Teaching and Preaching

Missionary Education and Colonial Subjects in Italian Eritrea (1890–1935)

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Abstract

During European colonial times in Africa and elsewhere, missionary education was an integral part of the colonial instruments for political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation. This paper aims to investigate the process of making colonial subjects through missionary education that was mainly provided by Catholic and Evangelical mission schools during the Italian colonial period in Eritrea. The paper argues that the Catholic and Evangelical mission schools distinctively worked to achieve their separate objectives that can be explained as employment versus salvation, teaching versus preaching, flag versus Bible, and hands versus soul, respectively. While the Catholic mission school focused on training the hand in order to supply labour, the Evangelical mission school stressed harvesting the soul to cultivate a docile labour force. Despite their differences, the works of the Catholic and Evangelical mission schools placed much emphasis on and exerted much effort to producing a class of colonial subjects that could serve as brokers of power.

Keywords


1 Introduction

In most colonial places the moral conquest of the indigenous people was an essential tool for a stabilised colonial system. In this process mission education constituted one of the most essential instruments of colonialism to ensure ‘passive acceptance’ by the indigenous (Dirar 2003, 402). During the early days
of the Italian colonial period in Eritrea, Catholic and Evangelical missionary schools dominated the school system in the colony. In other words, during this particular period the making of colonial subjects was achieved through a combined effort by the two missionary groups that enabled Italian colonialism to acquire a means of persuasion in Eritrea. It is thus the objective of this paper to create an understanding of the process of making colonial subjects under an educational system largely dominated by the two competing missionary schools. In investigating this process, the paper is guided by questions such as: What sort of educational system did the missionary schools apply? What were their differences, and how did these differences in educational systems shape the attitude of the colonial subjects to cultivate loyalty to the colonial state?

This paper intends to analyse the nature of missionary education under the Italian colonial system, particularly until the coming of the fascist system in Italy, by closely examining the content of locally printed textbooks that were in use between 1896 and 1935 in the Catholic and Evangelical missionary schools. The textbooks included alphabetical teaching with several short stories intended to facilitate the pupils’ mastery of the four language skills. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to create a new way of understanding the colonial missionary educational system under Italian colonialism by analysing the relationship these educational systems tried to forge with their subjects through the introduction of new norms and values, which were mostly strange to the indigenous people. The study adopts a comparative approach that interrogates how competing educational systems created a coherent system of producing loyal colonial subjects in a different cultural terrain.

2 Colonial Education in Africa

The most formal and perhaps most institutional educational system relevant to the current form was introduced in Africa by Europeans during the colonial period. Education was an incoherent project that was mainly affected by the different realities of the colonies (Mataschi et al. 2020), but all agreed on ‘the principle of an education based on selection and colonial role-attribution’ (Schicho 2014, 223). For example, in a more general sense, while the French system was projected to create an elite class known as black Frenchmen without endangering the superiority of the masters, the British system emphasised the notion of cultural adaptation in which the metropolitan institutions applied some adjustments to fit with the local political and organizational culture (Labouret 1940; Cligent 1964.). Nevertheless, in real terms the consequences of
the British and French educational system were the same despite their ideological differences.

The objective of the colonial educational system was mainly driven by utility rather than providing literary knowledge (Mataschi et al. 2020; Usuanlele 2014). Thus, the answers to the question of why colonial powers needed to educate their subjects focus around one theme: economic exploitation (Furnival 1942; Nyrere 1968). In this sense, the core motive of education was no different from the core motive of colonialism – that Africans would help the colonisers to man the local administration and private capitalist firms at a cheaper cost (Rodney 1972). Indeed, the success of colonialism would have been impossible to achieve if education had failed ‘to teach natives their self-negation and the heavy belief systems that de-ontologised their world’ (Abdi 2011, 84). In this sense, it was intended to ‘serve as nothing but an uncompromising instrument in the hands of the colonisers for the moulding of the native into a shape and form that reflect the desires of the master’ (Kamara 2005, 109).

In other words, education had more a valuable mission than the transfer of knowledge; it was basically a medium to train a new character within the African milieu. Consequently, this system created an emergent psychology of subjectivity in a way that assured their exploitation as if they only existed for such realities (Abidi 2011) by turning them into a ‘band of inept and unscrupulous individuals’ during the colonial and postcolonial African society (Kamara 2005). In effect, this meant that ‘[C]olonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, and the creation of mental confusion’ (Rodney 1972, 240) by alienating and depersonalizing Africans (Moumouni 1968). In so doing, it induced attitudes of human inequality characterised by a structure that underpinned ‘the domination of the weak by the strong, especially in the economic field’ (Nyrere 1968, 417). However, not all viewed colonial education through its unpleasant outcomes. In some aspects it increased African doubts about colonialist sincerity (Azikwe 1931). However, Lugard argues that African education guided the evolution of the race to a higher plane of thought and action (Lugard 1925). It was western education that ‘enabled Africans to achieve self-improvement’ (Illif 1969; Jones 1925).

During colonialism missionaries mastered education before the state. This forced the colonial state to create a symbiotic relationship with the missionary institutions (Schicho 2014). This and the missionary’s anthropological knowledge of the society cemented the relationship between the state and the missionaries (Cinnamon 2006). The missionaries were thus crucial agents of expropriation and the subsequent exploitation of all the ‘newly found lands’ (Mudimbe 1988, 59). However, the benefit was mutual. The establishment of the colonial administration in turn facilitated the missionaries’ free access to the indigenous people
(Mkenda 2018). From a utility perspective, missionaries were indispensable actors in the colonial enterprise. However, this always put the missionaries in a critical position because they had to prove their worth to the Africans and the state at the same time to gain a good reception from each audience.

3 Educational Philosophy during Italian Colonialism in Eritrea

From the beginning to the end of Italian colonialism in Eritrea, education remained instrumental to the breakup of the old social structures of the country. It was a system installed to ‘reinforce’ the indigenous people’s ‘role as inferior and as targets for an idea of a superior Italian civilization’ (Pretelli 2011, 275). Since the objective of Italian colonialism in Eritrea was to make the territory a white-settler colony, many Italian politicians and military generals considered educating the indigenous to be an unnecessary task since their role would eventually be replaced by white settlers. In line with this view, in a report sent to Italy the first governor of the colony, General Baldissera, stated that the ‘native,’ by all accounts, were an ‘inferior’ race and could only be good soldiers at a very cheap price (Wrong 2009, 35).

However, Ferdinando Martini (1897–1907), the first civilian governor of Eritrea and former minister of education, believed that educating the ‘native’ could create serious risks to the colonial project. Martini, the most influential governor who introduced serious changes in the colony, was very reluctant about educating the indigenous people. In Martini’s view the reason to not educate the indigenous was diametrically opposed to that of General Baldissera's argument. After he had paid a visit to a school in Massawa during his first year of governorship, Martini argued that the learning capacity of the indigenous was unexpectedly high. He concluded, ‘The native child, much more agile and alert, has the intelligence of a white child’ (cited in Smith-Simonsen 1997, 67 and 70).

The governor’s strong stance produced the understanding that a mixed-race school system should be disallowed. From Martini’s point of view, it was believed that putting the children of the subjects together with the children of the colonisers in one class and educating them would not only boost the confidence of the indigenous, but also harm the superiority of the white race. Martini indirectly rejected Baldissera’s conclusion that the indigenous were an ‘inferior’ race; instead, he recognised the intellect of the indigenous and viewed it as a political hazard. Educating natives was thus not considered a necessity while the colony was suffering from financial constraints (Smith-Simonsen 1997).
When Salvago-Raggi replaced Martini as governor, educating the indigenous became part of the official task of the state as of 1910 (Negash 1987). At the same time, the new governor instituted a stricter racial law to deter the indigenous people's access to the educational system. He imposed racial zoning in Asmara where the city was divided into three zones of European, African, and mixed (Barrera 2002). In spite of this, there was a growing demand for educating indigenous in order to properly run the colony's activities. However, who and what to educate them had become the affair of colonial theorists, politicians, and practitioners.

In an international conference organised by the Italian Academy in 1938, Giuseppe Bottai, who later became the minister of education (1936–43) in Italy, explained the purpose of educating natives: 'The objective of native education is not to produce masters of skills like ours [Italians] but expert manual labourers within their limited capacity' (Negash 1987, 72). The natives were to be instructed, not educated, since they were still in a state of nature. They had to be made to assist the Italians, not replace them in any manner. Foreign Minister Di San Giuliano also expressed that the objective of education was to maintain stability in the colony. It had to be carefully designed in order to not cause any ‘political or moral’ imbalance since the indigenous had an ‘infantile mentality’ (Smith-Simonsen 1997, 89). Education was well thought and politically charged institutions that intended to create loyal Italian colonial subjects with minimum knowledge who pays a maximum admiration and respect to Italian culture and history (Teklehaimanot 1997).

With the coming of the Italian fascist regime to power, led by Benito Mussolini in the 1930s, the colonial policy, particularly the educational system, was tremendously changed. Institutions of learning were turned into centers of institutionalised racism (Pretelli 2011). In addition, the debate on indigenous education gained new momentum. By now governors, particularly the proponents of Italian nationalism, began to publicly announce Italian superiority over the colonial subjects and advocated for the liberation of the ‘natives’ from ‘barbarism’. The main philosophical debate of this era regarding education focused on how to teach the local people Italian nationalism and the struggle for Italian unification. Andrea Festa, who was appointed as the director of education in the colony in 1932, rewrote the mission of education. He stated its goal was to acquaint pupils with Italy's glories and ancient history in order to recruit reliable colonial soldiers (Pankhurst 1968). Hence for him the goal of education had to be ‘to gain [the indigenous's] obedience without lowering them to a state of humiliating and barren slavery’, and to ‘enlighten’ them from their ‘animal instinct’ (Smith-Simonsen 1997, 126). In other words, the purpose of education was to cultivate ‘good savages’ (Pretelli 2011, 268).
It was not only Festa who advocated against westernised education for the indigenous. Colonial experts such as Enrico DeLeone also commented in support of Festa’s position of controlled education. He warned against the creation of ‘pseudo-intellectual natives’, and instead encouraged creating subjects whose interests were in line with the economic interests of the colonisers (Smith-Simonsen 1997, 126). In addition to DeLeon and Festa, Minni Caracciolo, a colonial education expert, stressed that educating the colonised people was one of the duties of the colonisers but it must not instruct the ‘natives’ on the spirit of self-respect. Instead, it should be a process of ‘moral conquest’ of the natives (Smith-Simonsen 1997, 129). It had to instruct them on fitting with the work in the field and to remain ignorant so as to not contend with the coloniser. At this time education was focused on how to make the pupils into brave soldiers that would defend the Italian flag, and to make them skilled labourers in economic activities.

4 Catholic versus Evangelical Missionary Schools

Without understanding the complicated relationship between the two missionary groups and the state, it is difficult to understand the role of missionary schools in colonial strategies. During the early period of Italian colonialism, the relationship between the missionaries and the state was unstable and irregular due to the competition between the missionaries, as well as between the state and the missionaries. Perhaps one of the major reasons for the rambling relationship was that the Italian colonial model was incoherent and inconsistent (Miran 2002). Historically the missionaries had entered Eritrea long before the colonial state. The first Swedish Evangelical missionary group landed at Massawa in March 1866. It was named Evangliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen, and internationally known as the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM). The Swedish Evangelical Mission started its activities by opening an education center at Umkullu, near Massawa, in 1879 (Lundstrom and Gebremedhin 2011). Before this period, in 1829–30 there were evangelical German and Swiss missionaries who had set foot in the region, though they were incapable of owning a center to provide evangelical services (Dirar 2003).

However, by the time the Evangelical missions arrived in the area, the Catholic mission had already established its name in the region for three centuries. The first Catholic missionaries arrived in the Horn region of Africa in the sixteenth century and remained there for a full century. They were then expelled, only to return two centuries later. By the nineteenth century the Catholic mission had already established its presence in the region for more
than a decade before the Italians set foot in the territory. One among them was a missionary group called Lazarists. Even though the first friars of the Lazarists were Italians, they were replaced by French friars and took over the responsibility of constructing seminaries in the region (Smith-Simonsen 1997). By the mid-1850s the Catholics were able to regularly exercise their activities with several establishments across Eritrea and Ethiopia, including schools, medical stations, an orphanage, a mission press, and churches (De Lorenzi 2013).

The preexistence of mission schools in the Horn region was not something an ambitious imperial state admired, given that the Italian state was a new player in the colonial venture. Even though it imposed several restrictions on the activities of the missionaries, the missionaries saw this reality as an opportunity since its coming would calm the turbulence in the region that had posed serious barriers to their activities. However, the state recognized the de facto reality of the missionaries and envisioned a fast expansion of territory with their facilitation. At the same time, it felt that the missionaries’ influence would cause some restrictions to the state’s exercise of power over the subjects. However, the state knew that the advantages of the missionaries outweighed their disadvantages and it decided to capitalise on their ethnographic and linguistic knowledge of the indigenous people. In addition, these resources empowered the missionaries to operate effectively and establish a relatively good relationship with the initial colonial governors (Dirar 2003).

The arrival of the Italian colonial state created a peaceful atmosphere within which the Evangelical mission could operate. The Italian occupation of Eritrea as a colony paved a way for the Evangelical mission to expand its task into the highland region of the territory, which had been inaccessible earlier though full of would-be harvested souls. Once the Italians established the colony of Eritrea the Evangelical mission began expanding its influence toward the highland and started to plan more systematically for pedagogical and literary production (Lundstrom and Gebremedhin 2011).

However, this atmosphere did not remain long. Even if the missionaries had merits, the relationship between the state and the missionaries remained strained, characterised by a shift from friendship to hostilities, particularly with the Evangelical mission. The working atmosphere for Evangelical mission became unpleasant as the Italian state began to place heavy restrictions for several reasons. Politically, the evangelical faith was considered to be antithetical to the colonial state’s mission. During the First World War Evangelists were accused of being sympathetic to the Germans and conspiring with Ethiopia to attack Italy. In one memorandum Governor Salvago Raggi stated: ‘Pending the change of religious policy, the Eritrean government must break and limit the activity of the Swedish missionaries, as a first step. Catholicism is
‘a fundamental element in our civilization’ (Lundstrom and Gebremdhin 2011, 361). The long-standing Orthodox Church and the Catholic mission viewed the expansion of the Evangelical mission as a serious threat. Fearing the risk of confrontation between the orthodox and new Protestant converts, Italians had some dissatisfaction regarding Evangelical mission activities. Despite this, the Swedish Evangelical mission continued until the coming of fascism, particularly until the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and was expelled when Sweden pledged allegiance to the Ethiopian emperor in the war (Pankhurst 1968; Smith-Simonsen 1997).

Restiction by the state not only targeted the Evangelical mission, but also the non-Italian Lazarist Catholic missionaries. This was because the colonial authorities suspected that French Lazarists provided support to the French cause in the region (Miran 2002). During the scramble for Africa the Italians felt threatened by the French. In a 28 April 1894 letter from Prime Minister Crispi to the governor of the Eritrean colony, Crispi said, ‘Of the work of the French Lazarists, I confess to you frankly, I have no confidence. It is obvious that the Lazarists cannot be eliminated by the stroke of the pen; it is an elimination which must be carried out slowly and with prudence’ (Pankhurst 1968, 673). Lazarists did not stay long after this letter; the state gradually expelled them until February 1895. Crispi’s mistrust of the non-Italian missionary groups was related to the subtle Italo-French political confrontation in the region. To him, the existence of French missionaries constituted a political threat to the Italian colony. Moreover, given that the Lazarists were French nationals, they showed little regard for the Italian language and culture. This was a serious concern among the Italian colonial administrators, who assumed that the Lazarists were promoting anti-Italian colonial resistance among the indigenous population (De Lorenzi 2013).

In contrast, Italian Catholic missionaries enjoyed preferential treatment. The missionaries, particularly the Capuchins, flourished under the auspices of Italian colonial rule. Over time colonial authorities realised the efficacy of the Italian Catholic missionaries because they had good experience and seniority compared to the state regarding ethnographic and linguistic knowledge of the colony. ‘As early as the 1890s, the colonial government was aware that Italian missionaries were useful in facilitating the spread of Italian culture and the consolidation of colonial rule’ (Negash 1987, 78). Second, these two institutions not only shared nationality, which was a major concern of the Italians, but also shared almost identical goals as that of the colonial state. This goal was ‘Italianization of the colonial territory’, which meant disseminating ‘a range of cultural, ethical and social values, which were assumed to represent the essence of being Italian or Italianta’ (Dirar 2003, 405). In addition, given the
state suffered from financial constraints, the governors found the missionaries were in a relatively good position to run education. Particularly during Martini’s governorship, it was this reason, not ideology, that cemented the relationship between the state and the Catholic missionaries (Miran 2002). Financially, the Evangelicals were richer than the Catholics, but while most of the friars from the Catholic Church viewed the state as an assistant the Evangelical friars wanted limited service from the state and viewed it as a distant friend.

In Eritrea the Italian colonial state succeeded in its objective of creating ‘good savages’. It utilised textbooks whose content were alphabets, primarily Tigrigna/Geez, and readings exercises. They also taught sentence formation, which is where the imposition of ideas about the sincerity of the colonisers and evangelisation began. These textbooks were published by the Catholic mission printing presses Francescana and Evangelical Mission Printing Press. The French Lazarist missionaries in Massawa established the first printing house around 1863. In 1879 they opened another printing house in Keren, a town west of Massaw. This was confiscated and transferred to the Catholic missionaries in Asmara when the colonial state expelled the Lazarist group in 1896. Some years later the Swedish Evangelical mission opened its first printing house in 1885 in Umkullu, in the vicinity of Massawa. Another commercial printing house was established in 1890 by Italians in Massawa, which was used to publish newspapers such as L’Eritreo and Corriere Eritreo (Pankhurst 1968).

This paper takes eleven locally printed teaching textbooks that were in use between 1896 and 1935 when the fascist government launched its invasion into Ethiopia and expelled the Evangelical missionaries completely. While five of the texts were under use in the Catholic missionary schools and published by the Francescana publishing house in the colony, six in use in the Swedish Evangelical missionary schools had been published by its own publishing house at Umkullu. It is worth noting that these texts were not exhaustive but representative texts only. The contents of the texts had two differing aims. While the Catholic missionary schools’ textbooks focused on producing local subjects whose main function was to be servants of the state, the Evangelical schools’ textbooks focused on producing subjects who were servants of God.

In the second edition of, Mesthaf Fidel Tigrignan Etalian (Book for Tigrigna and Italian Alphabets) published in 1908, the teachings were the Tigrigna and Italian alphabets. At the end of the book there was a reading section, which normally began with the construction of a sentence. Most of the sentences taught about spiritual and disciplinary aspects. Another textbook, Sillabario: Fidel Tigrigna Geez ksab nbab zbetsih Metshaf (Book for Tigrigna Alphabets and Reading), was published in 1914 and was comprised of alphabets and reading
paragraphs. The preface clearly states that the book includes selected stories and myths in order to develop the pupils' reading abilities and good discipline.

After the alphabet section both books provide lessons on different themes such as good living habits, advantages of learning, hygiene, eating habits, time management, hard work, and honesty. In the good living habits section, for example, the reading skill starts by stating that the first important behaviour is to fear and respect God, then parents and elderly people. Here the reading insists pupils to distance themselves from arrogance and show love in their school and work. Sentences regarding education preach, ‘As food is for our body, learning is for our mind,’ ‘He who is uneducated is a blind person,’ and ‘Learning gives us knowledge, knowledge helps us to understand God.’ The readings about hygiene teach about proper methods of maintaining a healthy and good-looking body. Another discusses proper eating and drinking habits. The message is to not eat or drink too much because any excess is harmful to the body and mind and can cause improper behaviour. The stories in its reading paragraph section teach pupils about good manners by narrating the characteristics of different animals and their relationships. The first is a conversation between the Devil and an ordinary man who was told to treat a tree in an extraordinary manner so that it would give him divine power. It finally turns him into an insane man who goes against God’s commandment.

Libro di Lettura, written in Italian and Tigrigna and published in 1917, narrates the biographies of Italian figures. The chapters discuss famous Italian engineers, philosophers, painters, musicians, entrepreneurs and merchants, literary experts, linguists and poets, explorers and geographers, emperors and popes, political thinkers and governors, and humanitarians and missionaries. This book provides the history of the Italian state through the biographies of individuals with remarkable achievements in their specific field of expertise across all sectors of the society. Particularly in the chapters about emperors and popes, and political thinkers and governors, the stories cover the long history of Italy and the historical processes that made it a great nation and why the pupils should respect it. In addition to reading ability, pupils were thus expected to know the history of Italy. Within this text individualism and capitalist methods are highly emphasised. Moreover, the biographies of individuals taught about Italian culture, which bestows glory and civility on Italian society.

Metshaf: Fidel Habeshan Etalian (Book for Habishian and Italian Alphabets), another version of the 1908 Mesthaf Fidel Tigrignan Etalian (Book for Tigrigna and Italian Alphabets), was published in 1923. The phonetics of the alphabets are written in Tigrigna. Along with each alphabet, there are words constructed in that alphabet as well as the meaning of each Italian word in Tigrigna. If the words are closely examined, they do not convey any meaning other than
teaching the pupil with sounds and phonetics as well as words that help them to pronounce the word properly. The words are randomly constructed and carry no subtle messages.

However, throughout the last chapter there are several messages that include spiritual aspects, such as Italian glory and personal discipline. These include: ‘Respect your masters and their orders’, ‘Italy is one of the biggest and civilised countries of the world’, ‘Love your master like your father and your colleague like your siblings’, ‘I love the most generous and powerful Italy’, and ‘A soldier whose uniform and body clean is a hero’. At the end of the book there is a section that instructs about body hygiene, which discusses the treatment of all parts of the body from the hair to the nails.

Perhaps one of the most famous reading texts presents the story of an indigenous man who had made several admirable adjustments in order to become a successful subject. The book is titled with the name of the person, Embaiè. Published in 1920, the book Embaiè has five chapters in addition to an introduction. The book portrays the language and structure of the relationship between the colonisers and subjects, in which the subjects are assumed to have benefited more (Negash 1987). Because this book provides a comprehensive understanding of the objective of colonial education, its contents are worthy of a detailed discussion.

As depicted in the book, Embaiè is a common male name in the local people of Tigrigna. The introduction reading starts with a summary of the impressive adjustments that Embaiè had undergone. Embaiè is portrayed as a poor and sad boy when he leaves his village to become a pupil in the Catholic mission school. However, after he attends school and goes through several experiences in the colony and in Italy as well, he becomes happy and prosperous with an optimistic attitude. At the end of the introduction the reading recommends pupils to follow Embaiè’s footsteps, who is characterised as an ideal civilised subject who accomplishes a tremendous transformation in his life.

Chapter 1 narrates the memory of Embaiè’s childhood and his posteducation life journey that leads him to become a shopkeeper in Asmara under an Italian businessman. Other than the introduction, the book is written in first-person narration. Embaiè narrates his life eloquently. In this chapter he depicts the topography and landscape that surrounds his village as terrifying and intimidating, one that demands courage and determination to walk on the road that leads to his village. Above all, the village and its people are described as disorganised and uncivilized. When Embaiè narrates about his school he expresses appreciation for the work of the missionary, who arrived at this place after crossing vast oceans and deserts to rescue the colonised from the shackles of ignorance and backwardness. ‘This condition,’ says Embaiè, ‘embarrasses
our family for they could not make a school to save us.' Embaiè appreciates the missionaries’ ingenuity and patience to save them from a condition of ‘nativity, ignorance and savagery’.

Chapter 2 narrates the ways and means Embaiè uses to adopt the advice and discipline of his master, Antonio. After completing his schooling, Embaiè finds a job opportunity in Asmara, the capital of the colony, working as a shopkeeper in a small business. During this period Embaiè learns the discipline of hard work from his master. Embaiè develops a dream of opening his own shop so that he would be economically independent, thereby supporting his family who live in a village. However, this is interrupted when his master requests that he accompany him to Genoa, Italy, where Antonio plans to resettle and open a new business since he has already accumulated enough capital in the colony. Embaiè does not hesitate because he sees an opportunity to become a good businessman and imagines a bright and happy future.

Chapter 3 describes Genoa as a hostile place for Embaiè to work, but it also serves as an informal school where Embaiè gains business lessons through reading and practice. In this chapter Embaiè reads several books about business ethics and hardworking habits. The chapter provides lessons by presenting the stories of different Italian businessmen who make extraordinary efforts in the colonies to expand their economic venture. To teach Embaiè capitalist business his master not only gives him books to read but also allows him to work with Italian businessmen. Having narrated this experience in chapter 4, in chapter 5 Embaiè is promoted from a pupil to an advisor. When he returns from a tour across Italy, Embaiè begins to deliver comments and advice to his master. When Embaiè introduces a new working system, his master is impressed by the actions and knowledge he has acquired. At the end of the reading Embaiè has become what might be called an elevated subject. ‘Dear son,’ his master says,

It has already been more than ten years since you have worked with me. I have come to witness that you are a strong, hardworking, knowledgeable, and lovely boy. This work is expanding by the day, and I cannot accomplish it alone. Therefore, from now onward, I ask you to be my partner in the business. I am sure the business will flourish under your supervision so that I will not be worried about it anymore. (Missione Cattolica 1920, 193).

Embaiè responds unequivocally: ‘I have no words to appreciate for you have been my teacher, father, etc. You have showed me the path to success. For the benefit of our business, I will gladly invest my energy, knowledge and talent to develop our business’. However, Embaiè does not stay in Italy permanently.
By the end of the narration Embaiè has returned to Eritrea, having been converted into a prosperous and educated person.

There are two important messages conveyed in Embaiè’s story. First, the colonisers are depicted as promoters of good. Throughout the readings the master is called ‘lord’ and perceived as a person with the ‘ultimate power of modernity’, ‘civility’, and ‘humility’. In this part of the reading the colonial master is a person with a fatherly character who cares about the betterment of his servant. While Embaiè’s home village is portrayed as a natural setting, Genoe is characterised as a modern setting. Embaiè equates his departure from the village as getting liberated from the misfortunes that his society in general and his village mates in particular have suffered from, such as locust invasion and perennial diseases. In other words, the indigenous society is depicted as still living under the persistent threat of nature.

Second, Embaiè’s story conveys what the future of the pupil will be under the colonial rule. The story presents the process of Embaiè’s transition from a village boy who had no future to a successful businessman. It narrates how Embaiè moved transformed from a rural to an urban center, from a naive and ignorant boy to a literate and enlightened person, from a man of nature to a man of civilization. Leaving his village to settle in Asmara, the reading shows the extent of transformation that Embaiè has gone through. Although he gained a good deal by coming to Asmara, at the same time he continuously complains and feels homesick. He lives in continuous compromise and negotiation between the kind of life he left behind and his new realities as a semi-civilised indigenous. In addition, the story narrates the professional challenges he encountered.

The second set of textbooks analysed in this discussion is that of the Evangelical missionary school. Although they do not differ in their pedagogy, they have a different emphasis than the Catholic missionary school’s textbooks. The oldest locally printed textbook known to date is *Fidel Tigrigna*. Published in 1896, the book starts with some words of prayers and hymns. Although it focuses on alphabets, there are also short reading sections in which the book teaches Christian morality and good manners. Most of these teachings are presented through stories of animals intended to instruct the pupils about the fear of God. The spirit of the lessons is not different in the two books that followed it, *Metshaf Fidel Zereba Tigrigna* (Book for Tigrigna Alphabets and Speaking) published in 1905, and *Metshaf Fidel Zereba Tigrigna* (Book for Speaking Tigrigna), published in 1911. They have almost identical curriculum with improved and elaborated paragraphs. What is different in these books is that, unlike the Catholic missionary school textbooks, they incorporate local myths and stories.
Basically, the Evangelical schools were set up purely to preach to pupils. Except for a few exceptions in which the textbooks present some stories to teach about plants and animals, they include no scientific lessons on worldly things. In the following three books – *Metshaf Fidel Zereba Tigrigna* (Book for Alphabets of Tigrigna) (1922), *Qedamay metshaf Nbab* (First Reading Book) (1928), and *Metshaf Fidel Bquanqua Tigrigna* (Book for Tigrigna Alphabets) (1935) – the messages of the paragraphs are the same but are presented in different styles. After alphabetical teachings, they directly engage in evangelization. Starting with stories from the Old Testament, they present several paragraphs about the omnipotence of God and his care of human beings. They teach about body parts and their purpose from a biblical point of view. They also teach about animals and their services to human beings, according to the Bible. The animal stories have another purpose – they teach good manners and behaviour such as family respect, dignity, honesty, and hard work in accordance with the interpretations of the Bible. There are also stories of people who live according to God’s orders and different preachers in Europe. The readings provide lessons on how to be a person with good manners along with having the fear of God in order to live in accordance with God’s guidance. The *Qedamay metshaf Nbab* (First Book for Reading) includes some lessons on biology, animals, and plants, mainly of local varieties. Throughout the readings there is repetition of examples and stories in order to instil the messages into the pupils’ minds.

In order to avoid redundancy, we focus on one representative of the reading textbooks, *Metshaf Fidel bquanqua Tigrigna* (Book for Tigrigna Alphabets). This textbook contains phonetic and reading lessons. Here pupils are expected to master writing the alphabets and reading sentences in small paragraphs. After providing alphabetical lessons, the book presents short stories on how to cultivate good behaviour, narrated by the story of a pupil named Bahtu. Bahtu, who is very loyal to the order of the family, wakes up early in the morning. After his breakfast given by his mother, he kisses the palms of his parents before leaving for school. When he encounters aged and senior people on his way he greets them humbly, as the custom dictates. In another story that focuses on forgiveness, a young girl who is seriously harmed by the act of another decides against seeking revenge but leaves it up to God despite her friends encouraging her to respond. In addition, there are a series of parables about the animal kingdom where the lion takes the majestic role and makes all animals bow to him, as humans do to God. At the end of every story there is a hymn that praises Christ and his eternity. One of the hymns reads:

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Born a weak and live orphaned child
I am still happy
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In the textbooks of the evangelical schools the message was singular and obvious – Christian morality. Unlike the textbooks of the Catholic schools that focused on the morality and the Italian flag and turned the indigenous people into subjects of the colonial state, the textbooks of the Evangelical school centered on biblical morality that changed the indigenous people into subjects of the Christian God. In addition to this difference, the Evangelical missionary schools’ textbooks borrowed many examples from the local culture, and adopted local habits and good manners as part of its curriculum. In these textbooks the glory of Italian culture and history are not portrayed, nor the history of any European civilization. The focus is merely on the history of Christ and his scripture. However, the assumptions provided in the curriculum and pedagogy of the Catholic and Evangelical missionaries portray the existing socioeconomic structure as if it is improper and backward. They assume that among the indigenous people there existed a lack of hygiene, good manners, mismanagement of time, and, above all, an improper belief system. This sort of portrayal was no different from the assumption of colonialism, and capitalism for that matter, that colonial peoples were governed by savage customs and barbarous living conditions.

One apparent aspect of both missionary schools shows there were real differences in their approaches. This difference is related to the nature of their schools’ racial policy. It is said that there was a separate educational system for the children of the settlers and that of the indigenous people. Education for the indigenous was not only provided by the missionaries but was also very rudimentary (Pankhurst 1972). Notwithstanding this similarity, the Catholic and Evangelical missions’ schools had different schedules and curriculum when it came to the typical teaching process of the schools. In the Catholic mission schools a typical school day schedule consisted of the following. After pupils woke up at five in the morning, they had to study Tigrinya and Geez until noon. In the afternoon the learning subjects were Italian and typing tutorials. In some schools the teaching continued during the evening and included Amharic, geography, and arithmetic, with workshops on trades such as tailoring and leather work.
Catechism and Bible history constituted one single subject. One of the reasons was the fact that the Catholic mission took over the responsibility of education through permission from the colonial state, which included focusing on the secular education necessary to facilitate the smooth function of the colonial state. Under this circumstance, it seems obvious that the colonial state exerted more effort on teaching rather than preaching.

In an Evangelical mission school, a typical teaching day was radically different from that of the Catholic. When the bell rang at eight in the morning, pupils gathered for morning prayers. Lessons involved Bible history and writing Tigrinya and Italian in the morning, and mathematics with some sewing and knitting lessons in the afternoon. The content of the lessons at each level focused on the Bible. One of the schools in Asmara with five levels of classes had the following schedule. Lessons were held from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., and from 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. At 8:00 p.m. there was evening prayer, usually led by a teacher. In level i lessons include Bible history, writing Tigrinya and Italian, mathematics, and basics of Italian. In level ii the lessons were reading and listening to detailed Bible stories, writing in Tigrinya and Italian, mathematics, and introduction to Amharic. In level iii the large Bible stories continued with additional lessons on the New Testament, Italian, mathematics, geography, history, science, and exercises in Amharic. In levels iv and v the topics of lessons were the same as in level iii but in a more-advanced version, such as the introduction of lessons of the Bible in Amharic and Geez (Lundstrom and Gebremedhin 2011). On any occasion, such as provision of health services or market day, new converts preached to any available audience. Given that the ultimate target of the Evangelical mission was the Oromo people in Ethiopia, the work of the Evangelicals in Eritrea was temporary and preparatory though this project was unsuccessful. Most of its work was adjusted to how to access this region and prepare Evangelist teachers to accomplish this task. Hence, unlike the Catholic missionaries who shared direct interests with the colonial state, the Evangelical school was much more interested in religious conversions.

The readings show that there were two schools, one belonging to the Catholic missionaries and another to the Evangelical missionaries. Thematically, while the former emphasised employment, the latter stressed salvation. Pedagogically, while the Catholic missionaries focused on teaching, the Evangelists emphasised preaching content that blended cultural traditions. For the Catholics, education was not a lesson that was good for the subjects’ soul but a process to make them fit for the kind of employment that the colonial state expected from them. The focus was on the hands of the subjects rather than on their minds, though it is hardly realistic to claim that education left no impact on the thinking capacity of an individual. In other words, while the Catholics trained the hand, the Evangelists cultivated the soul. When these two
educational objectives merged, they produced a class of subjects who would be fitting members of the community that the colonial powers aimed to forge.

Consciously or unconsciously, the education system was not framed to produce local thinkers who could have better living conditions. The stories and the reading paragraphs in the textbooks advocated a new attitude of dependency as well as invoking individualism and wealth accumulation. These characteristics were usually applied as a means to social merit and worth in a society. Moreover, since pupils were selected from among the sons of the chiefs or notables who had already shown some form of loyalty to the colonial system rather than on the basis of merit, the educational system ensured continuous regeneration of loyal minds thereby diminishing the value of merit. This process prevented the production of talented pupils in the colony on par with those in the metropolis since the system deprived indigenous pupils of metaphysical lessons. This resulted in the emergence of a new social class that was neither really indigenous nor European in culture and attitude. This marked a new beginning of distinct political and sociological features in the colonised society.

The new social class acquired a new moral order and disciplinary traits in the process of learning. In an ordinary phenomenon human behaviour can be classified as either moral or immoral. Although this classification already existed in the indigenous culture, colonialism introduced new elements of moral and immoral behaviours through the learning process. Given the notion that custom and reason were the criteria to classify the colonisers and colonised, a new set of morals appeared under the colonial system. Using custom as the benchmark, almost all elements of indigenous behaviour were categorised as immoral. The stories in the textbooks were designed to achieve this objective. One of the powerful stories of the missionary curriculum was to inculcate in the mind of the pupils that the colonial enterprise was a moral act. Portraying the whole body of colonialism in this way was an attempt to automatically naturalise all elements that the colonial system undertook. The automatic interpretation of this system was that any act of anticolonial resistance from the indigenous people was immoral. The act of resistance was perceived as an act of self-destruction since colonialism had been established for no other mission than to civilise the indigenous people.

5 Conclusion

The basic motivating force for the coming of Italian colonialism to Eritrea, and for the rest of colonial power elsewhere for that matter, was the economic exploitation of the colony in the most profitable and efficient way possible.
To this end, it was instruction but not learning that was believed to be the most effective tool of the educational system. The success of this educational system in Eritrea under the Italian colony was accomplished by the combined efforts of the missionary schools, the printing press, and the educational policy of the colonial state. In the Italian period the missionaries’ schools that were owned by the Catholic and Evangelical Churches dominated the provision of education to the indigenous people. While the former focused on teaching, the latter focused on preaching. Moreover, while the Catholic school insisted on training a skilful hand, the Evangelical emphasised harvesting a good soul. Their educational missions were aimed at training indigenous people’s hands for employment and their souls for salvation, which can be interpreted as education for flag and preaching for the Bible respectively.

Despite their differences, both groups of missionaries were successful in breaking the old order, thereby producing a class of docile subjects with good souls and skilful hands. This educational system had two objectives throughout the Italian colonial enterprise: first, to conceal the aggressive nature of the colonial state and deploy education as a means of disciplining subjects; second, to cultivate loyal and docile colonial subjects. Given this responsibility, though other factors were involved, education enabled colonialism to camouflage its aggressive characteristics as well as to produce a new class of indigenous people who brokered the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised. Doing it successfully lured the minds of the indigenous to accept the hidden objective of colonialism. Education provided the persuasive qualities of the colonial state in its entirety, using faith and instruction as its most effective tools. In other words, the educational system and the subjects that were disciplined and shaped through this way served as a means of achieving other ulterior objectives of the colonial system characterised by exploitation.

References


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