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Contemporary Amharic Oral Poetry from Gojjam: Classification and a sample Analysis¹

GETIE GELAYE

1. Introduction

In this paper an attempt is made to provide a sample analysis of Amharic oral poems and songs collected from two peasant communities in East Gojjam Administrative Region, Northwest Ethiopia. The sample poems and songs presented here were collected during my recent fieldwork where I carried out intensive recordings and interviews with the peasants, including elderly men and women, priests, adults and children. I have attempted to classify the poems into different genres and themes based on the peasants' knowledge of *gəṭəm*² (poetry) and *zāfān* (song) as well as from my own personal observations while attending several performances.

As the title indicates, thematically, most of the poems reflect issues related to the contemporary social, political and administrative conditions of the peasantry at the community level, that have been observed since the change of government in

¹ This paper is based on two phases of fieldwork conducted from 6 March–30 June, 1997 and from 29 November 1997–30 March, 1998, among the peasants of Dej Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis in East Gojjam Administrative Region. I am gratefully indebted to the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, for providing me with the necessary financial assistance for my field research in Ethiopia and my PhD study in Germany. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to my two field assistants, Damte Wondimu and Alemnew Azene for their kind contribution throughout the duration of my fieldwork and to those 32 key informants who patiently helped me in conducting several hours of interviews and discussions as well as in reciting and singing more than 2,000 poems that enabled me to get to know the process of social change, local politics and administration among the Amhara peasants of Gojjam. Finally, I wish to thank the editors of AETHIOPICA, for their critical comments to facilitate publication of this article in its present form.

² In this paper, except for place and proper names, the Amharic words and expressions are italicised and transcribed in the system used by AETHIOPICA.

Ethiopia in 1991. It is evident that the Amharic poems and songs play a significant role in reflecting serious problems and contemporary issues of the rural society, besides their function as entertainment and instruction in the daily lives of the peasants. They are the only way of expression of air out the peasants' ideas, opinions, attitudes and impressions, as well as their deep feelings of joy and happiness, sorrows and grievances both in different private and public performances and contexts. On the following pages, some personal observations on methodological issues and a sample analysis of Amharic oral poems and songs are presented in the light of the social (*mabbärawi*), cultural (*bahälawi*), historical (*tarikawi*), and political (*polätikawi*) contexts. These are only selected couplets of work songs, children's songs, and historical and contemporary poems raised in war chants and boasting recitals as well as some lamentations.

2. Background to the Methodological Issues of Collecting and Studying Amharic Oral Poetry: A Personal Experience

RUTH FINNEGAN³, one of the few renowned scholars of African oral literature, pointed out that oral poetry, "...besides serving the people in their day-to-day activities such as working in the agricultural fields and at home, religious as well as secular feasts and ritual ceremonies, often takes the place of news among non-literate societies". FINNEGAN further states that at local level public singing and chanting can take the place of the press, radio, and publication as a way of expressing public opinion and bringing pressure to bear on individuals, groups and authorities. Similarly, ANDRZEJEWSKI and LEWIS, indicated that "oral poetry is frequently employed to publicise events and served as propaganda for or against some person, group or matter of concern"⁴. Indeed, local poems and songs can thus be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political pressure, for propaganda, and to reflect and influence public opinion. In fact, composing, chanting, reciting and singing poetry is a widely known and deeply rooted form among most Amharas and the favourite form of the peasants of East Gojjam⁵. One of my informants in Dej Mariam described how poetry and songs are deeply interwoven into the lives of the rural people as follows:

³ See particularly the discussion she provided under sub-topics as "special purpose poetry" and "topical and political songs" (1970: 206, 272).

⁴ Their arguments are based on the study of Somali oral poetry (1964: 4).

⁵ I have discussed this topic in my M.A. thesis (1994: 4–8, 81–90, 109–116), and it is a theme to be treated in detail in my PhD dissertation, which I am currently working on. However, it is appropriate to mention here that DONALD LEVINE (1965) has interestingly described the poetic tradition and contributions of the Amhara people of Mänz in Northern Shoa.

After all poetry exists together with our lives. Here in the countryside, regardless of age and sex, every one composes a variety of poems and songs, or recites and improvises others poems. We sing songs and recite poems at the agricultural fields, on our journeys, in the bush, on holidays, on weddings and funerals. We also sing songs when we feel lonely, helpless, and during impositions and injustices imposed on us by the state and its local agents. In general, we express our happiness and sadness in our poems and songs⁶.

The study and classification of Amharic oral poetry is an important area of investigation both for Ethiopian and foreign scholars but it has not been systematically investigated due to the following three or more reasons. First, its close relationship with Ge'ez *qane*, which has a long history and tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, probably had a very strong influence upon the treatment and consideration of Amharic oral poetry as a distinct field of research. Second, it is quite clear that until very recently detailed and systematic research has not been carried out exclusively on the various genres of Amharic oral poetry composed, sung and recited mainly by the rural people and handed down through generations among the Amharic-speaking regions⁷ of Wollo, Gondar, Gojjam and Northern Shoa. Third, as a result we only have disjointed medley of works⁸ by European scholars and a handful of Ethiopian amateur compilers. Apparently, this should necessarily be a major area of inquiry that needs further research in systematically collecting, classifying and analysing or documenting not only the various genres of Amharic oral poetry but the different forms of Ethiopian oral literature among the diverse languages and nationalities of the country as well. In order thoroughly to investigate the subject of oral literature in general and oral poetry in particular, I have attempted to apply a combination of the following two major research methods and approaches.

Firstly, I carried out an eight-months fieldwork among the local people observing the various traditional, cultural, religious and social performances of

⁶ Mr. ABIYU FEKADU, aged 39, interviewed on 10.5.1997, in Dej Mariam, East Gojjam, Ethiopia.

⁷ To the best of my knowledge, the only research work carried out entirely on Amharic oral poetry of a specific region, so far, is the one undertaken by MARCEL COHEN (1924). However, similar general works have been contributed by ENNO LITTMANN (1914) and AUGUST KLINGENHEBEN (1959).

⁸ Regarding this point, I have prepared an article under the title, A Short Review of Europeans' Contributions to the Study of Amharic Oral Poetry. Universität Hamburg, Institut für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik, May 1996. Furthermore, a list of Ethiopian amateur collectors and compilers is found in FEKADE AZEZE's interesting review and bibliography (1984: 21–23).

every-day life on such occasions as festivals, celebrations, ceremonies, public gatherings and agricultural work parties. A careful recording of performances and intensive interviews were conducted besides keeping field notes and diaries. This enabled me the better to understand the attitudes of the local people and their role in composing and improvising oral literary texts as well as to follow with deeper understanding the process of the every-day life situation in the two research sites. Moreover, I have benefited considerably from the different concepts and terminologies used by the local people while classifying oral poems and songs into several themes and subjects. Secondly, by its very nature the field of oral literature has developed close relationships with such disciplines as linguistics, history, literature, anthropology and, in recent years, with politics, social change and rural development studies. Therefore, I have attempted to apply an interdisciplinary approach⁹ in classifying and analysing oral poems and songs in the different contexts and from different perspectives.

3. Identifying Genres and Classifying Themes

The two field research sites of Dej Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis where the Amharic poems and songs presented in this paper were collected, are located in northwest Ethiopia, in the Amhara National Regional State¹⁰, in East Gojjam Administrative Zone, and in Enarj Enawga *Wäräda* (district) Council, crossing the Blue Nile River some 293 kms distant from Addis Ababa. Both Dej Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis are located at a distance of 6 and 30 kms respectively, from Debre Worq, capital town of Enarj Enawga *Wäräda* Council. Dej Mariam has a total population of 5,248 within moderate climatic zone or *wäyña däga*, whereas Gedeb Giorgis is located in a lowland or *qolla* climatic zone situated very close to the gorge of the Blue Nile River (Abbay) with a total population of 5,164. In both communities, the peasants whom I interviewed are all Amharas and with the exception of a few Muslims, all are members and followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They are very hard working farmers who are proud of their region, which is renowned for its production of *teff*, a staple crop and a small-

⁹ See RUTH FINNEGAN (1992b), ISIDORE OKPEWHO (1992), GRAHAM FURNISS (1996), GRAHAM FURNISS and LIZ GUNNER (1995), OLATUNDE OLATUNJI (1979), FEKADE AZEZE (1994, 1998).

¹⁰ According to the new division of the National and Regional States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, five political hierarchies and administrative units were endorsed in August 1995. These are *ma'äkälawi mängäst* (Central Government), *källäl* (Regional or National State), *mästädadär zone* (Administrative Zone), *wäräda mäkär bet* (District Council) and *käbäle mästäädadär* (Kebele Administration). See also note 21 below.

seed grain indigenous to Ethiopia. Their life is based on working in the agricultural fields, still using the traditional plough to cultivate crops.

During the two phases of my fieldwork in East Gojjam, I attended group performances of Amharic oral poetry on wedding feasts, agricultural work parties, annual religious holidays and funeral ceremonies. The most colourful and attractive performance-occasions were wedding ceremonies and agricultural work parties. Therefore, I have had the chance to interview highly admired and recommended singers and poets and those who have attractive voices and remarkable memories. Based on observations of group performances and interviews with 32 selected singers and poets both in Dej Mariam and in Gedeb Giorgis *kebele*¹¹ administrations, I have identified the following major genres¹² of Amharic oral poetry. The poetic tradition of the peasants includes such important genres as historical poetry¹³, hunting poetry, love poetry, court poetry, praise poetry, begging poetry, conversational poetry, war poetry, heroic songs, New Year's songs, religious songs, healing (*zar*¹⁴) songs, cattle songs, lullabies, etc. Some of them are now forgotten or are on the verge of extinction. As to the latter, court poetry (*yāmuḡat gəṭəm*), hunting poetry (*yä'adän gəṭəm*) and smallpox poetry (*yäfäntata gəṭəm*) are just a few examples. Looking at the content and style of the genres of Amharic oral poetry, sometimes it is clearly noticeable that one form of poetry or song overlaps with another during performance and improvisation. In this respect, such

¹¹ *Kebele* Administration (KA) is the lowest unit of political administration endorsed by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, since August 1995, after the current political boundaries were newly restructured. The KA has a number of villages (*mändär*) and hamlets (*goṭ*) and is defined by its territory and local parish church. The name has been slightly changed, since the former Socialist regime (1974–1991) it was known as *Kebele* Peasants' Association.

¹² These are similar to the ones which I collected in Yetnora in the time of the Derg regime in 1992/93 when I was carrying out field research on a relatively similar topic for my M.A. thesis (1994). However, I found that the current political situation of the rural society contributed to the composition of similar themes and reflections by the peasants, due to the changes in ideology and administrative structures. In particular, after the rural land redistribution policy of 1996/97 was implemented, several hundreds of new poems and songs were composed and sung by different sections of the peasantry.

¹³ On the significance of Amharic oral poetry in historical contexts in Gojjam, see, for instance, the two articles written by ABDUSSAMAD H. AHMAD (1987, 1991).

¹⁴ I propose here that, *zar* or *wuqabi* poetry and its performance is a topic to be investigated by other researchers from religious, social, psychological, sociological and traditional healing perspectives. However, a brief description and analysis of the *zar* language is provided by WOLF LESLAU (1964).

forms as praise poetry, love poetry, work poetry, cattle songs, war chants, boasting recitals, lamentations and funeral poems can be mentioned.

So far, based on my collection, the following six major genres of Amharic oral poetry have been established: *zäfän* (songs), *qärärto ännä fukkära* (war chants and boasting recitals), *ängurguro* (lamentations), *yäläqso gəṭəm* (dirges or funeral poetry), *wäqtawi gəṭəm* (contemporary poetry) and *tarikawi gəṭəm* (historical poetry). As for *zäfän*, they can be further divided into work songs, wedding songs, children's songs, love songs, religious songs, and praise songs. I have classified such themes as landlessness, drought, famine¹⁵, war, migration, gender, social change, rural development, state-peasant relationship and local administration, under contemporary poetry (*wäqtawi gəṭəm*), or to use FINNEGAN's phrase, 'topical poetry'. This type of poetry is powerful, intense and full of metaphors and is similar to what is known in the Ethiopian tradition as *qəne* or *säm ännä wärq*¹⁶ (wax and gold). These are highly complicated forms of Amharic poetry both in the written and oral tradition, employing a variety of philosophical interpretations, witticism, and above all having *həbər* (double entendre), namely, *säm* (surface) and *wärq* (hidden or secret) meanings. *Qəne* or *säm ännä wärq* are also intended for the expression of obscure messages and symbolic representations to attain a maximum of thought with a minimum of words. Poems referring to a particular period of time or epoch, past reminiscences, an individual's role in administration, prominent figures, major events and happenings can be categorised under historical poetry (*tarikawi gəṭəm*). In view of such complexity, it is advisable to concentrate in one's studies either on a specific genre, or select a specific period of time and research site. I have familiarised myself¹⁷ with the thematic classification of Amharic oral poetry based on the topics and issues expressed in the poems collected, supplemented by detailed conversations and interviews held with informants.

¹⁵ So far, the only research works regarding this topic are FEKADE AZEZE (1994, 1998) and SHIBESHI LEMMA (1986).

¹⁶ *Qəne* and *säm ännä wärq* are specialised fields of both Amharic and Ge'ez poetry, a favourite form of verse, mainly among the Amhara people of Ethiopia comprising different forms and types. Historically *qəne* was originated and developed in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church by the clergy, including priests, *däbtära* and deacons. However, it is widely used among the ordinary Amhara people regardless of age, sex, place and time. See IGNAZIO GUIDI (1908), DONALD LEVINE (1965), ALEXANDER FERENC (1985), ALEMAYEHU MOGES (1959 E.C.), GETATCHEW HAILE (1991), among others.

¹⁷ See GETIE GELAYE (1994).

4. A Sample Analysis of Amharic Poems and Songs

4.1. Work Songs (*yäsära gätämočč*)

Work songs and poems among the peasants of Dej Mariam and Gedeb Giorgis, are performed usually in farm fields accompanying rhythmic work, a task that requires hardship and monotonous physical labour either in a group or individually. Thus, during individual activities such as ploughing, weeding, hoeing and fencing, the peasants sing solitary songs; and during co-operative works such as threshing and harvesting of crops, which are known in Amharic as *däbo*¹⁸, they sing *däbo* songs. Yet, as my informants explained to me, there are several types of work songs depending on the type of work in which they are involved. Both men and women of different ages perform a variety of these songs. By singing songs, the peasants overcome the hardship of their exhausting tasks, they praise their land, their produce, their oxen, even their work, their ancestors and themselves. Women, on the other hand, mostly sing and recite work songs in home activities such as grinding and chopping grain, spinning, fetching wood and water and the like. In their work songs, the peasants express their feelings of joy, happiness, their dreams, hopes, loneliness, etc., while cutting and threshing *teff*, constructing houses and herding the cattle. They also comment on matters related to current affairs, on local happenings and on a variety of personal and communal issues. Agricultural work songs, therefore, play an important role in the lives of the peasants, both at home and in the farm fields. As mentioned above, the peasants are proud of their region, Gojjam, which is praised in one of their work songs as follows:

አዲስ አበባ ላይ ቁፍ ጤፍ አይገኝ
እርሽርሽ ጎጃም ካንተ በፊት ያርገኝ ።

In Addis Ababa a single *qunna*¹⁹ of *teff* is not found,
Oh! prosperous Gojjam, let God call me before you.

¹⁸ *Däbo*, also known as *jige* or *wonfäl*, in East Gojjam, is one of the traditional forms of co-operation and mutual assistance, whereby peasants willingly contribute their labour and agricultural tools to carry out certain urgent and time-demanding tasks at peak harvesting, ploughing, weeding, fencing etc., seasons. It is a community-based mutual help agreement whereby the host is expected to provide food and drink for participants of a *däbo*. See also, GETIE GELAYE (1994).

¹⁹ Traditionally, *qunna* is a widely-used measure among the rural population of Gojjam. It is based on a basket and is employed to measure such produces as *teff*, wheat, legumes, barley, lentils, beans, maize, oil seeds and a variety of other crops. It is approximately equivalent to ten kilograms.

In the poem, the region Gojjam is personified and praised with double meaning: in its surface meaning, the poet expresses his appreciation using the phrase: ‘*kantä bäfit yargäñ*’ (let God call me before you) which means “let me die before you”, as if it is a human being. Its secret meaning implies that the peasants do not want to see their region, Gojjam, being destroyed, being poor, losing its greenness and being stricken by drought and famine, etc. The poem further indicates that while plenty of *teff* is produced in the region of Gojjam, not even a *qunna* of *teff* is cultivated (ironically ‘found’) in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. In fact, the peasants sing songs of praise to the creator God (*əgziʾabher*) and to the Holy Saints or Angels (*mäläʾəkt*), who safeguard the local population, bringing them a good harvest, guarding all their property, preserving the health and well-being of their children, their land, their crops and cattle throughout the year.

In the following couplet the peasant is indebted to God, the heavenly Lord, who enables him to exist and plough the land from morning till in the evening:

**ተመስጊን አምላኬ የላይኛው ጌታ
አርሼ እኖራለሁ ከጧት እስከ ማታ ።**

Be praised my God, you Lord of the upper Heaven,
For I survive on you, ploughing from morning till evening.

God has a special place in the lives of the peasants. In their every-day prayers, activities and conversations they refer to His miracles. They seek for His mercy at times of extreme trouble. They also consult Him for a better harvest season. They need His intercession for a peaceful coexistence. They complain to Him in times of natural disaster such as epidemics, drought, famine and the like. In the following poem the peasant expresses his indebtedness to God for he received a plot of land, during the redistribution²⁰ of rural land in the Amhara National Regional State²¹. It is to be remembered, however, that there were rural land redistribution policies and reforms in Ethiopia in the early years of the Derg regime²²:

²⁰ For a discussion of the rural land redistribution, readjustment or re-allotment policy, which was implemented in the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) in 1996/97, see SVEIN EGE (1997), TEFERI ABATE (1997) and YIGREMEW ADAL (1997). During my field research in Gojjam, I have recorded several hundred poems and songs composed and sung either in protest or in support of the regional state policy.

²¹ Since the change of government in Ethiopia in May 1991, 14 newly re-structured Regional States, or Regions (*keallal*), were introduced based on ethnic and linguistic boundaries. The Amhara National Regional State is one of the 14 regional states with its capital in Bahir Dar.

²² See, for instance, the two very authoritative works on rural land reforms and on the Ethiopian peasantry by DESSALEGN RAHMATO (1984) and SIEGFRIED PAUSEWANG (1983), among others.

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**ምን ይከፈለዋል ለእግዚአብሔር ውለታ
መሬት በማግኘቴ አገኘሁ እጩይታ ።**

What reward shall be paid to God,
By my getting land I have gained relief.

Another poor farmer expresses his happiness as he has got fertile land like other farmers, who were deprived of land for years. He refers to the equality of human beings, who all are equally born sons and daughters of Adam and Eve:

**ሁሉም ያዳም ልጅ ነው ሁሉም የሄዋን
ተድበሉ መሬት እኩል ደረሰን ።**

All are children of Adam, all are children of Eve,
We have got a fair share from the best and fertile land.

Similarly, in the following poem a Muslim farmer praises the *dälday* (re-distributors), local officials who were responsible for implementing the regional state policy, together with the militia men, cadres and executive committee members of the *kebele* administration. The singer is a beneficiary of the policy, being considered equal with the Christians:

**ሸንሸኖ ሸንሸኖ አከፋፈለው
አርሶ ለሚበላ ለእስላም ለአማራው ።**

Having measured out and measured out, they redistributed the land,
To anyone, who can plough and live, be it a Muslim or an Amhara²³.

4.2. Children's Songs (*yäləjočč gəṭəmočč*)

These are poems, songs and games performed by children between the ages of seven and fifteen years while they are looking after their cattle, protecting crops from harmful animals and taking care of babies. Children's songs can more easily be collected and studied for the following two reasons. Firstly, children can easily be approached and in most cases do not insist on negotiations or bargaining to sing such songs and poems. Secondly, they can freely express their feelings and make comments on past, present and future affairs and issues of the society. In East Gojjam, children are critical observers and commentators on local events in their

²³ Among the people of Gojjam, the nouns Muslim (**እስላም**) and Amhara (**አማራ**) are used differently from what may be the case in other areas of Ethiopia, for Amhara means an Orthodox Christian. It does not refer to ethnicity. As is expressed in the poem, Muslims were marginalised for years and treated by former regimes and governments as if they did not have their own ancestors' *rast* land. Therefore, their existence was dependent on trade in the towns and on handicraft work in the rural areas. Now the singer is delighted as he has got his own plot of land like the Amharas, meaning Christians.

songs and games. Sometimes, children sing songs while carrying babies at home and around the village while their mothers are participating in agricultural work, going to the market, fetching wood or visiting relatives. However, the most common occasion for the performance of children's songs is *käbt aqoma* (cattle herding). While looking after the cattle, children form groups and start singing and dancing to pass the day, once they have brought their cattle to the grazing land (*meda*, or *mäsk*). Some of them bring their *wasänt* (hand made flute) to accompany their songs and games. Reciting poetry is, thus, an enjoyable part of their daily games. In my collection, issues related to local politics and the interrelationship of individuals residing in their own community, such as hard working and lazy peasants, husband-and-wife affairs, are expressed in children's poems.

In the following three poems, children critically comment on the *bäherawi wuttäddärna agälgalot* (National Military Service) policy proclaimed during the time of the Socialist regime (1974–1991) in which boys and young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 were recruited for military training. My informants recalled that the National Military Service was one of the most destructive directives of the Derg regime and consumed the lives of thousands of Ethiopian youths. In the rural areas of Gojjam, local executive committees, members of the then ruling party, the Workers Party of Ethiopia the WPE, and officials of the agricultural producers' co-operatives were the highest authoritative state agents who were also recruiting boys and young adults for military training and sending them to the war front against their will. These state agents and officials used their power for corruption, nepotism and discrimination in implementing government policies and guidelines. In the following poem, children express the injustice of the rural authorities whose children were never recruited to the *zämäčä* (war campaign). Only sons of poor peasants were forcefully sent to the war front:

የሊቀ መንበር ልጅ አይሄድም ዘመቻ
 የኮሚቴ ልጆች አይሄዱም ዘመቻ
 የአ.ሠ.ፓ ልጆች አይሄድም ዘመቻ
 የአምራቾችም ልጆች አይሄድም ዘመቻ
 ድንበር አስከባሪ የድሃ ልጅ ብቻ ።
 /ኤርትራን የሞላት የድሃ ልጅ ብቻ ።/

The chairman's son doesn't go to war campaigns,
 Committee members' children don't go to war campaigns,
 WPE members' children don't go to war campaigns,
 Agricultural producers' co-op's children don't go to war fronts,
 Defenders of the borders are only children of the poor.
 /Those who filled Eritrea are only children of the poor./

As a result, parents of the boys and young men were extremely grieved as they lost their sons in the civil war. The following poem composed by children in Gojjam, refers to a mother who lost her son, forcefully taken for military service. In fact, the poem soon became one of the popular funeral songs of the time:

**የወንድ ልጅ እናት ታጠቁ በገመድ
ልጅሽን አሞራ እንጅ አይቀብረውም ዘመድ ።**

Mother of a boy, tie your stomach with a rope,
It is the vulture and not a relative that buries your son.

Normally, women tie their traditional dress with a waist-band (*māqännät*), a hand-made cotton and not with a rope (*gämäd*), as they do for several months in times of deep grief and sorrow when members of their families and close relatives have died. As is rightly expressed in the poem, it was, therefore, a distinctive sign of regional mourning²⁴ due to the frequent recruitment of boys and young adults to the war front, most of whom lost their lives and did not come back to their respective villages.

On the other hand, these children and cattle herders composed poems and songs about the civil war that took place between the liberation fronts in the northern regions of Eritrea and Tigray and the former Socialist regime of Ethiopia. Contrary to the above poem, sons of Gojjam are praised in the following poem for their courage and determination to fight against the enemy of Ethiopia who is recruited and armed with modern artillery, as if there were no voluntary campaigners from other regions:

**የኢትዮጵያን ጠላት የሚያባርር ጠፍቶ
ገባ የጎዳም ልጅ መትረየስ አንግቶ ።**

As there were no one to fight the enemy of Ethiopia,
The sons of Gojjam joined the army carrying artillery.

However, after the change of government that took place in Ethiopia in May 1991, it was hoped that there would be no more civil war and military service. Thus, children expressed their happiness as the recruitment of boys and young men came to an end. The following two couplets referring to this devastating policy were sung after the fall of the Derg regime:

²⁴ Traditionally, in Gojjam, people wear black clothes and shave their hair when they are in mourning. However, as I have observed and as I was told by my informants, the peasants of Gojjam have been wearing black garments, since 1989, known as *Gojjam azänä* (Gojjam mourns), as if the region were a human being. They are made from thread and not, as in former days, from white cotton or *sämma*. Almost every male peasant, including young boys and small children, wear them until now. My informants explained that they are a sign of mass protest in response to the various state policies and directives of the former Socialist regime and the present one.

**አሀያ መጣች ተጭና ወፍጮ
ተእንግዲህ ቀረ የልጅ መዋጮ ።**

The donkey came loaded with millstone,
There is no longer contribution of a son.

Here the first line of the poem, *ahāya mäṭṭac täčəna ...*, ‘the donkey came loaded with²⁵...’, is a common usage of children’s songs in Gojjam. It does not imply any semantic relationship with the second line of the verse. It is merely employed to supply rhyming words in the second and most significant line of the verse to complete it and make it rhyme. The other widely used pattern in the first line of children’s songs is, *afaf lafaf səhed agännāhu ...*, ‘while I walked along the cliff face, I found ...’, again used to explain ideas in the second line of the verse and to make it complete. The above poem expresses the fact that, during the last regime, peasants were supposed to pay several types of contributions, such as grain, labour and money, to the state, and one of the most horrifying of these was **የልጅ መዋጮ**, “son contribution”, to the war front. It is ironically expressed as such a policy was never seen in the lives of the peasants. Similarly, compare the following song:

**አሀያ መጣች ተጭና ኩብተ
ተእንግዲህ ቀረ ወታደርነት ።**

The donkey came loaded with²⁶ cow dung,
There is no longer military recruitment.

Other poems and songs composed and recited by children and young men refer to past and present regimes, critically commenting on a variety of problems. Such contemporary issues as the question of land, rural security, firearms, blood-feud, banditry, heroism, assertion of one’s manhood and the like are widely reflected in a special genre of poetry known among the Amhara men as *qärarto ənna fukkära* (war chants and boasting recitals), an important genre to be discussed in the following pages.

²⁵ In fact, this is not a form peculiar to children’s songs in Gojjam. Similar forms and lines of children’s songs have been collected by FEKADE AZEZE (1994, 1998) in his study on famine poetry among the peasants of Northern Shoa, in Ethiopia.

²⁶ The first line of this poem is similar to the above one, except for the last word, ‘cow dung’.

4.3. War Chants and Boasting Recitals (*qärärto ənna fukkära*)

Among the peasants of East Gojjam, *qärärto ənna fukkära*²⁷, also called heroic or war poetry, are expressions of an individual's bravery, strength, hard work and power. They are exclusively performed by men and are often composed when peasants are adolescents and later during adulthood. Elderly men are also skilled in performing *qärärto ənna fukkära*, recalling past experiences and adventures. They depict how they defended their surroundings from enemies and invaders in times of civil war and victory, and sing of heroism, blood-feud and about banditry. In Gojjam, banditry frequently occurs, particularly among the rural peasantry, who organise themselves into groups and are armed with both modern and traditional fire-arms. The Amharic word for banditry is *šəftənnät*, a word derived from the noun *šəfta* (bandit, rebel, out-law, etc.). According to TESSEMA HABTE MICHAEL, the *šəfta* is "one who stirs up trouble while taking to the forest or the bush, one departed from the king, the government's rule, instituted order, and the law"²⁸. The *šəfta* travel in the forest and in the bush consuming whatever they forcefully plunder from either the state or the rural people, such as cattle, crops, money and weapons. Some peasants join the *šəfta*, who are involved in local conflicts and blood-feuds, and protest against state policies, etc. Interestingly, they compose and recite heroic poems, war chants, praise songs and boasting recitals.

Traditionally, *qärärto ənna fukkära* are performed together, in the sense that first comes *qärärto* and then *fukkära* on such occasions as weddings, completion of agricultural works or on return from hunting and battle-fields. Usually, both *qärärto* and *fukkära* are performed inside a house in front of the crowd after a big feast when food and local drinks are served. Peasants appreciate those who have an attractive voice in reciting *qärärto* poems. The one who recites is expected to walk rhythmically with determination in order to gain the attention of others and to inspire them to join in the *fukkära*. The peasants are aided by their favourite stick or any kind of modern or traditional weapon so as to display their manhood. Indeed, performers of *qärärto* and *fukkära* look aggressive and war-like and are full of praise for the glorious deeds of the past. These genres are also very much respected by the peasants when freely expressing desperation, injustices, and hardship imposed by local authorities and agents of the state. In their songs the peasants also refer to kinship, tracing their ancestors and extolling the virtue of their relatives and close friends. Interestingly, the peasants need not necessarily wait for the occasion of a ceremony or feast to be inspired to perform *qärärto* and

²⁷ This genre of Amharic oral poetry is discussed in GETIE GELAYE (1998b).

²⁸ TESSEMA HABTE MICHAEL GITSEW (1951: 333).

fukkära when they result from entertainment or sometimes intoxication. Rather, they can perform during their agricultural tasks, on their journeys or in the forest, and improvise on the spot. In my collection, poems referring to historical events, contemporary affairs, state-peasant relationships and the like are also composed and improvised in *qärärto* and *fukkära* recitals. In the following *qärärto*, the peasants of East Gojjam express their feelings of bitter sorrow against local representatives of the present Ethiopian government known as *yäkor aballat*. *Yäkor aballat* are armed members of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, who are responsible for mobilising and organising the local people, redistributing land, controlling local administration and redrawing the boundaries in the newly restructured peasants' *kebele* administrations (KA):

**ጣሊያን አልመጣብን ተኩስ አልተተኮሰ
ወይ ወራሪ አልመጣ ችግር አልደረሰ
በኮር የተነሳ አገሩ ፈረሰ ።**

Neither did the Italians come nor did shooting break out,
Neither did invaders come nor did we face hardship,
Since the core members came the country is destroyed.

The poem reflects the disintegration of the peasants' country caused by the unqualified personnel of EPRDF cadre members (*yäkor abalat*) and their administration. It notes that no foreign invader at the time of the Italian invasion (1936–41) came or settled in their local communities; but “core members” are responsible for what the peasants refer to as the “destruction of the country”. This poem was recited to me by my informant Mr. MESSELU GESSESE in Dej Mariam peasants' *kebele* administration; it was originally composed by his elder brother during the redrawing of the boundaries of local communities, villages and districts in 1995.

In the following poem, the peasant draws a comparison between the current Ethiopian government and former regimes with regard to the land-holding system, reflecting on the different systems of land tax and tribute as well as other rural contributions. In the poem, the form of rural land tribute during the time of Emperor Haile Selassie 1930–1974, which was known as *asrat*, and the forceful extraction of grain during the Derg regime 1974–1991, known as *kota*, are mentioned. Now, the peasant expresses his grievance against the local state representatives of *yäkor abalat* (core members), mentioned in the above poem, who “confiscated” the peasant's land, having measured it with a “thong”. They are also described as “the ones more horrifying, worse looters than the previous regimes”:

አሥራት ቀረ ብዬ አርፌ ስተኛ
ከታ ቀረ ብዬ አርፌ ስተኛ ።
የኮር አባል መጣ የባሰው ቀማኛ
ወሰደው መሬቱን ሰፍሮ በመጫኛ ።

While resting and sleeping well now that *asrat*²⁹ was gone,
While resting and sleeping well now that *kota*³⁰ was gone,
There came the core members, the worst looters,
They took my land measuring it with a thong.

Similarly, another peasant named Mr. KASSAW TESFAW, expresses his sorrow and grievance against local authorities who confiscated his plots of land measuring them with a rope in Gedeb Giorgis in January 1997. It is a typical *qärärto* (war chant) mostly recited by poor and powerless peasants who have become disappointed with the present local administration. In the first line of the poem, Mr. TESFAW refers to the poor situation of a peasant institution that made him till the land, a job that he inherited from his fore-fathers who used to be not only *gäbäre* (farmers) but also *gäbbar* (tenants, serfs, or tax-payers) for years. In the second line of the poem, he expresses his complaint that he will no longer be able to plough, as his farm land was measured and confiscated during the rural land redistribution policy which was implemented in 1996/97.

እኔስ አርስ ነበር የገበሬው ፤ የገባሩ ልጅ
መሬቱን ቢወስዱት ቢለኩት ነው እንጅ ።

I , the son of the tenant, the peasant, would have ploughed,

Had they not measured and taken away my land.

The following extended lamentation song was sung to me by my informant Mr. TAGGELE KASSA aged 60, in Dej Mariam, whose farm-land that he had inherited from his ancestors was measured and confiscated by local officials. In the song, Mr. KASSA bitterly expresses his deep sorrow³¹ for his confiscated land for which

²⁹ During the time of Emperor Haile Selassie I, *asrat* was a tax (literally, tithe), mainly in Gojjam, one of the post-war land taxes which used to be paid in cash (see also ALLAN HOBEN 1973).

³⁰ During the time of the Derg regime, *kota* was a grain or crop extraction by the state which every peasant household was supposed to deliver to the Agricultural Market Corporation. The peasants recalled that *kota* delivery, forceful military recruitment, agricultural producers' co-operatives, resettlement and villagization were the most hated and destructive measures of the former Socialist regime.

³¹ Such poems and songs can also be classified and analysed under lamentations, *እንጉርጉር* (also dirges or funeral songs) as they mainly express deep sorrows and grievances about inequality and injustice, loneliness and imposition by administrations, besides dealing with the natural phenomena of death.

he had paid tribute for years and on which his life existence was based. However, now it is no more his belonging, in his own words he says “I have nowhere to go at this time of my old age”.

ወይ አገራ! ኧረ አገራ ኅጃም!
ወሰዱት መሬቱን እርስትና ጉልቱን
የራብ መከልከያ ልብስና ቀለቤን
የወጣሁበትን የገባሁበትን
አያቱ ቅማቴ እስተምንጅላቴ
ገብሬ ቀቅዬ የኖርሁበት አገር
ወሰዱት መሬቱን ሰፍረው በገመድ
እንግዲህ ደካማው እንግዲህ አሮጌው
ኧረ ወዴት ልግባ ኧረ የት ልሂድ?

Oh! my country, oh my country Gojjam!,
They took my land: my *rəst*³² and my *gult*,
That which was my food and my shelter,
That I inherited from my grandfathers and,
My great-grand fathers as far back as my ancestors,
And through which I came out and came in,
The land for which I paid tax and debts for years,
They took measuring it with a rope,
Henceforth, I, the weak and the old,
Oh! where shall I shelter, where shall I go?

Another peasant named GASHAW ADANE, who lost his plots of land, composed the following, even more saddening poem. As he has no more land to be ploughed, he prefers his oxen to be slaughtered and eaten before the local officials confiscate them as they did with his farm land. In his own words, he bitterly laments that: “what comes next is being the victim of migration”. It is a recent tragic phenomenon among the rural peasants of Gojjam, who frequently migrate to the southern regions of Ethiopia for seasonal labour, leaving their families behind.

በሮቼን አምጡልኝ አርጄ ልብላቸው
ደግሞ እንደ መሬቱ ሳይቆራርጧቸው ።

Bring me my oxen, let me slaughter and eat them,
Before they³³ cut them into pieces like they did with the farmland.

³² During the time of the Emperor and in the previous successive Ethiopian regimes *rəst* was a form of rural land tenure system with a right to inherit, use and transmit hereditary land-holdings. Similarly, *gult* was the right of tribute appropriation from the peasants granted by the Emperor to the various ranks of the warrior class, the church, and others in return for military, administrative and religious services rendered to the Emperor by the *gult* grantees (see ALLAN HOBEN 1973).

In the following couplet, Mr. ADANE laments as if he is dead and his corpse is being buried, due to the confiscation of his ancestors' land by local officials.

**አልሞተ መስሎታል እራሳው አልወጣ
ያባቱን ባድማ ሲካፈሉት በእጣ ።**

He thinks he is not yet dead, and his corpse not yet taken to the [grave],
Though they divided his fathers' land by sharing among themselves.

Another peasant is frustrated and worried about the coming of a worse famine year compared with the current low harvesting season, because the land is already confiscated and there is no more to be ploughed.

**ከዘንድሮው እራብ የከርሞው ይብሳል
መራቱ ተወስዶ ምኑ ይታረሳል?**

Next year's famine will be worse than this one
What can be ploughed as the land is taken away?

Among the peasants of East Gojjam, where these Amharic poems and songs were collected, the 1996/97 regional rural land redistribution or readjustment policy has created three new categories of peasants, according to the official documents of the regional state and to local informants. These are *qərrit fi-yudal* (remnant feudals), *birokrat* (bureaucrats) and *dəba arso adär* (poor farmers). This categorisation of the farmers resulted in several repeated conflicts, insecurity and suspicion among the peasants, on one side, and state representatives and local officials, on the other. Several hundreds of poems and songs are found in my field notes and recordings which will be described and analysed in my dissertation and in other future studies.

5. Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, an attempt was made to provide a classification of Amharic oral poems and songs into several themes and genres. Accordingly, such major genres as work songs, children's poems, war chants and boasting recitals were identified and a description and analysis of selected poems and their role, particularly in local politics and administration, were provided. In their poems and songs, the peasants of East Gojjam critically express their views, attitudes and feelings either in the form of support or protest, towards the various state policies and local directives.

³³ Here the personal pronoun 'they' refers to local officials or executive committee members who are responsible for the registration and redistribution of the rural land and for administering the peasantry.

Indeed, the Amharic oral poems and songs from the two peasant communities illustrate topics associated with the change of government, land redistribution, local authorities and their administration, as well as a variety of other contemporary issues affecting the rural society. The poems also throw some light on the understanding of the peasants' consciousness and observations comparing past and present regimes of Ethiopia, besides their power of aesthetics and creative capabilities of the peasants' poetic tradition.

In fact, this can be seen from a wider perspective, considering the function and role of oral literature in an agrarian and traditional society such as the two peasant communities mentioned in this paper. The peasants' response in poetry to the diverse contemporary politics and local administration need to be studied carefully and considered appropriately in the state's future rural policies and development projects if it is intended to bring about a democratic system that leads towards a peaceful coexistence among the rural peasantry.

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