

In *The Power of Continuity*, Eva Poluha, a Swedish social anthropologist, argues that over the last 150 years the relationships between government officials and citizens in Ethiopia have been characterized by hierarchical patron-client relations, an exchange relationship where players have reciprocal needs and expectations, but unequal power and status (Johnson and Dandeker 1990). According to her, these hierarchical modes of government continue to exemplify Ethiopian politics in spite of change of government – from feudal to “socialist” and from “socialist” to “democratic” rule – and “despite [Ethiopian] rulers’, intellectuals’ and students’ fervent preoccupation with change” (p.172). In the present monograph, partly based on her observation while living in the country for more than 30 years, she says, she attempts to identify and understand the processes that are behind the continuity or persistence of such patron-client politics.

The approach taken is to study the learning process of a group of Addis Ababa school children and relate and compare the findings with the major characteristics of the Ethiopian state from 1855 to the present. In relation to the children, Poluha focuses on their “cultural schemas or patterns”, i.e. interpretations of the world that the children share with others, in particular their conceptualisations of hierarchy. And with regard to the state, she focuses on five areas: the political domain, the police and army, the economy, the educational system and the state’s overall ideology. Here, the argument forwarded by the author is that one can, methodologically, use the children’s cultural patterns as expressed, among other things, in their interactions, thoughts and practises to learn about aspects of a society (including politics) of which they are a part. Towards this end, Poluha uses both primary and secondary sources. Data from an ethnographic fieldwork which she conducted between 2000 and 2002 in one of the schools in Addis Ababa constitute the bulk of the chapters in the book. Individual and group interviews, diary and essay writing by the children and participant observation are used as major techniques of data collection. This primary data is analysed using discourse analysis. For the history of the Ethiopian state, the author relies on secondary sources.

The major argument of the book is that “cultural continuity is a more frequent result of human interactions than change and that it also characterises the way we organize socially” (p.13). Regardless of social scientists’ obsession with change and development, Poluha argues, in reality (i.e. in people’s lives all over the world) continuity is the norm and change is the exception. But, she notes, unfortunately development is generally taken as positive change, while continuity is “thought of in negative terms, referring to conditions in the past”. In line with this argument, Poluha emphasises the importance of identifying and understanding processes which promote cultural continuity in order to pinpoint prerequisites for change and make sense of continuity itself. Throughout the book, she conveys this theme by focusing on the characteristics of people-state relations in Ethiopia under its three regimes- Imperial, Derg and EPRDF.

The content of the book is wide ranging. Following the author’s informative and innovative preface, *The Power of Continuity* takes nine further chapters to make sense of the characteristics of people-state relationships in Ethiopia over the last

Understanding Politics through Children’s Views & Practices

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The Power of Continuity: Ethiopia through the eyes of its children

by Eva Poluha

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“Why hierarchical modes of government [in Ethiopia] have such durable forms or why the official treatment of peasants was basically similar even when the individuals occupying the positions in the bureaucracy and the professed ideology changed” (Poluha 2004, p.11).

fifteen decades through the day-to-day lives of school children. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical context and organization of the book. Poluha bases her work on the concepts of cultural cognition, cultural schemas, ideology and discourse (pp.17-21) and she draws heavily on the theoretical work of Strauss and Quinn (1997).

Chapter 2 describes the fieldwork setting. The reader is introduced to the area where the school children lived, the general conditions of the children and their parents, the school where the fieldwork takes place and generally the fieldwork process. The author is very reflexive about her fieldwork. She presents an honest description of the methods which she used and their limitations. She also clearly states the difficulties that she encountered during her fieldwork (p.36).

Chapters 3 to 7 detail the author’s own ethnographic research with Addis Ababa school children and their teachers. Chapter 8 presents a review of the history of the Ethiopian state from around 1850 to the present based on the interpretations and analyses of previous writers. The discussion is divided into three parts: the “Modern” Imperial period from 1855-1974, the period of the Derg, 1974-1991, and the period of the EPRDF, from 1991 until the time of writing. Chapter 9 relates and compares the major characteristics of the Ethiopian state under the three regimes with the experiences of the school children that Poluha describes in chapters 3 to 7. Finally, after briefly summarizing cases from the anthropological literature which deal with social change, the author presents her preliminary conclusions regarding preconditions for change. She argues that access to new, critical and/or attractive information that either contradict or, at least, pose an alternative to the old knowledge or the already established practice is a major precondition for change. But, she notes, the availability of such information does not imply that change will follow. Rather, she concludes, “it seems as if the mechanisms and processes that promote continuity in cultural schemas and organizations are so powerful that change becomes an exception rather than a rule” (p.202).

The main strength of the monograph is that it includes excerpts from interviews with and conversations between children in most of its chapters, particularly chapters 3 to 7. To my knowledge, the present book is the only major academic work in Ethiopia which gives voice to children. In Ethiopia, the general tendency is to ask adults (such as parents and teachers) about children’s lives. In fact, until very recently children have attracted little research attention. Certainly, this is very ironic for a country where the children make up almost half of the

population (49%). Following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and the emergence of the so called the “New Social Studies of Childhood” as a distinct sub-discipline in the early 1990s, particularly in Europe (James and Prout, 1997; Prout 2005), there has been a growing interest among social scientists around the world in recognizing children’s agency. This is both in terms of listening to children’s voices and conceptualizing children as active social agents.

In Ethiopia, after the government’s ratification of the Convention in 1991, a growing number of studies have focused on children. Yet, children’s own reports of their everyday lives and experiences, and children’s own perceptions are hardly present in these studies. So, in a country where children are hardly consulted about their lives, I think that Poluha’s effort to understand politics by listening to its children’s views and perspectives is really a big step forward. As an advocate of a person-centered qualitative approach, I also found it exciting to read a book that is qualitatively researched and is mainly based on the perspectives of the children themselves.

What I also like about this monograph is that it gives very detailed information about the day-to-day lives of school children. Particularly, I found the chapter on the education of the school children (i.e. chapter 5) quite informative. In addition to excerpts from interviews with the school children and their teachers, one finds in this chapter the author’s very interesting field notes based on her observation while attending class with the school children.

I think Poluha has also benefited from being an “outsider” to the culture which she studied. Whilst reading the book, quite a number of times, I was thinking that most of the details that are included in the book would not have come out had the author been an “insider”. I think “insiders” tend to take most of these details for granted; in most instances, they do not reflect upon them or analyse them. But at the same time, the very descriptive and detailed nature of this monograph might be taken as a shortcoming by “insiders”, who would not be keen to read issues which sound too obvious.

More importantly, the author has achieved what she set out to do, which is to understand what is behind the power of continuity of political behaviour in Ethiopia by examining the daily interactions, thoughts and practises of Addis Ababa school children. She does this particularly in Chapter 9 of the book. Poluha starts this task by summarizing *how* and *what* the school children learn with the aim of

understanding the children’s cultural schemas and the processes that promote cultural continuity or durability. And, then, she relates and compares the children’s cultural schemas with the work of organizations and bureaucracies. Organizations, she says, exhibit similar characteristics with cultural schemas, and looking at the processes that strengthen existing modes of work in organizations helps one to understand the processes that reproduced the durability of the dominant cultural schema (i.e. modes of government) in Ethiopia.

With regard to *how* and *what* the school children learn, Poluha notes that through observation, interaction and negotiation with other children and adults, the school children learn that most relations in their surroundings are characterized by hierarchical (super-subordinate) relations. The children also learn to take these things for granted. Because the children take these issues for granted and consider it “natural”, she argues, they do not reflect upon it and “the lack of reflection, in itself, tends to promote continuity”. In school, at home and in their religious institutions, the author notes, the children also learn to conceptualize knowledge as something limited and static. As a result, they are not taught “to use information to revise or question what they already knew or to ask new questions” (p.193).

Pertaining to the work of organizations, the author discusses factors which she thinks are important in promoting continuity of an existing system of rules in organizations. Then, she argues that these factors are also functional in the school where the fieldwork takes place and in the Ethiopian state in general. These factors are: *control*, *repetition* (which makes existing rules to be firmly established and to be taken for granted), *institutional isomorphism* (which is often expressed/inexpressed in the form of being subjected to coercive and normative pressure) and *organizational outflanking* (which is the absence of collective organisation to question the existing system of rules) (pp.194-7).

The book is well organized and the writing is generally lucid. The title of the book accurately reflects the content or overall objectives of the author. The children’s pictures, the author’s fieldwork diary and the conclusions at the end of each chapter also help to make the book pleasant and easy to read.

The main drawback for the reader is the many chapters one has to read before reaching the core chapter of the book (i.e. chapter 9), which makes the book difficult to navigate and at times tedious. This is especially true if one considers the details that are included in these chapters, particularly in chapter 3 to 7.

I would also have liked the author to have cited and evaluated more material to back up her review of the history of the Ethiopian state. There is a good deal of published and unpublished material on Ethiopian history written by both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian writers. However, the author bases her review on very few (almost entirely non-Ethiopian) authors. What is more, Poluha interprets her data on the children’s conceptions of rank and status based on a western concept of equality (pp.93-98) without critically examining its relevance for the Ethiopian context. It appears, therefore, as if the western ideal of equality is the standard upon which other systems such as the Ethiopian hierarchical system should be evaluated or interpreted. As an anthropologist, I believe Poluha should have tried to understand the

children's cultural patterns in its own context or at least should have been more reflexive about her bias in the interpretation of her data.

In her analysis of the school children's lives, Poluha also gives little attention to their neighbours, although neighbours (both immediate and distant) play a significant role in children's lives in Addis Ababa, particularly in poor neighbourhoods. In the absence of responsible parents or caretakers, for instance, neighbours play an important role in fulfilling poor children's needs. They support children by feeding them, clothing them, giving moral support and advice and helping them with their education. This oversight by the author is partly related to the fact that her fieldwork is limited to a school setting. Poluha says she attempted to have a picture of the children's lives outside the school by asking them to write a diary about their activities and interactions outside their school. She then argues that

the diaries written by the children show where the children spend most of their time, i.e. "the home, school and mosque or church" (p.44). But, I think, it is possible that the children's neighbourhood does not appear on their diaries because of the diary format, which was prepared by the author (p.39). So that the fact that the children's neighbourhood does not appear on their diaries should not necessarily be read as if neighbours do not play a major role in the children's lives or the children do not interact with their neighbours as frequently as they do with people in their homes, school, mosque or church.

These are minor points. Eva Poluha has written an accessible and informative book that clearly depicts the lives of urban school children in Ethiopia. I would recommend this book to all working on or interested in the lives of Ethiopian children.



References

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