

# **Ethiopia`s Multicultural Education: A Negation to the Past and Champion of the New Beginning in Nation Building**

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## **1. Introduction**

In world history it is uncommon to find a modern state formed peacefully, except in most cases of colonial fabricated state experiences. Regardless of varied theoretical foundation of state formation, today`s modern states (both those formed from within and externally imposed) have passed contentious nation building process. Validly speaking, thus, failure and success stories of national unity, peace, democracy, and economic development of many states trace back to their path of nation building process.

At the core process of nation building, education has irreplaceable role in shaping citizens mind and equipping them with knowledge and skills to their contribution for political, economic, and social affairs of their respective states. This is true for France, USA, Russia, Germany, Japan, China, India etc. In these states and all other modern states education has central role throughout the endless process of nation building swaying equally to their failed and successful experiences.

The focus of this paper is, thus, to assess the role of education in promoting national unity and democracy in multicultural Ethiopia. The paper will be presented in four main parts. First it will deal with the role of education in nation building from convention experiences of other countries. Second, in Ethiopian context it will assess the role education as instrument of the assimilation policy of nation building approach throughout the imperial Ethiopian state and under the Derg`s “Garrison of Socialism.” Third, it will examine the role of education in promoting national unity and democracy vis-à-vis Multicultural nation building approach of FDRE. To the end concluding remarks will be presented.

## **2. The Role of Education in Nation-Building: Conventional Experiences**

Modern states whether emerged from war and conquest through imposition of rule of the powerful over the weak and subjugated societies surrounding the main stream of state formation process or appeared as independent states with varied groups of societies as a legacy of arbitrary political unit consequent to de-colonization process, they have

multicultural societies. States, once established as distinct sovereign territory where their ruling wing can fully exercise authority over the ruled, the next step will be nation building process to win consensus of citizens and to assure legitimacy of their governance. However, this process of nation building took different form in different states which determined their destiny in fact. While many states have pursued their nation building process based on the assimilation approach oriented to create peculiar society with unique identity by imposing majority's identities over minority identities on the rationale of national unity, many other follow multicultural state building approach which accommodate diverse identities for the same purpose (Yonatan, 2008:43). In both cases education has role to play to win the heart and mind of citizens and then to accept rule of the state and to give their allegiance for the rule and to remain as politico-legal members of the state.

Either approach they followed, modern states have applied education mainly citizen education, as medium to diffuse and orient their aspired state identity. Needless to say the centrality of education is not only to equip citizens with knowledge and skill instrumentals but also to verse with the political ideas of the state. It is through citizens' education that states communicate their identity and heritages, their distinct values and interests, and their vision of future destiny as a political unit.

More specifically, modern states organize citizen education based on the nation building approach they follow as means of safeguarding national unity and as instrument for national objective attainments. For instance, in the United States in the immediate post-civil war years, political science emerged as fields of study to solve emergent political and social problems of the state (Owen, 2004). Owen adds, in the United States Political Science was at the forefront in inculcating citizens with timely evolving problems to ensure America's unity and democracy until Civics Education was separately emerged in 1980s to teach citizens with ideas of political participation and political knowledge following the decline of American youth's civic engagements in national affairs.

In the same manner, in Post-Apartheid South Africa Civic education is designed to be democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist, absolutely radical changes from previous education of citizenship to maintain the unity and prosperity of the state (Mathebula, 2009). More importantly, Merriam (1931) quoted in Owen (2004:5-6) assessing the development, control, and implications of civic education in Cross-cultural eight nations—Austria-Hungary,

England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Switzerland, and the United State, found that civic education teach including:

*patriotism and loyalty, obedience to the law, respect for government and public officials, individuals' recognition of their political obligations, a minimum degree of self-control, responsiveness to community needs in stressful times, knowledge of and agreement with the legitimating national ideology, and a recognition of the special qualities of people within one's country compared to those of other nations.*

Bandyopadhyay and Green (2008) have also noted, education as core player of nation building process has been also applied in newly independent African state mainly in Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Zambia. Harber(1989:40) as quoted in Bandyopadhyay and Green (2008:10) Kenyan 1975 curriculum states 'education in Kenya must foster a sense of nationhood and promote national unity.'

Overall, regardless of the approach of nation building followed by states, in most cases education has played irreplaceable role to promote national unity and varied national objectives. However, impacts of education in nation building process largely depend on the political decisions of regimes in power of each state. Thus, while many states able to pass through successful citizen education which contributed much to their stability, national unity, and culture of democracy, in failed nation building attempts civic education remained unfruitful in diffusing values and identities of the state over majority of the citizens of the state.

### **3. Modern education and the creation of the modern Ethiopian State: Educational Policy par to Assimilation Policy of the imperial state and Derg's "Garrison of Socialism"**

Living aside the debates about the age of its existence as organized political unit, Ethiopia with its current geographic and demographic components appeared at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was during Menelik II that Ethiopia formed as a modern state. Prior to Menelik state formation process was already started by his predecessors Tewedros II and Yohannes IV. Both of Menelik's predecessors have done much in unifying the Orthodox Christian dominated old kingdom which was devolved during the *era of princes*. However, Menelik using the extra resources obtained from his conquest of previous independent south eastern, south, and south western new territories and his friendship with Italy – the then enemy of Ethiopian state- able to establish modern state by ceding Eritrea to the western power (Merara, 2003: Solomon, 2006). Thus, as Clapham (2000) has noted modern Ethiopia state is the result of war and conquest by which the central

government has successfully consolidated authority over previous independent and/or quasi-independent principalities through formidable state machineries.

Much worthy point here, Ethiopia has passed the state formation process which modern stable and unified European states have established their existing political, economic, and social infrastructures. At the same time this path of state formation is uncommon in most African countries (Clapham, 2000). Yet, Ethiopia shares much in common with African states than with modern, stable, and unified European states which pass the same trend of state formation experience. Many can question why such discontinuities encountered Ethiopia's state formation? And of course, many can forward different *casus belli*. In fact numerous geopolitical, economic, socio-cultural, technological, etc.... factors can influence the success and failure of forging stable, democratic, and unified states as of European experiences. However, the fate of states' stability and democratic unity, whether formed by war and conquest or appeared as independent state following decolonization, depends on their crucial phase of nation building process.

State/nation building is critical phase next to state formation where rational political decision making accounts to real circumstances held mandatory. Contemporary states' stability, democratic and tolerant political culture, diversity accommodative political unity, and equitable development rest at the nature of nation building approach they pursued. Remarkably, Clapham (2000:3), in his observation on one form of state formation process - the coercive one of European experience - and the transition to peaceful nation building, laments that:

*In the process, war has consolidated the control of central governments over quasi-independent vassals, and has imposed the need for an effective process of encadrement, through which the resources of the society could be mobilised and organised for purposes of protection. In particular, this has led to the creation of national bureaucracies capable of extracting resources in the form notably of men (through conscription) and money (through taxation), and using these resources to deploy the citizen armies that shaped the modern European nation-state between 1792 and 1945. Most important of all, this process shaped the 'imagined community' that was essential to provide the coercive apparatus formed by the state with the moral basis that was needed to ensure the willing participation and often self-sacrifice of its citizens. This imagined community in turn eventually also formed the foundation for popular participation and democratic accountability, and for the transformation of the state into a mechanism for promoting social welfare.*

In line with this point; therefore, limitations of state formation are ascribed to their failure of replacing coercive mechanisms used during the state formation at the next stage of nation building process. Inevitably state fail to win allegiance of their citizens and national unity

emerged questionable. Clapham noted that willing participation and self-sacrifices of citizens to the affair of their state should be won by moral basis instead of coercive state machinery. Essentially, education, particularly citizen education, has a flamboyant role in inculcating citizens' understanding about democracy, peace, political tolerance, national prosperity, mutual benefits of national unity, and shared meanings of state symbols and state identity (Misra, 2011). Ethiopia state formation process, however, sadly failed to follow this path due to irrational political calculations of political elites and academics of through the imperial era and the military rule.

After the emergence of Ethiopia as political unit, aristocratic elites of the imperial regime and military officers of the Derg had missed to pursue moral based feasible nation building approach. Instead, Menelik, Hailsilassie as well as Mengistu, indifferently sought Ethiopian national unity by imposing identities of one dominant ethnic group at the expense of diversified ethno-religious identities. Unique Ethiopianess was to be diffused forcefully specifically on those ethnic groups who resisted assimilation to the crafted alien identity.

### **Modern Education as instrument of Coercive Assimilation**

Though it needs further investigation if modern education was first introduced at his period, Menelik II blessed with the presence of European powers in the Horn of Africa, has opened modern school around the capital city. And modern education of the time was mainly introduced to facilitate the pursued assimilationist nation building process (Merara, 2003). In fact, it was Hailesilasse, effective successor of Menelik, who heavily implemented education as a means of force assimilation to create Amharanized Ethiopianness. The last emperor has made Amharic as medium of instruction in Primary school (1-3 grade) and the only Ethiopian language in schools in post 1941 period which marked the massive expansion of education in favoured provinces (Teshome, 1979). Noting Hailesilasse as kin adherent of linguistic and religious homogenization, Bandyopadhyay and Green (2008:6) say:

*Perhaps the best example of a regime that promoted religious and linguistic homogenization was HaileSelassie's Ethiopia, where Amharic became the sole language of primary education in 1943 and literature was banned in all other languages. In a particularly clever move Selassie also required missionaries to use Amharic: since they were already predominately located among non-Amharic speaker they thus became the "work horses of Selassie's national integration project"*

Needless to say Amharaizaion was a prerequisite of citizenship. Members of other ethnic group must learn Amharic and change their name to Amharic in order to gain citizenship

benefits (Teshome, 1979; Bandyopadhyay and Green, 2008). Alemseged (2005) states that to facilitate the assimilation process at the expense of quality of education, Amharic jostled English as medium of instruction in primary education and junior high school throughout Ethiopia during the early 1960s. According to Alemseged (2005) beyond the use of language education, teaching of selective history which glorifies only the dominant group, was exemplary of assimilationist policy of nation building during imperial Ethiopia.

Derg's "garrison of socialism" was not different in use of education as instrument of assimilationist Ethiopianess. The military regime produced new curriculum in which political education was one stream (Tekeste, 2006). Derg's political education requires Ethiopia students to indoctrinated with Marxist-Leninist politico-economic ideology and Myths of indivisible Ethiopian nationalism (Tekeste, 2006).

Ethiopia's Derg, though it didn't seem affiliated with the one ethnic group in its early years of state power in order to win the political situation of the time, in terms of policy of nation building it was not dissimilar from its predecessors. Mengistu was continuing the assimilationist policy of the imperial regime in new version of "*Ethiopia Tiqdem*" motto. Practically, it was during the Derg period when Amharic as a sole of medium of instruction gained much privilege. At the late 1970s the Institute of Ethiopian Languages in Addis Ababa University was renamed to Amharic Department simply connoting that it was the only recognized language of the state (Alemseged, 2005). Needless to say, Derg had also made Amharic sole medium instruction in primary school throughout Ethiopia.

In summary, neither the imperial regime's nor the military junta's homogeneity driven education policies as instruments of nation building have brought stability, democracy, and unity in multi-cultural Ethiopia. Rather assimilationist education policy was creating mass discontent by allowing the dominant to have upper hand in political, economic, and cultural affairs of the state. The Ethiopia nations, nationalities, and peoples were marginalised and denied the benefits of citizenry. Thus, alienated and despised ethnic groups began to view the state as enemy and waged war in need of national equality and democratic unity which respects their sub-national identities.

#### 4. **FDRE: Education as Par Excellence of Guarantee of National Unity and Multicultural Democracy**

Assimilationist approach of Ethiopian nation building process only led to armed struggles by ethno-nationalist movements. Hailesilasse's intention to assimilate Eritreans and compulsory language education policies only forced Eritreans to wage war of liberation in 1961, one year before the decree of unification passed. Oromo nationalist (mainly OLF) too forced to the bush in need of independent Oromiya state. In the same vein, Tigrayan nationalist have also decided armed struggle as the only means to respect their historical rich identity and to ensure democratic participation in Ethiopia. Many other ethnic groups too waged armed struggle one after the other either as separatist or democratic movements under the realm of Ethiopianness. Finally, after 17 years bitter armed struggle the TPLF led EPRDF coalition forces toppled down the Derg and replaced government power.

Thus, proving the failure of the century old nation building process, it was mandatory to pursue new path of national unity. After all, assimilation policy of unity had already cost Ethiopia national integrity. Eritrea won the battle and established its own government. Other ethno-national forces were seeking independence while the new coalition government was looking how to save integrity of the Ethiopian state. Thus, it became clear that the mercy of Ethiopian unity was only rest on the recognition of multicultural identity of the state. The only remaining avenue of national integrity was democratic unity. Firmly accepting this, FDRE constitution was ratified in 1995 fully granting the right to self-determination up to secession. Astonishingly, Article 39 of the FDRE constitution states:

1. *Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.*
2. *Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.*
3. *Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments.*

Adamantly, the new multicultural nation building process would have been meaningless without profoundly establishing it-self on democratic unity. Andreas (2010:6-7) laments:

*In Ethiopia, to embrace cultural diversity and the preservation of cultural distinctiveness was therefore not to keep but rather to defy the old ruling order. To champion the political freedom and equality of all cultural communities here was to call for the*

*emancipation of many whose cultures and identities had been scorned, their land and labour forcibly taken by those who belonged to the politically privileged culture.*

Concomitantly, it was also essential to make education policy of the state to fit with the new multicultural democratic nation building approach and new national objectives and goals. According to Tekeste (2006) among the defining features of the new education policy of the FDRE which became operational in 1994 were allowing ethnic languages and new scripts as medium of instruction in primary schools.

Towards effective implementation of the new policy, Ethiopian government has also asserted on democratic and decentralised governance of the sector in a manner that equal participation of nations, nationalities, and peoples is proved. According Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2002:32) new curriculum developed in order to:

- a) Produce citizens who stand for equality, justice and democracy;*
- b) Harmonize theory and practice (praxis);*
- c) Integrate national and regional realities;*
- d) Maintain the level of international education standards*
- e) Reflect the principles of equality of nations, nationalities and gender;*

To the novelty of the educational policy, primary education (1-8 grades) should be handled by the regional state. The new curriculum, in addition to creating enough room for regional state and their respective nations, nationalities, and peoples to design content and objectives of their primary education relevant to their context, it enable them to make mother tongue as medium of instruction at this level. According to MoE (2002:39) among many justifications of teaching children with their mother tongue in primary schools, as noted in the document of the Ministry:

*Learning in one's own mother tongue reinforces identity and enables its users to be proud of their culture and identity. They become self-confident and proud citizens. Such self-confidence coupled with the acquisition of knowledge and skill through schooling makes produce capable and productive citizens possible.*

Following this, today most of Ethiopian children are learning their primary education in their mother tongue except English. Remarkably, the new policy has opened opportunity for Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples to promote their history, culture, and identity consistent with their democratic unity.



Much worth also, the new curriculum of the new policy introduced civic education as subject study to equip Ethiopian students with constructive political, economic, and social knowledge and skills. To make corroborative with multicultural accommodative democratic unity approach of nation building process, the new civic education is designed based on the constitutionally acknowledged rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples (MoE, 2002: Smith, 2007).

In fact multicultural education is becoming inescapable path to foster national unity and democratic participation of diversified societies in many states. For example, in Canada since the early years of 1970s, government accepted to reformulate its education policy vis-à-vis the growing Canadian multilingual and multicultural society (Chahal, 2004). In United States too significance of multicultural education is gaining momentum to promote democratic values (Moore, 2008)

Apparently, post-1991 Ethiopia education policy is formulated to meet new national political, economic and social objectives. The incumbent government has enormously worked to make education compatible with the new quest for democratic national unity. However, some cynic observers view the new move to multicultural education as short-sighted decision of the government in power only done to serve limited political interests. Perhaps, if not for political and academic blindness, the only viable option of maintaining national unity and promotion of democratic politico-economic and socio-cultural governance of multicultural states is vested on accommodative political system. Thus, as education remains with pivotal role to communicated as well as to realise national objectives, Ethiopia`s effort to implement multicultural education deserves limitless appreciation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Modern Ethiopian state, similar to other experiences mainly in European case, was created through war and conquest. This episode gave the state exceptional scenario in African state formation process where most states are legacies of colonial scramble. Meanwhile, like most African states war and conquest resulted in multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious Ethiopia towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, throughout the last century Ethiopia has failed to appear as viable nation despite its blessing history. Mainly during the military regime period, Ethiopia`s survival as united political entity was questioned. Separatist movements and ethno-linguistic conflicts widely

encountered Ethiopia and remained as less integrated old African state. The emergence of those centrifugal forces was not chiefly because of bloody and chaotic Ethiopian state formation process. For the matter of fact, many modern, stable, and democratic European states and other viable states have passed similar way in their inception of political unity. Ethiopia`s fragility is not due to war and conquest dominated state formation process. Rather, it was because Ethiopia has missed out peaceful and rational nation building process after its establishment as a political unit. Engineers of modern Ethiopia have failed to pursue feasible nation building approach for the newly created diversified state throughout the last century. Menelik, later on Hailesilassie and Mengistu, indifferently sought to build single Ethiopian identity through coercive assimilation of various ethnic groups in to language, culture, and religion of one dominant ethnic group.

At the heart of this process, education was manipulated as means of dominance and oppression. Marginalised ethnic groups were deprived their right to teach and research their history, identity, and cultural estates. Moreover, assimilationist education has created inequitable participation at national level and marginalised communities were excluded from politic—economic and social benefits of their citizenship. Inevitably, exclusion and alienation gave birth to armed ethno-national struggle against the Ethiopian state.

Hence, since 1991 after long and bloody struggle, alienated and oppressed nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia have won the quest for national democratic unity. State policies turned from instruments of exploitation and oppression to means of common prosperity. Education, a lifeblood of modern state survival, then devised to support Ethiopia`s struggle to maintain its unity which was only possible through multicultural democracy. Eventually, Ethiopia`s flourishing political, social, and economic development are results of democratic unity and inclusive policies. And their continuity and sustainability will depend on production of democratic and competent citizens through inclusive, contextually relevant, and democratic education.

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