

Attacking Illiteracy

Ethiopia Faces This Problem With Courage

By R. H. Markham

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Addis Ababa

AS I go from my hotel up town I pass a little yard hidden by dense eucalyptus trees, from which at almost every hour of the day arises a babel of voices. When it's raining, the voices come from a little two-roomed shack in the yard. Once I ventured through the open gate and saw 16 boys and youths, with three small girls among them, sitting on stones, in groups of three or four, reading from old books. It was plain they were learning something by heart.

After eight o'clock in the evening all houses and windows in Addis Ababa are closed and the streets become empty, but as I pass this house at night I see dim rays, glimmering through the cracks, and hear the same droning of voices.

It is a school, a church school. I have run across many like it, on the porches of churches, for example; and strange to say I once found such a group on the steps of the new Parliament building. They seem to be modeled on the classic Greek schools of ancient times, which are said to have consisted of groups of youth walking back and forth with professors. Here the pupils, instead of walking, sit in any convenient place. And they do not imbibe much wisdom from their humble teachers, whose chief duty seems to be to help them learn by rote an ancient ecclesiastical language of whose meaning they are unaware, although in some of the more pretentious institutions the Amharic language, national history and the code of laws are taught.

Emperor's Hope

There are thousands of these schools in the land and they form the basis of public instruction in Ethiopia, but a meager basis indeed. The Emperor hopes to take the whole system over, place it under the control of the state and convert these almost useless institutions, directed by ignorant priests or monks, into effective primary schools under the care of trained teachers. He plans to use the existing system instead of creating one entirely new, because the church has much property and the state needs its financial support.

However, all this is only a project, and will not be realized for years because the church has no intention of letting the state interfere in its affairs. But the Emperor has already opened many schools and effected very substantial progress in the field of education. This is, undoubtedly, one of his best achievements.

At the beginning of this century there was not a single first-class state school in the land. Now there are 14 schools of various grades in the capital alone with 3000 boys and girls studying in them. In the whole Empire there are at least 50 good schools, with no less than 10,000 pupils and students.

This is, of course, a small number for 10,000,000 inhabitants, but it represents a commendable beginning, and illustrates how extremely difficult it is to make sweeping reforms in an ancient land.

Menelik School

A Model

Not less than a quarter of a century ago the great Emperor Menelik II, decreed that elementary education should be obligatory. He enjoyed greater prestige than any but even he found it utterly impossible to apply such a law in a land where there were no school buildings, no school books and no teachers. Besides that, there was a very limited state budget.

Still the conquering emperor did what he could and the Menelik School, an excellent solid building in the most attractive part of Addis Ababa, is a proof of his good intentions. In front of it is a flower garden, behind it a playground and on one side a large hall of galvanized iron used as a theater and moving-picture house. Near by is a small building known as the conservatory, where band music is taught. This is the best educational institution in the country and has the rank of a German gymnasium, a French lycée or an American junior college. Its graduates may continue their studies in European universities. A number also enter the recently founded Officers' Training School.

At present there are 40 Ethiopian youth studying in foreign universities on scholarships given by the Emperor. A number of such students have finished in England, France, Egypt, Italy and Syria and have re-

turned to serve their fatherland, where their lot is by no means easy. They have become used to European ways and cannot accustom themselves again to the easy-going methods of their own people. They burn with a desire for rapid reforms, grow impatient with an age-old lethargy, over-estimate their own capacities and feel out of place everywhere. Still they are a useful group and constitute the Emperor's best supporters. He is utilizing such young men just as fast as he can here and abroad, although he does not give them too much influence until he has tested their character and judgment. He knows that diplomas in themselves are not worth much. He mixes the old and new very wisely.

Girls Study With Boys

Generally speaking, women in Ethiopia do everything that men do, have almost as many rights and enjoy nearly as many privileges. Girls study with boys and there are also special girls' schools. There are about one third as many girls in school as boys.

There are few textbooks in Amharic, so that most subjects are taught in foreign languages, English and French, which adds a new difficulty to the ordinary ones facing all scholars.

Most of the instructors are foreigners, though native teachers are being used just as rapidly as they show themselves prepared. Generally speaking, every competent educated Ethiopian is sure of finding a job.

A number of religious missions have excellent educational institutions for both boys and girls. They have made a notable contribution toward starting an Ethiopian educational system.

The Results Obtained So Far

Results so far obtained in the field of education are, of course, extremely limited. The overwhelming majority of the nation is still completely illiterate. Certainly not more than a small part of 1 per cent can read. But that is not very vital, for there is nothing much yet to read. Education, although a basis for general reforms, can come only in connection with other reforms. Schools, written laws, books, a good administration, a desire for a higher standard of living, roads, and social organizations, will all have to come together. Better things must give an incentive to education, and education must also give an incentive to better things. With 98 per cent of the people living in tiny straw thatched huts, scattered sparsely through woods, mountains and deserts, utterly dark at night, and affording only the simplest and most meager family life, schools seem superfluous.

In this respect the Ethiopians are in the situation of much of Europe four centuries ago. But the people have shown themselves capable in every respect, they learn quickly, one finds everywhere among the youth a desire to get ahead, the whole population is intensely patriotic, discipline in class is good, and it is certain that the nation will steadily mount to a higher level of enlightenment.

It is interesting to note that a century ago there did not exist a single Bulgarian school. Now 90 per cent of the Bulgarians can read and write. So one may cherish bright hopes for Ethiopia.