

# Education and “nation-building”: Italians in Ethiopia during 1936-1941

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On May 1936, just a week after the proclamation of the Empire of Italian East Africa, the newspaper of Turin *Il Giornale d'Italia* published an article by Indro Montanelli, *La gioventù intellettuale etiopica desidera collaborare con l'Italia* .

“Really existed in Abissinia a kind of Ethiopian Modernist Party – wrote Montanelli - . It was made of few intellectuals and it was called <Circolo per i laureati>. The best representatives of Abyssinian youth took part in this movement. Conservative wing looked them with suspect so they were took apart from politics. They claimed a new social order on European basis, a modern separation of powers, executive, legislative and judicial. On contrary they were excluded by public careers and they were usually confined on irrelevant positions. By this way they were not dangerous for social order”<sup>1</sup>.

The author of the article explained to Italian readers that the program of Ethiopian Intellectuals was just an illusion because “the country was not ready for this kind of political development. In fact Ethiopia – Montanelli wrote – is a country without national consciousness and political Education which are the basis for a modernization of the state”<sup>2</sup>.

This article was a part of a wider Fascist propaganda organized to justify the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Montanelli I., “La gioventù intellettuale etiopica desidera collaborare con l'Italia” in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 17 maggio 1936, Torino. “Esisteva effettivamente in Abissinia una specie di partito modernista etiopico costituito da pochi intellettuali e chiamato < Circolo per i laureati > in cui si adunavano con sotterfugi vari tra i migliori rappresentanti della gioventù abissina, sospettosamente riguardati dall'elemento conservatore e da essi tenuti gelosamente lontani dalla cosa pubblica. Questi giovani che propugnavano un nuovo ordinamento statale sulla base europea, una moderna ripartizione dei poteri, legislativo, esecutivo e giudiziario, si vedevano viceversa esclusi dalle così dette carriere amministrative statali e costantemente confinati a posti più bassi, dove la loro influenza non poteva che essere minima e facilmente neutralizzabile.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*

So with his words Montanelli argued that in the 1920s and early 1930s young Ethiopian intellectuals were the opposition to the *regime* built by Ras Tafari.

Even if the concept explained in the article was the result of Fascist propaganda, it is important to underline that the words written by Montanelli represented not just a point of view of the author.

At the beginning of the Empire of Italian East Africa the Fascist Government, not just Montanelli, looked at Ethiopian people as a block without differences between social groups.

Montanelli's article referred to 50 Ethiopian students. Before their coming back to Ethiopia these young took their degrees at universities in America or Europe. Montanelli also referred to 200 young Ethiopians who finished high school. The Ethiopian Intellectuals, explained Montanelli, supported Italian occupation of Ethiopia as the only way to modernise the country.

The modernization of Ethiopian Education system began in 1908 when the Emperor Menilek II founded the Menelik II School in Addis Ababa, the first effort to develop a government school system on European system basis. Since then the modernisation stage of the country started. But as from late 19th century, few Ethiopian students already went abroad to take University degrees.

In 1925 Ras Tafari Makonnen founded the Tafari Makonnen School and six years later, in 1931 he founded the Empress Menen School, the first school for Ethiopian girls<sup>3</sup>.

In 1936 when Italians occupied Ethiopia the "Europeanization" of Ethiopia Education system was already started. In 1934 Andrea Festa, Chief of a central office for primary education in Eritrea, explained at the Second Italian Congress of Colonial Studies the Fascist Idea of Education for Ethiopians. He "declared that schools for Ethiopians aimed at forming the new generation and had well defined aims. The native child, he declared, had to be acquainted with a little of our civilisation in order to become a conscious propagandist for Italian culture. He had therefore to know

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Pankhurst R., "Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist occupation (1936-1941)" in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1972, pp.361-362

Italy, its glories, and Ancient History, in order to become a conscious militia man in the shade of our flag”<sup>4</sup>.

The Royal decree, 24 July 1936, set up the Italian Education system in the Empire of Italian East Africa. The Fascist Government distinguished between Italians and “sudditi coloniali”<sup>5</sup>(colonial subjects as Italians preferred to call people from their colonies).

Italian Education for Ethiopian students had to be workable to Fascist policy. By this way the courses for Ethiopian students served Fascist government “to indoctrinate them with feelings of loyalty and subservience toward the Fascist establishment, to give them an understanding of hygiene in part at least to reduce the dangers of contamination to Italians resident among them, and to prevent them from acquiring professional or political aspirations out of harmony with the Fascist ethos”<sup>6</sup>.

Fascist government aims to give native masses a basic education which could allow them to work according to their aptitudes.

Behind the separation that Fascist government did between Italian and Ethiopian students there was not just an outline of Education system in the colonies but the idea of the superiority of the civilization of Ancient Rome inheritors upon Ethiopian people.

By this point of view the Fascist Education system in Ethiopia was just a tool to pursue a more important political goal. Their aim was to change the Ethiopian social structure to turn it to a more simple schema in which Italians would had occupied upper social standings. In the Fascist idea the role of Ethiopian people inside the new social structure would had been to execute all the works weren’t live up to Italians.

By this way Fascist government tried to press down Ethiopians in the social hierarchy. Two elements had more relevance for the success of the Fascist project: the first one was to delete previous differences inside the Ethiopian society; the

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<sup>4</sup> Pankhurst R., “Education in Ethiopia durino the Italian Fascist occupation (1936-1941)” in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1972, pp. 364-365

<sup>5</sup> R.D.L. 24 luglio 1936-XIV, n. 1737 Approvazione dell’ordinamento scolastico per le colonie in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 3 ottobre 1936, n. 320, p. 1494

<sup>6</sup> Pankhurst R., “Education in Ethiopia durino the Italian Fascist occupation (1936-1941)” in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1972, p. 366

second one was to use Education system to shape a new identity for Ethiopian people and to confine them into a generic lower stratum of the colonial society.

There were also exceptions to this program. In 1940 Fascist government set up “a special convent school for the children of native notables”<sup>7</sup>. But this government act were more an effort to induce Ethiopian notables to embrace the Fascist cause than a real attempt to create an Ethiopian elite in Italian colony.

It is demonstrated by the enactment of racial laws to separate the way of life of both Ethiopians and Italians. The project to run schools for sons of Ethiopian elite was erased because it was dangerous for the social balance in the colony. It would had create two groups of colonial subjects, one of which in a leading position compared to other.

Fascist government had the same thought about both Ethiopian elite Education and “meticci”, mixed race persons. High Education for some Ethiopian students would had bred a caste of persons that would had felt themselves more similar to Italian than to Ethiopian people disappointing the fundamentals of Fascist government in the colonies. For the same reasons Mussolini’s government prohibited unions between Italian and Ethiopian people to stem the proliferation of meticci because of the ambiguity of their position inside the social structure. As sons of an Italian citizen and an colonial subject meticci were hanged between Italian citizenship and the position of submission trait of colonial subjects.

In 1939 the Commission established by Italian government to improve, by Fascist perspective, the laws about the rights of meticci, reported to Benito Mussolini the results of the survey. Representatives of Fascist National Party, Minister of Italian East Africa and the Division of Demography and Race of Minister of the Interior, took part of the Commission. The Commission determined that in the colony “another difficulty to reabsorption of *meticci* it were represented by the European Education issued them. Meticci turned away from indigenus environment due to the Education received, they are unable to take a part of social environment of their

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 377

fathers because they are not citizens, as time goes by meticci would be able to become a distinguished category whom is good to avoid inside population colonies. With the aim to do it is a necessity to forbid all kinds of schools reserved for meticci. We set that meticci can to attend only schools for natives where they can receive an adequate education as colonial subjects”<sup>8</sup>.

In December 1938 Stazzera, the Governor of Gimma, in his quarterly relation to Minister of Italian East Africa, took stoke of Italian Education in his territory.

Stazzera informed that in 1936 in the schools of his territory governor there were 700 pupils. During the 1937-1938 school year the number of pupils increased up to 2300. According to Stazzera’s relation the number of pupils grown as well in 1938-1939 school year up to 3000. “There are 31 schools – wrote Stazzera – one of which for Italian students in Gimma. There are also 6 schools for indigenous in Gimma, Bonga, Lechenti, Ghimbi, Dembidollo and Gore. All these schools are managed by the Mission of Consolata of Turin; there are other 23 schools ran by the Residenze. Schools of Residenze are managed by both soldiers and civil servants. Teachers direct Ethiopian students to a disciplined life style. They give to students some knowledge of both Italian language and arithmetic. They also teach their students to enjoy the rural life style. In October 1937 we opened the school of Muslim studies and in 1938-1939 we have added a second level course.

It is superfluous to explain that school buildings in Gimma are rudimentary but renovations are started. We can’t however forget that school with a surplus of comforts haven’t to disaffect indigene from both rural way of life and the tukul where native is born and where is a good thing that he remain. Native students are equipped

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<sup>8</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato ACS-MAI- Busta 2053/Fasc. III-75 Relazione di accompagnamento al disegno di legge del Ministro dell’Africa Italiana Teruzzi. The document of Commission on the rights of meticci explained that:”Altra difficoltà al riassorbimento dei meticci è stata finora rappresentata dall’educazione e istruzione a tipo europeo impartita ai meticci non riconosciuti di cui si è fatto cenno in precedenza. Staccati irrimediabilmente dall’ambiente indigeno per l’educazione ricevuta, nell’impossibilità di partecipare all’aggregato sociale del padre perché non cittadini, essi rischierebbero di formare, col tempo, quella categoria differenziata che, come si è detto, è bene evitare nelle colonie, specie se di popolamento. A tal fine è sembrato necessario vietare gli istituti d’ogni genere riservati ai meticci, stabilendo che questi ultimi potranno essere accolti soltanto negli istituti riservati ai nativi, ove potranno ricevere istruzione ed educazione adeguate alla loro posizione di sudditi (art. 6)”.

by Residenze of meal, books, notebooks, aprons and khaki clothes. Students seems to be very proud to wear the uniform during the class time”<sup>9</sup>.

Fascist government left also to Christian missionaries a part of Education of colonial subjects but Christian schools had to observe the Fascist syllabus. Prior Italian occupation there was in Addis Ababa the Consolata Mission school. In October 1936 it was reorganized and named Clementina Graziani, the mother of the Viceroy. “The French Capuchin Mission School was taken over in 1936/1937 by the Sisters of Canossa”<sup>10</sup>.

The Commission report on the Education of meticci and the Report on Education system in Gimma by the Governor Gazzera had a common basis. In both Ethiopian students were described as people who had to remain at their role, namely colonial subjects.

By this perspective we can consider Italian Education for Ethiopians as a tool of the Fascist project to push down in the lowest generic social group the Ethiopian people. It is difficult to comprehend if and how only 5 years of Italian Education system had altered the Ethiopian social structure.

According to the research on Education in Ethiopia of Tekeste Negash published in 2006<sup>11</sup>, Ethiopia has not been really colonised. In spite of long term independence

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<sup>9</sup> ACS-MAI-Dir. Gen. Affari Politici-Busta 143. Relazione amministrativa Economica del Governo dei Galla e Sidama per il trimestre settembre – ottobre – novembre 1938. Stazzera explained in his report on Servizio scolastico: ” Nel primo anno di occupazione dei territori dei Galla e Sdama gli alunni iscritti alle varie scuole raggiunse la cifra di circa 700, nell’anno scolastico 1937-1938 raggiunsero la cifra di 2300 e nel corrente anno, dai dati finora pervenuti, si arriverà a superare la cifra di 3000 alunni. Le scuole che funzionano regolarmente finora sono 31, delle quali una per Italiani in Gimma, sei per indigeni nelle sedi di Gimma, Bonga, Lechenti, Ghimbi, Dembidollo, e Gore, affidate, in base a convenzione, ai Missionari della Consolata di Torino; 23 sono sorte per iniziativa delle Residenze ed affidate a personale scelto fra impiegati e militari che abbiano le attitudini richieste per l’insegnamento e che tale servizio prestano gratuitamente. Tali elementi, che hanno il merito di inquadrare, sia pure in una forma incompleta, gli alunni indigeni, avviandoli allo spirito della disciplina, all’amore del lavoro campestre ed a qualche cognizione molto elementare di lingua e di aritmetica, saranno sostituiti man mano che verranno gli insegnanti di ruolo. La scuola per gli studi islamici di Gimma, inaugurata l’ottobre 1937, ha ricominciato il suo normale funzionamento con l’aggiunta del secondo corso. E’ superfluo accennare che i locali scolastici di Gimma sono per ora molto primitivi; ma è in corso una revisione generale, pur ricordando che la scuola con un eccesso di comodità, di lusso non deve disamorare l’indigeno dal lavoro campestre o dal “tucul” in cui è nato ed in cui è bene che continui a vivere. A cura delle Residenze è corrisposta agli alunni indigeni una semplicissima refezione; sono stati pure distribuiti alcuni libri, quaderni, grembiuli e dei vestitini color kaki, che gli alunni indossano con fierezza durante le lezioni”.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 378

<sup>11</sup> Tekeste Negash, *Education in Ethiopia, from Crisis to Brink Collapse*, Nordista Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2006

“the education system that Ethiopian government implemented was very similar to those that prevailed in African states that were colonised for longer periods”<sup>12</sup>.

It’s arduous to explain it as a legacy of Italian occupation. It could have more distant roots. In 1934, two years before Italian occupation of Ethiopia Ernest Work published an article, *A Plan for Ethiopia’s Educational System*, on *The Journal of Negro Education*.

Ernest Work was asked by the Emperor Haile Selassie to go to Ethiopia to make a study of the situation and to make recommendations for an educational system to develop in the country. “From all sides I was asked – wrote Work – what sort of an educational system I proposed to suggest – they hoped it would be French or Italian or English, depending upon the one asking. They often suggested it would be American since I came from America. My answer was always that so far as I was concerned it should be neither French, Italian, English, nor American, That I hoped it could be Ethiopian”<sup>13</sup>.

As from late 19th century Ethiopia’s governors tried to modernize the country calling European engineers to provide for it. Swedish, French, British, Italians, Greeks and others went to Ethiopia between 19th and 20th centuries to exchange their technical knowledge with money or economic agreements or political influences in Ethiopia for their European countries.

But trough technical knowledge, functional to the modernization of the country, the first germs of Europeanization arrived in Ethiopia also if the country was independent. According to Fasil Nahum and his reflections on the Constitution of 1931 “the introduction of a written Constitution was a result of the growing interactions between Ethiopia and Western Europe. These interactions revealed Ethiopia’s technological backwardness and whetted its appetite for modernization. Hence the written Constitution manifested a policy decision at the highest level for Ethiopia to become a modern state. Apart from her own strongly felt need to

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7

<sup>13</sup> Work E. F., “A Plan for Ethiopia’s Educational System” in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1934, p. 66

modernize, Ethiopia had to convince the world that she was modernizing and taking her place among the civilized states”<sup>14</sup>.

In conclusion Italian occupation of Ethiopia could had rendered permanent a process that in 1935 was even working.

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<sup>14</sup> Fasil Nahum, *Constitution for a Nation of Nations. The Ethiopian Prospect*, The Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville-Asmara, 1997, pp. 19-20