

Traditional Teaching in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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Traditional teaching in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been for centuries deeply part of the religious education, life and ethos of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The traditional teachers and students are still numerous, but the greatest teachers are passing away and Ethiopian youth is attracted by modern life. What about the future of traditional teaching? In order to begin to 'save' something of this unique oral tradition I conducted interviews with some traditional teachers in renowned places on the basis of a questionnaire asking them where they had studied, which subjects, with which teachers, how long, etc, in order to understand their training and effort. How could we all together keep traditional education alive for the coming Ethiopian generations? And what can be done in order to save it ?

Traditional Teaching

Traditional teaching in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church includes: Church singing and movement (*aqwaqwam*) ; poetry (*qene*) ; commentaries on the Bible, on the writings of the Church fathers and of the monks. For many centuries this teaching has been deeply part of the religious education, life and ethos of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The teaching is based on oral methods and memorization, with repetition and learning by heart by the students. The teaching is transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Every time I met traditional teachers, I became very fascinated by this unique way of oral teaching still existing in a Christian Church today, in Africa.

In her book printed in 1955, *Ethiopia, A Cultural History*, Silvia Pankhurst wrote a whole chapter on "traditional schools of the Church".² Every village has its church and nearly every church has its school. Memorizing predominates in the traditional instruction. Knowledge was imparted in the church schools until the beginning of the 20th century when a few state schools were opened under Emperor Menelik. In 1944 a modern Theological School was opened in Addis Ababa for advanced studies for deacons and priests. In Silvia Pankhurst's time all Church revenues were consolidated in a central Church Fund. Until the Derg time (1974) each church had its own separate revenue for its upkeep and that of its school, which was derived from endowments (lands or their produce, or money) granted by the emperors, royal persons, governors and pious parishioners.

Nowadays, the traditional elementary Church education still goes from learning how to read until becoming a deacon. It provides instruction for reading and writing in Ge'ez and Amharic, with emphasis on reading the Scriptures in Ge'ez, still the liturgical language of the Church, first by mastering the syllabary of the twenty-six basic characters, each having seven forms.

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² Pankhurst, Silvia, (1955, 232-283).

The second stage called *fidel hawaria* begins with the reading of the First Epistle of Saint John.

In the third stage the Gospel of Saint John, the three other Gospels as well as the Psalms are read.

In oral education some prayers are memorized such as the Nicæan Creed (*Tselsta Haymanot*), prayers to Christ (*Melke Iyesus*), prayers to the Virgin (*Wudasse Maryam, Melke Maryam*) and prayers to become a deacon (*Gebre Dikouna*)³.

Then the education in Church schools for higher studies can begin, in different branches: Church music (*zema*), the composition of poetry (*qene*), as well as commentaries and other matters⁴.

There are four disciplines of Church music studied in the school of liturgical music (*zema bet*): the study of the chant book (*degwa*) which has five branches (*yohannes, meraf, tsoma degwa* for Lent, *astemero* and *fasiku*); hymns sung after communion (*zemma*) and prayers for the dead (*mawasit*); 'the way of standing' or 'moving' (*aqwaqwam*) for monthly and annual festivals accompanied by sistra, prayer sticks and drums executed by the choir while singing (*mahelet*). The liturgy (*qedasse*) and the prayers of the Hours (*se'atat*) are studied separately.

The highest schools where the final exams are taken for Church music (*zema*) are: for *degwa, meraf* and *tsoma degwa* at Bethlehem (Gondar province); for *zemma* and *mawasit* at Zuramba (near Bethlehem); for *mahelet* and *aqwaqwam* in Gondar City and Beta Maryam (South Wollo); for *qedasse* (including *se'atat*) at Selelkula in Wollo and in the Monastery of Debre Abbay in Tigray.

For learning the composition of poetry (*qene*), the student goes to the house of poetry (*qene bet*). First the student has to know the Ge'ez vocabulary and grammar very well. In order to compose a *qene*, the student must comment on passages of the Bible in a *qene* for the feast of the day; or on the lives of saints for the feast of saints; he may also introduce moral precepts and even contemporary events. The main aim is to give a double meaning to words and sentences, with symbolism and allusion, as in parables.

Among the great schools of *qene* the most famous are in Gondar and in Wadela also known as Wadladelanta (Wollo), without forgetting Washera, Gonj and Tselalo (all three in Gojam).

For the study of exegesis and theology, the school or house of the Books (*mashafa bet*) is the highest school for studies of the Old and New Testaments and of other books and their commentaries.

At the end of the study of the books of the Bible, the way to prepare the Church calendar (*abushaker*) can be studied. This school used to be independant and is declining today.

The study of the Books of the Church Fathers (*Liqawint*) includes the study of the writings of the Church Fathers of Alexandria (such as Saints Cyril and Athanasius) and of Cappadocia (mainly Saints Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom) and other Fathers such as Saint Ephrem the Syrian.

³ To become a deacon one has to learn the *zema* of *Wudasse Maryam, arayam* (extracts from Old and New Testaments), *kestet* (also extracts from Old and New Testaments); and *tsoma degwa* used for Great Lent, which is shorter and easier to learn than *degwa*.

⁴ Painting is another traditional subject of study which includes decorating the walls of the church and the pages of books, as well as manuscript writing. It will not be included in this study. Traditionally painters (*tsa'ali*) and scribes (*kumtse'hafy*) are monks or priests (specially for painting) and also *debteras* and lay men.

These patristic extracts are gathered in two books: *The Faith of the Fathers* (*Haymanota Abaw*) and the *Kerlos*, after the name of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. These texts refer to faith and dogmatic theology.

In the school of patristics canon law is also taught. The book *The Law of the Kings* (*Fetha Negest*) is a collection of canons including those of the first three Ecumenical Councils, the *Synodos*, the *Didascalia*, the *Epistle of Clement* of Rome and the *Testament of Our Lord*.

Another traditional study is the study of monastic and ascetic life with reading and commentary on *The Book of the Monks* (*Meshafe Menekosat*) which include three works: *Filikios* with works by Philoxenus of Mabug; *Mar Yesak*, that is Saint Isaac of Nineveh, a Syriac author of the 6th century; and *The Elder or Spiritual Teacher* (*Aragawi Manfasawi*) by John of Saba another Syriac author of the 6th century. All were written in Syriac and translated into Ge'ez.

The best traditional schools are: for the Old Testament in Gondar, in Gojam (such as in Bitchena, Motta, Dima Giorgis) and in Axum; for the New Testament in Gondar; and for both in Saint Paul's Theological College in Addis Ababa and in Debre Libanos Monastery; for Patristic Books in the Monastery of Debre Libanos and in Ba'ata Church in Addis Ababa; for Monastic Books in Ba'ata Church in Addis Ababa.

The choice of the school depends on the interest of the student: he can study *degwa*, *gedasse* and/or *gene*. *Aqwaqwam* can only be studied after *zema*. Also one cannot study the commentaries of the Books without a good knowledge of Ge'ez which is studied in the *gene school*. There the student has also to study and to understand the system of commentaries which is connected to the system of *gene* (for example by understanding the importance of each word). One must also study the commentaries of the Old and New Testaments before studying patristics.

What has been written on traditional teaching?

Until now little has been written on traditional teaching. Mengistu Lemmu wrote several articles on traditional teaching (in English and Amharic); and so did Haile Gabriel Dagne and Alemayou Moges.

Among the foreigners let us name again Silvia Pankhurst. Roger Cowley has written down some Ethiopian commentaries of the Bible.

Professor Friedrich Heyer had a deep concern for traditional education by helping some traditional schools in Ethiopia through his association called *Debre Tabor* and its journal of the same name which has some articles on traditional education. He also wrote articles. For example, just before the 1974 Revolution, Friedrich Heyer and Fred Göricke produced together a long article on the sociology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which includes some remarks on traditional education.⁵

Some articles were written by Dr Verena Böll.⁶

When I was preparing my book on the life and spirituality of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church Tradition⁷, I had general interviews with several traditional teachers and I devoted a special chapter to this traditional teaching which is so specific to the Ethiopian Church. On 29 October 2002 I gave a lecture in UNESCO in Paris on the intangible patrimony of Christian Ethiopia, which includes traditional education:

⁵ Heyer, Friedrich and F. Göricke, (1976).

⁶ Böll, Verena, (2003, 31-45). In Marx, Annegret, (2001, 45-52) there is a reference (written with the help of Verena Böll) to the 'Kirchenschule' or 'traditional schools' with some pictures.

⁷ Chaillot, Christine, (2002, 83-100).

“Quelques Notes sur le Patrimoine chrétien intangible de l’Ethiopie chrétienne: l’éducation traditionnelle”.⁸

Problems and future of traditional teaching

Today there are still thousands of students of the Church tradition in many monasteries and schools all around Ethiopia, and many teachers. In the large monasteries and in the large parishes (*debr*), the number of teachers and of courses is of course greater, and the level of traditional teaching is higher than in small monasteries and parishes. One can say that traditional teaching has more or less remained the same until today. But the greatest teachers are old and passing away while the young of Ethiopia are more and more attracted by modern life.

With modernity growing in Ethiopia, one can wonder what will be the future situation of traditional teaching there. Thus some questions to be put are the following. What about the future of traditional teaching? How to make sure that it will not disappear in the future? Which Ethiopian Orthodox boy will still study the Ge’ez language and have an interest in traditional teaching within ten, twenty or thirty years?

In a lecture which I gave in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, on March 15th 2005, invited by the Anglo-Ethiopian Society, “Traditional Education in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, today and tomorrow”⁹, some of these problems were mentioned.

First, the political change in 1974 from a monarchic system to a communist antireligious system has affected traditional Church life at all levels, and secular education has increased. Until recently it was normal for boys to go and study in the traditional schools. Today boys do not obey this tradition blindly, however a few young boys who follow modern education in state schools now follow, at the same time, traditional education in church schools; and so do a few university students.

One has also to understand how much the traditional teachers made great efforts by studying for years, travelling, etc. For example, Memher Abba Gebre Selassie of Saint Paul’s Theological College in Addis Ababa, told me in 2002, being 89, that he had studied for fifty years! Today some young people think they know everything after a few years!

Another present problem is that the great scholars are less and less numerous: when they pass away their knowledge, which is known orally and is not written down, passes with them. For example, in 2002, there were only very few “four-eyed” teachers¹⁰ left in Ethiopia, such as Memher Gebre Selassie in Saint Paul’s in Addis Ababa and Abuna Merhe Kristos (Archbishop of Mekelle).

It is a fact that the life of students of the traditional teaching is hard and demanding for contemporary boys. For example, they leave their family; they beg for their food among families of the neighbourhood but also sometimes far away; and their daily life as students of the Church tradition is most of the time poor and very demanding. Studying in the church and begging, which were done by earlier students were seen as spiritual ways of life and with a Biblical understanding; this was then discouraged as being contrary to the communist ideology under the Derg regime. At the same time, how could one ask people who were traditionally feeding the boys to give food in times

⁸ See under ‘conferences’ on the website www.orthodial.com

⁹ See under ‘conferences’ on the website www.orthodial.com

¹⁰ A ‘four-eyed’ teacher (*arat ayna*) is one who can master the four highest subjects of traditional teaching: Old and New Testaments, the Book of the Church fathers (*Liqawint*) and the Book of the Monks.

of war, and also of drought and famine, when they did not have (and still, at times, often don't have) enough for themselves?

Today Church activities are generally centred on more utilitarian activities, for example preaching, or being a Sunday school teacher or leader, rather than on traditional teaching.

Traditionally there was an understanding about the gifts given to the traditional teachers for their living. Since the Derg communist period, most of the teachers receive wages paid by the Church. But some consider them too low, especially in the countryside, for example 70 birrs in a small place and up to 700 birrs or more in Addis Ababa. Thus teachers from the countryside shifted to the towns, which allowed some of them to begin traditional teaching in some urban parishes but impoverished the countryside schools. Nowadays good salaries are most of the time a priority and so are career prospects.

After having received traditional education, some graduates of traditional teaching chose, or were appointed, to jobs not connected with their traditional education. Thus, unfortunately, some traditional teachers, including some who were very learned, went far from traditional teaching, for example by having an administrative job where they do not transmit their knowledge.

Projects about the traditional teaching

In order to record something of this unique oral tradition, before it is too late, I began in 2005 to make specific interviews with some of the traditional teachers, mostly, when possible, the famous and the old, in renowned places on the basis of a questionnaire, in order to understand their training and efforts.

First I asked the traditional teachers I was meeting where they were born and in which year, where they had begun to study and where they continued their studies, what subjects did they study, with which teachers (for each subject), and for how many years; and also who were the teachers of *their* teachers, with their places of studying and teaching, and dates of death, (when remembered). I also asked about any special recollections concerning these teachers and their way of teaching.

Such interviews show that, as described above, all the teachers began with the reading (*fidel*) classes until *tsoma degwa*, nearly always in their native places, sometimes with their father if their father was a teacher; then they were staying and studying in the same place or were moving from place to place and studying different subjects with different teachers; but they were not always following the same trajectory, that is not always choosing the same subjects nor in the same order, or they chose to study one subject in greater depth over several years; they also studied for different periods of time, more or less long.

What is common to all is that they all moved around a lot, most of the time walking, sometimes far away from their native dwelling place or from the other places where they had studied.

In that way of analysis one may understand, step by step, who were the most famous traditional teachers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the course of the 20th century, mostly in its second half, and in which places. Of course, all such places are already known, specially the famous ones, where the final examinations are taken; but it is important to explain it in a systematic way and write it down. At the same time it is important to underline the names of the most famous teachers, alive or not, whose names must not be forgotten.

Thus such interviews allow one to begin writing a little history of the traditional education in Ethiopia, as each interview is a page of this history. Once other people could add information from their own interviews, this eventually would allow us to make a more and more complete chronology and historical record.

In fact, my proposal is that a coordinated team should work and put together their research. Such a team should not only make lists of the traditional teachers with whom they have conducted interviews, but also publish them so that the same teacher would not be questioned several times. It would also allow other teachers, maybe less famous and not so old, to be interviewed.

Then a table could be made with all these names and places of the interviewed teachers, including the names and places of their own teachers, which would show the importance of certain teachers and of some famous schools, as well as their links.

At the same time a map should be made showing all the places mentioned, with the most famous ones being underlined.

There should also be other written studies explaining in detail each teaching system of the traditional schools: what is taught and how it is taught and also the differences which exist in how the same subject is taught in different schools and places (for *degwa*, *aqwaqwam* and *qene*).

The daily life of the students and teachers of the Church tradition and their way of studying and teaching should also be explained and written down in detail.

Organized teams should also produce as many records as possible in different ways, especially by taping and making videos. And a kind of audio-visual library should be organized with all the tapes and videos of the interviews made with traditional teachers. Such documents would remain as a testimony and records of this oral teaching which is disappearing.

Such tasks cannot be undertaken alone. I have already sought the collaboration of the Youth association of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Addis Ababa, *Mehebere Kidussan*, knowing that its members have a wish similar to mine which is to keep alive the traditional education. In December 2005 it was decided to organize teams for taping a group of selected teachers during their lessons, for several months each (if possible), every day, and also with videos in some cases, in 13 different famous places of traditional teaching in Ethiopia. When I visited Ethiopia in February 2007 the teams of recording were beginning to be organized.

Conclusion

In 2004, the chairman of the Tabor Society, Pastor Beinke, who had made several visits to traditional schools in Ethiopia, told me: “ If the traditional schools do not get the proper help, they will lose their studies, which means that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church will lose its memory ; in other words, if Church tradition dies out, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church will lose its identity. ”

Traditional teachers who are strong Christian believers emphasise that traditional teaching is important because it is strongly connected to the Bible and it speaks about the mystery of God, that is theology, and through it Christian moral and spiritual teaching is given. As for *qene*, Adnasu Djambare indicates that it develops the conscience and renews the spirit.

In 1971, Ephraim Isaac wrote: “ In Ethiopia, as perhaps among African and Semitic people in general, religion is not a system for the soul, but a way of life... The remedy

for the spiritual as well as the material ailments of man is knowledge - relevant knowledge.”¹¹

It is important to save this knowledge of traditional and theological teaching because this is at the heart of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition.

I also asked for the comments of some Ethiopian traditional teachers and people about this question. For example, while asking permission in the Monastery of Debre Libanos in January 2002 for taping the teachers, and worrying about receiving a negative answer, I was most happy to receive a positive one. In fact I was told that some weeks previously a famous teacher of New Testament, Gebre Hewod, had passed away and that there was no tangible record kept of his wonderful teaching. Thus the monks encouraged me and told me it was good to tape the traditional teachers in Ethiopia.

In any case, more should be written down on the subject. And we should all keep this question in our mind: how to keep this teaching alive for the coming generations? And how to find ways of making this interest grow among many, especially among the youngsters in Ethiopia itself.

In order to keep traditional education alive, some people think that there is a need for integration between traditional and modern teaching, as is the case in the Orthodox Theological College of the Holy Trinity in Addis Ababa.

The old generation was so dedicated for learning. Teacher Henok of Axum told me: “In the past we used to come to the traditional schools for the knowledge and to serve God.” These are certainly the two main arguments that young people should have in mind and heart in order to continue and keep alive the traditional education in Ethiopia.

Traditional teachers should be spiritual. Abuna Mehere Kristos speaks of his teacher Toro (d. 1974 EC), in the Church of Sire Medhane Alem in Salale in Shoa, near Debre Libanos/Tsige, who was a deeply spiritual and holy person who did not care for the material things of this world. And traditional students also need to be spiritual persons.

This traditional teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not only a local patrimony. The year 2002 was the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage. It is important to underline that for UNESCO it is not only the tangible patrimony which has to be saved, but also the intangible patrimony. Traditional education being part of intangible patrimony thus it must be saved not only for Ethiopia, but also for the world patrimony.

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¹¹ Isaac, Ephrem, (1971, 282).

