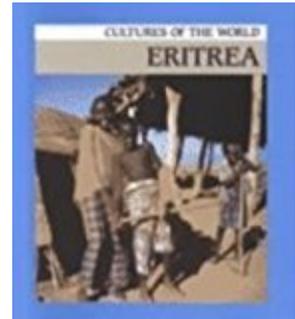


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Roseline NgCheong-Lum.** *Eritrea*. Cultures of the World Series, Ages 9-12. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2001. 128 pp. \$35.64 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7614-1192-5.



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Bursting with stunning color photographs and complemented by short box-sections containing folk-tales, descriptions of popular games and the ubiquitous coffee ceremony, this new title on Eritrea from Marshall Cavendish's Cultures of the World Series would appear a welcome addition to any classroom or young person's library. However, the author's apt description of Eritrea as a land of "extreme contrasts" applies equally well to her book. Quite strong in some areas, the book suffers terribly in others. While young readers would certainly benefit from reading about Africa's newest country, for which a great paucity of material exists, beggars can sometimes be choosers. Educators should choose this title only if they are well-equipped to critique colonialist stereotypes of peoples and can point out the more glaring contradictions and factual errors.

Overall, the title captures Eritrea as a nation-state quite well. The legacy of the 30-year independence war provides a context for everything from the condition of flora and fauna to gender relations and the preservation of Asmara's varied architecture as compared to the destruction of Keren and Massawa, as well it should. Moreover, the ethos of nationalism permeates the work: young readers will certainly get an accurate sense of what makes Eritreans Eritrean, as far as local portrayals to "the outside world" are concerned. At the same

time, it seems the author relied exclusively on rather simplistic explanations provided by "official" government-sponsored narratives. While this may not present a problem for the uninitiated, it is jarring and incomplete to anyone who knows Eritrea in three dimensions.

Much of the book is quite well done, particularly the sections on Geography, History, Government, Economy, the Arts, Festivals, and Food. The author treats colonialism accurately and sensitively. Without focusing unduly on the legacy of Europeans, she sketches the reasons why Eritrea found it necessary to wage an armed struggle. In explaining the Federation period in which an autonomous Eritrea was placed under Ethiopian control, she draws a helpful parallel between this arrangement and that of US states' relationship to the federal government (p.26). She also does a rather fine job explaining the complicated emergence and ascent of both the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). She fails to mention the civil war between the two fronts, however; a serious omission.

In some places she even offers critical insights, which I found pleasantly surprising, stating for example that "Reliance on the Ministry of Justice for logistical and financial support has hampered the judiciary's independence" (p.34) and "Defense expenditures took up nearly 30% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1997. This is

a substantial amount for one of the world's poorest countries" (p.36). She also mentions the lack of freedom of the press and accurately reflects the impression that the government of Eritrea and President Isaias Afwerki in particular appear as omnipresent paternalistic figures in Eritrean society. In one section she portrays Isaias and the PFDJ party as the benefactor of women's empowerment (p.55) and in another he is the impetus behind expanding creative expression in the arts: "Eritrean artists did not start exploring their cultural heritage and local landscapes in their creations until Isaias Afwerki exhorted them to diversify their subject matter" (p.86). While these statements may not be completely true, they reflect the kind of truth that is currently produced in Eritrean society and nationalist discourse.

Finally, the author takes care to include both real people and Eritreans who live in Diaspora in her discussion. On the first point, she mentions by name local figures who are well known in the arts and in areas like women's mobilization. The effect is to animate the abstract notion of "Eritreans" by giving them names, talents, and occupations. Secondly, she treats the issue of refugee flows and the importance of the Eritrean Diaspora very well, offering concise explanations for the displacement. The story of Eritrea includes the expulsion of nearly 1 million of its people, roughly one-quarter to one-third of the total population. To not mention them would be a terrible omission.

For all of these reasons, the sections which lack sensitivity and good scholarship are all the more offensive. In particular the sections entitled "Eritreans" and "Lifestyle" are horrible. At times I felt as though I could not even recognize the people the author was describing: if these were Eritreans, I didn't know them. To her credit she makes a valiant effort to include significant information about all nine ethnic groups, but it is not clear why she emphasizes some and terms others "minorities." Her descriptions appear like stereotypical colonial throwbacks and are sometimes so offensive it makes one wonder how such things are even published today. In addition to the usage of myriad problematic terms like "tribes," "huts," "archaic" and "ancient," and vacuous descriptions of cultural groups as "fierce," "proud" or "hardworking," worse characterizations abound. Some of the more obvious offenders include "With small, strong and wiry frames, long noses, and oval faces, today's Beja people..." (p.53), "The Nara and Kunama live in the western lowlands. Their strong physiques, which they have inherited from their Negroid ancestors, set them apart from the rest of the population" (p.54), and my personal favorite, "The

majority of Eritreans lead lifestyles that have changed little since Biblical times" (p.59). A glance at the bibliography reveals that the author relied chiefly on a 1935 text written by an Italian colonist for the information about ethnic groups. However, given the vast amount of material collected by the EPLF on Eritrean ethnic groups, and the fact that the author has clearly visited Eritrea, one wonders how she could resort to such insulting and damaging portrayals.

Other small inaccuracies abound, and some patently absurd generalizations are made. Contrary to what the author states, the EPLF did not form simply to allow Christians to join the liberation struggle, nor did ELF abandon the struggle to let EPLF fight alone (p.28). In one section on family and gender, the author states that "Eritrean men do not relish having daughters" (p. 61) and assures us that "The mother showers her children with love and care, while the father is the disciplinarian and spends little time with his children" (p.61). While there is no doubt that Eritrea is a patriarchal society, anyone who has spent time with living, breathing Eritreans knows such generalizations are meaningless. The author wrongly refers to the Tigrinya ethnic group as the Tigray; tells us that all Eritrean women have a serious addiction to jewelry; says that no women can be found wearing pants; and implies that all Eritrean Catholics devote much time to church activities.

In other sections we find obvious contradictions as well as inaccuracies. We are told that Eritrean Muslims do not know much about the Koran and follow only a "folk version" of Islam that allows them to "retain their pagan beliefs and observances," including drinking alcohol (p.70). A few pages later we are then informed that Eritrean Muslims need to know Arabic to read the Koran (p. 79), and later still that Muslims eschew alcohol completely (p.118). According to her scholarship, the Eritrean Orthodox Church is still under Ethiopia (p.72), when in fact it became independent in 1992. Early on in the book we are told that the Axumites were the first "outsiders" to rule Eritrea (p.21), and then later the author says that the Tigray [sic] people are the modern descendants of the rulers of Axum (p. 50). The former statement may be reflective of narrow Eritrean nationalism, but it is nonetheless false.

Other problems too numerous to mention abound, leaving the reader familiar with Eritrea feeling as though things are just "off" at best and completely wrong at worst. Honey wine non-alcoholic? Orthodox Christianity not really "indigenous"? (Do we need to reach fur-

ther back than the 4th century CE to locate authenticity? ) And while Tigrinya may indeed be a complex, understudied language it is probably not a good approach to tell children it is “not just difficult to speak but difficult to learn as well” (p.78). Indeed, many Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, aid workers, and researchers have obtained a strong command of Tigrinya.

With these problems in mind, the book still has many strong points, and if taken with caution could be a very informative teaching tool. Skillful, informed educators could use the book’s weaknesses to strengthen their own lessons about Africa. And to be fair, the uneven quality of the scholarship reflects the state of Eritrean studies generally. Far more information is available on the history

and politics of Eritrea than its ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Nonetheless, the book also contains implicit notions about progress and suggests that Eritrea is an exotic land of non-Western Others rather than a land of real people and great contrasts, at once traditional, rural, and local, as well as postmodern, global, and international. Choose with care.

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