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Beyond Theoretical Education: The Prospects for National Wealth in Dhofar

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Beyond theoretical education: The prospects for national wealth in Dhofar

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Abstract

Dhofar region in southern Oman possesses a wealth of livestock. This wealth is managed traditionally by different Dhofari groups in a distinct landscape and ecological conditions. By the seventies, development addressed all aspects of life in the Sultanate. Education turned out to be a prime objective in development plans. In Dhofar, young generations of pastoralists found their way into education. It is known that the route of education starts directly from primary school level to the university level. Consequently, theoretical university education detach and disengage young Dhofaris from their forefathers' traditional profession and most of all their wealth. Dhofar's livestock is unequivocally a national wealth that needs to be invested and developed by young Dhofari generations, trained in modern scientific management in order to investment in Dhofar's livestock . Therefore, it is a call for a focused education and training to address the potential of the region and its wealth. The paper attempts to draw attention to a situation which is taking place in Dhofar region and proposes certain recommendations.

Keywords: Dhofar, livestock wealth, traditional pastoralists, theoretical university education impact.

ما بعد التعليم النظري: فرص نجاح ثروة وطنية في ظفار

علي التجاني الماحي

مستخلص

يملك إقليم ظفار في جنوب عمان ثروة حيوانية. وتدير المجموعات السكانية في الإقليم هذه الثروة بواسطة أساليب تقليدية في الرعي. وخلال السبعينيات من القرن الماضي، شملت التنمية جميع جوانب الحياة في السلطنة، بحيث أصبح التعليم هدفا بارزا في خطط التنمية. وفي إقليم ظفار وجدت الأجيال الشابة في مجتمعات الرعي طريقها إلى التعليم. وكما هو معروف أن الطريق في التعليم يبدأ من مرحلة الأساس وهي تؤدي إلى التعليم الجامعي. والتعليم الجامعي النظري معروف أنه يبعد الأجيال الشابة في ظفار عن مهنة أسلافهم التقليدية وعن ثروتهم الحيوانية. وفي حقيقة الأمر، تعد الثروة الحيوانية ثروة وطنية تحتاج إلى تطوير بواسطة أجيال من أبناء ظفار، تكون مؤهلة ومدربة علميا على إدارة وتنمية هذه الثروة. وعليه هذا نداء ودعوة للبدء في تعليم وتأهيل متخصص لإدارة واستثمار هذه الثروة الوطنية في الظروف البيئية في إقليم ظفار. ويهدف البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على هذا الوضع الخاص بالتعليم الجامعي النظري لأبناء إقليم ظفار و ثروتهم الحيوانية، ويقترح بعضا من التوصيات.

كلمات مفتاحية: إقليم ظفار، التعليم الجامعي النظري، الرعاة، الثروة الحيوانية، الرعي التقليدي، منافع التعليم، زوال المهن التقليدية، سياسات التعليم، التعليم المتخصص.

Introduction

“It is said that Sinhue the Scribe once approached a peasant and offered him his services to teach his children the monumental language. The peasant was unduly disturbed. He said: “What would become of Egypt if everyone is made literate? Nobody will use his hands. The soil will remain untilled and nobody shall have pride in writing when he is hungry.”

Tigani ElMahi (1962: 181).

This paper addresses the indirect impact of theoretical education on Dhofari pastoralists and especially on the younger generation, their economy and their special contribution to the nation’s wealth, which lies in their animals. Education is meant to train the young to conserve the country’s heritage and contribute to social and national progress. However, the present trend of university education distances and alienates young Dhofaris from their forefathers’ traditional wealth, which is needed now more than ever. In response, the paper proposes policies to amend the present situation. However, before proceeding further, it is expedient to have a look at the Dhofar region, traditional pastoralism there, and then at the impact of university education and especially theoretical education.

Traditional Dhofari Pastoralists

The Sultanate of Oman is located on the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. This geographical setting has long driven commercial, political, cultural and human historical development, making Dhofar a distinct ecoregion (Map 1). The summer monsoon winds bring rain and fog that covers the mountain range and produces lush, green vegetation. During July and September, rainfall precipitation ranges between 200-500 mm. These flourishing conditions must have been a pull-factor for the prehistoric pastoralists in the Empty Quarter around 3000 BC (ElMahi 2013). At the same, changing environmental conditions caused by the dry phase of the Holocene acted as a push-factor, forcing the same pastoralists to seek more favorable conditions. Hence, the Dhofar region has offered sufficient space and natural resources to accommodate

pastoralism for at least the past 5000 years.

Pastoralism is the profession of several tribal groups, which can be named as follows (Janzen, 1986 and ElMahi, 2013):

Tribal Groups

No	Name	Location and animals
1	Bait Mashani	This tribal group occupies the eastern parts of Jabal al Qara. Their animals are camels and goats.
2	Bait Shahrah	This group inhabits the mountains of Jabal al Qara and al Qamr. Their animals are camels and cattle.
3	al Mashieki	These are Jabalis and occupy the area east of Jabal al Qara. They herd camels and goats.
4	al Kathir	This group are also Jabalis and live west of Jabal al Qara, keeping camels and goats.
5	al Mahra	They are also considered as Jabalis and live in the Barbazoon area which is in al Najd. Their animals are camels and goats. The al Mahra also occupy the eastern parts of Jabal al Qara and keep camels and goats. A related group are found in the western parts of Jabal al Qara, keeping camels, cattle and goats.
6	Bait Khathir	These people dwell in Dhaboon and some western parts of the areas in al Najd. They have camels and goats.
7	al Barama	This is another Jabali group, living in central and north Jabal al Qara. They keep camels, cattle and goats.
8	Bait al Awayid	Members of Bait al Awayid live in the eastern parts of Jabal al Qara. Their herds comprise camels, cattle and goats.

9	Bait Hardan	Bait Hardan members keep camels, cattle and goats and live in the western parts of Jabal al Qamar.
10	Bait Shamas	In central areas of Jabal al Qamar, Bait Shamas members herd their camels, cattle and goats.
11	Bait Akak	Members of this group are found in central areas of Jabal al Qamar. They keep camels, cattle and goats.
12	Bait al Amri	The al Amris live in eastern areas of Jabal al Qara and herd camels, cattle and goats.
13	Another group of Bait al Amri	These are found in the western parts of Jabal al Qamar. Their animals are also camels, cattle and goats.
14	Bait Said	The Bait Said people are found in the western parts of Jabal al Qara. Their animals are camels, cattle and goats.
15	Bait Qatan	Members of the Bait Qatan group live in central parts of Jabal al Qara. Their animals are camels, cattle and goats.
16	Bait Tabook	The central parts of Jabal al Qara are where the Bait Tabook people live and herd their camels, cattle and goats.
17	Bait Keshob	The Bait Keshob people also live in the central parts of Jabal al Qara and keep camels, cattle and goats.
18	Bait Jaboob	Bait Jaboob group members are also found in the central parts of Jabal al Qara with their camels, cattle and goats.

It is clear that these tribal groups occupy the mountain areas and plains of Dhofar in an ecoregion whose favourable annual conditions have significantly sustained and invigorated the continuation of pastoralism and its lore. Up to modern times, pastoralism here

has been practiced to fulfill mainly the objectives of a subsistence economy, producing and supplying basic necessities like food for local consumption (cf. Bodley 1994: 181). Moreover, this ancient subsistence economy has long shaped Dhofari pastoralists' culture and values, for pastoralism is a way of life and not merely an economic undertaking necessary for survival. It is an experienced adaptation to seasonal advantages and disadvantages. Nonetheless, the animals have a special value and place in the life of their owners, being a symbol of wealth, position and pride. And what is clear is that the Dhofar region holds the main concentration of livestock in the whole of the country (cf. EIMahi 2011:54 and 2013).

The Dhofar region and development

The year 1970 marked a notable turning point in the history of Oman. The discovery of oil triggered progressive development in all regions and sectors of the country and education was among the fundamental issues addressed. "Democracy in education" became a slogan for this new strategy and results have reached Omanis across the entire country.

Al-Hajry (2003) studied the situation in higher education, stating that the current demand for higher education is best expressed by the fact that almost 50% of the Omani population is under the age of fifteen. On the other hand, because the country is almost completely dependent on oil (an unpredictable resource), the demand for higher education can be understood as exceeding the country's economic capacity. Another aspect of this matter is the type of education available.

In Dhofar, development has encountered a well-embedded pastoral culture and economy based on an ancient body of principles grounded in empirical knowledge and precedent (cf. EIMahi 2011a; EIMahi 2011b and EIMahi forthcoming). Regardless of its current economic limitations, pastoralism remains a productive sector (cf. EIMahi 2011b), with Dhofar's herders possessing considerable wealth in livestock such as camels, cattle and goats – wealth that is still managed traditionally by senior members of the society.

For over seven years, the author has studied the goat and cattle herders and the camel pastoralists of Dhofar (cf. ElMahi 2001; ElMahi 2011a; ElMahi 2011b, ElMahi 2011c, ElMahi 2001 and forthcoming), an association that has cast light on theoretical education's influence and pastoralism's significance in terms of national wealth. However, though education's benefits are numerous and diverse in a setting like Dhofar, aspects of its impact deserve scrutiny.

Concurrently, education is directing young Dhofaris into professions and occupations remote from pastoralism and animal production. Indeed, modern education tends to eradicate everything traditional. By tradition, pastoralists' children are brought up to be conscientious and to keep and cultivate the family animals with care. This is the center of their lives and is well expressed in children's games which revolve around camels and their enclosures as shown in plates 1 and 2. Spending years in the field with pastoral families has made it clear that children are still occupied with the cattle, goat and camels during their primary, intermediate and secondary school years. However, university education develops their mind in markedly different directions, gradually side-lining pastoralism and its ways.

Yet this animal wealth has significant economic potential in a world challenged by problems of food security. Moreover, climate change is a serious global threat, and Dhofar's animals are productive in a warm climate. The challenges are obvious and the wealth involved is promising enough to merit attention in such unpredictable conditions.

Theoretical education

In Oman, as elsewhere, university education has become both a national quest and a symbol. Discussing this, the late professor Tigani ElMahi (1962:177-185) identified trends in the southern hemisphere as having a strong predilection for university education. He (*ibid.*) stressed that this is an aim that is understandable, genuine and devoid of pretense, its outcomes of great service to society. It is important, therefore, to take a closer look at university education and its

impact on Dhofar's younger generation. Education in the Sultanate has been addressed by a couple of researchers such as Al-Lamki 2002, 2006; Donn and Issan 2007 and Martin 2007. In view of that, Al-Lamki (2006) addressed the issue of development in private higher education. Al-Lamki (*ibid.*) reviewed the development of higher education and assessed it in response to the state educational guidelines and demand and supply in the Sultanate of Oman. Nonetheless, higher education needs to address the national needs and potential.

Development in Oman, as mentioned above, has addressed all the nation's social, economic and infrastructural sectors. It arrived in Dhofar in the 1970s when the various pastoralist groups were still engaged in seasonal, transhumant, and short-cycle movements (Janzen 1986, ElMahi 2011a, 2011b and 2013), for it is worth mentioning that the Sultanate was among the few countries that did not force its nomadic groups to settle down or change their way of life, the decision being left entirely to each group.

Because the benefits are so manifest, the government has provided for all stages of education from primary schools to undergraduate and postgraduate levels across the country. And the democratic thinking within the national policy ensures equal opportunity in educational institutions for all young women and men, irrespective of their background.

Nevertheless, theoretical education has transformed pastoral societies. It has provided advanced tools and equipment, but it has not transformed the values surrounding animal management. The effects anyway are evident and can be easily explained.

First, modern education is known to eradicate all that is traditional, with the result that young Dhofari graduates now have different expectations than their parents when it comes to career choices and lifestyle. They are becoming immune to the attractions of their forefathers' work and lifestyle. Also Dhofar pastoralism is still managed according to the old ways that involve seasonal movements and a subsistence economy, and which are thus at odds with the settled and stationary demands of modern education. It is

already noticeable that the current workforce tending the animals are not Omanis, but hired expatriates. Surviving members of the old generation, who are the “custodians of traditional pastoralism”, are still tending the herds, but no one can predict what will happen when the old generation passes away. During his years of research among Dhofar’s pastoral groups, the author repeatedly heard versions of the following questions and comments from the young:

“What benefit are we getting from these camels?”
“No. Definitely, I will go for a job in any government sector”.

Clearly, education is offering an escape from the profession of their families, which they now find unattractive and excessively demanding. One can see, therefore, that despite the benefits which a modern theoretical education is providing for society at large, it is manifestly neither exciting nor equipping young Dhofaris to engage in the management and increase of their traditional source of wealth. And yet the care and management of this substantial store of wealth is a matter of urgent national importance.

Development planning with long-term aims must consider impact and a balance of outcomes that threatens neither environmental conditions, resources, nor the welfare of society. It must enhance opportunities and the potential for prosperity. Though there are no official statistics, in Dhofar, graduates of modern educational programs rank high among the unemployed - a reality that cannot be ignored because it has implications for the whole society. However, the answer is not simply to provide stop-gap work or jobs falsely created. Simply employing graduates in government sectors without a clear vision can conflict with human resource management. What is clear, anyway, is that the general provision of theoretical education is serving neither the best interests of pastoral societies nor the contribution these groups can make to national wealth.

Discussion

Modern education, then, despite its manifest benefits, is distancing young Dhofaris from preserving the

heritage of their ancestors – a heritage whose values and practices are needed today more than ever. It might be useful to remind ourselves of how the late professor Tigani EIMahi (1962: 181) assessed theoretical education and education’s broad objectives:

“Without controverting their academic value, the theoretical colleges are breeding-places for unemployment, and notorious centres of trouble-making. The question in this connection is whether, at this stage, university education should really and unconditionally be regarded as an aim or largely as a tool?”

Indeed, university education, whether theoretical or practical, whether scientific or humanistic, is a necessary tool for promoting society’s welfare and potential. No nation can progress without both of these literacies. However, one must ask which comes first – university curricula that serve only for the enlightenment and edification of the young or curricula to serve equally the society, its resources and overall progress.

The high rate of unemployment generated by theoretical education programs needs to be addressed pragmatically through careful study and farsighted planning. The issue here is not simply employing young graduates, but where and how best they can serve their country. A comprehensive plan is needed which considers graduates’ qualifications and capacities and, most of all, precisely where they can serve society. It should also be clear by now that new specializations are required to meet the country’s needs.

The required type of education for Dhofaris must be well planned to make a direct investment in the national wealth of the area. A diversity of academic institutions is essential since the present lack of this is clearly having serious consequences. Education should not be a one-way track that leads from primary school to university. Intermediate and technical training should be added that equips the young to explore the country’s economic resources and potential.

Today, Dhofar with its livestock and favorable climatic conditions can make a valuable contribution to the

maintenance and growth of the nation's wealth, but it needs more specialized education in order to do this. It is to address certain specializations and serve the societies' capacities and potentials. A society's needs within its environment and economic prospects must be considered carefully before development programs are shaped.

Recommendations

Since this paper stresses the importance of diversity and specialization in education and training, it makes the following recommendations:

- 1) Diversity in academic institutions covering a variety of specializations.
- 2) At least one institution that can qualify young Dhofaris in animal husbandry and the economic management of livestock.
- 3) Investment by both government and the private sector in Dhofar's animal husbandry in order to enhance livestock's economic productivity.
- 4) Both the government and the private sector must invest in animal husbandry and farming and market its products in local, regional and international markets. Modern animal husbandry must replace traditional pastoralism (cf. ElMahi 2011b).

Education merely for the sake of education does not provide the essentials for meeting the challenges of the region's present and future. On the other hand, education merely for employment and without a well-shaped vision is equally unsatisfactory.

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