The Ethiopian Traditional Education: Philosophical foundations and reformist movements in Medieval Period

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Abstract

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The dominance of the traditional education as both a way of life and a foundation of the collective identity of the Ethiopian society, was so strong that there are rare accounts of challenges to it, or attempts of reform. This paper sketches an account on a philosophical and reformist movement by a group of monks in the 15th century Ethiopia, and provide an overview of the history, structure, and philosophical foundations of the Ethiopian traditional education system. Finally, the paper points out the contradictory lines of thinking embedded in this traditional system, and argues that the 15th century movement of Dekike Estifanos was a missed chance of modernization Ethiopia is still paying for.

Keywords: Coptic Church, Dekike Estifanos, Monk Education, Ethiopia, History of Education.

Resumen

La educación tradicional etiope: fundamentos filosóficos y movimientos reformistas en el período medieval

El predominio de la educación tradicional, entendida como forma de vida y como fundamento de la identidad colectiva de la socie-
dad etíope, ha sido históricamente tan fuerte que ha suprimido el nacimiento de críticas o el intento de reforma. Este artículo presenta una historia sobre un movimiento filosófico y reformista de un grupo de monjes en el siglo XV en Etiopía, y presenta una visión general de la historia, de la estructura, y de los fundamentos filosóficos del sistema de educación tradicional etíope. Finalmente, el documento señala algunas líneas de pensamiento contradictorias incrustadas en esta educación tradicional, y sostiene que el movimiento de Dekike Estifanos en el siglo XV fue una oportunidad perdida de modernización que Etiopía todavía está pagando.

Palabras clave: Iglesia de Copta, Dekike Estifanos, Educación monástica, Etiopía, Historia de la educación.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia prides itself of having a 1700 years-old traditional education system. The design and the dispensation of education until the introduction of modern schools in early 20th century was almost exclusively that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church\(^1\) (Milkias, 1976; Kebede, 2006, 2010). The Ethiopian traditional education largely focuses on the spiritual values and services of the church, with some secular content. As the Church was strongly associated with the Monarchy, in the medieval period, its education had profound influence on the political and social life of the society. The Church provided legitimacy and supplied elites to the bureaucratic functions of the Monarchy, while in

\(^1\) Islamic religious schools (Madrasas) were prevalent in certain parts of the country, although comparatively limited in distribution and their impact on the socio-political life of the country. This paper does not cover these types of traditional schools.
return received official status of state religion and amassed huge resources, mainly in the form of land.

As much as it is hailed for its contribution to the country’s socio-political identity and its literary and artistic advancement, traditional education is also criticized for its inhibitive impact on development. Not only was traditional education methodologically dependent on memorization of scriptures, it was also resistant to modern education as well as technological advancements. The introduction of modern schools, for instance, was strongly resisted by traditional scholars.

The dominance of the traditional education – emanating from the dominance of the Church – as a way of life and as a foundation of the collective identity of the Ethiopian society was so strong that there are rare accounts of challenges to it, or attempts of reform. In the very few incidents where critics posed challenges, they were met with firm and crushing powers of the church where they were labeled heretics, tortured and ultimately executed (Menasemay, 2010a).

This paper presents a short account on a philosophical and reformist movement by a group of monks/philosophers in the 15th century Ethiopia. Before that, the paper presents an overall overview of the history, structure, content and philosophical foundations of the Ethiopian traditional education system. Finally, the paper points out the contradictory lines of thinking embedded in the Ethiopian traditional education, and argues that the 15th century movement of Dekike Estifanos\(^2\), was a missed chance of modernization Ethiopia is still paying for.

\(^2\) Amharic words and local names are in Italics.
2. Traditional Education in Ethiopia

While it is not easy to precisely delineate the bounds of traditional education, the phrase is here used to mean the Church based formal education. The beginning of traditional education in Ethiopia is mostly associated with the introduction of Christianity in the Fourth century. Emperor Ezana (c. 320s-350s) of the Axumite Kingdom was the first of the royal dynasty to be converted to Christianity (Isaac, 1971) by Frumentius (a Greek who later became the first Bishop of Axum). After Ezana declared Christianity as the state religion the establishment of churches was accompanied by corresponding schools the primary purpose of which was to teach the religion and its scriptures, and to recruit and train priests.

There are, however, who claim that traditional education in Ethiopia predates Christianity. Gemechu (2016), who looks at education as a broader process of acquiring and imparting knowledge/skills, for instance, claims that certain social practices such as farming and craftsmanship do not have anything to do with religion. Rather these kinds of skills are formed, developed and transferred socially. Isaac (1971), on his part, attributes the pre-Christian origin of traditional education to the gatherings of learned men associated with the synagogues of Ethiopian Jews.

As the Axumite Kingdom expanded to the South and Southwestern regions of present day Ethiopia, Christianity also spread. The churches and monasteries established in the new areas became the pivotal centers of spiritual life as well as educational establishments (Wagaw, 1990). Every church maintained at least the basic form of such schools, while advanced studies – scholarship and research – are carried out at certain
long standing centers, mainly in the Northern parts of the country.

3. Content and structure of traditional education

At the surface, the church based traditional education appears ultimately dedicated to the simple task of propagating the faith and preparing clergies for the services of the church. Nonetheless, underneath this surface there is a complex and rich structure of education.

In a typical traditional school, a group of boys would gather outside the local church and a priest would instruct or observe the instruction by the senior student. Places of learning were not always fixed. Sometimes instructions may take place at the house of the priest, in the churchyard, or just under a tree. Books and writing materials were very scarce while seats and desks were almost non-existent. Lessons were mostly oral. Nonetheless, there was a painstaking effort by both teachers and students; some left home for distant monasteries where they study advanced levels, making their daily bread by begging (Isaac, 1971).

At the most basic level traditional schools introduce young children to the Ge’ez³ and Ethiopian alphabet and reading of the testaments in Ge’ez. There was, however, more emphasis on reading than writing at the early stages (Milkias, 1976). In principle church based education is open to all children, male and fe-

³ Ge’ez is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is an ancient language widely used in the Axumite Kingdom between 4th and 9th Centuries. It has seized as a spoken language sometime between 9th and 12th centuries but remains the language of the church.
male, of members of the faith. However, passage through the school system to the advanced level was very demanding and boys were far more encouraged to attend and to push through to the higher levels.

Most complete their education at the lower level, focused on the skills of reading and translation. These are likely to become deacons and priests and hold lower level jobs in the hierarchy of the church. Those who attend advanced levels in the great churches and monasteries become *debteras*, or the traditional intellectual elite. These are not only the pillars of the church’s continuity as the interpreters of doctrine, they are also largely sought for their knowledge and wisdom in the courts of the monarchy and local rulers (Wagaw, 1990).

The curricula of traditional Ethiopian education can be classified into different levels and type of study. Issac (1971, 243-47) puts it into four distinct schools with specific type of lessons in each: The School of Reading (for Deacons), the School of Singing and Dancing (for Priests), the School of Creative Writing (for Scribes), and the School of Literature (for Scholars).

The School of Reading, equivalent of the elementary school, is where children approximately between five and twelve study the basics, and it covers about six or seven years. The School of Reading itself has four stages. The first stage is the mastery of *Fidel*, the Ethiopian alphabet with 231 characters (33 letters with seven variations each). Having learned the alphabet one passes on to the second stage called *Fidel-Hawaria* (the Apostles Syllabary), which requires the reading and memorization of the first chapter of the first epistle general of St. John in Ge'ez. This is the stage at which writing and numerical studies are also supposed to start, but these are generally considered optional and often teachers would simply disregard
them. The third stage, called *Gabata-Hawaria*, is learning by heart of parts of the New Testament and the Apostles Creed. These are read aloud by pupils in unison to the right pronunciation and intonation. *Tselote-Hawaria* (religious prayers) would also be studied by heart at this stage (Milikias, 1976). The fourth stage in the School of Reading is called *Dawit*, which is the memorization and accurate recital of the Psalms. Passage to a new level is only after the mastery of the previous one. Graduation from the School of reading is celebrated with feasts. A graduate can read and recite fluently, but can hardly master writing; he can serve as a deacon in the church. Those who desire to pursue more than an elementary education will pass on to the higher schools.

The School of Singing and Dancing, or the School of Music, is also traditionally known as the House of Melody (*Zema-Bet*). How to chant in church services is the main content one learns to become a priest – as opposed to going to a theological seminary. This School includes the study of *Degua* (Musical Composition of the Ethiopian Church written by an Ethiopian scholar named Yared in the sixth century A.D.); *Zemare* and *Mewaset* (Eucharist Songs and Songs for commemorations and funerals, respectively); and *Qedasse* (general liturgy). These are studied in close connection with the rhythmic movement, dance or style of singing, called *Aquaquam* (literally meaning posture, manner of standing or balancing). Sometimes studying the different kinds of songs and the dance require attending specialized centers rather than having studied them all in one place. One is typically required to master *Qedasse* and to have a general knowledge of the others to become a priest.
The School of Creative Writing, known as *Qine-Bet* or the House of Poetry, focuses on the *Sewasew* (grammar of the Ge’ez Language) and the twelve different types of composition, all committed to memory, which could take about thirteen years. A graduate of this School, a Scribe, is expected to be not only a copyist, but also a poet and composer in his own right. A good knowledge of the Bible and the religious history of Ethiopia are also crucial. At the best-known schools of northern Ethiopia, philosophy is also taught. The main text called *Matshafa Falasfa Tabiban* (Book of Wise Philosophers) contains passages from Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes, and Cicero as well as David and Solomon. In later years, the work of Zara Ya’acob, a seventeenth century Ethiopian philosopher, who was critical of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is also studied.

The School of Literature is the highest level of the Ethiopian traditional education system. This school, also known as *Matshaf-Bet*, or House of Books studies literature and history. Classes covered oral exegesis of the Old and New Testaments, Church Fathers, monastic literature, ecclesiastical and civil law, and Ethiopian and world history. Scholars of *Matshaf-Bet* used to have exclusive custody of the *Fetha-Negast*, the major Ethiopian code of law. While decision is made by the king, interpretation of the law was theirs, and only theirs. Furthermore, *Tarike-Negest* (monarchic history), *Kibre-Negest* (Glory of the Kings), and world history texts such as Josppon’s/Janson’s History of the Jews, Johannes Madabba's writings on history of the world up to Islamic expansion into Egypt, and other historical tales were studied. Although it was not a requirement for one to be a monk to become a scholar, many of them were monks. Monks, particularly her-
mits had, at times, great influence on the Ethiopian society – Kings listened to their counsel and were generally held high as prophets. Some even held high official government posts. Be it a priest, a monk or a debtera who reaches this high stage of learning was highly regarded and referred to as liq (most exalted elder). The course takes about ten years and any graduate who has passed through all the schools, which takes at least thirty years, “is as competent as any well-trained theologian in Europe or America in sophisticated philosophical and theological discourse” (Isaac, 1971, p. 247).

In addition to the above-mentioned syllabi much more is offered as optional and/or extracurricular. Some of these include astrology, the preparation of medicinal herbs, “magical prayers” and “formulae” (Milkias, 1976). Regardless, traditional system of education was seen as strongly Ethio-centric. The centrality of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (its doctrine and values), the use of indigenous languages and the extensive readings in the native history, customs, languages and values gives the evidence that Ethiopia was the central subject of study. The traditional education targeted on preparing scholars who would serve the church and, by extension, the country. Deep knowledge of the Bible, of Ethiopian history and the tales and legends that accrued over centuries about events and personalities of religion and national tradition were among the requirements expected of these scholars (Kebede, 2006).

4. The functions of traditional education in Ethiopia

The strong tie traditional education has with the Church should not be taken as evidence that it is exclu-


sively limited to the formation of clergies and church ministers. The religious education extends to secular realms and church education produces civil servants such as judges, teachers, governors, scribes, treasurers, and general administrators, as well as high level advisors to the monarchy and local lords (Wagaw, 1979). Social norms and behavior, the structure and meaning of social hierarchy, the duties, functions and rights of individuals belonging to particular groups in the broader society were all framed and conveyed through the traditional education system (Kebede, 2010). Therefore, traditional education in Ethiopia welded the spiritual teachings with the secular way of life – playing integrative and nationalistic roles (Kebede, 2006). Menasemay (2010a, p. 71) hails traditional education to have excelled in absorbing the history and culture of the country and getting students absorbed into it, where in contrast modern education has remarkably failed cultivating “historical amnesia”.

Another crucial function of traditional education was its contribution to the advancement of knowledge and art. The state-monarch-church relation, manifested in politics religious studies and art, demonstrated the best of such union in times of harmony acknowledging the need for one another and making compromises when necessary, and caused disaster when they fell out of terms (Wagaw, 1990). Hence the ascendance and decline of philosophy, literature and religious studies corresponds with the dominant powers of different regions under particular dynasty or group of rulers. The advancement of the Ge’ez to become the official language of state and church between 3rd and 10th Century AD of the Axumite Kingdom; and the architecture and building art of the Zagwe Dynasty (10th to 13th Century AD) epitomized in the monolithic rock-hewn churches
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of Lalibela, one of the wonders of the world, can be typical examples in this regard. Also, the literary advancement and the flourishing of urban life in and around Gondar (14th to 19th Century AD) is another result of coordinated relations between church and state.

It is useful to note here that, for the most part of the country’s history in the past seventeen centuries, the monarch has always assumed the position of head of not only the state, government, the armed forces and the judiciary, but also that of the Church. With regard to the spiritual and educational functions of the Church the Abun (the Patriarch) was the supreme power following the Emperor. However, until the end of the Second World War, the Abun was appointed by the See of St. Mark of Alexandria, Egypt. The Abun, therefore, is not well versed in the language, culture and political idiosyncrasies of the Emperor. The Etchegue, the third person in the Church hierarchy, is a very important figure who has the local understanding the Abun does not. This highly learned person has a paramount importance in the administrative and political arena of the Church’s function linking the general population and the rulers, and the church leaders (Milkias, 1976; Wagaw, 1990).

Yet another important function of traditional education was as a means of social mobility. The chance for promotion in the elaborate hierarchy of the Church is among the major motivations of students at the church. Highly educated elites in the Church and state structure enjoy position of privilege as opposed to the rest of the population who are mostly peasants or soldiers. As one moves higher in their education they are likely to receive promotion from the Emperor and his landlords and are eligible for awards of land, cattle, servants, slaves and money according to their rank.
Those who enjoy privilege are referred to as ‘free’ reflecting the fact that they are free from manual labor for others. Appointment to the hierarchies of the state under the Emperor is considered one of the major basis of stratification, with which came wealth, social status and power.

5. The philosophical foundations of Ethiopian traditional education

The philosophical pillars of the Ethiopian Church-based traditional education are deeply rooted in the ideals of the religion. The nature of man, the nature of truth, man’s relation with God, etc. constitute the foundation for how education is understood and its roles are defined.

In Ethiopic literature and traditional teachings man is understood as being made of two distinct components – the body and the soul. Each has its own characteristics and purpose. The body which is believed to constitute four elements: water, air, fire and earth, has two defining characteristics – it is tangible or concrete and it is finite or limited in time and space. The soul, on the other hand, which is inspired by the creator into the human body, at the time of creation, is an entity with in the body but of not the same characteristics. The soul is invisible and abstract; it is permanent and eternal; it is part of God. The soul is defined in three basic characteristics: its immortality, its ability for understanding and cognition, and its capability of speech or prophecy (Wagaw, 1990).

The body and the soul have their own desires. The desires of the body (the Amharic phrase translates as the will of the flesh) are worldly, temporal and limited,
generally judged as short sighted. The desires of the soul, on the contrary, are spiritual and therefore transcendental and eternal. The soul is connected with God and ultimately its desires originate from God’s plan for man (or the specific individual). Therefore, the desires of the body and of the soul are inherently conflicting. The spiritual soul is regarded superior over the worldly body, and hence the main purpose of the human life on earth is preparation for the eternal heavenly life (Dagne, 2015). This conflict between these set of desires explains the human existence as a continuous struggle. It is one’s duty to subdue the bodily desires to those of the soul so that the soul will ultimately rule over the body. This requires practices such as fasting, enduring hardship and torture.

Since learning involves higher level abstract mental faculties and activities such as consciousness, cognition, feeling, memory, and the like, it is regarded as the function of the soul; it is something connected with the invisible and abstract world of the spirit, and of God (Wagaw, 1990). Learning is therefore an attempt to reach at the absolute, timeless and universal truth that is from God, and as Gemechu (2016) noted, it comes framed in the form of moral and spiritual realities. On the contrary, thoughts and acts of personal comfort and desires of the body are regarded misplaced devotion of time and energy on the temporal and the worldly. Therefore, such ideas, desires and behaviors are to be avoided, or suppressed.

In the education process, the role of the teacher is not only to nurture the spiritual growth of the student, but to discipline him as well (Wagaw, 1990; Dagne, 2015). The teacher on one hand channels wisdom, knowledge and truth from the realms of the objective world to his pupils, and on the other, he administers
disciplinary measures (at least at the early levels) upon any infractions of rules and regulations. Rules, regulations and norms are the foundation of learning by subduing the body and liberating the soul. It is the duty of the learner to submit to the rules and the prerogative of the teacher to enforce them. In effect one of the defining characteristics of the Ethiopian traditional education is a vertical relationship between the teacher and the students where the teacher has unchallenged authority over the student, and the student is required to address the teacher as yeneta (equivalent of master). The teacher is feared and revered.

Additionally, as man is created in the image and likeness of the omnipotent God, he is believed to be endowed at birth with some properties and gifts, such as intellectual grace and riches. Innate or natural knowledge is contained in the mind which has to be awakened and cultivated in to the soul through education. The will and power of God is needed to release the latent knowledge from within. Knowledge, eloquence, and the gift of prophecy are given from God acquired by the soul through the spirit, where the teacher is the intermediary who facilitates this process (Wagaw, 1990).

In summary, the main concept is that God is the center of every aspect of the human life – both the body and the soul. Knowledge and wisdom are from God and human beings are receivers. God instills some innate physical and intellectual attributes in human beings. It is up to the individual to initiate, cultivate and expand that treasure through learning, and finally to put it to use in the metaphysical realm (Wagaw, 1990). The individual is the means for the fulfillment of the grand design of the supernatural.
To wrap up it is very useful to look at the four points with which Dagne (2015, p. 101) summarized the tenets of traditional education in Ethiopia:

a. This world is temporary; the purpose of one’s life on earth is to be prepared for the eternal life to come after death.

b. Knowledge is from God, and therefore it does not change; it does not improve; it is objective and universal.

c. A student has to subdue his personal needs and desires and be unquestioningly obedient and disciplined.

d. The purpose of education (the church based) is to impart the eternal spiritual knowledge and services (religious), and therefore it is not concerned with vocational skills.

6. General critics and reformist movements of the Medieval period

Modern day critics of the traditional education system have articulated its shortcomings. One thing that comes right at the top is its chronic gender bias. Education was generally considered for boys and everything is set to fit as such. Girls are seldom educated at the primary level just about to read and write and Dawit (reciting the Psalms). Sometimes girls from privileged families might be taught at home, but this was for prestige than anything else (Milkias, 1976). Similarly, parents who were not Orthodox Christian did not have as much chance to send their children to

4 My own translation from Amharic.
the traditional schools that were aligned with the church (Wagaw, 1979).

Learning at the elementary level largely focused on reading and not so much on writing comprehension and arithmetic. Having Ge’ez, an ancient language that is hardly understood outside the church, as its language of instruction, the traditional education commits students to memorization and rote learning. Wodajo (1959) underscored that attempts to develop understanding and cultivate faculties of creativity, criticism, and imagination are barely incorporated in the methods and content of traditional education. Menasemay (2010a) however argues that this is an issue only at the early stage of the traditional education. In the advanced levels understanding and inquiry are very much at the center of the learning process. Indeed, this is evidenced by the high-level education of the elites such as at the schools of creative writing and literature (Isaac, 1971).

The strongest criticism scholars agree on is the exclusion of scientific courses from the traditional system of education. Not only did traditional education marginalize different forms of skills-based trainings (Dagne, 2015) but generally had little inclination to focus on technological and scientific components (Kebede, 2010). Rather the reluctance changed into rejection as religious doctrine slowly grew into rigid dogma (Kebede, 2006). This has continuously pushed to resistance to modernization in any form. The introduction of modern ways of life as well as modern technological advancements was fiercely resisted by the Church and its elites (Milkias, 1976; Kebede, 2014).

One might notice that these criticisms are informed by modern day knowledge of well-developed western education systems. However, it is striking to
observe that very similar criticisms were forwarded and efforts of reform were exerted by a group called Dekike Estifanos, back in the fifteenth century – a group of monks who had no contact with Western education.

Dekike Estifanos (Aba Estifanos and his followers), founded by Aba Estifanos, is a group of monks from within the Ethiopian Orthodox church who led reformist movements in fifteenth century Ethiopia. The movement started around 1406 EC\(^5\), in Tigray, the northern part of Ethiopia and spread to the central and southern parts, continuing at least until the 1470s EC. Dekike Estifanos defied the different social, political and religious orders of their time. They were critical of their fellow intellectuals, the emperors, the church and the society at large, for which they were severely tortured and persecuted. This was particularly for their challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the reigning emperors (Emperor Yesehaq, 1406-1421 EC, Emperor Zara Yaccob 1426-1460 EC and Emperor Ba’ede Mariam, 1461-1471 EC) and their local lords (Haile, 2004; Menasemay, 2010a, 2010b).

Since they were monks and their teachings were mainly framed in the religious context, they are often viewed as religious reformists, even heretics. However, it is important to note that politics, philosophy and religion were very intertwined in Medieval Ethiopia and religion was not only used as a tool for strengthening power by the monarchy (particularly by Emperor Zeara Yaccob, with whom Dekike Estifanos had the

\(^5\) EC: Ethiopian Calendar is a system of calendar used in Ethiopia, based on the Julian calendar. Depending on the month, the Ethiopian calendar could be seven or eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.
most intense rift, and from whom they received the most severe persecution) but it was also the definition of everyday life. Taking closer look at the different challenges they posed which were pertinent to different individuals, groups, institutions and practices, proves that they were dealing with far more than religious issues.

While their advocacy for reform extended to a number of areas such as rule of law, limit to authority, divorce between church and state, gender equality, relation between man and the environment, etc. the core essence of their philosophy regarding knowledge and education, which by extension addresses the other areas as well, is summarized in the famous metaphorical question of the founder. Aba Estifanos is reported to have asked “of what use is the sun if it cannot give light and warmth?”. This is a critique which conceives knowledge as the sun “that throws light on the right relations between the ruler and the ruled, men and women, knowledge and life and man and nature” (Menasemay, 2010a p. 81). Knowledge, the light, shall do away with ignorance, the darkness, and reveal truth and reality.

According to Menasemay (2010a, 2010b) the critical views of Dekike Estifanos can be put in three major domains: Critic of power, institutions and knowledge. Dekike Estifanos refused to address the Emperor with the respectful “You” as everyone else of any status did. They rather addressed him with the familiar “you”\(^6\)

\(^6\) In Amharic the word for the familiar "you" - *ante* - is used among friends, people of equal status and age, and those who are familiar with one another (it is like addressing someone by first name). The respectful "You" - *erso* - is used in formal settings, to address people of higher status or age, when the individuals are not close, etc.
which is used in interaction with persons of equal or lower status and age. Their justification was that it is not right to address a human being with the respectful “You” while addressing God, the almighty, with the familiar “you” (which is the default way in Amharic). Dekike Estifanos also refused to prostrate themselves before the Emperor, regardless of the very important political and social meaning of prostration. Contrary to how the Emperor wanted to portray himself, these practices of Dekike Estifanos desacralized him and made the point that he is not any greater than his subjects and that he does not hold any more privileged knowledge because of divine anointment to the position.

The other major aspect of the movement by Dekike Estifanos was their advocacy for rule of law. They challenged that emperors should also be bound by law and that the appointment of a person to a position of power is neither divinely ordained nor naturally determined. When they suffered attack they often appealed to the law than to the understanding and judgment of the individual at the court, even when that person was the emperor. They also often said that their debate was ‘with Ethiopia’ trying to project the issue as a social concern than personalized to the emperor or the local rulers. Doing so, they spoke of the institution of the Monarchy, not just the monarch personally. In their discourse Dekike Estifanos also addressed the issue of women. While they had women members, one of their leaders, Abuna Ezra claimed that there is nothing other than the mysteries of priesthood that is meant

(this is more like addressing by sir name). In Amharic God is addressed by the familiar “you” as ante.
to be known by men and not by women. Therefore, *Dekike Estifanos* broke not only what is assumed to be a natural order of individuals and classes based on their blood line, but also the gender divide that assigned different status and roles for men and women.

*Dekike Estifanos* also strongly criticized the intellectuals of their time for not pursuing the truth to the benefit of the society, rather than serving the Monarch as if they were soldiers. Speaking the truth and exposing injustice and wrong doing is the duty of the intellectuals, they asserted.

They made distinctions between skills and wisdom, within the learning process, and they ardently advocated for inquiry, research and examination as a means for one to come to the level of wisdom. They do not by any means reduce the importance of skills. They rather assert that skill is meaningfully utilized only if it is sufficiently supported by examination/research. To demonstrate this, in response to challenges of their accusers, one of them *Abuna Ezra* built a wind mill which evoked fear and wonder among the accusers. He not only showed how inquiry and examination can turn skills into beneficial knowledge/wisdom, but he also made the point that the forces of nature can be used to serve human purposes – shading light on a new dimension of the relations between man and nature.

Though they are frequently accused of abandoning what is ‘Ethiopian’ and preaching alien ideas, they always referred to ‘the works of fathers’. This entails that they were based in the indigenous knowledge system and culture. But they also demanded that intellectuals take a critical approach to their practices. A balance that acknowledges what is known and attempts to reach to the uncharted territory of new world of knowledge.
They refused to prostrate themselves before the images of saints, religious figures and the crucifix, claiming that these things are the work of man. They called upon their fellows “not to be fooled by your own work”. This, Menasemay (2010b) notes is to mean that human knowledge is fallible. One might also add that this substantiates their position that knowledge is neither absolute nor static – a call for continuous exploration and examination as a basis for learning.

7. Conclusion

The Ethiopian traditional system of education has its own unique structure and content. Largely based on religious thoughts and dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, included secular aspects and in effect served not only the Church but also the state in many ways. Education also served as means of vertical social mobility offering learned men the opportunity for prestigious positions. While it is possible to point to a number of shortcomings of the then traditional education, it is important to consider the infused social, political, religious and philosophical context of the time. Education was a binding force of the spiritual and religious life of the then Ethiopia. It contributed to advancement in literature and art, but also helped maintain the socio-political status quo.

Within such environment an exception to the otherwise stringent and self-perpetuating system of education was the movement of Dekike Estifanos in the fifteenth century. It is worth noting that Dekike Estifanos came out of the Ethiopian traditional education. They distinguished themselves from the learned men of the time whom they criticized of serving the interest of the
established order. They do not see the acquisition of knowledge as the ultimate end of education. Critically examining what one knows and admitting mistakes are crucial in exploring a new horizon of wisdom, they asserted. They called for equality between individuals and advocated for public reasoning before the law. However, their reformist efforts were crushed with unimaginable cruelty\(^7\). With that, not only the Ethiopian indigenous education system but the country at large missed a massive opportunity for progress.

It, however, remains to be an enigma how an education system could produce such critical thinkers who were willing to sacrifice for what they believed to be the right way of life, and those who remained oblivious to the ills ignorance was causing the society. One would wonder how it was possible for reformists who came way ahead of similar movements in the rest of the world were embedded in the same education system with intellectuals who categorically denounced every effort for modernization – in thought or material.

\(^7\) Particularly during the reign of Zara Ya’acob Dekike Estifanos were harshly persecuted. They were flogged, thrown down ravines, their hairs torn out, their faces and bodies lacerated with knives, speared, dragged on the ground until their skins peeled off, tortured by fire, their tongues pulled out, their ears and nose cut, their eyes gouged and hot rods inserted in the sockets, their limbs chopped off, beheaded, their corpses dismembered and burnt, and so forth (Haile, 2004).
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