

# Initiation Society, Learned Society and Knowledge Society

*Harris Memel-Fotê*

## Learning and knowledge

Learning and knowledge, insofar as they are structural dimensions of all individual life and all collective management of society, call for educational institutions, discursive practice and the social activity consisting in the intellectual appropriation of the world.

If *learning* (in French, 'connaissance', a somewhat ambiguous term) is a social activity leading to a personal and objective appropriation of things, the *knowledge* (in French, 'savoir') that results from that activity seems, in its turn, to be something more impersonal and more general. The archaeologist of the human sciences would define it as a domain, an object of discursive practice, as an area where individuals can take up a stance to speak of their aims, as a field for the co-ordination and subordination of their statements, as possibilities of use and appropriation afforded by discourse. Knowledge can determine learning just as it can be the result or the product of that learning. In that sense, three main types of knowledge may be distinguished: pre-modern knowledge, more or less metaphysical and religious in character, modern knowledge and post-modern knowledge of a scientific and philosophical character.

In every known human society knowledge presents three features: first of all, knowledge has several forms and modes; next, these forms obey a hierarchy; and, lastly, these forms evolve towards the preponderance of one over the others.

These anthropological characteristics are visible in Third World societies in general and in contemporary African societies in particular. In all these cases, the primary problem is to discover the modes of knowing which can be identified within these societies; the second problem regards the hierarchy according to which these modes of knowing are ordered and the significance of that hierarchy; the third problem concerns, on the one hand, the predominant mode of knowing, and on the

Copyright © ICPHS 2003

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, [www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)  
0392-1921 [200302]50:1:51-56;032752

other, the difference between that mode of knowing and the knowledge society which UNESCO has made its aim and free humans have made their dream.

### **Identifiable modes of learning**

Varying degrees of all modes of learning common to the current human experience can be observed in contemporary African societies:

- initiation through initiation societies;
- science through learned societies and universities;
- philosophy through the same institutions;
- scientific techniques through the industrial society;
- knowledge through the post-industrial society.

#### *Initiation*

First and foremost, initiation is the dominant educational institution in all types of ancient societies: in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, in the Pacific; next, the initiation which introduces the neophyte to esoteric instruction implies secrecy; that is why the study of secret societies or the study of secret rites is synonymous with the study of initiation; finally, as a method of revelation which recapitulates the sacred history of the tribe and the world, initiation also perpetuates social inequality, by conferring power within the society on the initiated, who possess and are able to manipulate a certain knowledge and know-how.

#### *Science*

While initiation signifies the acquisition of a more or less sacred form of learning, science, in its modern guise, is a profane social activity. It is objective and experimental and has passed gradually from the ideal domain, the subject of the exact sciences, to nature, society, culture and humans. It has evolved on a par with the great mutations of history, in the moral order (affecting the rights and duties of the human being), in the political order (affecting the organization of the city and democracy) and in the social and economic order (affecting the relations of production with work and the distribution of wealth).

#### *Philosophy*

As a form of rational learning which gives meaning to the world and to human existence, philosophy has accompanied the development of modern science. Like science, it diversifies into different categories according to its subject-matter: mathematical philosophy, biological philosophy, social philosophy, etc.

*Scientific techniques*

In the industrial society, technique, something of the order of know-how, has been grafted on to scientific activity, branching out and developing in all fields: agriculture, water, fauna, trade, games, culture, etc.

*Relative hierarchy*

By hierarchy, here, I mean the kind of social preponderance which governs and orders the modes of knowing. That preponderance can be sociological, when the form of knowing is exercised either by a large body of actors in global society or by a group which dominates society as a whole, according to criteria of technical or political efficiency. The preponderance can also be temporal, or rather, either historical, when one considers the chronology of the forms of knowledge, or prospective, when people speculate on the future of society so as to determine and inform the present.

In both respects we find the following:

- an advanced hierarchy in post-industrial societies;
- an unfinished hierarchy in pre- or proto-industrial societies.

The two types of hierarchy are said to be relative in so far as they are not permanently fixed in contemporary history and can evolve, social preponderance passing from one form of knowing to the other.

*(a) Advanced hierarchy*

Such is the hierarchy in contemporary industrial and democratic societies when learning is shared by the greatest number and is close to everyday life. In contemporary Western Europe, knowledge based in initiation well and truly exists today. Freemasonry, with roots which go as far back as the Egyptian tradition, and Rosicrucianism are both still successful organizations, even if they are not dominant in society. Yet Europe also opened the way for all the modern sciences, the exact and natural sciences, the social and human sciences, which now flourish in a multitude of universities and research centres across the globe. This is where learned societies were founded and have expanded into vocational schools of higher education or academies in the theoretical sense. Here, in these democratic societies, lies the epicentre of modern philosophical learning. Here, industrialization has flowered and reached a paroxysm with the many faceted ravages inflicted on the environment and the threat of the dehumanization of humankind. The consequences are such that industrialization in turn has to face the radical criticism and revolutionary attitudes of the ecological movement; it is this post-industrial experience in Western Europe that has given rise to the advanced programme of a knowledge society.

(b) *Unfinished hierarchy*

In Third World societies in general and in contemporary African societies in particular the preponderance sought today is that of scientific techniques as an expression of the industrial society.

*Initiation*

Before colonization, initiation dominated these societies by providing the principal means of education. This is no longer the case today. Certainly, initiation is still practised in the countryside but there the position is increasingly precarious owing to the rural exodus which has deprived the villages of a section of their population and to the cultural diaspora brought about by schools of colonial inspiration. Unless they have totally and permanently collapsed, however, the same educational structures as before can still be found in these areas. Such traditions might be the *n'domo* of the uncircumcised, the *komo* of the circumcised, the *korê* of the fully initiated among the Bambara and Malinké, for example.

This training, designed to snatch the human being from the animal condition in order to raise him or her to the dignity of the person fulfilled in and by the knowledge of God, consists of gradual instruction in inwardness. The human being starts by becoming more and more familiar with the significance of his or her own body, then experiences symbolical death and rebirth and lastly builds a physical foundation, a moral, intellectual, political and spiritual character while at the same time constructing a living space, that is to say the world around, of which he or she becomes a microcosm. Social ethics and morals, physical education and para-military training, sexual education, civic and religious education are all brought to bear in the edification of humankind, the globe and the cosmos.

Today, instruction of this kind is regarded as subordinate to the knowledge gained at school, university and in the armed forces.

*Science*

The modern *sciences* were acclimatized with colonization but only prospered in the universities and research centres, which were largely urban structures. In present-day Africa, scientific development lags so far behind that there are only a dozen or so academies, theoretically speaking, in the 53 independent states. In Cote d'Ivoire, the institution which was to mark the synthesis of the sciences, arts and culture was not founded until the year 2002. In other words, science will still be the preserve of a lettered elite and benefit an exogenous economy.

By the same token, the modern philosophy disseminated with colonization has failed to become a mass phenomenon here. In practice its scope is even more restricted in so far as the discipline is still comparatively little known in institutions for the production of knowledge in particular and in the social sphere in general.

*Scientific techniques*

Matching the weak progress achieved in the sciences, it is clear that the field of scientific techniques, as an expression of the industrial society, remains, with few exceptions, underdeveloped in African societies. Yet the ambition for development, which is also the ambition for freedom and independence, has been a determining factor in the project to achieve a fully industrial society.

*Industrial society and knowledge society*

What are the differences between the knowledge society and the industrial society, the structure which motivates the Third World in general and Africa in particular?

First, we must remove the ambiguity in connection with the notion of society. In the case of the initiation society and the learned society, the term is used to evoke elementary groups which make up global society. Conversely, in the case of the industrial society and the knowledge society, the notion refers to society as a whole.

But, while the idea of industry implicitly magnifies science and explicitly enhances scientific techniques in all areas – the economy, society, politics, culture – *knowledge* today is explicitly linked to science and modern philosophy on the one hand and to the post-industrial era on the other.

In the industrial society, together with the contractors, engineers, skilled and unskilled workers, the great majority of people consume all the products of industry; similarly, in the knowledge society, the great majority of social actors consume the learning produced by the scholars, the philosophers, the writers, the artists, the soothsayers and the prophets.

If African societies are not yet fully attuned to the modern sciences and to scientific techniques, in short to the industrial era, they are even less attuned to the knowledge society. Nevertheless these societies share a technocratic elite with the industrial societies just as they share an intellectual elite with the knowledge society. That elite is indeed the bridge between the past of African society and the immediate future, which is the industrial society, and the more distant future, which is the knowledge society.

At least four factors appear to characterize the knowledge society: in the first place, there is the importance granted on the social and political level to the learning deemed fitting to the 21st century and to the producers of that learning; in the second place, there is lasting peace, indispensable for the evolving and enjoyment of that learning; in the third place, solidarity which allows all groups within a given society and all peoples throughout the globe to benefit from the knowledge provided by one or some of them; and finally, in the fourth place, wisdom which pacifies and regulates, according to the three meanings of the word: discernment (theoretical sense), virtue or excellence (ethical sense) and performance (technical sense).

\*

The interest of a knowledge society is primarily theoretical. It concerns the nature of the society and the nature of the knowledge quite as much as the means of acquiring that knowledge.

It is an idea which only has currency, it would seem, in a democratic society familiar with modern scientific knowledge and committed to progress and to industrial prosperity. At the same time it recognizes the idea of a human dimension within that progress and that prosperity.

The legitimacy of the knowledge society is questioned today precisely because the fourfold concept is hard to grasp.

Yet constituent elements of the knowledge society are at work in existing societies. In the North, there is the invention of the democratic republic as an open system, embracing liberty, equality and fraternity as the values of individual and collective salvation, a system which reduces the institution of monarchy to its simplest expression. There is the invention of experimental forms of science, which reduces the institution of initiation to its simplest expression. There is the growth of total and systematic industrialization, the negative effects of which ultimately lead to a dis-paragement of the process in both ecologist ideology and the philosophy of communication. In the South, the factors of modernization have three main characteristics. In one sense they co-exist even if they are not the same age. In another sense, the object of their present aspiration, industrialization, has yet to be consolidated and will remain a dream for a few generations more.

Even so, the intellectual elite of the southern countries still acts as a bridge between the knowledge society and contemporary societies, in the North as well as the South. In so far as the knowledge society is of practical as well as theoretical interest, it will be in historical action that the peoples of the South will fill the gaps, or the void, which separate them from both the industrial society and the knowledge society.

Harris Memel-Fotê  
*Abidjan University*