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## The Struggling State

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## Educating Eritrea

### *Disorder, Disruption, and Remaking the Nation*

#### **A Ritual for the Nation**

It was October 2003 in the Senior Secondary School in Assab at 7:20 in the morning, ten minutes *after* the flag ceremony was scheduled to begin. A teacher stood on the podium next to the flagpole, lecturing the hundred or so students who stood in scraggly rows in front of him. He complained that only 30 percent of the student body was regularly attending the flag ceremony. The students applauded in the middle of his speech, and a teacher standing beside me laughed and told me that meant they wanted him to stop talking. No one was in uniform.

Two teachers walked up and down the disorderly lines of students, saying, “You, go there. You, make the line straight.” They pushed students into the correct positions. Students responded, good-naturedly but lazily, moving as directed but then jumping into a different line when the teacher was not looking. Another teacher walked in and out of classrooms, swishing a switch he had pulled from a tree through the air as he chased students hiding in the rooms into the schoolyard. Their playful shrieks and giggles distracted the students standing in front of the flag. Most of the teachers waited in the staff room for the ceremony to end.

A boy ascended the podium and tied the flag to its pole. The lead teacher instructed the students, “OK. When I say ‘attention,’ you have to stand like this.” He demonstrated the proper attentive position, in an exaggerated

manner, pinning his legs together, standing straight with his hands at his side, pushing his chest out. “When I say ‘at ease,’ go like this.” He demonstrated for them. Then he drilled them. “Attention! At ease! Attention!” The students in the front followed his instructions as he chastised them to “do it right.” The students in the back ignored him, slouching with their arms dangling at their sides, gazing down at the ground or up at the sky. The ones in the middle shuffled their feet back and forth in a vague imitation of the drill.

Giving up on having his instructions followed, the teacher continued, “OK, begin singing.” The flag rose, and the sound of the students singing was so soft it could not be heard over the rushing wind. The teacher cried out, “Be loud!” The students’ voices rose to a barely audible pitch.

Flag ceremonies, pledges of allegiance, or other rituals for the nation are present in schools around the world. They epitomize the process of inculcating the nation into students and, in doing so, creating a national citizenry (Rippberger and Staudt 2003). In Eritrea and elsewhere, students are inspected, lined up, drilled in military fashion, and required to sing the national anthem in unison. Theoretically, as individual student bodies are fused into a collective, national body and then marched off to class, a specific kind of educated national subject is produced (Foucault 1995; Luykx 1999). In this process, the nation becomes “embodied,” or viscerally felt (Benei 2008). These ceremonies are also a routine part of everyday “banal” nationalism—nationalism that gets inside its subjects and normalizes itself there (Billig 1995). Flag ceremonies are indubitably one of the most salient means through which students come to know that they are national, but these rituals do not always make students *feel* national, at least not in the way the nation’s leaders want them to.

As described above, in the Senior Secondary School, deviance and evasiveness occurred with such frequency during the morning flag ceremony that the ceremony became a mockery of itself. Students hid in classrooms or arrived late. Those present slouched, shuffled through the drills, and dragged their feet. They refused to sing. They lackadaisically went through the motions, not rejecting or opposing the ceremony outright but resisting through passivity, performing the ceremony, but not as they should. In the process, the symbols of the nation—anthem, flag, military-like drills—were hollowed of their meaning and no longer sacred. The authority figures ostensibly leading the ceremony—teachers—were either avoiding the ceremony or being laughed at by students.

More often than not throughout the time of my fieldwork, the flag ceremony in the Senior Secondary School was more a reflection of disorder

and mockery than of discipline. The broader politics and power dynamics at play in Eritrea produced this dance of resistance and discipline and effectively reduced the quintessential ritual of the nation to a caricature of itself and a joke. National rituals provide a rich framework through which to understand how national subjects *feel* about the nation, and classroom-based rituals are a key means to produce affective ties to the nation and embodied sentiments of reverence and passion for it (Benei 2008). However, a particular kind of affective tie to the nation is produced through disorder; at the same time, disorderly performances of the nation are also a manifestation of the everyday politics of impotence.

Education embodies the hopes (and fears) for the future of the nation itself. As noted in the previous chapter, one teacher stated, “Children *are* the nation.” Thus, perceptions of whether children will grow up well reflect imaginaries of the nation’s future and the ability of the nation to develop as well. The way citizens think about the transformation of the educated young person into a productive adult is reflective of desires not just for young people to grow up well but also for the nation to grow up well. According to many—teachers, members of the government, and parents—the failed aspirations for a “bright future” both reflected and produced a crisis, not only for schools but also for the nation. Mockery of the flag ceremony was emblematic of the conditions of disorder present in schools across Eritrea following the implementation of new educational policies. I knew from conversations with teachers who worked elsewhere and educational administrators that Assab was not the only town experiencing such disorderly conditions. While some flag ceremonies in Assab and throughout the country were far more orderly than those that routinely occurred in Assab’s Senior Secondary School, many schools repeatedly experienced conditions of chronic disorder.

These conditions of disorder in schools were a result of the vicious cycle of coercion and evasion that emerged in the years following the implementation of the Warsai Yikaalo Development Campaign (WYDC). As noted in Chapters 1 and 3, for the ruling party in Eritrea, learning to be national was equated with learning to be military—or, more specifically, adopting the ethos of the fighter. National Service was designed to be a transformative experience. It was supposed to ritually change students into national subjects who would emulate the values of the fighter. Given this, we might expect that as policies embedded schools into the military, everyday life in schools would become more ordered and disciplinary like the military and that teachers’ roles would shift accordingly. Indeed, in other countries with a strong military ethos, schools have been militarized in this way. For

example, in Turkey, schools and the army are both seen as training grounds for national subjects (Altınay 2005; Kaplan 2006). But in Eritrea, schools became a site of resistance to militarization. The widespread use of coercion to impose the military project on citizens resulted in evasiveness rather than buy-in. This chapter shows how this evasiveness played out in schools. Disorder was a manifestation of evasiveness, a means for teachers and students to enact their discontent with mass militarization, and a rare opportunity for critique of the government.

Schools in Eritrea and elsewhere are the key site through which educated young people learn to be national, and discipline and order are key means through which students become properly educated, national subjects, but the political implications of disorder in schools and its role in the production of national subjectivity are seldom examined and little understood. If order produces a disciplined, docile subject, disorder produces and is produced by a subject who is critical but also stuck in a liminal state, and therefore impotent. Disorder in Eritrean schools was produced through the tacit complicity of students and teachers as a political response to the implementation of life-changing policies, which they were powerless to protest. The first section of this chapter looks at schooling as a site of ritual transformation whereby children are turned into adult citizens within the context of mass militarization in Eritrea. I show that, in light of permanent National Service, students specifically and Eritreans more generally failed to “grow up” and instead got stuck in a permanently liminal condition. The following sections explore the implications and consequences of limitless liminality for schools, for relationships between students and teachers, and, ultimately, for the formation of affective ties to the nation. Educated subjects in Eritrea were produced through disorder, which, in turn, produced a climate in which a critical stance toward party versions of nationalism could emerge. Disorder in schools was a reflection of not only the broader national climate of evasiveness but also official struggles to legitimize the national project and the ensuing condition of impotence for both citizens and the state.

### **“A Teacher Is Someone Who Doesn’t Grow Up”: Education, National Service, and Limitless Liminality**

In the modern era, schooling is a key rite of passage, a key means to grow up by acquiring status and stature. Formal education moves students from the life stage of child to adult and, in doing so, transforms them from uneducated to educated people.<sup>1</sup> This transformation involves not only growing up in age and maturity but also acquiring a higher status as an educated

person and as a full, adult, national citizen. The years spent in school may be thought of as a liminal phase in a young person's life through which the young person moves from the dependency of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood, which include duties to the nation. Liminality denotes a condition of being "betwixt and between" known social categories (Turner 1969).<sup>2</sup> So, too, students are liminally located between the dependency of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood (Quantz 2011). The concept of liminality denotes a phase of ritual in which subjects retreat from society and go into seclusion to learn the sacred teachings of that society and reemerge, transformed and prepared to take on a new role as an adult or higher-status subject (Gennep 1960; Turner 1969).

Schooling is not the only means through which young people make this transformation to responsible adult subjects/citizens. Many countries utilize the military and national service to turn young people into full citizens (Gorham 1992). In Eritrea, National Service and military training were arguably the government's preferred method of ritually preparing its young for their roles as adult citizens in the nation. National Service, which was supposed to last for eighteen months, typically in a remote location, was arguably an intensive initiation into being Eritrean. While in National Service, the nation's young people had to submit absolutely to military authority, were indoctrinated and given political education by fighters who fought for the country's freedom, and were put through a series of rigorous physical exercises. The period of isolation from society, the submission to authority, the sacred teachings about the nation, and the physical rigors present in National Service were all reminiscent of initiation rites. By merging education with National Service, the two forms of ritual were fused, and one became fully Eritrean by becoming simultaneously educated and "like the fighters." If we see both education and National Service as liminal phases out of which a full-blown Eritrean adult emerged, fusing them suggests that the new policy reflected a move toward producing educated fighter-citizens rather than two distinct classes: educated citizens and fighter citizens.

By merging education and National Service and situating National Service at the end of students' secondary education, the government made it clear that Eritrean young people would not be allowed to become educated without also going into National Service, effectively combining the two liminal stages to produce an educated *and* militarized Eritrean man or woman. This merger by itself was problematic, given that many Eritreans tended to see the two classifications as distinct, but it was even more so because the liminal phase never ended. Liminality is, by definition, an in-between stage, and a *transition* from one phase to another. Clarity regard-

ing what precedes and follows it is necessary to bound and give meaning to the nebulous “in-between-ness” of liminality. Increasingly, in Eritrea, it was unclear which stages Eritreans were *between*. When National Service became indefinite with the introduction of the WYDC, the in-between became the norm, but it did not ever seem to lead to another stage. When one entered National Service, one did not leave normal life to pass through a liminal phase and emerge as a military, national citizen. Instead, one left ordinary life and entered into an indefinite phase of limbo.

A key example of this endless “in-between-ness” is illustrated by the blurring of category distinctions among types of teachers. There were two roughly defined categories of teachers—service teachers and professional teachers.<sup>3</sup> (The latter were generally referred to simply as “teachers,” but for clarity, I use the phrase “professional teachers.”) Service teachers were assigned to teach as the unpaid, volunteer portion of National Service. In contrast, professional teachers were teachers who did not enter the teaching profession by way of National Service but instead had been teaching for some time. During the first five years or so after the National Service program was introduced in 1994, the lines between service teachers and professional teachers were quite distinct. But as time went on and more and more university graduates were assigned to the teaching profession upon completion of their service, these distinctions started to blur—service teachers eventually became professional teachers. When their voluntary service was over, they would begin to receive salary and, in many cases, would continue teaching in the same location. The border war and the WYDC blurred these status distinctions even more. Between 2000 and 2002, the majority of professional teachers were compelled to join National Service. Indeed, in 2001, as noted in the Introduction, all teachers around the country who had not previously completed military training were conscripted into military training.<sup>4</sup> Following their training, they continued their work as teachers but now worked for pocket money, like others in National Service. The WYDC then extended this eighteen-month National Service commitment indefinitely. Thus, almost all male teachers under forty-five could have been thought of as “service teachers,” yet the professional teachers never completely thought of themselves in this way.

Despite this blurring of categories, there were still distinctions between types of teachers. Professional teachers continued to disparage the lack of maturity and commitment among some of their junior, “service” colleagues. Service teachers and professional teachers also had a different sense of the extent to which they were being coerced to teach by the government. Being “in service” made teachers feel as though they were being compelled

to teach. Conversely, being released from service through demobilization would indicate to teachers that they had a modicum of free will, would begin receiving their salaries, and could choose their jobs. (In reality, demobilization meant that they were finished with their National Service commitment and would begin to receive their full salaries again, although they still had little choice about remaining in the teaching profession.) As of 2003, no teachers in Assab had been demobilized. All of them were disappointed, but professional and service teachers articulated these feelings differently. The professional teachers spoke as if it were just a matter of time. Indeed, within a few months of the start of my fieldwork, the professional teachers had been demobilized (at that point, this group of teachers had been in National Service for approximately two-and-a-half to three years). In contrast, the service teachers were frustrated, hopeless, and seemingly completely confused about their status vis-à-vis National Service. They had no faith that they would ever be released.

Service teachers and professional teachers shared the sense that their lives were commandeered by National Service, leaving them in limbo. This created a sense that teachers would never “grow up.” While all teachers regarded teaching itself as a condition of being “stuck” and failing to “grow up,” service teachers felt particularly stuck. The following is Paolo’s story of how he came to be a teacher in Assab. It reflects this sense of being stuck. His story reveals his ambitions, his sense of lack of progress, and the role of both teaching and National Service in his failure to “grow up.”

Paolo was a geography teacher in Assab with whom I always enjoyed talking a great deal. Like many of the teachers, he was good-humored and keenly analytical about his own circumstances and how they reflected the circumstances in the country as a whole. He was a service teacher. Neither of Paolo’s parents had any formal education, and yet, like many, he placed great importance on education. His father was a small business owner, but his mother was illiterate. He had hoped to study business or accounting and become a business owner, but because he was working while in school, his exam results were not high enough to join the business program; instead, he was assigned to geography. As soon as he was assigned to geography, he knew he would be a teacher, because there was nothing else for a geography graduate to do. He told me that his first instinct was to leave the university and start a business on his own, but he knew if he did not stay in the university, he would be required to go into National Service, so he studied geography. When he finished his studies, Paolo completed his military training and then was assigned by lottery to do his service teaching in Assab. Most of the other teachers were assigned in the central highlands where



they were from. “I was unlucky,” he said with regard to his assignment to Assab. At first he did not like Assab, and at the time of our interview he still had mixed feelings about the town. He said that he was “afraid of the climate” because of the heat and worried because he did not know anyone. For a service teacher, who earned almost nothing, having relatives nearby was essential to survive.

From the beginning, Paolo treated teaching like a lower-status, undesirable career path that he took only because it represented an escape from the worse path of permanent conscription into the military. As a result, he noted that he had difficulty feeling like he was a teacher, especially because he was in National Service:

Paolo: When I came to this school, I thought to myself, “I am a teacher, and I should be acting like the other teachers,” and I was always trying to explain my knowledge to the students.

Jennifer: What does it mean to act like a teacher?

P: Outside the school, I don’t feel like a teacher. Starting from the beginning, my interest was not in geography or in teaching, but because I didn’t have good results, the university assigned me to be a teacher. So it is my duty to do everything that the teachers do, and I keep to my duty and try to think to myself, “Now I am a teacher and I should act like a teacher, and that is why I am trying to spread my knowledge.” I have a duty, but when I am outside, I am different. I came to Assab as National Service and am still National Service.

Paolo cast himself as not really being a teacher but merely “acting” like a teacher. He equated teaching with National Service, a liminal phase that he clearly hoped to pass through.

Paolo felt stuck in not only teaching/National Service but also the town of Assab. He noted that over time he came to like the town of Assab but would never stay there voluntarily because it was a dead end: “There is no opportunity [in Assab]. I like the society, but I don’t want to stay, because there is no opportunity. Not only for us [teachers] but for everyone in this city, there is no opportunity. It is a big military camp. I like the society; when you make relations, it is good, but there is no opportunity. Here we are young, so we have to grow up.” Again, he equated being stuck with militarization. Since the evacuation in 2000, Assab was full of soldiers on leave from the front and people in National Service. Paolo’s perception that the town was a “military camp” was a commentary on the everyday life of

the town being commandeered by National Service, which eroded civilian life and the capacity for business development.

He also illustrated the low status of teachers and the consequences of his own failure to grow up by talking about a failed relationship with a woman whom he was trying to pursue:

I was trying to make some relation with one lady, and I invited her to have a lunch, and the fourth or fifth time, she asked me about my job. So when she asks me about my job, I say I am a teacher, and she says, “Oh, Jesus.” She was surprised and upset [and said], “Oh, teacher, I hate teacher.” Because she knows about their economic background. So I became upset. So maybe what she says may be reflected and the society thinks in that way. They might think a teacher is someone who doesn’t grow up and doesn’t get opportunity, so how can you feel good? So it creates [a] certain pressure on me.

I asked Paolo what he meant when he said teachers never grow up, and he answered:

Here the society gives respect for someone with good position and money. Teachers don’t have power and money and status. So how can society give respect? So if you don’t have those, you become careless. Then students don’t do what their teachers say in class. So their parents’ [attitudes] become influential for their students. And the students don’t give respect for us, and this becomes really bad for the whole situation. Here the students are not motivated to learn, because no one has any opportunity. Everyone is involved in military service. Most of them have jobs, and they care more about their jobs than school. So there is some crisis in the idea about school.

Paolo’s story, like the life narratives of many teachers, was marked by not only aspirations and hopes for a better future but also the belief that being educated should help him meet his goals but, given the current climate of mass military service, could not. Teachers and students believed that because they were educated, they should have the chance to grow up, or to acquire greater status and wealth, but instead, teachers believed that they were relegated to a permanently lower-class status. This feeling had material effects on their ability to get promotions and to be able to save enough money to attract and marry a spouse, both actions that are markers of being “grown up” in Eritrea. But, as Paolo noted, national/military service was

central to the inability to grow up, and ongoing National Service led to “carelessness” among both teachers and students.

Paolo’s story was reflective of the dreams of many Eritreans. It was also reflective of broader trends throughout the developing world, where education is seen as the means to change one’s status but quite often never enables educated people to achieve this hoped-for status bump (Bolten 2015; Mains 2012). In Eritrea, teachers’ dashed hopes were exacerbated because their lives were commandeered by demands for endless service. Arguably the telos of hope for a better future both gives meaning to being an educated person and is produced through aspirations for education. Conversely, the failures of teachers to “grow up” served as a perpetual reminder of the inability of education to help people achieve their aspirations and, thus, unraveled this telos of hope.

Another teacher, Isaac, had a similar story to Paolo’s. Isaac, interestingly, was not a service teacher but instead had been an elementary school teacher who had been given the opportunity to get further training and, at the time of my research, was a Junior Secondary School teacher. He had achieved some professional mobility through teaching, but despite this, he believed that teaching was holding him back and keeping him in a low-status position:

Isaac: We Eritreans, we always think about how to get money. We work. But the problem is this work—teaching—doesn’t have any value. We can’t pay for our houses. To tell you the truth, if you are a teacher, you are not going to get a wife. In this country, [being] a teacher means having a totally lower status. The teacher has full-time work, but when you ask to get a wife, it is a difficult.

Jennifer: But you have a wife.

I: Yes. It took a lot of time to convince her to marry me. I had to tell her I will leave education to find another job. In general, a teacher is very poor in our country. The construction worker is better than the teacher, because they make more money. We work hard, but no one cares about us.

According to Isaac, the markers of growth—money, a house, and a wife—were not possible for teachers. Effectively, teachers were stuck in a liminal place—no longer students, but also not having the stature expected of educated people.

This failure to grow up is a common theme in the literature on youth in Africa (see, for example, Argenti 2007). The category of “youth” in Africa

more often than not refers to status rather than age. Indeed, official categories of youth often contain an age range that is wide. Although the category of “youth” in Eritrea was somewhat variable, it typically included people up to age thirty-five and often up to forty-five, the age at which one was no longer eligible for National Service. But many more attributes might determine whether someone could be categorized as youth. For example, if someone (male or female) was married and/or had children, he or she was likely no longer thought of as youth. Youth also reflected wealth, professional status, and birth order in families. Older siblings tended to be regarded as “grown up” more readily than younger siblings, but they also tended to be saddled with financial responsibilities for their families as well. Growing up in general was thought to reflect the ability to hold down a lucrative job and to save enough money to get married; however, everyone hoped to grow up even further and perhaps own property, start a business, or acquire further wealth and stature.

In many parts of Africa, one can grow old (“grow up” in Eritrean terminology) only by acquiring wealth and status (Argenti 2007; Bayart 2009). “Youth” itself is equated with powerlessness and lack of status, while “age” is linked with status and power (Bayart 2009). In many parts of the continent, youth growing up is linked with client-patron relationships and produces the permanent dependence of a large group of youth on a small number of wealthy and powerful “big men.” However, in Eritrea, state institutions allocate power to leaders who are empowered through the centralized single-party system itself rather than to a more decentralized network of “big men.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, in Eritrea, the failure to grow old/up was less about vulnerability as a result of permanent dependence on “big men” as it was elsewhere in Africa; however, perhaps ironically, youth were vulnerable because of government policies that placed them in a sort of clientilistic relationship with the party/government/state as a whole, rendering them effectively dependent on the state/party. The failure to grow up mainly manifested itself in dependence on the government, a condition that the government itself produced through conditions of National Service.

Isaac, Paolo, and others specifically noted the linkage between the failure of teachers to grow up and the ongoing condition of National Service. Later in my conversation with Isaac, he noted, “If someone works somewhere, he should have money. But we worked for four years in National Service without payment. We became fed up.” Isaac complained that other civil servants doing National Service actually were better cared for than teachers. Although teaching was thought of as a low-status position to begin with, National Service even more severely flattened any stature that teachers once had.

Furthermore, there was a sense that being a teacher was somehow on par with being a soldier, but slightly better than being a soldier (a concept discussed in Chapter 2 and also illuminated in Paolo's comments). Paolo complained that Assab was like a big military camp, where there was no opportunity and everyone was in a common position of dependence on the government. And yet, while being a soldier was, in many respects, the Eritrean condition and equated with being a teacher, it was also seen as worse than being a teacher and something to be strategically avoided, as Paolo did when he chose to study geography rather than go into business. Another teacher, Gebre, told me, "I never wanted to be a teacher, because it is not a good job, but when we were in military training, we hoped to be teachers. Now, sometimes I become angry because I am a teacher, and then I start to think about the soldiers and the hardship they face, and it is better to be a teacher. I say thanks to God." Paolo, Gebre, Isaac, and others articulated a sentiment that both teachers and soldiers were stuck in a limitlessly liminal condition—they could not grow up—and yet being a teacher was preferable only because it involved less physical suffering and hardship.

Teachers were in a limitless liminal phase in several ways. Their profession itself inculcated in them the ideals of growing in status by virtue of one's education, but the relatively low status of teaching left them with aspirations they could never achieve. Furthermore, many of them believed that the government was complicit in depriving them of the opportunity to grow up. Many teachers stated that they were not allowed to quit teaching. Indeed, if they hoped to get another job, they would have to acquire a letter of release from the Ministry of Education, something that was hard to come by even if they had completed National Service. National Service, which blurred the categories of professional and service teacher, exacerbated this sense of being "stuck." While in National Service, teachers could not leave teaching or seek another job. They were unsure of when they would be released from service and had no money or ability to get married or change their status.

This failure for teachers, who were supposed to be in positions of authority, to "grow up" had a significant impact on relations between teachers and students. Those in the liminal phase are supposed to submit to the (often totalizing) ritualized authority of those in charge of their initiation—authority figures responsible for sacred teachings. In this case, teachers should have been those authority figures, but because of National Service, teachers were stuck in a liminal phase and could not fully take on their proper positions or roles of authority. Instead, students often saw teachers as being more like their equals, their friends. Initiates in a liminal phase forge

an egalitarian and communal bond with each other, which Victor Turner (1969) calls “*communitas*.” While teachers should have been the authority figure, because both teachers and students were in an endless “in between” together, they formed communitarian bonds of a sort with each other, blurring, but not erasing, notions of authority. This relationship had significant implications for creating order in the schools.

There was also the sense that because no one was growing up, the nation was not developing. This sense of being stuck played out at the macrolevel of the nation and the microlevel of schools. Previous nationwide “*macrorituals*” through which educated persons were supposed to move up to new status positions changed beyond recognition or ceased to exist. Examples of these *macrorituals* were selective national examinations, including the matriculation exam, and university graduation. Instead of taking these selective exams and moving on to university, as of 2003, students were to be unceremoniously shipped off to Sawa and then kept in service indefinitely, not unlike teachers. Peter McLaren’s (1986) work on schools in the United States notes that *macrorituals* that demarcate status change align with everyday *microrituals* of schooling.<sup>6</sup> In Eritrea, just as these *macrorituals*, which were supposed to transform the status position of educated people, broke down, the *microrituals* that punctuated the school day and year were also disintegrating. This was most clearly illustrated in the fact that schools had a very difficult time actually getting started at the beginning of the school year. The sections that follow look at this breakdown of authority as well as *microrituals* of schooling.

## **Liminality, Disorder, and Schools That Never Really Started**

Monday, October 6, 2003, was my first day of fieldwork in the Senior Secondary School and was supposed to be the first official day of school, according to the school director and signs posted around the school. At 7:15, I walked through the school compound in the blistering late summer morning sun toward the classrooms. Thinking I was late for a school day that began at 7:00, I rushed as much as I could in the heat with the wind pressing against me. Sweat dripped down my back. Crows cawed. I was struck by the emptiness around me. Where the shouts of students should have filled the air, I could hear only wind and crows. The wide playing field was an expanse of dust devils and blowing scraps of paper. I could even hear the sea, which lay some three or four hundred meters away, just out of sight on the other side of a concrete wall.

Reaching the end of the playing field, I turned a corner, and on the other side of the main office building, where there should have been hundreds of students, I saw the school director standing in front of a cluster of about twenty students. The director shook his head, said good morning, and mumbled, “No students. No teachers.”

“Maybe they’ll come in fifteen minutes?” I suggested weakly. I sat on a bench in front of the staff room, fanning myself with my notebook and watching as he oriented the students.

Teacher Fitwi was the first teacher to arrive. He joined me on the bench and raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw so few students. “We have to start today,” Fitwi told me earnestly. “We have to give them something to do, so they will tell the others to come.”

Several other teachers arrived and pulled chairs out of the staff room into the breeze, gazing at the spectacle of the director and his two dozen students. One teacher started laughing as soon as he saw the students and joked, “Today we are going to teach students one on one!”

Around 7:45, the students trickled off to their classrooms, which were so full of dust that there was nowhere for them to sit. Swooshing noises ensued as students attempted to dust off their seats with scraps of paper that they had found on the classroom floors and clouds of brown dust billowed through the open windows. Teachers walked into the rooms with attendance lists but shortly after they took attendance, they returned to the staff room for a spontaneously called meeting. The students went home.

The first two weeks of school, I knew from my experience teaching at the school in previous years, were typically a sort of “warm-up” time, a liminal phase during which teachers and students adjusted to being teachers and students and prepared themselves to reenter the school year with its rigid routines and rituals. This warm-up period served as a transition between the no-school summer and the school year. As a liminal phase, it both was and was not school and, as such, was “betwixt and between” and marked by “anti-structure” (Turner 1969). Anti-structure is not an absence of structure but the spontaneous and unpredictable oscillation between kinds of structure—formal and informal (Turner 1969). In these spaces, social rules and hierarchies break down, and alternate types of relationships, marked by a more communal orientation, surface. In this space of anti-structure and disorder, new ways of thinking, imagining, and relating begin to emerge. Anti-structure also relates to categorical blurriness and is a key reason why those who cannot be clearly categorized (including those in a liminal phase) are often regarded as dangerous, taboo, or impure (Douglas [1966] 1984).

During this liminal period of “warm-up” school, students and teachers mingled and interacted in a relaxed manner and lackadaisically enacted routines. The few teachers and students who were present would go through the motions of the school routines, but schedules were not followed, little teaching or learning took place, and the school day was often abbreviated. Instead, teachers would casually drop into classrooms, write a few introductory notes on the board, and leave after a few minutes. Teachers spoke of “giving students something to do,” meaning they would give them some information, usually in the form of notes written on the blackboard, so that they would go tell other students that school was beginning. “Giving them something to do” was a means of transition from the “summer state” to the “school state”; however, “giving them something to do” did not constitute “school” and was therefore a liminal, in-between, transition phase. No one expected things to go according to schedule or plan because teachers and students were performing the everyday rituals of schooling in a somewhat erratic way.

When a critical mass of students and teachers had arrived at the school, as if someone had given an invisible signal, a series of ritualized practices began that signaled that the school year was about to truly begin. At this point, teachers began to talk about “controlling” the students.<sup>7</sup> Controlling the students signaled a change in attitude and authority relations between teachers and students. The first practice that signaled control was making students clean the classrooms, in effect transforming the space of the classroom from chaotic to orderly. Control also consisted of homeroom teachers taking attendance, creating a rotation of students to clean the room on a daily basis, and appointing class monitors whose duties included, among other things, managing student behavior when the teachers were not in the room.<sup>8</sup> Once all of this had happened in the majority of classes, then all teachers would begin to follow the school’s schedule, a bell would ring in between periods to demarcate specific times for specific periods, and the director would enforce rules around lateness for both students and teachers. The director would also, at this point, expect students and teachers to stay in their classrooms throughout the entire class period. Students who had uniforms would be expected to wear them. Teachers would begin to give tests and assignments for marks. All of these cues, which occurred tacitly, indicated the true beginning of the school year.

What was surprising about the start of the school year during the years of my fieldwork was that after the first two weeks went by, the school seemed no closer to starting than it had been two weeks earlier. A ritual demarcating the actual start of school should have followed the liminal phase, but that



liminal warm-up phase seemed to take over. The transition from summer state to school state extended well beyond its typical length of a week or two. In fact, at several points throughout the year, it felt like schools would never really begin. Every semester when I conducted fieldwork between fall 2003 and spring 2005, it was not until about a third to halfway through each semester that school really got up and running. Additionally, examples of uncontrolled activity, such as chronic truancy, excessive lateness, and ongoing behavioral problems (issues that previously would have occurred at the beginning of the year or in isolated cases) continued throughout the entire semester. Just as teachers (and students) believed that they were increasingly stuck in a permanent state of “growing up” (never grown), schools seemed to be permanently poised to start but never quite did.

When I asked teachers and students why the school year was so late to start, teachers said they were not showing up to school because students were not showing up, and students said they were not showing up because teachers were not showing up. Teachers and students were tacitly complicit in producing this disorderly start to the school year, as their lateness influenced each other.<sup>9</sup> In fall 2003, I recall sitting around the bars and tea shops in Asmara, feeling anxious that I should be in Assab to start my fieldwork when, indeed, most of my interlocutors remained in Asmara, where most of them spent the summer visiting family. For weeks, Assab’s teachers routinely met in Asmara and exchanged thoughts on when they would return. Their decisions hinged on speculating as to when the students would arrive for school, gauging how many teachers had returned, and knowing that as long as a critical mass of teachers remained in Asmara, there would be no consequences for their lateness. Occasionally, we would run into teachers from other remote regions who were having similar conversations. Around the country, everyone seemed to be waiting for a cue to start school that was slow to come.

There were several practical reasons for this extended foot dragging. Teachers, almost all of whom were now in National Service, were disgruntled; since they did not receive a salary, they knew they could not be penalized for late arrival, so they made it a point to return to Assab as late as possible. The Ministry of Education was also implicated in student lateness through some of its actions and lack of organization. For example, in 2004, the government-sponsored boarding school, a home for students whose families lived in the villages outside Assab, was not prepared with supplies and equipment, so approximately 50 percent of the Senior Secondary School students who lived in the boarding school could not come at the right time. Additionally, a shortage of seats on public buses to Assab meant

that teachers had to wait to find a seat on a bus, and fuel shortages meant that private or government vehicles that teachers might catch a ride on were delayed in leaving Asmara. But the main reason for the late start of school was a collective lack of will to show up.

It is significant that just as National Service, which had recently been indefinitely extended, was merged with schooling, both teachers and students appeared to give up on maintaining the rituals that made schooling formal and formulaic. What was happening beginning in fall 2003 was an expansion of the liminal, until everyone existed in a permanent condition of “in-between-ness.” Liminality, in the traditional sense of the liminal as a ritual stage, is supposed to be a contained, powerful, and volatile state. Although Turner (1969) has noted that liminality may be an extended state, I think it is important to explore some of the idiosyncrasies of permanent liminality. The late start of school was the clearest manifestation of these idiosyncrasies. During the “warm-up” weeks of school, rigidly hierarchical relationships between teachers and students tended to be more relaxed. This liminal phase at the beginning of the school year, with its more relaxed sociability and relationships between students and teachers, was supposed to end and give way to more structured schooling and relationships wherein students and teachers acted predictably and adhered to their proper roles, but this did not happen. As I explore in the next section, lines of authority and hierarchies in the classroom blurred as teachers and students increasingly started questioning the purposes of education. The rigidity of the categories of teacher and student became more flexible, contributing to a climate of disorder.

### “Playing with Us”: A Tale of Two Teachers

As the overarching “macrorituals” of schooling were changing (and being merged with the macroritual of becoming part of the military), the lines of authority between teachers and students began to blur, and schools became less ordered. A sense of community and intimacy arose between students and teachers, which can be explored using Turner’s (1969) concept of *communitas*. In the classic sense, subjects in the liminal phase experience a sense of egalitarianism and communion with other initiates but continue to submit to authority figures. One way to make sense of the changing authority relations between teachers and students is that the sense of *communitas*, typically limited to feelings of solidarity with other students, began to expand to include teachers, who were increasingly seen as being similar to their students. Both teachers and students were, in many ways, the same vis-

à-vis National Service—all received the same treatment in military training, all were required to perform the same National Service, and no special accommodations were made for those who had more education. Here I talk about how this flattening of relationships affected the classroom in different ways by looking at two service teachers, Aron and Yesob.

Aron, a biology teacher, was in his second year of teaching. He always looked very uncomfortable in front of the class and struggled to gain the respect of his students, as the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates:

Aron walked in, unnoticed by the students, and erased the blackboard by himself instead of asking a student to do it, as was customary. Students were talkative, but when Aron told them to stop talking, they became quiet for a few minutes. The students did not stand to greet him as they would have for other teachers, and he did not ask them to. He began to quietly copy from a textbook onto the board. When the students became too loud, he interrupted his writing on the board to silence the students again. Students continued to chat in low voices quietly while they took out their books and began to copy what he had written. After a few minutes, many of them started to shuffle papers noisily and move around the room. A group of boys in the back of the room were laughing and talking loudly in Amharic. About nine students in the back few rows were not writing notes at all. The ones who were writing were talking to each other while they wrote. There seemed to be a shortage of pens in the back of the classroom, and the students were quarrelling over a few pens that they attempted to share between them, grabbing them from each other and laughing. Aron ignored this behavior.

After giving the students some time to copy these notes, he called their attention to the board and read over the notes he had written. In contrast to their rather disruptive behavior while Aron was writing up the notes on the board, the students were quiet while he was talking. One boy was sleeping on the desk, but not disturbing anyone.

Aron left the room to clean his eraser and then returned. He erased the board and wrote up a second set of notes. As with the first time he wrote the notes and had the students copy [them], students were increasingly noisy while he was writing, but when he finished writing the notes and turned to face them, they were immediately quiet. Aron then read over the notes and checked to make sure that

students understood all the words. He then left the class ten minutes early. However, he noticed that students were beginning to leave the room and returned but did not attempt to teach again.<sup>10</sup> He spent the remainder of the period pacing up and down the aisles, assuming, or perhaps hoping, that the teacher's presence would keep the students from leaving the room and disturbing other students. The students were increasingly noisy and disruptive and, except for staying in the room, did not seem to behave as if there was a teacher in the room at all. When the students got too noisy, he left with five minutes still remaining in the period.

In Eritrean schools, certain classroom rituals were supposed to delineate hierarchies and single out the teacher as the authority figure in the classroom. I often stayed in classrooms for an entire morning and observed the radical and immediate shift when a teacher walked in (and conversely, when certain teachers walked in, the complete failure of students to make this transition).<sup>11</sup> When there was no teacher in the room, students would walk around, talk, and yell in loud voices, often chasing each other around the room or throwing things. As soon as a teacher walked in, students were supposed to sit quietly and attentively, ready to begin. When the teacher turned to face them, they would stand together and chorus, "Good morning, Teacher." Then one of them would take the eraser from the teacher and erase the board. Indeed, students often did stop their raucous behavior when a teacher walked in if it were a more senior teacher, and in previous years they had done so even for more junior teachers.

From the beginning, Aron failed to make use of these rituals. He did nothing to indicate that the students should change their behavior, yet they did begin to settle down on their own and start to perform like students, somewhat. In many ways, Aron assumed that students would know how to act, but he did not assert his authority. I knew from conversations with Aron that students did not see him as an authority figure. He complained that students were overly familiar with him and tried to talk to him outside class and befriend him, a line he did not want to cross. But while he did not like students treating him like a friend, he did not assert himself as an authority figure either. In response, the students were not completely out of control in Aron's class, but they did not quite act as they should either. Aron's classroom both was and was not proper "school." Students and teacher went through the motions of schooling, but the balance of power was compromised.

I often asked students why they behaved properly for some teachers but not others, and they invariably described the teachers they showed no

respect for as “playing with us,” meaning that these teachers were not taking their education seriously, so the teachers, in turn, did not deserve to be taken seriously. After one of Aron’s classes, I asked his students why they did not behave properly for him and whether he was playing with them. A debate ensued, with some of them saying that he was playing with them and others saying that he was a “very nice teacher,” the opposite of a “playful” one. Aron was in a liminal role—he was almost as young as his students, but he was in a position of authority. Students complied but did not treat him as an authority figure. A tacit agreement, a sense of *communitas*, existed in his classroom. As a result, his power was tenuous and contingent on whether the students would agree to let him teach them.

While Aron resented the *communitas* with his students foisted on him by their failure to respect his authority, another young teacher, Yesob, actually embraced the sense of *communitas* he had with his students. Yesob had a few more years’ experience than Aron but still very much looked like a service teacher. Like many of the service teachers, he showed up to teach in baggy blue jeans, a worn-out T-shirt, and flip-flops (professional teachers tended to wear button-down shirts, “dressy” jeans or khaki pants, and lace-up dress shoes or good-quality leather sandals). I recall observing him teach one morning. He walked into a very talkative and rowdy class, smiling, slouching, and shuffling a little. A few students in the front row cheered a little when they saw him. A handful of them stood up and nodded, and he told them to sit down. He grinned at them, walked to the middle of the blackboard, waved his arm dramatically, threw a piece of chalk at the back of the room, and yelled, “Hey!” grinning the whole time. Much to my surprise, the students were immediately quiet. He handed the eraser to a student to clean the board and immediately began teaching.

On another occasion, I recall Yesob sitting on the bench outside the staff room with two girls from his class. They had exercise books and he was ostensibly helping them, but they giggled and laughed as they leaned over him and he smiled up at them. They called him by his nickname, and they clearly were flirting with each other, something that was typically thought to be wildly inappropriate for teachers and students. While Aron was uncomfortable with students’ efforts to be familiar with him, Yesob seemed to actually like it. He cultivated these kinds of relationships with students and used them to solidify his authority in the classroom. Judging by the attentiveness of his students, Yesob’s approach seemed to be working. I asked some of Yesob’s students why they behaved in different ways when different teachers were in the classroom. They told me some teachers were “playing with” them. I specifically asked whether Yesob was playing with

them, remembering his teaching style, which seemed playful to me. “No,” they told me emphatically. “Teacher Yesob is very brilliant!”

While some classes, like Aron’s, arrived at a negotiated in-between and some, like Yesob’s, at a playful brilliance, still other classes fell apart entirely due to a lack of teacher authority. In the following section, I discuss one such example of a class that disintegrated into complete disorder and the implications of this. It is also important to recognize that while younger teachers had a harder time controlling their classes, even the more senior teachers were struggling with similar issues, albeit to a lesser degree.

### **Running for President: Performing Democracy and Disorder**

The changing relationship between teachers and students had some interesting side effects. As formal and hierarchical relationships between teachers and students began to flatten, disorder emerged. Students talked loudly and joked around with each other, both in and outside the class, at times even when a teacher was present. They frequently walked out of their classrooms if a teacher was not present or was late. They then heckled students in other classes through open windows. All of this created a climate we can better understand using Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of the “carnavalesque.” This notion shows how conditions in which people are out of control are not just the absence of order but important political spaces that allow for an inversion of hierarchies. Bakhtin’s concept allows us to explore how power becomes inverted through disorderly conditions.

Even more significantly, amid this disorder, spaces to rethink and rework how to be national began to open up. The disorderly flag ceremony that I began this chapter with was one such example, but other examples could be found, most significantly, in classroom debates and other interactive activities. Communicative and learner-centered activities in the classroom, such as debates, discussions, and mock elections, were encouraged by the 2003 policy reforms and, thus, became more common in classrooms at this point. These types of activities resulted in disorder and an unusually out-of-control climate in the classroom, during which it was more difficult for teachers to maintain authority, but communicative activities also created an opportunity for students to think through some of the core tenets of Eritrean nationalism. For example, elsewhere I have written about how the animated climate of classroom debates enabled students to think through how to be a good Eritrean citizen by leaving the country (Riggan 2013a). These instances of the disorderly reworking of the nation were both intentional and unintentional.

tional, but regardless, they forged the beginnings of a new way of thinking about the nation and citizenship. Teachers and students together opened up spaces in the classroom to critique and debate dominant ways of thinking about Eritrea and being Eritrean. Here I focus specifically on an activity in an English class in which students were asked to pretend that they were running for president and give a speech that explained why the class should vote for them.

Simone, the grade 10 English teacher who introduced this particular activity, struggled with teaching. He was awkward in the classroom, spoke with a slight stutter, and was routinely ridiculed by his students. His difficulties came mainly from inexperience, but, like many of the younger “service” teachers, he also lacked motivation to improve his skills, and when I was not watching, I suspect he was merely trying to fill the time in the classroom. The students often complained that he was a joke, noting that he was “just playing” with them and not really teaching.

I spent several days shadowing Simone exclusively. Unlike many of the more senior teachers, who enjoyed explaining what they were trying to accomplish in the classroom when I spent the day with them, Simone was clearly uncomfortable having me around so much. During this time, he gave a grammar lesson and a test and engaged the students in what he called a “debate.” Both the topic of the debate, “if you were president,” and the design of the activity were vague. It was unclear to the students and to me whether the students were supposed to be pretending that they were running for president of their class or of the nation. When I asked him for clarification after the class, Simone told me that they were supposed to be running for president of the class, but I thought that all of his prompts were intended to get students to talk about what they would do for the nation, and the students themselves approached the activity this way. Although the students’ unruly behavior and Simone’s awkwardness prevented them from engaging deeply with the issues that surfaced during the course of the debate, this disorderly attempt to simulate democracy included a complex performance of nationalism. The class I describe below was the second of two sections in which I observed this activity. As with the first section, Simone’s inability to manage the class quickly became apparent. The students were immediately playful and irreverent. What became clear in both sections, however, was that amid the carnivalesque environment created by students pretending to run for president, specific political commentary circulated.

It was close to mid-day when this class met. The school day was almost over, and the classroom extremely hot. Ceiling fans clattered noisily and

did little to cool off the room. The students were restless. Simone wrote the topic “Running for President” on the board and told the students that he would select five of them to debate.

“About what?” one student called out.

“About the topic,” Simone said. “About who will be the president of this year. If you don’t do it, I will choose myself.” No one volunteered, forcing Simone to choose one student to stand up. The student stood and then sat down again without saying anything.

Another student stood and started to say, “I . . . think . . .”

Simone interrupted and prompted him, saying, “I would like to be a president.” The student mimicked the teacher in a falsetto voice and talked about creating peace within boundaries and economic success. One student clapped slowly and loudly when he finished.

Simone made another student stand, but he promptly sat down again, like the first student. One boy left the room abruptly without permission. Simone then called on a girl. The boys in the back of the room were talking loudly among themselves, and the one who left the room came back in.

The girl Simone called on began in a loud, bold voice: “I don’t want to be president of Eritrea. Because this president makes a good one.” She then looked nervous and covered her mouth with shaking hands and continued, “I support this president because . . . eh . . . eh.”

As soon as her words begin to falter, the other students immediately mimicked her, saying, “Eh . . . eh . . . eh . . . eh.” Embarrassed, she still managed to continue. She talked about the WYDC, which engaged students in the process of building villages, and noted that these were good things. She then talked about the president’s wanting democracy and peace. She hesitated often in her speech but managed to get out, “The president wants this, this peace agreement.”

Other students mimicked her, saying, “This, this.” At this point, she sat down giggling and could not go on. It clearly took a great deal of courage for her to stand up and make this statement, and she worked very hard to present it with as much decorum as she could muster. But in the end, despite her show of confidence, her bold attempt to get past her nervousness, and her obvious sense of conviction, which was markedly lacking in the contributions of other students, she was reduced to nervous giggles and compelled to sit down. Effectively, the raucous environment in the classroom silenced this student and her bold endorsement of the president.

After the heckling of the girl who supported the president, Simone walked around the classroom, looking stern and being ignored by the students. Another student stood and then called Simone over to him. They



talked quietly for a few seconds, and then the student went to the front of the room. Simone gave him a cue to go on, saying, “I would like to be. . . .”

A boy in back mimicked Simone in a loud high-pitched voice, “I would like to be a president.”

A girl in front similarly mimicked, “I would like to be Eritrean government.”

The student at the front, seemingly earnest, began, “Okay. Students,” he said in a loud, clear, booming voice. “My name is Abdu, and I would like to talk my life.” All students laughed raucously and mimicked him, and he sat down instantly.

Another student then stood up and talked quietly. This time, the students did not mimic him. No one interrupted or heckled him, but it was quite possible that this was because no one could hear him. In contrast to the previous student, he spoke so quietly and the rest of the class was making so much noise that it was impossible to hear what he was saying.

Another boy stood up and made his contribution. Although there was noise in the class and it was hard to hear him, he was able to finish. He said that a president should focus on peace and development; however, he made his own stance on the current president clear by differentiating himself with his concluding words: “I wouldn’t like to be president, but I would like to say to this president that he [should] build schools and clinics in this country and to use properly natural resources and to import or export things.” This student’s rather direct critique seemed to change the tone of the class. His words seemed to encourage some students to resist participating even more, but they also led a few others to abandon the façade of “running for president” and instead to simply critique the current president.

The remainder of the class oscillated between student reticence, loud talking, and mockery and outright critique of Eritrea’s president. Students continued participating when compelled to. Simone continued trying desperately to get them to contribute to the class. Some were sleeping on their desks. He was having a very difficult time getting anyone to say anything. One student directly refused to participate, saying, “The question is who will be the president of this year? I don’t think I will be the president of this year.”

Finally, after much effort on Simone’s part, one boy stood and read from a paper, “I don’t want to be president, but I would like to say to [the] president that the country needs more knowledge and there are no schools in many villages.”

Another student followed him, and, after much imploring from Simone, said, “When we see the days and years of [President] Isaias [Afewerki], it is thirteen years, but when we think of this, these are very important days.

These thirteen years, there are more different problems—lack of medicine and hospitals and foods. We see so many travel from our country to our boundaries because of lack of food and water. So, I say to the coming president to see what is very bad and to make it better.” As with the previous few students, this student seemed to level a critique at President Isaias rather than advocate for himself as president.

Simone seemed to realize the turn that the class was taking and tried to get the activity back on track, saying, “Try to talk about yourself. About what you will do as a president. Talk about the economy.”

In response, a student answered, “Yes, we talk about the economy over the last years.” Some students laughed, but many ignored him. The bell rang, and the class ended rather abruptly. Students barely gave Simone and me a chance to leave the room before crowding out behind us, some of them jumping out of the open windows.

It is impossible to fully ascertain the motivations of the students through the course of this debate, and clearly many things were going on simultaneously. Students were critiquing the president and the economic and political conditions in the country. At the same time, their ridicule of the activity itself likely reflected their amusement at the fact that they were being asked to “run for president” in a country that was decidedly not a democracy. Many students were also simply taking advantage of a teacher with poor classroom-management skills to have some fun at the end of the day. This was a mockery of the class, the teacher, the activity, and the president himself.

Whether the heckling students intended to mock President Isaias or to make fun of their English class or teacher, what is significant and clear here is that what should have been sacred—the order of the class, a mock election for president, and especially a commentary on the president himself—was no longer sacred. What Teacher Simone accomplished here, albeit unwittingly and by virtue of his novice performance as a teacher, was to create a classroom climate in which the person of the president and the performance of political debate could be transformed by students into a subject of mockery and ridicule. Indeed, the disorderly climate of the classroom and the fact that the teacher had no authority enabled a mockery of the president, whether it was intentional or not. These disorderly conditions made it possible for students to undermine the teacher’s authority and the sanctity of the classroom as a space of orderly hierarchies. They inverted power and, in the process, challenged the president’s authority.

While it was a somewhat extreme example of disorder, Teacher Simone’s class was certainly not unique. As I noted above, a carnivalesque climate had taken hold across the school. In this particular “carnival,” typical norms

of classroom behavior altered to produce a chaotic environment, but these radically changing norms also emboldened students to say things that may not have been “safe” to say in other contexts. Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of the carnivalesque illuminates the social and political work enabled by disorder. Bakhtin (1984) and others have noted that the carnival locates its participants in a space where norms, rules, and authority are overturned (Mbembe 2001; Woldemikael 2009). As I noted above, a celebratory atmosphere tended to accompany communicative activities. Students became very enthusiastic and engaged, and, as the activity progressed, behaviors tended to get more and more raucous until the teacher or moderator typically gave up any attempt at control. Debates created a space in which the norms for student behavior were more flexible, but they also created a space where broader power relations could be commented on. As the classroom atmosphere became more out of control, students’ comments became bolder and more outrageous, as if the suspension of classroom-based rules and hierarchies enabled students to suspend other forms of social censure. Drawing on Bakhtin, Achille Mbembe (2001) shows that quite often under conditions of authoritarianism in Africa, ruler and ruled render each other impotent as the ruled engage in practices of vulgarity, ribaldry, and ridicule oriented toward mocking the ruler, but doing so in a manner that will be largely imperceptible. Similarly, the activity described above turned the president from a sacred figure into an object of laughter. In this process, official power is transformed into something ridiculous but not stripped of its power. At the same time, while stripping power-holders of their sacredness and legitimacy, those engaged in this mockery are not particularly empowering themselves. A condition of mutual impotence in which neither the power-holders nor the disempowered have legitimacy or moral authority ensues.

At the same time, serious opinions were conveyed in the midst of this carnivalesque climate. Whether or not students intended to do so, this activity revealed the reworking of Eritrean nationalism in several ways. First, the activity provided students with a forum in which they could critique or praise the direction the country was going in. Students were given a rare public chance to be engaged civic actors. But at the same time, students knew that the idea of running for president in a nondemocratic country was a game. The activity itself highlighted this. Students mocked the performance of being democratic because the possibility of real democracy was ridiculous in the context of a country where unquestioning obedience was clearly the operable expectation for how one should enact sacrificial citizenship.

Students also reworked the meaning of being Eritrean by critiquing the president himself. In many respects, nationalism was articulated through

their attitudes toward President Isaias. In many dictatorships, a cult of personality emerges such that the nation's ruler symbolically represents the nation itself (Wedeen 1999). The leader not only leads the country but also embodies it. In Eritrea, as I have noted earlier, there does not exist the same extreme cult of personality that is found in many other dictatorships. One does not see pictures of Isaias Afewerki in every home or monuments depicting the president's figure. As I noted in Chapter 1, the president has always depicted himself and been depicted as a sort of everyman, but being seen as one of the people does not preclude his being sacred. Even in the absence of a cult of personality that would exalt the image and the body of the president, the stance that one takes toward Isaias Afewerki defines one's stance toward the country, and, more specifically, the ruling party. To this day, many Eritreans (particularly in the diaspora) continue to admire him and trust him to take care of the country. Others may be disillusioned with the president and ruling party but still have a "grudging admiration" for his skill at consolidating the state and maintaining a certain kind of stability (Reid 2009; see also Müller 2012a, 2012b). But still others are tremendously angry with him and express a sense that he has betrayed the nation. Expressions of anger or even outright hatred toward the president were not unheard of during the course of my fieldwork. Even in the absence of a reverent worshipful stance toward the figure of the president, to most Eritreans, Isaias Afewerki is the face of The Struggle, the party, and the nation. He is the essence of the *tegadalai*. Thus, to critique President Isaias is not only to critique the party and its version of nationalism but also to dislodge the centrality of The Struggle itself. To critique him under the auspices of a mock election is to critique his self-proclaimed right to rule the country without being duly elected and to critique a version of nationalism that asserts the legitimacy and necessity of his doing so. Interactive and communicative activities, such as the one described in this chapter, thus enabled students to question meanings of Eritrean nationalism by questioning the authority of the president, who stood in for the nation itself. However, disorder, which both enabled the critique and left the meaning of the critique ambivalent, was also a significant factor. The debate raised questions and challenged the tacit notion that being Eritrean could be equated with tacit support for the president, the party, and fighters.

### **“Civics Is a Very Nice Subject”**

Another way in which national narratives were reworked was through teacher commentary on the teaching, or rather nonteaching, of civics. Like the

instances of the classroom debate above, conditions of disorder are integral to the critique of civics. If we see schooling as part of the process of ritually producing national citizens, then we might see the civics curriculum as the sacred teachings of the nation. As I noted in the last chapter, when I asked administrators in leadership posts in the Ministry of Education, who were often former fighters, how education instilled national identities in students, they often immediately referenced the civics curriculum. However, the actual teaching of civics was befuddled by disorderly conditions, and teacher attitudes toward civics were less than reverent.

When I asked the social science teachers about the civics class, they would invariably say, “Civics is a very nice subject” and then break out into laughter. The answer did not vary much, nor did the laughter. Civics, it appeared, had become a collective joke among teachers. During the two years of my fieldwork, I tried many times to observe a civics class. Civics, after all, was the subject that contained the most explicit messages about nationalism and citizenship, but, somewhat ironically, it was one of the least consistently taught subjects. The civics curriculum defines the attributes of Eritrean national “character,” describes the structure of government that should be in place, and clearly details a role for students in building the nation. Given this, it was striking that civics was a joke among teachers and seldom taught.

Textbooks play an extraordinarily powerful role in defining national narratives and creating a blueprint for national identity; however, to truly understand the production of nationalism, national duty, and national subjects in schools, it is also necessary to go beyond the written text and explore what is done, or not done, with these texts. In Assab, I found not only that it was impossible to observe a civics lesson because the subject was so seldom taught but also that the only available copy of the civics curriculum was a dog-eared photocopy that a teacher agreed to lend to me for a few hours for research purposes. Text can be a powerful tool to shape collective historical memory and a common sense of national belonging and character, but it is important to explore not only *what* texts say about the nation but also *how* they are taught or, in this case, why they may not be taught.

In Chapter 1, I discussed parts of the grade 6 civics curriculum in more detail. It outlines the Eritrean national character and orients it around qualities of “fortitude” and willingness to sacrifice and be an obedient and disciplined child, student, and worker. The grade 7 civics curriculum reprises many of the characteristics of being a good, patriotic Eritrean but deemphasizes elements of character somewhat and, instead, focuses on educating students about government and governance. Among other things, it

includes a unit that outlines various civil rights that are “commonly put into constitutions,” such as freedom of assembly, the right to vote and run for election, the right to leave the country, the right to live and work anywhere in the country, the right to due process, and the right to equality (Ministry of Education, CRDI 1995).

The irony of these rights being listed in the Eritrean civics curriculum is not lost on teachers and students, who are, of course, well aware that most of these rights are not guaranteed in Eritrea. Given the content of the civics curriculum and the political realities of Eritrea, it seems obvious why teachers would laugh knowingly and say, with irony, “Civics is a nice subject” every time I asked about the curriculum. But the humor they derived from the question about civics teaching and the statement “Civics is a nice subject” had a number of additional meanings.

The following excerpts from my field notes convey the general sentiments that teachers had about the civics curriculum:

In the staff room, when I ask about the civics curriculum, Beraki says, “Civics is a very nice subject” in a tone that I can’t quite read. Haile passes through and hears what we are talking about and says, “Oh, civics is a nice subject” and exchanges a glance with Beraki. So finally I ask what makes it nice. They laugh and exchange knowing glances again. Beraki says there are some stories that the students like. He tells me that the things they learn are things they already know, like respecting your elders. Then he says that there are also some political things, “a lot of things about ‘The Struggle,’ but you can just ignore those and teach the other things.” (Field notes, April 2005)

On another occasion, Paolo articulated the political nature of his feelings about teaching civics even more clearly:

When I ask Paolo about teaching civics, he laughs and says, “It’s very nice, but not realistic.” I ask why it is that every time I bring up the civics curriculum, everyone says, genuinely, “Oh, civics is very nice,” and then they start laughing. Paolo tells me that the subjects—democracy, elections, the constitution—are very nice in theory, but everyone knows that it is not realistic now, which is why they laugh. “The theory is nice and it is nice to teach the theory, but it isn’t done in practice, so they laugh.” Then Paolo says that he doesn’t even know what the election and parliament system in this country is supposed to be. (Field notes, April 2005)

The statement “Civics is a nice subject” had several meanings. At one level, teachers actually thought that civics was nice for the students. The idea of teaching about patriotism and how to be a good student and citizen appealed to them. They noted that “students enjoyed” the subject, and that, unlike the other subjects, it was easy, familiar, and fun for the students. It resonated with their identity and felt good. But the statement “Civics is a nice subject” was also deeply ironic. On the one hand, the civics curriculum articulated the official stance that the root of Eritrean national character emerged from The Struggle and its preoccupation with sacrificing for the nation. The fact that reverence for The Struggle was waning and that people were tiring of hearing about sacrifice was reflected in Beraki’s comment. Some parts of the curriculum *were* “nice”—the ones about values and discipline and student character—but some should be skipped, such as the ones about The Struggle. Meanwhile, the civics curriculum was also a living testament to where the nation should have been on its trajectory toward political development. It outlined an ideal of democracy and civil liberties that everyone had hoped for but saw little evidence of. The curriculum still existed, even though the trajectory toward elections and implementation of the constitution had been abandoned. Teaching these topics only served as a reminder of this abandoned trajectory.

The statement “Civics is a nice subject” also reflected the irony that little priority was given to the actual teaching of civics, despite the fact that its messages were so integral to the party’s understandings of how students would learn to be national. Civics was seldom taught, and, in fact, teachers often refused to teach the subject. In the Senior Secondary School, civics seemed largely forgotten and did not even appear on the course schedule. In the Junior Secondary School, students in grades 6 and 7 were scheduled to take civics, but teachers refused to teach it because it was not their subject and their workloads were already too heavy. Most teachers at one point or another had been compelled to teach civics but later refused. For example, in the Junior Secondary School in 2003, math and history teachers for grades 6 and 7 taught civics for several weeks, but they promptly decided to stop teaching it in protest when a new teacher was assigned to the school and had a lighter course load but was not assigned to teach civics. Thus, when teachers laughed about civics, they were laughing, somewhat defiantly, at the circumstances that surrounded the teaching of civics itself and complaining that no teacher was designated to teach it. No one was willing to take responsibility for teaching civics. Indeed, teachers all believed that it was not their duty to teach the subject, given that many were overloaded with teaching classes in their regular subjects. Laughter was a form of defi-

ant distancing from the responsibility to teach a subject that, while important in theory, was thought to be rather worthless in practice.

Given that the civics curriculum was intended to define the national character, culture, and moral bearing; spell out citizenship rights and duties; and articulate the values—sacred teachings—of The Struggle, we might expect more reverence for civics either from teachers themselves or from administrators responsible for ensuring civics was taught. The civics curriculum instead was a place where the disorder of things was clearly revealed. Everyone seemed to have abandoned it. Civics was at once an embodiment of the Struggle-centric nationalism of the party and an ironic joke. It presented “nice stories” about the nation, but these stories were selectively taught within a disorderly context in which there was no textbook, no teacher allocated permanently to the subject, and seldom a teacher who could be convinced to teach. This combination of disorder and irreverence for the narratives of The Struggle became reflective of the overall condition of disorder in Eritrean schools and, indeed, a sense of impotence in the nation overall.

### **Communitas and the Negotiated Production of the Educated Citizen**

Throughout this chapter, I have given several examples of the ways in which schools produced the nation but not reverence for it. Schools were supposed to produce a sense of reverence, worship, awe, and love for the nation, and yet students refused to comply with the rituals. At the same time, teachers—the state actors assigned to enforce compliance with these rituals and ritualized structures—were often complicit with students in their refusal to comply. In this process, disorder created openings through which to rethink the nation in schools.

If National Service/schooling was supposed to be a liminal space in which young people were transformed into ideal Eritrean educated persons/citizens/soldiers, this process failed when it was no longer clear that National Service was something that was passed *through* and, instead, became an endless stage of subservience to the government. At the time of my fieldwork, limitless liminality had captured the lives of teachers and would soon subsume the lives of their students, who would not pass through National Service but rather get stuck in it. In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that the microrituals of schooling also fell apart, making the very process of becoming national a mockery of itself. As schools were coopted into the machinery of conscription, they also became spaces of limitless liminal-



ity, something shown most clearly through the difficulty they had actually starting each year. Liminality played out in more subtle ways in the everyday life of schools as well and was manifest in student lateness, truancy, and chronic misbehavior. A sense of *communitas* between students and teachers (sometimes cultivated, as in the case of Yesob, and sometimes imposed on teachers by students, as in the cases of Aron and Simone) partially replaced the hierarchical authority that should have enabled teachers to maintain discipline and order. This sense of *communitas* between teachers and students was encapsulated through student comments that teachers were “playing with” them. In turn, students “played” with their teachers, a behavior that altered the classroom climate from disciplinary and ordered to disordered. Disorder and the carnivalesque environment it produced enabled students to take what was sacred—lessons, learning, teacher authority—and profane it by mocking it. In the classroom, power was inverted, but when power was inverted in these contexts, other sacred objects, such as the president of the country himself, were also subject to mockery, giving rise to an open political critique. Another inversion was present in teachers’ refusal to teach civics and their jokes about civics being a “nice subject.” Just as a political commentary that made the president less than sacred emerged from students’ comments about running for president in their English class, a commentary on the values of The Struggle and the party version of Eritrean nationalism emerged from teachers’ comments on the teaching of civics.

The condition of limitless liminality was itself a by-product of National Service and the government’s nation-making project. But instead of producing national subjects willing to sacrifice and suffer obediently for the state, the effects of this nation-making program were inverted. Just as Eritreans tried to escape the coercive reach of *gifa*, when schools became a mechanism to conscript, teachers and students began evading schooling. This does not mean that schools failed to produce national subjects, but rather that they produced national subjects differently than the official nation-making project required. Just as imaginaries of the punishing state erased nationalist discourses of honorable sacrifice and service, thereby undermining the government’s nation-building project, resistance to school-based rituals and routines recast the official version of the nation as something other than what was intended.

This negotiation, subversion, and mocking of rituals transformed being an educated, national subject into something fundamentally different. At the same time, mocking sacred national ideals ultimately left the state project intact, if illegitimate. Lacking legitimacy, the project became coercive, revealing, once again, the vicious cycle of coercion, evasion, and impotence.

It is particularly significant that this vicious cycle of coercion and evasion played out in schools, which are the state institution best situated to produce national subjects and socialize citizens. The increasingly carnivalesque nature of the classroom and school reflected not an outright rejection of the ideal of becoming an educated citizen but a confused renegotiation of the meaning of doing so. Through this renegotiation, the meaning of being national turned from a statement—Eritreans are like this—into a question: What are we like? The assumption that students should serve and sacrifice for their country embedded in official narratives of being Eritrean were turned into a sometimes-comical conversation about the appropriateness of service, the validity of the stories of *The Struggle*, and a critique of the president's job. Meanwhile, teachers did have a vision for what educated people should be like; even while teachers themselves were undermining authority in schools, they were also seeking to reinforce this vision through a series of coercive and even violent processes that are the subject of the next chapter.