

In May 2016, global attention was gripped by the sight of hundreds of corpses washed ashore on the northern coast of the Mediterranean. About 450 of these bodies belonged to Eritreans who had undertaken the perilous journey across the Mediterranean from the Libyan coast. They had trusted their fate to boats that were hardly seaworthy in the hope of reaching Europe and finding asylum. This was not the first of such incidents; nor was it to be the last. Few people could fathom the reason why the victims would resort to such desperate measures, courting almost certain death, rather than remain in their own country. The book under review provides the answer in eloquent fashion. At the root of this exodus of Eritrean youth is the most heinous form of 'national service' that the world has ever seen. Initiated to inculcate the values of the liberation struggle to the Eritrean youth, the institution has degenerated into a regime of veritable servitude costing each conscript up to two decades of his/her life.

It is to escape this bondage that so many Eritreans have 'voted with their feet', as it were. The world witnesses only the terminal stage of their tragic odyssey. Little noticed and recorded is the no less perilous journey to Libya. The migrants had to cross the Eritrean border to Ethiopia or the Sudan, eluding the soldiers instructed to shoot to kill (unless the migrants had managed to bribe their way) and face the hazards of traffickers and scorpions to cross the Sahara desert. Most ended up in detention lasting many years in Libyan prisons, subjected to the extortions and harassments of their captors. Nor is arrival in Europe or the Middle East a guarantee to a new life. The quest for asylum is a protracted and not always successful process. Israel, a country that started as a sanctuary for Jewish refugees, has been the most stringent in granting asylum; out of 36,000 Eritrean refugees who have arrived, only 1,950 have been screened to file asylum applications and only two of these have been accepted! Not only has Israel erected a wall in the Sinai to stem the tide of refugees, but it is pre-

paring to deport thousands of Eritreans to an unspecified African country at the time of writing.

Not all Eritreans took the tortuous path to safety. A few – a tiny minority, admittedly – were fortunate enough to exit the country legally. This included Eritrean sportsmen competing in global and regional events, notably football teams featuring in African championships. Almost invariably, members of these teams sought asylum in the host country after the end of the tournaments. The most dramatic case in this regard was that of the flag-bearer of the Eritrean team competing in the 2012 London Olympics, who sought asylum in England at the conclusion of the Games.

Drawing on interviews with refugees who had survived the treacherous journey, the rich data that is available online, the utterances of the architect of the odious system, the Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki, documents of human rights advocacy groups (notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), as well as the secondary literature, Gaim Kibreab has given us a comprehensive and nuanced study of the problem. As he himself confesses at the outset, the methodological challenges of conducting such an investigation are little short of daunting. Field research under the autocratic system that has prevailed in the country is unthinkable. Conversely, the large number of

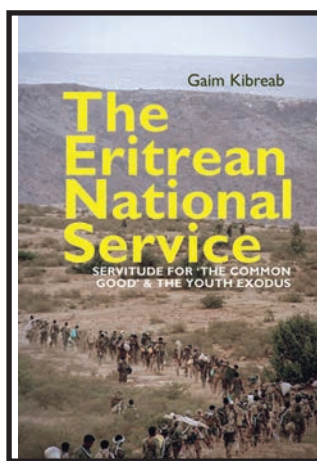
'From Badge of Honour to Unbearable Burden'

Bahru Zewde

The Eritrean National Service: Servitude for 'the Common Good' & the Youth Exodus

by Gaim Kibreab

James Currey, 2017, 215 pages, ISBN hb: 978-1-84701-160-2



Eritreans who have been forced to flee their country and seek abode in Europe and elsewhere has provided the author a large pool of potential informants. In view of the difficulty of using a random sampling method for refugees spread out across eighty-five countries, the author has been forced to adopt a snowball sampling method, selecting his respondents through a system of chain referral.

National (mostly military) service is not new; nor is it unique to Eritrea. And the author gives a detailed discussion of the origins of the idea of national service, drawing on the writings, among others, of the Enlightenment philosophers Montesquieu and Rousseau. He also discusses the arguments for and against national service. Within the African context, he cites the experience of countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, even if this reviewer detects a misreading of the objective of the latter case. The Ethiopian National Service was introduced in the 1980s to withstand the insurgency in the northern part of the country, not 'to pay back the taxpayer who footed the bill for university education' (p. 34). That rationale pertains more to the Ethiopian University Service (EUS) that was operative in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In a way, though, these discussions strike one as manifestly academic, as the Eritrean National Service (ENS) defies the norm. As the author underscores it in

emphatic fashion, what makes ENS so unique is its indeterminate nature, with conscripts being forced to serve for up to twenty years or more. Its magnitude is as striking as its open-ended nature. A total of half a million Eritreans (or 10% of the population) have been mobilized for the purpose over a period of twenty years. Nor has this been confined to the youth. Men up to the age of seventy and women up to the age of sixty are liable to be drafted into the militia. The net effect of this exercise is not only the subjection of citizens to eternal bondage but also the militarisation of society. The author draws parallels with the feudal institution of *posse comitatus*, which imposed compulsory military service on citizens. Given the fact that ENS degenerated into universal conscription of labour, it is probably more akin to *corvée*.

Such an onerous system was instituted against the advice of a working group that the president had set up soon after the attainment of independence in 1991. The group, composed of professional military officers, had recommended a structure tailored to the country's size and resources. The emphasis was on professionalism and institutionalisation, on quality rather than quantity. The president overrode these professional recommendations to institute a regime of mass mobilization. He did this partly to prepare the country for the war with his southern neighbour (Ethiopia) that he deemed inevitable and partly to enhance his personal grip on power; the two phenomena were in fact interrelated. As one of the respondents to the author's questionnaire asserted, 'without the ENS, there would have been no border war with Ethiopia' (p. 47). Not only did ENS precipitate the 1998-2000 war between the two countries but the debacle that Eritrea suffered in the course of the war amply demonstrated the failure of the institution to create an efficient fighting force. In the words of another respondent, 'It is not possible to build a country's military power and fighting capability on the basis of slavery' (p. 60, emphasis in the original).

The legal framework for the national service was first laid in 1991, even before

the country's independence had been formalized by the 1993 referendum. But the 1991 proclamation, designed to inculcate national unity and address the problem of youth unemployment, did not become operational until after formal independence. The principal legislation for the ENS was Proclamation No. 82/1995. The proclamation introduced an 18-month military service whereby conscripts were paid a paltry sum after the first six months. It also did away with the exemptions that the first proclamation had provided for, only veterans of the independence struggle being eligible for exemptions. But the legal basis for an institution that has assumed the form of permanent servitude was laid in May 2002 with the introduction of what was rather innocuously dubbed the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC). The ostensible rationale for the proclamation was the inculcation of the spartan values and the spirit of self-sacrifice of the liberation struggle by the *yikealo* (the veterans, literally 'those who are capable of achieving anything') to the *warsai* (the heirs).

In reality, however, the *yikealo* were scarcely in a position to transmit the values of the liberation struggle. 'The former paragons of virtue have become corrupt and self-interested' (p. 73). They were busy accumulating money 'by any means to make up for lost time' (p. 182). Corruption was rife throughout the country and the torrid training camp at Sawa, on the Sudanese border, was no exception. Those in charge of the camp were highly susceptible to corruption. Conscripts with the means could influence their place of assignment (the capital, Asmara, being the most popular for obvious reasons) or secure or renew the all-important travel permit (*menqasegesi*) to visit their families. They could even buy their way out of the camp by bribing high-ranking military officers, who could go to the extent of providing military vehicles to transport them to the border.

The less endowed would have to endure a regime of penal servitude that has few precedents or parallels in modern history. They have to undergo rigorous military training in one of the most

inhospitable places in the country. Non-compliance could result in detention and torture. Many ended up being personal servants of the commanders, running their small shops, clearing agricultural land and building irrigation canals, being hired out to commercial farmers (with the commanders pocketing their wages), building houses and even serving as domestic servants to their wives. Female conscripts became victims of sexual harassment and violence, with girls opting for unwanted pregnancy or even committing suicide to avoid the sexual advances of the commanders. What made their condition even bleaker was that there was no end in sight, as the initial 18-month limit has been extended indefinitely.

In an understandable effort at objectivity, the author asks his respondents if there were any redeeming features of the odious system. A high proportion of respondents are said to have appreciated the contribution of ENS to bring about national unity and cohesion through the coming together of youths from differing ethnic and religious backgrounds. They also point out the inculcation of work discipline that they were able to acquire in the course of the training. But the lingering question remains: at what price? Couldn't one have achieved these positive outcomes through other, less costly, means?

The damage inflicted by ENS went beyond the conscripts. It had a deleterious effect on the country's social fabric. The country paid a high price for the perennial mobilisation and excessive militarization. The economy, particularly agricultural production, suffered because of the diversion of skilled manpower as well as resources. The scarcity of labour, which was highly expensive even on a global scale, made firms and enterprises capital-intensive, thereby undermining their competitiveness. Following the strong challenge from Asmara University students in 1999-2001, the university was shut down. In its place, the government opened a string of colleges that were run like barracks. Thus, education, like the rest of society, was also militarised.

Perhaps the most disastrous outcome of ENS was the destruction of the family. Both conscription and the attendant migration were a drain on agricultural labour. Urban livelihood too was a delicate affair requiring the contributions of all members of the family. The author describes this situation in one of the most poignant chapters of the book (Chapter 9), drawing on the experiences of two families, one urban the other rural. The first was the case of Abdu's family in Asmara, which had led a reasonably comfortable life through the income generated by the different members of the large family. Until, that is, six members of them were called up for military service and then recalled for indefinite servitude on the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia. The mother died heartbroken at the uncertainty of the fate of her enlisted sons, as the government was not particularly keen to release the names of those killed in combat. Three of them decided to flee. Two of them made it to the Sudan; the third was captured, tortured and detained in a container for a long time. Of the two who had made it across the border, one fell into the hands of traffickers who demanded a hefty ransom to release him.

The second case was that of Tekle's family, whose members (including six siblings) contributed their share to achieve a fairly comfortable livelihood. This delicate balance collapsed when five of its young members were called up for military service. Here again, it was the recall for the border war and the subsequent indefinite detention, more than the initial call up, that led to the disintegration of the family. Tekle was forced to flee the country, eventually making it to England, via Italy and Calais in France. He then started sending money to his other brothers so that they can follow suit. He describes in graphic detail the anguish that he felt when one of them drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he tried to cross to Italy and the deep sense of ambivalence he felt about sending money to his second brother so that he could also try his luck.

The breakup of families and the erosion of values have other dimensions as

well. The youth haemorrhage through involuntary detention in military camps and migration meant that the burden of caring for children fell on the elderly. In a manner that is reminiscent of the AIDS epidemic, grandparents had to take care of grandchildren rather than being cared for. Conscripts could not even get leave to attend funerals of parents and siblings, thereby being denied the most basic expression of family loyalty.

The only salutary aspect of this calamitous situation was the remittances that successful migrants were able to send back to their families. Remittances from the Diaspora constituted the backbone of the Eritrean economy. Although it is difficult to disaggregate the contribution of those who had fled from the ENS, such remittances were estimated at a total of over \$400 million per annum. But no amount of money can compensate for the traumas and tribulations that the conscripts went through and the destruction of families that ensued.

In sum, an institution that could have had some rational basis had it been confined to a limited period has assumed the character of an onerous burden on the youth and society at large by virtue of its open-ended character. The contrast with the period of liberation struggle, when so many gave up their professions and businesses to join it, could hardly be any starker. Even in the initial phase of the ENS, it was not uncommon to see under-age youth faking their ages to enlist. The work under review proves conclusively that the ENS has been an unmitigated disaster on many counts. The only beneficiaries have been the smugglers and traffickers who extort enormous sums of enemy from the desperate refugees and the corrupt officers and commanders in the training camps who have used the institution to enrich themselves. Above all, it has helped to consolidate even further the autocratic power of the architect of the entire system, President Isaias Afewerki. The future of any country hangs on its youth. With its youth forced to flee their country in massive numbers, the future of Eritrea can only be surmised to be bleak.



Genre et fondamentalismes

Sous la direction de
Fatou Sow

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À partir de quels moments, pour quelles raisons et de quelles manières, la religion et la culture, lorsqu'elles se lient au politique, peuvent-elles être à la fois sources et lieux d'expression des fondamentalismes ? Ce sont les questions centrales qui traversent ce livre. Ce qui est considéré ici, c'est « la religion » lorsqu'elle est idéologie qui fonde la culture et devient outil d'accès au pouvoir moral, au pouvoir social et surtout au pouvoir politique. Les messages culturels et religieux et leurs interprétations sous-tendent souvent les décisions, les lois et les programmes prises par le politique. Ils ont des effets directs sur la société, en général, et sur les femmes et les rapports de genre, en particulier. Les contributions à cet ouvrage analysent les diverses formes du fondamentalisme dans quelques pays africains, leurs contextes d'émergence et la manière dont elles (re)façonnent les identités et les rapports hommes/femmes. Ces fondamentalismes constituent des sources de préoccupations persistantes dans les débats de société, aussi bien des organisations féministes et féminines que des mondes académiques et politiques. Les manipulations des cultures et des religions se font de plus en plus politiques et finissent par occasionner des discriminations sociales, voire des violences physiques, morales et symboliques assurément insoutenables.

