGOs, and systematically destroyed any meaningful research culture in Eritrea. Academic work is notoriously difficult, rendering Riggan's access all the more remarkable. Riggan employs in-depth interviews of teachers and directors in junior and secondary schools in Assab, in addition to the observation of classes, school rituals, and informal exchanges, as the basis of her analysis. She also draws on interviews with staff in the Department of Education and a variety of materials released by the PFDJ. The wealth of material collected is palpable, and the voices of teachers and students, including verbatim accounts of classroom interactions, are woven throughout the book.

Chapter One provides an overview of the complex historical context that shaped Eritrean nationalism. Riggan traces the development of a revolutionary ideology that differentiated the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (direct precursor of the PFDJ) from its predecessors and details how

the experience of suffering during “The Struggle” became the crux of Eritrean national identity. Chapter Two examines the transformation of National Service from duty to punishment, and the process by which state coercion delegitimized service and thus perpetuated coercion. This experience of coercion triggered evasion and avoidance in teachers, disrupting the functioning of the state without coherently opposing it, and resulting in a “vicious cycle of force and evasion.” Chapter Three suggests that the restructuring of education in 2003, allowing students to progress regardless of ability and transferring their final year to the military training school in Sawa, muddied the distinction between student and soldier. In Chapter Four, Riggan argues that the impotence and liminal position of teachers created an educational climate in which traditional hierarchies were blurred, and state nationalism could be criticized. Amidst this disorder, Chapter Five explores the teachers’ struggle to discipline students and reimpose moral order through the organization of space, categorization of pupils, and use of corporal punishment. Riggan argues that teacher sovereignty was itself experienced as arbitrary and punishing, creating its own cycle of coercion and evasion. Finally, the poignant conclusion examines the author’s own departure in the context of the mass flight of Eritreans and the literal hollowing out of the nation.

Riggan writes with nuance and integrity, not least as she refuses to obfuscate the intimacy between scholar and subject. Married to an Eritrean teacher and deeply involved as a friend and colleague in the lives of many others, the author includes several anecdotes that vividly illustrate the vagaries of life under coercive state power. When describing *gifa*, the state-directed mass round-ups of Eritreans for military service, Riggan slips between relating an intensely personal encounter with the state and rigorous academic analysis. The resulting style is compelling and eminently readable.

Contradictions sit at the heart of this book, reflecting the Eritrean state itself. Riggan argues that teachers, as middle actors, provided the state with institutional coherence while simultaneously being coerced. Although teachers held power at a community level, they lacked the status and biopolitical machinery to exert a broader influence. Tasked with producing the nation on behalf of the state, teachers experienced both a sense of duty to educate students and discontent at mass militarization and the erosion of education. Ultimately, Riggan suggests that teachers were unable to hyphenate the nation to the state, as the state “cannibalized” the nation in cycles of spiralling coercion and evasion.

The Struggling State situates the events of the post-war period within their historical context while skilfully applying a variety of scholarly frameworks, exposing nuances in the EPLF and PFDJ trajectory often absent from other contemporary analyses. Riggan demonstrates that Eritrea exemplified Aretxaga’s concept of the “maddening state” during this period, making the convincing argument that coercion is a state effect in its own right. This book addresses the difficulties inherent in pinning down the

experience of the “Sawa state,” and yet compares and compartmentalizes it, defying the PFDJ rhetoric of exceptionalism. It offers an exceptional insight into how the “everyday authoritarianism” of the Eritrean state was navigated and reproduced by teachers, as middle actors uniquely placed to experience and constitute the nation.

Clarissa Hjalmarsson
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom
cch46@cam.ac.uk

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Reid, Richard. 2014. “Writing Eritrea: History and Representation in a Bad Neighborhood.” *History in Africa* 41: 83–115. doi:10.1017/hia.2014.16.
- Woldemikael, Tekle M. 2003. “Language, Education, and Public Policy in Eritrea.” *African Studies Review* 46 (1): 117–36. doi:10.2307/1514983.