

A NOTE ON A
MODERN ETHIOPIAN PROTEST POEM

by Richard Greenfield^{1*}

The Ethiopian literary tradition, in Ge'ez and later in Amharic, is a long one: too long to be discussed here.² Suffice it to say that both Ge'ez and Amharic, now the first official language of Ethiopia, value the double entendre as a form of wit. In verse, surface or apparent meaning is referred to as 'wax' and underlying innuendo, often more important, as 'gold'. Traditionally, great freedom of comment has been permitted even orally at court, always provided the 'jester' was witty in this manner. Indeed, so important is 'wax and gold' that it has been taken as a central theme around which to write a study of Amhara society.³ However, all this is not to say that verse and prose written in Amharic cannot also be quite direct; indeed the little social criticism and general 'protest' writing surviving from the reigns of Emperor Eyasu (1911-1916), Empress Zauditu (1916-1930) and particularly Emperor Haile Sellassie (1930-) and from the Italian Occupation has been so. Yet an element of 'wax and gold' is seldom entirely absent.

Also important is the fact that in Northeastern Africa, as in Arabia, poetry, especially spoken poetry, has immense cultural significance. It has long been a custom in the University College of Addis Ababa for the best poems of the year to be read aloud over the loudspeakers to the crowds surrounding the football field on college open days. Programmes of cultural activities run together with athletic events. Almost always the Emperor and his entourage, members of the royal family and government, attended these 'College Days' and custom has not changed since the absorption of the University College into the larger structure of the Haile Sellassie First

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University in December 1961.

However, a newer precedent was set early in 1961 when a poem, read before the emperor and entitled "The Poor Man Speaks", was written and delivered in a manner which could easily be interpreted as severe criticism of the government and ipso facto therefore (in Ethiopia) of the emperor. A limited number of copies of the poem were sold to the public and their black market price by that very evening in the nightclubs and bars of Addis Ababa had risen as never before. Attempts were made to suppress the poem and the author found it prudent to retire somewhat into the background.

This fairly minor incident was remembered the following year when the students announced their 'College Day', to be held on Saturday, the 9th of June, 1962. The security forces discreetly asked for copies of the new poems that would be read to the public presumably in front of the Emperor. The student leaders -- not only the poets -- protested this 'affront' to their 'freedom', and refused to supply them. Either the Security Chief or the President of the University, the Emperor's grandson-in-law, conveyed this fact back to the palace, and the Emperor did not attend the College Day. The student newspaper stated that this was because of the question of 'censorship' of the poetry and termed the problem one of "protocol". Even so, three Amharic poems were read and sold at 5 Ethiopian cents per duplicated copy. By evening the exchange value of these poems was 50 cents and it subsequently rose even higher. These poems are in the tradition of "The Poor Man Speaks" of 1961. The first, "Submit to Cross Examination" or "Prepare to Answer Questions", is discussed in this paper. The second, entitled "Life", dwells on the uneven distribution of wealth in Ethiopia, -- the rich, it points out, are few and the poor multitudinous. The third, "You Are Lost on the Plain", seeks to examine the purpose of a soldier's life and the nature of his duty -- a significant question not so many months after the abortive

coup d'etat of 1960 and the Army crisis of 1961 which the writer has described elsewhere.⁴

A synopsis of the poem "Submit to Cross Examination" might go as follows:-

Questions come to the mind of the poet over and over again and he is puzzled, troubled, and frustrated. He seeks answers from people of all ages, occupations, and status, but none are of any help to him. He even goes to the forest to seek answers from different species in the animal world but they too fail him. Finally -- and this has a "gold" significance, since several leading radicals or progressives died in or following the abortive coup d'etat of December 1960 -- the poet travels to the "country of the dead" and asks the inhabitants there his series of problem questions.

With the first question begins the main body of the poem which is concerned with social criticism. The significance of the more disquieting aspects of contemporary Ethiopia -- from the poet's point of view (which is not untypical of many young intellectuals) -- are surveyed; the description of wealth and the gap between the haves and the have-nots; the oppression of man by man and the despair and burdens which afflict the intellectual in the system, are all touched upon -- more perhaps than the nature of the political structure itself. Criticism of civil servants who are able to adjust to a semi-feudal society are quite common in modern Ethiopian protest writing. In the 1960's particularly, the problems of beggars and displaced youths in city society, of the peasant farmers, and the problems presented by the attitudes of the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church, the government security services, by censorship and control of the press, by prostitution, etc., have frequently been discussed and this poem is thus again typical. The poet is also concerned by the conception of freedom and its interpretation in a society which uses the same Amharic word for that concept as for the concept of national independence.

Finally, the poet, exhausted by the fact that no one, including the dead, supplies immediate answers, asks his audience to remain silent. Significantly, in the sense of the "gold", he remarks that they are not "completely" dead, i.e. their ideas are a clue--even an inspiration--to such as he. The poet concludes by expressing his satisfaction that he is reaching an audience and that his words (interpreted in the "gold") are, in fact, a vehicle for the ideas of people now dead!

Even so the force of this poem lies less in its use of traditional "wax and gold" and rather more in its somewhat unusually bold enumeration of the uglier aspects of life in Ethiopia, as the poet sees them. The poet uses symbolism and extended metaphor, but the Amharic is nonetheless that of the common man charged with emotion and concern for social reform and an attempt has been made to convey this in the English. Some degree of paraphrasing in the translation has therefore been unavoidable.

Submit to Cross-examination

I am puzzled and worried because I cannot find an answer to a
question in my heart.

The laughter in me is turned into earnest sadness.

I am supposed to know more than the ordinary man -

I am counted among the learned men of my time -

My thoughts soar above the clouds- But all, all in vain!

My knowledge has been wasted-

I am unable to realize the hopes locked in my breast.

I have gone in search of the solution to my problem.
I thought that children might know the answer;
Then I thought, if children do not, older people might know;
I went to servants and maids too;
I went to great landlords and also to mere squatters;
I went to men and to women;
To the handsome and the beautiful;
To learned men and to illiterates; to rulers and to subjects;
To urban dwellers and to country folk.
I asked them all- everyone of them.
Then I went to the woods and asked every species of animal
In the vain hope of finding the answer to my problem.
It was then that I determined not to seek help from any living being.
Dejected and tired, I started out on a different journey.
A journey to the country of the dead.
The dead will be able to help me, I thought;
And I started to ask questions one after the other.

Inhabitants of the land of the dead!
Men of the remotest world!
Tell us about your country-
About its limits and boundaries;

Its differentiating characteristics.

How is your country different from ours?

Jealousy, intrigue and outright meanness-

We have these in our country!

Do you have them there, too?

We entreat you to tell us all about your country-

Lest we arrive there all unprepared.

We are convinced that we cannot outlive time.

We only drift along.

Oh for a meeting with a man who has returned from the land of the dead!

I would like to ask him a thousand and one questions!

What is the political set-up in the realm of the dead?

Does it have a real pattern?

Or only a pattern without a design?

How about its riches?

Are they collected into the hands of the few?

Does oppression, slavery and the torturing of man by man abound there?

Are there people who dance while others weep?

Or do people hold meetings, discussions and strikes for a superior end?

Are there engineers, doctors, lawyers and such there?

What is the number of people inhabiting that world?
Do the people live at peace with their leaders?
Or do they quarrel and rise up against them?
Are the ruled silent, afraid and timid?
Or do they speak up about their grievances?
Are people's lives partly hidden for fear of murderers?
Is the sky there above the ground?
Do flowers bloom?
Do birds sing at harvest time?
Do people have freedom of expression?
What happens to man if he express complaint against the rising sun
And the coming of daybreak-
For such phenomena, as he sees them,
Signal but the beginning of a day without food and drink?
Can he complain about having to walk in the mud barefoot?
Is he free to express his views on another man's merits and demerits?
Are actions such as these tolerated?
What do the people of the country of the dead value?
Do people sleep there?
Do boredom and despair abound there?
Is work taboo?
What is the mental state of people there?

Are the people brave?

Do they revolt, after deliberation, when there is such necessity?

Do people there go for the glittering and the superficial-

For cars bought on credit and sophisticated clothing?

What is the attitude of public servants towards their democratic responsibilities?

Are they honest and upright men?

Or are they mere slaves to their own selfish desires

And stooges of the powers that be?

Are there poor men in the country of the dead?

How do they earn their livelihood?

Are they literate or illiterate?

Do they beg in the streets

And sleep on open verandas

And on flights of steps exposed to the cold and the weather

Or do they support themselves?

What is the life of the farmer there?

What kind of plough does he have?

Does he own a farm of his own

Or is he merely a tenant farmer?

Does he merely farm for subsistence or for more?

Tell me about the average man's home!

Does it consist of a conical tukul with a thatched roof

A fireplace open and central
With cows beside it?
Are there priests, deacons and clergymen in the country of the dead?
Answer only of that kind which knows not what it talks of!
What of their number? Overwhelming great?
And do they sing the same rhyme year after year?
Do they ever harp on prayer and fasting?
Two things whose significance they understand not one jot!
Do they teach the observance of a thousand and one holy days?
Today is Sunday! Tomorrow is St. George, the next Abo,
Then comes St. Gabriel, St. Michael and St. Mary,
Then St. John, Kidanê Mihret, Bishop Taklé Haymanot,
St. Steven and the rest!⁵
If your people observe all these for their souls' salvation,
How can they live from day to day?
And what of those who do not conform and holiday?
Are they excommunicate - ostracised from society?
Does your church use these weapons too?
What do your priests teach of hell and heaven?
Is hell said to be full of worms with no sleep there?
And fires that burn without end?
Do they answer Yes! No! Black! White! - no grey?

And the educated there, are there any?

Is theirs too a life of fear and conflict?

Are they productive and resourceful

Or sterile?

Committed - or fickle?

Changing like the chameleon?

Is the educated man in the country of the dead regarded as an outcast
from society?

An eccentric?

Or is he recognized for what he is?

Where does he live?

In a room in a hotel, or an apartment, or where?

What does he do if he cannot sleep?

Smoke, drink and frolic?

Play chess?

Or just drift along?

Are there a great number of city slickers in your country?

Are your cities crowded with informers and secret police?

-Immature and inexperienced, dogging the weak and the innocent

-watching government citizens with evil intention?

What do they find?

What do they report?

Do they really know what they are doing?

Do they realize the consequences of their actions?

They sow the seeds of fear

And distrust among the people.

What principles can they be following?

What do they live for other than to ruin the lives of others?

Are there prostitutes in the country of the dead?

Do they stand by their doorways bidding the passers-by to enter?

Working at night and sleeping during the day?

How do they dress at night?

Do they look like scarecrows with their short skirts?

Or do they have beautiful national dresses?

What do the rich of the country of the dead think of the lives of
these prostitutes?

Do they think their lives are full of luxury or hardship?

The ability to earn the bare necessities of life-

Food, shelter and clothing.

Getting and spending;

Living from hand to mouth;

-Sequential misery;

Caught in a net of necessary evil,

Selling themselves to the beat of music.

Tell me, is the country of the dead also a city of prostitutes?

The misery of young girls;

The cancer of a whole people;

That is what prostitution is.

A fast spreading disease it is.

What laws are made to check it?

And what replaces it?

What halts its devastation?

Is there censorship in your country?

Does it pass for wisdom to organise to kill

The flowering author

And intentionally to belittle his work?

Is your heritage of literature mature or infant?

Of what do your authors write?

Do they merely plagiarize themes of flattery, eulogy and hero worship?

Of what do your poets sing

And your politicians propound?

And the reading public?

Is it sick of it - of this great garbage heap?

Do you censor literature to glorify the fatuous
To bury the sublime?
Is there freedom in the country of the dead?
What is this Freedom?
Has it the image of chauvinism -
Cheap nationalism -
Or naught but hollow, bragging, lip service?
Or has it form without shape,
Solidity without Rigidity?
Is the tradition of freedom rooted in your past?
Or but an innovation of the time?
If it is not alien to your culture,
On what criteria do you judge it?
Could you mean merely 'territorial integrity'
When you think of Freedom?
Could that be what you mean by Freedom?
What exactly is Freedom?
Can mere physical survival be called freedom?
Does hunger, poverty, suffering and complacency surround you
And you call it freedom?
Do common men in the country of the dead

Know that others make light of their freedom
And exchange it for their own vested interest?

People, I could go on asking you questions one after another . . .

But I think I will cut my questions short

For fear that you might get bored.

All the same, I want to thank you -

People of the country of the dead -

For your kind attention.

For now - keep my words;

And the answers that are suggested by your minds,

Keep them too.

You are dead - yet not completely dead.

You hear but you don't answer.

But your listening to me - this is significant achievement enough -

You have been doing half the talking!

It takes two people to hold a conversation;

One listens while the other talks.

Footnotes

1. Mr. Greenfield wishes to acknowledge great help in the translation and discussion of this poem from an Ethiopian who prefers to remain anonymous. He is also grateful to Praeger Publishers for permission to use a few lines of the poem already published by them in translation in his Ethiopia, A New Political History, London and New York, 1965.
2. A useful summary of Ethiopian literary tradition may be found in U.S. Army Area Handbook for Ethiopia, Department of Army Pamphlet 550-28, Washington, 2nd Edn. 1964, pages 137-146. A parallel but abbreviated section is to be found in George A. Lipsky (editor) Ethiopia, Its Peoples, Its Society, Its Culture, The American University, MRAF Press, New Haven 1962, pages 121-28.
3. Donald Levine, Wax and Gold, Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture, University of Chicago, 1965. See especially pages 5-17.
4. See Greenfield, op. cit.
5. Further information on these figures is to be found in Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church, 4 Vols., Cambridge, 1928. A recent study on the significance of Ethiopian names, with translations, is Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria, Les Noms Propres, Les Noms de Bâptême et L'Etude Généalogique des Rois d'Ethiopie (XIII-XX Siècles) A Travers Leurs Noms Patronymiques, Belgrade 1966.