

## The Land of the Scribe and the Thumb Print

### The Sociology and Politics of Literacy in Ethiopia

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#### ABSTRACT

The foci of this article are two-fold: The first is to provide a critical overview of the history of literacy in Ethiopia and the second is to highlight the sociological, political, and historical contexts within which literacy evolved over the centuries. Built-in these discussions is a tacit theoretical underpinning that views literacy as a construct which intersects socio-economic, political, ideological, and historical dimensions. Such a conception understands literacy as a human activity which transcends the narrow confines of rationality and technicality. Rather, it regards literacy as a process-oriented human endeavor that encompasses both technical, cultural, and ideological dimensions and expressions all at the same time. The title of this article, Ethiopia: The land of the scribe and the thumb print reveals the gist and the leitmotif of the paradoxical literacy situation of Ethiopia: Despite the possession of centuries-old literacy, Ethiopia's rate of literacy achievement remains to be one of the lowest in Africa which, indeed, is paradoxical.

#### SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Literacy represents a mesh in a very wide net that stretches from religion, culture, and history to politics and economics and out to the general public in the wider society. Thus, a discussion of literacy in any society is enmeshed in a web of sociological, historical, and political issues. These multiple issues possess complex ideological manifestations and are revealed in the day-to-day literacy practices of institutions as they conduct their business of literacy. In Ethiopia, too, the story of literacy intersects the overall socio-historical and political expanse of the country. This story thus needs to be told in the contexts of the possession of traditional and modern institutional infrastructures through which superstructures of varied orientations manifested themselves. The articulation of this story and an understanding of it, thereof, requires a succinct examination of the infrastructural/superstructural tensions and harmonies that undergird it. It therefore is appropriate to provide the reader with a brief account of Ethiopia's socio-political and historical profile so as to be used as background information to explicate the complexities of literacy development in the country.

A number of writers, both expatriate and national, consider Ethiopia as a country peculiar, in many respects, among the countries of the whole of Africa. The country's achievement and possession of its own writing system and calendar; its own distinctive art, music and poetic forms; as well as its maintenance of political independence throughout its history all make Ethiopia unique. (1,2,3) Since the time of the Axsumite Empire, generally considered to be the precursor of modern Ethiopia, the country has been dominated politically and culturally by successive Christian ruling classes. Throughout ages, these classes sought and sustained their legitimacy of power through their close alignment with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church(E.O.C.).

Successive Ethiopian governments sought legitimacy through claims of divine relationship to God rather than succumbing to the will of the people. They were thus theocratic-based governments much of whose ideological justifications to rule were closely aligned with the theological teachings of the E.O.C. An understanding of this alignment is particularly important to discern the active and dominant role of the E.O.C. in the literary life of the country. For a seminal work on the socio-cultural and political bonds of the church and state, see Tamirat.(4)

The modern Ethiopian national-state, which the present leadership inherited, evolved over centuries and took its present socio-political shape under the arduous and adept leadership of Emperor Menilik II toward the last quarter of the 19th century (for an excellent summary of this political evolution, see Addis Hiwet (5)). Emperor Menilik was not only the unifying leader but also the "education monarch". The modernization of the Ethiopian Empire-State was started by Minilik and completed by his successor and last Ethiopian monarch, Haile Sellassie I. While Menilik opened the first modern (European) elementary school, Haile Sellassie established the first university college for which he may be referred to as the "second education monarch".

Perhaps as a result of his early close encounters with the French as his tutors, Emperor Haile Selassie did seem to have recognized the close link between schooling and the modernization of the state machinery including the army and the bureaucracy. His recognition of the modernizing mission of schooling was self-evident in his aggressive expansion of the school system and the institutionalization of several other literacy institutions. The quantity and quality of such institutions reached an unprecedented level in the nation's history although it could not yet match the rapid increase in population.

Ethiopia has never had a census until 1984. The credibility of this census, however, is questionable and its completeness suspect since, at the time it was taken, a substantial portion of the country was under a wide-spread civil war. The degree of accuracy of this census and, hence, its credibility is very relevant for our purpose here since it is intimately related to the context within which the literacy/illiteracy statistics are to be viewed. But, for now it suffices to say that the 1984 census puts the total population of Ethiopia at 42 million and its growth rate at 2.9 percent. (6) The present estimate puts the national population at around 53 million and the growth rate at 3.1 percent. (7)

One useful way of looking at the social composition of the Ethiopian society is the religious practices of the people. The two largest religious groups are Christians and Moslems followed by groups that believe in one or another form of traditional African religions and a form of Judaism. The various churches, monasteries, and mosques scattered throughout the country have played significant roles in the literary life of the society for centuries. A symbiosis of Christianity and Islam has, at times, served as a unifying ideology for the country through creating a conducive socio-psychological climate and, at other times, as a source of bitter conflict and civil war.

The linguistic-ethnic composition of Ethiopia is also another prism through which one can look at any social phenomenon that occurs in the country. Like most African nations, Ethiopia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse

country. This diversity had deserved the country two diametrically opposed labels, viz., an "ethnic museum" (8) and a "prison of nationalities" (9). The more important point for our purpose, however, is that Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state with many languages, ethnic groups, religions, and cultures. It has been estimated that well over 80 different languages and dialects are spoken in the country. (10)

Of all the multiple languages and dialects spoken in the country, Amharic, which also happened to be the language of the palace and the court for many centuries, has been demonstrably dominant in that it had served as a lingua franca for business, commerce, and government; it has been a medium of instruction in primary schools for long although an educational policy that favors the provision of classroom instruction in several other local languages has been introduced by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) since 1992; it is still the official language of the federal government; and it is spoken as a mother-tongue by a substantial segment of the population.

The Amharic syllabry, which is a distinctively Ethiopian writing system, is believed to have been "derived from the writing system of ancient South Arabian inscriptions" and "is used, with slight variation, for Giiiz, Amharic and Tigrinya and occasionally for several other languages..." (11) The invention and further development of such a writing system is certainly an immense and creative contribution of Ethiopians to human civilization. The possession of such an old artifact is a national treasure which needs to be cherished and nourished not only by Ethiopians but, also, all Africans both in the continent and the Diaspora, for, it represents and expresses the racial and ethnic transcendence of human inventions. The recent decision of certain political groupings to adopt the Latin script for writing some of the Ethiopian local languages (e.g. the Afar, Sidama, and Oromiffa languages) is mind boggling given the presence of a more culturally relevant and historically closer literate endogenous culture.

The process of nation-building which, in earnest, began during the zenith days of the Axsumite Empire was facilitated through the movement of people as a result of migration, commerce, and military expeditions and conquests. Consequently, many Ethiopians today acquire a number of languages in addition to their own mother-tongues either through the natural process of learning one another's language as a result of geographic adjacency or formal education, the latter being true particularly for Amharic. Learning to speak Amharic, let alone to read and write, has been considered as a sign of modernity, a measure of success, and a source of power, especially prior to 1974. Put another way, Amharic retained its privileged status as a result of the view that it is "more highly developed than other Ethiopian languages, in that it has a well established writing system and fairly well standardized norms of spoken and written usage". (12)

However, Amharic's privileged position is now getting eroded by the day due to the "politics of ethnicity and ethnic self-determination". Whether or not this will create an enabling condition for the expansion of literacy and national cohesion or ethno-national fragmentation and the reduction of literacy is anybody's guess. This is probably so because the country today is in a state of political confusion and lacks a sense of direction and stability. While it may be true that instability can create opportunity for plurality and success in many endeavors including literacy, it is equally true that it can lead to further instability and chaos.

The political inadequacies of the monarchy and its concomitant socio-economic inequalities finally brought down the old imperial rule and opened a new chapter in Ethiopian history. A social movement that involved peasants, workers, intellectuals, and soldiers erupted in February 1974 and culminated in the abolition of the monarchy and its replacement by a military government. The age-old ruling institutions and ideologies came under attack. Ethiopia's old political anomaly in the whole of continental Africa came to a halt while, at the same time, a new anomalous political and economic terrain began to evolve.

Following the 1974 Revolution that abolished the monarchy, a number of far-reaching reforms were initiated. The major political and economic demand of this popular movement, expectedly, was the cessation of the feudal property relations. And, this was accomplished through the much celebrated Rural Land Proclamation of March, 1975 that made rural land the 'collective property' of the Ethiopian people. (13) Not surprisingly, the TGE has also retained the basic tenets of this policy, perhaps, because of a camouflaged Marxian understanding of the Ethiopian society reminiscent of the Stalinist background of the core leadership of the TGE.

The 1975 agrarian reform not only destroyed the foundation on which the feudal system was built but, also, created a conducive atmosphere for instituting subsequent major socio-economic reforms that were to serve as pillars for a significant restructuring of society. Old institutions were replaced with new ones and old official views were condemned

and new ones implanted. These changes were the result of not only the radicalism of the leaders of the popular movement but, also, the appalling living conditions of the mass of the Ethiopian people. The dialectic of the demeaning life-conditions of people and the radical leadership it produced precipitated a strong sympathy for new visions and institutions.

The new military leadership, having embraced socialism as its official ideology, tried to establish its political legitimacy primarily through socio-economic reforms. Nevertheless, the leadership began to manifest a predilection toward political authoritarianism a la its predecessor right from its inception. This tendency was later to lead to consequences that stood against the very reforms and institutions that the leadership introduced. Notwithstanding the dire consequences of the policies which in hindsight become obvious, hitherto unknown conditions for mass action for the improvement of the political, social, and economic conditions of the people were created during the first few years of the revolution. These conditions were in many respects related to the course of educational and literacy developments. Even much more fundamental and far-reaching, but, controversial policy actions have been taken by the TGE which came into the Ethiopian political scene in May, 1991.

The foregoing socio-historical description of the Ethiopian society should now serve us as a general background to better understand and appreciate the historical evolution of literacy in the country. In Ethiopia, educational research in general and literacy research in particular is at its nascent stage. The purpose of this article is therefore to document and/or critically examine the development of literacy in Ethiopia in relation to history, sociology, and politics. It is hoped that this modest contribution will be a positive addition to future literacy research efforts in the country, albeit in a very small way.

## **TRADITIONAL CHURCH LITERACY**

After the introduction of Christianity to the Kingdom of Axsum in the fourth century A.D., the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in due course evolved into a major indigenous institution that exercised an immense influence on the socio-cultural and literary life of the people. The E.O.C.'s dominance of the Ethiopian sociocultural life, particularly in the northern and central highlands of present day Ethiopia, is well documented. The Ethiopian Orthodox clergy is said to have taught in schools attached to the monasteries and churches of northern and central Ethiopia since the fifth or sixth century A.D. (14,15,16) In his seminal and now classic work, Richard Pankhurst eloquently summarizes the educational role of the Church:

... In the highlands of Christian Ethiopia, the Church for centuries constituted the main guardian of traditional culture, and provided the only schools in the land. The Ethiopian church schools, which have in all probability existed for more than a thousand years, are attached to individual churches and monasteries which today number over 15,000 though all have not yet been counted. The education they have so long given is primarily religious, and consists in the first stages of the students' career in learning to read, write, and recite a few biblical texts in Giiz, aptly referred to as the 'Latin of Ethiopia' in as much as it is a dead, ecclesiastical language. (17)

In northern and central Ethiopia, there is a church in almost every village where instruction is provided. The curriculum of these church schools is exclusively religious in as much as they were not designed "to extend man's understanding of the world but rather to lead men to accepting the existing order of things as it is, to preserve whatever has been handed down through the years, and in turn to pass it on unchanged to the next generation". (18) In a similar vein, Teshome Wagaw critically appraises church education in Ethiopia when he wrote:

Church leaders, here as elsewhere, were conservative in thought and deed, and the philosophy behind their whole approach to education reflects their attitudes. A child was supposed to be quiet, polite, shy, unquestioningly obedient and uncomplaining, and respectful toward the church, government officials and the elders. If he disobeyed or absented himself from class, he was beaten severely. (19)

The traditional church education system was thus surrounded by an atmosphere of harshness and conservatism in the sense that the metaphysical rather than the real, obedience rather than comradeship, shyness rather than assertiveness, repetition and memorization rather than critical reflection and discourse constituted its pedagogy and ideology. As

Donald Levine rightly put it, traditional church education in Ethiopia has never sought "to cultivate the individual but aims solely to prepare cultural specialists who will be able to perform the rituals and perpetuate the teachings of the Ethiopian Church". Levine goes on to explain that the preparation of cultural specialists was accomplished through teaching the church liturgy where pupils memorized extensive extracts from the bible in Giiz with minimum comprehension. (20) Learning and instruction in the so called modern school, too, appear to share these shortcomings, probably because of the deep entrenchment and transfer of church pedagogical practices onto modern educational institutions. Nevertheless, such a critical appraisal of church education should not belittle the positive role church schools played in the sustenance and nurturance of literacy in Ethiopia. No one can dispute the immense contribution of the E.O.C. to the "enlightenment" of the Ethiopian society for centuries. It was the Kes Timhert Betoch, the priest schools, that modulated the how's and what's of reading and writing in historic Ethiopia ranging from primary level all the way to higher education.

Despite the Church's long history of involvement in literacy activities in the country, its contribution to the spread of literacy among the populace was, however, very limited. This was perhaps, among other things, due to the lower attendance of children, for they were desperately needed on the farm. Very few children of the peasantry attended these schools and even those who attended dropped out after doing very little in reading and, thus, creating fertile environs for relapse. Reflecting on the rate of attendance, Pankhurst wrote, "... traditional schools, like those in former times, were attended by a minority of the population. The literacy rate was therefore not high, the more so as church instruction was entirely in Giiz, a dead language". (21) This state of affairs was exacerbated by a conspicuous exclusion of girls from the priest schools to the extent that one could consider them as "boys' schools".

Moreover, the Ethiopian traditional literati, despite its romantic reception by some (22), has always been known for its lack of novation and innovation. The debteras, as these traditional literati are known, wield their power over the populace through their exclusive possession of and access to the word. The debteras were believed (and are still believed in many parts of the country) to possess magical curative powers and were often appealed to by many people for specific protection from the evil eye and other vices. They, therefore, saw no advantage in spreading literacy among the common people since that would mean working against their own self-interest, i.e. power. Instead, they made sure that their prestige and power was protected through the uncontested and unshared possession of the skills of reading and more importantly writing as the latter was often associated with witchcraft. (23)

The Church's involvement in the spread of literacy began to increase when some church schools, particularly those around cities and towns, adopted the curriculum of governmental primary schools in the 1960s. (24) The Church's increased involvement in popular education through teaching, reading and writing at priest schools, kes temeheret bet as they are called in Amarigna, is evidenced in the Ministry of Education's (MOE) report which indicated that in 1969-70, these schools turned out 64,041 neo-literates. (25)

In addition to the Church's quantitatively expanded literacy involvement, the foregoing figures imply two new phenomena: its submission to the modernization paradigm and its long overdue reawakening in recognizing the significance of reducing the national illiteracy. Despite its socio-historical limitations in the democratization of literacy, the E.O.C., nonetheless, has to be commended for having "...contributed to creating and maintaining a modicum of literacy in the country...". (26)

## **TRADITIONAL MOSQUE LITERACY**

It would be a gross error to attribute Ethiopia's historical and comparative literacy achievement exclusively to the traditional church schools. While the leading role of preserving literacy may go to the E.O.C., another institution, the Mosque had also played a significant role in Ethiopia's possession of a literate culture. The Quranic schools of the Muslim-inhabited areas in the eastern and western lowlands of the country had their share in the creation of sustainable literacy in the country. It has been noted by historians that children from Somali and Danakil families were taught to read and write Arabic in the early part of the 19th century and perhaps even much earlier. For example, the city of Harar in eastern Ethiopia was known for its good Quranic schools where children received instruction in reading and writing Arabic during the day while adults studied Muslim law in the evening. (27,28,29)

Arabic is the religious language of Islam and therefore it has been the medium of instruction in Quranic schools. Like

that of the church schools, the curriculum and the purpose of Quranic schools and their purpose were exclusively religious. Pupils in these schools were oftentimes expected to memorize many chapters from the Quran with minimal understanding since recitation rather than reflection was the focus of the schools. As a result, many learners dropped out with very nascent literacy skills. (30) A dilemma that arises when discussing Quranic schools in Ethiopia is the extent to which they could be considered as endogenous institutions since both their curriculum and the language of instruction are typical of Quranic schools elsewhere. Nonetheless, their contribution to Ethiopia's maintenance of a literate culture cannot be discounted.

It may be worthwhile at this point to ponder about some of the major similarities between the Church schools and the Quranic schools. These similarities are perhaps rooted deep into the very nature of the two religions with their tendency to idealize the unknown and powerful. The Quranic schools' involvement in the dissemination of literacy seems to have been very much restricted, probably, for the same reason mentioned for the 'priest schools', i.e., learners' labor on the farm was more valued than their schooling. The curricula and purposes of both schools were and still are primarily concerned with fostering religious values and beliefs and complying with the rules of authority and power. Their instructional methods are conspicuously authoritarian and teacher-centered where strict memorization of non-comprehensible religious texts are valued and promoted. Also, both schools appear to be outstanding in their systematic exclusion of women.

Despite the foregoing shortcomings, the long time operation of these two schools provides a testimony to the continuation of traditional education in Ethiopia. The more recent phenomenon of modern (European) education could therefore be considered as a break in this continuity although both the Church and Quranic schools have been recently involved in modern education provisions to some degree. The major responsibility of the modern education sector, which is described below, has been left to the government, missionaries, private entrepreneurs, and organizations and are described below.

## **SECULAR LITERACY**

Relative to the history of the traditional forms of education discussed above, the secularized form has been introduced to Ethiopia only fairly recently. It was not known until a few mission schools were opened in the late 19th century. These schools operated under difficult conditions because of the strong opposition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which, as pointed out earlier, had a commanding role in literacy acquisition. This opposition was also strengthened by the resultant resistance of not only of the monarchs but also the general public. (31) The opening of the mission schools is therefore to be viewed as a private initiative. The seeds of public education were yet to be sown during the early part of this century.

As pointed out earlier, the processes of modernization and unification were the dual achievements of Emperor Minilik II who ruled the country from 1889 to 1913. The products of western civilization such as the railroads, the telegraph and telephone, the postal system, and the first modern schools all got a foothold in the country during the reign of this Emperor. (32) The sources of these reforms are difficult to determine, for, we may never be certain whether they were due to the adeptness of the reformer or the demands of some global phenomena. Nevertheless, it may be safe to assume that there must have been a world process that made its way to Ethiopia in the person of Emperor Menilik. Based on the pioneering work of Richard Pankhurst, Tekeste Negash makes the following observation about the beginning of secular education:

Modern public education made a modest entry into the history of the country in the beginning of this century (1908) with the establishment of the Menilik School. The idea for the school was certainly inspired by the mission schools that sporadically appeared after the middle of the nineteenth century. The Ethiopian Church, which up to that period had a virtual monopoly on education, strongly opposed the establishment of a secular school. The Ethiopian Church feared the undermining potential of a state school system...(33)

Menilik's initiatives were vigorously pursued by Emperor Haile Sellassie who is rightly identified as the leader who, through his systematic maneuvers of the Church and the nobility, brought Ethiopia closer to the twentieth century. His enthusiastic modernization efforts and keen interest in education were apparent from early on when, following Menilik's

footsteps, he opened the second modern school during his regency in 1925. This Emperor, himself a graduate of the Minilik School, recognized the modernizing value of education so much so that he encouraged and protected the educational activities of foreign missionaries to the dismay of the Orthodox Church and the aristocracy. This probably makes Haile Selassie the first Ethiopian Emperor to challenge the authority and monopoly of the E.O.C. over learning in the country.

Emperor Haile Sellassie's period had been marked by the proliferation of primary and secondary schools throughout the country at a rate unprecedented in Ethiopia's entire history. The country's further acceleration in educational developments may be attributable to the Emperor's insightful recognition of the potential modernizing role of education in the nation building process. In this regard, Richard Panhurst wrote: "The advent of Ras Tafari Makonnen (the future Emperor Haile Selassie) as regent and Heir to the Throne in 1916 was an important event in the history of Ethiopian education, as of modernization in general". The Emperor's success in establishing a Ministry of Education and Fine Arts in 1930 which he presided over for many years also attests to his determination to modernize the state machinery. (34)

Despite all these educational efforts, however, Ethiopia's educational performance remained very low and even lagged behind the newly formed independent nations of Africa. For example, Balsvik points out that, "in 1961, when the average enrollment in Africa primary schools was estimated at more than 40 percent, the Ethiopian figure was 3.8 percent; on the secondary level, estimates for the continent and Ethiopia were 3.5 and 0.5 percent, respectively". (35) This created a paradoxical situation in that a country with a long literacy tradition found itself unable to cope with the educational demands of the twentieth century not even by African standards. This paradoxical situation is best captured by the famous maxim that refers to Ethiopia as the land of the scribe and the thumb print. Lipsky provides an excellent summary of Ethiopia's ailing educational performance more than three decades ago:

The country's illiteracy rate, approximately 95 percent in 1960, is one of the highest in the world. The inaccessibility of a major portion of the country, the critical teacher shortage and the resistance of the high nobility to education as an aspect of unwanted modernization are major factors in delaying the progress of learning. The existence of a great number of languages and dialects, many of which have no written alphabet, and the unfamiliarity of more than half of the population with the official language, Amharic, pose additional difficulties to the spreading of literacy. (36)

The situation in the 1970s did not change substantially since Lipsky made the foregoing observations. If one can trust statistics produced in the absence of a complete census, the illiteracy rate in 1974 was put at 93 percent which is only a 2 percent gain since Lipsky made his estimate 14 years ago. The country thus entered its new historical chapter with only a 7 percent literacy rate. Since its inception, the post-Revolution Ethiopian leadership sought its legitimacy through promoting a train of thought that portrayed the imperial rule as one responsible for the nation's backwardness including its lower achievements in education.

As it will be shown later, the new leadership began to show its preference toward mass education through its very initial critical characterization of the imperial system of education as one which was elitist. Its initial commitment toward the democratization of educational provision was manifested in what was known as the "Development Through Cooperation: Work and Enlightenment Campaign". This campaign, launched in 1975 and in which about 60,000 secondary school students, teachers and, university students participated, had a component of literacy teaching. The primary goal of the literacy portion of this campaign was to teach "reading and writing to as many people as possible and to give basic agricultural, health, technological, and other community-oriented education for the betterment of the masses in cooperation with appropriate authorities". (37)

The campaign can be considered as the precursor of the 1979-1990 Ethiopian National Literacy Campaign(ENLC) in the sense that it was the first systematic effort of literacy provision to be carried out at a large scale. In the past, sporadic and limited efforts, largely by non-governmental organizations, were made to tackle the problem of illiteracy, but these could not even keep pace with the growth of population. (38) Statistical skepticism notwithstanding, approximately 160,000 people are said to have been made literate through their participation in the Development Through Cooperation Campaign. (39) Even if the statistics were to be trusted, the literacy gain is quite insignificant when measured against the national illiteracy rate. Given the added problem of relapse, it, indeed, is a drop in the bucket. Nevertheless, the experience gained from this campaign in the sphere of structure, logistics, mobilization, and text preparation cannot be

underestimated.

## MISSIONARY LITERACY

Of the organizations that have been active in literacy development in Ethiopia, the foreign missionary schools set-up, mainly, by the Portuguese, British, German, French, Italian, Swedish, and American have been in operation for a fairly long period of time. Like that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church schools, the primary literacy interest of the mission schools was largely religious. That is, their major focus was on a gradual dissemination of denominational biblical knowledge among the Ethiopian citizenry. The ideological and functional nature of literacy in Ethiopia was therefore continued and reinforced by the work of these early missionaries. In other words, the word was simply employed as an effective technology through which the evangelization of the populace was to be accomplished.

The first missionary boarding school was opened in 1603 after a Jesuit missionary succeeded in converting the king of Gonder, the seat of government at the time. This school instructed the sons of the nobility in reading and writing (40) even though the long term goal had been the conversion of a large portion of the population into Catholicism. Over the next few centuries, a number of other missionary schools were opened in different parts of the country to accomplish this goal. One writer, Airen, claimed that the literacy rate reached unparalleled levels in Ethiopian history as a consequence of the literacy works of the foreign missionaries. (41) This claim, however, appears to be an exaggerated assertion motivated by an ideological orientation rather than a true literacy achievement supported by evidence. Airen's primary motive was, I would argue, the articulation of a hidden ideology which highlights and subtly expresses the superior contribution of European missionaries to Ethiopia's "enlightenment". Otherwise, subsequent national literacy statistics wouldn't have been as low as they had been. Airen's foregoing observation, however, could be meaningful to the extent that it pointed more to the lower performance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church than to the performance of the mission schools.

The advent of the foreign missionaries, besides posing a challenge and a threat to the EOC, also, brought a hitherto unknown literacy phenomenon in the country, i.e., the use of a vernacular, Amharic, for literacy instruction. The missionaries, in their drive to reach out to the ordinary people, began to use Amharic in their day-to-day literacy activities. Given the E.O.C.'s persistent use of the liturgical language of Ge'ez in its schools, the decision of the missionaries to utilize a popularly spoken language was, indeed, a watershed in Ethiopia's literacy history. It was probably the most revolutionary educational development in the country initiated and implemented by foreign nationals. The completion of the translation of the Bible into Amharic in 1818 by an Ethiopian convert to Catholicism (42), was also a landmark in the democratization of literacy since, now, more than ever, common people speaking the vernacular could be motivated to learn the be, bu (literally, the ABC) of literacy in order to read the Bible.

The contribution of the mission schools to literacy in Ethiopia extends to other educational spheres as well. Their religious and literacy activities were oftentimes supplemented by the provision of instructions in various local and European languages as well as the training of people in technical and vocational fields. Unlike in the E.O.C.'s schools, people could now see for themselves the possibility and importance of establishing a linkage between schooling and life. The inclusion of girls in mission schools was also a radical educational phenomenon that brought a challenge to the thinking and schooling practices of the traditional educational establishment. (43)

However, neither their evangelical missions nor their literacy efforts could win the missionaries acceptance. Many Ethiopians were unsympathetic to and resentful of their presence in the country as a consequence of which many were persecuted, detained, and expelled from the country. (44) The older institutions (e. g. the E.O.C. and the nobility) considered missionary presence and activism as an incursion in the power politics of the country. Their presence was perceived as a conspiracy orchestrated by alien forces to subvert the country via a religious conversion to Catholicism. This was in turn viewed as an instrument of divide and control by polarizing the people along religious dimensions. The stiff resistance to religious conversion may thus be explained in terms of a broader national resistance put up by Ethiopians to defend their country from any form of foreign intrusion and may also be regarded as a critical element in the country's maintenance of national independence and sovereignty. That was probably why the long time Ethiopianist, Richard Pankhurst, two decades ago, concluded that the power of the EOC and, to a lesser extent, Islam significantly restricted the impact of European missionaries and made them less successful in Ethiopia than anywhere else in Africa.

(45,46)

Some of the curricula used in mission schools did also make some to be very skeptical and critical about the motives of missionaries. Berehane Mariam Sahle Michael, while commending the mission schools run by the British, French, and Italians for teaching Ethiopians different languages which are vital for accessing knowledge produced elsewhere, at the same time, expressed his wariness about the intent and content of the history curriculum. He considered the contents to be irrelevant to the youth of Ethiopia and, only, designed to contaminate young Ethiopians with alien cultures and ideologies. (47) To this writer, the history curriculum was like a double-edged sword aimed at the gradual destruction of the sovereignty of the Ethiopian nation.

One major educational contribution of more recent missionaries that deserves special mention is the Lutheran Mekane Yesus Evangelical Church's "Yemiserach Dimtse," Literacy Campaign (YDLC), launched between 1962-1975. This campaign has been operative in 12 of the 14 administrative regions of the country. The YDLC, whose target group was young adults between ages 15 to 25 residing in rural Ethiopia, had the following objectives: teach participants how to read, write, and compute in Amharic; provide a basic social and civic education; make literacy work-oriented; and promote socio-economic changes. It was reported that up to December 1975, a total of 535,391 students participated in the campaign. (48) This Campaign is probably a demonstration of a break in continuity in that it pointed to the evolution of traditional literacy work to encompass issues of socio-economic development and modernity.

## **LITERACY UNDER SOME VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS**

A number of national voluntary organizations have also played key roles in the planning and implementation of literacy programs following the publication of the November 1955 Imperial Edict enjoining on everybody the pursuit of literacy. The most outstanding ones include teacher and student groups, the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (EWWA), and the National Association of the Army of Letters, Beherawi Yefidel Serawit Mahber in Amharic. (49) The major goal of each of these organizations was the teaching of the three Rs to as many people as possible. As might be expected, this was in tune with the UNESCO's 1950s philosophy of fundamental education. The application of those skills to vocations had yet to await the directions of the UNESCO through the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP) in which Ethiopia was to become a participant in the 1960s.

Students at elementary and secondary schools across the country, students at Teacher Training Institutes, University College students and other enlightened youth groups were organized to conduct literacy classes for adults and children. The University College students, who in the 1960s were deeply aware of the lower educational performance of their country, were particularly instrumental in bringing the awareness to elementary and secondary school students. The Ethiopian University Service, which required every university student to provide a one-year national service after completion of the junior year, also created a framework for communication among and between students at all levels. It provided a network through which the more mature and more sophisticated university students could help in organizing other students to provide literacy. Elementary and secondary school teachers were also mobilized to render such services in evening classes. The driving force behind such useful and youthful action was the students' strong "nationalistic feelings" and a critical awareness of Ethiopia's poor literacy performance even by African standards. This lower rate of performance was, of course, more pronounced and more obvious when looking at the literacy condition of Ethiopian women.

The feminization of illiteracy in patriarchal societies is a well known fact. Women's social position under such arrangements has always been subordinate to men. Ethiopia being one, women have been culturally excluded from having access to the word, that men were there to read it for them. The first organization to recognize and change this state of affairs in Ethiopia was the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (EWWA). The EWWA, in its effort to promote the woman to woman reading culture (i. e. women taking charge of their lives) attempted to set up centers where "adult women in and outside of Addis Ababa ... were taught literacy skills, home sciences, personal hygiene and several vocational courses, sometimes lasting two years, to enable the participants to earn a living. (50,51)

A third voluntary organization that joined hands in the fight against illiteracy which became active between 1962-71 was the National Association of the Army of Letters (NAAL), Beherawi Yefidel Serawit, a non-profit organization. This

organization was a brain child:

of a group of relatively highly educated and placed Ethiopians concerned about the state of illiteracy in the country. The group received the philosophy of "hulum yimar" (literally, let all learn) from Menilik's time. As a non-profit making voluntary organization, the NLCO used voluntary teachers, students, free classrooms during, especially, the "Kiremt" [summer] vacation and evening hours. It produced and used its own teaching materials. (52)

The NAAL was set up under the patronage of the Emperor and received support from local and foreign sources. However, the literacy outcome of this organization has been insignificant given the magnitude of the problem of adult illiteracy in the country. The fact that its leadership was left to volunteers with a token government support made its contribution to the reduction of illiteracy marginal. (53) Nonetheless, the organization, in collaboration with others, was responsible for bringing the magnitude of the problem of illiteracy to national awareness. The NAAL was one of the co-sponsors of the first national conference on adult illiteracy in Ethiopia in 1971. (54,55)

## **ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS AND CAMPAIGNS**

Although the imperial governments of Ethiopia since the time of Emperor Menilik were largely preoccupied with the expansion of formal schooling, they sometimes appeared to be cognizant of the magnitude of adult illiteracy and the importance of adult literacy. The 1898 and 1921 imperial Edicts by Emperor Menilik and Empress Zewditu, respectively, which elucidated the philosophy of Hulum Yimar, were testimonies of this recognition. Hulum Yimar was an ideological expression of the need to make a massive and popular effort to reduce and eventually eliminate illiteracy from the country. The first issue of a national newspaper, Berehanena Selam, "Light and Peace", in January 1, 1925 underscored the provision of large-scale literacy as one of the major justifications for its institution. (56)

Likewise, the October 20, 1928 Proclamation of Education, issued by King Teferi Mekonnen (soon-to-be-Emperor Haile Selassie), stated that children between ages 7 to 21 must receive instruction in reading and writing. A fine of Ethiopian Birr 50.00 was to be paid by parents who failed to do so and seemed to be consonant with the hulum yimar philosophy of the preceding periods. (57) The November 1955 Imperial Edict on literacy may also be viewed as a continuation of the 1928 Proclamation except that the former was more formal and specific in its articulation than the latter. The 1955 Edict was not only a major step in the recognition of the problem of illiteracy but also a bold move in its proposed solutions. According to Tilahun, this proclamation:

(a) encouraged the [adult] illiterates between the ages of 18 and 50 to learn Amharic reading and writing in their spare time; (b) instructed all employers to provide learning facilities for their employees; (c) requested EOC especially its clergy to teach Amharic; and (d) authorized the MEFA to draw up the necessary program and supervising mechanism and to ensure its implementation. In short and according to this proclamation, the entire community was expected to assist in the drive for literacy. (58)

Perhaps as a result of this Edict and the UNESCO's continued advise, the 1960s saw an upsurge in adult education in general and adult literacy in particular. A Ministry of Education and Fine Arts(MOEFA) publication (59) indicated that well over 24 organizations were already engaged in literacy activities by mid 1960s. In an attempt to coordinate the literacy activities of these organizations, the Imperial Government established a Division of Adult Education and Literacy within the MOEFA under the Department of Formal Education. The Division was, however, unable to successfully execute its tasks primarily due to inadequate financial allocations and insufficient staff. (60) The Division was elevated to a Department of Adult Education in 1967-68 and charged with the responsibility of coordinating literacy efforts, collecting statistics and setting standards. (61) This was a formal institutionalization of the national will to attack systemic illiteracy in a more coordinated fashion.

Ethiopia, a member state of UNESCO, had been selected to be one of the eleven countries where the Experimental World Literacy Program was to be implemented. Accordingly, the Ethiopian Imperial Government agreed to carry out two experimental projects aimed at reducing illiteracy. One was a project of functional literacy, which was financed jointly by the Ethiopian Government and the United Nations' Special Fund, working through the UNESCO; the other was a project undertaken by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). In line with the EWLP's

directives, both programs were designed to relate the teaching of reading, writing, and computing with vocational-technical-agricultural training. (62,63,64,65) The Ethiopian version of EWLP was thus named the "Work-Oriented Adult Literacy Project" (WOALP) implicating its close link to the world of work. The former Adult Education Division of the MOEFA was incorporated with into this pilot project. (66)

Despite the enormous amount of money and energy put into the pilot projects, neither their contribution to the reduction of national illiteracy nor their enhancement of national development has ever been systematically studied. In a context where the literacy skills developed were bare minimum to begin with and an environ which was less than conducive to foster sustainable literacy, it would be reasonable to expect a high relapse rate which renders the performance of the pilot projects ineffective.

Although the WOALP's numerical contribution to the systematic reduction of adult illiteracy remains clouded, its positive contribution in providing significant organizational and educational experiences should not be underestimated. Tilahun Workineh underscores this fact when he wrote:

The WOALP has contributed to our experience in adult education, e.g. pre-vocational training for factory workers, preparation of teaching materials, approach to the language problem, research and evaluation, training of instructors, and linking of functional literacy to agricultural or home-economics demonstration (67)

Despite all the literacy efforts discussed so far, Ethiopia entered its new historical chapter with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. A more recent document published and distributed by the MOE claimed that the illiteracy rate at the time of the 1974 Revolution was 93 percent, (68) which is only a one percent increase over the 1965 UNESCO report; an achievement which hardly shows any modest literacy gain.

As pointed out earlier, Ethiopia has undergone a series of structural transformations since the demise of the ancien regime. One of the areas in which the post-Revolution leadership has been credited is the field of education where its expansion of the school system has been noted. (69,70) As was pointed out earlier, the military government's enthusiasm for the democratization of education was first observed in the 1974-76 "National Work Campaign for Development Through Cooperation", shortly known as the zemecha (campaign) in Amargina.

It was envisaged in the zemecha that all the vernaculars would be used in literacy instruction; a very ambitious task for an incompetent economy. While this was a noble and novel educational goal, its implementation would require not only a huge financial and logistical resources but, also, a large contingent of well-trained cadre of literacy workers and teachers deployable in the eighty plus ethno-linguistic regions. In hindsight, it may be reasonable to conclude that the execution of such a task would have drained the national economy to a point where other sectors of the economy could have come to a paralysis. Perhaps, as a result of a more realistic assessment of the national capability, it was later decided to use three of the vernaculars, viz. Amargina, Oromiffa, and Tigrigna, for literacy instruction during the campaign. Literacy kits including Syllabry Wall Charts, Reader One, and Reader Two were prepared and distributed for use to the very many campaign sites across the country. (71) Although the contribution of this campaign to the reduction of national illiteracy has never been systematically studied, its contribution in providing a wealth of information and experience in the spheres of organization, methodology, and mobilization of resources has been well recognized. (72,73,74) Such an experience was pivotal in the design and implementation of a more massive adult literacy drive undertaken between 1979 and 1990.

## **THE ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL LITERACY CAMPAIGN (ENLC)**

The post-revolution military government, dissatisfied with the literacy performance of the country, began to show its support for a large scale literacy, first in its implementation of the "Development Through Cooperation Campaign" in 1974-75 and next, in its policy statement outlined in the 1976 New Democratic Revolution Program. This predilection and commitment was later to be strengthened and reinforced through the launching of the nation-wide ENLC in July 1979. The brief discussion about the ENLC below is largely based on a field research conducted for 18 months between 1989-1990. (75)

Two interdependent immediate contexts created the condition for the institution of the ENLC: The glaringly obvious literacy underachievement of the old imperial rule's educational policy, which the new military leadership perceived as elitist and oppressive and desired to discredit before the revolutionary zeal of the people, provided the internal context; the leadership's positive perception of the literacy achievements of national literacy campaigns in socialist countries created the external context. These two complimentary contexts provided the much needed political justification to plan and implement the ENLC. The ENLC was thus conceived of as a credible legitimizing mechanism that would bring the much needed national and international recognition to the new military leadership. The political motivation to launch the ENLC becomes obvious when one looks at both the initial and the revised plans of the campaign.

Initially, it was planned to eradicate illiteracy from all urban centers by 1982 and from all of Ethiopia by 1987. This plan was obviously unrealistic at least on two grounds: The absence of a national census renders such a projection least useful and inappropriate; and the very poor performance of the Ethiopian primary schools was not taken into account in this planning phase. The revised plan, which sought to eradicate illiteracy from Ethiopia by 1994, too, was unwarranted due to at least four factors: The 1984 census was incomplete since a large chunk of the population in the northern portion of the country was beyond government control; the performance of primary schools showed no significant improvement; the performance of the ENLC at the time of the revised plan was still far below expectations; and the military/political situation in the country at the time was hostile to undertake any meaningful educational program.

The organizational structure of the ENLC has been built upon the classic notion of "democratic-centralism" where the flow of information was, in large measures, uni-directional, i.e. top to bottom. The exceedingly elaborate structural set-up was too centrally controlled that several problems surfaced: Inaccurate documentation, misrepresentation, and misreporting of literacy statistics; evasion of accountability; curtailment of local initiative and independent action due to organizational inflexibility; and concealment of individual and group waste and inefficiency.

The ENLC lacked an explicitly stated educational philosophy to guide its actions and practices, particularly at the planning phase. Educational programs lose a sense of direction and long term purpose when they lack a succinct articulation of a guiding philosophy. Under such a vacuum, the daily grinds or practices would be filled with waste and confusion. Such was the organizational equation inherent in the structure of the ENLC. Many educational bureaucrats, having been cognizant of the structural weaknesses of the campaign, embezzled campaign funds and used the structural flaw to pursue self-promotional interests through cover-ups and other manipulations.

Many adult literacy learners and teachers were not enthused in participating in the campaign which resulted in a conspicuous absence of commitment. Furthermore, the timing of literacy teacher training sessions, the incompetence of teacher trainers, and the overcrowded curriculum rushed through the "literacy marathon sessions" all rendered the preparation phase of the ENLC ineffective and inefficient.

The official national literacy statistics was far from being trustworthy due to the mode of its generation, documentation, and distribution. In 1990, the government reported a 75.3 percent national literacy rate. If these government statistics were correct, it would mean a 68.3 literacy gain which, indeed, is an impressive achievement. Unfortunately, just like other similar national campaigns, this figure is suspect and extremely controversial. I have discussed the problems of the ENLC official literacy statistics extensively elsewhere. It may suffice to mention one point here that would depict how much the official figure may have been inflated. A survey conducted in the same year using 1600 individuals yielded only a 23.06 percent national literacy rate and was latter supported by a similar statistics, percent, which came out of the .

Despite the numerous problems and failures briefly discussed above, the ENLC was not without some recognizable merits and achievements. Some of the more pronounced contributions of the national campaign toward the national literacy life of the country therefore deserve mentioning:

First, the ENLC brought the enormous magnitude of the problem of illiteracy to national attention. Unlike in the past, people in Ethiopia now recognize that illiteracy is a serious social ill that requires national effort to remedy it. The contribution of the ENLC toward creating such a socio-psychological climate cannot be underestimated.

Second, the experience of the ENLC in the areas of organization, mobilization, literacy text preparation, teacher recruitment and training, and literacy instruction is enormous. It has been an important educational experimentation which, if systematically studied, can inform and positively influence future literacy initiatives and programs, albeit a

costly one. A literacy bank with a chunk of literacy information could evolve out of the rich experiences of the ENLC.

Third, despite the absence of reliable numerical figures, a large number of adults have been given an educational opportunity which they were able to benefit from literacy work in the ENLC. Prior to the launching of the campaign, peasant associations (PAs) in rural Ethiopia had to rely on hired personnel or the voluntary service of rural primary school directors and teachers to serve as secretaries to communicate messages with administrators, upper level PAs, party and government functionaries, etc.. Kudos to the ENLC, there is hardly any PA in Ethiopia today where quite a number of individuals with well-developed literacy skills are not available.

Fourth, the ENLC has been able to sensitize the general public toward continuing education. This was particularly evident in urban centers where the evening classes were getting significantly over-crowded. Again, despite a lack of precisely established figures, the number of individuals in evening classes who were first introduced to literacy through the ENLC is believed to be quite substantial.

Fifth, the contribution of the ENLC to opening windows of educational opportunity to rural children, who would otherwise have been left out as a result of the inadequate number and poor performance of regular primary schools, has been enormous. Indeed, this age group appeared to have been the outstanding beneficiary of the ENLC. Furthermore, the number of older adults, both in rural and urban Ethiopia, who can read and write letters for their own private matters, sign their names at public places, calculate weight and price of their sellable goods at market places, and so on, has been raised as a result of the ENLC.

Sixth, although the resolution of the problem is far from complete, the institutionalization of the fifteen local languages to literacy use has been a positive step in the right direction. Languages which have never been put into print were, for the first time, used in literacy in the ENLC. The growth and development of any language in this positive direction should start from somewhere. And, the ENLC is to be commended for facing the hitherto unspoken challenge despite its poor planning and implementation.

Finally, the ENLC, through its mobilization of urban-based school-youth, has been able to expose young people to Ethiopia's rural realities. The awareness created among these prospective teachers, scientists, engineers, doctors, administrators, and so on as a result of their introduction to rural life through the ENLC could make them more realistic about problems and issues that the country has to deal with in the foreseeable future.

The highly visible "Campaign" character of the ENLC began to subside sometime in the late 1980s. The growing waning of the political legitimacy of the military government became more pronounced and obvious beginning in the Spring of 1990 and, hence rapidly pushed the ENLC to its inevitable end. It finally became an educational dinosaur along with the 'political will' that brought it to life in the first place. The military defeat of the government by an ethno-national guerrilla group which later became the TGE ended the life of a military dictatorship and along with it the life of the ENLC.

During its past four years of "transitional rule", the TGE has demonstrated an uncompromising determination to reorganize the centuries-old Ethiopian nation-state along ethno-federal lines. As a prelude to this socio-political rearrangement, the TGE has instituted laws which permit and encourage several of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic groups to use their respective languages in primary school instruction. The implication of such a political and policy decision to the historical evolution of literacy is apparent. Four years have elapsed since the ENLC came to a halt and no literacy work in the non-formal sector has been underway in these years. Also, the formal sector has not been spared from the attendant consequences of the political confusion of the past four years. It may be, therefore, reasonable to argue that the nascent literacy skills which were acquired during the ENLC might have been already lost creating the phenomenon of what may be called a transition from literacy to illiteracy. In relative terms, it may not be far from the truth if it is conjectured that Ethiopia's literacy achievement is back at where it was in 1979.

Today, Ethiopia is at cross-roads in its quest for literacy. The TGE transformed itself into a permanent government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) on August 5, 1995. This federation is constituted by nine ethnically carved out regions seven of which have already decided to use their own languages for primary school instruction. This decision also involves the use of the Latin script, instead of the Ethiopic, for their respective writing systems. Since the formation of the TGE in 1991, inter-ethnic conflicts have been exacerbated in the country. The foregoing decision is therefore to be understood in the framework of a perceived inter-ethnic discord which collates a

web of disharmonious ethno-national relationships and an actual socio-political and ideological constructions passionately advanced by certain political groupings. Whether this configuration will assist in the creation of a trans-ethnic national literate culture or become a hurdle that would thwart the national will and aspiration for literacy, only time will show. What we can assuredly conclude for now about the state of literacy in Ethiopia is best captured by the old adage used as the title of this article: Ethiopia: the land of the scribe and the thumb print.

Hopefully, a political leadership that would be more perceptive of and realistic in its literacy understanding and approach will evolve. A more mature literacy program that combines professionalism and commitment could emerge to guide the "new generation of Ethiopian literacy programs and schools" if national and local political and educational leaders are willing to compromise their partisan interests. The transformation of Ethiopia from the land of the scribe and the thumb print to only the land of the scribe will depend upon the will and commitment of national and local leaders to create "new literacy programs and schools". Only leaders with reformed visions and renewed commitments can resolve Ethiopia's age-old literacy paradox and dilemma and bring the country closer to the fast-approaching 21st century.

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