

Indigenizing the Educational System of Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper tried to show how the Ethiopian educational system was sidelined in favor of western system of education, and it calls for the need for re-Ethiopianising it. In the analysis of the historical evolution of the educational system in Ethiopia, we can witness about the existence of indigenous educational system that had left its imprints in the socio-economic and political facades of the Ethiopian society. However, the system was eventually superseded by religious schools (church schools, mission schools, Quranic schools” and finally by western schools under the guise of modernization. Due to the quest for absorbing western modern values, in the late 19th century western school system initiated by missionaries who plan to use it for religious proselytizing became dominant. 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-Ethiopianised and thereby produced intellectual dependency that triggers many social evils and served for colonization of the non-colonized state.

Keywords: *Africanization: colonization: education: Ethiopia: westernization*

1. Introduction

The article tried to show how the imposition of Western Education affected the locally grown traditional educational system and thereby reproduces social evils, primarily spearheaded by alienated Ethiopian elite from their traditional education system and the Ethiopian society in lieu of promoting social transformation. 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 a calculated means that served for the colonization of the non-colonized state and citizens.

This paper has hardly any primary data rather it’s based on review of literatures’ using historical causation model. Therefore, the paper is more of synthesis and analysis of research works undertaken so far on the issue. However, in many instance, the writer had incorporated primary data from other studies. Finally, this paper could serve for further research and academic debate because the educational and economic problems of today could have their root on the distance past.

Though there is no universally accepted monolithic understanding, it’s necessary to have a vivid perceptive of what education is meant before we begin narrating about the historical evolution of educational system. 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.

Kofi Anan, 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 a trigger and precipitator of many socio-economic ills.

2. African Traditional Education

As it's indicated by Fafunwa (1982:9) 'no study of the history of education in Africa is meaningful without adequate knowledge about indigenous educational system. Indigenous educational systems were operating before the advent of Western Education. Thus, the genesis of education in Africa is not a colonial invention.

According to Walter (1972) and Moumouni (1968) indigenous African education was; communitarian/collective, gradual/progressive in conformity with the physical, emotional and mental development of the learner and embody lessons on mutual respect for the opinions of others, deference to elders, conflict negotiation and forgiveness.

It is against this background that Western Education emerged in Africa in the course of the 19th century as an instrument of colonization and pacification of Africa. This process has resulted in the denigration and marginalization of African systems of education and knowledge. Besides, Westernized African elites developed contempt toward their own people.

This disillusionment aroused due to alienation from their roots (Woodson, 2009:4) and the deep seated epistemological plunder which was also undertaken through disinformation, selective omission, distortion of data and trivialization. Hence, the knowledge of Africa became a product of Western episteme. This indicates that the resurrection of African epistemology and knowledge should focus on deconstruction/denunciation of Euro-centrism and the revival of the African past.

2. 1. Indigenous Education in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the Indigenous education is credited for training state functionaries, minting coins, carving obelisks, inventing writing systems, music, philosophy, art, aesthetics, healing, micro-financing, soil and water conservation, food processing, terracing and pastoral traditions associated with egalitarian socio-political orders, devising technologies and passing down the techniques of iron-smelting, tanning, weaving and pottery(Belay, 1992:32).

These educational institutions were not bereft of scientific reasoning in their essence as in the usually discourse. But due to this misconception, in late 19th century they had given way for western school system. Ethiopia had imported western education by sidelining (zero beginning) its own system. Therefore, the country failed to create a uniquely Ethiopian system of education. Hence, the educational system was de-Ethiopianised and followed by colonial schooling in non-colonized state This policy of westernizing Ethiopian society with complete neglect of the cumulated experience of the past created inter-generational barrier.

Despite Ethiopia's grand history of repelling foreign invaders, a baleful brand of colonial influence was infused through the educational system .Thus, the country failed to come up with educational modernity for it traversed in the path of the West, without renewing its own traditional education. 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, this paper attempts to indicate the triggers of such eccentric processes that has used for the colonization of the minds in the non-colonized state.

3. Religious Education in Ethiopia; Church, Quranic and Mission Schools

As it is indicated here above, inscriptions and carvings on stones show indigenous education system had preceded the adoption of Abrahamic religions. However, the Christianization of Ethiopia had brought about hierarchical system instruction organized and presented under the aegis of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Damtew and Altbach, 2003:317). Similarly, following the introduction of Islam, Mosques in the peripheral areas and in few central communities such as Wollo were the responsible institutions for providing education until they were eventually overwhelmed by western education in the early 1900s (ibid).

In Church education, monasteries and convents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were the epicenters of the educational system whose utmost objective was producing religious and civil servants functionaries (Pankhurst, 1968:666). 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.

Most studies branded the curriculum, the content and the philosophical orientation of this educational system 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 Ethiopianised and there of its legacies and history. However, it's not exclusively national for it deals about history and culture of multitude of peoples of the world.

Besides, 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 legitimating political positions. However, some scholars view the integrative nationalistic function of traditional education in terms of its de-politicization, a freedom from political influence and vicissitudes because the 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 was an identical twin reinforcing each other than separate entities thought this doesn't annul the integrative role.

The critics of the Church education have point out that the techniques and the contents of the education system were inappropriate to develop either the understanding or to cultivate the intellectual faculties of creativity, criticism, and imagination due to the heavy dependency 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 students, it's 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 wisdom if the system of education is mere imitation? Moreover, the school system focusing on Geez is not an arbitrary preference. Rather it's a well-founded because the language is believed to be the repository of all rounded achievements of Ethiopians for centuries. Thus, it's 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.

4. The de-Ethiopianisation of the Educational System

4.1. Influence of Mission and Foreign Schools

The introduction of modern education in Ethiopia coincided with the arrival of missionaries (Bahru, 2002:23). They were aware of the role of modern education for proselytization and hence, they were active in establishing schools and sending youngsters abroad (Bahru, 103). Furthermore, increased foreign contact since the reign of Tewodros II had also resulted in over sea study of young Ethiopians (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 education for proselytization were active in establishing mission schools⁶ 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.

The process of modernization under the auspice of missionaries was demanding a dismissal of any traditional commitment that do not conform to a 'scientific worldview, and disclaiming the indigenous culture before conversion.

Missionaries were contemptuous of indigenous cultures and hence, instructions were designed to impart foreign cultures and values. Local students were persuaded to denigrate and reject their own cultures and tradition. This has caused alienation from native values and promoted Eurocentrism, *i.e.*, the towering of western culture and decentering and devalue the traditional way of life (epistemological plunder). They have also infused gendered and divinized education system.

4.2. Impact of King Advisors (Westernized Regimes)

Emperor Tewodros II was attracted by European technology and military power due to the influence of his advisor, John Bell. He was the first king with the concept of modernizing the country using the light of Europe long before Menelik II. Similarly, Menelik in the post Adwa period showed a significant concern for the expansion of Western education by sidelining traditional schools due to his Catholic advisors. During the reconstruction era (1941-1951), the education advisor, Ernes, pressured Hailesellassie to adopt Western Schools (Tekeste, 1990)

4.3. Italian Occupation

Pankhurst (1972) and Tekeste (1990) argued that Italian invasion had disrupted Ethiopia's educational system. Italians changed the Ethiopian educational system by exterminating thousands of educated Ethiopians who had been awaited for institutional transformation. 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 educational system fell in the trap of self-disillusionment because education in the post-war period has been exclusively dependent on expatriates.

Moreover, the 1936 Italian curriculum introduced a dual system of education and two types of schooling namely Italian type schools, and schools for colonial subjects (Pankhurst, 1972:370). Thus, Italian occupation has left two destructive legacies of the extermination of the cumulated local potential for indigenized transition and as well infused the spirit of colonial and radicalized education.

4.4. Aggressive Europeanization in the Imperial Period

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 ten 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). Though, 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 Haileselassie was also promoter of western education in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1968:677). He established Ras Teferi Secondary School and Haileselassie I University College (Tekeste, 2006: 12) yet the educational system was devoid of Ethiopian way. Expatriates did not embody the indigenous Ethiopian cultural contexts, values and aspirations.

They were perusing Rostow's development model; what had proved successful in their countries would also benefit Ethiopian. As a result, the curriculum and policies were detached from the contextual reality of the country (Pankhurst, 1968:676). The curriculum was imported outside which was essentially constructed to serve a different society than Ethiopia. The great events, historical developments and medium of instruction were European. The Western-orientation of the curriculum has left Ethiopian students with in Western mental orbit with total ignorance of their own history and culture. Therefore, the development of modern education lacked the Ethiopianisation of the curriculum. In this regard Pankhurst (2010) wrote as:

. . . It was common to observe that Ethiopian students have been taught more about Shakespeare 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.

Thus, 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 Haileselassie government.

4.5. Sweeping Dismissal during the Dergue

The indoctrination of Ethiopia's intellectual elites in Western ideas ended with rejection of the traditional authority and ideology (Messay, 2001) and the adoption of ideologies from outside which is still intact. According to Messay (2001), the spread of Marxist-Leninist views was due to Westernized Ethiopians who walked away from the traditional beliefs of their people. The students sloganeering with the intention of liberating the mass from the oppression of tradition ended up with legitimating militant socialism. In addition to the student, Dergue's approach was complete rejection of the indigenous roots and the cultural currents. The dislocation of the socio-political equilibrium is one of the cultural impacts of this militant socialist secularization.

The impotency to heal the deep cultural fissures and alienation from the past resulted in intellectual dependence and outward oriented mindset; weakening of the evolution of national solidarity; new value system; social stratification and dependence on foreign curricula. Together with the legacies of the measures taken by the Dergue, the EPRDF had also ethicized the educational philosophy using Weberian approach. Still the struggle for the re-Ethiopianisation of the educational system awaits the liberation of the epistimi base of the past from the burdens of such historical process and the framing of the new approach connection to the internationalization process.

Conclusions

- The process of adoption Western education was an abrupt shift from the traditional system to the Western school through the dissolution of the traditional institutions.
- The path traversed by Ethiopia was not to modernize the traditional system rather it was a policy of throwing away its own indigenous experience.
- The imported experts, curriculum and alienated Ethiopian elites failed to see the socio-economic priorities of the society in the educational directions.
- Thus, such educational system was means that served for the colonization of the non-colonized state.

Way forward

- Re-Ethiopianising- the repatriating of the new Ethiopian educational modernity from exile should focus on the re-invention of the glorious past.
- The re-Ethiopianisation should be both transformative and preservative and it should be grounded on Ethiopian way of life.
- Perusing postmodern approach in democratizing the *episteme* and formulating transformative epistemology.
- Indigenizing the curriculum and orientation of the ethno-federalist approach to mobilize young minds for innovative revolution
- Aligning the policy objectives with the demands of the economy and the markets.

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