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In memoriam Səbḥat Gäbrä-Əgzi'abəḥer (1936–2012)

REIDULF K. MOLVAER, Bygdøy, Oslo

Səbḥat Gäbrä-Əgzi'abəḥer died on Monday, 20 February 2012; he would have turned 76 years old on the 5th of May this year. Like that the hedonistic and bohemian life of an author and journalist came to an end, someone who had both obtained popularity and managed to make himself very controversial, even obnoxious to some. It was his writing through which he became familiar to many Ethiopians, though he was "more of a reader than a writer", as he said – and many therefore blamed him for not having written enough – an artist in living and of life, by his own definition. Whenever I met him, he made a point of stressing how good life was. It was perhaps him instead of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who should have written about this as "the best of all worlds", and while Leibniz may have written it as a spoof (to flatter or please adoring followers), it seems that Səbḥat actually meant it. "If I had believed in God, I would have said that He had made all for the best", he once told me. But he did not long believe in God, although his clerical father in Təgray had tried his best

to imprint Christianity in him by taking him to church regularly and teaching him to pray. Instead, perhaps due to the less religious atmosphere in Addis Abäba, where he arrived to when he was still young, he developed an almost religious devotion to the importance of satisfying the lust of the flesh, which eventually dominated his life, and also became the central theme of his literary production – short stories and novels, not all of which were published. However, he also wrote a lot for newspapers and periodicals, and then his purview broadened: he wrote about a variety of topics that interested his readers. In this way, he gained popularity among readers, but much of his fame was on account of his pioneering introduction of “naturalistic” themes in Amharic literature. In this area he was especially influenced by French authors, most importantly by Émile Zola. Ethiopian society is not abstemious when it comes to sexual indulgence, but Səbḥat was the first to write about it quite openly, using colloquial but (hitherto) “taboo” terms. In this respect, his focus was mainly from the male perspective. Nägaš Gäbrä-Maryam had written something similar from the female point of view as a prostitute in his novel *Setännä adari* (‘Prostitute’), where the quality of “services rendered” is seen as prominent. Səbḥat on the other hand was more interested in the quantitative aspect (not “how good” – at least for the woman, but “how often”), as most men do. His best known novel is *Letum aynägallänn* (‘May the night never end!’), dealing with leisure activities of the emerging “middle class” in “bars” in Addis Abäba – places not only where one gets intoxicated, but also dances and sleeps with the “hostesses”. It was rather the detailed description of this kind of life that was novel in Səbḥat’s writing. Abba Gubännä had also written about men’s inclination to seek excitement and diversion in the company of casual partners. But Səbḥat went further, and implied that such encounters could help to make sense of, if not give meaning to, human – at least male – life; for his female characters, the economic motive was perhaps the main interest, portrayed in his literature. His other books, *Təkkusat* (‘Fever’), *Amməst, səddəst, səbat* (‘Five, six, seven’), *Səbattännaw mälak* (‘The seventh angel’), and *Yäfəqer šamarwočč* (‘Love candles’), are variations of a theme, although he changes the pivotal stories. His central interest remained the same, and he confessed that this was also the main interest in his life. He wrote about his life in a book called *Mastawəša* (‘Reminiscences’).

In many ways Səbḥat was a lucky man. He received one scholarship to the United States to study Library Science, but as it did not interest him he returned home; later he received a UNESCO scholarship to France for two years to study philosophy and sociology, but after some weeks he stopped studying and started writing instead, without losing his scholarship.

He was happily married to Hannah Yəlma (the daughter of a well-known politician who did not approve of him) and had a son with her. When she

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took their child and left revolutionary Ethiopia, he changed, adopting an easy, devil-may-care kind of life of drinking and drugs (mainly *çat*), and did not take his work too seriously. He went from one place of work to another in rather rapid rotation, but never seemed to lack the means of support. After some time, he started to live with “another woman”, and had several children with her. Though considered a loving man, both to his friends and – perhaps first of all – to children in general. He was caring and cheerful under changing circumstances, and because of his cheerfulness and his friendliness, many people became attached to him. One of them was the author and journalist Bă’alu Gərma, who made Səbhat and his life the basis of his novel *Därasiw* (‘The author’). Other friends gave him jobs when he needed to earn a living. He said that he enjoyed life thoroughly. In spite of his innovative approach to literature, which offended many, he adopted a realistic attitude to how life should or can be described in popular books. In ancient Rome, there were life styles perhaps not very different from life in Addis Abäba, but it was *sub rosa*, this means that one could, in certain gatherings, say and do things that were never to be repeated outside the spaces where they took place. Səbhat described what everyone knows, or is aware of, and most males and many females participated in; but he was the first to write about it openly and detached from where they took place. Many love him for it; others appear or pretend to be shocked.

He was a delightful companion, whether one likes his writing or not.

In memoriam Afäwärq Täkle (1932–2012)

RICHARD PANKHURST – RITA PANKHURST, Addis Abäba

Afäwärq Täkle was Ethiopia’s most celebrated artist. Born in the old Šawan capital, Ankobär, on 22 October 1932, he was the son of *Ato* Täklä Mammo, a minor court functionary, and *Wäyzäro* Fälläqäč Yəmatawärq. As a small child, Afäwärq was seriously wounded during the Italian invasion. After the Liberation, he was enrolled in Addis Abäba’s Patriots’ School, together with the children of other Ethiopian Patriots. He was subsequently selected as one of the first students to be admitted to the newly established, élite Ḥaylä Šəllase I Secondary School at Kotäbe. There he studied with sons of the nobility and other youngsters destined to play important roles in post-war Ethiopian government.