

EDUCATION OF THE ADWA FIGHTERS

(Extract from the paper «Education of the Adwa Fighters and the Impact of the victory on the foundation of State Education» by Dr. Haile Gabriel Dagne. Presented at the Adwa Centenary ceremony Feb. 28 - March 2, 1996 in Addis Abeba.)

The reader may ask what the battle of Adwa has to do with education. He may be right because the literature on the series of battles in nineteenth century Ethiopia deals more with military, political and diplomatic questions than with the socio-cultural backgrounds. Historians express their surprise at Ethiopia's... «military ability which was unique at the time in the entire context of Africa and the Middle East» (Erlich, 1988: 115) or at the «superiority of Ethiopian arms vis-a-vis Italian» such as in Dogali (Bahru Zewde, Dogali, 1988: 116).

The reasons for Ethiopian victories at the series of battles from Gundet (1875) to Adwa (1896) are mainly attributed to the military and political situation, the imports of arms or the diplomatic shrewdness of Ethiopian leaders like Menelik II. Little attention was paid to the socio-cultural, and particularly educational perspectives that empowered the foot soldiers and the leaders to series of victories that culminated in resounding success at Adwa...

The Ottoman/Egyptian attempt to occupy the Nile Basin was backed by well trained military leaders. The Italian Army thrusting from the Red Sea was also led by generals who graduated from the military academies. What kind of training, if any at all, did their Ethiopian opponents have? ...

In Ethiopian history, education as a formal institution existed as church and mosque school systems that prepared a small portion of the young men to serve in the elaborate religious functions and occupy leadership positions in the hierarchy. The clergy had never allowed practical subjects to prepare the young for secular life to be included in the curricula of the other-worldly oriented church schools (Haile Gabriel Dagne, 1967, 1976).

The only «educative medium» for the young people of the time was the «social environment»: the home,

the village community, and the courts of the notables, kings or emperors. To complete their education, young men labored as apprentices under the guidance of a family head or village elders, or they joined a renowned politico-military leader of their choice... Even though traditional education was not organized in a written form, it had developed certain patterns, and the following ideals and content can be identified in incidental instruction: bravery, loyalty, patriotism, leadership qualities, bodily fitness, skill in the use of military tools.

The ideals of Military and Leadership Education

Most observers of the time agree with the assertion of M. Perham (1948: 160, 164) that «the Ethiopians were soldiers before everything and their highest ambitions were military» Haberland (1965: 200) rightly underlines that the ideal conception of a full-fledged human being was, in the less other-worldly oriented Ethiopian culture, «tileaasew» who, through his personal ability and character, attained the desire of most of his people: heroism, will power and leadership quality, irrespective of his birth as a son of a famous person or homo novus.

The «achievement system»

Haberland relates this social trait, which he calls the Ethiopian «Nationaleigenschaft», to the «achievement system» (Verdienstkomplex). He stresses that it is the unquenchable urge of the Ethiopians, to strive, through individual display of bravery, for «fame», «name», «office» and promotion from the rank and file to the «achievers» (verdiestadel), which in this paper we call the politico-military hierarchy.

The achievement system, and the urge for fame that goes with it, was embedded, in what Haberland calls the «change of office» tradition (Aemterwechsel) of the Ethiopian social system. Positions of leadership at regional and state level were not occupied by birthright, but by achievement in bravery and leadership. The constant change of office (shum shir) under the overall leadership of the emperors, left room for those who had met the «ideal image» of a

hero and a leader to compete for position, that would earn them gult land, i.e. privileges to collect produce from farmers of an area delineated as gult.

In line with Haberland, H. Erlich (1988:115f) sees "the urge to excel", which "characterized many Ethiopians of that period", embedded in the "socio-politically flexible" society, typified by "upward-downward power-game". Erlich states further that this power-game was not based on birth right or hereditary privileges, but more on personal merits and proven achievements. The socio-political context was open enough to reward the talented and the ambitious and had created an "ever-renewed leadership at all levels in the state". To fit successfully in this system, young men had to internalize the highly esteemed values of bravery from their social environment.

The immediate and the most formative social environment for the young, was the family, generally recognized as the "psychic agency" of society (E. from, 1971:83). The family strived to shape the young men not only as productive farmers but more so as brave fighters, as "jegna" (Heroes), who would protect the community and aspire to leadership. Young men were induced to emulate in their daily interaction the ideals of "jegninet" (Heroism) incorporated in the person of a "tilea sew". Such models of heroes were abundant in the village community or at regional and national level. In the process of their growth young men acquired, to use the concept of Erich Fromm, the "social character" of their group, namely the urge to excel as hero. As the successful defence against the scramble for Africa demonstrated, the value of bravery transformed, through traditional education "into an inner drive" or associatively "inherent striving", became a potent force that channelized the energy of the people for the purpose of continued functioning of Ethiopian social systems.

Civic Education Ideals of Patriotism

The civic education of the young also included patriotism, loyalty and obedience. From the story telling, narration of events, by parents and village elders the young were informed and made aware of the power structure beyond the village territory, to

which local leaders were subjected. The concept of Ethiopian statehood and kingship was conveyed to the young, mainly by the clergy, who Haberland (1965:37) called "the consciousness of the Christian state". The clergy, next to the politico-military leaders, constituted the most influential strata in the Ethiopian social structure, that dominated the cultural life of the Christian population. The clergy taught, and still teaches today religious and social ideals at church services, ceremonies, festivities and during pastoral (nefs abat) household visits, including the well-being of the Emperor and country in their regular prayers. The clergy imparted in the Christian youth ideals of patriotism, love and loyalty for Emperor and country.

Haberland (1965: 47f), in his study on the Ethiopian kinship, described on the basis of rich historical records, the deep-rooted sense of calling (Sendungsbewusstsein) for the state of Ethiopia (Mengiste Ethiopia). The conviction of belonging to a larger state form led by a king having biblical origin was deep-rooted in the consciousness of the ordinary Christian highlanders. The state of Ethiopia (mengist), assumed to cover unlimited area in the Horn, was conceived to encompass several ethnic regions (ager or gizat) ruled by traditional local leaders but subject to the "Shum-shir" authority of the Emperors.

Ethiopia: At the center of the world

The clergy taught that Ethiopia, one of the oldest countries in history, was at the center of the world and that her kings, as elects of God, descended from the Salomonic dynasty, and ruled in an unbroken chain of succession whose genealogical connections chroniclers took pain to establish (Tadesse Tamrat, 1990: 117). Furthermore, Ethiopia, which, as a holy land "stretches her hands unto God", was given by Christ to his mother St. Mary for protection (tamre mariyam, 1976EC, p.424). In his proclamation for the general mobilization, Menelik denounced the Italians invading a land which God had delineated by sea and given to Ethiopians (Zekre neger: 254). Even some bandits and rebels such as Dejach Hogos of Agame defected from the Italian camp because, according to Gebre Sellassie (237,254), they did not want to fight with aliens, against Christians, and the king of their country (mengist). One of the motives, that mobilized the energy of the foot soldiers and their

leaders at Adwa and its precursors, was, therefore, the conviction to fight for a just cause of defending a holy land of their fathers.

Apprenticeship and Military service

After individual instructions at home and in a village and mastering the traditional skills required of a soldier, a young man, having won confidence in sport and hunting performances, would decide to join a regular army of a renowned politico-military leader "of his own will and choice" as enlistment was voluntary (Arnoldi, quoted in: Tsypkin, 234). He would strive to outshine others and compete for rank and office by attracting the attention of his leader in demonstrating the standard capabilities: marching long distances, "... without any noticeable exertion" subsisting "... on minimum rations without appreciable drop in efficiency", excelling as an "excellent marksman" (Marcus, Archiv Orientalni), hunter, horseman, gugs player. Above all he would demonstrate courage ignoring death. Obscure figures like Alula (Erlich, 1988: 116), Habte Giorgis aba Mechal and Balcha aba Nefso could achieve high positions from scratch.

Court Education in Leadership Qualities

The "educative environment" of the courts (Gibi) of the politico-military leaders and the palaces (beta mengist) of the Kings and Emperors were valued and aspired. Minor notables desired to serve their master or the Emperor who handled and solved political or military problems. Young men who grew up in the court of politico-military leaders, had better opportunities to be promoted to rank and position, as they had better chances to demonstrate their ability, loyalty, obedience and win the confidence of their leaders. Several politico-military leaders whom Menelik had educated in his palace and created from "dust and earth" led the foot soldiers to victory at Adwa...

The conviction of the just cause to fight for the Emperor and the country, which Gebre Sellassie repeatedly referred to, was particularly true of those leaders whom Menelik raised from "dust and earth". Gebre Sellassie (251, 262) compared the patriotic anger against the enemy at Adwa, with "a hot pan

(mitad) on fire", and the valor of the foot soldiers (serawit) marching into the battlefield with a determination of "crowds of monkeys swarming to invade piled bundles of grain". The internalized value of bravery through the "educative media" of the family, the villages and the courts was effectively mobilized at Adwa.

Gebre Sellassie's statements were endorsed by several observers. The impression of the two Russian military officers, Arnoldi and Bulatovich, who served under Menelik, was summarized by Tsypkin (1988: 238): Ethiopia had by that time... *«developed a brilliant model of warrior, perfectly handling weapons, hardy, and bravely looking into the eyes of death»*. Erlich (1988: 118) observed that the urge to excel in the Ethiopian "upward-downward power game" (shum-shir) system has *«provided Ethiopia at the turn of the century with tested leadership at all levels»*.

Some contemporary observers, due to the prevailing "European arrogance" (Marcus, Archiv Orientalni: 159) could not conceive that a native African people could defeat an European power. Ignoring the potency of the social order discussed above, they wrongly pronounced, with racial underpinnings, those Ethiopians as a "unique race".

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