

Urban Students on the Way to Educate Farmers: Some Impacts of the Ethiopian National Literacy Campaign (1975-1991)

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In 1974, the emperor Haylā Sellasé was finally overthrown after a decade-long struggle lead by the marxist-leninist Ethiopian Students' Movement. Soon after the revolution, the Därg, a military committee composed essentially of low and medium ranked officers, took the power, adopted in his turn marxism-leninism and initiated a wide « Development Through Cooperation Campaign » aimed at bringing the revolution into the countryside and making the entire population literate. Launched in 1975, it lasted until the fall of the regime in 1991 as the « Literacy Campaign ». The university and secondary school students were the spearhead of this massive and long-lasting effort. They were sent all over the country to teach the population how to read and write, to spread marxism-leninism and to organise the peasantry along the lines of the newly adopted ideology.

During Haylā Sellasé regime, formal education as well as literacy were mainly urban phenomena. On the contrary, this campaign initiated a massive population movement, even if temporary, from the city to the countryside for the very purpose of education. As a result, the young urban and educated ethiopians not only taught the rural population, but also shared for several months the reality of the peasants, their everyday life, their troubles and, to some extent, their harsh living conditions.

This presentation aims at analysing some impacts of the campaign on the ethiopian society. What has changed since the spread of literacy in the lives of the farmers' communities ? To which extent did this campaign allow social mobility among peasants, in particular through its links with the formal education system? How did it influence their feelings and perceptions towards formal education ? Moreover, how did this shared experience between the poor, illiterate and historically submitted rural population, and the young and revolutionary urban intelligentsia, contribute to modify each actor's social and political consciousness ?