EDUCATION OF THE ETHIOPIAN MAKWANENT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BAIRU TAFLA

The imperial court of Ethiopia consisted of roughly three groups in the nineteenth century; namely, the *mäkwanent* and *mäsafent* (high officials), the *liqawent* (learned clergy men), and the *särawit* (the soldiers and atendants in general).[1] The classification seems to have been based not on a single factor but on a mixture of elements pertaining to profession, education and birth. The difference between the *mäkwanent* and *mäsafent* was negligibly slight, and the available sources of the time frequently merge them together. They are in any case treated as a single social unit for the purposes of the present paper. Members of this group acted as military leaders, governors, judges, superintendents, councillors and envoys.

The second group was composed of a section of the *kahnat* or clergy distinguished for its learning in ecclesisatical matters, law and tradition. The *liqawent* participated in some major court activities particularly in judicial affairs. It was a common practice for the court to turn to this learned group for reference whenever difficult legal, religious or historical problems cropped up. The third social group was, however, nothing more than an admiring audience at the court of justice.

This paper attempts to survey the type and degree of education normally acquired by the *mäkwanent*. Education of the people who played significant roles in the political, military and administrative life of Ethiopia in the nineteenth century is one of the most lightly treated aspects of Ethiopian history. It is not, of course, without reason. The material source on the subject is very scarce. The scanty references to academic education which appear in travel books, chronicles and oral tradition usually refer to the church people . The *makwanent* are often described as shrewd, intelligent, brilliant

1. Gäbrä-Sellasé, Alaqa. *Tärikä-Zämän Zä-Dagmawi Menilek* (Addis Abäba: 1959 E.C.), p.p 61, 66, 68, 104-5, and 169.

and so forth, but seldom are allusions made to their formal educational background. Among their multiple functions and prerogatives, these grand officials included the patronage of churches and monastries at least within their jurisdication; and, one cannot help wondering if they escaped educational influence of the church which traditionally sponsored formal education.

Judging from the accounts of oral tradition, it seems that it was a custom or even a fashion for the well-to-do to send their six or seven-year-old sons to the nearby church schools or employ tutors for them. [2] Two of the missionary teachers, Krapf and Isenberg, noticed this practice around 1840 in Šawa and briefly remarked in their journal as follows: "If a boy does not like instruction, he is punished by his parents —a custom in Abyssinia."[3] The children received rudimentary education which consisted of the alphabet, selected reading extracts from the Holy Scriptures, and the Psalms which was the most popular prayer book of Ethiopia.[4] The coincidence of a resourceful teacher and intelligent pupils might also include a few more courses such as the *Weddasé-Maryam* and a few isolated prayers. Much of the content of the courses was committed to memory, but no doubt fast reading was emphasized at the expense of comprehension and the art of writing.

In most cases, the sons of the notables were hardly given the opportunity to continue with their study further than the reading of the Psalms. For some obscure reasons, the notable resnteds[5] available higher education to their children. There were, of course, a few exceptions among them who were as learned

2. The Moslems also sent their sans to the Mosque to learn the Koran in Arabic. Females in either religious group were not normally given formal education although exceptions like Empress Ṭaytu and Wäyzäro Sähay-Wärq Dargé received deeper learning than many men in the Christian sector.

3. C. W. Isenberg and J. L. Krapf, *The Journals of* (London: 1968), p. 86.

4. *Ibid.;* also Käbbädä Täsämma, *Däjjazmac, Ya-Tarik Mastawäsä* (Addis Abäba: 1962), p. 23.

5. The origin of this resentment is not established. Most informants, among whom are some of the clergy, attribute it to a belief that higher learning was the soure of magic. But this allegation seems to be more relevant to the bias against the art of writing as we shall see it later than to this particular prejudice. Others connect it with the superstition that participation of children in the Mäkfält or Zäkké might improverish wealthy parents.

as the *liqawent*. One of such people was Däjjazmač Wäldä-Gäbr'él of Tegray who has gone down in oral tradition as a master of ecclesiastical learning.[6] But in general, the sons of the mäkwanent around the age of twelve to fourteen were diverted deliberately, and at times by circumstances, from the formal to the informal and unlitrary training in such fields as horseracing, sports, military exercises and the observation of etiquette. Thus, most of the leading political figures of the nineteenth century were graduates of the primary church schools.

Negus Sahlä-Sellasé, 1813-47, went to one of the church schools at Sälla-Dengay. Travelling to the town in 1842, Rev. Krapf learnt about the school to which the sovereign went in his childhood:

> Before we reached the place, I saw on the road a hill, on which I was told that the present King was educated and guarded by the Alaqa Woldab, (who is not to be confounded with the same name mentioned before.) It is a pretty little square hill, on which his royal highness had a beautiful view of the country around and on which many ideas and future schemes may have been raised and planned in his mind.[7]

The prince interrupted his education as the result of the political circumstances which ensued from the sudden death of his father in 1813. The elder brother and heir presumptive, Bäkru, was at Märahbété at this time and was unable to reach Qundi due to the Galla revolt which immediately followed the death of the ruler. The *mäkwanent*, therefore, summoned Sahlä-Sellasé from his monastic school and enthroned him.[8]

Sahlä-Sellasé gave his children at least as much education, and probably under more or less the same conditions, as he did receive. The British envoy, Major Harris, who visited Šawa in 1840-42, gives us a brief account of the type of education given to the princes and the circumstances under which they were trained:

6. Atmé, *Yä-Talla Tarik* (I.E.S. Ms. 173, N.D.), folio 60.
7. Isenberg and Krapf, *op. cit.*, p. 290.
8. Atmé *op. cit.*, folio 62; also Taddäsä Zäwäldé, *Yä-Abéto Ya'eqob Accer Tarik* (Addis Ababa: 1948 E.C.), p. 27.

They are trained to equestrian and war-like exercises, and to the use of the shield and spear; and are made to attend divine service, to fast, to repeat their prayers, and to persue the psalms at night. Their course of education differs little from that of other Abyssinian youths, than whom they are even more under monkish influence. The study of the *Gebäta Hawariat* or "table of the apostles," which comprises the seven epistles of Peter, John, James, and Jude, and the acquisition of the Psalter by heart, is followed by the persual of the Revelation, the epistles of St. Paul, and the gospels-the histories of the Holy Virgin, of Saints George and Michael, Saint Teklä Haimanot, and completing the course. Few of the priest-hood understand the art of writing, and all regard the exercise of the pen as shameful and derogatory. The royal princes therefore stand little chance of instruction in this branch of education, and their acquantance with the Abyssinian code of jurisprudence must depend also upon the erudition of their preceptors. The strictest discipline is enforced; disobedience is punished by bonds and corporal chastisement, which latter the king causes to be inflicted in his presence; and fully imbued with the conviction that to "spare the rod is to spoil the child," His Majesty occasionally corrects the delinquent with his own hands.[9]

It is therefore, highly probable that the sons of the *negus* could at least read. One of them, *Ras* Dargé, certainly partook religious education in his youth, and one of his interests in later life lay in theological discussions with the clergy and in the reading of the scriptures.[10] With regrad to their moral education, Major Harris' information is fairly well supported by a remark of chronicler Gäbrä-Sellasé who states that *Wäyzäro* Bäzzabeš, the legal wife of the king assigned a girl to guard the young princes against their hearing of trifling matters and uttering improper words.[11]

Emperor Téwoderos, too, attended school in the convent of Täklä-Haymanot at Čankar somewhere between Gondar

9. W. Corwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, 2nd Edition, II (London: 1844), pp. 15 f.
10. From an interview with Käntiba Dästa Metekké: 84, on 22, 10, 1965 in Addis Abäba.
11. Gäbrä-Sellasé, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

and Lake Tana, and "In all probability he recieved as much book-learning as could be provided for a young man around Gondar in those days."[12] But it seems that he too abandoned his studies due to the political situation of the period. We do not know precisely to what extent he made use of his academic learning throughout the rest of his life, but he certainly made impressions with his biblical-learning on the foreigners who met him.[13] He also cornered the clergy, according to one of his chroniclers, in a debate which involved religious questions.[14] He was probably interested in providing his people with formal education. He allowed foreign missionaries to teach in his dominion. He also encouraged teachers versus the non-teaching monks.[15] It should, however, be noted that he was so obsessed by the interest in technical skills that his attitude towards acacdemic learning is hardly magnified.

Practically nothing is known about the educational background of his successor to the throne, Asé Täklä-Giyorgis. His reign is not well studied. But the next Emperor Yohannes IV, was well versed in eclcesiastical learning. One chronicler compares his education to that of the church scholars.[16] He descended from a longline of families with a tradition of religious learning from which he seems to have inherited not only the tradition but also books. A biographer of *Negus* Mikaél of Wällo records that Yohannes gave his godson, Mikaél, the *dawit* which belonged to the families for centuries and which he inherited through Mikaél Sehul, and that *Negus* Mikaél prayed with it even during the biographers time.[17]

Again like in the case of Téwodros, material is lacking to establish with certainty the degree of his belief in and his attitude towards academic education. He was a zealous Chris-

12. S. Rubenson, *King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Abäba: 1966), pp. 28-29.
13. Martin Flad, Henry A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London: 1968), p. 60.
14. Enno Litmann (Ed.), *Yä-Téwodros Tarik* (Princeton: 1902), pp. 27-28.
15. C. Mondon-Vidaillet (Ed.), *Yä-Dagmawi Téwodros Band Abennät Yamigan'Tarik* (Paris: 1897), pp. 27-28.
16. Annonymous, "Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV," (Ms. in the possession of the author, N. D.), folio 7.
17. Haylä-Maryam Särabiwon, "Yä-Le'ul Ras Mikaél Tarik," *A'emero*, 2.1. 1907 E. C.

tian and his *awaj* of 1878, demanding the conversion of Wällo Moslems to Christiantiy, was accompanied by the assignment of the famous *mämher* Akalä-Wäld to teach them.[18] We do not, however, know whether the activities of the *mämher* and his companions included 'literacy' or it was mere preaching of the Gospels. At least in the case of *Negus* Mikaél, the change of faith included the acquisition of reading skill in Ethiopic. The late *Aläqa* Lamma also tells us in his reminiscences that the educated were highly favoured by Yohannes in contrast to the illiterate.[19] One can, therefore, assume that many if not all aspired to acquire some learning in order to win the Imperial favour.

From the practical point of view, the emperor seems to have occasionally read documents for himself without the aid of a secretary. Portal, the British envoy to his court prepared an Amharic translation of a document and presented it to the Emperor in 1887 after which he made the following statement: "His Majesty read over the translation himself, and then caused his interpreter to read aloud, he then turned to me and said, 'I can do nothing of all this.' "[20] The fact that he ordered his interpreter when the need for louder reading came is an interesting phenomenon which was probably characteristic to all the rulers and their high officials. It was customary for the great dignitaries of the nineteenth century to employ scribes or secretaries not only to keep their correspondence but also to read aloud when necessary. At the Council of Boru-Méda in 1878, Yohannes ordered someone to read alooud both the original and the translation which came from the Patriarch of Alexandria.[21] Menelik also demanded of his officials in 188-89 to read to him article 17 of the proposed treaty of Uccialli when reminded by an Ethiopian of the dangerous consequences that might follow from the signing of such a treaty.[22] Chronicler Gäbrä-Sellasé, too, suggests the existence of the practice in the royal palace by using such a phrase as "... the listner would be bored and the reader would get tired" if all that happened was recorded in the chronicle.[23]

18. Gäbrä-Sellasé, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
19. Mängestu Lämma, *Mäsehafä Tezzeta Zä-Aläqa Lämma Haylu Wäldä-Tarik* (Addis Ababa: 1959 E.C.), p. 59.
20. G. Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London: 1892), pp. 157-58.
21. Gäbrä-Sellasé, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
22. Atmé, *op. cit.*, folio 102.
23. Gäbrä-Sellasé, *op. cit.*, pp. 40 and 85.

The fact that the soveriegns and their officials employed people to read to them should not, nevertheless, be understood that they could not read. The practice could have possibly originated from the great sense of honour entertained by the grand dignitaries. They were after all not to serve but to be served according to the traditional concept of lordship. Furthermore, there was no reason why they should reveal their weaknesses by stumbling over letters, words or phrases infront of their subjects. The secretaries read letters aloud on their behalf, preserved documents, and took down dictations.

The *mäkwanent*, of course, never learnt the art of writing. They did not even bother to learn their own signatures. Instead, they used seals. The only reference to an attempt to write, which the writer could so far come across was that of Emperor Menelik.[24] The educational background of Menelik is one of the obscure aspects of his life. His chronicler tells us nothing more than the fact that he was brought up away from the royal court at a place called Tamqé under a strict supervision of a guardian.[25] He was then taken to the north at about the age of twelve by Emperor Téwodros, but it is hard to say whether or not the sovereign helped him attain any formal education. Yet, from all indications Menelik could read. In a couple of instances, he is credited by his chronicler for investigating criminal cases by prudently examining, comparing and contrasting letters inscribed on parchments and seals.[26] The first Italian consul to Ethiopia, Salimbeni, also records that the emperor read his translation of a document in 1890 and admired the consuls calegraphy.[27] Finally, a volume, consisting of the Psalms and a collection of prayers, which exists in the manuscript section of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, bears indications that it was used by Menelik.[28]

A more interesting phenomenon in Menelik's history of education is, however, the fact that he attempted to write with his own hands. In the rainy season of 1878, he allegedly devised a new Amharic alphabet. The motive and purpose of

24. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 62 and 299-300.
27. Carlo Zaghi (Ed.), *Crispi e Menelich* (Torino: 1956), pp. 239-40.
28. I am grateful to Dr. Kenäfä-Regbä for bringing to my attention the existence of this manuscript.

the device are not clear. The new alphabet was composed of similar characters to those of the conventional Ethiopian alphabet; and one can assume, among a host of other possibilities that the king, if not trying simply to learn to write, indeed devised a code intended to serve for secret correspondence. In fact, the editor of Menelik's chronicle M. de Coppet attributes the new device to *Däjazmač* Mäšäša Wärqé, an educated notable who played an active role in the relations between Yohannes and Menelik.[29]

Whatever the purpose of Menelik's new alphabet was, the fact that the chronicler attributes the very writing of it to his master stands out as an intriguing historical problem. The art of writing was regarded as a degraded and evil skill not only by the *mäkwanent* but also by the clergy who were the source of whatever formal education existed. 'Literacy' in most cases, therefore, meant attaining the skill of reading only. Otherwise, the term could not, in its usual definition of "ability to read and write," be applied to the traditional Ethiopian society. Curious though it may seem, only a negligible proportion of the 'literati' could write in the nineteenth century. Referring to the last quarter of the century, His Highness *Ras* Täfäri described in one of His speeches of 1925 the magnitude of the problem with which the people were faced when desiring to communicate through letters simply because those who could write were rare.[30]

The absence of the practice of writing among the *mäkwanent* coupled with the custom of making secretaries read aloud on their behalf, gave the impression to many foreign travellers that the Ethiopian notalbes were wholly illiterate. Contrary to the consistent information obtainable from oral tradition, for example, Portal alleges that *Ras* Alula could neither read nor write.[31] Peace went further and extended the allegation to the whole aritsocratic class.[32] The French traveller Vanderheym, on the other hand, avoids such a sweeping generalization by stating that the grand officials employed secretaries mainly to write for them.[33]

29. Maurice de Coppet (Ed.), *Chronique du Régne de Ménélik II Roi des Rois D'Ethiopie* (Paris: 1932), p. 158 fn. 7.
30. *Fré Känäfer' Zä-Qädamawi Haylä-Sellasé* (Addis Abäba: 1943 E.C.), p. 13.
31. Portal, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
32. A. B. Pease, *Travel and Sport in Africa*, III (London: 1902), p. 9.
33. J. G. Vanderheym, *Une Expedition avec le Negous Menelik* (Paris: 1986), pp. 120 f.

The origin for the hatred of the art of writing is one of the enigmatic problems in the cultural history of Ethiopia. According to His Excellency *Blattén-Géta* Mahtämä-Sellasé, the traditional society tended to admire soldiery as a profession in contrast to high academic learning, and that bravery and patriotism were among the most desirable qualities to the attainment of which one always aspired.[34] Oral tradition on the other hand consistently attributes its origin to the belief that he who could write was likely to copy an *Awda-Nagast* or a book of magic, and that as a source of such a tendency, writing came to be regarded with contempt because of its association with magic.[35] Whatever explanations are forwarded, the origin of the bias against the art of writing was probably connected with the general social prejudice against manual work. Menelik was probably right in including it in the list of social biases in his proclamation of January 1908 which demanded social respect for manual labour.[36]

Emperor Menelik was perhaps the most advanced Ethiopian monarch of the nineteenth century regarding innovations and attempts to break down some of the detrimental social customs. All foreigners who met him describe invariably his great interest in new things.[37] His enthusiasm undoubtedly extended to academic education in its wider sense. He befriended foreign educated Ethiopians; he also sent abroad a few students among whom was his own cousin, Gugsa Dargé. Finally, he opened a modern school in 1906-7 at the capital and obliged the sons of the notables to enroll in it.[38] In view of this, it is not surprising to read Rosen's remark of 1905 that writing was one of the major courses in the palace (a precursor to Menelik School) which was attended mainly by the pages.[39]

34. Mahtämä-Sellasé Wäldä-Mäsqäl, Balambäras, *Zekrä Nägär* (Addis Abäba: 1942 E. C.), p. 616.
35. This story is popular among many informants including members of the clergy. But it is difficult to test the validy of such an allegation.
36. Mahtämä-Sellasé, *op. cit.*, pp. 432-33.
37. E. G. see Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, 1800-1935, (Addis Ababa: 1968), p. 20.
38. *Fré Känafer*, op. cit., p. 31.
39. P. Felix Rosen, *Eine Deutsche Tesandts chaft in Abessinien* (Leipzig: 1907), p. 267.

To conclude this brief survey of the education of the ruling class in the nineteenth century, it can safely be generalized that certain aspects of formal education, particularly reading of prayers, were popular among the *mäkwanent* while other aspects suffered cultural biases. Most of the soverigns and their *mäkwanent* could read their prayers and letters, but they leaned so heavily on secretaries for their correspondence that it may not be a mistake to refer to them as a class of semi-demi-literates. The reason for their disinterestedness in higher academic education may be attribued to their socio-cultural background. The fact that whatever academic learning existed in Ethiopia was of a religious character can nonetheless share the blame. Furthermore, the clergy, though often respected for their profession, were always regraded by the upper class as an embodiment of cowardice and cunning, a prejudice which was hardly an asset in a country where bravery was venerated. There was, therefore, no reason for any one of the *mäkwanent* to join the clergy in high learning. The majority of the clergy themselves entertained bad supersittions against the skill of writing, and the *mäkwanent* could not escape their influence. The paradox was nevertheless outstanding: higher leraning was not greatly appreciated, and yet scholars were sought for their legal, historical and religious knowledge; Western education was looked upon with suspicion, and yet foreign educated Ethiopians were constantly employed in communicating with the outside world; writing was regraded with contempt, and yet writers were always needed in the compositions of letters and amulets and in the copying of the Holy scriptures.