

Reviving the Spirit of Scholarship in Islamic Universities: Reflections from the Life of Some Early Muslim Scholars

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Abstract - One of the underlying factors that accounted for the excelling of the Muslim Ummah was the high esteem with which the early Muslims held knowledge. Knowledge is the bedrock upon which the foundation of Islam is erected. The rapid growth and rise of Muslim civilization and its distinctiveness was not unconnected with the attitude which the earlier Muslims showed to scholarship. The zest, thirst and enthusiasm the Muslim scholars displayed towards knowledge and the effort they exerted in the course of acquiring it will forever remain a legacy worthy of celebration and emulation. Conversely, the main factor that still retards the Muslim world from progression and keeping it on the back lane is the lackadaisical and indifferent attitude the latter Muslims show to scholarship. While institutions at all levels and of varied grades are constructed in the Muslim world on frequent basis, the kind of graduates the institutions produce are nothing to write home about, compared to other students in the non-Muslim world. Students nowadays join universities and other institutions of higher learning for the sole purpose of certification rather than knowledge acquisition. This is evident in the fact that reading culture, bookishness, research and spirit of scholarship in general are almost dead in our learning environments. Libraries become full and congested only when examinations approach. This paper seeks to highlight the effort, dedication and commitment of some of the early Muslim scholars towards the search of knowledge. It aims at equipping student of Islamic universities and higher educational institutions with a manual for reflection and revival of the increasingly deadening spirit of scholarship. The paper makes use of the six essential elements of knowledge acquisition as paradigm to trace the efforts of Muslim predecessors towards attainment of scholarship height. The researcher recommends the working out of modalities that will center on the promotion and bolstering of scholarship culture in Muslim universities and higher institutions of learning.

Key Words: *Student, Scholars, Scholarship, Knowledge*

1. Introduction

Islam as a universal religion not only encourages the search of knowledge, but also makes it incumbent upon every single individual. The first verse that was revealed in the Glorious Qur'an emphasizes the importance of reading (Q 96:1). In another place, Allah swears with the tool of writing as well as with what people write (Q 68:1). There are numerous places in the Qur'an where an indication of the superiority of the learned over unlearned is made. Despite that a dog is a despised creature, it has a distinction when it is learned (Q 5:4). Muslim civilization was very flamboyant during the periods of the two dynasties that succeeded the reigns of the four rightly guided caliphs. The Islamic renaissance which culminated to the establishment of great learning centers, rich library complexes and magnificent observatories had provided the ground and erected the foundations of modern science which the West now boasts about. All these were the result of relentless effort, serious hard work, unshakeable interest,

strong will and vigorous determination the earlier Muslim showed to scholarship. Unfortunately, this rich legacy is now tapped and enjoyed by other people because the later Muslims have to a large extent, digressed from the successful path of the founding fathers of their civilization.

Now with the current wave of establishment of Islamic universities and higher educational institutions in the Muslim world including Nigeria, there is a restoration of hope for the resurgence of Islamic civilization. This, however, depends on the degree and frequency of competent students the institutions produce. This paper seeks to in a way, dispense some of the processes that can lead to the realization of such a dream. In a very particular term, it aims at equipping student of Muslim educational institutions with a manual for reflection and revival of the increasingly deadening spirit of scholarship. The paper makes use of the six essential elements of knowledge acquisition as paradigm to trace the efforts of Muslim predecessors towards attainment of scholarship height. The elements which constitute the sub-segments of the paper, have been deduced from a poem which as Zarnuji (n.d) pointed out, is attributed to the Fourth Caliph and Prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib (R.A). Ali ibn Abi Talib is among the notable individuals who were endowed with extraordinary wisdom among the Sahabah (the Prophet's disciples). The six elements are: - (i) Intelligence/Smartness (ii) Passion/Enthusiasm (iii) Patience/Perseverance (iv) Resource/Sustenance (v) Teacher's Guidance (vi) Long Time Span.

1.1. Intelligence/Smartness

For someone to prosper in his pursuit of knowledge, he must have the acumen that will inform him and give him orientation towards being educated. In other words, one's intelligence and smartness are the primary factors that wake him up and imbue in him the passion to search for knowledge. Without adequate acumen, a student may not rightly identify the areas of his weakness (which he may therefore, strive to improve) and the areas in which he is strong (which he shall maintain and add up to it). A shrewd learner always designs the scheme of his reading and knowledge acquisition based on the order of priority. This means he ensures that he begins with the most essential aspects of knowledge. As a Muslim, he shall acquaint himself with the rudimentary knowledge of Islam like the knowledge of the Qur'an, Hadith, Tauhid, Fiqh and other fields that will serve an immediate purpose. Conversely, an unintelligent student is the one who defies and overlooks priorities. Instead of concentrating on the most significant aspects of the knowledge of Islam, he jumps to other unnecessary and least needed fields like philosophy, logic, rhetoric, etc. As Abu Zaid (2002: 55) narrates, "whoever does not put effort to master the rudiments, he will not be able to attain [the goal]".

Abdullahi Ibn Abbas one of the most learned companions of the Prophet (SAW) was a paragon of intelligence and scholarship. He excelled in the field of Qur'anic interpretation to the extent that as Shafiq ibn Salamah chronicled that:

one day Ibn Abbas read Surah al-Nur and then began giving its interpretation. Someone who was present at the occasion [narrated and] confirmed that had the clan of Deilam listened to such an excellent interpretation of the Qur'an, it would have [certainly] embraced Islam (in Rijiyar Lemo, 2013: 21).

In the same vein, Shafiq narrated another event that:

Ibn Abbas gave a lecture during Hajj exercise. He read and interpreted Surah al-Baqarah. Had the Persians, the Byzantines

and the Turks listened to him, they would all have embraced Islam (ibid).

Ibn Abbas's erudition and prominence were facilitated by his intelligence and the effort he invested in seeking knowledge, besides the prayer of the Prophet (SAW) to him. He (Ibn Abbas) was once asked about the method he followed to acquire such an oceanic knowledge. He answered that it was "through too much inquisitive tongue and an intelligent mind (Zarnuji, n. d: 57-58)."

1.2. Passion/Enthusiasm

This is a personal driving force towards the acquisition of knowledge. Allah (SWT) ordered the Messenger (SAW) to seek for more knowledge (Q 20:114). This instruction was not directed at the Prophet only, but for the generality of the Ummah as well.

Because of his thirst to acquire knowledge and desire not to miss significant portion of it, Umar Ibn al-Khattab (R.A) used to arrange with his neighbour Aws bn Khawali al-Ansari; if he went to market this day, the neighbor would go to the Prophet's court, and on the other day Umar would go to the Prophet's court. Both of them would then meet and inform each other what they had missed (Al-Muqaddam, 1995). Jabir Ibn Abdullah had travelled all the way from Madina to Syria in order to collect a single hadith from Abdullah bn Unais (Rijiyar Lemo, 2015). This thus, became a tradition which the majority of the Ulema adopted and made it a ladder towards knowledge acquisition. Imam al-Bukhari narrated that Aisha the wife of the Prophet (SAW) never heard something she knew not before except that she referred to the Prophet (or someone else after his death) in order to know and understand the issue better (Bukhari:103).

Rijiyar Lemo (2015) has postulated some six attitudes that justify and vindicate one's passion and enthusiasm for knowledge. The attitudes if followed accordingly, will certainly link a student to his target. After all, almost all the celebrated scholars in the Muslim intellectual circles have passed through most if not all of the processes. They are: - (a) Intellectual Sojourn (b) Frequent Questioning (c) Possessing Books and Frequenting Library (d) Voracious Reading (e) Time Management (f) Jotting Down Points. They are delineated below:

a. *Intellectual Sojourn*

Journeying to other places in order to seek for knowledge is a tradition that a judicious student will not hesitate to adopt. The significance of this in relation to learning is translated by the fact that the Prophet (SAW) himself had to travel from earth to heaven in order to receive some divine instructions from Allah. If Allah willed, he would have sent the instructions through the usual agency of Angel Jibreel. Prophet Musa (AS) also had to comb a very long distance so as to meet a scholar from whom to learn some new facts (Q 18: 60).

Abu Ayyub al-Ansari travelled all the way from Madina in order to meet Uqbah bn Nafi' in Egypt to hear a single hadith. The *Tabi'un* (successors of the Prophet's companions) mounted upon the back of the same trend. Abu al-Aliyah Rufa'i bn Mihran al-Basri narrated that they, (the *Tabi'un* in Iraq) used to hear from (genuine) sources something that referred to the Prophet's companions. They would however, not feel satisfied unless they journeyed to Madina to hear from the horse's mouth (Al-Muqaddam, 1995). Imam Bukhari travelled to many distant towns and cities in his onerous effort to collect ahadith (the traditions of the Prophet (SAW)). He had reportedly met over one thousand scholars at

different places. Ar-Razi's news of intellectual sojourn will undoubtedly remain shocking and incredibly surprising. The first time he set out for the search of knowledge, he spent over seven years walking on foot. He trekked a distance of over 1000 miles. He combed the way from Bahrain to Egypt, then to Ramallah and Tarsus all on foot (ibid).

b. Frequent Questioning

A learner must develop the culture of frequent questioning. In this vein, Muhammad Ibn Muslim ibn Shihab says, "knowledge is a store [of wealth], the key of which is questioning" (in Rijiyar Lemo, 2015: 56). In a narration similar to the one about Ibn Abbas's manner of frequent questioning, Mu'awuya Ibn Abi Sufyan (R.A) subjected one Dagfal Ibn Hanzalah al-Shaibani to a knowledge test. The former certified the latter's erudition. Being incredibly impressed, Mu'awuya asked Dagfal, "how have you arrived at this mastery [of knowledge]? Dagfal answered, "I mastered it by utilizing an intelligent mind and a tongue that used to ask frequent questions" (ibid).

c. Possessing Books and Frequenting Library

Enthusiasm towards learning is also translated by the degree and height to which the learner loves book and strives to possess it. Scholars in the past had demonstrated the rarest and unique lust for book, and a will and determination to own it, against all odds. Almuqaddam (1995) chronicled that the great scholar of Haleb, Sheikh Ahmad al-Hajjar one day saw a book for sale and he didn't then own a penny to purchase it. He instantly removed his clothes, auctioned them off and bought the book with the money. Because of their exuberant love for books, some scholars went to the extent of selling off their houses in order to buy books. Ibn al-Kassab was one day pressed by the desire to buy some books at the cost of 500 dinars. He didn't have the money at the time. He consequently sold his house and bought the books. Another scholar Abu al-Ala al-Hamdani heard book agents announcing a book auction of Ibn al-Jawaliqiyy. He was penniless by then. He consequently sold out his house to pay for the money of the books when for three days he couldn't get any money (in Rijiyar Lemo, 2015).

Penury is usually taken as excuse for not purchasing books by students nowadays, and then a pretext for lack of reading. There were many scholars who turned library into their most visited place. Notable among the scholars whose names history will never forget is al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 852 A.H). He used to frequent the Mahmudiyya Library in Cairo. He read almost all the books in the rich library. Imam Suyuti who came later also reaped a lot from the same library. His attitude of frequenting the library were the corollary of his intellectual height that restored most of the books which were almost lost (ibid).

d. Voracious Reading

Reading was for many Muslim scholars what food is to the body. In fact, their thirst superseded the need of the hungry man to food. They reached the commanding height of intellectuality through reading. Al-Mubarrid used to say that he never saw someone deeply interested in reading than three men; al-Jahiz, al-Fath bn Khaqan and Ismail Ibn Ishaq, the Qadhi. Al-Jahiz never held a book except that he read it from cover to cover. Al-Fath used to read every time and within every interval – while walking or going to restroom or wherever. The third person Ismail Ibn Ishaq would never be seen without a book in his hand reading or flicking through its pages. Imam Ibn al-Jawzi was reported to have

read more than twenty thousand volumes of books (Al-Muqaddam, 1995). The story is the same about many other scholars.

With the proliferation of technological devices and widespread of social media in the contemporary time, it is expected that knowledge seekers would access books and read them with relative ease. A single computer device may contain thousands of variety of books in the form of *Maktabah al-Shamilah* (Islamic electronic encyclopedia). However, this is not the case as most young men now use the technological advancement in less useful purposes.

e. Time Management

Time especially to someone with positive aspirations like student, is a precious asset. Surprisingly however, not many students make best use of their time. Most of them squander and waste it without the slightest concern or worry.

Sheikh Ahmad Ibn al-Hasan al-Rumi used to spend most of his time rehearsing. At the time he was pursuing his scholarship, he made it incumbent upon himself to memorize three hundred lines daily. Most of the scholars didn't use to allow even an hour interval without doing something intellectually beneficial. There were among them who were reading even when they were walking like al-Khateeb al-Baghdadi (d. 463 A.H), Abu Bakr al-Khayyat (d. 320 A.H), etc., or inside restroom like the grandfather of Ibn Taimiyya who used to ask one of his sons to read aloud for him to listen while he was relieving himself in the toilet (Rijiyar Lemo, 2015).

f. Jotting Down Points

A clever and wise student always moves about with a pen and jotter for documenting important points. It was reported that there was a time Ismail Ibn Yusuf bought a pen with a huge amount of money in order to jot down an urgent and important point on the spot he heard it (Zarnuji, n d). In this regard, Imam al-Sha'abi said, "When you hear something [new], write it even if on the wall". Some scholars jotted down important points so much so that the points were later developed into books in volumes. Books like *Bada'i al-Fawa'id* by Ibn al-Qayyim were a corollary of years of jotting down (Rijiyar Lemo, 2015).

1.3. Patience/Perseverance

As a Muslim, student should put at the back of his mind that Allah subjects the believers to tests and trials in whatever they pursue. The test may in most cases, come with sufferings, afflictions, and to some extent lead to disastrous consequences. According to a popular hadith, Muslims are subjected to tests according to their degree of nobility in the sight of Allah. Prophets being the noblest and most meritorious creatures were in the first class of the test; they suffered in no small measure while carrying out their mission (Sunan Ibn Majah: 4023). The next class is that of the scholars. They were the spiritual heirs of the Prophets (Sunan Abu Dawud: 3641). This means that students who tread their path must also be ready to face multifaceted challenges in the course of their initiation into the scholarly circle. It was said that "the treasures of favors are attained through the viaduct of trials" (Zarnuji, n. d). Therefore, they should prepare for struggle and suffering while trying to make ends meet in their scholarship pursuits.

Muslim scholars had met a lot of social and economic challenges while learning. History books account the stories of some scholars and how they were confronted with hardship, trying to force them to give up and how they proved

invincible against the challenges. It was reported that Imam Malik said, "This affair [knowledge] is not acquired until the bitterness of poverty is tasted (Al-Muqaddam, 1995: 161). That is why he one day had to remove the thatched roof of his house, sell it and use the money to finance some educational needs (ibid). The erudite scholar Sheikh al-Arsabandi was once seen gathering the rinds of watermelon thrown on the street. He washed and ate them because of burning hunger and penury (Zarnuji, n. d). Ibn Karrash was equally compelled by hunger and poverty to consume his urine while cleaving towns in search of knowledge! (Al-Muqaddam, 1995).

1.4. Resource/Sustenance

While poverty is usually associated with the process of scholarship, it is not a sole excuse for outright abandonment of knowledge. In our society today, penury is not only an excuse for not being able to heavily invest in knowledge acquisition, but also a pretext to distance away from participating in scholarship pursuit. Other societies operate some schemes where the well-to-do shoulder the educational responsibilities of the destitute. The latter then recompense by contributing to the society according to their respective areas of specialization. Through this communal mentorship, many children from the poverty-stricken families transform into highly productive intellectual class.

A quick scan through the pages of history tells us about the many scholars who were orphaned while they were very young. The responsibilities of their education were shouldered by their mothers. Few examples in this regard will be given. Sufyan al-Thauri was sponsored by his mother. She used to encourage him and assure him of her unflinching support with the little she earned through knitting. Imam al-Auza'i – an orphan was brought to prominence through his mother's itinerary effort. She used to carry him from town to town and linked him with teachers. The mother of Imam Rabi'a bn Abi Abdirrahman – the teacher of Imam Malik spent over 30,000 dinars on her son's scholarship. The same thing can be said about Imam Malik and Imam Shafi'i. The scholarly trips embarked on by Imam Bukhari were facilitated by his caring, judicious and dedicated mother. With adequate sagacity, she managed the tittle resources she had on her son's education (Al-Muqaddam, 1995). Therefore, while it is understandable that the loss of one's father can be seen as a big blow and inevitable hindrance to the smooth continuity of running his or her life, it should not serve as a permanent cause for termination of pursuing a goal towards by treading the path of educational success.

1.5. Teacher's Guidance

The established tradition of knowledge acquisition is that knowledge is sought from those who are endowed with it. A teacher is the guide who leads student to the land of success. He cuts short the long journey and trims the distance of the way one must comb before reaching the doorstep of scholarship. Without teacher, one will certainly meander, wander and wallow around a dark desert trying to arrive at a vague, murky and unrealistic destination. Teacher is therefore a strong and essential component of building an intellectual society.

The copious mention made about the scholarly sojourns undertaken by different scholars points to the fact that one can never learn without grasping from the mouths of teachers. To buttress this point, few illustrations will perhaps suffice here:

Abdullah bn Abbas used to frequent the house of the Sahaba to learn many things. Most of the time he would go to a companion's house before the latter waked up from sleep. He would wait by the door until the companion came out to find him waiting (Zahabi, 2012: 63).

The Salaf accrued great concern to scholarship and hearing form the teacher's mouth. As highlighted earlier, they used to trek thousands of miles for the sole purpose of meeting a scholar. The erudition and well grounding of a scholar was often deciphered through the number of his teachers. It was the yardstick to measure the milestone one has so far reached in scholarship struggle. Bukhari is said to have learned hadith from over a thousand teachers all in different cities and provinces (al-Asqalani, 2007: 609).

1.6. Long Time Span

Knowledge is something that is pursued from birth to death or as the popular saying rightly puts it "from cradle to the grave". This entails that whoever is in this rank shall prepare to dedicate a large portion of his life to its cause. While the Western system of education designated some years after which someone is said to have graduated, hence he may detach himself from the learning line, Islam recommends that we make learning a lifetime affair. Abu Nu'aim used to say, "We never ceased to seek for knowledge provided we met someone who would teach us". Imam Tha'alabah narrated that he had never for a single day missed Ibrahim al-Harbi at a language learning session for fifty years. Ibn al-Qasim one of the distinguished scholars of the Maliki School spent seventeen consecutive years without a day-break, sipping knowledge from Imam Malik (Al-Muqaddam, 1995).

2. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is noteworthy that the notion of Islamic university that was in the past an only theoretical matter, has now come into full operation in the world in general and Nigeria in particular, despite the slow pace at which it is patronized in the latter case. Quality assurance being an ethical symbolism with which Islamic university is identified, should not merely start and end with the physical edifice and administrative undertakings of the institutions. Rather, Islamic university should work out modalities that will distinguish its intellectual product from that of the conventional university. This can only be achieved if students are well groomed in the art and culture of research, reading and scholarship in general. Therefore, the researcher calls upon all the stakeholders involved in the academic planning and quality management units at Islamic universities to intensify efforts in bringing the sterling scholarship attitudes of the predecessors into full operation as highlighted in the essay.

This paper has attempted to dispense student of Islamic university with a manual for reflection towards building personal culture and trait that will lead him to scholarship height. It used as theoretical framework, the six essential elements of knowledge acquisition which were reportedly postulated by Ali bn Abi Talib. It traced the life of some early Muslim scholars and discovered the way they utilized the processes to arrive at the land of success during their scholarship struggle. While the paper believes that some of the essential elements may not be in full operation in the modern sense, it is yet clear that overall neglect of them will retard the path of intellectual success. Meanwhile, it is good to remark that all the

Muslim intellectuals who have succeeded in their mission must have mounted upon most if not all of the processes while acquiring knowledge.

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