

NIBAAROOT MININ TA?

A SWAN SONG OF A POET

PREFACE

In its first issue of November, 1991, "Ziharari Xaba", a monthly newsletter published by the **Harari National League**, contained the following editorial remarks regarding its objectives:

ziharari xaba luukhukh min tawagaat?

min tatliimdaat?

Minilik naftanya zulmi aada zebe,

baad zebe, diin zebe, zabooraadabe

illaaw min aayna mahguut be taacaat.

The above quotation clearly states the fundamental problem confronting the Gey-Usu Nation -that of purging itself from the great harm (illa) inflicted upon it by the Nefteгна System through cupping (mahguut). But what are these injuries that need cupping?

Abdulhafiz Kalifa - one of the famous writers of modern Harar - in his poem, "Nibaaroot Minin ta?" written about twenty-five years ago, burrows his way into the bosom and mind of the Gey-Usu to dig out its pain and its tormented self. "nibaaroot minin ta?" is a repository of the collective agony and pain (illaach sabab be) of Harar resulting from a century-long Nefteгна oppression.

Although the Neftegna system - created and fashioned by the Amhara ruling class - forms the underlying basis on which the moral agony of Harar is manifested, it has to be remembered that this is only one aspect of the process that resulted in the gradual deterioration of the Gey-Usu condition. The other aspect is the socio-economic transformation of Harar from a predominantly agricultural society to a mercantile

society. The negative consequences of this transformation might have been less severe in the absence of alien Amhara politico-cultural domination. Having said that it is quite essential to put the transformation question in a historical (African) perspective.

The moral agony of the Geey usu' (Harari) poetically displayed in "nibaaroot minin ta?" cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both a fact and an issue demanding poetic expression.

Modern African cities have become the focal point for Western cultural invasion and diffusion into the countryside. Ngugi Wa Thongo - the celebrated Kenyan writer - observes in his article, **The language of African literature**, that the "national heritages of Africa were kept alive by the peasantry." According to Ngugi, the urban middle class is so consumed by an identity crisis - a crisis emanating from its perception of an illusory contradiction between speaking its mother tongue and belonging to a larger national geography - that "had it been left entirely to the petty bourgeoisie, African languages would have ceased to exist - with independence!"

Thus in the African context a nation without a peasantry is doomed to disappear as a nation; Its identity is in a grave danger. As the beloved Gey-Usu historian - **Abdulmuheimin A. Nasser** - puts it, it becomes a "disappearing identity."

The fundamental predicament of the Geey usu' identity lies in this: The gradual diminution of the peasantry as a dominant social group made it vulnerable to the cultural onslaught of alien forces. The Amharanization policy of the neftegna system was, of course, a deliberate and systematic attempt by the various Amhara rulers to dissolve distinct national entities into the melting-pot of the Empire State of Ethiopia. It has to be emphasized here that peasant societies, however, are in a better position to keep alive their language (which is a carrier of their culture and history) against this onslaught.

"nibaaroot minin ta?" is a passionate portrayal of the anguish and suffering of the Gey Usu ego by one of the most passionate tribunes of Harar - the late **Abdulhafiz Kalifa**. It is a political treatise written in the language of poetry, precisely because its exposition of the moral agony of Harar is at once the expression of the monstrous cruelty of the Neftegna system and the protest against the system. The following lines could be regarded as the quintessence of this protest veiled under the garb of poetic language:

Ayaamum killexa ayaam dija gir

qixxe girzoom azzo almoot khaana gir

altinwaawaxa maam maajna qabaxoo gir

nibaaroot minin ta hirir yilzaal khaana gir

yizaany yimashiim azzo khaana gir

kilmasha qadaam suguldum aasho gir

zag zaayo saam alasaagada gir

nibaaroot minin ta yikut max khaana gir

Therefore, I dedicate this paper to **Abdulhafiz Kalifa** who as a writer and as a martyr is forever enshrined in the great heart of his people.

Occupation and transformation of Harar

The incorporation of Harar into the Ethiopian Empire after the defeat of Amir Abdullahi's army by the invading forces of Menilik in 1887 marks a turning point in the history of the

Gey-usu people. The occupying forces of Menilik and succeeding rulers of Ethiopia controlled the economy, politics and culture of Harar by establishing what is commonly known as the Nefteгна system. But on the other hand the Gey-Usu (or city dwellers) ceaselessly struggled for its national rights, for the survival of Gey Sinan (the language of the city) and Geey aada (the culture of the city). Thus in collaboration with Somali compatriots the Gey Usu revolted in 1948 against the defunct Haile Selassie administration by initiating what has come to be known in the oral tradition of Harar as the "**Kulub**" movement.

The incorporation of Harar into the Ethiopian Empire has, primarily, changed the political status of the Gey-Usu from being a free nation to a subjugated nation. But this incorporation formed the basis for a second and more enduring transformation drastically changing the social life of the Gey-Usu.

The urban culture of Harar (Gey-Ada) was based on the irrigated and terraced gardens (Masnu), grain fields (Gey Fagay), and fallow fields (Gaffa) - commonly called the "Geey Harshaach". Although the reduction in the size of the Geey Harshaach (especially the

Gaffa fields) due to invading sedentary settlers dates back before Menilik's invasion, the period after Menilik was characterized by a transition of the Gey-Usu economy from Harashinat (peasantry) to Dukkaan Waddallanat (mercantilism) largely brought about by economic forces.

I have the opinion that these social forces - occupation and transformation - are mainly responsible for the migration of the Gey Usu from his city and for the severance of the old familial and social ties - that network of interrelationships within which individual elements of the society are interwoven into a social whole. With the break up of the social fabric, the ethical standards of the Gey Usu (ethical standards refers to that interrelated complex of ideas which centres around the notions of brotherhood and affinity, right and wrong) has undergone drastic changes.

As a result, a gradual drift from the Geey aada plunged the Gey Usu into the morass of insoluble contradiction, i.e, the contradiction between the egalitarian values of the Geey aada and the individualistic culture of the new mercantilism. Thus the traditional sense of duty, of decency, of fairness, of guilt, of unselfishness gave way to rugged individualism, to self-indulgent hedonism and to naive cynicism.

Abdulhafiz Kalifa - The conscience of modern Harar

"nibaaroot minin ta?" was a logical response by one of the rational souls of Harar to the deterioration of the Gey Usu condition as it drifted away from the egalitarian values of Geey aada and sunk deeply into the waters of egotistical calculations.

There are no static values in social life. Every thing grows or it must decay and this is particularly pertinens in the realm of values. However, the corruption of every civilization begins with the corruption of its "underlying principles". The lamentations of A. kalifa in "nibaaroot minin ta?" demonstrate the authors indignation and sorrow at the gradual corruption of the "underlying principles" controlling the lives and destinies of the individual members of the society:

Alax mulux zitaam dugusin ta baayo gir

yahmalli iji sinat le amarakoot shikif max aasho gir

dumdum zita hirqaa'oot yixxenaba qabaxa gir

nibaaroot minin ta uuga alaqa gir

His rejection of the more frivolous pleasures of the world of ceremony along with its extravagant ritual:

balachu baayo maam zannaar adiijo gir
sallixuw hashoo maam bun qahwa baayo gir

His weariness with the world:

uruusuw maxoora angat amosew gir
nibaaroot minin ta? maax max masata gir

and his concern with his inner life

"iqoot shahan sawra alkhaana gir
bahar kut boo'o maam altiwako gir"

reveals to us his Neo-Platonic thinking which regards the material world simply as a testing ground for a man's soul. In "nibaaroot minin ta?" A. Kalifa attempts to deal with the social life of modern Gey Usu in the perspective of a metaphysics of man's fate "Iqootuw ishoot be zayri'o khaana gir". The very title of his poem - Nibaaroot Minin ta - poses the problem metaphysically.

"nibaaroot minin ta?" - A critique of the Gey Usu Nibaraoot

As a keen observer of his people, A. Kalifa understood the basic problems of his time. He subjected the different facets of Gey Usu Nibarot into scrutiny. Penetrating the Gey Usu soul, he breathed into his poem, its ambition, its suffering and its weaknesses. Broadly speaking we can identify three characters each of which conceives, behaves and acts after its own fashion. They are The Idle, The Pretender and The Self-indulgent. Their values differ from each other and so they are sensitive to certain things and blind to what they do not wish to see. The world in which Abdulhafiz's characters live determines their behaviour and activity. It is a harsh, tormented world from which his characters seem to escape to a fictitious world of their own. The reader of "nibaaroot minin ta?" is confronted with this cruel world thus:

Faraakh yiqabxo maam qalbi tasqaaqala gir
hoojiw imayuqo giish be hadaro gir
milhaaj zalela giishum yifaro khaana gir

nibaaroot minin ta maax max masata gir

In the next pages A. Kalifa's characters will be presented as they unfold themselves in their behaviour and actions.

The Idle

Bala'o sacho maam nye'o naqaho gir

leexo waalalo maam gaar max gaba'o gir

yigabo waqti wum yixalo khaana gir

nibaaroot minin ta yikut max khaana gir

From these first three lines the reader is carried along into the world of the alienated, vaguely disquieting and menacing. There is a complete separation between the life of the idle as he thinks about it and his life as he lives it:

Tastiiw yifaaco zaal limaay roohaqa gir

atnafsaakh baayo maam tinfaash alaaco gir

which results in the total estrangement of the individual even from himself:

Qaamuw qonaxo maam saatalqaam alhaca gir

The condition of the unemployed is even more severe, not only because

"afeet max isaal mihra alaganyo gir" but also his hopes of returning back to farming is frustrated by:

harshiiw yasacho lem miy qabaxo gir

qarxa' khaana maam gufat daraqa gir

After long years of negligence, the good old agriculture has crumbled

"maagat tadmamasa maam afar tamala'a gir"

which the author hints at with sullen melancholy.

As the stable core of his life recedes

"uruus kilafalaxa karsi aqooqa gir

nattu bizha beem aax rabaax fagaga gir"

the idle person sinks further and further away into the abyss of boredom "nibaaroot minin ta miraaq masata gir". As Eldrige Cleaver said, "Life is motion and motion required direction." But for the alienated person life is at a dead end, so that the approaching hour of rest "yigabo waqtiw " is, for him, repugnant "yixalo khaana gir".

The Pretender

The group of people subsumed under this category live in a suppressed struggle with the world around them, that is, in an effort to suppress the disparity which exist between their life as it is and their life as it should be, they are forced to enter into false situations:

Ayuqbuny baayo maam la'ay be tashelamo gi

karsiiw agaro maam libaasha abeeso gir

ayqir max baayo maam dirqi sehaqo gir

nibaaroot minin ta iskizkiz max khaana gir

Their lives are organized in accordance with their values "ayuuqbuny" which they accept unquestioningly and obey the demands it makes upon them "dirqi sahaq". They are prisoners of their own pretension and so in trying to mould reality:

Yizaany baayo maam nuuruw eqabo gir

to their image of it, they become exhausted even before they are active:

"imaydalgo dalagama wi zi' takoo'a gir'

The Self-Indulgent

Possessing both money and leisure, left entirely to its own devices, this social set behaves in ways that are peculiar to itself marked by a certain unconscious comedy:

qarshi aaco maam buskut wakhabo gir

inzoo be yirzaal walhax max aasho gir

They are endowed with a certain naivete which is intrinsic to their position in society so that what is trivial for others is charming to them:

zinbi kat zaymila' sinaan le fayfayo khaano gir

and their face becomes distorted with sear which habit had rendered familiar to their features "sin wa arraatuw zalkut be aqaasaro gir".

Completely immersed in their own microcosmic world and oblivious to the world outside, it is infinitely more important to them to play contradictory roles in society as a means of safeguarding their solitary life. By indulging in extravagant ceremony, they define for themselves a way of life which is befitting to their conception of life. It is a gratuitous display of opulence, but of an opulence which has no other spectators than the actors who take part in it:

Zitaa zalta qixxeem gaar zinaaw ri'ew gir

xunsus sababzo leem seeranya fukkara aasha beew gir

Amid all the pomp and arrogance:

iqalxaakh wa firuny max baayo gir

uqaakh baayo maam angat aqaanano gir

nibaaroot minin ta ruhuw alamaajo gir,

there is already awakened the fire that is never quenched:

which in its effect is no less devastating than is committed by negligence on the terraced gardens of Harar:

Bunaach azeeb zinyaam uuldumeekh baaya gir

azeeb zinaara jammi' bootali khaana gir.

Conclusion

The melancholy thoughts of A. Kalifa in "nibaaroot minin ta?" cast a gloomy shade on all spheres of modern Gey Usu social life. They are tears of sorrow that flow, not from his eyes, but in the depth of his heart

"qalbi be zamasaro waay ibi' ", as he observes the gradual erosion of the Egalitarian values of the Geey aada which give meaning and direction to life.

The image of the past "baabaach kutub be zitwaaqara aada " glided like a phantom through every line of his poetry. This aching of the heart is a reflection of the tension between his ideal world and the real world around him which has lost its moral base:

matbaakhat massaadab uwum miraas max aasho gir

haq wa hulluw mookh goobana aasho gir

hinbi qir yilzaal qummuuxxo mala'o gir

haq lalu makhnasaa mookh goofaay masalo gir

Postscript

Towards a New Harmony:

"There is no remembrance which time does not obliterate, nor pain which death does not terminate"

says the Knight of La Mancha, in Cervantes' novel Don Quixote, one of the greatest comic figures of all time. To this we add: There is no repression which Revolution does not terminate.

One early May morning the Ethiopian people woke up bewildered as the Nefteгна system crumbled before their eyes by the gallant forces of the EPRDF. With sheer delight they wept - tears of joy. For the defeat of the hated Derg regime heralds the coming of a bright future of Harmony and togetherness.

With the demise of the policy of Amharanization and the restoration of national rights, a golden opportunity has been created for the Renaissance of the Gey Sinan as a language of formal education and of conceptualization. The integration of the language of formal education with the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community restores the Gey Waldi to his society and environment. "With that harmony between himself, his language and his environment as his starting point, he can learn other languages and even enjoy the positive humanistic ...elements in other people's literatures and cultures without any complexes about his own language, his own self, his environment."

Someone recently remarked to me that for him A. Kalifa is not dead. I said, "Yes, that is true. He lives in the person of **Abdumuheimin A. Nasser** whose knowledge of the Gey

Sinan and the Gey Tarikh is unsurpassed by any one alive and on whose shoulders rests squarely the task of restoring the Gey Sinan as the language of education and thinking.

Notes

1. Swan song: this word is defined in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as follows:

From the belief that a swan sang sweetly when about to die - last performance, appearance, work before death of a poet, musician etc"

Although the evidence suggesting such a description of "nibaaroot minin ta?" with exactitude are not available to me, however, given the fact that the work being, no doubt, the most complete expression, and aesthetically the most satisfying of all A. Kalifa had to say convinced me to describe it as such

2. The ethical standard of the community is " that interrelated complex of ideas which centres around the notions of right and wrong, justice and humanity" Anna Van, T in her book The semantics of international law, New york, 1953 pp-3.

3. Ngugi wa Thion'o, The Language of African Literature. The quotations are taken from my personal notes and not directly from the journal in which the article appeared.