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In memoriam Didier Morin (1947–2016)

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In memoriam Didier Morin (1947–2016)*

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Didier Morin (b.16 December 1947, Paris, d.11 December 2016, Saint-Quentin) studied Amharic with Joseph Tubiana, and ‘Afar with Edouard Chédeville at Langues O’, namely the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales. At the same time, he took courses in the prestigious Sciences Po Paris, and, in 1973, obtained his diploma there. Meanwhile, he defended his MA dissertation in linguistics on southern ‘Afar at Langues O’. In the following years he spent considerable time in Djibouti, where he first stayed as a volunteer of the *aide technique* and, between 1978 and 1982, in the section of human sciences at the Institut supérieur d’études et de recherches scientifiques et techniques (ISERST), the institute that later became the Centre d’Études et Recherches de Djibouti.

In 1986 he defended his PhD thesis (*thèse d’État*) on the grammatical typology of ‘Afar and Somali at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3. Three years later he entered the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), where he first worked at the Centre d’étude d’Afrique noire of Bordeaux (CEAN, UMR 5115; later renamed as the *laboratoire* Les Afriques dans le monde or LAM), and, from January 2001, at the Langage, Langues et Cultures d’Afrique Noire (LLACAN, UMR 8135), where he was *chargé de recherche* until his retirement in 2012.

After 1982 he travelled back several times to Djibouti to perform further fieldwork on ‘Afar and on Somali, but he also worked on Sāho and Beḡa in Sudan and in Egypt. He taught both in France and abroad.

Morin spoke ‘Afar and Somali fluently, and his keen interest not only in the language, but also in the culture and traditions of the communities he studied is already apparent in one of his earliest works, namely the ‘Note de synthèse, Rapport à la Commission en vue de la codification des coutumes’, that he submitted in 1974 to the Judge Jambon, who presided over the committee in Djibouti. In the course of carrying out his fieldwork in ‘Afar country, he travelled by foot accompanied by camel guides in order to administer twelve questionnaires: (1) du mariage, (2) de l’obligation alimentaire, (3) du divorce, (4) de l’autorité parentale, (5) de la dot, (6) de la filiation, (7) de l’adultère, (8)

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des régimes matrimoniaux, (9) de l'absence, (10) des incapables, (11) de la responsabilité, and (12) de l'expression de la coutume. This 'Note de synthèse' already included comparative remarks on the traditions of the Ciise (Somali spelling of ʿĪse), the major Somali-speaking group of Djibouti.

During the five years he spent at the ISERST in Djibouti he had the opportunity of meeting and working with Camad-Laqde Casan (ʿAfar spelling of Ḥámad Laʿdé Ḥasan), one of the most outstanding ʿAfar intellectuals, and Xasan Shiikh Muumin (Ḥasan Šiḥ Mūmin), a major Somali poet and playwright of the time. These two men not only had a wide knowledge of the traditions and oral literature of their respective peoples, but were also actively involved in the production of new literary works, within the framework of both traditional and modern genres: Camad-Laqde was a poet and a traditionist, and the author of a theatre play in ʿAfar, while Xasan Shiikh Muumin composed both traditional poetry and modern, frequently political, songs, as well as a considerable number of theatre plays. Collaborating with them made Morin profoundly different from many other linguists who were working on ʿAfar and Somali in those years, and who simply had an interest in the language, in some cases only a theory-oriented one.

Indeed, he never separated the languages he worked on from their oral literatures and, especially in the case of ʿAfar, from their historical and cultural traditions. Even in strictly linguistic papers, he often preferred to use examples drawn from poetry, proverbs or narratives rather than plain sentences elicited from his informants.

His first publications on oral literature, as far as the present writer knows, were *Contes de Djibouti* (1980) and 'Un conte somali: l'oryx que je tuerai' (1982), which appeared while he was still at the ISERST in Djibouti. The first one is an anthology of ʿAfar and Somali folk tales collected together with Xasan Shiikh Muumin and Camad-Laqde, that includes both the original texts and the French translations. The second one is an analysis of the textual and narrative style of a short Somali narrative about a fool (*doqon tala-xum*) and his stubborn wife. Textual features and the performance style of oral texts is an area he further developed in several chapters of the four monographs he published with Peeters between 1991 and 1999, and especially in *Prosodie du texte de style oral. L'exemple d'une langue accentuelle: l'afar* (2005), where he proposed a complex model aimed at replacing a more traditional syntactic description of sentences and their organization in discourse, with a stylistic perspective that takes both prosody and rhythmic segments into account, and shows how oral texts are organized into *espaces séquencés*, 'sequenced spaces'.

Oral literature, both in its poetic and narrative genres, is the topic of Morin's four monographs mentioned above:

- *Le Ginnili, devin, poète et guerrier afar* (1991) results from his cooperation with Camad-Laqde, and discusses °Afar vaticinal poetry, the rituals it is associated with, as well as its internal features, such as its rhythmic structure and other textual peculiarities that distinguish it from other oral genres.
- «*Des paroles douces comme la soie*» (1995) is a major work on folk tales in °Afar, Somali, Sāho, and Beġa. Its fourth and fifth chapters discuss the relationship between content and form and, respectively, *le style des contes*, suggesting an areal perspective for these four Cushitic cultures, on the basis of a corpus of three Beġa, four Sāho, four °Afar, and five Somali tales whose texts are reported in their transcribed form, and translated with a rich array of notes. Significantly, the book also includes long sketches ('presentations') of Beġa (pp. 19–61), °Afar and Sāho (pp. 62–127), and Somali (pp. 128–220), where important points on the phonology, morphology, and syntax of these languages are made.
- *Poésie traditionnelle des Afars* (1997), as Morin explicitly states at the beginning of the book, 'est composé de poèmes donnés par un seul informateur' (p. vii), namely the above-mentioned Camad-Laqde, and is the most important work published so far on the rich tradition of °Afar poetry. Its different genres and styles are discussed with a massive array of examples, that also include excerpts from religious poems written in °Afar *°aġamī* script in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a final chapter, excerpts from a theatre play by Camad-Laqde show how modern °Afar theatre alternates dialogues in colloquial style with sections composed in traditional poetic styles.
- *Le texte légitime* (1999) deals with traditional oral literary practices, their style, their *rhythmique*, and the organization of their content in a still wider comparative perspective, going beyond Beġa, Sāho, °Afar, and Somali to include a section on Amharic public discourse: 'Le style des proclamations en amharique' (pp. 77–84). He argues convincingly that major genres of poetry in the four Cushitic communities that he studies form a sort of *discours tendu*, where public discourse is the object of political control. In the third part, on 'L'écriture du conte oral' (pp. 151–253), he re-examines forty °Afar narratives published by Leo Reinisch in 1886, transcribed in contemporary °Afar orthography, and translated into French, with interesting remarks about how Reinisch reorganized these oral texts when he transcribed and prepared them for publication.

The language sketches in «*Des paroles*» are part of a group of strictly linguistic contributions by Morin, together with other descriptive papers such as 'Le nom en afar du sud' (1977), 'Connexité linéaire et connexité configurée: l'exemple du joncteur *oo* en somali' (2008), and several others. His contribution to Sāho and °Afar dialectology has also been of considerable

importance, from his remarks in «*Des paroles*» (pp. 62–77) to his 1994, 2006, and 2015 papers. They are major overall dialectological analyses of the Sāho-°Afar group, and whoever works on Sāho or °Afar dialect variation should study them with great attention.

Morin's interest in °Afar history and oral traditions appears in several detailed remarks especially in *Le Ginnili* and in *Poésie traditionnelle des Afars*, as well as in a number of his articles. His major work in this field is however the *Dictionnaire historique afar (1288–1982)*, first published in 2004, and subsequently revised in a second edition that appeared in 2015 with 174 additional pages. It is an encyclopaedia of °Afar history and traditions that, in Morin's words (in the *Avant-propos* to the first edition) was born from (1) the 'dégâts dans la mémoire collective que produit la scolarisation à Djibouti, où la francophonie se construit résolument sur l'amnésie' (p. 2, 2nd edition), (2) the disappearance of the older generation 'encore capable d'évoquer le souvenir de Húmmad b. Lo°oytá, de Tolá-ḥ Hanfaqé et de tant d'autres' (ibid.), and (3) his 'obligation de restituer aux Afars' (ibid.) what he had learnt from his teacher Edouard Chédeville, from Camad-Laqde, and the other informants that both he and Chédeville had worked with.

Morin's *Dictionnaire afar-français (Djibouti, Érythrée, Éthiopie)* published in 2012, with its 870 pages of entries (and 56 additional pages of a detailed 'Introduction grammaticale et méthodologique'), is the richest °Afar dictionary published until now. Yet it is even more than that, since (1) it is also a polylectal dictionary where the local variants of northern and southern dialects are meticulously reported, and (2) an encyclopaedic dictionary, where several entries not only provide translations, likely etymologies (especially for loanwords), grammatical information, a rich array of different meanings, and many examples of how a given lexical item is used (in phrases, idioms, proverbs, poetry, etc.), but also offer a considerable amount of cultural data. For example, the entry on *doonik*, n.f 'boutre', 'sailboat' (pp. 301a–302a), has a long box on the 'vocabulaire du boutre' with the terms for its different parts and sails, and the actions and verbs that are associated with it. It is followed by a section 'Vocabulaire' that discusses the relationship the °Afar have with the sea, and the main features of °Afar sea-faring vocabulary, starting from the southern °Afar proverb *meqe num doynikit ma gaca* (*me°e n. d. m. gaḥa*) 'a well-born man does not go to work on sailboats'. Another representative example is the entry *xaasiga* (*qaasiga*), n.f 'repas de chameau' 'meat-eating party', that describes the °Afar ritual of men slaughtering a camel and eating it in a separate place for several days, with a wealth of detail covering four columns of printed text (pp. 331b–333a). This dictionary of a language that is still mainly an oral one, and has only recently had texts written by native

speakers, is also remarkable for the choice of its registers. Indeed, beyond recording dialectal variants (as mentioned above), Morin states,

Tout en prenant en compte les usages dits «familier», «péjoratif», voire trivial (quelques anecdotes sont l'occasion de sortir du conformisme ambiant), la langue décrite est d'abord celle du registre soutenu, celui des genres littéraires oraux, pour autant qu'un dictionnaire, à travers ses exemples, puisse proposer des modèles. [...] Le lexicographe avoue ici sa préférence—son plaisir—à décrire l'afar dans son usage plénier (p. 1).

Morin realized the importance of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (*E Ae*) when it was launched in 1997 by Siegbert Uhlig's team in Hamburg.¹ He contributed to its five volumes with a considerable number of entries on 'Afar, Sāho, Beḡa, and Somali linguistics, anthropology, literature and history, as well as on several other topics: he authored or co-authored (also with the present writer) fifteen entries in *E Ae* I, ten in *E Ae* II, eight in *E Ae* III, nine in *E Ae* IV, and three in *E Ae* V. After the fourth volume of the *E Ae* was published, he wrote a fiery paper on 'La participation française à l'*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ou: Du déclin des études éthiopiennes en France' (2012), where he pointed out that too few French scholars had written entries for this encyclopaedia, and decried the steep decline of Ethiopian studies in his country during the last decades.

Finally, one has to remember Morin's enthusiastic contribution to the rebirth and renewal of the journal *Pount* since the first issue of its new series appeared in 2007. Almost every subsequent new number of the journal had an article, a book review, or some other kind of contribution by him.

Morin was a man of uncommon knowledge and education. He chose a difficult and little studied area of specialization, showing how rich and complex it was, and generously publishing as much as he could on it in order to preserve the memory of what was being lost, and to make it available to new generations of interested people, both in the Horn of Africa and in other parts of the world. He was also a man of great friendships and intense enmities, who had a profound esteem and respect for his teachers and for the major 'Afar and Somali intellectuals with whom he had the privilege of collaborating, such as Chédeville, Camad-Laqde Casan, Gamaaladdiin Qabdulkaadir 'Reedo', and Xasan Shiikh Muumin. He was impatient with

¹ *E Ae*. S. Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. Bausi, ed., IV: O–X; A. Bausi in cooperation with S. Uhlig, ed., V: Y–Z. *Supplementa. Addenda et Corrigenda. Maps. Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).

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people he considered trivial, or whose methodology he did not agree with. In a generation where the tradition and the intellectual curiosity of the great French humanist scholars is often lost to people with more narrow research interests, he was a living example of what Dante's Ulysses said,²

Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
Ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza

(You were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge).

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² Dante Alighieri, *Inferno (Hell)*, canto xxvi, vv. 119-120 (tr. Allen Mandelbaum).

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