



# Aethiopica 22 (2019)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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## Review

NĀGAŠĪ GĒDĀY, ጠግረ መዋቲ (*Tomarä mäwati*, 'Letter of the dead')

Aethiopica 22 (2019), 292–295

ISSN: 1430-1938

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Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut  
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik  
der Universität Hamburg  
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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NĀGAŚI GĀDĀY, ጠግረ ሙዋቲ (*Tomarä mäwati*, 'Letter of the dead') (Addis Abāba: Säggär mattämiya bet, 2010 EC = 2017/2018 CE). 328 pp. Price: 121.95 ETB, \$25.00. ISBN: n/a.

Among the Ethiopian Semitic languages, Gəʿəz is certainly one of the most studied. In the last two millennia, many biblical and canonical texts were translated from foreign languages into Gəʿəz and many hagiographical, philosophical, historical, and medical texts were composed in Gəʿəz. However, by the late thirteenth century at the latest, the language was no longer spoken. Nevertheless, the literary production in Gəʿəz continued up to the nineteenth century, and many manuscripts are productions of this period. From the twentieth century on, scholars have engaged in studying, editing, analysing, and translating these old texts into various contemporary languages rather than composing new Gəʿəz texts.

The purpose of the present contribution is to review a new book which virtually announces the revival of Gəʿəz literature. The book is a very recent work composed in Gəʿəz. Apart from the Amharic Introduction, the two-line announcement, and the remark on the back cover, all twenty-eight chapters, including the Acknowledgments, are written in Gəʿəz. It is a novel which realizes a new genre in Gəʿəz literature and which can be regarded as the first modern novel in Gəʿəz.

The Introduction claims that the composition of the novel aims to show Gəʿəz scholars how to put their expertise to good use and to share their experience with their society in different ways. Its second goal is to challenge the people who claim that 'Gəʿəz has died' (p. iii).

PLOT: The novel tells the story of a family. The central figure is Zäkewos, the Ethiopian version of the biblical name Zacchaeus, the oldest son of the family. Many individuals who have connections with the family are cleverly introduced in different parts of the novel. The story takes place in Əfrata, a small district near to the town of May Čāw in South Təgray (p. 14).

In Əfrata, there is a custom of burying a child born with short stature or with a serious physical disability soon after his birth since the inhabitants believe that the birth of a dwarf will bring drought and famine to their district (p. 34). Zäkewos is also a dwarf, but, luckily, he grew up safely under the protection of his parents. However, because of his extreme short stature, oversized head, small hands, and small fingers, he suffers both mentally and physically at the hands of people who see him as strange. He is not able to play or compete with his fellows (pp. 34, 162).

His father Baħrā Ab (lit. 'Sea of the Father') is a well-educated and successful person in the district. On the one hand, he is a priest whom the people love and respect because of his kindness, innocence, and social integrity. On the other hand, he is a farmer who

works hard cultivating his farms. He also owns enough livestock and a furnished country house. His thoroughness and warm love for his wife and kids mean that the family enjoys a happy life.

In their neighbourhood lives Gəyaz (the Ethiopian version of the biblical name Gehazi) who has been Baḥrā Ab's best friend since childhood. He is a lazy man who left his wife and children to suffer hunger at home. Baḥrā Ab strongly advises him to quit drinking and spending the whole day idly, to cultivate his land and to save his family from extreme poverty. Gəyaz becomes jealous and nurses a grudge in his heart. Then, with the help of his nephew who is a soldier, he has a catapult placed in Baḥrā Ab's farm in the night planning to kill him. As planned, the catapult goes off and Baḥrā Ab loses both legs (p. 311). Soon after the incident, Baḥrā Ab is taken by someone to a health centre, and from there to a far-away place. His family and neighbours believe that he has died after finding his legs on the farm together with enormous pieces of oxen flesh. They take some parts which they suppose to be his body and bury them (pp. 68–70, 90–104).

The incident changes the life of the family. Without Baḥrā Ab they lose their happiness. All the responsibility of looking after Zākewos and his two younger sisters is laid upon the shoulders of the wonderful wife and mother Mä<sup>°</sup>aza (lit. 'Fragrance'). She is very sad and constantly grieves the loss of her husband. Even so, she attempts to carry the burden of life alone. But, after some time, poverty starts to take its toll. To feed the children, she sells all the cattle and eventually the house itself. And finally, she leaves home and looks for a fairly ruined hut by the roadside.

The new life in the hut is the reverse of their previous one. Mä<sup>°</sup>aza leaves the hut early in the morning to collect wood for fire from the jungle and to draw water and bring it to the market places to make money. But even with such incomparable sacrifice, she is not able to fully protect her children from hunger. However, she has a dream in which she sees Zākewos becoming a church scholar with a good personality like his father. She brings him to *Māmbəḥ* Sirak who gives him primary education. Zākewos is highly attracted to the intelligence and talent of the exemplary church scholars. Thus, as a teenager, he leaves the hut and his beloved family, and goes to the distant formal church schools.

After completing his further education, Zākewos returns home and finds the so-called *ṭomarä mäwati* which was written by his father, addressed to Mä<sup>°</sup>aza. The letter announces that Baḥrā Ab is still alive even if he has lost his legs. It also says that the reason why he left his home is the custom of the inhabitants to reject handicapped people and to consider them as cursed (p. 324).

Turning to the literary features of the book, it is a novel like other romance books. The only thing that makes it a bit special is that it is written in Gə<sup>°</sup>əz which has no native speakers. It takes its title from the letter which was apparently written by Baḥrā Ab considered dead years ago. *Ṭomarä mäwati* literally means 'letter of the dead'. The narrative begins unexpectedly briefly presenting the last event (the letter) without mentioning the characters specifically. This kind of narration is also done by other story writers to make the reader curious as to how and why the episode narrated happened. Then, from the second to the last chapter, the narration continues

sequentially. Sometimes, the dialogues or the expressions are accompanied by biblical quotations, legends, fables, and proverbs. This increases the beauty of the book.

The author creates the characters, giving them their own personal qualities; he also points out their weakness and negative characteristics. Through their behaviour and the ups and downs of life, he attempts to show the imperfections of humankind, the discrepancies of life, and the dramatic changes in the world. Through them, he clearly indicates that everything in the world is temporal and that the world is unfair for the innocent (pp. 138, 199).

Besides telling the stories of individual characters, the author depicts with the geographical locations of the towns and districts where the story takes place, the lifestyle of the people, religious and traditional celebrations, education, and many other social aspects. He shows respect for the decent customs, mentality, and experiences of the people, while criticizing the bad intentions and habits of society as well as the corrupt administrative system of the elites (pp. 26, 30, 41, 131). He sees education as the key to everything and encourages the readers to learn. He also warns against not teaching children saying that 'who does not care for order and discipline in the lives of his children puts a heavy burden on his country' (pp. 203 and 212).

Regarding language use, the author's skills should be appreciated, since writing such a large book in Gə'əz clearly needs a good knowledge of Gə'əz as well as mature experience in expressing himself in the language. Nevertheless, some remarks should be made concerning language use. The author uses unusual combinations of words such as *əm-bäbbä-mäkan-u* and *ənzä-trägmä* (sic on pp. 73, 76, 96, 98, the correct form is *tärägmä*). Contextually, a reader will understand that he uses *əm-bäbbä-mäkan-u* to mean 'from each place' or 'from all places'. But to express this idea, there are various widely-used phrases such as **እምኩላሂ** (*əm-k<sup>w</sup>ällähe*), **እምኩሉ ፡ መካን** (*əm-k<sup>w</sup>ällu mäkan*), and **እምኩሉን ፡ መካናት** (*əm-k<sup>w</sup>ällon mäkanat*). In the case of *ənzä-trägmä*, he uses *ənzä* wrongly, prefixing it to a perfective verb. It is never prefixed to a perfective verb (except to the verb **ሀሎ** (*hallo*), 'exist'), but instead to the imperfective verb. He also sometimes uses inappropriate verbs and nouns such as **ሚጠ** (*meṭä*), 'bring back', in the place of **አውሥኦ** (*awśə'a*), 'give answer', and **አስከራን** (*askären*), 'box', in the place of **በድን** (*bädn*), 'dead body' (pp. 113, 116, 211). Most probably, this occurs due to the influence of Amharic: in Amharic, both *meṭä* and *awśə'a* have an identical meaning *mälläsä*, 'answer' or 'give back'; *askären* is also used to mean 'dead body' in Amharic.

There are also some idiomatic expressions which are directly translated from Amharic such as *əm-gize habä-gize* (Amh. *kä-gize wädä-gize*), 'from

time to time'; *am-əgrä-mängädəyā* (Amh. *əgrä-mängäden*), 'alongside'; *aḥatti ḥamus yəʾati zä-tärfäṭta* (Amh. *and ḥamus näw yäqärrat*), 'she has only a few days' (pp. 34, 55, 60). Again, the expressions *zämädä-zämäd*, *wäyñ bä-wäyñ*, *ṣəbur bä-ṣəbur*, and so on (pp. 2, 75, 101, 108, 116, 133, 164) all show the influence of Amharic. This kind of word construction does not work in Gəʿəz. Besides, in the case of *zämädä-zämäd*, the idea that he wants to present is missed: he uses this phrase to refer to many relatives or all family members, like in the Amharic *zämäda-zämäd*, but its right meaning is 'relative of relative' and it refers to a single person only. However, these few imperfections should not diminish one's appreciation of the author.

Secondly, the author's creativity is of some interest. To express some minor elements, he invents new phrases by combining two or three different words. For instance, he uses *məḥlafä-qal* (lit. 'passage of word') to mean 'telephone'; *mäṣḥetä-ʿayn* (lit. 'mirror of eye') meaning 'eye glass'; *betä-gəbr* (lit. 'house of work') to say 'work place' or 'office'; and *lʿul betä-fəṭḥ* (lit. 'great house of justice') to mean 'high court'. All these phrases are innovations (pp. 96, 119, 121).

The author presents such an exciting book in Gəʿəz using all his potentials, sharing his knowledge and experience in the stories that he creates based on realistic facts. It is recommended that any person reading Gəʿəz should read this book. For Gəʿəz scholars, I think, it is an inspirational work which should stimulate the composition of new Gəʿəz texts alongside the analysis of the old texts.

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MARIA BULAKH and LEONID KOGAN, *The Arabic–Ethiopic Glossary by al-Malik al-Afdal: An Annotated Edition with a Linguistic Introduction and a Lexical Index*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, 1, The Near and Middle East, 113 (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2017). xix, 473 pp., 20 illus. Price: €149. ISBN: 978-90-04-32182-3.

Over the last few years, Maria Bulakh and Leonid Kogan—both researchers at the Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, National Research University, Higher School of Economics (Moscow)—have published several significant works on the diachronic development of (Ethiopian) Semitic and