



### Short Review Paper

## Quest of Traditional Education in Ethiopia: A Retrospective Study

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### Abstract

*Ethiopia is one of the known countries for struggle of independence during colonial time; a home of archeological findings like Lucy; a center of religious belief like Christian, Muslim and Waqefata; obelisks like rock of Mukaturi of Showa, Aksum obelisk of Tigray, Lalibela church of Gonder, Sof Humor of Bale, and so forth. Like that of historical victories Ethiopia is also known for her traditional education too. This study uses qualitative research approach to answer the research question, starting point of tradition education and specifically retrospective research design of historical research method was employed. The source of the data was secondary data that was collected by different researchers at different time. Similarly, I used different archaeological finding that was collected by different scholars. Hence, this article figure out that traditional education was not introduced since 4<sup>th</sup> century that stick to introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia but rather it goes back to the history of ancient Cushitic people of Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** Religious education, Cultural education, Philosophy of education, History of education.

### Introduction

Ethiopia is a country located in east Africa which has more than 96.6 million people today<sup>1</sup>. Ethiopia has long history in all aspects like education, cultures, norms, values, religious, farming style and so forth. On the top of this, Ethiopia is also known for being home of different nation and nationality people living together in diversity. The focus of this article is on the educational aspect of Ethiopia, particularly on the traditional education. It is a long history that inspires all of us even though somewhat difficult to clearly point out the time at which traditional education begun. In fact there are some hints known and cited by scholars when traditional education was begun. That is in 4<sup>th</sup> century during Aksumite Kingdom<sup>2</sup>.

For more than two octants of centuries the history of traditional education of Ethiopia is known and stick to Church education. But in reality do we mean that there is no traditional education in Ethiopia before introduction of Church education? Do not we have our own civilization? Could not we contribute anything for today's civilization? No, we have our own contribution in all aspects. Ethiopia has and had her own finger print on Egyptian and Greek civilization which is indirectly high contribution for today's civilization.

For centuries it was token and written that traditional education was introduced to Ethiopia since 4<sup>th</sup> century of Christianity during Aksumite kingdom and 7<sup>th</sup> century of Islam<sup>3</sup>. As far as I am concerned, at that time, it is not a traditional education that was imported to Ethiopia, the land of Cush, but rather the dogma of religious education of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewhido

Church and Islam respectively<sup>4</sup>. The main focus of the then traditional education was to preserve church teachings<sup>5</sup>. By the same token there was a traditional education the way the society (Cushitic People, the indigenous people of Ethiopia, are Afar, Somali, Oromo, Sidama, Agewo, Hadiyya, Kambatta, and so forth) learn and transmit cultural heritage, values, norms and indigenous religious dogma to their children<sup>6</sup>. There was a wonderful ancient Cushitic cultural education that disseminate from areas like Malka Kunture, Harar, and Muka Turi to Aksum, Yeha, Nubiya, then to Egypt and Greek<sup>7</sup>.

**Research question:** The major research question that this article has tried to address is: Did traditional education begun in 4<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian context?

### Research Methods

Qualitative research approach was employed to conduct this research. Out of qualitative research design I used historical research method leaning against to retrospective design. An adequate secondary data was collected to have an evidence for research question above. The document analysis of books for instance, like Abebe Bekele, Tabor Wami and Belay Mekonen was done. All sources were written by three different languages: major of them was written by English whereas some of them are Amharic and Afaan Oromo. I recorded data to my note book from all sources first, and then interpret accordingly. Analysis was done firstly by coding all necessary and sufficient data then classify into different themes that make sound and enable me to get answer for my research question.

## Data Analysis

**Education and Traditional education:** Education is simply a process of imparting or acquiring knowledge. Anyone can impart or acquire knowledge in different ways. Those can be through modern type schooling system the so called progressive education system or traditional education system. In fact many scholars define traditional education as teacher-centered delivery of instruction to classes where students are considered as receivers of information whereas progressive education as student-centered approach where students take part in constructing their own understanding.

Here, I argue that cannot we talk about education without traditional education since traditional education basically focuses on educational practices and expert mastery. If so, where is the place of cultures, norms and values of a society? As far as my knowledge is concerned, I classified traditional education in to two different parts. Those are traditional education that takes place in school system and in the society. That is why I am claiming that traditional education is not only the one that takes place under the control of religious education. In Ethiopian context, it was there before the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia. We have our own way of imparting and acquiring knowledge for elders. For instance artisans learns how to make pot from his / her ancestors not from religious education. This implies that there was another path of acquiring knowledge out of the so called Ethiopian traditional education which I call it cultural education of ancient Cushitic people, the indigenous people in East Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.

### Historical foundation of Traditional Education in Ethiopia:

The term Ethiopia comes from the term Greek which means black face people. By the same token, the term Ethiopia was written more than 40 times in Holy Bible which indicates Cushitic people and the home land of Cush is Ethiopia. On the top of this, Cushitic peoples are known for their wisdom particularly on building, and poem<sup>7</sup>.

It is not necessary for traditional education to stick to religious education. For instance farming style has no link with religious. But it is clear that ancestor taught their descendents how to farm, how to hunt and how to prepare apparatus for those purposes. So, I can claim that there was traditional education in Ethiopia before introduction of religious education.

We can also find a lot archeological findings like letters on rock found in Mukaturi of Showa of which is 20,000 years old, and similarly that of Sidama which counts 10,000 years old<sup>7</sup>. They are also base and indicator of cultural traditional education. Even, those archeological findings can be seen as a cornerstone for other obelisks like that of Aksum obelisk and pyramid of Egypt.

Tabor indicated that those archeological finding shows and give clue that civilization goes from areas like Harer, Diredeba,

Mukatari, Sidama and the like to Aksum then expands to Egypt and Greek<sup>7</sup>. Still today Harer, Dire Dewa, Mukaturi, Wolayita, Sidama and the likes are the land of Cushitic People and a place where we can find a lot of ancient kits. On the top of this, today they have had their own way of transmitting knowledge and wisdom to their successor. Among the major ways for instance Gada System of Oromo people and Chambelala of Sidama people are pillar one. Hence, therefore, traditional education in Ethiopia goes back to the history of Ancient Cushitic Empire.

Many scholars pointed out that traditional education begins during 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D of Aksumite civilization and Muslim religious education back to 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup> which I prefer to say a half way displaying history. There are also archeological findings of letters on rock found in areas like Mukaturi, and Sidam and Wolayita that indicates there was a traditional education in Ethiopia before 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>.

The prominent objective of Church traditional education was to train priest, monks, teachers and debteras<sup>5</sup>. It focused on social studies like theology, philosophy, language, art, and literature, then mathematics and at the end natural science<sup>2</sup>. The structure of traditional education was: seven years for *Zema* bet, nine for *Sewasew* (grammar) bet, four for *Kene* bet and ten to Old and New Testaments<sup>4</sup>. Here *Zema* bet is the lowest level that is almost equivalent to elementary school of westerns where as exegete of Old and New Testament is one of the most advanced school of taught that requires ten years. Similarly, the main purpose of Islamic education in Ethiopia is to preach the religion and preserve the cultural heritage with such method of translating the Quran which uses the Arabic language and script exclusively, and understanding the interpretation of verses by Islamic scholars called Imam, Sheik, Kabira, and Uluma<sup>4</sup>.

On the top of this, in cultural education of ancient Cushitic people learns like military, engineering (like construction of buildings), leadership, and astronomy<sup>7</sup>. Let me show that those things by using particular example of Oromo nation which is one of the largest groups of Cushitic people found in Ethiopia. Oromo nation known for his ruling system called Gada System. Most of the time people understanding of Gada System is only limited to a ruling system and judiciary. But, in reality it is beyond that. Pervasively, Gada System has all aspects of individual and group lives' philosophical, sociological, psychological, historical, religious, leadership, cultural, etc. It is not new for educators to understand that philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history are fundamental foundations of education<sup>8</sup>.

Gada system is a philosophical paradigm. It is the world view of Oromo nation. There are a lot of do's and do not do's which is rule and regulation of the society, waqefata as religious, sike and ayantu for social values and the likes. It has its own hierarch of job description at each stage<sup>9</sup>. For instance, if one want to be Gada, he has to pass through levels such as Dabale that takes (0-8 years), Game titika (9-16), Game gurguda (17-24), kusa

(25-32), Raba Dori (Kondala) (33-40), Gada (41-48), Yuba I (49-56), Yuba II (57-64), Yuba III (65-72) and Gadamoji (73-80). In this hierarchy Gada is the highest level and the ruling one. After eight years on position of ruling the society he come back to Yuba I which is an advisor for Gada that of his descendent one. When one shifts from Raba Dori (Kondala) to Gada he has to do a lot (like on his speaking skill, military skill, and leadership skill and way of conflict resolution) in order to be Gada. This indicates that there is a clear cultural education that Gada has to pass through<sup>6</sup>.

Such system was neither built over a night nor a history of 16<sup>th</sup> century or something copied and pasted from others. It is an indigenous ruling system of the people. It is a long history of the people that passed from ancestors to successor through embedment. They teach their descendant through participatory method of learning, which is a very strong teaching method that might be a base for today's constructivist theory of learning.

#### **Philosophical foundation of Traditional Education:**

Traditional education has its own philosophy which enables people to define and describe reality. Ancient Cushitic people believe that there is a single reality which can be best described by realism<sup>10</sup>. For instance, if we see Oromo people, they believed that true is from God / Waqa and single in reality. They have a proverb that says "true is the only son of God"<sup>11</sup>. They have their own worldview that is Gada System. I claim that Gada system is not only ruling system of Oromo people. It is a philosophical paradigm of the people in all aspects of their life. It has religious aspect called Waqefata, and also educational aspect that force society for betterment of life. For this society education can be considered as part of their life that goes with progressive education<sup>12</sup>.

The other wing of traditional education in Ethiopia is religious education. The truth as traditional Church/ Mosque educations is considered as an absolute, timeless and universal<sup>5</sup>. Since it is believed that Church / Mosque are rooted on the word God and God gave religious dogma for His followers through Bible/ Kuran. The teaching of Bible / Kuran gave more emphasis to moral and spiritual reality. So far, here we observe that people should accept the teaching of Bible / Kuran as it is since both are considered as the true source of wisdom and knowledge.

As we see from the historical background of Ethiopian traditional education, we can observe that more focus was given to religious dogma. In traditional education, Bible / Kuran were considered as an ultimate source of knowledge whereas teachers are transmitter of this reality. The role of teachers is to nurture the spiritual growth of their students, to bring latent knowledge and ideas to consciousness and to be a moral and spiritual leader<sup>2</sup>. Knowledge is inherited from heaven as a gift and human beings are knowledge receivers<sup>5</sup>. A religious education gave attention to a subject centered that emphasis truths gained from enduring theological, philosophical, historical, literary, and

artistic works in the Bible / Kuran and engineering, poem, craftsman, and leadership.

In similar fashion, in cultural education of Ancient Cushitic people there are norms, values, and cultures that found in the society as the source of the knowledge. Cultural education of Ancient Cushitic people is very deep and complex than religious dogma. They used participatory way of teaching their descendents. That is the reason why we found cultural medicine, storytelling, and life style in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Psychological foundation of Traditional Education:** If there is education there is a way of transmission. So, the big question to be raised is then how do ancient people deliver knowledge and wisdom of construction, poem, and military to their successor. This issue goes to know how of psychology in general and pedagogy in particular. Psychology deals with how humans learn and behave. And also the main goal of any education is to bring about learning. So, psychology in education helps us to deal with how human can learn what is intended.

In traditional education there were no formal written documents of education like today. There was no do's and do not do's. The way contents organized was not as such on the line of educational theories. They were simply training their descendant's mind and hand through participatory way of learning. During this time student engaged in the activity posed to them and made adaptation. This adaptation was built through process and over time.

In contrary to this, when we see traditional religious education it is expected from teachers to train mind and hands of the students through rote memorization and imitation. It was just like spoon feeding style. Teachers were transmitters of knowledge whereas students were passive receivers. The mode of deliver was simply talk and stick. No two way communication. On the opposite of this, students are actively participant in all aspects in cultural education of Ancient Cushitic people. For instance, in Gada system all peoples starting from birth to death they have their own activity to take part in. The system lets the students to engage in / embedded in / in all activity. It is expected from each people of the same Gada to achieve and perform what is expected from him to do so. At each eight years pattern one person passes from one Gada to another<sup>6</sup>.

Generally, in traditional education of religious education all learning experiences and the content were predetermined by the church or mosque literates of religious leaders and teachers. Subject to be learned was arranged accordingly based on their complexity level. At the first stage they taught alphabet, next reading and writing then at the end religious dogma will be offered to the students. There was exit at different stages. Unlike religious education in cultural education of ancient Cush, it was ancestors and elders who mold and coach the successors.

Through the process, it is up to the student to determine and decide to give his own meaning. The work of the elders is give guidance and facilitation for their descendent in order to go further. Even such mode of delivery leads the students to have their own position in all aspect of their life rather than leaning against some one's ideology. That is why most of the time Abba Gada amends new rules and regulation based on the context from time to time. Hence, Ancient Cush people have and used a very advanced learning theory like the 21<sup>st</sup> century called context based learning from that time till now. They teach how to fish rather than getting fish form someone always. They teach how to learn<sup>13</sup>. Generally, even though there is no clear cut listed documents in the line with educational psychology there are a lot of indicators like gada system, sike, and ayantu of Oromo people and Chambalal of Sidama.

**Sociological foundation of Traditional Education:** Traditional education of religious had no room to collect contents from the society. The contribution of the society for development of curriculum was null. Even students did not take part in curriculum development<sup>2</sup>. The responsible body for curriculum development was Church /Mosque leaders and teachers. No academic freedom was observed from religious education. It was mandatory to respect and accepts what their teacher taught them whether he is right or wrong. It was strictly forbidden to question the knowledge of their teachers and the source of knowledge too. The door of religious education was not open for all society since the objective was for the sake of religious purpose. It was intended to expand religious teaching across the country. So, this education was only given to the child of priests, scribes, royal families and land lords. The main focus of religious education was not to bring civilization. It was for the purpose of preserving religious dogma from false teaching.

In cultural education of ancient Cush there is a room for both family and students to take part in on what is to be taught and how to learn<sup>6</sup>. Students have freedom to ask and understand whatever comes to their mind. No limit of questioning. There is an academic freedom. There should be education to be respected<sup>14</sup>. There was a job description for all at all level. Everyone knows what should he do and when. Students give their own meaning based on their socio-context and solve problems accordingly. Unlike traditional education, it is the student themselves who construct their own meaning. Now day's this ideology is widely accepted as theory of constructivist learning. But this theory was not new for Ancient peoples. They knew how to teach and learn; what to be learnt. For instance counting systems they used in their day to day activities, the way they make right angle and circle. To construct right angle they measure 3 arm then mark it again measure 4 arm then make mark and at the end measure 5 arm then mark it. At the end they tried to form triangle. The triangle formed becomes a right angle with hypotenuse 5 arm unit. This is a very common concept they apply to form right angle in rural areas. Still it is common method used today.

For instance, they used place value of number system for instance to call 12 (which is twelve in English) Oromo nation call it ten-two. In fact it is similar in Amhara nation for small scales less than one hundred thousand. Above that still Oromo nation uses the same way of reading style. For instance 125,125 (one hundred twenty five thousand in English and similarly it is true for Amharic) whereas it is different for Oromo nation. They call it hundreds of thousands and twenty five thousands one hundred twenty five. To me this shows that Oromo nations are familiar with mathematics and scientific notations of number system.

Generally, Cushitic people use a various concepts of mathematics, engineering, literatures, poems and farming styles. Those are cue that indicates there is a traditional education in all aspect in Ethiopia before 4<sup>th</sup> century. That is cultural education.

## Conclusion

Ethiopia, the land of Cush, has a long history on traditional education. It is beyond 4<sup>th</sup> century that sticks to introduction of Christianity to the country. Ethiopia is one of frontline country for civilization of world. On the top of this, Ethiopia is the home of engineers, architects, poems, fighters, way of farming and in general the land of civilization before to Egyptians and Greeks. There are living evidences of Gada system, Chambalala, and archeological findings like rock called *Tiya*, Lalibela, and Aksum the work of Cushitic people of that century. Having this in mind, I can conclude that traditional education in Ethiopia has two parts: one is traditional education introduced to Ethiopia in 4<sup>th</sup> century during the introduction of Christianity. And the other is the cultural education of indigenous people which got negligible emphasis in history of traditional education.

**Further Recommendation:** This area of study is first in its kind and new virgin area of study for educational researchers. So, one can do a depth study on Oromo people, Sidama people, Wolayita people, Afar people, Somale people and so forth for more investigation.

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