

Which way Ethiopia? Problems of an African educational system. /
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Which way Ethiopia?

Problems of an African Educational System

The history of education in Ethiopia is the history of a struggle between the country's traditional values and those of the modern world. Ethiopia's rôle in Africa as the ancient empire that retained its integrity and resisted imperialism when the rest of the continent was being carved up is no longer accepted as an adequate image by many educated Ethiopians. The contempt for the rest of Africa expressed in the *Kebrä Negast's* formula "The will of God decreed sovereignty for the seed of Shem and slavery for the seed of Ham" is no longer defensible in a country that is host to the Organisation of African Unity and the UN's Economic Commission for Africa. Gibbon's words — "Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten" — are no longer applicable in the century of the Global Village, with Addis Ababa only some twelve hours from the major European capitals.

The power of tradition in Ethiopia is overwhelming. The Church, the nobility, and the Emperor either own or control major interests in land, education, industry, communications, and every other area of endeavour. The initial impulse towards modernisation in the 'twenties came from the Emperor, then still known as Ras Tafari, partly because of what has been termed his "radical paternalism", and partly because he was the only possible source of any kind of major political initiative of that kind. Yet in the 1960s and 1970s the close personal control of the Emperor, necessary in the feudal times

during which he grew up, is seen by many of his subjects not merely as obsolete but as positively reactionary. Without commenting on the justice of this attitude, the fact of its existence must be recognised, and its influence on the pattern of education acknowledged.

Ethiopia is a rich country populated by poor people. Over seventy per cent of the population lives more than a day's journey from an all-weather road. Predominantly agricultural, Ethiopia is a text-book example of a one-crop country at the mercy of the rapacious consumer nations who control the market. The per capita income averages around £23.50 a year, one of the lowest figures in Africa. Yet the traveller on the road, say, from Addis Ababa to Harrar will be impressed by the obvious fertility of the land as well as by the primitive methods used to farm it. There are only 2,013 schools in Ethiopia, just over half of which are Government run, the rest being Mission schools, private schools, or Orthodox Church schools — about one school per 12,000 people. Only about 14% of the school-age population in fact attends, and the vast majority of these are in the urban centres.

It is only against this background of potential wealth and entrenched tradition that the successes and failures of the educational system can be understood. The traditional Church system of education was, and is, based on an acceptance of authority, tradition and discipline that is spartan in the extreme. Students were taught self-reliance and denial as a matter of course — they would begin by learning by rote the *fidel* — the syllabary of over 250 letters in which both Amharic and Ge'ez are written. They might end up as 35-year-olds, at the highest level in the system, still learning by essentially the same methods. Knowledge was handed down and accepted; it was not for the student to offer his ideas or criticisms. In addition, as a Nigerian writer has stated of his own country, the "idea of the book is also influenced fundamentally by the religious circumstances of its introduction to the people. The Koran and the Bible were the first books in mass circulation . . . and they were presented in such a way that their contents were not to be disputed. Books, therefore, came to be regarded as infallible . . .". This attitude is fundamental in Ethiopia even today. Even the most revolutionary students tend to regard the works of Lenin and Mao as bodies of dogma, not to be criticised or adapted, but merely applied without question. As recently as the mid-fifties the Jesuits who ran the then University College of Addis Ababa could give low grades to those pupils who questioned their theological or philosophical assumptions. It is true that this situation became a *cause célèbre* and was corrected, but the

underlying attitudes were harder to eradicate, and have only changed slowly.

“You are to teach three things. Discipline, discipline and discipline,” said the Emperor to the President of the University College around 1960, and the remark is squarely in the Ethiopian educational tradition. Historically, the first alternatives to the Orthodox church schools were the missionary schools, which in many respects were little better — “. . . their curriculum is suitable only for training youths to be interpreters . . . dogmatic religion rather than useful education seems to be the aim of at least some of them . . .”.

As early as 1908 the Emperor Menelik II founded a school in Addis Ababa, and in 1922 the then Regent Tafari Makonnen founded and paid for the Tafari Makonnen School, still one of the major high schools in the capital. The state education system was systematically destroyed by the Italian Fascists during the occupation of 1935-1941, but by 1952 over 540 schools had been established or rebuilt. Lack of capital, of roads, and of trained teachers has meant, however, that recent growth has been slow, slower in fact at the lower levels than in higher education.

Some recent developments, however, may herald substantial changes. The potentially most significant of these has been the publication in October 1972 of the *Education Sector Review*, sponsored by the Imperial Ethiopian Government under pressure from the World Bank. The *Review* is not yet generally available, although an interesting summary of its main proposals appeared in the October 1972 issue of *Africa* magazine.

The three basic theoretical assumptions of the *Review*, which involved almost all of the big names in education in Ethiopia, are equity, quality, and development. By equity is meant basic education for everybody in the country in as short a time as possible; by development is meant a structural growth at all levels to ensure that future manpower needs can be met; by quality is meant a refusal to lower standards in order to achieve these aims.

The *Review* commits Ethiopia strongly to the objective of universal education, at least at the elementary school level. The implications of this commitment for the high school system and for the one national and one private university are far-reaching. Haile Sellassie I University originally planned to double its size, in terms of student enrolment, every ten years. In fact its rate of growth has been nearly twice as fast — it has doubled student enrolment approximately every five years. The University's plan, *A Blueprint for*

Development, published in 1970, envisaged 20,000 students in three or four regional campuses by 1990. Right now, in 1972, the University will be admitting 5,000 students for the second semester. The mathematics are obvious.

Unemployment among high-school graduates who have completed 12th grade is a national problem. However, of the university's graduating class of 1972 at the time of writing only two or three have not found employment. The incentive to enrol in the University, which provides free tuition and cheap accommodation, is thus very powerful. It is clear that adoption of the *Education Sector Review's* recommendations to increase the base in elementary education from 14% to 66% to 92.4% will not only create contradictions in the policies presently being followed in the area of higher education, but will strain the social and economic infrastructure of Ethiopia severely.

The dialectic of tradition and modernism is thus at work in Ethiopian society in general as well as in the sphere of education. The University is committed to a policy of the maintenance of standards through (relatively) slow growth. It now appears that the Government is committed to mass education at lower levels as fast as possible. Unless urban industrial development can keep up the pace the consequences could be grim.

There is no doubt that the Emperor still, at 80 years old the dominating political figure in Ethiopia, is personally dedicated to education as a weapon in the struggle for development. His speeches over the last fifty years have consistently harped on this theme. However, it remains to be seen whether his concept of education will emerge as the dominant one in Ethiopia, or whether the extremes of reactionary and progressive thought will fight it out to the finish. Whatever happens it certainly seems to be true that, in the words of *Africa*, "... Ethiopian education seems ripe for a revolution."

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