

General Seminars as a means of knowledge sharing

by Solomon Abegaz, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Alemayan 1985 class

Nowadays, for anyone interested in learning and acquiring knowledge, the resources and means to do so are beyond quantification. The reality forty years ago was quite different, and the means of learning were limited to what we shared among fellow students, classroom lectures, laboratory sessions, books (sometimes because of their limited numbers, we had to take turns to get them from the library), and general seminars. Actually, we also used to read magazines (e.g., Ethiopian Herald, Reader's Digest) that were usually placed on the front racks of the library. Those magazines provided us with knowledge on diverse and broader issues. I hope many of us remember the column "Between you and me" by Ephrem Endale in the Ethiopian Herald (was it published every Saturday?). It used to be my warm-up session before diving into serious reading of my lecture notes or the reference books in the library.

Forty years is a long time, and there were (and still are) substantial developments in the field of knowledge. As a reflection, I will not discuss those developments, but rather how our educators have addressed the scarcity of knowledge resources and how hard they have worked to circumvent these challenges. To be precise, I would like to say a few words on the culture of offering voluntary general seminars on broader topics during those periods. At our fortieth year anniversary, I thought it would be befitting to express our gratitude for those who had taught us through presenting general seminars.

As undergraduate students at Alemaya from 1981 to 1985, we attended numerous general seminars that significantly contributed to the development of our knowledge base and broadened our thinking. Most of the time, the seats in the lecture theatre used to be filled, and we had to stand the whole period (sometimes more than two hours) at the back.

As a means of showcasing, I would like to name some of them. Let me start with the well-known Biochemist, the late Dr Getachew Bolodia, who used to offer general seminars whenever he came to Haramaya as a guest lecturer. If I am not mistaken, the last seminar he had offered was on Genetic engineering (this one was presented in the main hall, not in the lecture theatre). To this day, I recall how he explained the complex subject of genetic engineering in a highly simplified manner, making it easily understandable (I wonder if Alemaya has kept the recordings?). I can't forget how he had equated the four bases of the DNA structure to letters of nature through which nature has written all the myriad and diverse living things of the planet. He even joked about how our alphabets (English and Amharic), which have a large number of letters, struggle to convey all concepts exhaustively, while nature uses only four letters. Recently (last October), I attended a lecture series on Genome editing organized by the Ethiopian

Academy of Sciences and presented by Dr Dereje Beyene of Addis Ababa University. The presentation was a marvel, but without any exaggeration, except for the latest developments in the techniques, most of the scientific concepts explained by the presenter were similar to those presented by Dr. Getachew previously. Long ago, I had heard that there was an initiative to establish a foundation in his name, but I don't know its current status.

The other seminar was the one presented by the Late Dr Tamire Hawando on his team's work on a subject related to soil profiles in Hararghe. I recall how succinctly he presented the subject and how he effectively related it to soil fertility.

The other seminar was Mr. Mulugeta Assefa's (I presume he is now a Professor) presentation on *Khat* (*Catha edulis*), where he provided an explanation of the chemical compounds found in *Khat* and the active ingredient that causes addiction. Among the questions was a very important one raised by Dr. Tamire Hawando during the question and answer session. The question was why sheep and goats, which we usually observe at Bati, Alemaya, Dire Dawa, and Harar, and which usually consume *Khat* leftovers (*Geraba*), get fat while humans consuming *Khat* lose condition? Mulugeta had provided an explanation from the perspective of his area of specialization, Chemistry, and attributed the difference in chemical composition between the young leaves, which are consumed by humans, and the older leaves (*Geraba*) consumed by animals. An additional and very important intervention came from Dr. Getachew Bolodia (who was also attending the seminar), who explained that the difference in the digestive anatomy of humans (Monogastric) and sheep and goats (ruminants) could be the real reason.

The other seminar, which I also recall, was a presentation by a British National named Dr. Bull, who presumably presented on 'Irrigation economics'. I remember the presenter showing large number of slides full of numbers but I had forgotten the details but remember him talking about feasibility of irrigation projects.

There were also other seminars that I failed to attend or had faded from my memory. That culture was highly educational, especially during those periods when the source of knowledge was limited. For those giants of educators and for those who had ably coordinated the presentations, we would like to express our gratitude and also would like to tell them they had sown seeds of knowledge which still are growing and flourishing in our hearts and minds. Thank you. For those who have passed away, we would like to say '**Let your soul rest in eternal peace.**'