

Asfaw Yemiru, former street urchin who founded a school for disadvantaged children in Addis Ababa – obituary

He started teaching street children under an oak tree aged 14 and persuaded Emperor Haile Selassie to grant him land to build a school

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Asfaw Yemiru

Asfaw Yemiru, who has died probably aged 79, came to Addis Ababa as a nine-year old street urchin but, through talent and initiative, acquired an education; aged 14 he started teaching other street children under the shade of a tree, and he went on to found the Asra Hawariat (“Footsteps of the Apostles”) School which, over the years, has offered free education to some 120,000 of the poorest children in the Ethiopian capital.

There is no official record of his date of birth, but Asfaw Yemuri was born into a large family in a poor village in the remote Ethiopian region of Bulga, probably in 1941 or 1942. His father was a Coptic Orthodox priest. Much of his early childhood was spent minding his father’s sheep and goats, but when he was about eight years old the whole family made the trek to Addis Ababa, for Asfaw and his 11 brothers to be ordained deacons.

Having glimpsed the opportunities city life might offer, Asfaw made up his mind to move to the capital and the following year, without telling his parents, he walked back to Addis, a journey of 75 miles. He spent his first 14 months sleeping in a churchyard, begging for food but often going hungry.

One day, begging outside St. George's Cathedral, a barrowload of oranges tipped over in the street. Quick off the mark, he scurried about, picking up the fruit for its thankful woman owner. As it happened she had been looking for extra domestic help and took him into her household as a general dogsbody.

She allowed him to attend a local primary school, where he did brilliantly well, completing the first eight years of the syllabus in just two years. Eventually he won himself a free scholarship place at the General Wingate boarding school, run by the British Council.

Soon after his arrival, remembering his own experience as a street child, he persuaded the headmaster to allow him to arrange for scraps left over at the end of school meals to be distributed among the children outside the school gates.

Soon, however, as he recalled in an interview, "these ragged boys and girls began to ask for education as well as food" and, still in his first year, Asfaw began to put aside time on Sundays to hold classes under an oak tree in the local Paulos Petros churchyard: "I then altered this to teaching during the weekdays as soon as my own school day was finished, between 4.30 and 6.00."

Many of the children took shelter during the rainy season under the eaves of the church while others slept in the churchyard. Eventually, however, the church told Asfaw that the children would no longer be able to sleep under the church gallery, so he decided to look for somewhere to build a school.

One day, early in Asfaw Yemiru's final year, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie paid a visit to the General Wingate School and, as Asfaw recalled: "I decided to chance the traditional practice of hurling myself in front of the Emperor's car, with the hope that he would listen to me before I was hustled away by his bodyguards.

"It wasn't a good time to intercede because there had been recently an attempted coup and the bodyguard were taking no chances. However I lined my orphans up by the roadside and dashed out in front of the moving car. Fortunately it stopped and I was hauled up by the guards to speak to the Emperor."



Asfaw Yemiru (left) with Haile Selassie on a visit by the Emperor to the Asra Hawariat school in 1970

Asfaw persuaded him to grant him 300 square metres of land up against the Wingate School wall. In the early days classrooms were built by the children themselves, using whatever was to hand – eucalyptus wood from the trees they had cleared, broken bricks from a local brick factory. The earliest classrooms had shelves which were used as bunks by the children until dormitories could be built.

Initially the school filled up with the 280 children who had been Asfaw's pupils in the churchyard, but by the beginning of the second year the classes were filled to overflowing and there were queues of people waiting for admission.



Asfaw Yemiru in his school

The children were taught practical skills such as how to farm a plot of land, in addition to the Three Rs; corporal punishment was banned and the school was entirely free. It gained greatly in popularity when other primary schools in Addis began to demand that their children wear uniforms and pay for textbooks.

Somehow, Asfaw managed to raise the money to expand, including from proceeds of plays put on by the children and a 335 mile sponsored walk, together with loans and donations from both foreign and Ethiopian well-wishers including Emperor Haile Selassie and the headmaster of the General Wingate School.

In 1965 the school was given official recognition by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and eventually Asfaw was able to build a second campus in Addis after Haile Selassie gave him land for the second site in 1972. This was an area in a forest which had to be cleared so that they could put up the school buildings.



Asfaw Yemiru spent a short time in jail during the time of the Dergue, the Stalinist military junta that ruled Ethiopia from after the deposition of Haile Selassie in 1974, to 1987. But somehow both he and his school managed to survive the dictatorship and the long-running Ethiopian civil war, at the end of which the school compound was commandeered for use as field hospital for war-wounded and a transit camp for demobbed soldiers.

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2021/05/14/asfaw-yemiru-former-street-urchin-founded-school-disadvantaged/?fbclid=IwAR37h3S8DkpcOgCtI-oNniGQWP-MpHiG_xB4dguHMa4frJsvtu1wsbp8vDw



Asfaw Yemiru poses with one of his pupils, Yewubeneh Bekele, in 2001, after being named winner of the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child CREDIT: MARIA BREMBERG/ PRESSENS BILD

Currently there are 885 children on the school roll, ranging in age from five to 14, the main target groups being the most vulnerable children ranging from orphans and street children, (housed since the 1990s with local foster families), to children from low income single parent households. Despite their disadvantages, the school regularly gets among the best exam results in Ethiopia.

Asfaw Yemiru was never content to rest on his laurels. During the pandemic lockdown he was working on imaginative ways of carrying on the children’s education in households lacking home computers.



He was seen as a national hero and today many taxis in Addis Ababa have his photograph prominently displayed. In 2001 he was awarded the World Children’s Prize for the Rights of the Child, an award established by Sweden as a national millennium project which has been dubbed the Nobel prize for children.

“People talk about basic needs, food and shelter,” Asfaw Yemiru said on being told of the award: “But for me, education is the key.”

Asfaw Yemiru and his wife, Senayet, had two daughters and a son.

Asfaw Yemiru, born probably in 1941 or 1942, died May 8 2021

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