



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH SCHOOL SYSTEM

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The educational system in Ethiopia has been profoundly molded by the past. Traditional education derives its distinctive character from the unique Christian heritage of the country. Ethiopia is, after all, the only African country to have preserved Christianity as its religion for over a millennium and a half. Moreover, having its own written language and literature it developed from very early days a tradition of ecclesiastical scholarship. The long monastic tradition dates back to the fifth century and the significant role of monasticism in the diffusion of Christian learning during the mediaeval period has been described in an earlier chapter. In the Christian highlands of Ethiopia, the Church constituted the main guardian of traditional culture and provided the only schools in the land for many centuries. Not only did it preserve its ancient tradition with tenacity and convey it to future generations but it also secured remarkable continuity that has lasted to the present day. For the authority of tradition in present day Ethiopia remains compelling and forceful.

The church school system has been the instrument that has preserved the traditional learning of Ethiopia and conveyed it faithfully to succeeding generations. The priests and Church scholars who are the bearers and propagators of traditional learning have themselves been formed in the church school system that we propose to examine in some detail. For, in spite of the inevitable changes taking place in Ethiopia with the steady expansion of modern secular education in the present century, church schools still play an active part in the Ethiopian educational scene.

The church school system, which is one of the oldest in Christendom, originated in the Aksumite Kingdom with the introduction of Christianity about the 4th century. In the course of the centuries the school system has grown and changed in many ways. With the expansion of the Kingdom and Christianity to the south and southwest, churches and monasteries were founded, which became for centuries important centers of learning.

In their present form the church schools evolved during the "golden age" of the Church from the 13th to the 16th centuries when the literature of the Church had reached its peak. After the great wars, particularly after the 17th century, cultural activities declined. From that time to the present the church schools have undergone little change. The schools have in this period confined their educational activities to glorifying the products of past centuries and conveying these to the coming generation. We shall not discuss here the historical development, but rather the educational activities of the Schools, as we know them today in the country. The church school system has the following divisions:

- (1) Nebab Bet (Reading school)
- (2) Qedasse Bet (Liturgy school)
- (3) higher schools, namely
 - (a) Zema Bet (Music school)
 - (b) Quene Bet and (Poetry school)
 - (c) Metschaf Bet which again have different subdivisions. (Literature school)

1) **The Nebab Bet**

The Nebab Bet, the Reading School or the "House of Reading" is the first stage of the traditional schools, where primary instruction is given. We find the Nebab Bet in practically all churches and monasteries, in a number of villages and in the compounds of well-to-do landlords. It is a one-teacher school, with instruction given by a priest or layman with church education. It is difficult to estimate the number of Nebab Bet in the country or to evaluate the school population involved. According to the Church Office there are about 15,000 churches in Ethiopia. If each church has one Nebab Bet, which is probably the case, then there are at least 15,000 one-teacher schools.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Each Nebab Bet may have an average of 20 pupils. We may then be justified, with some reservation, in saying that at present the total Nebab bet enrolment might well be 300,000. This does not include pupils receiving instruction in the village schools and in private compounds. Normally children start school between the ages of 5 and 7, when they are traditionally considered ready to learn. Theoretically, both boys and girls and members of all ethnic groups and classes are eligible to enroll in church schools. However, in rural districts, parents generally discouraged the education of girls, since their function is to be housewives, and for this role no formal education is felt to be necessary. Non-Christian families are reluctant to send their children to a Nebab bet because it is closely integrated with the church. Therefore, the Nebab bet and the church schools as a whole can not be considered to serve the entire population, but only members of the Orthodox Christian Church.

The prime function of the Nebab bet is to teach children to read religious books, practically all of which are in Geez. Instruction in the Nebab bet consists almost exclusively of reading. Children master the 231 letters of the Geez syllabary, and are drilled in the art of good reading. Traditionally writing is not taught, since this was not needed in everyday life, unlike reading which is necessary for daily prayers and participating in the church service. In urban centres and roadside towns the Nebab bet has a new function today. The modern schools often accept more readily in their primary grades those children who can already read and write. This limitation of the enrolment is mainly due to the large number of applicants and to an insufficient number of schools, so parents, especially those who do not need the labour of their children, are obliged to send their children to the Nebab bet as a first step to enrolment in a modern government school. The instruction in the Nebab bet is given in three different stages:

- (a) Fidel (Alphabets) Instruction
- (b) Drill in the reading of various religious texts
- (c) Reading of the Psalm of David

a) Fidel Instruction

The first subject of study for the child is the set of Ge'ez letters, known as the Fidel. In earlier times the letters were written on a roll of parchment, which the pupil carried with him. When he was studying a particular part of the Fidel the student unrolled the parchment and fixed the two-ends of the roll on a wooden stick with a piece of cloth or string. Today children use a printed table of letters, which is glued on a single sheet of cardboard. This is available for about ten cents in every market place in the country, so that the traditional parchment is disappearing.

What is the process of learning the letters? The child, who is led by his teacher or a monitor, touches with a straw each letter from left to right of the table and names the letter in a loud voice. He repeats this for months. Usually the child learns the whole set of letters in sequence by heart, so that in reality he may not be able to distinguish one letter from the other. As a next step to help him distinguish individual letters, he is led to pronounce each letter reading from right to left and then from top to bottom. This process is known as Qutir, i.e. "learning by counting each letter". The large number of characters (33 in 7 orders) with the differences and irregularities of the related sets are not easily grasped by the beginner. To help the child distinguish the different characteristics of the alphabet another table has been prepared. On such tables the number of the letters and the forms in the seven orders remain the same, but the place of the characters is changed or mixed up, so that the child cannot depend only on his memory and the sequence in which he has memorized the characters. Today the standardized table "Aa, Bu, Gi, Da" is much used, however, so that the pupil may learn even this by heart and only comes to distinguish the individual characters well after much practice.

When the pupil knows the letters to some extent, he starts to practice reading a text. Generally, the first epistle of St. John is used for the purpose. The child uses four methods to practice reading this text known as Fidel Hawaria or the first Epistle of St. John, first he pronounces every letter of the word pointing at each letter with a straw (Qutir-method). He repeats this pronunciation exercise on the same text several times. When he is able to distinguish the letters he passes to the next drill known as Ge'ez, i.e. the beginning of reading. Here the student attempts to put the letters together in a chanting form and read them as a word. The same process is repeated for several days or even months. When the teacher feels that his pupil has mastered this stage, he leads him to "Wurdnebab". Now the child practices reading and learns to take much care over words that must be read together, the accents, the pauses and the soft or hard pronunciations of the syllables. This step is important, so the pupil spends more time on it. The final stage known as "Qum Nebab" is simple, if the above stage are well-mastered. Here the child practices reading at a very lively pace, but without mistakes. The four steps are repeatedly drilled on the same text, Fidel Hawaria. The exercise of reading can be quite difficult for the beginner, particularly because the text is in Ge'ez, a language no longer spoken and therefore far from the experience of the child. With this stage the pupil is introduced to the art of reading Ge'ez, and his Fidel lessons are therefore completed. He can then practice reading different religious texts.

b) Reading lessons from religious books

The number and the kind of books the student has to read at this stage is not standardized. All depends on the availability of books. Traditionally, teachers in different areas select any text for reading. The following texts are known to have been used in different areas: Gabata Hawaria, i.e. selected epistles of St. Paul, St. James, and St. Peter; the Gospels, usually the Gospel of St. John is used as a text for exercise; Arganon: praises of St. Tamara Mariam: the miracles and wonder of St Mary; Paulos: the epistles of St. Paul; Tamara Iyasus: the miracles of Jesus; the Acts of the Apostles, etc. Pupils need not understand the texts of these books, but they have to be able to read them well, since these are the books read in the Church service, where young boys serve as readers, deacons, and later on as priests. The methods of practicing the reading are those described under the Fidel Hawaria, namely, Qutir, Ge'ez, Wurdnebab, and Nebab.

When the pupil is able to read a text, he starts a new lesson known in Amharic as Yemata Timhirt, i.e. an evening lesson, or Ye'qal Timhirt, i.e. memorization. Every evening he has to memorize the daily prayers. In the evening the pupils come to the house of the teacher, which is also at the same time the school itself. All stand around the teacher while the lesson is given. The teacher or an advance student recites to the pupil sentence by sentence or verse-by-verse the standard prayer the child has to memorize. The pupil then repeats the sentence till he knows it well. This exercise is repeated for months or every a couple of years, until the boy knows the main prayers by heart. In some cases the Ethiopic catechetical book, the Aemade Mestir (Columnae Mister), particularly Mistere Sellassie (on the Trinity), is taught in Amharic. All other texts are in Ge'ez. Since the pupils do not understand the texts, the memorization drills are very exacting in energy and time. When the teacher is convinced from his daily observations that his pupil had mastered the reading exercises, he lets him start to learn the reading of the Psalms.

C) Reading the Psalms

The pupil now learns to read the psalms, the most important devotional book of Ethiopian Christians. The method he uses is the chanting from and the Wurdnebab reading process. After repeating the entire book of Psalms several times using Wurdnebab, he continues reading for months, even over a year, using the Qum-Nebab reading method. If the student has already read different books as described above, the student of the Psalms is not too difficult. In some cases students are made to memorize the texts of the Psalms. This is particularly important for those students who plan to continue on the higher learning, since passages from the Psalms are used frequently in the hymns and poems of the church. Gradually the pupil masters the art of good reading. The teacher normally does not set a formal examination to judge the work of the pupil. However, he follows the progress of his student daily, so no special tests are needed.

When he is convinced that the pupil has reached the level of knowledge traditionally required at this stage of learning, he indicated that the time has come when he may leave the Nebab Bet. This is considered one of the most important events in the life of the pupil. It is also an occasion of joy for the family, and the parents usually organize a feast to mark the event.

A reader of the psalms enjoys certain privileges as one of the elite in his village. He may be called upon to read and write letters. At certain ceremonies he may recite prayers, if no priest is available. The girls from traditional families who have attended the school usually marry before or shortly after they complete the lessons in the House of Reading.

2. Qedasse Bet— The training of the altar priest

Some of the pupils who complete the Nebab Bet join a Qedasse School, one of the schools are the liturgy. A teacher specialized in Qedasse or the Mass is to be found in practically all the main churches. A teacher specialized in this branch of the liturgy teachers the Gebre Diquana and Gebre Qissina, i.e. the functions of deacon and of a priest in the liturgy. Children of the clergy, who use church lands usually enter such schools in order to become deacon or priests in a church and thus keep their church land in the hands of the family). The office of a priest is particularly attractive to tenants or landless peasants, because a priest in his area enjoys privileges, and his office entitles him to possession of the land known as Semon land. The function of an altar priest is limited to carrying out the rituals of the Mass and the Sacraments. For this purpose scanty training suffices. A Qedasse teacher normally teaches only the hymns which a deacon or a priest has to use in the liturgy of the Church. The rest, including the teaching the traditions and service of the Church, is learned through daily experience in the parish itself. Usually a candidate for his training is attached to a priest or monk to whom he gives certain services, accompanying him on visits of families, festivals, and ceremonies in and outside the parish. Through observation or day-to-day practice and instruction by his priest-master, the boy learns the Church activities and functions of a deacon and of a priest. The activities of the priest, therefore, are limited to the rituals, which do not usually demand the understanding of the Scriptures. Thus relatively little education is expected from a young man to be ordained

3. The higher schools of the church

We have seen that the Qedasse bet trains mainly the altar priests, who are known as the semonegna (those who serve weekly). These are the only members of the clergy who are allowed to celebrate the mass and administer sacraments. However, before and after the mass there are readings of the scriptures, ritual dance, and long hymns and poems. To be able to carry out this further service one has to attend a higher school of the church, which should be considered an extension of the Nebab and Qedasse Bet.

The leading teachers and scholars of the church, who are known as Debtera, are trained in the higher school. A Debtera is a general term given to all those who have completed one of the higher schools of the church. Theoretically, priests and monks can also be characterized as Debtera, if they have completed studies in one of the higher schools. In practice however, few fall into this category, and these few are not usually known as Debtera. The majority of the Debtera are laymen, and as such they are not allowed to serve in the mass and the administration of sacraments. Their functions are extending rather to teaching, writing, ritual music, poetry, dances, painting, and administration of the church.

A student of the Nebab Bet or Qedasse Bet, who would like to join the higher schools, usually leaves his parents and joins the wandering students who travel from parish to parish and from monastery to monastery. Traditionally a boy can receive only the Nebab Bet instruction while he is at home. The main reason for wandering in search of schools and teachers is that in rural areas any higher education is not possible for a youth who remains with his parents, except in a few cases of Debtera families. The heavy demands of cultivation and cattle tending force the parents to demand the services of their children. Besides this, the student is attracted by the adventurous and romantic life of a begging and wandering student, about whom much is spoken and fabulous stories are told. Wandering students usually come from farming and clerical families - very few are from the higher classes.

With the spread of modern education and a modern school system this institution is declining. Fewer young people are motivated to study in the higher church schools. One of the main reasons for this change is that the graduates of the church schools have lost their traditional elite status in the social order, which today particularly in the modern sector, is being occupied by those who have a modern western type of education.

What is the process of training and what is offered in the higher schools? The main courses of study are in church music, church poetry, and religious literature, each divided according to content of instruction

In all these schools the students must learn the material by heart. To demonstrate this we should describe the average study day at the Zema Bet. The teacher of Zema sits in the middle of his pupils, who are practicing their daily assignment of the hymns individually or in-groups. Each group sings from a single text, or one of the groups sings and the rest observe him. The more advanced students serve as monitors to instruct the beginners. When one of the students has mastered the hymn, he goes and sings before the teacher. The teacher either approves and gives the student a new assignment or orders further practice on the same text. The lessons advance in this manner day after day until the student finishes the fixed text of the hymn and knows it by heart.

The training challenges the memory of the child rather than leading him to think. In spite of the monotony of the learning and teaching methods and the exacting length of time, the students show surprisingly high morale. There are of course reasons for their diligence. The wandering student expects a high position in the church hierarchy. Furthermore, since the instruction is considered sacred, just as prayer is, the student takes his assignment seriously. The resulting high morale in the school community helps the individual student to adapt himself to the hard work. The usually strict demands of the teachers are accepted without hesitation, because the wandering student has come to the school of his own free will and has willingly submitted himself to the authority of the teacher. If he is not satisfied, he can leave the school and look for another one.

b) Qene Bet

There are Qene forms or models that the student has to master in order to be able to compose the Qene poems which are sung in different sections of the liturgy of the church or used to celebrate church and state ceremonials. About nine models are famous in the Samenna Worq (wax and gold) Qene system. There are also other Qene types which are however not as widespread as the Samenna Worq.

The student begins by learning first the simplest Qene form known as the Gubae Qana which is an epigram composed of

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

two rhyming verses. He then learns Ze'amlakiye (3 verses), Wazema (5 verses), Nibezhu (3 long verses), Sellassie (6 verses), Zeyi'eze (5 or 6 verses), Kibryieti (4 verses), Itane Mogar (7 or 11 verses) and Mewadis (8 verses). These are most widespread but there are other forms, e.g. in Gojjam, the Gonji and Washera schools of Qene differ from this.

The student learns Qene with more interest and motivation than the other disciplines, such as Zema. There are several reasons for this. The main one is that the student understands the Ge'ez language in the Qene school. The teaching method allows the boy free activities and movements as illustrated below. In the student an aesthetic interest is developed, or at least awakened. The following illustration may make this clear.

The Qene lessons usually start in the afternoon or in some places early in the evening. The place of instruction is usually a communal hut near the teacher's dwelling known as the Mahber Bet, or simply in the open or under a tree. First there is a prayer to be recited. The teacher may then make some remarks on the students' work for the day. As the main task of the session some Ge'ez verbs are conjugated, and the proper usage of selected verbs and nouns is demonstrated by examples from different Qene verses composed by the teacher and advanced students on the spot. The story or legend of the saint whose feast is to be celebrated on the next day is then narrated; this comprises the theme of the Qene composition by the students, using the vocabulary and grammar already discussed at the session.

During the evening the student endeavours to find the proper music to fit the Qene model he is going to compose; since all Qene has to be sung, his Qene piece must be suited to a corresponding musical form. The next day the student looks for a secluded place and meditates on his composition. When he has composed his Qene verse after the model assigned to him by the teacher, he then approaches the teacher, who sits for the most part of the day at a place known to all. The teacher is usually engaged in some individual work such as reading, copying a manuscript, or even doing some handwork.

The student recites the product of his intellectual labour. The teacher either accepts the verses or offers critical comments and sends the student back for further meditation, students come at intervals to the teacher to recite in the manner.

In the afternoon the session or Gubae takes place again. The work of the day is first reviewed, in which a lively discussion is usually generated.

This timetable shows that the student does not assimilate his lesson passively it happens in other branches of traditional learning. He has the opportunity to discuss the theme given, which challenges his intellect. He should not, however, contradict or be critical of religious and other accepted values. The student strains his power of expression to construct the Qene verses in a vivid, enigmatic manner or to express his experience in social life in connection with biblical stories, visions, and legendary events.

One could say that in the Qene School the content of learning covers practically all aspects of the values of the traditional social system in which the student lives. The Qene School is perhaps the only school where the students can receive both intellectual and traditional training. It is generally recognized that the most able clergy of the Church are those trained in the Qene School. The main interest and purpose of the school is, however, not to develop poetic and other aesthetic interests in the child or youth, but to enable him to carry out the Church rituals. A graduate of Qene School looks for a position in a Church and serves in the choir where he composes Qene and sings, or he may take a post as a minor teacher or administrator in the Church. Those who want to study further may join the next school, the Metsehaf Bet. To specialize in Qene so as to be a teacher in a higher school, the student must attend several schools and study more branches of Qene, which means studying and wandering for some years more.

c) Metsehaf Bet

This is the general term for the School of Commentaries composed of four branches. The first type is known as Beluy. The 46 Books of the Old Testament are studied and commented upon. The second branch is the Haddis, a specialized school on the commentaries of the 35 Books of the Ethiopian New Testament. The third branch is Liqawent, which presents studies and comments on the various writings of the Church Fathers, e.g. Saint John Chrysostom, Qerlos and others. The canon law (Fetha Negest) as well as the calendar calculation (Bahre Hasab) are also studied here. The last branch of the Metsehaf Bet is the Menekosat, the School of Commentaries on monastic literature.

In these specialized branches the students learn the traditions of the Church, theology, Church history and laws, through the interpretation of the various individual writings. The commentaries of these teachings do not proceed under

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

systematic theological or historical categories, but when each sentence or phrase of a text is interpreted, depending on the content, theological, moral and historical questions are raised, discussed, and developed. The student has to learn each sentence of the commentary by heart. The following is a typical example of a Metsehaf Bet lesson

Students come to the teacher in a group of three or four, all studying the same text. One of the group reads a sentence or a phrase. The teacher first translates the sentence into Amharic and then comments on it. The students listen attentively and try to remember the comment word for word. When this group leaves the teacher, another group or individual comes to read to the teacher and hears his commentary. After leaving the teacher each group moves apart and tries to comment on the text just as the teacher did, as much as possible word for word. If one misses a word or an idea, another member of the group recalls it and supplements. After some time the group goes again to the teacher and reads the same text and again comments on it. This way the group can compare its progress to know how far it had grasped the interpretation of the previous time. I

This memorization of the commentary of the books exacts many years of exercise and labour, which the adult student is ready to accept. A graduate of the Metsehaf Bet enjoys high prestige as a scholar and can take a high post in the Church hierarchy, such as head of a monastery (Gedam) or a large church (Debre). This hope is perhaps one of the motives that encourages the student to spend more than half of his life at such a school. At this stage memorization is not felt as a burden by the student, because ever since his early days in the Nebab Bet he has developed his powers of memorization.

One important reason memorization is so stressed all through the Church Schools is that writing materials were traditionally not well developed. The few handwritten manuscripts on parchments were, and still are, very expensive. Aside from the Authoritarian tradition there is another consideration; the student is not allowed to have a critical opinion about any text to be commented upon, since it is believed that God revealed the content to the Fathers through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, these patristic writings are not to be considered critically, but simply learnt by heart. The habit of memorization and the uncritical acceptance of the commentary condition the mode of thinking of the student.

In this way the historical interpretations are mixed with legendary tales and special natural events, all considered to be miracles, and even concrete phenomena are given symbolical meanings. The expressions are vividly illustrated with parables, analogies, proverbs, and popular wisdom. Parallels are quoted from the history of the country while interpreting the passages on the Holy Land. Generally, the approach to reality is well mixed with mythical attitudes.

These schools of commentaries are not to be found everywhere, but in large churches, Debre, and in monasteries, Geddam, where extensive libraries and famous teachers are to be found. It may be that church schools as a whole will take on a new impetus and play an important role in raising the general level of education of the clergy in the future.

The church schools that have been described above provide the continuation of traditional education in Ethiopia. Modern education, of recent origin, is provided mainly in schools operated by the Government. However, in the urban centers and roadside towns the elementary church school, the Nebab Bet is flourishing as an institution to prepare pupils for Government schools, teaching young children literacy in Amharic. This role is encouraged by the shortage of places in government schools and the consequent preference given to children who can already read and write. Such schools may perhaps play a wider role within the context of the national campaign for literacy and provide more instruction for adults as well as young pupils.

It should be noted that the Church is fully aware of the necessity to train its own future leaders in such a way that they will fulfill their role in modern society. Modern theological colleges exist which combine traditional studies with the broader curriculum demanded in the twentieth century. A number of theological students have also progressed to further advanced studies abroad. In other words, the church is successfully bridging the transition from strictly traditional scholarship to a new, dynamic era where traditional learning and modern education will blend together to ensure the continuity of Ethiopia's Christian heritage in the setting of modern world.

Source

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