

Review

Re-Africanizing the educational system of Ethiopia

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This paper tries to show the evolutionary development of education in Ethiopia along with its historic dysfunctions on the prospect of social transformation. The historical backdrop that centered on traditional educational system, which was predominantly ecclesiastical, is also briefly outlined for the sake of coherent understanding of the link and the miss-link in the educational system of the country. Ethiopia had started indigenized education in the Pre-Christian Eraatin Aksum as we witnessed it from local tradition. However, systematized ecclesiastical traditional education enshrined following the adoption of Christianity and the rise of Islam. These Educational institutions were not bereft of scientific thinking in their essence as in the usually discourse. But due to this misconception, in late 19thcentury they had given way for the newly inaugurated western school system initiated by missionaries who plan to use it for religious proselytizing. Thus, Ethiopia had imported western education by sidelining its traditional education system instead of creating at least a synthesis. Therefore, the country failed to create a uniquely Ethiopian system of education. Hence, the educational system was de-Ethiopianized or de-Africanized and thereby produced intellectual dependency and mind colonization that triggers many social evils as it has been witnessed since 1960s. Thus, this paper attempts to show how the conviction of being tabula rasa, otherwise called a zero beginning, for the commencement of modern education in Ethiopia served for colonization of the non-colonized state and polarized mindset among its citizens.

Key words: Africanization, colonization, education, Ethiopia, westernization

INTRODUCTION

The article tries to show how the imposition of modern education affects the locally grown traditional educational system and thereby reproduces social evils in lieu of promoting social transformation. For such end we tried to justify how modern curriculum alienated Ethiopian elite from their traditional education system and the Ethiopian society at large. Therefore both imported experts and

alienated Ethiopian elites did not have the socio-economic priorities of the Ethiopian society in their educational directions. Thus, such educational system was calculated means that served for the colonization of the non-colonized state and citizens. This paper has hardly any primary data rather it is based on review of literatures using historical causation model. Therefore,

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the paper is more of synthesis and analysis of research works undertaken so far. However, in many instance, the writers' personal experiences in many encounters are included. Therefore, the paper would serve for further research and academic debate because the educational and economic problems of today could have their root on the distance past.

It is necessary to have a vivid understanding of what education is meant before we begin narrating the historical evolution of education in Ethiopia. According to Paulos (2005:79), education is a conveyer belt of human values, skills, ideas, and facts, an integral aspect of a society's reproduction of itself. He further elucidates that the conflicts and tensions that germinate in a given society, the solutions, both functional and dysfunctional, that the political system generates to resolve them find their way into the educational system and condition its structure and content (Ibid). Education is a bridge from misery to hope, a platform for democratization and vehicle for the promotion of culture and national identity. Education opens doors that no other process can do.

KofiAnan, in one of his great speeches, describes that 'for everyone, everywhere education is a basic human right and a road to human progress and the means through which every human being can realize his or her potential. Only a person who is aware that he or she has rights can better strive for rights, whether it is the right to obtain adequate food, shelter, medical care or to participate actively in socio-economic and political life.' It gives each person a way to understand the world and develop self-identity.

Education is an important tool in addressing poverty and the inequalities present within and between countries. Education is the key to national development and a path for the survival of civilizations. Thus, it is important that any educational process must take into account the cultural tradition of the target population. But this element was lacking in many African countries including Ethiopia at the onset.

Hence, this paper tries to show how the tabula rasa approach in the adoption of modern education in Ethiopia through complete neglect of the home grown educational system served as triggered and precipitator of many socio- economic ills.

African traditional education

In Ethiopia, the existence of inscriptions and carving son stones¹ indicates that indigenized literacy preceded the adoption of Christianity. However, the Christianization of Ethiopia led to the commencement of hierarchical

system of religious instruction organized and presented under the aegis of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Damtew and Altbach, 2003:317). Thus, church schools in the highland Christian community and as well Mosques in the peripheral areas and in few central communities such as Wollo were the responsible institutions providing education until they were eventually overwhelmed by western education in the early 1900s (ibid).

Monasteries and convents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were the epicenters of such educational system whose utmost objective was producing religious functionaries (Pankhurst,1968:666) and as well as civil servants as secondary option. The emphasis on serving the church did not entail the confinement of the traditional system to the formation of priests rather it extended to producing civil servants such as judges, governors, scribes, treasurers and administrators (Wagaw, 1979). Thus, in addition to religious instruction, the curriculum was encompassing a secular component that focuses on the history, social customs, foreign and local languages, values and political organization of the society.²

Most studies branded the curriculum, the content and the philosophical orientation of the traditional system of education as Ethio-centric, not ethno-centric. In fact, the focus on the Christian doctrine and values, the use of indigenous languages and the extensive use of books with native contents bear witness to the fact that the subject of study was profoundly Ethiopianized and thereof its legacies and history. However, it is not exclusively national for it deals with the history and culture of multitude of peoples of the world and the planetary system.

The ecclesiastical scholarship had three distinct and successive stages which seem similar with elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels of modern secular schools. It begins with the learning of Ethiopic or Ge'ez syllable, Ethiopian writing system, by heart in accordance to their vertical and horizontal sequence along with simple arithmetic. This elementary education dispensed to students who finally became mainly ordinary deacons. Students who seek to pursue higher levels set out to known churches and monasteries in Ethiopia. Hence, secondary studies begin with "ZemaBet" (School of Music-hymn) in which students study the musical composition and the liturgy of the Ethiopian church (Milkias, 1976:81). Higher education commence at "Qiné Bet," which means "School of Poetry" (Ibid.). It focused on the composition of poetry added with the teaching of philosophy from Metsahafe-Falasma Tabiban (Book of Wise Philosophers) with passages from Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes and Cicero (Ibid).

The third level, called "MetsahafBet (School soft texts,

¹Ezana's inscription supposes pre Christian literacy. According to the oral tradition and local sources there was a pre Christian school called Betketinrun by Embrem, the high priest of Axum and the tutor of St. Frumentius

²Balsvik argues about the absence of the aforementioned secular subjects (Balsvik 2005):3

or books),” provided an in-depth study of the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments as well as of books related to monastic life (Ibid.). It also includes the study of major three books of Ethiopian history and code of laws, namely, “Tarike-Negest (monarchic history), Kibre-Negast (Glory of the Kings), Fetha-Negest (laws of the Kings)” (Ibid.1976:82). World history has been taught at the third level focusing on the societies of the ancient world.

The impacts and critiques of traditional schools

The description of the daily routines will be more of sociological than historical. Thus, it is mandatory to stick to historical narratives. The education has been with a transcendental power of political rivalries. So, it was an agent of unity and national cohesion via the national saga of the ‘Solomonic descent.’ This shows how educational power was abused by political elites of the time for social control and legalizing political positions. However, some scholars view the integrative nationalistic function of traditional education in terms of its depoliticization, a freedom from political influence and vicissitudes because traditional schools were “run by the church without the intervention of the state” in either designing the curriculum or covering the expenses. However, this is a blind folded assumption for the church and the state were identical twins reinforcing each other than separate entities. However, this does not annul the integrative role.

The critics of the traditional system have point out that the techniques and the contents of the education system were not particularly appropriate to develop either the understanding or to cultivate the intellectual faculties of creativity, criticism, and imagination due to the heavy dependence on “the role of rote memory (Wodajo, 1959). However, given the high level of poetry instruction which seeks great use of the imagination and creative mind of the pupil, it is unworthy to argue about the absence of reflective thinking in these native schools. How could a student in the remote rural parts of the country come to know about astronomy, astrology, medicine and even some extra sensory wisdoms if the system of education is mere imitation? Moreover, the school system focusing on Geez is not an arbitrary preference. Rather it is a well-founded because the language is believed to be the repository of all rounded achievements of Ethiopians for centuries. Thus, it is to enable the students to decipher such achievements by immersing themselves in the language of their antecedents that Ge’ez preferred to be medium of instruction.

Though access to church education was limited, the number of schools was numerous. According to the report of Hanlon quoted by Pankrust (1968:666) before 1936 in the highland parts of the country churches

were available in every village and every church was owing its own school. Thus, in spite of its partiality and exclusiveness, the level of literacy was sufficient of the need of the society of the period and compared favorably with many countries of the time (Ibid:668). According to Pankrust, the proportion of citizens able to read and write was about the same as Western Europe in early 19th century (ibid). Eventually the credit attached to literacy diminished and since late 19th century it was regarded as derogatory profession at least among the soldiers. The folk was making sarcastic as the ‘worst of the beasts is the scorpions, the worst of men is the (teacher) and intelligence is better than study (Pankhurst, 1968:673). Practically it has been observed that let alone the folk, half of the first Ministers of Menilik II received neither traditional education nor Western education (Ibid).

The De-Africanization of the native educational system³

Modern education in the Sub-Saharan Africa has a strong colonial component for it aimed to change an African to European image. Thus, deeper scrutiny of the Ethiopian experience depicts the same imprint of the continental experience, i.e. colonial schooling in non-colonized state. The attempt of instituting modern education in Ethiopia traced back to the 19th century Bahru, 2001). Emperor Tewodros II who was attracted by European technological advancement and military power had opened an armament manufacturing school at Gafat to train young Ethiopians in arsenal production (ibid). He was the first king with the concept of modernizing the country using the light of Europe long before Menilik II. Thus, he reached at a conclusion of catching up with the economic and social advancement of Western Europe by sidelining traditional schools and promoting western education. Thus, for the promotion of science, technology, and enlightened values, the distinctive features of modernity were valued than the indigenous knowledge. It is not because that there was not better means than the adoption of the western system of education to effect a rapid modernization. It was rather a failure of creating a synthesis between the new and the old, the local and the foreign system.

This policy of westernizing Ethiopian society undermines the role of the indigenous education to the society. This is the basic reason that inhibits the production of citizens who are capable of interpreting, enriching, adapting and synthesizing the heritages of the country to the new needs, new problems and situations. Thus, the country failed to come up with Africanized

³BahrucalleditModern(Bahru, 2002:104)and Richard Pankhurstlabeledit foreign(p.671)

modernity for it traversed in the path of the West without renewing its own traditional education. The process of adoption was an abrupt shift from the traditional system to the Western school through the dissolution of the traditional institutions and the infusion of the spirit of modernity. Thus, modern education in Ethiopia was instituted against powerful indigenous forces (Paulos, 1990:243). Due to this reason, the traditional system directly counteracted the effort of modernization by producing a mind that repudiates everything sanctioned by tradition.

The path traversed by Ethiopia was not to modernize the traditional system rather it was to erase past practices so as to implement a new system, that is policy of throwing away the old in favor of a new alien system (Damtew and Altbach:321). Wion (2006) also describes the state of students' mind and attitude towards their society and culture as follows:

. . . most Ethiopian students began to consider the home-grown knowledge system and the local culture as 'backward' or 'non-civilized and have been using these two words to designate their own society.

Moreover, as in many parts of Africa, the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia coincided with the arrival of missionaries who saw the provision of modern education as a prerequisite for winning converts (Bahru, 2002:23). Furthermore, the increased foreign contact since the reign of Tewodros II had resulted in oversea study of young Ethiopians under the auspice of missionaries (Pankhurst, 1968:671). Several youngsters were taken abroad basically by Protestant and Catholic missionaries (Ibid: 671). Thus, missionaries who were well aware of the role of modern education for proselytization were active in establishing mission schools⁴ and as well sending promising Ethiopian students to the metropolitan centers abroad (Bahru, 2001:103).

At home mission education was delivered by both local converts and foreign instructors (Pankhurst, 1968:672). However, due to the established tradition by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church there was strong resistance to these schools for they were believed to be centers of heresy.

Ethiopian's culture seems to have internalized this refusal to stand out and question. In spite of this fact, Ethiopia failed to create a uniquely Ethiopian system of education. This is due to eventual detachment of academia from the reserves of the past for they were uprooted by western education.

The other historical phenomena that caused the de-Ethiopianization of the educational system was the Italian invasion. Invading Italians changed the Ethiopian educational system in 1936 by exterminating thousands of

educated Ethiopians had been awaited for institutional transformation by relinking the local educational experience of the past with the recently introduced western education. As most of the pre-war educated Ethiopians combined traditional training with modern education, they could have secured a smooth transformation in the education system.

Once again Ethiopian education system fell in the trap of self-disillusionment because education in the post-war period has been exclusively dependent on expatriate advisors, administrators, and teachers. The 1936 Italian curriculum introduced a dual system of education and two types of schooling namely "Italian type of schools" and schools for" colonial subjects (Pankhurst, 1972:370). Thus, 1930s Italian occupation has left two distractive legacies, that is, the extermination of the cumulated local potential for indigenized transition and as well infused the spirit of colonial education.

Institutionalization of Western education

The institutionalization of the public education system was the result of a paternalistic voluntarism in its nature (Martin, 2000). Menelik's reign in the post Adwa period showed a significant concern for the expansion of western education. The sooner he started the project he faced the opposition of the church and most of the nobility. However, he overcame it through a compromise of importing teachers from Egypt. Accordingly, in 1906 10 Copts arrived in Ethiopia and sooner deployed at Addis Ababa, Harar, Ankober and Dessie under the direction of *Hanna Salibey* (Pankhurst, 1968:676). The students were learning predominantly languages such as French, Italy, English, Amharic, Math and Sport. French was the medium of instruction (Ibid: 676). Thought the government had imported staffs from Egypt to help build up formal education, these expatriates did not embody the indigenous Ethiopian cultural contexts, values and aspirations. As a result, the educational curriculum and policies they implemented was detached from the contextual reality of majority population of the country.

Emperor Haile Sellassie is also recognized as the dedicated promoter of western education in Ethiopia (Ibid, 677). In 25 April, 1925, he established schools in Addis Ababa and Empress Menen Girls' School opened in 1931 to educate Ethiopian girls. The school sought to give girls a technical education, but it also tried to preserve traditional female occupations. Thus, the curriculum was not free from gender bias and did not call for gender equity. These schools were heavily dependent on foreign staffs and curriculum. The schools established by these two imperial leaders produced some of the greatest but alienated Ethiopian intellectuals of the 20th century many of whom were cabinets in Haile Selassie's government.

⁴Isenberg and Krapfin Shewa, Flad at Meqedela had established Mission Schools

Similar conditions were also prevalent in higher education. In Ethiopia higher education has gone through three major changes since the early 1950s. The first is the phase of an elitist education system under the traditional monarchy. The second phase was when the country fell under the military rule where ideological control penetrated into the educational system. The third phase is the experience under FDRE. During the first phase of expansion half a dozen specialized technical colleges were established. The nation's higher education institutions strove with considerable early success to maintain international standards, but the cost was high with wastage rates approaching 40 percent in the late 1960s (Saint, 2004:85).

This has produced an educational policy that lacked direction and national objectives (ibid). This is mainly because neither the imported experts nor the alienated domestic elites had embodied the indigenous socio-economic situations and identified the priorities of the society. According to many scholars, the main reason for the lack of a national direction is attributed not only to the decisive role that foreign advisors, administrators, and teachers played in the establishment of Ethiopia's education system but also the Ethiopian alienated elites were not willing to help and lift their society, but to rule over them and manipulate their needs and fears. The curriculum at all levels reflected courses which were offered in Western countries. Moreover, educational opportunity was highly centralized (Balsvik, 1979:183).

Foreign instructors tended to think that what had proved successful in their countries would also benefit Ethiopian. Therefore, the development of higher education faced the shortcoming of Ethiopianization of the curriculum. Rather the curriculum was imported from UK, USA and various other European countries which were essentially constructed to serve a different society than Ethiopia. Most scholars criticized modern education in Ethiopia because the Western-orientation of the curriculum has left Ethiopian students wit in Western mental orbit with total ignorance of their own history and culture. In this regard Pankhurst (1990) wrote:

. . . it was common to observe that Ethiopian students have been taught more about Shakespeare in particular and Western philosophy in general. The students of such Western-oriented schooling knew more about the rivers and people of Britain and the United States than those of Ethiopia and its neighbors.

In the post-revolutionary period, the situation was hardly changed with the exception of the change of the contents from West to East, Stalinism. This was preceded by massive deployment university students, administrative and academic staffs towards the country side (Balsvik, 2005: 260). Government 'intervention in university affairs including security, surveillance, repression of dissent,

mandated courses on Marxism, prohibition of student organizations, appointment of senior university officers and control of academic promotions expanded (World Bank Sector Study, 2003:1).

The students were sandwiched between the military regimes who defy to relinquish power to the people and the resistance of the impoverished peasants.

The 'westernized mind, the plough culture of the peasants and the guns of the regime' failed to communicate each other about the causes of the underdevelopment in the country. If they were doing so, it was the beginning of the end of ignorance and the blood that stained the land could have produced verdant scenery. Thus, at the end of the day the students applauded and versed war songs and ended with tragedy. The awakened generation has lost the means of establishing a republic other than sings for war. I could not find the answer why the students failed to fetch the waters of democracy from the broken feudal dam under the popular revolution in lieu of handing it over to the soldiers who had again reassembled it and canalled the ferment of the revolution into 'soldiers' socialism.' The only vivid thing is that the soldiers commit treason against the people, and the students lost in the jungles of the rural Ethiopia and the second phase of the revolution continued. With the intensification of the civil war coupled with the recurrent drought and famine education was neglected. Tekest called the educational process seen during this time a crisis (Tekest, 1990).

Conclusion

Ethiopia aspiring to catch up with the economic and social development of the West, it has pursued an approach of sidelining traditional schools with a replacement of western educational system.

This has created a riff and failure to have creative incorporation.

Moreover, the introduction of the western educational system was postdated even the experiences of colonized states of the continent. Its advent has to do with the coming of missionaries. Generally, dispassionate lessons should be drawn from the past flaws for the development of the Ethiopian system of education and higher institutions must foster the creative and dynamic learning so that learners use their full potential in educational and research on technical subjects and core social values. Moreover, social awareness about the role of education for development needs to be improved gradually.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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