A GLIMPSE OF ETHIOPIA'S FIRST PUBLIC LIBRARY

By Richard Pankhurst

Little has been published on Ethiopia's first public library — a precursor of the present-day National Library, which was founded in 1930. No mention of it is made in Adrien Zervos' seemingly comprehensive study of the Ethiopian State immediately prior to the war[1] or, as far as the present writer is aware, in the extensive foreign travel literature of the period. Recent studies of Ethiopian library history refer to the institution only in the briefest manner. One account states that "the Ethiopian Ministry of Education established a library in the 1930's which was open to the general public" and was said to have contained "over 1,000 books",[2] while another, based on the documentation now presented for the first time in the present article, notes that "a beautiful furnished public reading room" was founded in 1930 "in a museum near the palace."[3]

Dearth of information on this early educational establishment gives particular interest to the following eye-witness accounts written, it would appear, by one of the library's first foreign readers.

The author of the descriptions here reproduced was Eugene Gaspard Marin, a Belgian scholar of remarkably wide interests, who lived in Whiteway, an Anarchist colony in the Cotswolds in England where he was affectionately nicknamed Gassey. In 1928 he set forth for an extensive tour which took him for several months, in 1930-31, to Ethiopia where he was befriended by Walda Sadeq Gashé, one of the country's first free-thinkers, and returned to England in 1938.

Several years ago in 1970 the present writer, then collecting data for a study of *gabata* and other Ethiopian games,[5] recalled that as a child he had stayed in Marin's house, and had been told that the Belgian was gathering information on the games of all the countries he visited. Postal enquiries, following by a visit to Whiteway, revealed that the travelling scholar, who had died on September 27 of the previous year, was indeed the author of a pioneer study of Somali games,[6] and that his diary and a number of letters to his comrades in the Cotswolds were still extant, and covered many points of historical and cultural interest. Permission was obtained from Marin's executor, Hilda Gustin, to publish some of his papers relating to Ethiopia.

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Some of the most interesting parts of the papers on Ethiopia relate to the establishment of the public library which Gassey visited on November 13, 1930, apparently not long after its inauguration. In his diary for that day he notes that the institution, which seems to have stood in the vicinity of the Menelik palace in front of a small museum[7] containing crowns and other royal insignia, was almost without books except for two cupboards, one holding books and manuscripts in Ge'ez and Amharic, and the other, books in French, English and other languages. Readers were also lacking, for he was almost the only one except for a few loungers who came to watch him, while the librarian, a former weaver, was seldom there. The reading rooms and chairs, were, however, most luxurious.

The diary entry, which is valuable in giving us an at least approximate date for the establishment of the library, is in French and reads as follows:

"13 November (= 4 Hedar). Inauguration de la Bibliotheque publique. Manque de livres (une armoire de Livres et Mss en geez et en amhara, et une de livres français, anglais, etc); manque de lectures (j'y suis à peu près seul, si on excepte les badauds qui viennent pour me regarder); le bibliothécaire, un vieux tisserand, est rarement là, mais les salles de lectures, les fauteuils, etc. sont somptueux. Derrierè la bibliothéque est un petit musée que contient surtout des insignes, couronnes, mateaux, armes, etc. ayant appartenu aux rois defuncts."

Gassey reverted to the library in an English letter of January 7, 1931, to his friends at Whiteway. In this epistle he once more emphasizes the lack of books and readers, and declares:

"Opposite the King's Palace, a museum and a public library have been started on the occasion of the coronation. The Museum contains mostly regalia from previous kings. As for the library it is beautifully fitted: there are separate reading rooms commanding the most beautiful panoramic view over the district. The seats are luxurious armchairs of velvet and brocade: there are only two things missing, i.e. books and readers. When I say books, I exaggerate: there are two cupboards of them: one containing gi'iz and amharic manuscripts — some over a thousand years old — and the other, books in European languages, but these seem to have been mainly chosen for their bindings, which are truly admirable. As for readers, there do not appear to be any, besides your humble servant, round which a circle of chatting and inquisitive onlookers is always sure to form. People naturally come to see 'the reader.' Needless to say how kind the 'staff' is to me. Today I have induced two of my pupils to come and read there, and I hope, with the Chief of Education's help, we shall be able to create a reading public. I shall do everything I can in this direction."

In a postscript of February 15 Gassey gives us a further glimpse of the library, and its manuscripts which he claims to have investigated with some attention, and remarks:

"I am sorry to say that I am still the only reader at the library, but as I am there every morning from 8 a.m. till noon (2 till 6 according to the Abyssinian reckoning) people have got used to me and it is only when some very important person passes that way, that he is led in to see the phenomenon — when kowtow and politenesses are exchanged — thus I am getting slowly prepared for my visit to the Far East. I have noticed that the Abyssinian Bible (MS) is much fuller than the English. Apart from the books familiar to many of you, and the so-called apocrypha, I notice a 'Book of Moses' a 'Book of Enoch' and a 'Book of Ephraim'. Among other valuable antique MSS, are chronicles giving the history of Abyssinia from the days of the Creation, such are what may be translated as 'The History of the Kings', 'The Glory of the Kings' and 'The Wealth of the Kings'. There are also books on law, magic, etc, but I can decipher just enough of the language to discover the existence of these treasures — not enough to read and understand them — If that is not a 'supplice de Tantale!' "

This early, but according to Gassey, still sadly underutilised institution clearly made a deep impression on the Belgian who again referred to it in an Esperanto account of his travels. The relevant passage relates that one of the "Europeanisations" introduced at the time of the Ethiopian ruler's coronation in 1930 was a library with which Marin was particularly interested, and he continues:

"I tried to find out where it was but no one could help me about it. At last, I visited the Minister of Education[8] hoping he could tell me, and in fact he very kindly made its locality clear to me. It stood by the imperial palace. But it was one thing to find the library, quite another to find the librarian, because the place was always locked. After some trouble, I found him also; he was an old textile worker who lived some distance away in the forest. He said to me that he could not show me the library because he was too occupied with his weaving. But the sight of a thaler soon made him decide to accompany me with his bunch of large keys. The site of the library was wonderful. From the windows the eye wandered over the great African rift-valley across the trans Arusi Mountains to [Gassey here leaves a space]. My guide took me to see the reading rooms for the Emperor and his ministers; they were richly furnished with European armchairs in the style of Louis XIV covered with silk and gold cloth. He also showed me the smoking room which somewhat surprised me as the Ethiopians do not smoke. It seemed to me that only two details were lacking in this ideal library, i.e. books and readers. When going out I espied the word 'catalogue' on a door, I made known my desire to go in: surprised, he unlocked the small room; in it was a table, and in the table a drawer, and in the drawer an exercise book, and in the exercise book a list of books: that was the catalogue. Then I asked whether I could see the books. 'The books?' 'Yes, the books!' 'Now let us go!' And he led me into another little room: there were two long glass shelves. One held the

Geez and Amharic books, manuscripts on parchment and bound between wooden tablets. The other held the foreign books arranged according to language: French, English, Italian, German, Russian and others. The whole looked very beautiful, but I soon noticed that the books were chosen only for the ornament of their binding. I selected a volume from an English popular encyclopaedia bound in red with gold leathers and with that the librarian led me into the large imperial reading-room. But now, I was no longer the sole visitor because a crowd of seekers of knowledge surrounded me to see what a 'reader' looked like! They turned and re-turned my pages and asked a hundred questions about the pictures but I understood only very few word of their language."

Such, as far as can at present be established, are the only contemporary eye-witness accounts for Ethiopia's first public library, which unfortunately soon appears to have fallen into disuse.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A Zervos, *L'empire d'Ethiopie* (Alexandria, 1936).
2. R.K.P. Pankhurst, "The Foundations of Education, Printing Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia", *Ethiopia Observer* (1962), VI, No. 3, p. 283.
3. R. J. Pankhurst, "Ethiopia, Libraries in," *Encyclopaedia of Library and Information Science* (New York, 1972), VIII, 219.
4. N. Shaw, Whiteway, *A Colony on the Cotswolds* (London, 1935).
5. R. Pankhurst, "Gabata and Related Board-Games of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa", *Ethiopia Observer* (1971), XIV, No. 3.
6. G. Marin, "Somali Games', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1931), LXI.
7. The museum was at the Menelik Palace as referred to in Zervos, op. cit., p. 232.
8. Probably the Secretary-General of the Ministry, Blattengeta Sahle Sedalu. Zervos, op. cit., p. 223.

EDUCATION FOR THE PEOPLE — A COMMENT

Section 9 of the Education Sector Review, 1972 (Curriculum and Methodology), was one of the pivotal documents to emerge recently in Ethiopian education prefiguring, it is hoped, great strides in practical, need-oriented education for the mass of the Ethiopian people, rather than the creation of a privileged, deracinated minority only.

The keynote throughout this 40-page report is Ethiopian education for Ethiopians. It recommends that the general aims of Ethiopian education should be, among others (p. 11).

1. To relate education given at every level to direct economic utility in the community.
2. To raise the earning capacity of every individual.
3. To match manpower supply to manpower demand.
4. To Ethiopianize the content of education.
5. To use the national language as the medium of instruction at all levels.
6. To foster a rational and scientific outlook on life through technical and vocational training.

What would the new-style education look like on the ground if the recommendations of the report were adopted? In the first place, the school building and the area around it would become a focus for the whole community. It would no longer be an elitist forcing house where the mysteries of what we currently call academic subjects are carried on in an atmosphere completely divorced from the community outside.

There would be training in local crafts and skills, and the promotion of Ethiopia's rich cultural diversity among all sections of the community through the development of what the report calls 'community practicums'.

> Until a far greater number of children have received some minimum education, there exists a need for both the children who are not in school and the adults who have never been to school to be given an opportunity to acquire at least some basic

> knowledge .... A community practicum is therefore an interrelated in-school and out-of-school practical educational experience of a semi-institutionalised nature. (p. 27).

The central curriculum of the school itself would be very different too. The old separate, and largely foreign-oriented subjects such as 'History', 'Biology', 'Geography' and so on would give way to a more integrated and interrelated approach.

> The traditional subject divisions used in schools may be of interest to teachers, but they are not realistic to children... Children see the world as a whole, not as a grouping of 'subject' areas... they ask questions which cut across traditional subject areas... A single topic, 'Our Food'... can provide learning experiences in language, mathematics, science, social studies, health, home economics and art (p. 30).

The report visualises 12 years of primary and secondary education divided into 3 groups of 4 years each. At first there would be 4 years of Minimum Formation Education (MFE), then 4 years of middle school followed by 4 years of high school. It is in the initial 4 years of MFE that the integrated skills approach would be most apparent. There would be 5 curriculum areas in MFE (pp 18-22).

1. Core Skills Communication and Computation.

a. Communication — fluent oracy in Amharic;
reading with accurate comprehension; the ability to write short factual accounts and short imaginative compositions.

b. Number — money; time; measurement; capacity; weight; data recording; decimals.

2. Physical, Cultural and Moral Activities

Physical Education; local and national culture; national religious festivals and their relevance to individual responsibility for personal conduct, respect for moral equality and the brotherhood of man, devotion to truth and respect for excellence.

3. Practical Activities

Agricultural projects; small-scale manufacturing projects (school bags, sacks), student shop and snack bar; re-afforestation and road construction; arts and crafts; constructing classroom equipment and demonstration apparatus.

4. Environmental Studies

Health and nutrition; Natural History; economic aspects of local crafts, industries and crops; local history, geography and basic geology (including soil science); community development.

5. Citizenship

Project planning; selection of project leaders; community problems; data collecting for problem solving; taking responsibility for school and community projects.

The second 4 years of the ongoing school programme, the middle chool (current grades 5-8) would still be designed to prepare the student for life as a citizen whatever job or profession he eventually takes up. "The attitude, skills and knowledge acquired by the pupils must be in line with both the local and national perspective... The concept of primary and secondary education as basically a preparation for university studies and the preparation of an 'élite' is no longer relevant." (pp. 23 - 24).

To carry out these aims, the middle school curriculum must continue with the less formal approach. The 'Topic' concept would still bridge subject boundaries, but there would be a gradual introduction of more structured units to accelerate the rate of dealing with each piece of topic material. The main language of instruction would continue to be Amharic, though English would be introduced as a foreign language from the first year of middle school, primarily as a reading resource skill.

The following four years in the high school would follow a more formal pattern somewhat similar to that of the present comprehensive secondary school, with some general academic courses as well as vocational courses closely oriented to the manpower needs of the nation.

After universal MFE, students would be selected on the grounds of aptitude and ability for the following stages, on various criteria and in accordance with the economic resources and manpower needs of the country, but an important feature of the Sector Review proposals, is the 'Completion of Studies Certificate'. At the end of each stage of education, the participants will be regarded as graduates of that stage, not as rejects for the next which was the case with the old élitist 'pyramid' approach. It would be planned in such a way that graduates of each stage would be gainfully employable at an increased standard of living. (p. 8).

In order to implement these proposals as widely and as quickly as possible, to ensure that at least a minimum of education reaches the farthest corners of the country in the shortest possible time, the Review suggests thee types of teacher.

a. 8th grade graduates with the equivalent of 2¼ years of teacher training, (8+1).

b. 12th grade graduates with 1 very intensive year of teacher training, (12+1).

c. 12th grade graduates with either 2 years teacher training (at a TTI or similar) or with 4 years extra training (Education Faculty, National University or similar), (12+2 or 12+4).

These teachers would be 'differentially trained for the level to which they will be subsequently assigned' (p. 6). MFE teachers would be mainly type a, with a few type b. Middle School teachers would be predominantly type b, with perhaps some type a. High school teachers would generally be type c.

An interesting feature of staffing would be the employment of trained or untrained Community Assistants. These would be usually village residents employed on a local basis to lead groups at all three levels of education, MFE, Middle and Higher, in projects of local interest and concern. These Community Assistants would ensure that the local community had a direct and participatory interest in the school management and curriculum.

In an appendix on language use, the Review notes (Appendix 1, p. 1),

> When for one reason or another the Western system of education was introduced in Ethiopia... according to the judgment of the administrators then, it was easier to teach the whole student population of the country the language of the few instructors than have those few instructors learn the language of the pupils.

The result has been that,

> The Ethiopian pupil spends most of his time in struggling with the structure of English thus giving little time to the subject-matter which he is learning.

It is suggested predominantly Amharic-medium instruction would not only make the learning task easier for the Ethiopian student, but would also increase the prestige of the national language, and ultimately its comprehensiveness as well.

This does not preclude other Ethiopian languages, however. The report offers for consideration that,

> The production of elementary reading materials in the local vernacular and the national language side by side, *at least* for

Gallinia and Tigrinia, would mitigate the concern of those experts who feel that literacy should start in the mother tongue.

Neither are foreign languages neglected, though the Review warns sternly that, "Whether languages be used as media of instruction in Secondary Schools, or simply be taught as second languages, they must be taught effectively" (Appendix 1. p. 4). It goes on to recommend that proper period allotments must be made. For instance it is totally unrealistic to expect children to progress satisfactorily with 3 periods of teaching a week. Support from radio and all media is also recommended, as indeed it is at every level and area throughout the Review.

The sub-committee responsible for this report was international in composition and each member highly qualified in his field, Dr. Fisseha Haile Meskal and Dr. Getachew Haile from the National University, Ato Kebede Frie Senbet, Ato Gebeyehu Kumsa and Ato Tilaye Kassaye of the Ministry of Education, Mr. Gautier from France and Dr. Dan Anderson from the USA and Mrs. P. J. M. Irwin from Britain. Their deliberations were the result of many hours of discussion, reading, personal experience and opinion sounding.

Other articles in this issue show that Section 9 of the Education Sector Review pulls together a number of ideas that have been widely advocated at different times and in different places, in addition to some strikingly new ones of its own. It offers an exciting prospect of relevant education for the mass of the Ethiopian people which should not be lightly passed over at a time when constructive change is the keynote of our current social scene.

The editor

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