

INTRODUCTION

Everyday Authoritarianism, Teachers, and the Decoupling of Nation and State

Assab, May 2000

Teacher Ezekiel woke up and found that his head was resting on a pile of Kalashnikovs. He could feel the rocking motion of the boat and the sun beating down on him, his body soaked in sweat. Squinting, he opened his eyes and scanned his belongings; everything he owned of any worth was in a pile around him. Next to his head, two feet, wearing *shida*, the black plastic sandals emblematic of Eritrean fighters, were anchored on top of his radio. Opening his eyes a little wider in the bright sunlight, he looked up at the fighter who was scanning the crowded boat, calling for someone. The fighter waved, having found his friend, and then stepped down from the radio and moved on, never even noticing Ezekiel waking up from much-needed sleep. Ezekiel put his head back down on his Kalashnikov pillow and closed his eyes.

Three days earlier, it had been a typical blazing hot day in late May in Eritrea's port town of Assab. Having finished marking exams, Ezekiel and his friend had been on their way to the cinema to have a drink and watch a movie to celebrate the end of the school year. "Where are you going?" People they passed asked them.

"To the cinema," Ezekiel and his friend answered.

"You can go, but there won't be any movies. Everyone is leaving."

The presence of the war had loomed over the residents of Assab since the border war with Ethiopia broke out two years earlier in 1998, but this was the first time civilians were evacuated. The front was some sixty kilometers away. The port, which had served as Ethiopia's main access to the sea, closed when the war began, and many of the town's residents returned to the Ethiopian or Eritrean highlands, leaving shops, restaurants, and homes shuttered and empty. The town filled with soldiers. Several times, Ethiopia had unsuccessfully attempted to bomb Assab's airport and the village of Harsile, the area's water source. The school had become a hospital during the first offensive in 1998.

After being told about the evacuation, Ezekiel rushed home to pack. On the way, he ran into his school director, who was heading to the port. In a panic, she ordered him to remain behind to hand back report cards to any students who showed up. He refused, telling her he was going to the same place she was, the same place everyone was going.

Ezekiel and the town's residents had no reason to think the government would not safely and successfully evacuate them. Amid chaos and fear of imminent violence, the residents of Assab hoped and, indeed, assumed that the government would protect them, evacuate them, and provide for them when they were displaced. While these events were occurring in Assab, towns in the western lowlands of the country were also being evacuated, with residents relocated to camps for Internally Displaced People as the fighting forces engaged in a strategic withdrawal in the face of oncoming Ethiopian forces. However, once in the port, where Ezekiel and most of the town remained for several days while the boats were prepared for the evacuation, it was unclear whether anyone was in charge. There was little food. Shops were closed down, and everyone was left to fend for him- or herself. Rumors circulated that the town's top officials had begun to evacuate their own family members and property days before they announced the evacuation to the population at large. At one point, one of the Ministry of Education supervisors showed up with crates of beer that would have been sold at the teachers' club, handing them out to teachers for free while saying, "This is our beer." The implication was that they'd better drink it now, because it would be looted when they left. At one point, while sleeping on the hard concrete surface of the port, Ezekiel and the other teachers woke up to see a military truck suspended overhead from a large crane. The electricity in the port went off while the boats were being loaded by crane, halting the evacuation process. The technicians who worked for the electric company were in a bus, fleeing the town by road, leaving no one to keep the power running.

After the evacuation, when teachers and others arrived in Massawa,

Eritrea's northern port, hungry and exhausted, they were told almost immediately to report for National Service. The government was calling up everyone from around the country for military training and possible combat. Conditions in military training were harsh; trainees were required to engage in extreme physical labor in 120°F desert conditions and to work and sleep outside. They were given limited water and little to eat. Most significantly, they were under the absolute control of commanding officers, all of whom utilized various forms of corporal punishment to discipline trainees, and some of whom believed it was within their rights to beat trainees or tie them in stress positions in the desert sun for hours to punish them for deviation from the strict rules. In the years following these events, conscription into the military would extend well beyond the eighteen months of service outlined in Eritrean law and well beyond the period of actual fighting in the border war. Indeed, the time limits on *service*, a term that includes both national and military service, have become indefinite for many Eritreans who have been “in service” for well over a decade.

Wartime highlights what Begoña Aretxaga (2003) calls the “maddening” nature of the state as people hope that those in charge will take care of them, fear that those in power will hurt them, and experience government institutions unraveling, ultimately muddling the way people imagine the state. During the evacuation of Assab, the state receded. Its institutions and representatives lost the capacity to act “as the state” in the face of chaos and disorder and instead just took care of themselves. Teachers fled before marking their exams. The school director had to abandon her duties. Subsequently, the state, which people thought of as protective during the evacuation, enabled its agents to use force against its people to recruit and train them to be soldiers. A *de facto* state of emergency was enacted, giving state actors powers of control, coercion, and capacity for violence. Violence and force were used to turn civilians, who thought of themselves as needing protection, into soldiers who would protect the nation. In the process, these civilians were also turned into what I call *coerced subjects*—citizens forced to defend, use, and experience violence for the state.

This book is about how citizens imagine their state *and* nation when they experience the state as turning against them. It is now common among scholars to view nations as imagined communities, but national imaginaries do not simply arise spontaneously, nor are they solely the machinations of governing elites' national projects. The way citizens imagine the nation and their identity as nationals is always a combination of non-national (ethnic, regional, religious) solidarities, lived experiences, and nation-making projects that attempt to bundle these into a neat, unified package. States,

meanwhile, are *thought of* as a totality that has sovereignty over national territories and people, including the power to nationalize them, but states are seldom as coherent or cohesive as they seem to be in our imaginations. In reality, states are a configuration of actors, agents, policies, and processes and are only a totality in the imaginations of their citizens, employees, and others who tend to characterize them as such. State actors struggle with each other and with citizens to influence the ways both the nation and state are imagined. When we examine the ways imaginaries of state and nation mutually shape each other, we see that the production of the nation and state is the result of a complex and unwieldy process, particularly when states use force against citizens.

Using the case of Eritrea, I show how citizens' often-coercive encounters with state actors shape their imaginaries of the state, the nation, and the linkage between them. The ideological and imaginative glue that binds nation to state—the hyphen in nation-state—can't be taken for granted, particularly amid conditions of authoritarian rule.¹ National imaginaries are radically altered by state coercion; however, the complex processes through which coercion decouples the nation from the state are understudied. Even when people experience the state as incompetent or dangerous, they hold out hope that the state still cares and has the capacity to care (Aretxaga 2003). These contradictory experiences of the state become even clearer when we understand that even when the state is coercing its subjects, “it” is not a monolith but rather a plurality of actions, actors, and imaginaries, constantly being made and remade in interactions between those who represent the state and those to whom they represent the state.²

Most importantly, government employees, who give the state its institutional coherence and materiality, also feel coerced by the state and are responsive to the shifting imaginaries shaped by these experiences. My focus here is on teachers, who are the government employees (state actors) most directly responsible for shaping the nation's young. Teachers and schools provide a unique vantage point through which to understand the dialectic of how national imaginaries get produced in response to feelings that the state is turning against its people, in large part because teachers are situated to do the work of hyphenating, or gluing, nation to state. Those same teachers who experienced the botched evacuation and were subsequently conscripted into a grueling summer of military training in 2000 were released from the military and back in the classroom the following fall, charged, as all teachers are, with inculcating national values and identities into their students, many of whom were also evacuated and had relatives serving in the armed forces. Even as teachers confronted their own maddeningly con-

flicted imaginaries of the state, they produced the nation for and with their students in schools and classrooms. In doing this, teachers navigated the tension between their charge to educate the nation and their discontent with the party-government program of mass militarization. This book examines this tension at a moment when imaginaries of the coercive state were eroding, unraveling, and changing sentiments about what it meant to be national in Eritrea as a whole.

Education, Nationalism, and the Struggling State in Eritrea

Understanding the relationship between nation and state is essential to understanding Eritrean political and social life and is central to scholarship on Eritrea (Connell 2011; Dorman 2006; Hepner 2009b; Hirt and Mohammad 2013; Müller 2008, 2012b; Riggan 2013b). Indeed, much of the scholarship on Eritrea notes that it is difficult to distinguish between nation and state in large part because the ruling party has worked very hard to synthesize the two (Dorman 2006; Müller 2008, 2012b). Meanwhile, ethnographic work tends to emphasize often quiet, but widespread, grassroots discontent with these efforts at synthesizing the nation with the state (Hepner 2009b; Hirt and Mohammed 2013; Mahrt 2009; O’Kane 2012; Poole 2009; Riggan 2013b; Treiber 2009; Tronvoll 1996, 1998). The predominant version of Eritrean nationalism was carefully crafted and constructed by the ruling (and liberating) party, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), during the country’s thirty-year war for independence from Ethiopia, which is referred to as “The Struggle.” The EPLF intentionally oriented the Eritrean nation around the revolutionary values of The Struggle: self-sufficiency, an orientation toward “progress” and development, an absolute willingness to sacrifice, and a warrior ethos. The EPLF, which was renamed the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) when independence was won in 1991, embodied both the state and the nation. It enjoyed widespread support during the post-independence years, a moment in history that is described as effervescent for people’s widespread emotional coalescence around the party and independence itself (Hepner 2009b).³ But since the border war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998, the euphoric tone that marked the years between independence and the onset of the border war has been replaced with a sense among many that the government can only bring about a hopeless future. An iconic popular expression, coined by Eritrea’s president, Isaias Afewerki, during Eritrea’s thirty-year struggle for liberation, describes the country’s “warrior ethos”: Eritrea is a nation of

soldiers. However, for teachers, students, and others, mass conscription has given new meaning to that common expression.

Eritrea's national/military service program, which became controversial at the end of the border war, is central to sentiments that "the government" (*mengisti*), a catch-all phrase that references a wide range of political, bureaucratic, and military policies, practices, and personnel, is turning against, and indeed punishing, its people. National/military service is effectively indefinite for the majority of conscripts. By law, National Service in Eritrea requires citizens, male and female, to undergo six months of military training and twelve months of unpaid, voluntary service, typically in the military, but for educated people, often in a civil capacity. During the border war with Ethiopia (1998–2000), the government mobilized as many citizens as possible; however, despite the fact that there has been no fighting since 2000, those serving in the military have not been demobilized and, at the time of my fieldwork (2003–2005), even those assigned to serve in a civil capacity typically served much longer than the requisite eighteen months. In 2002, the government introduced the Warsai Yikaalo Development Campaign, which allocated the labor of those serving in the military to development projects and extended the term of National Service indefinitely for most conscripts. Following the war, the government began to rely on increasingly coercive measures, such as *gifa*, or mass round-ups, to ensure that Eritreans did not escape from service. Detentions without cause or due process became more frequent, and it was effectively impossible for almost all Eritreans to leave the country. In light of these circumstances, during the course of my fieldwork, Eritreans often referred to their country as a "prison" and depicted the state as punishing. For example, when teachers recounted stories of military training to me, they described it as a punitive experience, telling stories about enduring harsh conditions, sleeping outside, eating watered-down lentils and stale flatbread. They described their fear of commanders who controlled their every moment and movement and could punish them for any failure to follow strict orders at all times of the day, even if they did not know they had done something wrong. Few mentioned the need to defend the nation, despite the fact that a war was going on at the time. This suggests that when the state is imagined as coercive, imaginaries of the nation and national duty also change. The experience of being a soldier became an experience of state violence. Imagining military service as punitive rather than as one's duty to the nation reflected a shifting affective stance toward the nation or, more specifically, toward the government-constructed image of the nation as oriented toward defense, sacrifice, and militarization. Official versions of nationalism were hollowed

of effervescence by the government's own policies and practices, which were intended to perpetuate the very sentiments of patriotism that they eroded.

Education in Eritrea is central to the PFDJ's militarized nation-building agenda and to the erosion of populist support for that agenda (Müller 2012b; Riggan 2011). At the time of my longest period of fieldwork in Eritrea (2003–2005), educational institutions were directly implicated in the making of soldiers through the auspices of a dramatic educational reform. In 2003, as part of a comprehensive educational reform package, the Ministry of Education announced that the education system would be expanded from grade 11 to grade 12, but *all* grade 12 students from the whole country would have to attend school in one boarding facility located in Sawa—the nation's military training center. Military training would begin in the summer before grade 12. Additionally, as part of the same package of reforms, the government announced a shift from a system of highly selective promotion in Senior Secondary Schools (grades 9–12) to a system of mass promotion. Thus, the same year in which it was announced that everyone would attend grade 12 in Sawa, it was also announced that everyone would pass. Although there was a complex rationale for this change in promotion policies, which I discuss in Chapter 3, what this policy signaled to teachers and students was that the government no longer “cared about” education, as many of my interlocutors frequently commented. Rather than being rewarded for educational accomplishments, students believed that they were being promoted *en masse* and, furthermore, punished by being sent to military training. Educational policies thus provide a particularly salient example of government programs, which were intended to socialize Eritreans into the party's vision of national duty, being reinterpreted as the government turning against the people.

A state like Eritrea that prohibits citizens from leaving, engages in mass round-ups, detains arbitrarily, permanently conscripts a large swathe of its population into the military, and utilizes schools as a conduit for military conscription might seem like a “strong” state in the sense that it has the capacity to implement policies and enact sovereignty over its people. Such a state might not seem to be “struggling,” yet I argue that states in Eritrea and elsewhere struggle in a variety of ways.⁴ States struggle to legitimately enact their own nation-building projects. Authoritarianism and state coercion, in particular, reveal weaknesses in the hyphen between nation and state, weaknesses that are present in all states, even those that we might not label as authoritarian or coercive. The case of Eritrea highlights these state struggles in several ways.

Specific to Eritrea, the term “The Struggle” refers to Eritrea's thirty-year

war for liberation from Ethiopia, which resulted in Eritrea's independence in 1991. The PFDJ affixes itself to the legacy of The Struggle, a legacy that has fused the creation of a sovereign state, the defense of those sovereign borders, the development of that sovereign nation, and a notion of Eritrean citizenship oriented toward willingness to sacrifice for the nation (Bernal 2014). I explore this legacy in more detail in Chapter 1. The PFDJ envisioned a form of nationalism in which individual citizens in the post-independence nation would *willingly* struggle for the development and defense of the independent nation, but the party eventually had to *force* its citizens to participate in the nation-building project oriented toward these goals. However, as the party turned toward force, it struggled in a different way—to maintain the legitimacy of revolutionary nationalism. As Eritreans came to view the state as punishing, sentiments of national duty and loyalty to the revolutionary legacy were eroded. In this process, as I detail in Chapter 2, the party's rather monolithic definition of what it meant to be Eritrean was challenged. Thus, the second form of struggle illuminated here is the struggle of the party to maintain the legitimacy of its nation-making project.

These challenges to the legitimacy of the party's nation-making project occurred subtly and ambiguously but persistently in the realm of the quotidian, particularly in schools. This brings us to the third manifestation of state struggle. Individuals, including state employees, struggled with their feelings about the state, the nation, and their responsibilities to it. The struggles of state employees, particularly teachers, were especially paradoxical because their struggles occurred in their encounters with students and, thus, constituted and altered the state itself. These everyday struggles in schools are important to explore not only because schools were where divergent meanings of what it meant to be Eritrean clashed but also because teachers' struggles reflected and resulted in a diminished capacity to discipline educated citizens. Schools were alternately spaces of institutional disintegration, the subject of Chapter 4, and spaces of coercion, discipline, and violence, which is examined in Chapter 5. When teachers struggled, the nature and coherence of a key state institution—schools—were at stake.

In short, the Eritrean state struggled to be legitimate, to produce loyal national subjects, to reproduce and reify itself, and to achieve institutional coherence. These struggles are certainly not unique to Eritrea; indeed, all states struggle to produce these effects. But the conditions in Eritrea produced by mass militarization, the party's orthodox adherence to its revolutionary nationalist agenda, and the government's increased reliance on coercion amplify these struggles and expose the paradoxes of state legitimacy and control.

Emergent Authoritarianism and the Imagination of Nation and State

When I first visited Eritrea as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1995, the official National Service program had just begun. Each evening, adults and children from the neighborhood where my host family lived crowded into their small living room to watch footage of National Service recruits completing their military training in Sawa. Extra chairs were brought in for adults, while teenagers stood at the back of the room and young children filled in the floor space between chairs and table. The same scene was repeated in the living rooms of anyone who had a television as well as in many restaurants, hotels, and shops throughout the town. The recruits performed elaborate military drills while the national anthem and patriotic songs played cheerfully. Interspersed with scenes of military unity, interviews with soldiers of both genders and from all nine Eritrean ethnic groups espoused the success of National Service in meeting both of its goals—to develop the nation and to create a sense of national oneness. Meanwhile, that summer, mandatory summer service programs for high school and university students (*ma'ator*) were in full swing. Tent camps had popped up along the sides of roads, and groups of young people were planting trees or building terraces. While there was some debate about these programs, in general Eritreans enthusiastically supported the idea of service (Hepner 2009b; Müller 2008; Reid 2009). It seemed to me that every family had at least one (or more) member involved in National Service or summer service.

In the years prior to and immediately following independence, the Eritrean government engaged its population in a highly effective nation-building program. During the war for independence, the party created a national ideology and a state apparatus to disseminate it, which together effectively galvanized and unified the population (Hepner 2009b; Pool 2001; see also Connell [1993] 1997 and Iyob 1995). Eritrea is a country where the party leadership has been engaged in a long effort, one that predates independence by well over a decade, to produce institutions to govern, educate, and generally manage and look after the welfare of Eritreans. These institutions of governance were also intent on instilling a particular sense of *Eritrean-ness* in the population. Given the effectiveness of a nation-building project that fused nation to state, Eritrea might appear to be a strange place to interrogate the weakening relationship between the two.

Eritrea was quite different from most other African states at independence (and, indeed, states in Africa and elsewhere today), where societal forces and relationships are often densely intertwined with state institutions,

leading to what Goran Hyden (2006) has called “politics in people” and what others often gloss as “clientilism” or “patrimonialism.” In contrast, in Eritrea “the state” is quite strong and well emancipated from society (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Eritrea is also interesting because, unlike many countries in Africa where attempts at fusing nation and state fell apart because of either the institutional weakness of the state apparatus or because of the lack of coherent, populist nationalism, in Eritrea the PFDJ/EPLF adeptly hyphenated them. Eritrea’s leadership quite intentionally created institutions of governance to produce and promote a version of nationalism that enabled Eritreans to imagine their national community and situate the party-run state apparatus at its center. This project of making the nation-state enabled the state and the nation to reify each other, leading to what appeared to be a strong state that at least initially produced strong attachments between its people and the nation.

However, the state is not the only entity with the capacity to produce imaginaries of the nation; the ways in which citizens think and feel about the state directly affect the ways in which they imagine the nation, and vice versa (Appadurai 1996; Gupta 2012; Herzfeld 1997; Wedeen 2008). Imagination is a social process that gives us a profound and powerful collective capacity to think through our interconnections with other people, times, and spaces that are unknown to us and spread across a national territory and, at times, the globe (Appadurai 1996). One example of this is Benedict Anderson’s (1991) famous assertion that nations are imagined communities, but imagining the national community is difficult without placing an imaginary of the state at the center of what the nation is. The understanding of a territorial entity called the nation, a community of people attached to that territory, and the sovereignty of a state over that community and territory (even if it is not the state all the people want) is central to defining the nation (Wedeen 2008). The state, thus, plays a critical role in nationalizing the nation, but when the state is not imagined as benevolent, it loses its hold over *how* people imagine the nation, leaving nationalism fragmented, conflicted, and susceptible to skirmishes over the meanings of the nation and national belonging.

In the years following Eritrea’s 1991 independence, Eritreans tended to imagine the state as benevolent despite initial evidence of authoritarianism. The ruling party argued that it was inventing its own form of governance, which would be uniquely suited to Eritrea’s own historical circumstances. Indeed, Eritrea’s leaders rather self-assuredly asserted that they were not going to repeat the mistakes of other newly independent African nations (an assertion the government used and continues to use to give license to many of

its coercive and authoritarian tendencies). In the years between independence and the border war, the government announced a date for elections; engaged Eritreans in a grassroots, collaborative process of constitution making; and implemented a number of highly progressive policies to promote gender and ethnic equality (Müller 2005). During these years, education and health care were expanded into rural areas, and the National Service program was implemented. Party leaders, along with many foreign diplomats and Eritreans themselves, saw tendencies toward authoritarian consolidation of power at that time as actions of a regime that was “in transition.”

Up to and through the border war, this bond between nation and state in Eritrea remained strong; it only began to disintegrate in the year after the border war ended (roughly 2000–2001). In fall 2001, prominent party insiders wrote an open letter critiquing the government’s management of the war and the country. They were subsequently arrested. Shortly thereafter, the private presses were closed, and several journalists were arrested as well. This trend began to delegitimize the party’s governing strategies and nation-making project. The 2002 implementation of the Warsai Yikaalo Development Campaign, which effectively extended national-military service indefinitely, and the mass round-ups (*gifa*) that followed further challenged people’s loyalties toward and trust in the state.

By the time I began fieldwork in 2003, it had become quite clear that many Eritreans inside Eritrea did not believe that the government would transition to democracy. Indeed, people commented that the government no longer cared for the people, only for itself. Elections were postponed again and again. *Gifa*, which made it clear that the government had the capacity to detain without cause, was enacted with a new ferocity (as I discuss in Chapter 2). A form of extensive but low-tech surveillance became common (Bozzini 2011), and there was increased paranoia about internal opposition, especially within the ruling party (Hepner 2009b). People felt constrained and forced by the state. Coercion, or the sense of being *forced*, is one of the key modalities through which the state is encountered in authoritarian regimes.

The idea that states have a legitimate capacity to use force (against their own citizens, if need be) is central to conventional understandings of what the state is, yet anthropological work on the state pays surprisingly little attention to the nuances, complexities, and paradoxes of coercion. The way coercion reworks citizens’ national identities and imaginaries of the state is seldom examined. (Additionally, we know little about how and why state actors choose to utilize force and violence. I address this below.) With some very notable exceptions, the trend toward examining the state through the

lens of poststructuralist or Foucauldian approaches has tended to illuminate forms of discipline that do not use physical force, on the one hand, but emphasize the disciplinary capacity of physical force to create docile subjects on the other.⁵ Coercion does not simply produce docile, disciplined subjects, however, but subjects who are simultaneously docile, discontented, unruly, and disorderly. Coercion is a form of productive power—in other words, a state effect, but one that produces effects that are hard to control.

Many authoritarian regimes have power over the bodies of their subjects, including the power to relocate, detain, harm, and kill; however, this power creates conditions in which state subjects imagine themselves individually and collectively as coerced subjects, or subjects who can be forced.⁶ Conversely, they imagine the state as not only able but willing to use force. The state imagined in this manner becomes illegitimate precisely because it is experienced as turning against its people. At the same time, coerced subjects develop a set of strategies to avoid coercion, and solidarities form around evading the state. An affective climate in which fear intermingles with humor and ridicule of authorities emerges. Furthermore, the humor, ridicule, fear, and evasion that emerge to cope with state coercion undermine and unravel the national projects that states often enlist to legitimize their use of force. The coercive state, thus, cannibalizes the legitimacy of its own national project.

Over time, fewer and fewer Eritreans regarded the state as legitimate, and yet lingering and maddening desires for a benevolent state have arguably prevented people from engaging in broader resistance to such repressive conditions. This condition is reminiscent of what Achille Mbembe (2001) calls “impotence.” According to Mbembe, when subjects perceive the state as having the capacity to absolutely command them—to tell them when, how, and where to walk, stand, dance, talk, work, fight, and so on—they will comply, but only to the extent that they are forced. Mbembe notes that as these state commands are enacted, symbolic and disciplinary realms join to produce docility and obedience, but they never quite produce complete compliance among citizens, and thus the seeds of transgression may emerge in subtle ways as symbols are transformed, rituals subverted, and narratives quietly rewritten. Citizens evade state commands and ridicule those in power with all sorts of humorous and vulgar forms that delegitimize their power. According to Mbembe, ridicule, ribaldry, and other subtle but powerful ways of symbolically diminishing the grandeur of the state render both the state and its subjects impotent. Rather than undoing official power, this situation results in what he calls “mutual zombification” (2001: 111). Ruler and ruled are caught in a sort of bizarre, grotesque dance that leaves them both sapped.

Coercion produces what I think of as a vicious cycle of impotence. When a regime must rely on force to govern, it strips itself of legitimacy, thereby further necessitating its reliance on force and further undermining its legitimacy. As Eritrea's leaders became more and more reliant on force, particularly to conscript Eritreans into National Service, but more generally to command Eritreans to do their "duty" as national subjects through ongoing National Service, they made the very concept of the state impotent. As the Eritrean leadership became more reliant on *forcing* its citizens to defend and sacrifice for the nation, Eritreans quietly ridiculed the state and developed evasive tactics to avoid and escape from its demands.

Attempting to consolidate power over state institutions while building coherent national identities is a delicate balancing act under the best of circumstances, but authoritarian regimes face particular challenges in doing so precisely because their subjects believe they are forced to perform "as if" they are compliantly patriotic (Wedeen 1999: 15–16). For this reason, authoritarian regimes often produce hollow nationalisms that are performed but not felt and thus never achieve emotional resonance or legitimacy. Fearing disloyalty or disunity, authoritarian governments may actually turn on their nations, violently cleansing and attacking parts of their populations and, in doing so, cannibalizing the nations by symbolically stripping away the capacity for their populations to imagine themselves as part of the national communities (Appadurai 1996; Aretxaga 2003). Additionally, coercive practices designed to force citizen bodies to comply with performances of obedience can backfire, producing an empty performance, an illusion of compliance, and an imaginary of an illegitimate state (Mbembe 2001; Wedeen 1999). It is precisely because of their power to coerce citizen bodies that authoritarian regimes undermine national loyalties.

Authoritarian regimes, like any regime, want to appear legitimate and thus must "manage the symbolic world"—in other words, they must control not only the symbols of the nation but also what these symbols signify to citizens and how nationals feel about these symbols. These regimes do so by exerting disciplinary, coercive, *and* symbolic power (Wedeen 1999: 32), but what the Eritrean case shows us is that often the efforts to exert disciplinary power are overly reliant on coercion and result in delegitimizing the symbolic world of the nation. Authoritarian regimes are adept at commanding citizens to perform in and observe national rituals but often fail to be perceived as legitimate representatives of the nation (Mbembe 2001; Wedeen 1999). They produce a display of power, docility, and obedience, but the fact that coercion is necessary in the first place reveals the limitations of coercion—it produces empty displays of loyalty (Mbembe 2001:

110). Coercion of the body and the production of national ideology thus coexist in a mutually constitutive but troubled relationship.

To understand the complex and nuanced process of how once-effervescent Eritrean nationalism began to cool in the face of coercion, one must step away from the official project of nation-state formation and examine the informal spaces in which people transgress these disciplinary-symbolic systems of (state) power to produce alternative imaginaries of state and nation (Wedeen 1999: 151). Powerful, but not entirely coherent, national imaginaries circulate outside the official national project. Alternatives to the official national project always exist, but they take on a new salience when citizens come to imagine the state as increasingly incompetent or dangerous, as the state in Eritrea came to be imagined. But even more interestingly, in Eritrea, I found that these alternatives to the state project could be and were produced within state institutions themselves, most remarkably in schools.

Teachers in the Middle

In late summer 2000, teachers were released from military training. One evening around that time, I was in a small nondescript bar on one of the back streets of Asmara where teachers from the South Red Sea region tended to congregate at all times of day for cappuccino, tea, soft drinks, or beer. I was with several teachers and other civil servants from the region and noticed a teacher who often sat with us but on this night was sitting across the room with a man I did not know. He was talking intently with this man, huddled over their beer bottles. Half an hour or so later, the teacher joined us and said, “That was our commander when we were in military training. I saw him here and I wanted to buy him a beer. To just talk to him as a person.”

He paused, and I let the significance of what he had just said sink in. Military training varied in its level of harshness, with some trainers using relatively little force and violence while others used a great deal. Military training, which involved intimidation and hierarchical authority, was an intense encounter with the coercive state, particularly for teachers, who were more accustomed to being the authority figure than to having authority wielded against them.

“I am very happy tonight,” the teacher noted. “Now I know this man as a person. Military was very hard. They don’t treat you like a person. I was happy to talk to him and know who he is.”

This brief anecdote, a unique occurrence, gives us a rare insight into the state that is coercive, authoritarian, and often violent but also intimate and

personal. Exploring the motivations of this civil servant and former military trainee buying a beer for his former military commander, who had wielded authority over him and had used force and possibly violence against him, allows us to disentangle the state as people from The State writ large. The teacher's desire to know the person who had caused him pain on behalf of the state illuminates the fact that the state, ultimately, comprises people, albeit people who are imagined as part of a much larger totality.

The language commonly used to talk about the state in Eritrea illustrates a similar interplay between the state and the people who constitute it. The word *mengisti*, which translates as “government,” is typically used to describe the state and more often than not refers to a realm of officialdom—the president, the leaders of the party, and mandates, practices, or policies that were passed down from the top. For example, various forms of service, *gifa*, and educational reforms were all attributed to “the government,” and, indeed, these policies and practices did emanate from on high. *Mengisti* typically was not a word used to describe intimate encounters with the state but rather a term to depict a form of higher power—The State. This is an important distinction because it suggests that Eritreans made scalar distinctions regarding how they thought about where and what The State was; however, these scalar distinctions broke down and became blurry in practice. I recall a conversation I had with several teachers and lower-level Ministry of Education bureaucrats about what and, more precisely, who constituted *mengisti*. Everyone agreed that the head of the South Red Sea branch of the Ministry of Education was the government, but aside from agreement that the head was “government,” there was great disagreement about where the government ended and the people began. A lively debate ensued as some contended that the lower-level bureaucrats around the table were also *mengisti*, while these bureaucrats themselves strongly disagreed. (Indeed, my argument throughout this book is that teachers *are* the state because of their particular positioning and the role they play, but most teachers would disagree with this viewpoint.) Although Eritreans drew a clear distinction between *mengisti*, which was clearly thought of as existing at a higher level, and their own encounters with those endowed with state power, these distinctions were in reality very blurry, in large part because very little in Eritrea was the result of clear “policy.” Blurriness around what was and what was not *mengisti* came, in part, from the lack of rule of law in Eritrea, which manifested itself at all levels and made it impossible to know who or which entity was responsible for how people were treated. This ambiguity contributed to the sense of arbitrariness surrounding being coerced and punished. Eritreans talked about *mengisti* as “out there” or “up

there,” but *mengisti* also had very direct effects on people’s lives because it forced them to do things. At the same time, there was uncertainty and debate as to where/who/what *mengisti* was. It was simultaneously intimate and transcendent.

When the state is coercive or violent, we seldom examine its ambiguity or explore the complex agency of actors carrying out violence. Instead we reify an imaginary of a powerful state that *is* violent. In material terms, The State does not act on bodies; rather, individual state agents do.⁷ But through state agents’ interactions with the bodies of state subjects, everyone involved—agents and subjects alike—come to imagine the state and their relationship to it.⁸ For this reason, it is crucial to understand the state as the people who act on its behalf and to explore the belief systems and contradictory experiences that shape these people’s actions.

I refer to these actors, who are in the employ of but not necessarily empowered by the state, as *middle actors*. Middle actors may be military commanders or police, but they may also include bureaucrats, civil servants, or teachers. They are *in the middle* by virtue of being both powerful and disempowered. They are influenced by the same quotidian social, political, and economic processes as the broader citizenry, but they also have power to shape this citizenry’s actions, beliefs, and imaginaries of the state. They often hail from dominant groups in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, class, region, or gender, but their position as frontline state agents means that they are typically not among the elite of these groups.

I look at teachers as a particularly important type of middle actor, for they are situated in the middle in some particularly paradoxical ways. Teachers produce and reproduce both state and nation. Teachers are often students’ first encounters with the state (Luykx 1999; F. Wilson 2001). They inculcate national identities and a sense of citizenship duties in students but are often critical of the very state that they help constitute. In Eritrea, teachers were caught in the middle as they tried to navigate between their desires to help the nation develop while contending with the state’s project of mass militarization and its assumption, which they were highly critical of, that both students and teachers were soldiers. Teachers had their own educational nation-building project but were pressed to comply with government policies. They tried to negotiate the *de facto* merger of educational and militarized identities but were affected by state coercion and, in turn, coerced students on behalf of the state.

A variety of types of state actors could be analyzed to understand this dialectic of being coerced/coercing. Other ethnographies of the everyday state focus on other types of middle actors, such as members of the military

(Bickford 2011; Glaeser 2011; Kanaaneh 2009; Macleish 2013), customs agents (Chalfin 2010), bureaucrats and civil servants (Gupta 2012; Herzfeld 1992), and artists (Adams 2010; Frederik 2012). Additionally, a series of studies of vigilantes shows how those outside the state do the work of the state but also respond to state incompetence and impotence in an attempt to make society more moral (Goldstein 2003; Hellweg 2011; Smith 2004). These studies and others all recognize the importance of understanding how states are imagined and experienced by examining the actors situated ambiguously in the middle—citizens experience these actors as representing a state, but the actors themselves may be disillusioned with the state or have motivations that differ significantly from government policy. All of these middle actors constitute an arm of the state, but their social positions are also often ambiguous. For quite some time, anthropologists have been studying up, focusing on the beliefs, cultures, and practices through which the upper echelons of power become manifest (Nader 1972); however, the mandate to study up in many ways sets up a false dichotomy between those who are empowered and those who are disempowered, between the elite and the subaltern. More often, state actors who engage with the population are simultaneously powerful and lacking in power. For this reason, I suggest that a framework that emphasizes the ambiguity of power among those situated liminally between the state and the people is important, yet few theoretical frameworks are explicitly designed to allow us to do so. A study of teachers, like other middle actors, is neither a study up of those with power nor a study down of those who are disempowered, but a study of the intersections of both.

Eritrean teachers have an elite status because they predominantly come from the dominant gender (male) and ethno-religious group (Tigrinya); however, teachers do not consider themselves to be elite members of society for a variety of reasons, and many Eritrean teachers argued compellingly that they were disrespected by society in large part because of the way they were treated by the government. Eritrean teachers are predominantly male and from the dominant Tigrinya ethnic group. Tigrinya people comprise 50 percent of the Eritrean population, reside primarily in the central highlands of the country, and are mostly Christian. The other eight ethnic groups are predominantly Muslim and are scattered around the coastal and western lowlands as well as the more remote northern highlands. Teachers are also elite by virtue of being educated in a country where higher education has been a rarity. Thus, they have a good deal of power and stature in Eritrean society. Teachers are role models for many Eritreans because they have succeeded educationally. However, teachers also believe that their social status

is much lower compared to that of other educated people and argue that they are paid less and treated worse than other comparable civil servants. They are thought to be noble by virtue of their education but also in a lower-status profession, constantly under the thumb of the state. Teachers often feel maligned by the government, often comparing themselves to police and soldiers—other groups of state employees thought to be even more poorly treated and regarded.

For Eritrean teachers, the experience of mass militarism, the recent war, and the coerciveness of the government in general played significant roles in shaping how they acted as the state, but in different ways for different teachers. There were two categories of Eritrean teachers in Assab during the two years I conducted fieldwork—“service teachers” and professional teachers.⁹ The distinction between service and professional teachers was blurry. The Ministry of Education had hired the older generation of professional teachers in the early 1990s. This generation was conscripted into National Service at the end of the border war in 2000, and their demobilization was finalized in spring 2004. They were, first and foremost, teachers and considered themselves professionals. In contrast, a younger generation of teachers, referred to as “service teachers,” had been recruited as part of their National Service obligation following completion of university or teacher training. Members of this group were not demobilized during my time in Eritrea, although they had been released from active military duty to teach. While all teachers were unhappy about their extended National Service, service teachers, who did not know whether they would ever be demobilized, were particularly discouraged. In reality, the distinction between a professional teacher doing National Service and a National Service conscript serving as a teacher (service teacher) was a blurry one, and quite a few teachers fell between the two categories. Nonetheless, the categories determined how quickly one was demobilized and, as I discuss in more detail below, teachers’ attitudes toward the government.

In Assab, most teachers came from elsewhere. As I discuss in more detail below, Assab was a somewhat transient place. So, too, was teaching a transient profession. Eritrea’s National Service program and civil service jobs displaced and relocated many people. Transfers of civil servants were not limited to a few isolated cases but were widespread, particularly within the Ministry of Education. As of 2003, when I began fieldwork, all teachers in the South Red Sea region had already experienced a transfer at some point or expected to be transferred in the future. To be a teacher meant not counting on being able to settle, put down roots, or imagine a future independent of a state that could relocate you. Although in many respects moving people

around the country, particularly under the auspices of service projects, was a strategy of nation building, because teachers felt coerced into moving, it actually undermined their ability to imagine the state as benevolent.

Thus, teachers were in an ambivalent position—relatively elite and privileged compared to Eritrea’s population as a whole, but thwarted in their aspirations compared to other educated people in Eritrea. As symbols, teachers simultaneously represent the lived embodiment of people’s hopes for a good future and their disappointments in the actual future. For this reason, studying teachers allows us to understand the contradictions of state power as it is imagined as oppressive to teachers while being enacted by them. This complex social status shapes teachers’ beliefs, which in turn influence how they act “as” the state. Michael Lipsky’s ([1980] 2010) sociological study of “street-level bureaucrats” documents the beliefs and prejudices that certain state employees bring to their work on the street. On top of all this, they bring their own prejudices and belief systems to bear on their work as the state in a process that Michael Herzfeld (1992, 1997) has called “cultural intimacy.” As both Akhil Gupta (2012) and Herzfeld (1992) note, bureaucrats often use the power they are allocated not to help but to produce indifference. Extending these arguments, I suggest that the “social production of indifference” (Herzfeld 1992) emerges not because state actors are bad people who want to hurt others but because they are responding to a combination of their own beliefs about what is right and moral, their disillusionment with the state that they are unwittingly and inadvertently a part of, and the structural/institutional constraints of their job. But, ironically, middle actors themselves are often not happy about the roles they play for one reason or another. They are keenly aware of the limits of their power and, at times, of the injustices around them. They often feel alienated, disenfranchised, and victimized by the state that they represent.

Middle actors are also often empowered to utilize force in the name of the state, but their decisions about whether to do so are framed by their ambiguous status. Under conditions that are violent and coercive, it is important to ask how and why state actors behave coercively and violently. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) work on the state of exception, which itself is derived from Carl Schmitt’s ([1922] 2005: 1) assertion that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” scholars have focused on the devolution of sovereignty and, specifically, the devolution of decision making about the use of force and violence to state actors (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Middle actors are often in a position to decide on the exception and, thus, be sovereign, particularly under conditions in which the state is impotent and incompetent. The violence that results is

often seen as a necessary means to produce moral communities, often bringing together public actors and institutions with private relationships (Buur 2003; Lyons 2008; Peteet 1994). In this vein, forms of violence can be seen as attempts to retain order, justice, and morality in times of anxiety. Teachers at times seek to reinscribe morality by using violence, through corporal punishment in particular.

Teachers are also complex and interesting because even when they disagree with government-mandated educational policies, they must comply with them, because resistance to these policies might undermine the quality of education. Teachers may abhor government policies that are largely imposed on them, but they believe in education and schools as a moral good, even if a tainted one, and, ultimately, have to make a choice between resisting distasteful policies and doing their best to maintain the school as a good, moral space. Teachers in Eritrea and elsewhere thus simultaneously resist *and* do work in a way that they think is morally correct and in the best interests of the students (Downey 2007) or in the best interest of the nation (Silver 2007; Wilson 2001). In Eritrea, they had what they regarded as a moral mandate to produce educated citizens for the nation despite conditions that were out of control, even though these same teachers, in some cases, contributed to the chaotic and out-of-control atmosphere.

Studying middle actors requires examining how structures constrain and produce certain actions but also exploring alternative structures and variegated ways in which middle actors respond to structures. The move to merge military training with secondary education was one such structural constraint that teachers had to contend with. The government command that education should shuttle students into military service, which was enacted through both National Service and educational policy, certainly placed structural constraints on how teachers could educate. But at the same time, teachers' beliefs about what their work was for—to produce national subjects—also profoundly shaped what they were willing and not willing to do in classrooms. Teachers responded to these various structures in what were often contradictory ways. At one extreme, some teachers resisted everything associated with being a teacher, showing up for the school year late, arriving late and leaving early almost every day, not disciplining students, and not planning lessons. At another extreme, some teachers appropriated and tried to understand the new policies and help students understand why being sent to the military did not preclude their working hard to have a bright future. Most teachers' responses were far more complex and contradictory. On many days, the same teacher would drag his feet and show up late for class but then afterward express anxiety about how disorderly

the school had become and think of ways to create order and improve the quality of education. Times of moral crisis, flux, or change highlight the paradoxes of middle actors by showing how they wield power, how they are disempowered, and how the tensions between their empowerment and disempowerment mutually constitute each other. The government's merging of secondary education with processes of military training produced such a crisis, ultimately revealing that teachers and the government had radically different notions of what an educated national subject should be.