

Higher Education in Ethiopia and the Battle between Knowledge of 'Them' versus knowledge of 'Us'

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The Encounter

The measure taken this month by the Ethiopian Anticorruption commission on the top officials of the Federal Customs Authority and other suspects incited a wave of wide public opinion. By chance, I have been lecturing on a Course titled: 'Public Administration Ethics and Anticorruption' for 3rd Year **Public Administration and Development Management** students in this semester. Thus, I found the event to be an ideal 'laboratory case' to examine thoroughly for better communication in the teaching learning process. Of course, my students are heavily curious, disciplined, obedient to discharge all orders I assigned to them and as hard working as possible. I thought they would take the recent phenomena serious.

After days, I included one Item of 10 questions in their examination wholly concerned with interpreting the event of the anticorruption measure in light of their knowledge at theory level. I also added another Item of 10 questions in which I asked them to identify social values in Ethiopia as those encouraging public corruption against those discouraging it. The remaining two Items were the traditional type of direct questions where my students had to give answers by memorizing what I told them in the class and what I wrote for them in the teaching material. In short, I asked them to answer as the original European and American scholars wrote them.

On the morrow, I met two Sections and I asked them how the examination was. Almost all of them told me that the second Item of 20 direct questions were 'very good' while the other Items on Ethiopia were 'very bad'. About the reason, they told me that questions on Ethiopia were strange, unexpected, and complex, and suggested remedial alternatives, as they were graduating students after a month or so. The moment reminded me of the fact that there must be some gross weakness with the entire academic staff and me on how we have been trying to guide these young students of the generation, who are by some chance at our hands. This again led me to raise other more crucial and fundamental concerns of this paper.

Once the government built our universities, how are, we, the Academic Staff and the Management, running them in light of their intended strategic goals?

The Grand Paradox

University education and its expansion in Ethiopia and similar countries in the South has been a challenging project due to a set of structural paradoxes prevailing at present. These paradoxes are as much the sources of our troubles as they are the repositories of our successes, when effectively understood, and wisely resolved.

Structural difference marked by an imaginable degree of socio-cultural variation is by far the most significant and the grandest one. The very socio-economic site and the social surrounding of modern higher education and its fast expansions in the South, in general, and in Ethiopia, in particular, are structurally different from the structure in the developed North. In the words of Adebayo, the basic socio-cultural structure in the South has never been a creation of what he calls 'High Cultures'. 'High cultures' for Adebayo refer to the natural and organic dynamics of capital formation and circulation, wide national market, and a quest for overseas leeway for home products.

The structure in the South is an artificial foundation from above imposed on predominantly, agrarian, rural and pastoral, communal, traditional and subsistent communities, more or less, fitting the subtle characterization of August Comte as communities of 'mechanical solidarity'. Without any further abstraction, any one could easily observe that almost all universities in Ethiopia are only a few meters away from these majority communities everywhere, even in Addis Ababa.

The paradox is, however, that the basic source of modern scientific knowledge of these Ethiopia's universities is the different social structure in the North—Europe and America. This scientific knowledge in the North is inherently the outgrowth of the special social reality there. This knowledge has come down across generations of Europe and America tremendously affecting the overall societal structure and equally being affected by it. Euro-American modern knowledge at their universities has helped as a mental mirror and compass to guide, sift, refine, demonstrate and shape the basics of their existing structure unique to the special social surrounding there. Free market economy, the preponderance of civil society, individualist form of life, industrialized and urbanized social setting, capital and capitalist innovation, dynamism and forward looking social values are the governing glues across the board there as opposed to that of Ethiopia in the South.

Concisely, knowledge born out of a structure of high cultures but replicated into a structure of low cultures hosts the crucial paradox of higher education in Ethiopia, and the larger South.

This is but a mother paradox producing and reproducing a chain of multiple boulder paradoxes still in the face of Ethiopia's universities. The logic of Low Cultures makes it a duty for the government to own the expansion of higher education by itself. However, the paradox is that these public universities should develop objective, value free, independent, and secularized academic traditions in the feet of the North. Agrarian, rural, and pastoral subjects of academics and research for universities in Europe and America are already anthropological enquiries into the past. Paradoxically, they constitute the essence of existing social predicaments aching states of the South, Ethiopia, at the forefront. As the North attained the peak of modernity, the goal of higher education in America and Europe, in the words of Andrei Heywood, is 'education for its own sake'. In Ethiopia, the paradox is that it has a stated goal— higher education for social transformation from one to the other higher stage.

How are we managing these paradoxes?

The Trespass

A careful interpretation of the above structural paradoxes soon clarifies that Ethiopia's universities, particularly, the academic staff and the Management have to resolve them, by any means. What is their resolution? The answer is simple at the lips but most earth-shaking in practice—contextualization or making a deep synthesis of knowledge originating in the North in order to recreate it to serve the demands of the South. Whether one likes it or not, Ethiopian scholarship is nothing more than a simple shadow of western epistemology and good for nothing if it could not undertake a successful contextualization project. In short, it has to change its vast knowledge of 'them' into that of 'us' or that of the foreign and the exterior into the domestic and the interior. This is without exaggeration what scholars of India, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and many other emerging societies have done effectively.

I argue firmly that this task has divided the academic community and the Management across Ethiopian universities into two opposite blocks of views and beliefs—imitators versus learners, sympathizers versus synthesizers, replicators versus sifters or in-side-out versus out-side-in lookers.

Imitators have a good knowledge about 'them' in the North with a remarkable capacity to memorize even names of white authors, educators, innovators, and so on. Nonetheless, their knowledge about 'us' is something that is given and already known even without conducting a research. For this reason, imitators, argue that it is not necessary to worry about how to apply this knowledge for the benefit of the 'us' in the South. Imitators are strong sympathizers of knowledge about 'them' because it has no blunder to correct or refine when applied to Ethiopia. For imitators, the Ethiopian scholarship has no any possible alternative knowledge other than accepting knowledge of 'them'. For them, modern knowledge is an objective and value-free science when it discusses at Ethiopian

universities about institutions, processes, findings and policies in Europe and America. When these subjects of Ethiopia come for review, they automatically become issues of 'partisan politics' for them deserving no priority of concern.

Synthesizers, on the other hand, are good learners of the 'us' as much as that of 'them' but in order to contextualize and never to swallow it. Synthesizers are voracious learners and believe that knowledge of 'us' is more difficult and challenging than knowledge of 'them'. This is because the former stayed outside the coverage of modern education. The ultimate purpose of synthesizers behind attending and teaching university education is never to look like 'them' but to change the living of the 'us'. For synthesizers, there is an additional duty for scholars of Ethiopia in the South, which imitators do not want to hear and can never perform. That is sifting knowledge of 'them' to fit it the demand of the 'us' in the South. Thus, synthesizers are in-side-out lookers where they first look at the reality under their feet before they resort to London and Washington while imitators are out-side- in-lookers.

Imitators are excessively confident that modern education has lifted them up out of the backward traditional social setting in Ethiopia so that they are different and important for the country. For synthesizers, their modern knowledge of 'them' is meaningless unless it passes the challenges by the wisdom of the 'us'. Imitators believe that the problem of backwardness with the 'us' is because they fail to replicate that of the successful North. For synthesizers, the problem is with the failure of replicators to select the appropriate and the realistic. For this reason, imitators are functional preoccupied with the Part and the Unit rather than the Whole while synthesizers are the opposite—believer in structuralism. Imitators have ample time because their knowledge of 'them' is pure, complete and unmistakable, while synthesizers are busy with contextualizing, redefining, rewriting and sifting knowledge of 'them' to produce knowledge of 'us'.

Imitator sympathizers and sifter synthesizers have also other differences in their views of academic engagements. For imitators, procedures and rules are the end rather than the means in the daily teaching learning process. For synthesizers, procedures, and rules are only means to achieve the end—effectively influencing behaviors of their students. Thus, what matter for imitators is what the procedure expects of them, while what their students have been looking like from year to year stands top for synthesizers. Because the social surrounding of the 'us' is illiterate and backward, the best teaching methodology for imitators is top down while bottom up investment on human beings is the priority for synthesizers. Sympathizer imitators admire the complexity, beauty and advances of buildings, machines, and tools. Sifter synthesizers attach high values for knowledge, attitude and skills of coordination, synergy and value development.

Alignments

How are imitators and synthesizers aligned horizontally and vertically in the campuses of universities in Ethiopia? Students are, without doubt, victims of imitators while some imitators at the academic staff are the innocent culprits. Imitators and sympathizers at the university Management are the chief commanders of the undeclared 'epistemological attack' on the generation. While they are consciously at the side of the imitators' dictum, 'knowledge for its own sake', in their management styles, imitator managers provide protections for the mass of procedural, sympathizer, and top down staff everywhere. At serious debates on the appropriate 'epistemology' for Ethiopia of the South, they proudly take several hours explaining their experiences in Europe and America. As they are far in the distance within their own world, Imitator managers give a warm applause for regular attendances of classes rather than changes in student behaviors so that they are ready to die for procedures than substances.

Imitator managers blame failures on their subordinate teachers while they readily take rewards for successes for themselves. They emphasize the rule as the immediate arbiter in conflicts rather than their unchallenged moral superiority and academic supremacy. Imitator managers search for the pillars of their legitimacy for ruling university communities not from their unparalleled academic brilliance and entrenched moral leadership as role models, but from the letters of their appointments. For this reason, they are practically myopic, muscular, and self-doubting 'administrative elites' than dynamic, transformative, and strategic leaders. They libel their synthesizer colleagues and teachers around them as 'parochial, inexperienced, and incapable.'

Most of these imitator managers have had announced promises of rapid institutional reform through Business Process Engineering, Curricular Development, Modularization and other progressive schemes. During preliminary studies, they proudly told us that they benchmarked globally renowned universities from Harvard and Oxford to Pretoria and Berlin. Where did these promises evaporate today? Remember, as compared to other public offices with an excellent record of reform implementations, these imitator managers at the have at their disposals a big army of qualified personnel from first degree to PhD levels. So, why are our universities least managed, least computerized, least economical, and least academic while they have this resource? Simply, it is because of management obsession with imitation and replication rather than redefinition and contextualization.

Imitators of the university in Ethiopia are socially the perfect equivalents of the comprador bourgeoisie in the national economy and cultural collaborators in the arts industry. Essentially, they are modernists lost in the warm love of the knowledge of 'them', and not developers for the betterment of the 'us'. Unfortunately, like the compradors in other sectors, they and their imitator followers have a big superiority at present. When this supremacy is gone gradually, then, students will begin to ask some day saying: what is the relevance of your teaching about 'them' to that of the 'us'?

By this, modernist imitators will lose the war totally, even though they win the battle today.