

THOMAS L. KANE

## MUSLIM WRITERS IN AMHARIC

The centuries of warfare between Christians and Muslims have left the present day Amhara in control over areas inhabited by Muslims of varied racial and linguistic origins. These centuries of conflict have also led to a considerable antipathy between the two groups, of which the most notable expressions in recent times are the forced conversion of Muslims under the Emperor John IV and the disturbances which broke out during the brief reign of Ləḡ Iyasu who was deemed to be following a pro-Muslim policy.

This constant strife has bred a sense of superiority among the Amhara as being bearers of the True Faith, a sense of superiority which extends to the language also. To quote Donald Levine:

' Knowledge of Amharic is considered another index of superiority and the Amhara look down on Ethiopians who do not speak Amharic or who speak it with an accent ' (1).

The initiators of Amharic literature, Afäwäriq Gäbrä-yäsus and Həruy Wäldä-səllase were pious Christians, particularly Həruy, and their work bears adequate testimony to this fact. Such works as Həruy's ' Goha Säbah ' (Morning has dawned) (2) or ' Aläm Wäratäñña ' (Fickle world) (3) by Mäkonnen Endalkaččäw (a post-war writer very akin to Həruy in traditional training, outlook and piety) are so Christian in tone and content as to make it difficult to imagine that Muslim writers would soon attempt to write in Amharic. These early initiators of Amharic literature, however, were all products of traditional Christian religious training and as secular education has been made increasingly available by the government, the heavy piety of the early writers has gradually given way to works written in a more secular spirit, works in which the influence of Western culture through literature, radio, cinema and personal contact is quite apparent.

Muslims in Etiopia, especially those sedentary groups long in contact with Islam, have a literary tradition of their own which is attested by

(1) DONALD LEVINE, *Wax and Gold*, Chicago 1965, p. 78.

(2) E. CERULLI, *Nuove pubblicazioni in lingua amarica*, « Oriente Moderno », vol. XII, n. 6 (1932), p. 165 ff.

(3) A. GERARD, *Four African Literatures*, Berkeley, 1971, p. 304. The title of this work is given as ' The inconstant World '. Muslims appear in this work in unfavorable roles.

numerous chronicles in Arabic the best known of which is the *Futuh al-Habasha* (4). This tradition, however, does not seem to have been extensively cultivated and no creative works appear to have been produced. Attempts made in the past to write in the vernacular languages of Ethiopia, specifically Amharic in the Christian North and Harari in the Muslim Southeast (5), came to nothing, the Ethiopian's innate conservatism, scribal opposition and the religious prestige of the liturgical languages, Geez for the Christians and Arabic for the Muslims, apparently having stifled this tendency.

In 1928, Cerulli noted the appearance of several short works in Arabic which were allegedly printed in Addis Ababa but which were actually printed in Cairo. These concerned the life of Sheikh Hussein, a saint of Bale, who has become an object of veneration by the local Gallas (6). The fact that these were written by Muslims of Ethiopia was regarded by Cerulli as 'una notevole novità'. Andrzejewski reports that these works have been reprinted as recently as 1948 and are still on the market in Ethiopia today (7).

Whether any creative writing in Arabic is now being done by Muslims from the southern area is not known. Certainly instruction in Arabic continues to be given in the kuttabs of Harar, but the ability to read which they provide is strictly limited to religious subjects. However, contact provided by the Hajj, the radio programs in Arabic and the continuation of the centuries-long migration to Cairo for religious training serves to maintain Arabic and provide some individuals with fluency in the current written language. In the North, in Eritrea, the proximity of Arabic-speaking countries provides more opportunity and a greater need to cultivate Arabic. The conflict now taking place in Eritrea which receives much support from Muslim groups and which is carried on by a political movement obtaining sanctuary in and help from Arab countries has made it necessary for this movement to present its case to Arabs in Arabic and in an Arabic written in the somewhat simplified language of the press (8).

Owing to Amhara ascendancy in the Ethiopian highlands, Amharic long ago managed to attain a position of dominance even over Tigrinya which is indicated by its appellation; 'ləsanä-nəgus' (king's language). Muslim groups living among Christian Ethiopians would have had to learn Amharic and learn it well. However; there is little evidence yet available that they wrote in it. A brief history of a Harari emir of the 16th Century

(4) E. CERULLI, *La Letteratura etiopica*, Milan 1968, p. 126.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 130.

(6) E. CERULLI, *Pubblicazione recenti dei musulmani e dei cristiani dell'Etiopia*, « Oriente Moderno », Anno VIII, nr.: 9 (1928), pp. 429-430.

(7) B. W. ANDRZEJEWSKI, *Allusive diction in Galla hymns in praise of Sheikh Hussein of Bale*, in « African Language Studies », XIII (in press).

(8) Various writings and publications of this group are listed on pp. 58-59 of *'Al-adwa 'ala al-qadiyyatu-l-ʿArīriyyah*, by Rašīd Jabir al-Asad, Baghdad, 1969.

written in Amharic has been discovered by Wendt but he is of the opinion that this documents is a translation from Arabic prepared at the instance of M. Mondon-Vidhailhet some time toward the end of the last century. On the basis of evidence provided by mistranslation and grammatical mistakes in Amharic, Wendt felt that the translator was not a native speaker but one who did have a good knowledge of Shoan Amharic<sup>(9)</sup>. There is no evidence that the translator was a Muslim, but there is a possibility that an Egyptian Copt long resident in Ethiopia could have been the translator of the work.

The first identifiable Muslim writer in Amharic was Haġgi Yusuf Abdurrahman whose collection of Amharic proverbs was published in 1942 (A. M.) under the title of 'Yamarəñña mərṭ məssalenna tärät' (Select Amharic proverbs and tales): The title page indicates that he is from Harar<sup>(10)</sup>.

While this is significant in that it marks the first attested instance of a Muslim writing for what is even now a largely Christian readership, the subject matter is too general to provide any information on Ethiopian Muslims.

The essentially secular nature of the modern schools provided by the Ethiopian government poses no threat to the religious sentiment of Muslims. In consequence an increasing number of them have been educated in these schools as higher education has been made available outside the capital and those among them who are interested in writing are now in a position to make their contribution to fictional Amharic literature.

The first Muslim writer to have done this is Mähämäd Usman whose brief narrative, 'Gwade, əngadih amačəh nəññ' (My pal, now I'm your brother-in-law) appeared in 1953 A. M. This work while brief (34 pp.) and in the pocket-sized format (12×16 cm.) in which most Amharic books are printed is the only work which deals with Ethiopian Muslims.

This tale deals with young Zaki from Addis Ababa whose wicked stepmother takes advantage of her merchant husband's frequent absences from home to mistreat Zaki and eventually estrange him from his father. On graduating from high school, Zaki runs away to Harar (why Harar is never made clear) where he meets young Foziya Elyas, daughter of Fitawrari Elyas. When she learns of his sad circumstances, she persuades her father to hire him as a tutor to prepare her for the eighth grade.

The two soon fall in love, although Zaki is careful not to manifest his feelings since he realizes that he is without any permanent means of making a living and she is the daughter of a wealthy man. Malicious gossip that

(9) K. WENDT, *Amharische Geschichte eines Emirs von Harar im XVI Jahrhundert*, «Orientalia», Vol. IV, fasc. 3/4 (1935), p. 484-501.

(10) A HAĠGI YUSUF ABDURRAHMAN of Harar is listed as being one of the learned consultants participating in the translation of the Quran into Amharic. (See below). He is probably also the same individual Andrzejewski mentions as being responsible for the publication and distribution of a work on Sheikh Hussein. (See B. W. ANDRZEJEWSKI, *op. cit.*).

they are indulging in licentious behavior costs Zaki his job, and he leaves for Addis Ababa to enroll in a teacher training institute. He plans to return to Harar after obtaining a teaching job to ask for Foziya's hand. If Fitawrari Elyas should refuse, Zaki and Foziya plan to elope.

During Zaki's year at the institute, he manages to keep in touch with Foziya by sending letters to her school, but after being assigned to Dessie, he gets no more letters, a fact which begins to depress him.

In Dessie, he becomes acquainted with a teacher named Dawid. They get on well together and eventually discover that each one is suffering from love problems. The two friends put their heads together and decide to proceed to Asmara to abduct Dawid's beloved, a girl who is variously identified as Luwiza, Luwaza, Lowoza and Loza. He writes to her to tell her to get ready, but on arriving in Asmara, Luwiza meets them and tells them her mother has assented to their marriage. On going to her house, it is discovered that Luwiza and her mother are Zaki's long-lost sister and mother.

After the newlyweds return to Dessie, Zaki proceeds to Harar to find out what has happened to Foziya. He encounters her in Dire Dawa while she is running away to find him. They return to Dessie where it is discovered that Foziya is Dawid's half-sister. The story ends with Dawid promising to arrange a conciliation between Zaki and Fitawrari Elyas.

This story is typical of the many stories published by Christian writers on the theme of school romance versus parental opposition. As already noted by Comba<sup>(11)</sup>, little space is devoted to description of either the milieu, the characters or the sentiment of love. The attention of the writer is mainly on the action of the story. The wicked stepmother is also a stock figure in Amharic literature. As usual, no motive is assigned to her actions, although jealousy seems the most likely reason. Usually such stories as these contain the complete texts of the letters passed between the lovers, a feature this story is mercifully without.

Owing to the lack of description, this story provides very little idea of the kind of people these Muslims are. Zaki's father is said to be a businessman whose business causes him to spend most of his time in the provinces. What kind of business this might be is nowhere stated. One assumes Zaki's mother is a Muslim because of her choice of mate and because she leaves for Asmara, a town with a large Muslim population, after her divorce. It is the usual procedure for a divorced woman who cannot maintain herself to return to her family. Zaki's stepmother may not be a Muslim. The visitors coming to the house on the birth of her first-born say, 'Congratulations, Mary has had mercy on you!', but this may be no more than a polite formula spoken irrespective of religious affiliation. The girl's name, Luisa, is clearly due to Italian influence. Her last name is given as Năgaš which seems to be her

(11) P. COMBA, *Le roman dans la littérature éthiopienne de langue amharique*, « Journal of Semitic Studies », vol. IX, n. 1 (1964), p. 178.

stepfather's name if one assumes that Zaki would have recognized her name otherwise. This patronymic is Amharic, but so little is known about Ethiopian name-giving that it cannot be assumed that the stepfather is Amharic-speaking or not a Muslim on the basis of this name alone.

The second family, that of Fitawrari Elyas Ğafār, is stated to have come from Adal-Issa subprovince (which borders on French Somaliland) from which Fitawrari Elyas was transferred to Harar. The title, 'fitawrari' indicates that he is in good standing with the Ethiopian government which is accustomed to granting titles like these to leading personages, both Christian and Muslim, as a means of rewarding their loyalty. The fitawrari could be either a Dankali Afar or an Issa Somali. The name Dawid, borne by the fitawrari's step-son, is the Galla form of the Christian Dawit, the form current among Ethiopian Muslims being Dawud.

It should be noted that this story envisions a certain amount of inter-marriage among the various Muslim groups.

In the preface, the author mentions that he is a cadet teacher in an institute like the one Zaki went to, and thanks Kamil Abubākār Šarif for helping him get the book published. He also thanks the owner of the Addis Matämiya Bet (New Printing House), Abba Bora Mähämäd Bašer (the name or title Abba Bora indicates that he is a Galla), for doing a nice job on the book.

There is no indication that Amharic is not the speaker's mother tongue.

The author of 'Yämäqabru täl' (Worm of the grave), Säyed Abägaz, is described in his book's second preface as the son of the Näggadras Abägaz Säyäd of Dessie. The writer of this preface is Qäñazmač Amäde Lämna, an Amharic name, but as his son's name is Mähämäd Lämna, it is assumed both are Muslim. The relationship between the author and Qäñazmač Amäde is owing to the latter's interest in the author's essay, 'Yäman læğ näh'? (Whose son are you?) which decries the traditional practice of considering suitability for marriage on the basis of lineage.

A few words such as dahray, used for 'rear' in the phrase 'yädahray bär' (rear door), həyyab (gift), and əmba (mesa-like mountain) which are Tigrinya suggest that the author is a Tigrinya speaker.

Little is known about the author of the third work, 'Angät yalläw yəfräd' (Let him with sense judge), Abdul-bari' Mähämäd. He declares that he is the son of Hağği Mähämäd Märära, but that is all. His work was also printed by the Addis Matämiya Bet which is located in Addis Ababa.

It will be seen from the foregoing that there is a certain community of interest linking these three writers together. Asmara, Dessie, Addis Ababa and Harar are associated not only in these stories but by the personal relationships of the authors.

The second work, Yämäqabru täl, has social justice as its theme. It relates the story of Mäkonnən, a young university graduate, whose active social conscience does not prevent him from succumbing to the blandishments

of a wealthy widow, Mən Qärräš, who introduces him to the life of the wealthy class. He tries to maintain his egalitarian standards by insisting the servants be allowed to listen to his talk on life abroad which he gives to the noble guests of Mən Qärräš. He protests vigorously when he is told that a young slave girl was buried alive to serve Mən Qärräš' grandmother in her grave <sup>(12)</sup>.

As he comes to know Mən Qärräš better, he discovers that her father, Fitawrari—(so in text), has built up his estate through illegal means: usury, fraud and murder. His relationship with her is ended only when he finds out she has been unfaithful to him. He knocks her down, but she takes revenge by having him beaten, castrated and then left in the woods to be eaten by hyenas.

Mäkönnən is saved by a widow searching for her son. She takes him home and restores him to health. After his recovery, Mäkönnən and the widow's son, Efreṃ, decide to put an end to the Fitawrari's abuses, but the Fitawrari gets wind of their coming and surrounds the house. Mäkönnən escapes in the guise of a nun and becomes the leader of a band whose efforts are directed toward compelling the Fitawrari to pay his peasants for the work they do. An unsuccessful attempt to capture the Fitawrari permits him to bring in a force of police against Mäkönnən. Priests intervene to stop the fighting, but Mäkönnən does not trust the Fitawrari to keep his word. The Fitawrari succeeds in depriving Mäkönnən's band of water and when Mäkönnən breaks out of his hideout, he is felled by a stray bullet and captured.

After his capture, the timely arrival of the district governor prevents Mäkönnən from being killed by the Fitawrari. An inquiry is held, Mäkönnən is exonerated and the iniquity of Mən Qärräš and the Fitawrari exposed. The book closes with their suicide by jumping into a river.

Except for a fleeting reference to the use of the Quran along with the Bible in court procedure, there is no reference to Muslims or Islam in any part of the work. Christian religious figures appear and there are several brief Bible quotes, but they are too common to indicate any special knowledge of the Bible on the author's part. Mäkönnən, despite his advanced education, some of which was had abroad, is presented as being a devout Christian. Before undertaking his campaign against the Fitawrari, for instance, he prays to God, realizing that revenge is best left to Him. While he scorns the priest who is sent to him by the Fitawrari to arrange a reconciliation, feeling that this priest is too subservient to an ungodly man, he is properly respectful when other priests come to arrange a cease-fire, even falling on his knees before them.

The chief interest of this work is the reflection it gives of the reformist thinking of young, educated Ethiopians. The author in his preface inveighs against those who make life miserable for others in the pursuit of their own

(12) See E. HABERLAND, *Untersuchungen zum athiopischen Königtum*, Wiesbaden (1965), p. 308, for a reference to this practice.

selfish interests as in Rhodesia, South Africa and Viet Nam. His real interests lie within Ethiopia, however, as the thrust of the book is against the possessors of unmerited privilege. Each Ethiopian, he maintains, whose forebears have enriched the soil with blood and bone in defense of their country, the soldier, the farmer, the suffering student, should be considered as 'balabbat' i.e. notables, not just the landowners and high-rise owners.

The book elaborates on the theme of justice for the oppressed. The Fitawrari keeps slaves in contravention of the law, obtains land through usury and pressuring widows to deed him their land in return for life-time protection after which he poisons them. He exploits his tenants and smallholders to work his land for which service he does not even provide food. The author is careful to keep this work from sounding too subversive by presenting the Fitawrari as operating outside the law. At the end of the story, he has the governor scold the people for allowing the Fitawrari's abuses to go unreported.

The author gives a program of social reform in the guise of a talk on foreign conditions, alleging them to be the systems prevailing in the three Western countries he has visited. One system calls for grain to be delivered by the farmers to the government in return for a check which cannot be hoarded as it becomes invalid a year after date of issue. Those who do not produce food receive checks for their labor which can be exchanged for food. Another system has the government control the profits of private farms, companies and merchants and sees to it that the pay of the workers is commensurate with the organization's income. Skilled auditors keep constant check and companies concealing income are confiscated. Since foreign merchants coming into the country use the requests of native officials to purchase stock for them as a means of making these officials subordinate to them, they succeed in hiring and firing workers at will and preventing these workers from obtaining redress from the government. This practice has been prohibited, with violators having their stocks confiscated and being dismissed from office. However, their families receive an allotment from the government so they will not starve but must live 'like common people'.

Unions have a workers' committee to discuss a worker's appeal for a redress of grievances. After this, the matter is taken up with the company administrator then with the government's labor department. Should the company administrator have the labor department officials under his control, these officials are brought to trial, dismissed and their property confiscated.

It is noteworthy that all the abuses are automatically assumed to come from the part of the government or the foreign businessman and that no other remedy is proposed than instant confiscation.

A third procedure, aimed at illegal sources of income such as bribery, usury and theft would require accounting for any conspicuous consumption not in keeping with an individual's income, all such illegal funds to be confiscated. People who had money buried in pots, invested in 'villas' or kept in a bank or money belt would be asked to give it up to establish

new industries. After the workers in these industries received their portion of the profits, the rest would go to the government which would return the original capital to the owners. Meanwhile a vigorous campaign against bribery would be instituted, with specially trained people being posted in each company office. These people would offer bribes to officials and take pictures of them taking these bribes by means of cameras concealed in their pockets.

The author's anti-traditionalist tendencies appear when he has the notables question Mäkönnən. In such a society, notables would not be given special consideration before the law. There would be no *dägg-tənat* (the traditional practice of waiting outside the door of an influential person in order to obtain his influence in settling a problem in one's favor). The author attempts to give appeal to his vision of an educated society based on merit by having Mäkönnən point to a map on which India and England are shown, and pointing out that 'this island, no bigger than the butt of a griddle' achieved domination of huge India for 100 years through learning, science and technology, not through sheer mass of numbers.

The author's reforms parallel many of the ideas put forth in Abbe Gu-bāñña's 'Alwällädəm' (I will not be born). Common to both works is the conviction that foreigners are oppressing native workers, exercising undue influence in the government and removing profits from the country. An especial target of both is the class that unjustly profits from the labor of the poor and deprives the tiller of his land.

In *Gərmaččāw Tāklä-hawaryat's* 'Araya', the notable, or *balabbat*, was presented as jealous of his privilege, thoroughly conservative and disturbed by the changes resulting from the introduction of Western ways and the education of the young along Western lines<sup>(13)</sup>. While a certain faint criticism seems implicit in his presentation, *Gərmaččāw* sees the notable as a *pater familias*, capable of good whereas in this work they are presented only as the enemy, whose complete removal is indicated as being a wholly desirable goal.

Apparently aware of the limited appeal of his disquisitions on social conditions, the author has seasoned his work with a certain amount of sex as in the incident in which *Mən Qärräš* seduces *Mäkönnən*, and violence—*Mäkönnən's* beating and castration, the battle with the *Fitawrari* and the police among others. These incidents however do not disguise the basically didactic nature of this work.

The third work, 'Angät yallāw yəfräd' (Le thim with sense judge) by *Abdulbari* Mähämäd is a moralizing play in ten acts, written in rhymed couplets in a metre of four stresses. It is not so much a play as a poem in the narrative style of medieval poems such as those written by *Chretien de Troyes*, only with the speakers indicated as they are in play scripts. An occasional 'stage direction' is supplied at rare intervals, often at the beginning

(13) *GƏRMAČČÄW TÄKLÄ-HAWARYAT, Araya, Addis Ababa, 1947, p. 101 ff.*

of each 'act' but usually there is no indication of the location of the action except what can be deduced from the speaker's words <sup>(14)</sup>.

The focus of the play is not very clear. It begins with a condemnation of those who overindulge in credit by presenting the case of two young bachelors who spend their money on cigarettes, liquor and women. It then introduces their doxy friends, Assälläfäčč and Kābbābuš who turn away from them in search of richer game, namely the accounting department chiefs, Ayyälä and Ambärbär, who finance their sprees with company money. Even so, the story shifts from Ambärbär and his passion for Assälläfäčč to the efforts of Ambärbär's abandoned family to find him. The family is eventually brought together after one of Ambärbär's sons is rescued from death by a friendly angel. When the other son upbraids his father for deserting them, the father seeks out a thug and incites him to murder this son. Both are soon caught and at the conclusion of their trial, all the characters appear onstage to receive a moral lecture from the governor of the town and to ask the audience to judge them, an act which provides the title of the play.

The only Muslim character in the play is the shopowner Kädīr who makes only one brief appearance at the beginning of the play.

In its moralizing tone, its diffuseness of purpose and its language, this play differs little from similar writings by Christian writers. In its attack on drinking, overspending and consorting with prostitutes, it parallels 'Yāmalādaw dāha' (Broke next morning) by Däbbäbä Adäməqqe. The language is highly poetic with many obscure words and expressions, but this is a typical feature of works written in rhyme. The writer appears to have a good grasp of the rhyming conventions of Amharic poetry and to use them competently. As far as the Western reader can judge, the author's mother tongue is Amharic.

These three Muslim authors write like their Christian counterparts and on subjects that their Christian fellow authors have dealt with. This marks a change in orientation from the previous writings of Muslims of Ethiopia from religious subjects to wholly secular matters. It is also significant that they chose to write in Amharic when it was not impossible for them to have adopted Arabic as a literary medium. Their situation is not the same as that of the Gallas who have no literary tradition of their own (omitting of course those Gallas who became Muslims) and hence wrote in Amharic because once assimilated this was a logical step for them to take, even though Galla writers such as Pawlos Ñño and Kuma Ida'e occasionally interpolate brief sentences in Galla in their writings. Gallas might undertake to write more in their language, but official policy does not favor the publication of works in any Ethiopian language in daily use save Amharic and Tigrinya. The government's assimilationist tendencies do not favor Arabic

(14) A case in point is the opening of Act 9 on page 76 which begins with a soliloquy by Ambärbär. Though his wife speaks immediately afterwards, the action shows they are not visible to each other.

either, which may well have prompted support for the translation of the Quran (without an accompanying Arabic text) which was recently published (15). Be that as it may, the appearance of Muslim writers in Amharic marks a significant stage in the development of that language toward becoming the national language of Ethiopia.

Muslims writing in Amharic also promises the probability that the way of life, the thinking and the traditions of Muslim groups will become known through these works and provide insights into these matters no outsider could hope to attain. Another significant development may be that as Amharicization and literacy become more widespread, the members of these diverse Muslim groups will find themselves able to communicate with each other on matters of common interest which their diverse linguistic backgrounds and the limitations of the religiously oriented Arabic available to them have prevented them from doing thus far. Perhaps they will find through the ability to exchange ideas with their Christian co-nationals a means of overcoming that state Trimingham has described as 'though of the same race as the Abyssinians, they are psychologically aliens' (16).

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(15) *Qəddus Quran*, Artistic Printing Press, Addis Ababa 1961 A. M. This work was translated by Sayəd Mähämäd Sadiq and Muhammad Sani Habib and supervised by two graduates of Al-Azhar. Native scholars, one each from Wollo, Harar, Tigre, Shoa and Arussi provinces were chosen to review the translation.

(16) J. TRIMINGHAM, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, p. 30.