

Unwritten Testimonies of The African Past  
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PROVERBS - AN OLD LITERARY TRADITION IN ETHIOPIA

AMHARIC

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What is a proverb? Aristotle considered it "a remnant from old philosophy, preserved amid countless destructions by reason of its bravery and fitness for use". Cervantes described proverbs as "short sentences drawn from long experiences" and Russell regarded them as "one man's wit and all men's wisdom". There are still many other descriptions and explanations of proverbs which, generally speaking, define a proverb as a very short and precise reflection of human knowledge and wisdom of life. A proverb generalizes to a high extent certain social experiences and finds its linguistic realization in a quite popular metaphorical language (CONRAD 1975, 251).

Proverbs obviously belong to a very old literary tradition of mankind. They disclose in a surprisingly precise manner a people's philosophy of life, its ideas and concepts about the world, its self-consciousness. They reflect common human knowledge and experiences, perceptions, attributes etc. The linguistic and metaphoric realization of a proverb - better: the concept of it - differs, of course, from language to language according to the historical, cultural and social background and peculiarities of a people.

Usually the time and place of origin of a proverb, its author or creator remains unknown and due to the long age of proverbs and growing social contacts between people a certain process of 'internationalization' of proverbs can be recognized. If we compare, for instance, the proverb "Carry coal to Newcastle" with Russian "Lomit'sja v otkrytuju dver'" and the German "Eulen nach Athen tragen" with the common meaning of repeating or saying something already well-known, we find one and the same concept expressed by quite different metaphoric means - even within the European language family. On the other hand we may find striking metaphoric similarities between proverbs in ling-

uistically quite different languages like Amharic and German, for example:

Amharic: yäqoffärut gudgwad yägäbubbätall.

German: Wer andern eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein.

It seems, however, that such cases where the metaphoric realization of certain concepts of proverbs coincides with those in other languages are very rare, and it usually needs a high level of language competency to understand a proverb in a given source language precisely and to translate it adequately into the corresponding target language.

In our short contribution we'd like to emphasize the specific role of proverbs in the Ethiopian history and society. It is well-known that Ethiopia is a country with a very old literary tradition dating back to the Seventh century, if not before. This tradition is mainly based on writings in Ge'ez, the classical language of Ethiopia which remained the medium of written communication until its substitution by Amharic in the middle of the Nineteenth century. At that time Amharic was already widespread as mother tongue and third or second language among the population in central parts of Ethiopia. It was known as 'lāssanā nīgus' (language of the king) and served as the means of communication at the court and in the administration, even when king Yohannes IV from the Tigray dynasty ascended the throne.

At that time Amharic was not only an important means of oral communication; there existed already quite a number of written documents. According to KANE (1975, 3) "the oldest known writings in Amharic are poems or songs in praise of the Emperors Amdä Səyon, Yeshaq and Gälawdewos ... written in the Fourteenth century". Since that time on several attempts have been made to write in Amharic. Strelcyn proves in his works that besides religious literature, commentaries on the Psalms etc. (CERULLI 1968) to the earliest writings in Amharic belong also medical treatises, for instance the 'Traité de diététique' (STRELCYN 1965) and others.

In this context has to be mentioned also the early moralistic-didactic poetry including philosophical essays, folk tales, fables, parables and proverbs. With reference to this folk literature MORENO (1948, 7) stressed that "Ethiopia ... is close to the Asiatic and European worlds linked together by a very ancient stream of exchanges ... in the Axumite period and even before."

This influence of antique Greek philosophy and christianity on the Ethiopian literature can be recognized during the Axumite period as well as during the period between the Thirteenth and Nineteenth centuries. While the first period comprises mainly translations of religious texts (LITTMANN 1909, 203ff) the second period is mainly characterized by translation literature from Arabic into Ge'ez (translations of liturgies, legends and calendars of saints), by historiographical literature and collections of anecdotes and sayings and by philosophical writings. These works contain not only philosophical reflexions and considerations, instructions etc. but also riddles, tales, proverbs and wisdom from the Greek, Arabic and Middle East cultures. One of these books is the Angarä Fälasfa, another the famous Mashafa Falāsfa Tabībān. Besides sayings and anecdotes of famous people the latter contains also moralistic and didactic sentences and proverbs, for instance "Wise men are like stars for the mankind" (verse 151), "Patience is the key to joy and a kind word, the key to concord and harmony" (verse 276) or "The tongue is the interpreter of the heart" (verse 233 - PIETRUSCHKA 1985).

Since the reign of Tewodros (1855-1868) who "gave the greatest impetus for writing in Amharic" and who gave the "greatest impulse and encouragement to Amharic literature" (ULLENDORFF 1973, 149) many of these sayings, tales and proverbs have been translated into Amharic and belong to the most popular literature in Ethiopia. Later on they have been collected and printed by Ethiopian and foreign authors like HÄGGI YÄSUF ABDURAHMAN (1956), MAHTÄMÄ SILLASE WÄLDÄ MÄSQÄL (1956), I. GUIDI (1894), F. M.C. MONDON-VIDAILHET (1904), E. MITTWOCH (1907), J. FAITLOVITCH (1907), L. FUSELLA (1942), TADDÄSÄ ALANA (1957), KÄBBÄDÄ MIKAEL

(1946, 1956), ASRAS ASFA WÄSSÄN (1954), KÄBBÄDÄ INGIDA SÄW (1954) and HAYLU YEMÄNĪH (1952). Amharic proverbs we can also find in dictionaries, for instance in the Amharic-English dictionary of C.H. ARMBRUSTER (1920), in the Amharic-French dictionary of J. BALTEMAN (1929) or in the Amharic-Russian dictionary of E.B. GANKIN (1969).

Proverbs reflect all spheres of life. Their content is as broad and contradictory as life itself. They reflect worry about property and money. They express joy and fear, bravery and anxiety. They talk about oppression and upraising, courage and cowardice, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, love and hate. They reflect ethnic peculiarities and religious rules, relations between members of the family and relatives, qualities and attributes of people one ought to strive for or to condemn.

The following examples of Amharic proverbs which we have found in the above mentioned literature and in two collections of KIBRÄAB ADMASSU DÄJÄN (1981, 1984) may illustrate the wide range of themes which the Amharic proverbs embrace.

(a) A proverb reflects a short story:

mägämmäriya yänäqqämä<sup>V</sup>ayen.      First the one I'm sitting  
on.

Underlying story: A man came to a forest and met an ape. In the body of the ape stuck many thorns. The ape suffered badly, he could neither sit nor go or lay down. The man wanted to help the ape and asked him which of the thorns he should extract first and the ape answered: "First the one I am sitting on!"

Meaning: The most important thing should be done first.

(b) Proverbs with moralistic-didactic contents:

baläbetu yaqqalläläwn amole      A debtor will not accept  
balä'ida ayqqäbbäläwm.      an amole (salt bar used as  
currency) if its proprietor  
has diminished it before.

Meaning: There is no use of cheating somebody.

(c) Proverbs praising the dignity of labour:

yalädiha zäwd  
yalägbäre ma'id  
ayggänim.

No crown without the poor,  
no bread without the farmer.

kämäccägar  
särtö madär.

Better to work hard  
than to be bothered.

(d) Proverbs reflecting subordination:

nigus aykkässäs  
sämay aytarräs.

The king cannot be accused,  
The heaven cannot be plowed.

yänigus awag  
lähullu yibäg.

An order of the king  
is good for everybody.

sum siqqottam siddässätim  
mar yizo idäggü.

The lord may be angry or satis-  
fied, honey has to be brought  
to his door.

(e) Proverbs which express inequality and oppression:

bäre yarsall  
mirtun gin ahyya yafär-  
sall.

The ox plows,  
but the donkey ruins the crop.

barya sikora  
'irasun bädulla.

When a slave shows off  
beat his head with a stick.

saysäru magnät  
saysädiqu gännät.

To get (something) without work,  
To enter the paradise without  
approval.

(f) Proverbs reflecting protest and uprising:

agär biyabär  
nigus yascäggär.

If the country is united  
the king gets trouble.

nigus käsomäw  
'irša yäsomäw.

Farming promotes more  
than a king (can promote).

kibär kalsasa  
diha aynorim.

Until authorities are diminui-  
shed the poor cannot live.

(g) Proverbs with religious content:

sāw yassiball

'igzer yifässimall.

haymanot yälelāw sāw

ligwam yälelāw färäs nāw.

People think  
God completes.

A man without faith  
is a horse without bridle.

(h) Proverbs about love:

fīqirinna dīnkwan

yätīm yittākkälall.

tāwāddādu wādiya

gādālu meda.

yāwāddādānna yabbādā

and nāw.

Love as well as a tent  
can be planted everywhere.

For a man who is loved  
a cliff becomes a plain.

It is just the same:  
a lover and a crazy man.

(i) Proverbs about men and women:

mawrat setinnāt

māsrat wāndinnāt.

setin yammānā

gumīn yāzāggānā.

yālāset

mīn yadārgall bet?

Talking is typical for women,  
working is typical for men.

Who beliefs in a woman  
takes a handful of fog.

What does a house  
without a woman?

(k) Proverbs about marriage and family relations:

'innatitun aytāh

ligitun agāba.

māngad bāt<sup>y</sup>wat

mīst bālīg<sup>y</sup>innāt.

līg<sup>y</sup>un bātut

'ihīl bāt<sup>y</sup>qāmt.

līg<sup>y</sup> 'indabbatu

sāw 'indābetu.

After having seen the mother,  
marry the daughter.

The road in the morning,  
the wife in the infancy.

A child at the breast  
(is) grain in October.

A child is like his father,  
a man is like his house.



(1) Proverbs about relatives:

zämäd yäläläwn  
qusil yigädläwall.

The one who does not have  
relatives may be killed  
(even) by a wound.

ba'id käsamäw  
zämäd yänakkäsaw.

Better to be bitten by a  
relative than to be kis-  
sed by a foreigner.

zämäd<sup>V</sup>inna mädhanit  
yücäggärällät.

Relatives and medicine  
are good for difficult  
days.

(m) Proverbs about other nationalities:

akorakkoru 'indägalla  
atäkwakkosu 'indamara.

They ride like a Galla  
and shoot like an Amara.

wädag<sup>V</sup> käraya yimätall  
tälät käbet yinnässall.

A friend comes from (the  
far region of) Raya, an  
enemy from the (own) house.

In some of the Amharic proverbs the interlinguistic relation-  
ship and the influence of other Ethiopian languages and cultu-  
res on Amharic is quite obvious. Thus we find direct transla-  
tions from Ge'ez like

g<sup>V</sup>oro nägärin yiläyyall  
gurorro 'ihilän yitmall.

The ear distinguishes a  
word, the throat tastes the  
meal.

(Ge'ez: አዘን ይረዳህ ነገር ወገን ይጥላል አለ::

or

akko zätämhirä  
yihäwn mämhirä.

'akko'in Ge'ez means "not",  
in Amharic it is the Gerund  
form of 'akkäkä' - "to have  
a scratch"

The two translations are:

first - "Not the one who learns becomes a master."

second- "The one who learns with pains becomes a master."

An other Amharic proverb shows the influence of the Tigrinya  
language:

giddäfänn bittillänn  
giddif adärräghuwat.

'gäddäfä' in Tigrinya means "to let go", in Amharic the verb 'gäddäfä/däggäfä' has two translations: 1. to help 2. to make a mistake

Therefore, the two possible translations of this proverb are: first - When she told me: Help me! I helped her.

second- When she told me: Help me! I made a mistake ...

An other example shows the influence of the Oromo language on Amharic proverbs:

kä'ona bet  
ona set.

'ona' is an Oromo loanword in Amharic and has the meaning "empty, abandoned"

Translation: Better an abandoned (useless, empty) woman than an empty house.

These mentioned above examples of Amharic proverbs may give a small impression about the rich cultural heritage of the Ethiopian folk literature which originates from very old literary traditions of the Ethiopian people and which reflects, on the other hand, the longstanding contacts of this country with other parts of the world.

In order to preserve this cultural heritage which has been handed down from generation to generation orally, great efforts are being made to collect, to write down, to translate and to publish these pieces of Ethiopian folk literature. In this context the Academy of Ethiopian Languages, mainly the Department of Oral Literature, plays an important role. Its objectives are, among others,

- to promote the collection and research activities of oral literature in the country and
- to preserve, document, and disseminate the collected materials (ACADEMY 1986, 16).

At present, the research work of the Department of Oral Literature is concentrated on eight Ethiopian languages, namely on Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Wolayta, Sidamo, Hadiyya, Gedeo and Kembata languages. So far more than 30 000 pieces of songs, oral



poems, proverbs, tales, anecdotes, riddles, legends and others have been collected from ten Ethiopian regions. The taped materials are transcribed in the originally taped language and then translated into Amharic.

Nowadays, it seems that new proverbs arise only scarcely - maybe because the existing proverbs represent already a rich source of linguistic material fitting all situations of human life, may be because modern texts prefer a clear and standardized terminological vocabulary and leaves little room for proverbs.

It is agreed, however, that the very short and precise linguistic form of proverbs with their wide range of linguistic, cultural and emotional attributes substantially enriches our speech and raises its efficacy and expressiveness.

Therefore, the mentioned endeavour of the Ethiopian cultural authorities "to preserve and, if necessary, to improve all valuable things handed down to us by our forefathers and to forward them to the next generation" deserves our consent and respect and should be understood as an invitation to strengthen the work on the collection, publication, translation and popularization of proverbs.

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