

The Sidāma of Ethiopia and Rational Communication Action in Policy and Dispute Settlement

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Abstract. — In this paper I seek to discover whether Jürgen Habermas's rational communication theory can be applied to the dispute settlement and policy making of an African people. The Sidāma of Ethiopia are shown to use rational communication in terms of establishing procedural limits to reach consensus, recognizing distinctions between rational and nonrational discourse, emphasizing the importance of normative truth concepts, and maintaining criteria for sincerity. In comparison with other African societies it is demonstrated that such discourse is far from uniformly distributed across Africa. Finally, the question is raised as to whether Habermas's theory may be more appropriate in some premodern than modern societies. [*Ethiopia, Sidāma, African societies, rational discourse, dispute settlement, communication, decision consensus*]

John H. Hamer, several periods of field research among the Sidāma in Ethiopia and the Bukusu in Kenya. — His publications — as result from this research — include several articles and the book "Humane Development. Participation and Change among the Sidāma of Ethiopia" (Tuscaloosa 1987).

In this paper I examine rationality as it relates to dispute settlement and policy making among the Sidāma of Ethiopia.¹ The theoretical setting for this analysis is that of rational communication action as propounded by Jürgen Habermas (1984). The problem will be to consider the validity claims of truth, normative commitment, and sincerity, embedded in argumentative reasoning, directed toward establishment of social consensus. First it will be necessary to discuss consensual argumentative discourse concepts as developed by Habermas.

Habermas postulates that in the "modern" world persons raising validity claims have to distinguish between language representations and the objects which they represent in order to reach a consensus on how to deal with the latter (1984: 51). By contrast, there is a tendency in the "primitive" world of myth for the "objective" and "social" worlds to be mixed. Therefore the linguistic representations of them are reified, leading to dogmatic assertions outside the realm of "rational discussion" or "criticism." In his view rational discourse can only occur when a discussion is open and

of sufficient length so that the validity claims of truth, normative commitment, and sincerity can be used to reach an understanding (42-44). Habermas admits that such an ideal speech situation is only a latent possibility and not a reality. Nevertheless, the universal structure of speech implies the potential for realization of the ideal. It is his contention that all speech directed toward intention requires some form of truth orientation. What this truth may be can only be realized through consensual discourse (372).

Habermas does not accept Peter Winch's proposition that worldviews of truth are relative to particular language structures. He accepts the principle that all languages will provide some truth criteria, but the forms will vary and some will make greater provision for elaboration than others (1984: 58 f.). In fact he has been criticized for ignoring cultural differences in arriving at truth concepts, and that norms and values may not be conceptualized as open to discursive validation (Braaten 1991: 35 f.). But, in Habermas's view language should be simply a means of "... communicative action utterances ..." for reaching understanding with others (1984: 98 f.). The question is the extent to which it permits contestation between subjects regarding the validity claims that can lead to consensual action?

Despite some degree of linguistic terms for truth and rationality in all languages Habermas has tended to equate the highest degree of potential for rational discourse with the "modernism" of the Western world. The use of myth to conflate nature and culture on the same level cannot, in his view, compare with the standards of the modern thinker (1984: 48). Since a clear distinction is not made between things and persons, moral failure is articulated with physical failure.

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