



Vignette 3

Homo economicus and the developmentalist state: Controversies over Citizenship Education in Ethiopia

Jennifer Riggan

Arcadia University, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

The author analyzes a classroom observation of a lesson on traditional versus modern practices of saving money, given in the context of Ethiopia's Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) program. This program's curriculum was central to Ethiopia's post-1991 nation-building project and is in many respects a blueprint for a particular notion of citizenship and personhood, and for relationships between Ethiopians, their nation, and the world. This vignette unveils the deeply controversial nature of the lesson's content and juxtaposes this with the lack of debate encouraged in the classroom. It shows how the CEE curriculum espouses a set of financial priorities here that may be unrealistic for students on the one hand, and antithetical to their religious, community and cultural values on the other.

Teaching homo economicus personhood

The classroom was wide and cool with a beautiful view of the school compound from its third-floor window. There were about 30 students in the class. On the board the teacher had written some notes on unit 9: 'savings.' They read:

Savings:

Why people save money.

Factors affecting saving:

Income

Level of consumption

Extravagant practices

Absence of family planning

Religious dogmatism

The teacher noted that there were traditional ways to save and modern ways to save and said that “the modern way is better than traditional way.” Then, she asked students, first in Amharic and then in English: “Why do people save? Who can tell me, why you would save money in the bank?”

Students answered with comments such as: “When we save our money in the bank, we get extra money.” “If we put our money in the bank we can withdraw when we need it.” And, “it is advisable to save money using modern institutions.” Finally, one student said: “Saving in Ethiopia is very low. Income in Ethiopia is very low.”

The teacher ignored the fact that this last comment deviated from her question. As she questioned the students, she didn’t pause long to hear what they thought. Most students seemed to simply parrot what the teacher had said. She moved on to discuss the next factor affecting saving: “Many people prepare big wedding ceremonies. This leads to what? Extravagant practices. Also, *betam tililik* [very big] national holidays. This leads to what? Extravagant practices. There are also some ceremonies like graduation ceremonies.”

She then moved on to family planning. “Having more children has a negative impact on saving.” She asked how many people there were in each of the students’ houses. Students mumbled, “two,” “three,” and “four.” The teacher ignored the fact that the students were admitting to having small families and responded by saying: “When you see the trend, there are a lot of children. Having children makes it very difficult to save money.” She then rather abruptly moved on: “The other factors?” Students limply chorused, “some religious dogma.”

The teacher responded with an example: “In Orthodox Christianity there are many holidays.” She elicited names of holidays from students and then continued, “religious holidays discourage savings. Also, religion gives us a ‘don’t worry about tomorrow’ attitude. You stop thinking about the future.” She then made a comment about the problem of ‘excessive generosity’ and concluded by asking the students: “Have you any questions? What have you learned? What does savings mean?”

Students, together, repeated the basic points that were written on the board. The remainder of the class was a review of the material, with the teacher asking questions and drilling the students on the material that was printed in the textbook, had been covered in previous classes, and was introduced in this class period. The discussion proceeded with the teacher asking questions and the students calling out the answers, not as a group, but individually and in clusters of several students at a time.

Teacher: What are the modern institutions?

Students: Bank. Insurance. Microfinance.

Teacher: What are the advantages of modern institutions?

Students: Security.

Teacher: What are the major factors inhibiting savings habits in Ethiopia?

Students: Income. Level of consumption. Absence of family planning. Extravagant practice.

Teacher: Who can tell me what leads to extravagant practice?

Students: Weddings. Birthday celebrations.

The class ended abruptly when the bell rang.

Positioning Ethiopia's Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) curriculum

The above is taken from my observation of a lesson from Ethiopia's Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) program which I conducted in April 2017. Between 2016 and 2017, I set out to conduct research on the CEE curriculum; however, my fieldwork got off to a late start due to civil unrest in Fall 2016 and a subsequent government declaration of a six-month state of emergency. When I did finally gain permission to conduct interviews and observations of CEE teachers in 2017, it was close to the end of the year. Most teachers were teaching the unit on 'savings' by that point. This particular unit would not have been my original choice of focus for fieldwork on the politics of teaching CEE, but it was a useful accident as there were a number of controversies surrounding it; namely that it was an attack on Ethiopian culture and a product of the ruling party's developmentalist agenda.

The CEE curriculum found itself centrally situated in debates that emerged around widespread protests and anti-government organizing. Many people argued that the CEE was propaganda that promoted a vision of citizenship held by the party that had ruled Ethiopia since 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party. The curriculum was widely criticized for promoting the ruling party's agenda.

Indeed, the CEE curriculum was central to Ethiopia's post-1991 nation-making project and posits a particular relationship between Ethiopian citizens, their nation, and the world. In 1991, following the overthrow of the communist dictator, Ethiopia reconfigured itself as an ethnic federation under the control of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF). Despite hopes and promises that Ethiopia would move towards a multi-ethnic, multi-party democracy post 1991, the EPRDF managed to consolidate power and crackdown on any viable political opposition. Meanwhile Ethiopia projected a global image of itself as a stable country focused on peace, human rights and development.

In many respects the CEE curriculum is a blueprint for a particular notion of citizenship and personhood. CEE is a required and mandatory subject from elementary school through university. Students are required to score well on a CEE examination in order to be admitted to university. The curriculum centers around constitutional democracy, which undergirds a sense of patriotism, responsibility and government accountability under ethnic federalism; and individual responsibility, which is tightly linked with living peacefully in a multi-ethnic country but also produces a very particular sense of developmental homo economicus such as we saw in the class

I described above (Yamada, 2011, 2014). It also holds up Ethiopia as a model of racial justice, human rights and economic development for the world.

However, Ethiopians did not see their own government as a model of justice, human rights and development. In May 2014 protests in Ethiopia began in the Oromia state, the ethnic state of Ethiopia's most populous, and most historically disenfranchised, ethnic group. Security forces used excessive force against protestors at this time, resulting in many deaths throughout the years of protest (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The protests continued, becoming bolder as they pushed back against a pattern of central government repression and gaining greater support (Fasil & Lemma, 2015). Underlying the protests were not only frustration with the lack of democracy and the stranglehold that a single, ethnically controlled party had on Ethiopia's hopes for democracy, but the widespread sentiment that the spoils of Ethiopia's aggressive developmentalism evaded the youth while the party elite became wealthy and corrupt. Protests spread throughout the country converged around frustration with youth unemployment, corruption, failure to institute democracy and the clinging to power of Ethiopia's ruling party. Tellingly, foreign-owned businesses, which were seen as a vehicle through which wealth was generated, not for the country, but for the party elite, were a particular target of protestors. A six-month state of emergency was declared on October 2016 and then extended for three months, because the government regarded the wave of protests unmanageable. Although the state of emergency temporarily restored calm, protests once again emerged in July 2017 before the state of emergency was lifted in early August of that year (Al Jazeera, 2017).

During the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that there was deep concern about what was perceived to be a political bias in the CEE curriculum, as well as frustration with teachers and with students. Teachers, students and others commented to me that everyone believed that CEE teachers were 'politics' teachers who had been put in place to spout the party's ideology. Meanwhile, CEE teachers themselves told me that they were not political but rather 'secular' and devoted to teaching theoretical topics such as democracy and human rights. Teachers and students also expressed frustration that there was a wide discrepancy between the curriculum and 'reality.' A most notable example was that the curriculum taught that citizens have a right to peacefully oppose the government, in spite of the fact that police had recently actively, violently clamped down on protestors. Another noted discrepancy between the curriculum and reality was the assertion that individual Ethiopians could be responsible for their own prosperity in the face of widespread corruption, consolidation of wealth by the elite and investments in construction, tourism and other large-scale businesses, while youth were left jobless and the country remained impoverished. The unit 'savings' gets to the heart of these issues.

Civics Education and neoliberal developmentalism

Looking at my fieldnotes from classroom observations on the unit on ‘savings,’ one can see why this unit was controversial and yet the classroom structure afforded no chance for students to debate these controversies. Indeed, the mandate that students would be tested on this subject foregrounded an imperative to learn and regurgitate the content rather than debate it. This was problematic given that these issues were highly personal for students whose families likely placed great value on traditional ceremonies, participated in traditional savings institutions and, in many cases, did not have money to save. Thus, the curriculum espoused a set of financial priorities that may have been unrealistic for students on one hand, and antithetical to their religious, community and cultural values on the other.

In another class I observed on ‘savings,’ traditional savings institutions were specifically named and denaturalized. The teacher discussed several institutions with students writing the words: *idir* and *ikub* on the board as if they were new vocabulary. He then noted that, “these are popular in rural areas. These institutions of saving are established where there is no modern institute of saving.” Partly through elicitation and partly through lecture, he explained that *ikub* is a system where everyone contributes each month and one month each member takes their share of the money turn by turn. He then goes on to explain *idir* as people contributing either money or time, and when someone dies or gets married, the *idir* would provide labor and supplies (tent, plates, cups, chairs) to support a wedding or mourning.

The teacher continued asserting that, “traditional institutions of saving are a risk. People shouldn’t be advised to save in traditional institutions.” The teacher then moved on to discuss ‘modern’ savings institutions. In this discussion no risks were noted.

As with the lesson described in the beginning, most teachers taught directly from the text identifying the ways that traditional culture posed barriers to saving, highlighting the risks of traditional savings institutions and propping up institutions such as banks and insurance companies as vital to saving. One teacher particularly took on ‘planning’ as an essential disposition for saving.

Towards the end of the lesson, the teacher comes to a final point, “the other traditional factor [that stops saving] is [an] unplanned life. What is an unplanned life?” The teacher continues, “for example there is an unplanned family. If a family has a lot of children then they haven’t something left for savings.” He then wrote on the board:

$$\text{Income} - \text{consumption} = \text{savings}$$

And the teacher explained: “When you have a lot of children consumption increases and savings decrease.” He then briefly noted, “other factors that affect savings:

income factors. This is not a traditional factor but is a factor that affects savings.” Without pausing to explain or discuss income, he then moves on quickly to discuss “inadequate financial institutions.”

In interviews with teachers, most teachers told me they were aware that the savings unit was completely unrealistic for students. One teacher noted: “Most students who come to government schools have a low socioeconomic status. They can’t even feed themselves so in practice it is impossible to save.” And another told me:

Even though they read it [the text], unless they have it [money] they can’t save. We tell them we have to save to get better options in the future. But even they don’t have their lunch or breakfast, they keep silent. Some students eat and others keep silent not eating. This is because our culture blinds us not to speak in or out. They keep [their opinions] in their mind rather than speaking. Money that you get per month is not enough. Some days they get money. Some days not.

It is easy to see why many commented that this particular component of the curriculum seemed like an attack on community institutions. Not only did it criticize community-based savings institutions such as the *ikub* and *idir* and attack the extravagance of traditional religious celebrations, the savings unit put the blame on individuals for engaging in such traditional practices and failing to plan for savings. And it taught these lessons to students who, in some cases, came to school hungry because the economy failed to provide an adequate living standard for them.

Ethiopia’s CEE curriculum is clearly positioning Ethiopian citizens to imagine a particular relationship between themselves as citizens who behave in fiscally responsible ways, their country as a developmental state, and the world which is honoring Ethiopia’s unique role as a model of development. Students are being taught particular habits, beliefs and dispositions that will, ostensibly, enable them to inhabit a particular subject position in this relationship. But this positionality does not reflect the reality of their everyday lives in which traditional institutions are sometimes more reliable than banks, cooperative borrowing and lending imbued with social relationships have long proven themselves to be reliable, social traditions often shape and sustain communities, and, perhaps most importantly, most people have no money to save.

References

- Al Jazeera. (2017, August 15). Ethiopia lifts state of emergency imposed in October. *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/ethiopia-lifts-state-emergency-imposed-october-170805044440548.html>
- Fasil, M. & Lemma, T. (2015, December 16). Oromo protests: Defiance amidst pain and suffering. *Addis Standard*. Retrieved from <https://addisstandard.com/oromo-protests-defiance-amidst-pain-and-suffering/>

- Human Rights Watch. (2014, May 5). Ethiopia: Brutal crackdown on protests. *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/05/ethiopia-brutal-crackdown-protests>
- Yamada, S. (2011). Equilibrium on diversity and fragility: Civic and ethical education textbooks in democratizing Ethiopia. *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, 14(2), 97–113.
- Yamada, S. (2014). Domesticating democracy? Civic and ethical education textbooks in secondary schools in the democratizing Ethiopia. In J. Williams (Ed.), *(Re)constructing memory: School textbooks, identity and the imagination of the nation* (pp. 35–59). Rotterdam: Sense Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-656-1_3