An Overview of Ethiopian Educational Engagement, History and Philosophy

By: Atlabachew Getaye   **getaye.atlabachew@yahoo.com**

Ethiopia has gone through the implementation of different educational philosophies, which range from idealism to modernism by answering the above questions differently at different times. The area of engagement has also been diverse. At the beginning, learners were prepared for church and mosque services. Learners used to focus on acquiring readymade ideas and beliefs of the church and mosque curricula. In other words, they were not active learners. Then, there were shifts of ideologies from idealism to existentialism, modernism and progressivism, and side by side the nature of students' engagement also changes in line with the enacted educational philosophies.

Ethiopian education types of engagement, history and philosophy is summarized below. Education in Ethiopia started in the six century when the Sebean alphabet was introduced along with Christianity. The education system of the church served the nation for centuries, preparing graduates for religious and governmental leaders (The Education Sector Review, 1972). The philosophy of the church education in Ethiopia appeared to be idealism. Its metaphor was supernaturalism. The epistemology of the education system was faith. According to Teshome (1990) the role of education was to prepare youngsters for church service. The church system of education in Ethiopia has its own coherent indigenous philosophy. In its teaching, man is assumed to be made of two entities: a body and a soul. The body has four elements: water, fire, earth and air which make man part of the material world having its own desires being in conflict with the soul. The soul is spiritual and it is eternal and higher. According to the church, the main goal of life (education) is to attain the wish of the soul and to that end trainings were given to overcome the cravings of the body in the form of praying, fasting and hardship. The church believes that man is the replica of the omnipotent God, and he is endowed with innate knowledge. The mind is perceived as the jug of this wisdom, and the act of learning should activate the hidden treasures and use them for good intentions. The power of God is essential to release knowledge from within, and He is at the center of everything. The role of the teacher is to interpret knowledge, and his authority could not be questioned. (ibid)

The school system of the church can be classified into four: the *Nebab Bet, Qeddase Bet, Zema Bet* and the *Mestsahift Bet* (Haile Gebriel, 1970; Teshome, 1990). The primary level, the *Nebab*

Bet, literally means the "House of Reading", is open to all children where students practice alphabet (Fidel) instruction, read the Psalms of David and get exposed to different religious prayer books. According to Haile Gebriel (1970, P.83) "The prime function of the *Nebab Bet* is to teach children to read religious books, practically all of which are in Ge'ez [syllabus], and are drilled in the art of good reading".

Then comes *Qeddase Bet* – the training of the altar priest. Priests get training at this stage of the education system. Their training qualify them "to administer the mass and sacraments, to serve as *Yenefis Abat* (father-the confessors for the people), to baptize children, and to perform burial rites and ceremonies" (Teshome, 1990, pp.38&39). The mentor usually teaches only the hymns essential for the liturgy of the Church.

Zema Bet (School of Hymns) which can be considered as the first stage of higher education entails four disciplines: *Degwa Bet, Zemare and Mewasi'it, Qeddase and Sat'at* and *Aquaquam.* *Zema Bet* is known as the House of Music where students learn how to sing in the first three schools. In *Aquaquam,* learners practice how to sing in a choir (Ibid).

The second stage of higher education is *Qine Bet.* Students get training on how to appreciate and compose religious songs. It is at this stage that students appreciate the meaning of Ge'ez literature in its deep sense. Mentors expose their students to various types of poetry making models. There are many models of Wax and Gold, of which nine of them are famous, ranging from two rhyming verses to eight verses. Learners are expected to compose their own *qine.* It is only then that they will be considered as mature scholars (Teshome,1990).

The pinnacle of learning in the church education system is the *Mestsahift Bet* which contains several branches of study such as the *Bluey* (the Forty six books of the Old Testament), *the Haddis* (the thirty five books of the New Testament), *the Liqawint* (the writings of the church fathers)*,* the Bahre Hasab (the calendar calculation) and the *Fetha Negest* (canon Laws). Here, students learn the history, tradition, law and theology by interpreting the various individual writings, applying different schools of thought. For Teshome "the *Mestsahift Bet* was in essence a university where the whole approach of learning, including the qualifications of the professors, methods of teaching and learning, and the popular attitude toward the leadership of the

community of scholars, reflected maturity of mind and the ideals of democracy in action" (1990,p.39).

With regards to the teaching learning method, the subsequent style is a typical example of a *Mestsahift Bet* lesson:

> *Students come to the teacher in a group of three or four, all studying the same text. One of the groups reads a sentence into Amharic and then comments on it. The teacher first translates the sentence into Amharic and then comments on it. The students listen attentively and try to remember the comment word for word. When this group leaves the teacher, another group or individual comes to read to the teacher and hears his commentary. After leaving the teacher each group moves apart and tries to comment on the text just as the teacher did, as much as possible word for word. If one misses a word or an idea, another member of the group recalls it and supplements. After some time the group goes again to the teacher and reads the same text and again comments on it. This way the group can compare its progress to know how far it has grasped the interpretation of the previous time.* (Haile Gebriel, 1970. P,95)

The pedagogy of the church as can be understood from the above quotation was highly dependent on repetition, memorization and strict adherence to the convention of the teacher. Students were not active in their learning; they simply tried to memorize word for word- the stock of knowledge which was handed down by their teacher. They did not have room to construct knowledge by analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and reflecting. They did not try to understand their learning experiences in an autonomous and reflective manner.

The above teaching method holds true to the *Qu'ran* School too. The curriculum of the *Qu'ran* School entailed some chapters from *Qu'ran*, grammar, and Islamic thoughts, and the education system had two levels: *Tahaji*, the lower level where learners used to identify Arabic letters and memorize texts, and *Meglis*- the higher level- where students used to study grammar, religion, politics and civic concepts. *Tahaji or Mejlis Qu'ran* is the initial stage of learning where by students identify Arabic letters so that they would be able to read the *Holy Qu'ran*. The teacher teaches his students both orally and in written form. The next step is called *Nahew*. Here students learn the Arabic language, its grammar and use. The third stage is *High Fikh*. At this stage, students learn cannon laws: the study involves both holy and worldly issues such as family responsibility, marriage and inheritance issues, followers' responsibilities, etc. The next high

level education is *Haddis.* The commandments of Mohammed, his deeds and other scholars' commentaries and thoughts are thought. *Qu'ran Tafsir* is a stage where learners learn the interpretation and analysis of respected scholars of *Qu'ran.* The students are called *Derresa* (Haile Gebriel, 2007).

Like that of the Orthodox Church education system, memorization and rote learning were encouraged in the *Qu'ran* School during Arabic reading. The interpretation and teaching styles of *Qu'ran Taefisir* are similar to that of the church education. The student reads part of the Quran in front of his teacher, and the teacher translates the Arabic passages into students' first language, followed by his analysis. Then, learners revise what their teacher told them either individually or in groups (Ibid).

The major objective of the teaching learning process is to know the contents and interpretation of *Qu'ran*, and there is no room to add or subtract contents since the contents are assumed that they emanate from Allah. Whatever happens within the society or upon nature, explanation is given from the *Qu'ran* (Ibid).

When it comes to Ethiopian Orthodox Church, educationalists analyze its education system in different ways. For some, it nurtured the required psychic and spiritual energy to sustain life in a modest manner withstanding foreign aggressors and creating solidarity and conviviality within the nation through sharing and loving one other (Teshome, 1979). For Girma Amare (1964) quoted in Teshome (1979) and others, the education of the church was trying to prepare learners to accept the existing status quo as it is with the intention of preserving whatever has been handed dawn through the years, and to pass it on without modifying to the next generation. Consequently, learners failed to get room to be critical and reflective thinkers.

If we try to analyze the teachings of the religious institutions, based on the aim of modern education, it is possible to claim that students were restricted to accept the prevailing order which clashed with the principle of modern education i.e., to take the initiative in order to engender new dimensions and skills and be responsive to the social, economical, technological and environmental needs of Ethiopians. Nevertheless, the aim of modern education is highly different from that of religious education in such a way that modern educationalists claimed that the role of education

… is not acquiring a stock of ready-made ideas, images, sentiments, beliefs etc.; it is learning to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose and to wish. It is a postulant to a human condition learning to recognize himself as a human being in the only way in which this is possible; namely, by seeing himself in the mirror of an inheritance of human understandings and activities and thus himself acquiring (in the words of Leibniz) the character of un miroir vivant, doué d'action interne, acquiring the ability to throw back upon the world his own version of a human being in conduct which is both a self-disclosure and a self-enactment

Since the very concept of education was conceived differently from modern education, the church and mosque education systems could not produce critical thinkers who could generate wisdom useful for the transformation of their country. That is why Mulugeta Wodajo's remark, made in 1961, still reverberates: "With her three thousand years of history, although Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in the world, she is also one of the youngest. Nowhere else is this paradox more evident than perhaps in the field of education." This is the case because education was limited only to religious aspects, leaving aside other major socio economic needs of the country particularly technology, economy, environment and science.

The lag of the church and mosque education in being responsive to the material needs of the nations led the way to modern education. Modern education was started during Emperor Menelik. He realized the inadequacies of religious education. Consequently, he declared the historic educational proclamation saying: "In other countries not only do they learn, even more they make new things. Hence, as of today all six year old boys and girls should attend school." (Ayalew, 2005). Despite his enthusiastic proclamation, the achievement on the ground in expanding schools and in making new things was little, so it seemed that the Emperor was crying for the moon. It was simply the basics particularly languages along religion that the curriculum presented as the contents of education. Learners were not engaged in a curriculum which could make them innovative and problem solvers. Of course, there was a tendency to shift from idealism to basics (existentialism) but it failed to bring the desired aim, i.e. creating new things due to its foreign based curriculum and teaching staff and the conservative nature of both the church and the people.

The clergymen of the church at that time were especially anti technology. A case in point would be their strong protest against the introduction and use of telephone and car by the Emperor, assuming that the technologies were the inventions of Satan. There was no conflict between 'atomism and holism' here. The Bible informs us that the world is the works of his hands, as a vase is the work of the potter. The point is Christianity is a collaborator to scientific technology as far as the invention has positive role in the day to day activities of mankind.

Anyway, invasion followed which brought attitudinal changes towards education (Ayalew, 2005). The Italian invasion demolished the country's educational system which had been at its infancy stage. The invaders killed the elites systematically. They tried to preach the philosophy of fascism with the intention of propagating the superiority of Italians over Ethiopians. It was a short lived philosophy due to their eviction after their five year stay. However, the conquest had thought people in the hard way that modernization was compulsory for the existence of their country. To maintain independence, in the eyes of the people, modern education was seen as key to equip oneself with the required technology.

During the restoration period, education became secular without facing any notable resistance from the people. The late Emperor also felt that education was the key for development. The aim of education was to produce semi professionals hinging upon the British school system at the beginning and the American system later. The state was engaged excessively in the expansion of the education system without giving due regard to the relevance of the curriculum probably because the education system did not have the right educational engineers so as to formulate relevant educational policy. According to MOE as quoted in Wubit (2006, p.19):

> *… from 1942 to 1972, the education sector was allowed to expand with confidence and optimism. Gross Primary enrollment increased by 60% between 1968 and 1972. Between 1961 and 1971, the government expanded the public school system more than fourfold, and it declared universal primary education a long-range objective. In 1971 there were 1,300 primary and secondary schools and 13,000 teachers, and enrollment had reached 600,000.*

Enrollment at all levels rose from 196,000 to 1,100,000 between 1960/61 and 1974/75. From philosophy perspective, it followed essentialism, having other traits too. Even if the expansion was commendable, according to Tekeste (1996), the education system was highly elitist,

divorced from practical aspects. Besides, the education system was characterized by high drop outs and lack of equity between urban and rural areas (Fasil G/Kiros, 1990).

Then, Ethiopia experienced political revolution. The unanticipated military regime came to power, upholding socialism as its guiding principle. The education policy, according to the MOE (1976), concentrated on implementing three major themes: using education for production, scientific consciousness and socialist consciousness. With regard to education for production, it attempted to develop in the mind of students the dignity of labor and the need for the community. Education for scientific consciousness claimed that the "world is knowable". Accordingly, critical thinking, research and creativity were encouraged. Finally, education for socialist consciousness which emanated from Marxist- Leninist philosophy dictated class struggle.

The country's education system went through a very radical type of change which was almost educational revolution as a result of which it lacked legacy (Mohammed, 2012). The shift was so extreme which took the nation from fear of God to the denial of God. Besides, the philosophy of Marxist- Leninist did not have rooms for feudalists, capitalists, merchants, religious people, etc which brought its own negative impact on the education system by nationalizing all types of private schools. According to Wubit (2006, p.27), "Private sector development and the development of the market incentive structure both in the education sector and in the labor market were highly discouraged."

Even if it was highly centralized, the education sector expanded greatly. For instance, from 1975 to 1990, the increment of primary education was 12% per annum, so was the increment of junior and secondary education. The number of primary schools expanded from 3,196 in 1974/75 to 7,900 in 1985/86.

The educational philosophy of the Derg regime was absolute modernism, applying reasoning as its epistemology, but it did not have the appropriate native intelligence that could advance the borrowed thoughts by amalgamating with the local needs of the country. Besides, according to Tekeste (1996), the training failed to link thoughts with actions due to lack of finance and infrastructure. The education system of the Derg regime also failed to engage learners in the local needs and experiences of the nations since the curriculum was borrowed from the Soviet

Union. In line with this, educational engagement for Oakeshott (1998,p.291) should accomplish the following tasks:

> *The engagement to educate is a transaction between the generations in which newcomers may enjoy what they can acquire only in a procedure of learning: namely, an historic inheritance of human understandings and imaginings. And the idea 'School' is that of a place apart where a prepared new-comer may encounter this inheritance unqualified by the partialities, the neglects, the abridgements and the corruptions it suffers in current use; of an engagement to learn, not by chance, but by study in conditions of direction and restraint designed to provoke habits of attention, concentration, exactness, courage, patience and discrimination and the recognition of excellence in thought and conduct; and of an apprenticeship to adult life in which he may learn to recognize and identify himself in terms other than those of his immediate circumstances.*

Since modern education during the Derg was foreign driven in its educational contents, the inherited experiences of Socialism were not useful in preparing learners to Ethiopian mode of adult life by equipping them with the values of the required local thoughts and manners. Since education was highly politicized, instead of promoting friendship, tolerance and modesty, class struggle was the fashion of the day and so was the killing of one another. This made the country lose its best minded students of that generation.

On the other hand, the non formal education system of the Derg regime had its own strength. The literacy campaign, which was started in 1975, reduced illiteracy from 93 per cent to 37 within a short period of time (Tekeste, 1996). In fact, the literacy campaign got international praise when the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) awarded Ethiopia the International Reading Association Literacy Prize in 1980.

When it comes to higher learning, minimum higher learning institutional standards were, by and large, maintained both in teaching and research, and colleges and universities used to entertain only the fine minds of the country, and graduates were not worried about securing jobs. Unlike primary school graduates (31.3%) and secondary school graduates (5%) who were, for example, unemployed in 1980/81, the proportion of unemployment for some university education was only 2% for the same period (Fasil G/Kiros, 1990). In other words, university graduates did not face serious unemployment compared to other primary and secondary graduates. It does not

necessarily mean that the economy of the country was able to absorb graduates, but the government used to assign them in its different sectors.

The structure of Ethiopian education system between 1962 and 1994 followed a 6-2-4 structure. It had six years of primary education, followed by 2 years of junior schooling and 4 years of senior secondary education. National examinations were held at the end of each structure, i.e. grade 6, 8 and 12.

The present structure of Ethiopian education system is 4-4-2-2/3. Unlike the previous structure which used to administer national examination three times, the present education system conducts national examinations only twice at grade 10 and 12 (World Bank, 2005, & Teshome, 2007). As to political ideology, the present government claimed that it enacted federalism (World Bank, 2005). The education system has been decentralized at region level. The aim of education, according to the Education and Training Policy (1994), "is to strengthen the individual's and society's problem solving capacity, ability and culture starting from basic education and at all levels". The curriculum contains some of the elements of progressivism as part of its education system.

Unlike the previous regime, the actor of education is not the government alone but the private sector too. The private sector which contributes, according to TGE (1994), 17.3% of the higher learning has brought its own merits to the education system particularly by creating space for those who cannot join public universities. When it comes to the government, higher learning has expanded, having 35 universities.

Nevertheless, the issue of quality is a pressing problem for the present education system. Universities cannot meet the minimum standards due to lack of professors, and the economy of the country is not in a position to absorb graduates due to their continuing outflow which casts doubt on the problem solving ability and creativity of the higher learning curriculum (Saint, 2004; Wubit, 2006). The English language competence of students and the academic and language competence of fresh instructors are worrying. Scholars in the field proposed the need to change the emphasis from expansion to quality education, and to balance the level of graduates with the country's market capacity (Saint, 2004; Tekeste, 2006, & Wubit, 2006). In addition, they pinpointed the need to incorporate from the fertile ground of Ethiopian church and mosque

education essential values such as friendship, tolerance, modesty and self pride in the curriculum so as to produce ethical graduates.

In line with the curriculum, scholars criticized Ethiopian governments for failing to incorporate Ethiopian local and traditional values in the education system. In other words, Ethiopian students have been engaged in irrelevant curricula and poor quality learning which may be the causes for the dissatisfaction of learners and for failing to be creative and problem solvers.

To rectify the above problem, it seems impetrative to give due attention to the comments of Maimire Mennasemay (2006). For him, modern education has failed to instill the native culture in the mind of students and into its education system, as a result: "It has deprived students of the opportunity to make the crucial transformation from the unhistorical consciousness of youth to the historical consciousness of adults who understand the man-made nature of their circumstances and recognize themselves as collective agents capable of changing these circumstances within the historical possibilities they share with their compatriots". The civilizing process is far from Ethiopian way of life, and it seems compulsory to awaken the traditional values which have been accumulated for years in the church, mosque and Gada systems instead of packing our education system with irrelevant western baggage. However, he cautions that "…to awaken this humanizing and civilizing process of traditional education means also to inquire into the reasons that prevented traditional education from bringing about productive social transformations in Ethiopia."

REFERENCES

Ayalew Shibeshi.(2005). *Educational Policy and Management.* Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University

Fasil Gebre Kiros.(1990). Implementing Educational Policies In Ethiopia, World Bank Discussion Paper No. 82, Washington D .C.

Haile Gebriel Dagne. (1970). "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church School System." In *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life.* Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*.*

…………… (2007). *Studies on Education in Ethiopian Tradition.* Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University

Maimire Mennesemay. (2006). Towards a Critical Ethiopian Theory of Education, in Messay Kebede, Eva Poluha and Paulos Milkias eds, Education and Social Change in Ethiopia.

Ministry of Education. (2003). *Education Statistics Annual Abstract* (2010-2011 G.C.), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Mohammed Girma. (2012). Cultural Politics and Education in Ethiopia: A Search for a Viable Indigenous Legend. *Journal of Politics and Law*. Vol. **5**(1).

Oakeshott, M. (1998). "Education : the Engagement and its Frustration". In Philosophy of Education: Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition. *Philosophy and Education.* Vol.1.

Saint, W.(2004). "Higher Education in Ethiopia: The Visions and its Challenges." <u>Journal of Higher Education in Africa</u>.(2)3,83-113.

The World Bank. (2005). *Education in Ethiopia*: *Strengthening the Foundation for Sustainable Progress.* Wahsigton.

Tekeste Negash. (1996). *Rethinking Education in Ethiopia***.** Uppsala: NordiskaAfrikainstitutet, University of Uppsala.

……………….. (2006). *Education in Ethiopia: From crisis to the brink of collapse. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet - 33*. Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitute.

Teshome Wagaw.**(**1990**)**. *The Development of Higher Education and Social Change: An Ethiopian Experience.* Michigan: Michigan University Press.

TGE. (1994). *The Education and Training Policy.* The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Wubet Kifle.(2006). Human Capital and Growth in Ethiopia. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University.