Revisiting Traditional Education

Woube Kassaye[*]

Considering the role of education, many countries including Ethiopia link educational development with national development. Neglecting or belittling traditional education that has significance in the endeavor could be taken as ignoring invaluable experiences of the society. Modern education in Ethiopia and in other African countries often considered as Western Education has been given exceeding precedence over traditional education. The has faced serious criticisms and challenges. Thus, this article briefly discusses the role of traditional education in relation to modern education.

Various scholars have stressed the role of education in terms of generating and transmitting knowledge and worthwhile values, -promoting labor productivity and human resource development, creating and improving technology, enhancing culture etc. Hopper (1971) indicated that one of the functions of education is to transmit or communicate the cultures or subcultures which already exist and will continue to exist, thereby reinforcing social systems. Philips (1975) noted that education is the process, which bridges the generation by both passing old values and creating new ones. Education is also essential to avoid mistakes, illusions, false enlightenment, dangerous oversimplification etc. It does not only provide knowledge, skills and the incentive needed by a modern productive economy, but also the necessary technology, which accounts the highest percent of production. Similarly, human resources (manpower) development is highly associated with education (Forojalla, 1993; Philips, 1975). Considering the role of education, many countries connect educational development with national development. However, one should bear in mind that if there is no adequately prepared blueprint of educational planning and appropriate education system which is supported by research feedback the outcome is doubtful. Forojalla 91993) shares this view by stating that nowadays no sound

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development can occur in the absence of proper planning system and an equally sound education system.

No human society is without education and no education is without culture. Development is highly associated with education. It is believed that balanced development can only be ensured by making cultural factors an integral part of the strategies designed to achieve it; consequently, these strategies should always be devised in the historical, social and cultural context of each society (UNESCO, 1982). Thus, one can not thoroughly discuss about the education of a certain society without understanding its historical, social and cultural components.

Africa is not only the cradle of mankind, but it is the cradle of many inventions such as a) the use of preheated forced-draft furnace which exceeded to temperature around 1500 degree centigrade and the production of carbon steel about 1500 – 2000 years ago, where such technology was not in use in Europe until the mid 19th century,   b) the existence of a complex astronomical calendar system in 300 B.C.   c) the introduction of writing system, for instance, the *Meotic* text, the *Kemetic* and the *Geez* or *Ethiopic* script predated all European systems. The latter is the only African writing system used in schools and business transactions (i.e., used within Ethiopia), d) the existence of rock hewn (monolithic) churches at Lalibala and steles (obelisks) at Axum in Ethiopia, and e) the invention of musical notation system by St. Yared. These and other cultural heritage are found and encoded in various forms – symbols, rituals, designs, artifacts, music, dance, proverbs, riddles, poetry, architecture, technology, science and oral traditions (Elleni, 1995). Their contribution for development, particularly in the field of education is immense. However, "though these appear simple on the surface, it is not until one attempts to unravel the encoded philosophy or messages within them that one is struck by their profundity" (Elleni , 1995). Neglecting tradition in the endeavor to bring about change could be taken as ignoring invaluable experiences for mankind. Thus, considering those practices and ideas of traditional education that have value and significance is

indispensable. In relation to this point Trimingham (1952) stated that "any account of Ethiopian education must recognize the contributions made by the different religious, linguistic and cultural communities". However, modern education in Ethiopia, often referred to as western education, has been given more prominence than traditional education.

The view that modern education has neglected the experiences and the needs of African society is acceptable by various authors. Ocitti (1994:9), for instance, underlined the failure by western as well as African educators for many decades to conceive indigenous education (traditional education) as education because of the following reasons:

i.   education means schooling and anything outside the realm of schooling is not education;
ii.   the colonial distortion imposed on Africa has made their valuable experiences to comply with or pegged to the colonial interests, and
iii.   most of the framework considered in the publications are unfamiliar to professional educationists and educators to understand African education.

Similarly, Elleni, (1995) noted that the educated elite – "the determiners" – who chose modern education in Africa were unprepared to foresee and to minimize the resultant culture clash, disruption of African life and alienation of the modern educated youth from its cultural heritage. The determiners (elite) operate education on totally different system of values and philosophy of education. Similarly More (1962:45) bitterly condemned modern education for its destruction the culture of the people, for instance, by developing an infertility complex about ones own tradition without having acquired anything substantial to replace them. Contrary to this, the westerners do not abandon their heritage, however, selectively borrow ideas and technologies from every where and place them within their own cultural and conceptual framework (Elleni Tedla, 1995). In relation to this, Henzen in Ocitti (1994) underlined that "the productive harmonization of African education and culture in the modern world is a meaningful

utopia awaiting realization in the societies of today and tomorrow".

Little attempts have been made to study traditional education. In relation to this point Elleni, (1995), for instance, concluded that there are no serious efforts to study, promote and incorporate indigenous education; the attention of international organizations, donors and scholars has been devoted to modern education. It was reported that despite the contribution of Church and Quranic education, the attempt to study it is very limited (Imbakom, 1970; Habtemariam, 1971; Tilahun, 1997). Similarly, Girma (1967), pointed out that "many foreign visitors ... have written, sometimes at a considerable length, about the system of church education in Ethiopia, but really a systematic and scholarly study in this interesting area is long overdue". Regarding Quranic education, Bowen (1976) noted that the existence of Quranic school that largely escaped the notice of travelers of former times, however, appear to have been culturally important by foreign observers. In both Church and Quran education a very few studies were made. Similarly, the role and experience of education in relation to the culture of the different societies of Ethiopia have hardly been studied. However, a very few studies were made. Abbink (1996), for instance, on the education of the Surma people reveals that I) the provision of modern education does not (and can not) tie in with traditional or future concerns of the large majority of Surma, that ii) there is no community linkage and the emphasis is too much on "formal education".

Although traditional education, particularly, the Church and Quranic education has its own limitations, its significance has been stressed by various authors such as Elleni, (1995); Imbakom, (1970); and Girma, (1967). Tilahun (1977) also pointed out that the limitations of Church education should not be taken as failure, but something that should be subjected to critical appraisal and examination. Traditional education in both the Church and Quranic schools have been appreciated in many ways such as in: a) overrcoming illiteracy; b) cultivating the essential virtues of good-man; c) placing emulation as a method of teaching; d) assessing the progress of each pupil

daily rather than setting formal examination; e) sustaining the cultural and intellectual wealth of the society; f) emphasizing learning by doing; g) encouraging teacher and pupil relation; h) applying simple teaching and learning materials; I) using simple classrooms and multi-grade teaching in a class; j) encouraging peer teaching; k) employing low cost building, desks and chairs. On the other hand criticisms were forwarded by authors such as Girma (1967); Tilahun (1997); Girma, Abraham and Abunal (1974); Teklehaimanot (1999). Some of the criticisms are: a) lack of a coherent standardized system of education under a central authority, b) enrolment of women, c) completion of the whole program takes a very long time, d) de-emphasizing originality, e) over0reliance on learning several religious texts which are considered sacrosanct and unchanging, f) providing little attention for secular culture and spoken languages, g) disregard for practical skills related to production and livelihood.

Despite the foregoing limitations, the provision of traditional education for centuries testifies its continuation in Ethiopia. Although modern education is considered as a break in this continuity, it still provides education for millions of children who do not get access to modern education. This implies that as long as there is the provision of traditional education, and that it has its own merits, considering it as part of the education system is advantageous in many ways. A similar view expressed by Wass (1980) on the role of non-formal education is that education does not make its optimum impact on development unless its various elements – whether formal, non-formal or informal, and the interrelationships between them – are conceived and planned as part of a coherent approach. In fact this should rely on research feedback. To do so, all the concerned bodies such as the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaux, the Ministry of Information and Culture, religious institutions should revisit the role traditional education plays in the country's educational development.

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