

Pierre Guidi, *Éduquer la Nation en Éthiopie. École, État et identités dans le Wolaita (1941-1991)*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020, 350 p.

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As I write this review in the winter of 2020, the relationship between the Ethiopian state and the Tigray regional leadership has degenerated into an open conflict and humanitarian emergency. In this context, reading Pierre Guidi's *Eduquer la Nation en Ethiopie* feels particularly relevant. The book explores how educational discourses, policies, and practices fostered changing sentiments of national belonging and state affiliation in multilingual and multireligious Ethiopia. The focus is on the Wolaita, a Southern rural region incorporated into Ethiopia in 1894, from the reinstatement of emperor Haile Selassie following Italy's colonial occupation in 1941 to the end of the subsequent socialist revolutionary government known as the Derg in 1991. Guidi's objective is to retrace how the expansion of schooling gave policymakers, students, and teachers in the "periphery" the tools, space, and possibility to actively engage with the critical question: what does it mean to be Ethiopian?

The book includes a preface by the historian of education Rebecca Rogers, an introduction, two parts of five chapters and one interlude each, and a conclusion. The first part analyzes the years of Selassie (1941-74), while the second concentrates on Ethiopia under the Derg (1974-91). Both pursue the same line of argumentation. Chapters 1 and 6 introduce state actors and agendas with respect to education. Chapters 2 and 7 retrace how schools progressively shaped life trajectories of students and teachers across different ecological and social settings in the Wolaita region. A close analysis of teaching materials (Chapters 3 and 9) and grounded experiences in schools (Chapters 4 and 5, 8 and 10) assesses relationships between policy and practice, and explores schools as a crucial site of socialization, politicization, and identity formation. An elegant writing and an almost symmetrical structure, two introductory maps and descriptive section titles make of this book a smooth and pleasant read.

The author suggests that Selassie and the Derg approached school policy with similar goals—to centralize and legitimize their rule, build a "modern" society, and unify an extremely diverse population into one national community—but promoted significantly different views of nation and modernity as well as pedagogic ideas and methods. Selassie considered the



expansion of formal education as key to post-colonial reconstruction to initiate a capitalist sector in a feudal economic structure. The Derg, conversely, pointed to general and free education for all as a crucial step to the emancipation of the oppressed, the fight against feudalism, imperialist capitalism and divine monarchy, and the construction of a new socialist humanity.

The book shows how, in different political contexts, a school system gradually took shape in the Wolaita. Under Selassie's rule, students were mostly the male children of Amharic notables from wealthy urban families—especially in the capital Soddo. Village schools remained a rarity until the late 1970s, except for a few state-sponsored literacy centers and the British Sudan Interior Mission's educational facilities. Under the Derg, two literacy campaigns (1974-78, 1978-85) and a massive growth of the primary and secondary school system spread education across both urban and rural settings. Guidi argues that by 1991 the Wolaita had become a "schooled society." This concept, borrowed from the sociologist Ivan Illich, describes a political community whose members believe that education primarily occurs in schools.

The book's main argument is that such an unprecedented expansion of formal education in the Wolaita was not predetermined from the outset nor resulted from top-down state policy but was the outcome of constant negotiations between central and local constituencies around curricula and their meanings. Progressively, schools became a space around which communities from a wide social spectrum made political claims and engaged in state politics in new ways. In this respect, Guidi identifies two specific tensions as the backbone of nation-state formation in Ethiopia.

The first tension lays in Selassie's attempt to transform a heterogeneous and multicentered empire into a homogenous and centralized nation-state. Along with infrastructure building and land tenure reform, the local administration—embodied by the two reformist governors Germané Neway (1958-59) and Sama'et Gabra-Wald (1963-73)—assigned schools two aims: to empower peasants and make them more loyal to the center, and to culturally assimilate peripheral communities into the hegemonic Amharic-speaking minority. The book retraces how, as a school diploma allowed increasingly more rural students to improve their conditions, Amharic notables opposed the expansion of education as a threat to local hierarchies. In response to this opposition, peasant families organized collective protests. Simultaneously, local communities experienced Amharic-language education both as an opportunity and an imposition. An opportunity because, by learning Amharic, students could develop a stronger connection to the political center and enter the "Ethiopian" nation after decades of marginalization. An imposition and even trauma (p. 131) because teachers and the children of elite Amharic families derided rural students' difficulties in Amharic and emphasized the supposed cultural inferiority of local languages and identities. In Guidi's telling, such tension between homogenizing curricula and both social and cultural heterogeneity on the ground caused local students and their families to express their social status in national terms, equaling the binary locals/settlers and Wolaita/Amharic with oppressed/oppressor.

Under the Derg, a second tension emerged between massive mobilization from the bottom up for the expansion of education and state violence on and through educational practices. The book retraces how, in a climate of revolutionary solidarity, local communities

enthusiastically joined the new regime's plan for mass education. Schooling and literacy classes gave them the chance to acquire the tools to familiarize teachers with their fights against local notables and voice their claims on a national scale. Moreover, while Amharic remained central in the curricula, the Derg assigned a wide range of experts to prepare educational materials in local languages as well. As a result, peasants no longer felt discriminated against by Amharic-language curricula. They started to feel part of the national community and engaged as never before in the construction of school buildings, the transportation of textbooks, and the foundation of school cooperatives. Student enrolment tripled, from 42.665 in 1977-78 to 131.268 in 1982-83 (p. 242). Yet state authorities strictly surveilled schoolteachers and adopted coercive and punitive practices to force peasant communities to enroll in literacy classes. Moreover, pedagogic methods involved vertical knowledge transmission with no space for discussion as well as harsh discipline and punishments for students. Guidi argues that this tension between horizontal mobilization and vertical control informed experiences at school in the Wolaita until the collapse of the Derg regime in the early 1990s.

The shaping of these two tensions shows that peripheral communities proactively participated in the expansion of literacy and schooling. In exploring this process, Guidi's book convincingly questions an existing scholarship (Messay Kebede, Tekeste Negash) that tends to address peripheral communities as passive recipients of top-down policy. A compelling methodology makes this intervention possible.

First, Guidi develops a solid theoretical framework that engages with foundational studies of nationalism, state building, and education. Inspired by Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and their later critics Christopher Bayly and Partha Chatterjee, Guidi addresses the emergence of nationalism as a global phenomenon and of "nation" and "modernity" as mutually connected and situated representations in perpetual construction. Moreover, he draws from Hannah Arendt and James Scott's respective insights on authoritarian state politics to show that the Ethiopian state saw schools as an instrument of political and cultural domination. Following the anthropologist Christine Chivallon, the author suggests that educational ideology and teaching contents make sense only if they speak to the social environment in which they circulate: "reality and imagination are not to be dissociated" (p. 27).¹ He thus connects a close reading of curricula with an analysis of how social hierarchies interact with and inform school experiences, exploring multiple dimensions of education in the Wolaita: intellectual, political, and social.

Secondly, Guidi harnesses an extremely rich collection of written and oral sources. Official documentation produced by the Education Ministry of Ethiopia (reports, curricula, statistics, plans) allows him to retrace state educational planning as well as school statistics and trends on a macro scale. Printed teaching resources such as history, geography, literature, and civic education textbooks, reading exercises, school songs, theater plays (a common educational practice in Ethiopia), periodicals, and personal memoirs by former teachers and students give access to pedagogic methods on a micro scale. For example, they show how teaching contents transmitted specific ideologies, adapted to local contexts, and changed over time. The main

¹ « Réel et imaginaire ne sont pas dissociables ».

strength of Guidi's dataset is a collection of about forty interviews the author conducted in the years 2007-11 with central and local administrators, teachers, students, and their parents.

Guidi's talent at bringing to life his multivocal archive enriches the history of education in Ethiopia in at least two ways. First, he shows that the Ethiopian school system was "hybrid" (p. 55) in that it resulted from the mixing of different projects (and funds) from a wide range of international, national and local actors. The United Nations supervised, inspired and oriented educational approaches both under Selassie and the Derg. Cold War politics played a role as well: under Selassie, the Education Ministry employed British, Canadian, and U.S. officers, while Indian Western-educated teachers worked in local schools; during the Derg, conversely, East German advisers helped administer the expanding school system, while Soviet nationality politics inspired local language teaching. Teaching content always had a local character, as shown for example by Amharic-centered understanding of civilization in Selassie's years, but also the inclusion of Wolaita-specific mythologies in history textbooks and the wide-spread use of local pedagogical practices like theater plays and songs in the whole period under examination. The classroom, Guidi shows, was a crossroads for a variety of global networks.

Furthermore, Guidi elevates the "subaltern," foregrounding their voices in the book's main arguments and the social history of education. He is sensitive to individual perspectives while maintaining the capacity to retrace broad trends in how local communities experienced and made sense of education. This is particularly evident in the examination of girls' education. We listen to first-generation female students, who by attending co-educational schools met the hostility of the community (p. 70); of different mothers who viewed their daughters' education as either detrimental to the household due to girls' distraction from domestic work or as an opportunity for their daughters to grow up as stronger women and turn into emancipated wives (p. 88); of women who recall literacy classes during the Derg as public spaces for female sociability and opportunity for contact with new understandings of femininity (p. 216). A gender perspective permeates all chapters of the book—for example, Guidi also analyzes the gendered dimension of teachers' punishments on students, the representation of women in textbooks, and the relegation of female graduates to supposedly "female" jobs. He argues that, though increasingly more female teachers and students entered the field of formal education, schools remained a masculine space throughout the twentieth century.

The book paves the way for new questions. Firstly, how did colonial education policy and praxis contribute to the process of national identity formation retraced in this book? The book's lack of reference to colonial-era education is a virtuous silence that efficiently decenters the analysis from Eurocentric perspectives on the history of Africa, especially for the decades 1940s-60s. Nevertheless, the period of Italian rule in Ethiopia (1936-41) constitutes a gap in the history of education that would be worth exploring to ultimately assess and possibly further question the impact of colonialism on Ethiopia.²

Secondly, to what extent did the expansion of education act as an arena for imperial identity formation in peripheral Ethiopia? It would be interesting to place Guidi's research

² Scholars have little explored the history of colonial education in Ethiopia. The most complete study in this respect is from the early 1970s: Richard Pankhurst (1972), « Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist Occupation (1936-1941) », *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 5(3), p. 361-69.

findings within the context of imperial formation in Ethiopia, an aspect little explored. Recent scholarship on global empires has called into question the conventional narrative that leads inexorably from empire to nation-state. National and imperial political imaginations, historians have argued, have not been mutually exclusive but tend to inform each other.³ This argument applies well to the case study examined in the book, which shows how an imperial state develops different educational strategies to integrate diverse peoples in the Wolaita, while sustaining or making distinctions among them. By concentrating on nation-state building, the author does not explore this process as a feature of imperial politics, and the reader is left wondering: how do nation and empire coexist in Ethiopia? In short, Guidi's insights foster fresh discussion that both perspectives (colonial, imperial) would further enrich.

Éduquer la Nation en Éthiopie builds on interdisciplinary theoretical literature, offers insights into the intellectual, political, social dimensions of educational discourse, policy, and praxis. Guidi moves between different scales (international, national, local), concepts (nation, class, gender, and generation), and sources (archival, printed, oral). As such, this monograph will be of extreme interest not only to scholars of education and state building in Africa, but also to anyone asking questions of center/periphery relations in modern Ethiopia.

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³ See for example Jane Burbank and Fredrick Cooper (2011), *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.