

Waldorf in Ethiopia

by Barbara Sohn

Five years ago in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, the Regina Family Center was founded. The founding impulse came from Regina Abelt, a German midwife from Addis Ababa, and several mothers whom she had cared for during their pregnancies and births. Out of this positive experience came the wish for a holistic way of life and a corresponding approach to education. The initiative for a Waldorf daycare was born.

Ethiopia, located at the horn of Africa, is an anchor of stability in the region. It is a country on the move, with a long and fascinating history. Ethiopia is a state with many ethnicities where more than 80 different languages are spoken. English is the language of politics and economics, and those who want to pursue higher education must learn English early, as all instruction in the higher classes is only in English. Ethiopians are predominantly deeply religious, whereby religious affiliations are as numerous as the ethnic composition of the country. The two main religious communities are the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims. In addition there are various Ethiopian evangelical Christians, Catholics, adherents to nature religions, and Jews. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians represent the most historically influential religion. Ethiopia is thus one of the oldest Christian-dominated countries in the world. Secularism is anchored in the democratic constitution.

A Little Paradise

Addis Ababa is a loud, hectic city full of contrasts. Busses, taxis, cars, donkey wagons, hand carts: everything is pushed and pulled through the streets and alleys. Modern high rise buildings stand next to simple tin huts, and rich and poor live close together. Next to big shopping centers are rickety little stands selling fruit and vegetables along the edge of the city. Spices and Khat (an herbal stimulant), everyday items and second hand clothing are offered next to the finest cotton textiles and artistic baskets in the markets or directly on the street.



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In order to get to the Family Center where the kindergarten children are cared for, one has to drive to one of the higher lying areas on the edge of the city. A large gate separates the area from the rest of the world. When you step inside you feel you have entered another world. There is a stone house, with two side buildings, a vegetable garden, trees and bushes, flower beds that please the eye, and birds and insects, two horses, three turtles and a dog that enliven the garden. A small playground is there with a sandbox. At the moment, 18 children ages 2 - 5 are cared for by seven women, whose origins, cultural backgrounds, and education are very diverse.

The initiative has had turbulent times and has now found its home. Waldorf education can take root here and offer something that runs counter to current trends.

In Ethiopia too, prevailing governmental authorities have succumbed to the error that progress can only be made at the cost of childhood. Thus the very youngest are already taught reading and writing in state and private kindergartens. When children enter school at age five, they are expected to speak Amharic and English, to read and write the Amharic alphabet, be acquainted with the Roman alphabet and have basic skills in arithmetic. In the state-recognized Daycare and in the kindergarten of the Regina Family Center (RFC) which is still developing, children are still allowed to be children and to develop freely in a protected space. As we introduce the RFC we want to begin to bring closer the diversity that lives in the initiatives.

Senior-Expert-Service in Action

In the autumn of 2015, I became acquainted with the RFC Waldorf initiative. The German organization »Senioren-Experten-Service« (SES), sent me to Addis Ababa in order to accompany the development of a kindergarten. As a retired Waldorf kindergarten teacher, I helped introduce Waldorf early childhood education to the educators and assistants, as well as the parents of the children. In the afternoons and on weekends, we worked through the foundations of early childhood education step by step and put the necessary structures in place for creating daily and weekly rhythms. In the mornings, we practiced what we had learned. At that time

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there were mixed-age family groups with eight children from nine months to four years old. Free play, preparation of breakfasts and lunches, singing and storytelling, caring for animals, watering the plants, playing in the sand, and on the swings and the slide were the focus for activity. And the young women knitted and sewed on the sidelines, creating the first toys. The highlight was the Open House, with a puppet play, first in Amharic language and then in English. Six intensive weeks!

In July 2016 I traveled a second time to Ethiopia. At that time a move had taken place and another was planned. I encountered different spaces, in the middle of the city, and different faces - many changes had taken place. I could not build on the work done earlier. However, the attentive attitude of the caregivers toward the children, the interest in the education, the joy for artistic activity, and a light atmosphere with human warmth were palpable. It was a matter of supporting these elements. The focus of this visit was the inner work in preparation for the founding of an official kindergarten. And in the meantime the location had been determined for the final move: back to the house with the big yard at the edge of the city! My time and funds from Germany and Switzerland were sufficient so that I could prepare the rooms for the kindergarten children with Haben, a mother and member of the RFC Board, and to re-do another room for the kindergarten children.

A Protective Space for Childhood

There was a third visit, planned to take place after the government was to grant the license for the kindergarten. A challenge: Fulfilling the parents' expectation that their children would be well prepared for school, as mentioned above, which meant introducing early academics without doing harm. It is a distant goal of the RFC to found a school. A Waldorf School would be the solution to the problem, since the achievement tests do not need to be taken until the end of 8th grade.

The Regina Family Center Project has the capacity to grow. A second building block is the realm around pregnancy and birth with gymnastics and support for the young mothers. Regina Abelt has taken this on. The social aspect plays a large role. A café is planned as a meeting place. The large area offers possibilities for a variety of uses. In the summer, school children come for vacation groups and on the weekends, private occasions such as children's birthdays are celebrated.

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There should be a harmonious threefoldness of education, rights, and finances. However, the second two bring enormous difficulties. The government makes demands, and creates regulations that make it difficult to realize the concept. For a while the financial burden was oppressive. Every bit of material and moral support is welcome.

The International Association for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) supports the beginning collaboration among the four Waldorf initiatives in Ethiopia: one in Hawzen with a kindergarten and a school, two in Addis Ababa - a private playgroup here and the RFC Daycare described above - as well as a home for AIDS-orphans in Debre Markos. Support is being found for projects such as consulting, training and further professional development for the caregivers. Together with Angelika Wagner, teacher trainer and director of the Waldorf kindergarten training center in Mannheim, I will continue to accompany these projects.

A network of helpers has formed around the RFC. This includes the SES that paid for my travel costs, the Windrathertal School from Germany that carried out a four-week project with two teachers and pupils from the 11th Grade in January 2017, the members of the association »Zukunft gestalten- Waldorfpädagogik in der Region Südostbayern« whose members offered material donations to the groups, as well as friends who are prepared to offer financial support.

Ethiopian society is going through changes and searching for new ways. In a diverse country there is room for diverse educational approaches and directions. Each of the four Ethiopian Waldorf initiatives that are all working with Waldorf education is developing its own identity. Waldorf education is universal - limited neither by time or place - and the lawfulnesses of child development are valid everywhere. Something wants to develop here that will be unique, and based on the cultural impulses in Ethiopia!

Barbara Sohn is a retired Waldorf early childhood educator, who taught as an elementary school teacher in a social project in the slums of Mexico and at the Swiss »Colegio Suizo de México«. Later she was active for many years as a Waldorf early childhood educator in Rosenheim, Germany. She advises faculties and travels for international projects. She is also a member of the board of the Bavarian association „Zukunft gestalten- Waldorfpädagogik in der Region Südostbayern e. V.“ ("Forming the Future - Waldorf Education in the Region of Southeastern Bavaria, Inc.")