Knowledge and Its Attainment in the Ethiopian Context

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A reflection on the state of knowledge in traditional Ethiopia reveals the narrowness of the area in which initiative and creativity were encouraged. This fact was, *inter alia*, a consequence of the type of curriculum accepted and followed in traditional schools. The narrow scope of the curriculum and the virtual absence of argumentation and criticism severely restricted the field in which methodological and substantive innovations could be introduced.

The traditional system of education is based on the theory that the present state of knowledge is all that could ever be attained. To seek for entirely new items of knowledge and sources of knowledge is a useless waste of time and energy.For, as Haile Gabriel Dange [1968:64-65] accurately states the traditionalist fundamental assumption,

> Knowledge received through the medium of Ge'ez [i.e., knowledge as revealed by Holy Scriptures] and that contained in the Koran can never be invalidated nor is it subject to change. It is eternal. The [knowledge and insights revealed by the holy] books have as their foundation the authority of the Holy Spirit... They are not man-made... Therefore, the teacher knows that his only duty is to pass on this immutable knowledge; and it is the student's duty to accept (but not to add to or question) what he is taught. He memorizes what he is taught since the received knowledge is the truth and, hence, eternally valid. Thus to question or to try to acquire new knowledge is a vain attempt. (my own translation)

Because of such assumptions, research, investigation, experimentation, theorizing and speculation have been, at best, actively discouraged; they might result in *illusions* of new knowledge in a world where nothing is new under the sun. The belief in the possibility of new knowledge is heretical and, therefore, has to be eradicated. To the traditionalist, knowledge is a sacred inheritance and man is a mere receiver, a receptacle. This view of man has something in common, strange as it may seem, with Locke's theory of knowledge. For Locke (1690: 10) supposes

> ... the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:- How comes it be furnished? ... Whence has it all the *materials* of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.

Experience, in both the Lockian and traditional Ethiopian conception, is the sum of the actions of external objects on our minds through the mediation of the senses. Locke (1690: 10) amplifies this by saying.

> ... our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects do convey into [our blank] mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them.

The epistimology of Locke and that of traditional Ethiopia consider knowledge a gift and not an acquisition. They hardly ascribe to man any active role in the process of knowing. But this is contrary to evidence from pyschology which clearly demonstrates that man, even at earliest enfancy, acts on and reacts to his environment (cf. Piaget, 1971; Thurstone, 1960). Thus man acquires knowledge by interaction with his fellowmen and the material environment surrounding him. The characteristic social dimension of knowledge derives from man's interac tion with society. Through his actions and interactions with his material environment man aims to understand the secrets of nature and, as a consequence, to gain mastery over it.

Historical studies of the growth and development of knowledge show that knowledge determines the manner by which man perceives his surroundings and himself. As an illustration compare Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler. The former advocated a geocentric theory about the sun, whereas the latter supported the Copernican view. Hanson (1961:23-24) describes the difference in their preceptions of the sun's diurnal motion thus:

> Tycho sees the sun beginning its joruney from horizon to horizon. He sees that from some celestial vantage point the sun (carrying with it the moon and the planets) could be watched circling our fixed earth...
>
> Kepler's visual field, however, has a different organization. Yet a drawing of what he sees at dawn could be a drawing of exactly what Tycho saw, and could be recognized as such by Tycho. But Kepler will see the horizon dipping, or turning away, from our fixed local star. The shift from sunrise to horizon-turn is... occasioned by differences between what Tycho and Kepler think they know.

Perception, in the sense of apprehending and observing reality, is, therefore, theory laden. In other words, it is impossible to preceive any element of reality, any fact in isolation. It is in the nature of human perception that the mind apprehends any given fact in a context, i.e. in relation to a certain theory or system of beliefs. As Northrop (1947:36) accurately points out:

> It cannot be too strongly emphasized that if one wants pure fact, apart from all theory, then one must keep completely silent, never reporting, either verablly or in writing one's observation to one's colleagues. For the moment one reports or describes what one has observed, one has described fact rather than merely observed, or immediately apprehended, fact. In short, one has observed fact brought under concepts and propositionized.And to have concepts and propositions is to have theory.

Professor Northrop could also have added that if one wanted pure fact one must not only keep completely silent but one must not think at all about one's observation. This, however, only the dead can do.

From what has been said so far, it is evident that one's cultural background (inclusive of the knowledge one has acquired) has a significant influence on the observation of objective reality, the categorization of experience and introspection. For instance, the traditional systems of beliefs in Ethiopia endow the trees, the mountains and rivers as well as man and the animal kingdom with spirits. Typically such a conception of the universe obliterates the boundary between the objective-as-public and the subjective-as-unique. Such systems of beliefs hardly favor the existence and development of science. In societies where such systems of beliefs are dominant, supersitition is the way to understanding and tradition is the source of as well as the criterion for knowledge. Becuase of this overwhelming dominance of tradition, new items of knowledge, new points of view, new sentiments are very suspect and, hence, are violently opposed and resisted. They are considered disruptive because they disturb the stagnant harmony whose foundation is ignorance and unquestioning belief. Authority, be it that of the shaman or of the ruler, is absolute. Such systems do not allow for internal corrective measures. Such systems fetter the mind and make it one-tracked. Simple-minded incantations are offered as all embracing explanations for the profound questions of the origins of the universe and the destiny of man. Evidently, then, in traditional societies such as ours the sciences can hardly exist let alone flourish.

In Ethiopia, since knowledge is considered a gift from heaven, those who claim to possess it have always guarded it jealously. They are afraid of criticism and of views conflicting from their own. They have never hesitated to act in collusion with the political powers-that-be to suppress and root out the conflicting views. For this reason, original thinkers have had either to keep silent or to claim that their views were not new.

As an illustration, consider the case of the sixteenth century Ethiopian monk, Bahrey. He wrote a short but brilliant work (of twenty small chapters with an introductory paragraph) on the enthnography of the Oromo of Ethiopia. At the time of his writing the Oromo were beating the forces of the central government sent to arrest and push back their successful progress to the northern parts of the country. For the period in which he wrote (and considering Ethiopian historiography of even the present day) his description of the socio-political organization of

the Oromo is uniquely dispassionate. One of the remarkable things that Bahrey has done is to explain purely in human terms victory and defeat; divine intervention is hardly invoked as "explanatory hypothesis". For instance, in Chapter 19, he analizes the structural defects of his society and clearly implies that the causes of the defeats of the central government and the reasons for the successes of the Oromo were to be found in the structure of their respective socio-political organizations.

Bahrey knew he was doing something original, and thus treading on dangerous ground. So, right at the beginning of his introductory paragraph he remarked:

> ... If any one asks me why I am writing the history of the bad ones [i.e., the Oromo, when the proper thing to do is to write only about] good people, I answer him by saying go and read and you will find written in the books the history of Mohammed and the moslems, who are our religious enemies. (my own translation)

Bahrey thus disclaimed any originality, for it was a sin and a crime to be original, to be a pioneer of thought and deed. Moreover, the custom was and has been to suppress and persecute and not to criticize and point out errors of fact and methodology.

The absence of a tradition of a spirit of intellectual adventure, the non-existence of constructive criticism and the customary suppression of conflicting views have been, I believe, crucial negative factors responsible for the burial of innovations such as Bahrey's. No wonder that Ethiopian civilization has not been characterized by a dominant world-view conducive to a scientific and humane attitude.

As is the case in our country, when only one theory of knowledge is declared valid, sanctioned by tradition (be it moslem or christian) and protected by force from criticism and the competition of progressive views, such a theory has attained the status of dogma. A dogma advocates a particular world-view to the forcible exclusion of others. It, therefore, inculcates a particular mode of cognition. To modify or replace a dogma requires long and sustained intellectual and socio-political struggles; for, many adherents of the prevailing dogma find it conceptually difficult to understand the modifications or the replacing world-view; while others resist the modifications or the replacing world-view because acceptance would threaten their vested interests.

The history of humanity is replete with struggles for and against new perceptions, new world-views. The outcomes of these struggles are the transformation of people's perception of their material and human environment and the creation of new states of consciousness. Modifications or changes in social relations or in intellectual and educational fields do not necessarily always bring about progressive socio-political transformation nor new and useful knowledge. However, change is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for progress.

Since the beginning of this century, Ethiopia has undeniably gone through changes. To mention one or two examples, changes have occured in some areas of social relationships, e.g., the abolition of classical slavery. In the field of education now there are, both in absolute and relative terms, more Ethiopians who have studied in modern educational institutions than at any other period in history. Confining ourselves to education, how deep are these changes? The changes are significant but not deep. We have the trappings of modern educational systems—usually adopted whole-sale. We import new educational fads as fast as they come. It is practically impossible to think of any innovation that we can call our own in the systems of modern education we have adopted. As a consequence, Ethiopia has become perpetually dependent in the educational field and its educated citizens eternal apprentices.

The modern educated Ethiopian, on the whole, is non-creative, non-productive and unduly consumptive. Instead of competing worthily in the realms of creativity and productive achievement, he is prone to gossip. He is adept at solving national and international problems in the course of a card-game. Thus, his leisure is to discuss with his bosom friends, over glasses of beer or whisky, such topics as *Shum-Shir*, with incidental observations on justice, international relations, etc., interpersed here and there. He hardly has any deeply-felt sympathy for the suffering poor, nor a true commitment to his country, nor a burning desire to change the lots of the overwhelming majority of his very deprived fellow citizens. Such is the typical product of the modern system of education.

In many respects, and as far as knowledge is concerned, the modern so-called educated Ethiopian is a dabbler. He is an expert in mouthing slogans and clichés as panacea for all our national ills. Any thing difficult, be it intellectual or practical, is to be avoided. But knowledge is not *manna*. It is acquired through effort. Our educated person, on the contrary, would

> ... prefer a quick initiation into the deeper secrets of this world to the laborious technicalities of a science... (Popper, 1962:27)

Epistimologically, a strong case can be made for the view that the desire by the modern Ethiopian student to be educationally spoon-fed comes from the implicit belief that he is merely a passive receptacle. The teacher is mainly there to pour knowledge into the student's mind. It is obvious, therefore, that both for the traditional and the modern student knowledge is something received and not actively acquired. This explains why the modern Ethiopian "educatee" is no more (perhaps, even less) creative than his traditional counterpart.

To conclude, both the traditional and modern educational systems in Ethiopia have failed to inculcate in the learner that knowing is an active process that demands much mental and physical exertions. Both systems have failed to impress on the student the following: For his material progress, man must have a profound scientific understanding of his material environment so that he may rationally *act on* and *transform* it to forms useful to him. For his socio-political progress, it is

essential for man to understand the workings of human socio-political institutions so as to uncover their internal contradiction, to be able to predict their future development. This would then help man to work for the realization of that socio-political system which the particular epoch's level of knowledge has shown to be the optimum for the freedom, well-being and over-all material, intellectual and spiritual development of each and every member of society.

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