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9 October 2004

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/10313/>
MPRA Paper No. 10313, posted 07 Sep 2008 05:09 UTC

ERITREAN EDUCATION - RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

By
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Abstract:

Education has long been recognized as a central element in economics development. In Eritrea, Church education played a significant role in transmitting church literature from generation to generation. Quranic schools also played a similar role in the Muslim communities of the Eritrean Society. Since Independence, education is well organized in the country. Eritrea has invested heavily in education and has embarked on a wide-ranging program. The World Bank, Eritrea has also made substantial investment in a plan intended to quickly raise the country's skill levels. The guiding purpose of the research on which this article is based, is to explore the educational history of Eritrea at different periods. It covers the Eritrean education system during the Italian Rule, British Rule, and Ethiopian Rule. It also provides educational development of Eritrea after independence. The methodology used in this paper is essentially a descriptive analysis of data obtained from the secondary sources.

I]. INTRODUCTION:

Education has long been recognized as a central element in development. It is a vital input in modernization where the developing country Eritrea began its drive for social and economic development since its independence. Education is perceived as a means not only of raising political and social consciousness, but also of increasing the number of skilled workers and raising the level of trained manpower (Ravinder Rena, 2000, p1). These benefits, together with the visible gains for individuals from education, stimulated an unprecedented growth of enrollment in schools, colleges and university of Asmara. Substantial investment has been made in Eritrean education sector for the last twelve years.

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered in the north and west by Sudan, in the south by Ethiopia and Djibouti, and in the east by the Red Sea. It has an estimated population of about 4 million and a total land area of some 12.2 million hectares. Its annual population growth is estimated at 2.9 per cent. Eritrea has nine ethnic groups and six administrative zobas (provinces/regions). The country has six agricultural zones defined by climate, altitude, soils, and population density.

The guiding purpose of the research on which this article is based, is to explore the educational history of Eritrea at different periods. It covers the Eritrean education system during the Italian Rule, British Rule, and Ethiopian Rule. It also provides educational development of Eritrea after independence with certain goals to be

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achieved. The design relies on a study, focusing in-depth on this particular attempt to produce knowledge to suit Eritrean education system.

The methodology used in this paper is essentially a descriptive analysis of data obtained from the secondary sources, mainly government and /or Ministry of Education documents, survey reports, research articles, media accounts books and other published and unpublished materials on Eritrea.

III]. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN ERITREA:

When we closely look into the educational background of Eritrea, historically, to start with, it had the 'traditional education' which was heavily religious-oriented whether Christian or Islamic.

A. Christian Education:

For a long period of time, church education was the only source of education for the Christians in this area. For centuries, its central purpose has been to prepare a clerical class highly proficient in Biblical interpretation and religious doctrine, adopt in the shaping of exceptionally sophisticated poetry, in reproducing church music and in performing traditional religious dance. In other words, like church education in Christendom, it was designed primarily for the training in the priesthood, but served also to diffuse and preserve all aspects of Christian culture. Further, in the past, the church provided the primary level of education required for service in government (Girma Amara, 1967, p 4). Until the present decade, church schools were responsible for giving many children the opportunity to learn letters, now the task of the modern school system i.e. 'learning to read' is the school of reading in which children learn 'Ge'ez alphabet' instruction. The Ge'ez language consists of 34 letters with 7 forms each 5 letters with 5 forms each. The methods of instruction applied by the Orthodox Church include Readings writing and memorization.

It is to be noted that many of the churches have had an outstanding track record of running several schools and clinics across the width and breadth of Eritrea since their establishment. Their many schools and orphanages have raised generations of citizens that have distinguished themselves as exemplars of personal character, integrity and civic virtue. Many products of these church schools are highly respected citizens in the professions and positions of leadership within Eritrea as well as in the Diaspora.

B. Islamic Education:

Islamic education in Eritrea was the only source of education for Eritrean -Muslims. The function of Koran-oriented education was primarily to produce people who are well aquatinted with the basic principles of Islam. The study of Koran was, therefore, an essential starting point. The schools also provide basic and advanced Arabic grammar, higher levels of interpretation of Islamic religion, basic and advanced arithmetic, history and hygiene. The purpose of Islamic education was to teach Muslim children about the culture heritage and brotherhood of Islam. Similar to church schools, the methods of learning were primarily based on listening reading oral recitation and memorization.

Traditionally, however women were not encouraged to get education both among Christian and Muslim communities in Eritrea. The traditional education system was however the main agent for the expansion of education. Before 1900 the priests and the sheiks were the only educated people. Religion was the core of the curriculum (Adane Taye, 1992, pp.3-8). This religious oriented education contributed little to the solution of the secular problems that confronted the people and the country.

What is most important in the traditional education is the emphasis it placed up on obedience and subordination to authority. However, these days, the traditional schools are losing their importance because they cannot solve the problem of the present day secular issues.

III]. MODERN EDUCATION IN ERITREA:

A. Eritrean Education - Italian Colonial Period (1890-1941):

A formal European style of education was first introduced into Eritrea during the Italian colonial period. The first schools for Italians only, were opened in 1896. There was only a very gradual opening up of education opportunity for Eritreans, beginning only after the World War -I. It is reported that in 1923 there were only 523 Eritrean students enrolled in the country.

The purpose of Italian education in Eritrea was clear and narrow. It was to indoctrinate the Eritreans with devotion for Italy and a respect for Italian culture and civilization. These schools were opened for Eritreans to become worthy elements of the native troops, interpreters, clerks, telephone operators and typists.

Allen (1953) pointed out that "there had been about twenty- five (25) schools in operation during the Italian colonization. In addition Eritreans were allowed to learn or study up to grade four: this was extended to grade five at the end of the colonization period. The medium of the instruction during this period was Italian."

It is observed that in 1935, 2,472 students were enrolled. By 1939, the total number enrolled in Eritrea was 4,177 students. This shockingly small number of Eritrean students had further declined by 1941. Then there were only 16schools in operation. There were 152 teachers in these schools including 33 Italian elementary school teachers, 86 nuns and 27 Eritrean assistants. Moreover only one out of five students remained in these schools until the end of the school year.

B. Eritrean Education - The British Military Administration (1941-1952):

During the British Military Administration schools were expanded rapidly. In 1941, a new educational system was established in Eritrea and Captain Kynaston Snell became the Director of Education and Mr. Issac Teweldemedhine, an Eritrean who received his elementary school education at the Swedish Mission school, was appointed inspector of education. He had teaching experience before the Swedish Mission School was closed in 1932. Under the new education system many new schools were established and a system of teacher training was opened in 1943 to train elementary school teachers.

In December 1934, there were 19 elementary schools. Regarding the expansion of elementary schools in Eritrea, Allen (1953), stated that "19 schools which had been established in the first month of operation, however in December 1943, the number of schools had grown 28 with 50 instructors, and the enrollment of pupils were considerably increased (Allen, 1953; Teshome, 1974, p 48.)."

During this period, Tigrigna and Arabic became the media of instruction in Eritrean elementary schools. Mr.Issac Teweldemedhin and other Eritreans took the initiative of producing textbooks written in Tigrigna, because there were no textbooks written in Tigrigna. According to Trevaskis (1960), "Arabic textbooks for Eritrean elementary schools were obtained from Egypt and the Sudan."

By 1947, the first middle school was opened with 115 students; there were 59 primary schools in Eritrea with 4,906 students and 151 staff. In 1949, there were 5 middle schools with 504 students. The first 7 Eritrean students were sent to Khartoum for secondary education. By 1950, there were 85 primary schools with total enrollment of 913, with 210 staff and 7 middle schools with 82 students. English had become the medium of school instruction (Trevaskis, 1960).

C. Eritrean Education - Federation Period (1952-62):

During the Federation Period with Ethiopia, the establishment of schools and progress of education were maintained. In addition to elementary and middle school, 2 secondary schools, a vocational trade school, and a nursing school were opened. In general, education during this period was limited to just the completion of middle school education (up to grade 8). The standard of education and the standard of English as a second language were maintained. According to the information available, in the Haile Selassie -I and Prince Mekonen, together about 250 students were enrolled in 1956. Writing was considered an essential skill for academic success. But the high demands and expectations of Eritrean school children were not yet met. English, which was taught as a subject beginning of grade V, continued to be as a subject up to the end of grade VI. Using English as a medium of instruction from grade seventh onwards was likely to contribute the decline of the standard of education in Eritrean schools. It was because the school children in Eritrea were expected to use their mother tongue outside classrooms and as media of instructions from grade one to grade six and from grade seventh onwards Amharic and English respectively. Hence, the students were expected to learn at least three languages.

D. Eritrean Education - Ethiopian Period (November 1962 - May 1991):

As a result of Ethiopian annexation on 14 November 1962, Eritrean educational system was merged into the Ethiopian educational system. Three terms a year were changed into two semesters a year. Middle school entrance examinations, which were given on the completion of grade-4, were dropped. Elementary, middle and secondary education which were organized in three levels of four years each: i.e.1-4 primary school, 5-6 middle school, 7-8 junior secondary school and 9-12 senior secondary school were introduced. Therefore, from 1964 – 1991 national school examination were prepared on the completion of grade VI, VIII and XII. Moreover, Amharic language was introduced as a subject in some Eritrean schools in 1958 and gradually became the medium of instruction first from grade one in 1962 and eventually it extended from grade I to VI.

Thus the Ethiopian government substituted Amharic for Arabic and Tigringna in Eritrean elementary schools. Eritrean elementary school children, especially Arabic and Tigringna speakers were denied the right to learn in their mother -tongue. Arabic and Tigrigna textbooks were abolished from schools and some of the textbooks were burned. However, the use of Arabic and Tigringa languages in regular academic settings was terminated (GOE, 1966, p 50).

In 1964, it was reported that there were 200 primary schools opened, enrolling over 42,000 students. There were also 7 secondary schools, with almost 19,000 students operating, with a small evening program, university extension and a TTC. There were also a surprising number of private schools and about 30,000 students enrolled in government schools. But after the heavy and fierce fighting began in areas surrounding Asmara 1975, the number of schools and students dramatically dropped. Many students were massacred, mass imprisonment, detention, blockage of main roads, others were forced to serve in the military and some others were left their towns either to join the liberation fronts or to live as refugees through out the world.

E. Eritrean Education -Since Independence (1991-2001)

The devastating 30 years of colonial war for independence was finally ended in May 1991. Unfortunately, the problems did not end then. The economy and infrastructure had collapsed and social services including education and health had disintegrated. Its human resources development was greatly hampered during the struggle as its youth were persecuted and displaced. The quality of education had so much deteriorated that there was a crisis in the system. An illiteracy rate of over 70 per cent, a very low attainment level amongst students, and also amongst many teachers, an acute shortage of schools, a large number of schools badly damaged during the war, a depressed state of Eritrean culture and language among the nine groups have been inherited due to the imposition of Amharic language and culture inside and outside schools.

The educational system in Eritrea shows all the symptoms of prolonged neglect under conditions of colonialism and war. At the time of independence in 1991, 84 per cent of the existing 190 schools were rated to be in serious disrepair. The remaining 16 per cent were far from providing a satisfactory learning environment (MoE, 1998). Disparity in the geographical distribution of schools was sharply marked. For instance, the number of secondary schools and students in the highlands was much higher than those in the lowland areas of Eritrea. Today, more than 829 government and non-government schools are functioning; however, most of these schools need lot of improvement, expansion and/or replacement.

In Eritrea, education starts at the age of five with two years for social interaction and adjustment of behavioral reaction. Thereafter follow five years of elementary school at the age of seven until grade five, where the children learn to read and write, operations, mathematics, biography, geography, Eritrean history, singing, arts and sports.

Primary education is followed by two years of middle school (grade 6 and 7) where the subjects mentioned above are deepened. Finally there is four years of secondary school (grade 8 to 11) with the subjects such as physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, mathematics, English and civics. All the students in the country who

completed their grade eleven have to go to Sawa (*Warsai Yikealo* Secondary School) where they learn Grade twelve for one and appear for the matriculation (national examination) based on their performance in the exam, they are selected for the Eritrean Institute of Technology – Mai Nefhi

In Eritrea, over the last twelve years, there has been a phenomenal increase in enrolment. For example, school enrollment increased by 270 per cent at the elementary and middle levels and by 185 per cent at high school level. The number of schools at all levels (Junior, Middle, Secondary and Technical) increased from 293 in 1990-91 to 1000 in 2002-2003. During the same period students' population increased considerably from 208,168 to 5, 00,000 while the numbers of teachers increased from 5,286 to about 10,000.

Eritrea has now one University, one Commercial College, Teacher Training Institutes (TTI), and a number of other Technical and Vocational Institutions (MOE, 2001-2002). One of the remarkable developments in the education sector of Eritrea is opening of Eritrean Institute of Technology- Mai Nefhi and Orotta School of Medicine (both started in February, 2004). Further, efforts are underway to embark colleges like: Agricultural College, Marine Technology College, College of Business and Economics, College of Social Sciences, and other professional colleges in the country (Ravinder Rena, 2004, p 8).

The Missionary Congregation Piae Matres Nigritiae of the Comboni Sisters originally founded the University of Asmara in 1954 as the Holy Family University Institute. The university currently has the Colleges of Science, Arts and Language studies, Business and Economics, Agriculture and Aquatic Sciences, as well as the Engineering Program, Education Program and Law program. Besides, University of Asmara has launched Post Graduate Programs in English, Economics, Geography, Agriculture, etc.

Transformation of Education:

It is to be noted that in partnership with the World Bank, Eritrea has also made substantial investment in a plan intended to quickly raise the country's skill levels. Over 50 million US dollars have been used to provide for undergraduate and post-graduate scholarships for almost 1000 Eritreans, the recruitment of expatriate professionals (particularly from India) and training for members of the Eritrean civil service.

Eritrea has been achieved much in education, however; still it has a long way to go. According to the Ministry of Education Report (MoE, 2002), the major deficiencies of Eritrean school system are the following: overall access to education, which stands at 38 per cent is low; opportunities for higher education are limited and the products of the educational system are not well prepared for employment.

Eritrea is now embarking on a major expansion and overhaul of its educational system whose main goals are the following:

- 1] Universal primary and middle school education for all its school age population;
- 2] A widely expanded integrated high school education, with a core as well as an

enrichment curriculum with the flexibility to prepare students for university education as well as employment;

3] A wide network of vocational schools and community colleges;

4] A vision for up to eight universities located in various regions of the country, with a total enrollment of up to 20,000 students;

5] A flexible system for people to move from schooling to employment and back to school, if they so choose;

In its thorough discussion of the educational program, the government has made education a top priority. It made this choice, keenly aware that it was making a decision on where it was going to put a substantial amount of the country's resources, both domestic and external.

IV]. CONCLUSION:

Church education in Eritrea played a significant role in transmitting church literature from generation to generation. Memorization and recitation were the main strategies and mastering the reading ability. However, church education became instrumental in instilling submissiveness, blind obedience, uncritical acceptance of orders and a strong belief in fate, which hindered social transformation. Quranic schools played a similar role in the Muslim communities of the Eritrean Society.

Since Independence, education is well organized in Eritrea. The government subsidizes tuition and studies relevant to the development of Eritrea have been given importance. Eritrea has invested heavily in education and has embarked on a wide-ranging program designed to revitalize and develop the collapsed educational system. Further education has been set as the government's priority. It has been realized that the previous educational system under the *Derge* regime was intentionally designed to reinforce the colonial ideologies and political machination. Moreover it has been believed that through education the major Eritrean national development strategies could be achieved. The government of Eritrea is understood that the overall vision of Eritrea's future progress is ultimately based on human capital formation, with the education and health as key inputs.

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