# The Cultural Foundation of Education in Ethiopia

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## 1. Introduction

Education should be an endeavor to introduce the desirable change into a culture while steadily standing on it. It is like a mason who, first of all, lays the foundation work and using the foundation as a working place and platform continues further construction works upon it. The foundation serves both as a facilitating ground as well as an important input for the additional construction components. This is because on the one hand it is on the foundation that all the movements start and take place and on the other hand the depth, width and strength are essential inputs for further construction. That is the reason why one can not think of a relevant and useful curriculum that is based on alien culture.

The very first statement of the **Education and Training Policy** issued in April 1994 reads: *Education is a process by which man transmits his experiences, new findings and values accumulated over the years, in his struggle for survival and development through generations.*

This is an unequivocal assertion that culture is the basis of education. Amare (1998) has rightly represented culture and education as content and means in the same order. The cultures of the various nations, nationalities and peoples constitute the Ethiopian culture which due to its diversity and continuity is very rich and complex in character. This rich and complex foundation makes the development of education to be challenging and whose solution can not be prevailing without democratic process.

Despite the complex nature of the cultural basis, however, both the monarchy and the military administration of the *'Dergue'* regime had opted for setting educational foundation on a narrow segment of the Ethiopian culture which

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effectively served only a limited membership of the Ethiopian community, and as a consequence, resulted in unsatisfactory and undesirable social, economic, political and cultural outcomes.

A change that required an armed struggle was thus a necessity; and the political economic and social change since the beginning of the 1990s enabled the country to move along a road of democratization, one important result of which is the new constitution.

The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia declared that the Government *shall have the duty to support, on the basis of equality, the growth and enrichment of cultures and traditions that are compatible with fundamental rights, human dignity, democratic norms and ideals.* (TGE, 1994).

Among so many other activities to implement the above cited declarations, two important documents are issued, viz. - the Cultural Policy and Education and Training Policy.

The Education and Training Policy stipulates that primary education will be given in the nationality languages and so far 17 languages are used as media in the primary education system of Ethiopia. Some more vernaculars are also used in the non-formal education programs.

## 2. The Past Scenario

Until the beginning of the 20th century education in Ethiopia rooted itself in monasteries, abbeys and mosques. The objective was basically religious although some scribes who graduated from these traditional schools functioned as secretaries of the aristocracy. Curriculum was basically static and there was a belief that studies that were true and valuable in the past were true and valuable forever (Adane 1991:4). Contents ranged from reading, writing or calligraphy (*kum tsifet*), liturgy (*kidasie*), church music (*zema*), poetry (*kine*), commentaries (*mesahft*) and some calendar calculations and astrology (*Bahrehasab, Abushakir*). The duration ranged up to over 20 years, depending on the learning

pace of each student. Every student was treated according to his learning capacity. Grade grouping and promotion time was thus accordingly flexible.

The medium of instruction in churches was *Geez* which in the past times was a spoken as well as a written language. Now, however, it is not spoken and it is only a liturgical medium in the churches which is only written and interpreted language having a status similar to that of Latin. *Geez* alphabets characterize Ethiopia to be the only country which has developed its own alphabets in Africa. *Geez* has been a literary language for millennia and it was written on stones and later on parchments of goat skins for prayer books and texts for learning. All the other learning - teaching materials like the ink, nibs, and different colors were also locally produced by the ecclesiastical group themselves. The *Koranic* schools though not as wide spread as the *Geez* schools were part of the traditional schooling system; many of them used Arabic as a medium of instruction in the teaching of *koranic* verses.

Students of the traditional schools used to travel far from their villages, usually to other regions, so that they could be free from parental pressure or temptation to discontinue education in order to help in the farming activities of their families. Hence, although the households located around the school were socially obliged to support the subsistence of the students, one can say that they were practically on their own and sort of self supporting. Despite the fact that there was no fee to pay, the students were supposed to render labor service to their teacher in the form of fetching firewood, water and the like. If the schools were within full-fledged monasteries, the students were also supposed to work in activities like flour grinding, bread baking, agricultural work, etc. for the community on whom their subsistence depended.

One can see that neither the central government nor the local authority was involved in designing the curriculum, financing and administration. They were basically non-government schools. Thus, though generally similar, every school had established its own curriculum and also its own area of excellence. Due to the historically and traditionally established centers of excellence which spontaneously served as points of reference and standard, however, curriculum throughout the country was more characterized by uniformity and convergence

rather than divergence. The practice was also that students moved from school to school and the consensus was developed that a certain school was better than the other. In fact there were renowned and recognized teachers in respective areas of studies and the schools were generally, and naturally associated to be the best.

## 3. Legacies of Traditional Education in Modern Schooling

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century when modern schooling started, the Ethiopian church had almost a monopoly over Education in Ethiopia. There was strong opposition to the establishment and running of secular type of schools. After all these schools did not evolve from the traditional schools of the church or the mosque. Rather the schools were alien (the curriculum, the teaching staff and books, and even the medium of instruction were foreign) to the Ethiopian situation.

The first government schools used Egyptian Copts as the first teachers in order to appease the ecclesiastical status quo with the logic that their faith being the same they would not disregard the doctrine of the Ethiopian church. Moreover the monarch emphasized that the school would mainly be involved in the teaching of foreign languages like English, French, Arabic etc. -which for two decades, dominated the curriculum content that made it look like a specialized school of languages.

To check whether the traditional school that thrived in Ethiopia has fairly contributed and served as a good basis for the modern secular system of schooling, some points about the influence of the traditional schools are listed below.

a.  The traditional system of education was by objective and content almost totally religious. And as a result, in the post traditional system of education there was what was known as moral education in the schools which almost amounted to an Orthodox Christian religious education and which affected the non secularity of the schools up to the mid seventies.

b.  The Ethiopian secular culture and spoken languages were not given the appropriate emphasis and level of importance in the curriculum of the traditional schools. This was the case in the "modern" system of education also up to the beginning of the 90's when the Education and Training Policy was issued in 1994.

c.  Knowledge was considered sacrosanct and unchanging and thus to be learned as it was. This wrong concept of epistemology affected the pedagogy that emphasized rote learning and memorization was indeed the main methodology in the church school. This practice creeped into the modern system of education and became a prevalent and lingering constraint of the service.

d.  Emphasis on knowledge and disregard of practical skills related to production and livelihood in the current methodology followed by many teachers could trace its genesis to the traditional schools. Even the skill of writing was discouraged by same traditional schools resulting in expulsion of some students who secretly tried to practice. (Habtemariam : 36)

e.  The authoritarian role of the teacher in our schools now and her/his expectation of submissive behavior of the students is no different from the traditional schools, where the teacher was *Yenieta* ( my master).

f.  Some other minor issues like the blind to be mainly engaged in teaching is again the influence of the church education that mainly used the oral means of teaching are not unimportant to consider.

Of course the Ethiopian society as a religious society had the means of access of religious schools to some of the young boys. Otherwise the role of the traditional school in promoting the useful production related cultural values in a formal way of schooling was very limited. Neither agriculture nor other activities like the crafts of pottery, blacksmith, spinning, weaving, basketry, masonry etc. which were essential in the rural life, were recognized and given any place in the traditional system of schooling. On the contrary, some less desirable cultural values like fatalism, too many holidays, lengthy fasting time, and absolute submission and obedience to superiors which were directly and indirectly disseminated through the traditional education affected the productive life of the nation.

Thus although the traditional schooling has left us with rich literary heritage like the alphabet itself and a lot of useful documentation and relics, it has not proved to be a good foundation and point of departure for the so called modern system of schooling which started in 1908. This important missing link could be attributed to the attitudes and readiness of both the old and the new, which were aloof of each other and as a result were both losers.

## 4. The Present Situation

Both of the monarchy and the military periods had educational systems which suffered *dependence on outside curriculum which did not correspond to the local peculiarities* (TGE 1994). However, although alien curriculum, scholarship and communication of the western culture has been in contact with the Ethiopian culture for a century as Amare (1998) rightly pointed out *Ethiopian culture remained Ethiopian and the western is western.*

Two important facts can be pointed out here. Firstly the Ethiopian culture remained Ethiopian by the fact that schooling and modernization (modern communication etc.) was not widespread enough to influence it as much as the primitive system of education. Secondly even the extent of the cultural role played by the schooling system in Ethiopia was to undermine many Ethiopian cultures and impose cultural values of a single dominating 'national culture' upon the other nations and nationalities in the country.

Hence the role of education in the domain of both cultural maintenance and promotion was anomalous.

However, education or for that matter any *development that does not take account of the cultural base and of the cultural diversity of the peoples for whom it is intended is bound to be development that is not very successful* (Okonjo-Jweala 1992:531).

As mentioned above both the constitution and the Education and Training Policy have capitalized on the importance of peoples using their own language.

The language policy is a cornerstone for the cultural basis of education. The Education and Training Policy states: *Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages primary education will be given in nationality languages.*

Hence out of the over eighty languages 17 languages are used as media of instruction in the primary school and pre-school teachers are also mostly taught in their mother languages.

It further promulgates that *every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to develop its own language, to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history* (TGE 1994). The constitution further mandates the Federal Government that *it shall establish and implement national standards and basic policy criteria...for the protection and preservation and historical legacies* (TGE 1994).

Another important aspect of policy that helped to establish a strong cultural foundation of education is the power of people over their local affairs. For instance influencing the designing and then approving the basic education curriculum is one essential basis for education to be founded on the cultural realities of the peoples concerned.

Curriculum content and title development of textbooks for primary education is now mainly the responsibility of respective regional state governments but with technical assistance from the Federal Ministry of Education.

It is unthinkable to fairly set education of a multi-national society on the cultural reality in the absence of democratic governance. One can not build consensus on such matters without consultation and serious attendance and listening to the people. In relation to the developed system of organization, it is stated that *educational management will be decentralized to create the necessary condition to expand, enrich and improve the relevance, quality, accessibility and equity* (TGE 1994:29).

According to the Proclamation No. 41/1993 issued on 20 January 1993 to define the powers and duties of the central and regional executive organs of the transitional Government of Ethiopia, the respective bureaux of education in the regions were given, *inter alia*, the following responsibilities.

a) Ensure the quality of education in the region.
b) Prepare and implement the curriculum of the primary education.
c) Provide textbooks and other learning teaching materials appropriately prepared for the primary education in the region.
d) Regulate and issue licenses to those who want to establish non-government schools.
e) Render special support to minority nationalities and other disadvantaged groups in the provision of education
f) Support the education of the region by the use of mass media.
g) Conduct studies to improve the quality of education in the region.
h) Coordinate the community in its initiative and effort to participate in the educational activities.

The above listed responsibilities of the regional governments to be materialized and enforced through the bureaux of education directly or indirectly indicate that education needs to be firmly founded not only on the ethos of the Federal Republic but also on the socio-cultural conditions of the national states in the country.

Besides shouldering the responsibilities of planning and implementation of the regional educational programs, the regions are also members of the membership of the Federal Curriculum Council.

The Federal Curriculum Council is composed of the representatives of the regional councils and bureaux of education, pertinent ministries and commissions, universities and colleges, research institutions, Prime Minister's office, peoples representatives and Federation Council, civil societies and distinguished personalities. This council which is chaired by the Minister of Education aims, among other things, at ensuring that:

- the curriculum preparation process is according to the constitution and the policy of education;
- the democratic rights and equity issues of the nations and nationalities are appropriately reflected in the curriculum;
- the curriculum responds to the regional needs and fulfills the federal and international standard requirements, and
- that the curriculum is designed to produce young people with relevant knowledge, skill and democratic outlook.

The attempt to ensure the social and cultural basis of education goes down to the grassroots in the process of implementation also. In the teaching-learning process at the school level parents are engaged as members of the school boards, and every teacher is required to be evaluated by parents (and students) in order to get his/her promotion in his/her career of teaching. This is a practical manifestation of the community ownership of the school and one instance of ensuring the socio - cultural basis of the present educational system in Ethiopia.

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