

A THEMATIC APPROACH TO
FAMINE-INSPIRED AMHARIC ORAL POETRY

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ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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FAMINE-INSPIRED AMHARIC ORAL POETRY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
DEDICATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER I	
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Purpose of the Study	1
1.2 Scope of the Study	3
1.3 Significance of the Study	3
1.4 Limitation of the Study	5
1.5 Definition of Terms	6
1.5.1 Amharic	6
1.5.2 Folklore	6
1.5.3 Oral Poetry	9
1.5.4 Famine /Hunger/	13
CHAPTER II	
ETHIOPIA: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE	16
2.1 Geography and Climate	17
2.2 Language	20
2.3 People, Culture, and Economy	24
2.4 Famine in Ethiopia	29
2.5 The Oral Traditions	33

.../

	PAGE
CHAPTER III	
METHODS	40
✓3.1 Method of Data Collection	40
✓3.2 Method of Classification	44
CHAPTER IV	
MAJOR THEMES OF THE COUPLETS	48
4.1 Anguish	48
4.2 Insecurity	57
4.3 Disillusionment	62
4.4 Resentment	69
4.5 Gratitude	75
4.6 Tenacity	79
CONCLUSION	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87

- i -

TO

Ayda, Nebiwu, and Dagmawi

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ABSTRACT

Famine, which followed in the wake of drought and other natural or man-made disasters, has been a common occurrence over the long history of Ethiopia.

Most of the written documents that are related to famine have only recorded a historical account of the famine that has occurred; and some of the best writings have tried to explore its causes, damage and the ways and means with which it could be tackled. The social dimension of this catastrophe however, has been given little attention.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to thematically analyse famine-inspired Amharic oral poetry, and by so doing gain some insight into the psychology of famine victims; their feelings, hopes and aspirations.

This thesis is divided into four chapters.

Chapter one deals with the purpose, scope, significance, and limitation of the study and also with definitions of terms.

In chapter two, a socio-economic and historical survey is made with the aim of providing some of the necessary context for a critical appraisal of the collected poems.

Chapter three deals with methodology, i.e., the methods of collecting and classifying the poems.

The fourth chapter, is devoted to the discussion of the major themes of the poems.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the important elements the researcher has observed in the course of his study.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The prevalence of drought conditions has created strain on the basic necessities of life and has further complicated the already poor life situation of the peasants in Ethiopia.

One of the ways in which people express their deep feelings of hardship and miseries is through verse of sorrow, which is commonly known in Amharic as, engurguro¹ - a word equivalent to the English term lamentation. Below is a popular Amharic couplet² which reflects the abominable conditions in which the peasantry in a poor country like Ethiopia live.

አንገረገሪ ነፍሱ ለማጥ ነፍሱ ይህ
አየረፈረሰ የሚጠጣቱ ውሃ: :

Lamenting in verses
Is common for the poor man
As the water he drinks is always muddied.

¹It is very often imbued with feelings of loneliness, disappointment, grief, and the like, and in many instances, chanted or sung in solitude to express private or social matters.

²The word 'couplet' refers to the two line Amharic poem which, literally translated in English is 'poem'. Of the forty-six samples selected for the research, forty-four are couplets. Hence, the word 'poem' has been alternatively used with 'couplet' in this study.

The image of the muddy water here, stands to express the general conditions of his existence, which is all the more complicated by recurring and persistent natural disasters, mainly droughts.

The above couplet is thus, the reflection of the fact of life one sees in the poverty-stricken segment of the Ethiopian society. It is in fact, more applicable to the peasant majority, which time and again suffered under the hard blows of famine.

The problem of the poor man, particularly in the rural areas, is not only non-availability of potable water and the constraint in fetching it, as the surface meaning of the couplet suggests, but also in the general lack of other basic necessities of life, especially food. He is ill-fed, ill-clad, and ill-sheltered. The inner meaning of this couplet expresses in full, all the hazards he faces. Couplets like the above and other poems have been composed to express the miseries and unhappy experiences of people who, at one time or another, felt or witnessed, or suffered from the consequences of famine or hunger.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to thematically analyse famine-inspired Amharic oral poetry and by so doing gain some insight into the psychology of victims of famine, their feelings, hopes, and aspirations.

1.2 Scope of the Study

Famine problems have been common features among the Ethiopian peasantry. Their responses to such problems have also been expressed in various ways, of which oral literature is one.

Oral literature regarding famine and related conditions, could be found in various forms and in different vernaculars of the Ethiopian people. As the topic of this study suggests, the focus here is solely on famine-inspired Amharic oral poetry, generated as a result of famine and related conditions in the country.

Amharic poems (inherited or topical, event-attached or not), that seem pertinent to this study and which were available to the writer of this study have been treated here.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study has been conceived as a result of the researcher's long years of service in the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, an organization, responsible for ameliorating the sufferings of disaster victims in Ethiopia.

During these years of service, the writer had the opportunity to closely witness the sufferings of people who had been victims of natural and man-made calamities; and was also deeply involved in the day to day activities of the organization which has been conducted with the aim of alleviating the sufferings and plight of Ethiopian compatriots afflicted by the calamities.

Most of the written documents that are related to famine tend to record a historical account of the famine that has taken place, and some of the best writings have tried to explore its causes, damage and the ways and means with which it could be tackled. Some authorities are of the opinion that the social dimension of such a catastrophe has been given little attention.³

Insight into the social implications of famine can also be gained by a comprehensive description of imaginative works related to famine; which however, have been ignored so far.

The lack of comprehensive research on social implications of famine from a literary perspective, and the topicality of famine as the subject of study in all its ramifications has motivated the researcher to undertake a critical examination of Amharic oral poetry dealing with famine and related conditions.

Furthermore, the collection and compilation of these poems is attempted with the belief that it will help stimulate further studies in the field of literature, sociology, anthropology and other related social sciences. Such studies would be worthwhile in a country like ours, where cyclical and recurrent drought and famine conditions have become part and parcel of the complex life system of the society. The outcomes of such studies would also undoubtedly contribute their share towards solving the perennial drought and famine problems.

³Alula Pankhurst, "Social Consequences of drought and Famine: An Anthropological Approach to Selected African Countries" (Unpublished Master's thesis, The University of Manchester, London, 1985), p. 6.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

Unlike poems which deal with such subjects as love, courage, death, and marriage, field-collected and printed work data seem to indicate that poems related to famine and its consequences are very rare. One of the reasons for this could be that, the former ones are in many cases matters of everyday life situations involving groups of people whose actions can easily be recorded during the particular occasion or event; while the latter is in most instances, a private affair; a result of desolate conditions, intoned during moments or times of distress and despair.

Poems that evolve in such conditions surface in a number of cases to the point of becoming recognizable and popular among the community through time. It is therefore difficult for the researcher to succeed in collecting enough material from a specific area within a specific period of time, unless he lives among the people for quite a while. This, of course has implications for the researcher who is not lucky enough to get the necessary resources to spend some time with the people in question. Because of such problems the researcher could not restrict the collection of the poems to one region alone; for instance, Shoa or Wello, and also to a certain specific period of time. This has been the major limitation of the paper on the part of the researcher.

However, efforts have been made to include in the study, poems that would be taken as representative in expressing the misery, fear, and the hope, felt by the hunger-stricken masses. Thus, all the generalizations presented in the conclusion are based on the poems treated in the study.

1.5 Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 Amharic:-

The couplets used for this study are basically of Amharic origin, and it is technically appropriate to refer to them as 'Amharic poems' or 'couplets'.

But the reality is that, Amharic, by and large, is not a language that is confined to the Amhara nationality alone. In fact, it is a language that has a wide currency throughout the country. Furthermore, the problems experienced in Ethiopia as a consequence of disasters, are not limited to those people whose language is Amharic. The problems have also been common to other groups of people who share common values and ways of life, and respond to such catastrophes in a more or less similar manner. And as such, the poems and expressions though represented in Amharic, have a universal applicability and carry similar significance among other groups as well.

1.5.2 Folklore:-

Oral poetry, which is the main subject of this study, is part and parcel of the broad body of knowledge known as 'folklore'. The question of determining the definition of folklore has been a controversial issue for a long time.

Regarding this point, Alan Dundes has the following to say:

Debates about how folklore should be defined have been waged continuously ever since the word was coined in 1846 by William Thomas. Most definitions concern the 'lore', but some concern the 'folk'. Lore - the materials of folklore rather than the people who use the materials - has been described in terms of origin, form, transmission and function. However, there has been no widespread agreement among folklorists about what folklore is.⁴

This existing diversity is further illustrated by Maria Leach's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, which carries the twenty-one definitions given to this same subject - Folklore. Out of these definitions, the following two are given below to at least point out the basic ideas embodied in Folklore, with the sole purpose of giving a firm basis for the discussion and analysis of the poems at hand, and also make the reader sense the existing controversies over its definition.

According to Gaster, folklore is understood in the following manner:

Folklore is that part of a people's culture which is preserved, consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs, and practices, customs and observances of general currency, in myths, legends, and tales of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of

⁴Alan Dundes, The Study of Folklore (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 1.

an individual. Because it is repository of popular 'climate', folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for more formal literature and art; but it is distinct therefrom in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people.⁵

Thomson seems in agreement with Gaster when he says:

Although the word folklore is more than a century old, no exact agreement has ever been reached as to its meaning. The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either in memory or practice rather than written record. It involves the dances, songs, tales, legends and traditions, the beliefs and superstitions and the proverbial saying of peoples everywhere. It also includes studies of customs, of traditional agriculture and domestic practices, types of buildings and utensils, and traditional aspects of society organizations...⁶

Based on the above definitions, one can realize that, 'folklore' embraces the greater part of traditional culture, of which oral literature is one. Oral literature on the other hand embodies various other forms, including oral poetry - the subject of this study.

According to this paper, therefore, 'folklore' refers not only to the unwritten literature of people, but also to the customs, beliefs and traditions that people have handed down from generation to generation.

⁵ Maria Leach, (ed.), Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1960), p. 399

⁶ Ibid., p. 403.

Folklore, thus, denotes man's social and material heritage, while 'oral literature' refers to the verbal form of the heritage, characterized by its artistic qualities.

1.5.3 Oral Poetry

Oral poetry is one of the important branches of oral literature. It is also regarded as the oldest form of verbal art. The various types of songs sung on different occasions and for different purposes, poems and dirges, for instance, are included under the heading of oral poetry.

The unwritten literature of people, both in the form of prose and verse is in fact, an oral activity. But there exists a difference between the methods of delivery of poetic and prosaic elements.

According to Owomoyla, "whereas the prosaic components are delivered in the same manner as ordinary speech, the poetic are distinctly rhythmic and the voice is usually modulated."⁷ This refers in short, to the choice and arrangement of words employed in the composition of poetry and also the way it is presented, to eventually create a specific emotional response. Thus, "poetry is, by and large, differentiated from prose as being

⁷Oyekan Owomoyela, African Literatures: An Introduction (U.S.A. African Studies Association, 1970), p. 8.

marked by greater specialism."⁸ Such specialism in the practice of poetic composition and performance, also suggests the fact that oral poetry in general, is employed for more serious purposes than is prose.

Like all other genres of oral literature, the study and analysis of oral poetry has been affected by different theoretical approaches to folklore. The Structural-Functional School of British anthropology, for instance, gave more emphasis to sociological and anthropological aspects rather than the literary. The concentration was purely on the function of literature in a society. These functions, among others, range from, justifying (aimed at making people accept a given status quo), pedagogic (used to instil in the members of the society skills or behaviours that are considered essential), to entertainment. The aesthetic aspect, however was ignored. It was assumed that oral literature is not worthy of study in its own right.

Regarding the implication of this approach to the collection and analysis of oral literature, Finnegan remarked thus:

The result is that over the last generation or so practically no collection or analysis of oral literature have been made by British scholars. When oral literature was mentioned, the fashion was to play down the aesthetic aspect in favour of the functional... prose narrative

⁸Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 82.

was more often referred to than sung poetry, since it was easier to make a quick record of it and since it was more suitable, particularly in the form of 'myths', for use in functional analysis.⁹

The dominance of this functional approach is thus regarded as one of the main factors that hampered the study of oral literature in this century.

The Historical-Geographical School of folklore has also its negative impacts on the study of this oral art. This approach has been popular in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Here the focus was on the area of origin and spread of oral tales.

As Finnegan remarks in this connection, "detailed investigation of the actual social literary role of forms of oral literature in particular cultures were thus not called for."¹⁰

The Historical-Reconstructional approach, on the other hand, concentrated on making use of folklore and folklife materials to recapture vanished historical accounts.¹¹ As was the case of the two previous approaches, the study of oral literature in its own right was also played down here.

These and a number of other theoretical points of view have thus affected the study of oral literature in general.

⁹Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 39-40.

¹¹Richard M. Dorson, (ed.), Folklore and Folklife (U.S.A. The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 12.

It is generally agreed that the attitude of Westerners toward Africa and its traditions in the past has been opinionated, and this, on its part, has had further implications in the study of its oral literature. The widely held belief has been to view Africans as destitute of traditions, in fact, having no oral literature.

The following rash remark quoted by Burton a century ago regarding the literature of non-literate Africans illustrates the point:

"The savage custom of going naked," we are told, "has denuded the mind, and destroyed all decorum in the language. Poetry there is none; the songs are mostly repetitions of a few hyperbolic expressions. There is no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings, or arrest the passions; no admiration for the heavenly bodies, no taste for the beauties of creation. We miss the cultivated mind which delights in seizing on these objects, and embodying them in suitable words."¹²

Such generalization and criticism was, in fact the reflection of a widespread assumption equating literature with writing.

Be that as it may, some remarks have to be made on the definition of the term 'poetry'. Various direct and indirect definitions have been given by several prominent personalities.

¹²Richard F. Burton, Wit and Wisdom from West Africa (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), p. XII.

Here are three definitions¹³ of poetry which give some insight into its nature.

"Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions."

William Wordsworth

"Poetry is life seen through a temperament."

William Wordsworth

Poetry should be brief, passionate, intense."

Edgar Allan Poe

Folk poetry in general, therefore, is understood in this paper as being one of the major genres of oral literature, distinctly rhythmic, written metrically in a language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm, and employed for more serious purposes than prose. This general definition equally applies to Ethiopian oral poetry as well: thus, this also applies to Amharic oral poetry, which is the subject of this study.

1.5.4 Famine /hunger/

The poems contained in this study are, in the main, woven out of the intense feelings of people, arising from the shortage of food. Famine and hunger, terms directly or indirectly recurring

¹³Stanley C. Glassey, The Groundwork of English Composition (London: The Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 199-200.

in these poems, denote the hungry man's quest for food. These terms, therefore, deserve some introductory statements.

Famine is understood by different people differently. Because of the existing confusions in terminology, ordinary hunger, undernourishment, malnutrition and famine are used interchangeably as if they are synonymous.¹⁴

Mesfin Wolde Mariam's definition of famine follows thus:

Famine is a general and widespread prolonged and persistent, extra-ordinary and insufferable hunger lasting for several months and affecting the majority of the rural population over more or less extensive area, resulting in total social and economic disorganization and mass death by starvation.¹⁵

If famine means that much in terms of its duration and effect, how about hunger, a term which, in most instances, is confused with it?

Here again, a distinction is made between what is termed as 'specific' and 'general' hunger.

'Specific hunger' is taken as a tendency of an animal to ingest certain foodstuffs selectively,¹⁶ while 'general hunger' is

¹⁴Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia: 1958-1977 (India: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd., 1984), p. 4.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶Ibid.

equated with famine, affecting large numbers of people in rural areas as a consequence of non-availability of food for a relatively long time.

Thus, general hunger, hereafter, hunger, in this study, which is quite often seen to be synonymous with famine is a condition where a total lack of food is experienced, leading to death and/or to the migration of people in search of food away from their homes and localities. Since hunger and famine have come to mean substantially the same thing, the researcher has taken the liberty of using them interchangeably in this study.

CHAPTER II

ETHIOPIA: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter attempts to make an examination of the wider background against which the famine problem of the Ethiopian rural masses should be seen.

Factors related to the recurrence of disastrous food shortages in the country are numerous. They range from unfavourable climatic conditions to backwardness both in terms of farming methods and the land holding system.

Any analysis of literature without some background to contrast with is, of course, a futile attempt. As Finnegan succinctly puts it:

In Africa, as elsewhere, literature is practiced in a society. It is obvious that any analysis of... literature must take account of social and historical context - and never more than in the case of oral literature.¹⁷

It is quite true that a full account of the country's social, economic and historical features that are backgrounds for the poems treated in the study could be given by authorities in the respective fields. This chapter however, would only venture to give a brief introduction on the subjects with the aim of providing some context which is essential for a critical examination of the poems.

¹⁷Finnegan, Op. cit., p. 48.

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¹⁷Finnegan, Op. cit., p. 48.

2.1 Geography and Climate

Ethiopia, one of the oldest nations in the world, is situated in the horn of Africa. Physically, it consists of a wide range of geographical features, characterized by very high plateaus with precipitous edges, towering mountain peaks, deep gorges and valleys, mighty river systems, lakes, great grasslands, warm and arid lowlands. The lowland areas in the east, south, south-east and west are characterized by high temperatures, excessive evaporation, scanty rainfall and limited vegetation.

Ethiopia's natural resource is its rich and large agricultural land. About sixty-five percent of the total land area is considered to be suitable for cultivation and pastorage, though at present less than twenty percent of the total arable land is cultivated.¹⁸ The country also has abundant surface and underground water resources for irrigation and drinking. But very little of this has been utilized.

The mountainous terrain has a considerable effect upon the country's climate. Though Ethiopia is situated in the tropical zone, its high altitude is responsible for the cool and bracing climate.

¹⁸Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation (London: H & L Communications Ltd., 1985), p. 34.

The relationship between temperature and population density is also clearly marked in the country. The most densely populated part is the plateau to the north-west of the Rift Valley.¹⁹ Due to this favourable climatic condition, out of the total forty-two million, thirty-eight million of the population (i.e., ninety percent) live here, which constitutes forty-nine percent of the country's surface area.²⁰ The remaining ten percent inhabit the lowland areas, which constitute the fifty-one percent of the land mass. The highland areas have plenty of rains at times, but there are also times when they fall short of the expected amount, or even cease totally, giving rise to drought. The African continental problem of desert encroachment has also, year to year, its impact on the life of the Ethiopian farmer, by affecting the rainfall pattern. At times, there are disasters from heavy rains and floods, and at other times from drought. Such an imbalance of nature is well expressed through a popular Amharic folk poem in the following manner:

¹⁹Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Tackling the Ravages of Drought (Addis Ababa: 1985), p. 3.

²⁰Ibid.

ዘናቡን ስታዘዝ የእሳህ የእሳህ
ጣ ዩን ስታዘዝ የእሳህ የእሳህ
ተዘራጭ እንደሁ ቀበቅቡ ያጭሉ::

You send the Rain
That flood, O God,
And the Sun's heat
That scorches.
There it is, my tilled land for you
To sow it yourself.

The poem reflects the misfortunes that have befallen the peasant farmers and made them despair to the point of resignation or anger.

The seasons of the country are broadly divided into two. These are the long dry season, bega, and the big rainy season, keramt.

Since agriculture is the dominant activity in the country, the importance of rain in the appropriate season is a prime concern of people. The availability of an adequate amount of rainfall which at times fails in many years, strongly determines success in agricultural production.

Both the keramt and bega rains received by the Ethiopian highlands, especially the south-eastern highlands, in the end empty themselves to the low-lying areas in the form of run-offs, thus accelerating soil erosions and grossly limiting production of food-grain for the more than seventy-five percent of the

population of the highland regions of the country.²¹ Over-population in these areas as indicated earlier, is also another problem which further aggravates the situation.

Furthermore, since the highland population totally depend on rain-fed agriculture, and the topography of the area makes irrigation agriculture almost impossible; absence or shortage of rains in these areas will have a catastrophic effect.

This also holds true for the nomadic and semi-nomadic population (in the dry lowlands surrounding the central highlands), whose livelihood depend mainly on animal husbandry.

2.2 Language

Scholars have differed on the number of languages that exist in Ethiopia. Some believe that over seventy languages²² are spoken, while others put the number as high as ninety.²³ In both cases, it testifies the linguistic diversity of the nation.

²¹Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Combatting the Effects of Cyclical Drought in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, 1985), p. 9.

²²M. L. Bender, (ed.), Language in Ethiopia (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 73.

²³Addis Ababa University, Admas (Vol. 1, No. 2, Addis Ababa: 1972 (Ethiopian Calendar.)), p. 29.

Three major linguistic families are found in the country. These are, Cushitic (predominantly spoken in the southern half of Ethiopia, including Oromo, Somali, Sidamo, and Agau), Nilotic (spoken mainly along the northern and western escarpment leading to the Sudan) and Semitic, spoken mainly in the northern half of the country.²⁴

Amharic, in which the collected poems for this study are expressed, is among the many languages found in Ethiopia. It is Semitic in origin and is both spoken and written.

Amharic has been spoken in Ethiopia for centuries, though no one knows exactly for how long. But still there are some scholarly speculations along this line.

Dr. Sirgiw Hable Selassie, an Ethiopian scholar and historian believes that, Amharic, most probably began to be spoken widely during the reign of Emperor Lalibala (1185-1220),²⁵ while Wright believes that, Amharic came into existence by 1300, and the earliest Amharic manuscript dates from about 1800.²⁶

²⁴Simon D. Messing, "The Highland-Plateau Amhara of Ethiopia" (Unpublished Doctor's thesis, The University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 1957), p. 4.

²⁵Sirgiw Hable Selassie, "Amharic as a Literary Language Prior to the 19th Century" (Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa: 1969), (Mimeographed.)

²⁶Stephen G. Wright, "Amharic Literature," Something, the literary magazine of University College of Addis Ababa, No. 1, (Addis Ababa: 1963), p. 12.

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²⁶Stephen G. Wright, "Amharic Literature," Something, the literary magazine of University College of Addis Ababa, No. 1, (Addis Ababa: 1963), p. 12.

Based on the latest available data, the commonly held view among many scholars is that, the oldest known writings in Amharic are poems or songs dating back to the fourteenth century. These poems have been written, in praise of the Ethiopian Emperors Amda Sayon, Yeshaq and Gelawdios.²⁷

Though Amharic appeared in writing in the 14th century, it is only in the middle of the nineteenth century that it began to be used as a medium of written communication by gradually replacing Geez, the ancient and liturgical language of Ethiopia. According to Ullendorff:

It was... king Theodore who gave the greatest impulse and encouragement to Amharic literature as a plank in his general program of Imperial Unifications...²⁸

Since the reign of Emperor Menelik II, it has further grown to be the only widely written language of Ethiopia.

Before the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, the concern of the government has been to further develop Amharic throughout the country, by paying less or no attention to the other languages. Although Amharic, by virtue of being a written language, played an important role in the past, there were also other equally important major languages with large numbers of speakers. These are the Oromigna and Tigrigna which should have also deserved due attention.

²⁷Thomas Leiper Kane, Ethiopian Literature in Amharic (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 3.

²⁸E. Ullendorff, The Ethiopians (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 155.

The language and ethnic policy brought about by the 1974 national revolution completely changed this past trend. According to the National Democratic Revolution Programme issued in 1976, "no nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism."²⁹ Hence, the way the various ethnic groups and languages of Ethiopia is looked at, at the moment is, against the background of the above policy.

It is quite true that Amharic pre-dominates on the plateau of north-west central Ethiopia, specifically in Shoa, Wello, Gondar, and Gojjam regions. But because of the position it has maintained through centuries as the nation's official language, it has also remained the common medium of communication (Lingua Franca) for the larger centers of population in the other parts of the country.

Among the most clearly observable features of the Amharic language is, its use of puns or double meanings. Such usage of language has always been the delight of the Amharas, mainly of those in religious circles. It has served as a medium for criticism and for profound witticism. But it has also been regarded as one of the stumbling blocks for those who venture to learn the language, mainly foreigners. "...Amharic has always delighted in the

²⁹The Provisional Military Administrative Council of Ethiopia, Program of the National Democratic Revolution (Addis Ababa: 1976), p.

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innuendoes and witticism... and circumlocutory constructions," remarked Wright, "which are the despair of foreign learners."³⁰

2.3 People, Culture and Economy

That, Ethiopia is a country of diverse ethnic groups, languages and cultures has been well-known for a long time now. Most studies along this line indicate that, there are more than one hundred ethnic groups within the country; although most of these groups are numerically very small.³¹

Among these ethnic groups are included, the Semitic speaking Amhara and Tigre, predominantly inhabiting the central and northern highlands of Ethiopia. The Amharas occupy mainly the regions of Gondar, Gojjan, Shoa and Wello (the district of Lasta in the main). These Semitic speaking groups are characterized among other things, by their deeply rooted faith in Christian religion. There are also other Semitic speaking groups, such as the Gurage and Adere. The Nilotic tribes are found, roughly speaking, along the western border areas of Ethiopia.

From the speakers of the Cushitic languages, we have the Oromo (the major ethnic group in the country), the Sidama, the Somali and the Afar tribes.

³⁰Wright, Loc. cit.

³¹John Markakis, Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 51.

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The historic migration of the Oromos, beginning in the sixteenth century, carried them from the lowlands of the Horn of Africa to the highlands of the Ethiopian plateau, where they settled.³² Thus, the Oromos have not been confined to the southern regions of the country namely, Harrarge, Bale and Arsi, but they are also found in administrative regions of Illubabor, Wellega, parts of Shoa, Wello and other areas.

The majority of the Oromos are muslims; but there are also Christian Oromos, and some of them adhere to animist beliefs.³³

Ethiopia is essentially a rural country, whose economy is mainly based on agriculture. It is estimated that, out of its forty-two million people, over eighty-six percent³⁴ live in the countryside, engaged in various forms of traditional agriculture. Hence, land is the principal natural resource of life and subsistence in rural Ethiopia, where both forms of agriculture, i.e., crop production and animal rearing have been going on for ages.

According to the study made, the Ethiopian rural population consists of highland croppers, who make eighty percent of the total population. The lowland pastoralists account for only nine

³²Ibid., p. 52.

³³Fred Halliday, Maxine Molyneux, The Ethiopian Revolution (U.K. Unwin Brothers, working, 1981), p. 60.

³⁴Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopias Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation (London: H & L Communications Ltd., 1985), p. 34.

percent.³⁵

The basic economy of highland central Ethiopia from where part of the poems for this study have been collected is agriculture. The people in this region are mainly agriculturists who use the plough to cultivate their land.

Several major food crops, such as teff, maize, sorghum, barely, wheat, pulses, are grown, whenever and wherever climatic and other conditions permit. injera, the recurring word in quite a number of the poems in this study, lofty bread, a home-made diet of central highlanders and others, is made out of barely, maize, sorghum, teff and similar other crops.

Although the country's agricultural potential impressed many observers in the past, famine of one kind or another has occurred several times causing severe damage. In most instances, factors directly responsible for the outbreak of famine are identified as drought, or erratic rainfall. But major causes of famine are also found in the country's socio-economic system and in the level of productivity of peasant farmers.

Improper use of land and continued destruction of vegetation are also causes of famine. In many northern highland parts of the

³⁵Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, "Food Supply Prospect," (Addis Ababa: September, 1985), p. 2.

country, population density, both of people and animals, and over exploitation of the land, have resulted in the destruction of much of the vegetation and soil erosion. Population concentration in the highlands that are free from excessive temperature, coupled with years of poor agricultural practice, deforestation and over-grazing have resulted in depleted soil conditions, making large areas of land agriculturally unproductive.³⁶

The settlement or resettlement programmes adopted and implemented by the country over the past few years have not only been aimed at making drought victims self-supporting, but also to give a respite to the overused lands and making them available for rehabilitation activities.

The land tenure system, (which was the practice prior to the 1975 land reform that transferred the ownership of all the rural land to the people and altered the institutional structure of agrarian production), had also its big share in negatively affecting food production. Then, the majority of the peasants were subject to archaic property relations and they were forced to pay rent or tribute to the landlords, the nobility and church institutions.

In northern Ethiopia, rural land tenure chiefly consisted of communal ownership of land, based on kinship relations. But, since

³⁶Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Op. cit., p. 156.

the same land held communally, was also held as gult or fief by the nobles or the clergy; the latter were entitled to collect tribute from peasant farmers, in the form of agricultural produce.

Unlike the northern regions, the southern regions were characterized by a feudal mode of production involving landlordism, tenancy and rent. In these regions, tenants were forced to pay high dues, ranging up to fifty percent or even seventy-five percent of their crop production,³⁷ thus, killing the incentives of peasants to produce more.

Because of such and other man-made problems and natural disasters, Ethiopian peasants were unable to produce more food that would safely take them through the lean years. "Since time immemorial, the Ethiopian peasant has been weak, under-nourished and teetering on the brink of starvation."³⁸

For people living under such conditions of severe food scarcity, it is quite natural that their primary concern would be the acquisition of their daily bread.

The following observation made by Levine, reflects this fact of life in rural Ethiopia:

³⁷Halliday, Op. cit., p. 64.

³⁸Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation (London: H & L Communication Ltd., 1985), p. 72.

When asked what is their chief goal in life, Amhara peasants frequently respond with the expression sarto mablat ("having worked, to eat"). This response says many things. It reflects their constant preoccupation with the need to eat. It suggests that having enough to feed oneself one's family, and one's guests is the farthest horizon toward which the peasants normally aspire. It also implies that in order to eat, one should work by the sweat of his brow; it praises independence and self-reliance.³⁹

2.4 Famine in Ethiopia

Famine resulting from natural and man-made disasters, such as droughts, pest infestation, war and so on, has been a constant visitor of Ethiopian peasants throughout the ages. Hardly half a century passes without the occurrence of natural calamities associated with famine. That Ethiopia is particularly drought-prone, has been well known to the international community for more than a decade now, if not earlier. Drought accompanied by famine, disasters and death of human beings and livestock has been a phenomenon in a country which has enough land and manpower resources, but which is economically too weak to overcome this problem.

³⁹Donald N. Levine, Wax & Gold (U.S.A. The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 81.

Not all of the famines in Ethiopia are recorded in written documents. The earliest recorded famine was in the ninth century. The second available record is that of the thirteenth century's outbreak of famine and epidemic.

According to Dr. Richard Pankhurst's historical accounts, there were seven famines in the thirteenth century, four in the fourteenth, eleven in the seventeenth, five in the eighteenth, and 'The Great Famine' of the nineteenth century which occurred in 1888-1892.⁴⁰ The latter, which was the last recorded famine in the nineteenth century was not only disastrous in terms of the loss of human and animal lives, but also, well documented and still remembered by the Ethiopian people to this present moment. In vividly describing the horrifying situation of the famine, Afework Gebre Yesus notes that:

The people were dying of starvation along the paths in the fields, in churchyards and in the compounds of the nobility. The time was a time of festivity for hyenas and vultures and of misery for human beings. Far from people showing sympathy for each other, a mother no longer wept for her child nor did a child for his mother. Burial of the dead became a rare (phenomenon). At that time, to be buried was reserved for the fortunate ones. The rest were

⁴⁰Richard Pankhurst, "The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia Prior to the 20th century." 1984. (Mimeographed.)

'buried' in the stomachs of hyenas and vultures. In a (fertile) country like Ethiopia, there was no cow in the fields, no calf in the stables no farm in the country.⁴¹

The same source indicates that the famine's devastating results led to the emergence of 'unnatural practices' in the country, such as the eating of traditionally forbidden foods, the abandonment or sale of children by their parents, murder, suicide and even cannibalism.⁴² Contemporary folk poems, which survived to this day also express the misery of the time, as will be seen in this study.

In the twentieth century, a number of severe famines broke out in the wake of recurrent drought situations. This has continued right through to the present day.

In 1972/74 and intense and prolonged drought built up to its peak in the northern regions of the country. The famine of this period, popularly known as 'The Hidden Hunger' is believed to have claimed over 200,000 human lives. It was also the immediate cause for triggering the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution.

This in turn brought about the establishment of an institution charged exclusively with the task of saving the lives of the famine stricken people and rehabilitating them. The institution, the

⁴¹Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Op. cit., p. 59

⁴²Ibid.

Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, was the first of its kind ever to be established in the long history of Ethiopia, and for the first time anti-drought and famine measures became systematic. Since its inception, the Commission has always openly sought assistance from the international community in order to help people made destitute by disasters.

The 'Hidden Hunger' was also followed by several other famine situations in the wake of recurring droughts. The 1984/85 famine, which is the latest in the long line of the country's disasters is regarded as the worst of all the calamities recorded so far. It not only won a lot of sympathy and humanitarian concern from the world community, but also resulted in the intensification of the country's rehabilitation programme which involves the moving of people from the drought-affected regions of the north to the less populated and more fertile areas of the southern regions. Although the settlement scheme that had been carried out over the past few years, has put many settlers on the right track toward self-sufficiency, it has not been without problems of its own, associated with social and economic factors. Some of these problems will be reflected through the topical folk poems in this study and they will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter.

2.5 The Oral Traditions

In Ethiopia, as in many other traditional societies, where literacy has been comparatively very low, orality has been playing an important role.

The study of oral traditions of the differing linguistic groups in this multi-lingual nation is extremely taxing if not impossible. The inquiry into the study of the oral tradition of even one linguistic group poses innumerable difficulties. Nevertheless, the following brief introduction about the oral literature of the Ethiopian people is hoped to give some insight into the literary milieu in which the famine inspired poems occur.

Many observers in the past had a wrong view of the artistic culture of the Ethiopian people, mainly of their oral traditions. They even went to the extent of believing that the Ethiopians are uncreative, and the country's culture as being a prohibitive force that provided no outlets for creative expressions.⁴³ Such rash generalization has mainly emanated from those who have a distorted image of Africa in general, as indicated in the introductory chapter of this paper. The generalization, however, has been dismissed long ago, by those who have taken the time to closely and deeply observe the objective conditions of the cultural life of the country.

⁴³Levine, Op. cit., p. 269.

Among them is Donald Levine, who remarked thus:

The Abyssinian genius freely discloses itself in the stories, verse and proverbs that make up its very rich oral literature. Within this oral tradition, especially in its verse, a good deal of original expression and personalized commentary may be found.⁴⁴

Here, the term 'Abyssinia' used to refer to the Semitic linguistic groups of people in Ethiopia. But the fact still remains that the unwritten traditions, although they were far less widely known and appreciated in the past, cut across regions to encompass other nationalities of the country as well.

It is quite true that oral literature in general is a reflection of people's lives, their thinking and activities. In like manner, the stories, proverbs, songs, riddles and other forms of oral literature told among a certain group of people in Ethiopia depict the life, the belief and the activities of these particular groups; for the images and figurative expressions used in them are drawn from the people's own surroundings. This, however, does not mean that the oral literatures of differing groups do not express identical themes or ideas that could be shared by others.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Regarding this point, an author, who seems to have closely observed the Ethiopian oral literature in general and the tales in particular remarks thus:

Though there are many languages and many tribes, the stories the people tell around their fires at night are the same. In the old days, perhaps it was different. But now the tales you may hear in the villages of the Amharas you may also hear among the Gallas and the Gurages, and even beyond the Ethiopian border in the land of the Shilluks and Dinkas, for they have been carried back and forth for centuries in the migrations of cattle herders, by camel caravans and by the traders who cross the mountains with bracelets, knives, and spears to sell.

Where the stories came from in the very beginning no one knows. Some, perhaps, came from India and Arabia, others from the Sudan and the Congo. But many, no doubt were told for the first time by wise old men in grass-covered huts in Ethiopian... villages.⁴⁵

The above observation has close relevance to the reality of the Ethiopian situation. As a matter of fact, it not only perceives the reality in terms of Ethiopian oral literature, but also looks into the linkage effect of oral traditions within and without the border of a socio-political entity such as Ethiopia.

⁴⁵"Folktales from Ethiopia", (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1967), p. 2.

It is appropriate to treat at this juncture the role Ethiopian oral literature plays in the society. The functions of oral literature are many and varied. Some of the most common ones are presented here with the aim of giving readers a glimpse of its significance in maintaining the wholesomeness of the individual and the stability of the society in general.

In traditional Ethiopia, as is the case of most societies where the literacy rate has been very low for ages, oral literature has served as a medium for transmitting and preserving social education. Individuals, particularly the young, learn the values and norms of the community (which of course they are supposed to conform and adhere to), through stories, songs, riddles, and other forms of oral art. Oral literature also provides people with mental relief. It answers their questions regarding the natural phenomena and their surroundings.

Oral literature has served the Ethiopian society to unequivocally express its distaste and indignation toward authorities, to reject oppressions and protest against impositions. Finally, it offers an enjoyable escape from reality, such as injustice, disasters, poverty, famine and misery which had accompanied the Ethiopian society since time immemorial.

Poetry, one of the major genres of oral literature and the subject of this study is one of the oldest forms of art in Ethiopia, and deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the people.

In Amharic, the language in which the collected poems have been composed, it is commonly known as gitim, literally meaning, poem; whereas its modern and technical term is sine gitim, referring specifically to the genre, poetry. The gitim is mostly rhymed and usually in couplets on the pattern aabbcc and infinitum.⁴⁶

No discussion of Amharic poetry is complete without some mention of sam-enna-worq, (literally means wax and gold), the favorite form of verse of the people. Like other Ethiopian languages, Amharic offers resources for punning or obscure meanings. Verses composed in sam-enna-worq are distinguished from ordinary verses, and it is a method of composing poetry in puns or in ambiguity of word meanings, which has its roots in Geez poetry. It is built of two semantic layers; the 'wax' being the apparent or the surface meaning of the words, whereas their more or less hidden actual significance is the 'gold'.

Levine's remark on the functions of this form of verse, particularly in the traditional Amhara society, is worth quoting here.

It provides the medium for an
inexhaustible supply of humour...
a means for insulting one's fellows
in a socially approved manner, a
technique for defending the sphere
of privacy against excessive
intrusion, in a social order that

⁴⁶Kane, Op. cit., p. 23.

thrives on rumor and gossip and puts most of its people at the mercy of superiors.... Finally, it provides the one outlet for criticism of authority figures in a society which strictly controls every kind of overt aggression toward authority, be it parental, religious, or political. Thus, it has been a safety value for certain social tension....⁴⁷

There are various other forms of Amharic verse either sung, chanted or spoken, differing according to subject matter and occasion. Regarding the composition of these verses, Levine has also the following to say:

The composition of original verse is by no means restricted to a class of professional poets. Every good Amhara is more or less adept at it. Extemporizing verse is a favourite activity at feasts, weddings, and in the aimless camaraderie of the drink-house. Sometimes a minstrel is on hand to begin the entertainment, but the usual pattern is for him to be fed verses extemporized by others present which he then embellishes with music.⁴⁸

The above remarks regarding the composition of verses also applies to engurguro as well as to other verses such as those performed at funeral ceremonies.

The collected couplets predominantly deal with the difficulties of survival in an environment where drought and famine

⁴⁷Levine, Op. cit., p. 9

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 271.

rage constantly. They came out from people who were calamity-ridden as well as from those whose heart was broken by the affliction of their compatriots. These couplets, like any other forms of oral art, have social purposes.

One of the main functions of these couplets is, of course, to somehow lighten the hardships of people brought about by drought and famine. Singing or chanting such couplets when grinding or pounding corn, working in the fields, tending cattle, building the cottage and when performing similar other duties, and when one is in a lonesome situation, helps one to at least temporarily fight against hardship and misery. The couplets also record the famines and other calamities that befell the masses, the measures taken to mitigate them, and praise hard work to alert people against such eventualities.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter deals with methods used in gathering and classifying data. Furthermore, it raises a few points on the translation and selection of the poems included in the study.

The methods employed in the process of carrying out the research include, pre-fieldwork preparations (such as the identification of pertinent written or other sources to begin the study with), interviewing, and supplementing fieldwork by printed or written materials.

Translating a poem from the original into another language certainly poses innumerable difficulties. Due to this and other problems, injustice has at time been done to the original material, for bad translations distort facts. In order to minimize the lose of meaning and thought of the original, the need for expanding the English version during translation was found useful in the study.

3.1 Method of Data Collection

The need for following basic methods in collecting primary data for the study was highly felt by the researcher from the outset.

Since systematic fieldwork usually begins with pre-field preparations, libraries and other sources were made use of beforehand to obtain background information on the nature of the study proposed to be undertaken by the researcher, and on the general theory and practice of tackling such a study. The collection work began in late 1983, when the researcher was on a business trip to the various drought-affected localities of Wello Administrative region. This has continued up to the end of 1985, until a reasonable number of poems has been obtained.

The task of collection in the field was done, in the main, whenever the researcher had similar opportunities to visit the region cited above. The assistance of colleagues working in temporary relief shelters, grain distribution centres, and those executing similar tasks to aid drought-victims was used in the selection of informants and in arranging appointments for interviews. Their services were also valuable in establishing rapport with people in the region.

Before directly going into the main topic of discussion, starting with general conversation was found to be valuable in conducting the interview with the informants. The topic for such conversation was predominantly on questions regarding drought and famine, and the assistance that has been rendered to avert the calamitous situation in the area. This was in fact a provoking subject for those who have been facing and witnessing, time and again, problems associated with drought and famine. Some even

broke into tears in the middle of the conversation and told the researcher such saddening stories of how one lost beloved children, wife, husband, cattle, and so on, as a result of the disasters. Such a sensitive topic of conversation at the beginning and also in the middle of an interview has served the researcher as a bait for extracting the required information from informants. Whenever the information needed has been made available, it was taken down on paper along with some other useful details.

Because of the difficulties mentioned in chapter one, and other problems relating to obtaining data, the need to supplement the collection of poems by other source materials became apparently a necessity. The researcher by resorting to one of Dorson's suggestions on collection, "the folklorist obtains his primary data... by way of printed sources,"⁴⁹ fell back on written source materials. These are, research and seminar papers, books and other printed materials, which include works of prominent personalities such as Balambaras Mahtem Selassie Wolde Maskel, and Dr. Richard Pankhurst. These works, of course, treat other themes or present the famine situations from a different perspective, but also casually include some couplets related to famine and similar conditions.

Every time poems pertinent to the study have been collected, they were translated into English, then filed. The translated version has also been rechecked against the original, to find out

⁴⁹Richard M. Dorson (ed.), Folklore and Folklife (U.S.A. The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 465.

whether some improvement in the translation should be made or not.

The language of poetry has always caused difficulties among translators, for a great deal of information could be compressed in a single word in a poem. This is particularly true with Amharic poems mostly in couplet form which "... are not only compact but also culture-sensitive."⁵⁰ Since much meaning is also conveyed through sounds, this too poses another difficulty in their translation, as it is true with other songs or poems.

The translations in this study are in most cases not literal. However, efforts have been made to make the translated versions succeed in conveying the essential qualities and meanings of the original. Almost all of the original poems have been expanded when translated, by adding phrases or sentences that are hoped would clarify a concept contained in words of the poems. Although care has been taken to convey in translation the message of the poems, it should be noted that absolute accuracy has been impossible.

The task of translating was followed by classifying the poems by theme. Of the many poems collected, only some have been used in this study. The sampling has been made on the basis of the plight and feelings of famine-victims they reflect.

⁵⁰Hailu Araaya, "Ethiopian Folk Poetry Recreated" (Addis Ababa: Faculty of Arts, Addis Ababa University, 1978), p. 6. (Mineographed.)

Some poems have been left out for problems associated with translation and for various other reasons.

The original Amharic and the translated English versions of the poems are put in close proximity in the main body of the text for an easy reference.

3.2 Method of Classification

The classification of the collected poems, based on the dominant theme reflected in each of the grouping, has undergone various stages before this final one.

Initially, the plan was to group and analyse the poems within a framework of history, - for instance, historical watersheds of drought-famine periods, such as the 'Great Ethiopian Famine' of 1888-1892, the 'Hidden Hunger' of Wello of 1972/74, and the 1984/85 Ethiopian famine. The scanty nature of the collected poems befitting this categorization was too small to warrant any reasonable analysis. This method also precluded most of the poems which have been difficult to associate with event at a certain point of time, but still valuable and capable of enriching the study. It was therefore abandoned.

The second attempt to classify involved the putting together of the poems by major subjects they contain; like, the value of an injera for the hungry man, the scourge of famine, fear of resettling away from home, and the like. This classification was

also rejected, for it was felt that, it would invite monotony through most of the discussion of the poems later, besides other problems. Furthermore, if we take under this method of classification, the subject, injera, it would end up in a conglomeration of several and important themes, which would have better been discussed in other individual themes for a better effect.

Following are given two verses to exemplify the above points:

ለምኔ አንድ አንጾራ ይላል የተወጠ
አንኳን ለዘላለም አንድ ቀን ለይቼ።

The "haves" would ignore
The value of an injera.
The "have-not" craves
For a single bite.
Which he finds hard
Even to catch a glimpse of.

አንጾራ ለሌብሉ ለይህን ለይህ
ተሻገር ይሄላል የምላጡን ጭሀ።

Tell not the hungry man
"There is injera yonder,"
Lest he risk his life
Across flooding water.

It is quite true that, both poems, like many others, take injera, (the most persistent topic among the peasantry as well as others), as the core of the subject, whose meaning establishes the relationship between the hungry man and the daily bread. But despite this, the same subject is treated differently under the two couplets; based on the kind of message the couplets

address to our senses, feelings and intelligence. The first poem reveals the hungry man's anxiousness and his emotional attachment to bread, while the second one focuses on the kind of fierce and dangerous struggle the hungry man makes, in order to assure his survival. The very fact that both poems treat the same topic, injera, therefore, does not necessarily mean that they should be put in the same category.

The aim of poetry in general, is not limited to the expression of facts alone. Its meanings rather branch out to convey several thought hidden in any particular poem. As Alexander Pope puts it:

A poem is an exploration rather than a disquisition. It is not a way of stating effectively an already known idea or message. It is a way of struggling with the excitments and tensions of the words surrounding and embodying one's attitude towards a particular subject until those excitments and tensions result in the creation of a pattern and at least a temporary conviction of having achieved some kind of resolution.⁵¹

Thus, Pope stresses the search for 'meaning' in poetry, veneered by ordinary facts. "The 'meaning' of a poem" Graham also asserts that, "is not just the events of story it contains, but their significance,"... not simply the prose contents,... but its

⁵¹Quoted in, Robin Skelton, The Practice of Poetry (London: Heineman, 1972), p. 1.

whole effect."⁵²

Although the overlapping of themes from one category into the other is evident, the poems have been as much as possible assessed and reassessed before this final classification.

The themes identified among the poems selected for this study therefore, are: (1) anguish, (2) insecurity, (3) disillusionment, (4) resentment, (5) gratitude and (6) tenacity.

⁵²Desmond Graham, Introduction to Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 13-14.

CHAPTER IV

MAJOR THEMES OF THE COUPLETS

In this chapter, the themes of anguish, insecurity, disillusionment, resentment, gratitude and tenacity are discussed. Of course, these themes are not mutually exclusive. A certain amount of overlapping is unavoidable as the content of any poem is not rigidly circumscribed and it is in its very nature to be suggestive.

The thematic analysis of the couplets is based on operational definition or explanation of the category (theme). Each category is defined or given explanation at the outset, in order to bring into focus the major theme that is going to be discussed.

Since content and style are so inter-related in any work of literature, the literary techniques employed in the couplets no doubt deserve independent treatment. In this study however, the literary aspect has been dealt with side by side in the process of analysing the basic contents of the couplets, whenever thought helpful to elucidate their meaning.

4.1 Anguish

The poems categorized under this sub-heading express the pain, distress, suffering, despair, affliction, melancholy, misery and agony of people in hunger.

Among the earliest poems depicting the miseries and melancholic situations of famished people, we have those composed during the 'Great Famine' of 1888-1892 and cited in some written documents. The following couplet of the period, for example, which is also very popular to this day among the people, shows in a very simple and straight forward manner the miseries of those, deprived of the basic necessities of life, as a result of the raging drought and famine of the period.

ረባሽ ለፍቱ ዑሃ ጠጣሽ ለቲ
ጉዳቲን ጣን ያውቃል ያለጦ ቀነቲ፡፡

O, mother, I'm hungry,
O, sister, I'm thirsty,
Who knows my sufferings
Except my girdle. (1)

The reference to 'mother' and 'sister' shows us the victim's ardent desire to communicate through the medium of poetry his/her unfortunate situation, to those most closely related to him/her and would sympathize with him/her, thus proving utter helplessness in the face of disaster. The 'girdle' on the other hand, symbolizes the measurement of the extent of hunger that has put strain on people, for it has to be adjusted to the size of the waist, every time one gets thinner due to starvation.

Another couplet of the same period, which has tried to censure the actions of people who have been involved in one way or another in some unnatural practices gives an insight into the severity of the famine.

The couplet is said to allude to a woman who ate her own child during the 'Great Famine'.

A literal translation of the surface meaning of this couplet is:

ዘባድ ለመ ነገድ ከመጠረድ መተግ
ዕጣኑ ይሻሻላል ለዕለተ ስራተግ::

Rather than go down to Matama,
To trade in civet,
Better is the incense
For the daily supper. (2)

The pun lies in the Amharic word for incense, (itan)* which also means 'little child'. Hence, a literal translation of the inner meaning of this same poem would be:

Rather than go down to Matama,
To trade in civet,
Better is the little baby
For the daily supper.

In a country like Ethiopia where hunger and disease are endemic, the young have always been at risk. In famine situations, most parents would have no means to care for their children. And yet, the hungry young persistently asks for food and comfort, which even mothers could not provide.

Here is a poem which reflects such painful life situations in a society under the pangs of hunger.

ለጆ "እንጆራ፣ እንጆራ፣" እናተ፣ "የለም! የለም!"
 እንጂህ ያለጡን የሚቸለጡ የለም፡፡

:

The child incessantly persists: "injera!, injera!..."
 The mother cannot but cry: "Yelen!, Yelen!..."⁵³
 Alas! there is no greater agony than this. (3)

The dialogue used here (the hungry child crying, and the poor mother with nothing to give) is very descriptive and powerful in presenting to our imagination a vivid picture of crushed humanity.

The option left to such helpless children as it has always been, is to cry until death overtakes them, as expressed in the following poem:

አለ ቀስ ልጁ በጣም ምርጫ ብሎ
 ከራብ የበለጠ ምን ያገኘን ብሎ፡፡

The child wept so bitterly
 Realizing there was nothing more
 Debilitating
 Than the pangs of hunger. (4)

The Ethiopian rural population has been living for ages under conditions of severe food scarcity, as historical accounts tell us. This in turn has given rise to people's preoccupation with issues concerning food and the need to alleviate hunger. Most of the poems in this study reflect this fact of life in various ways.

⁵³Means 'there is none!'

The following poem shows how arduous the search for daily bread is, and also how anxious are people in crisis to satisfy their hunger.

አንገረ አለ ቢሉን የወረደኩ ተ
ከሽተላ ይበባል የደንገይ ስለተ: :

Stones as sharp as daggers,
My bare feet, had to
Cope with,
Upon hearing , there was
injera below. (5)

The poem exhibits the desperate attempt of those in hunger, which leads many to risk dangerous courses in order to fulfil their dreams or hopes of finding food.

A similar, but more expressive and profound poem reflects the situations of those in severe food shortages.

አንገረ አለ ብሉ አይነገረዎ ለደ-ሃ
ተሻገር ይሄዳል የዋላውን ውሃ: :

Tell not the hungry man
"There is injera yonder"
Lest he risk his life
Across flooding water. (6)

The common sense that tells him that he shouldn't jump into a flood or **into** torrential waters, seems to disappear in a situation of gnawing hunger. The poet brings out **this** abnormal condition by telling us that we shouldn't tell a starving man that there is food across torrential river, because he is so desperate that he risks his life.

It is usual for the poverty-stricken people to lament indirectly (like poem(2)), through couplets embodying the principle of double meanings, which is common in Amharic verse.

The following couplet, like (couplet(2)), expresses the painful feelings of the hungry man in an ambiguous manner.

አላቀቀህም ያልሰኘ አንደዘመናዬ
አንጀራላባ ተቆተ አልነበርክም ወይ?

My friend, like those robed in modern style
You tell me that you know me not.
Haven't you been in my stepfather's house? (8)

Since the pun lies on the first word of the second line of the original, (injerabate)*, the inner meaning that the hungry man is more concerned with and worried about goes, thus in translation:

Mr. injera,
Like those robed in modern style
You tell me that you know me not
Haven't you been in my father's house?

Here, injera, which is the main preoccupation of those starved, is personified. Thus the famished one finds at least some relief from his gnawing hunger by addressing it through the artistic medium of poetry.

From the tone of this couplet, one gets the feeling that, the anonymous poet might have been once upon a time a respected member of the society. But then, he seems to have lost everything that

used to be easily available to him. He has, however, succeeded in giving us the true and yet saddening picture of famine-ridden persons in so few, but effective words.

When the injera fails to respond an appeal is made to God as usual.

ፀይ ሀብቴን አቃኛፀ ፀይ ዕድሉን ባርከፀ
ሀዳ ተቀደደ ሲርባኝ የጣከፀ::

O! Lord, fortune or good luck
Endow me with,
For my belly is being torn apart,
As hunger forces my fingers,
To scratch it. (9)

The images of the restless fingers and the torn apart belly demonstrate the tortures and torments received by victims of famine.

The poem not only reflects the affliction or injury of the famine-victims, but also the fatalistic views of the rural people who give more emphasis to God's will than to human effort in the attainment of a goal.

Past famines are said to have always left vivid impressions on the minds of people living in communities. This fact was established after historians and anthropologists have found evidences in the oral traditions of people they have been researching. In like manner, some of the collected poems which fall in this first category corroborate this idea by the remembrance of famine in times of plenty.

አሁን ዘመት ገባ አኛዎ አየነው
አያሌ ሰው ቀረ ሳይገናኘው::

Grain has returned from battle,
Some of us were fortunate to see it return.
But many were absent (meaning = dead)
To go and welcome it. (10)

አሁን ዳር አደረ በቻውንዎ ዋለ
ጠላት አንደሌለው ሰው አንጻሳገደለ::

The crop keeps itself safe outside in the field,
As though it has no enemy it had created. (11)

In these poems, the wounds of the past seem not to heal very easily. Those who somehow survive the hunger threat, and in a better position later on, still feel the shattering effect of the famine in their normal life pattern because, one way or another they have lost their friends and family members. Thus, the enmity between them and the 'crop' is kept alive.

Another poem, which is said to be of a recent origin, and very popular among the drought and famine-victims of Wello, recalls the days of trial and tribulation in the following manner:

ከራ አየተሰለ ሣር ይበላል በረ
አኛንዎ የዘገ ቀን አገኘነ ዛሬ::

The innocent ox, grazes on grass
While a sword is sharpened,
To chop off its head.
Alas, we too, in the past,
Encircled by famine's threat
Death was our awaiting fate. (12)

On the basis of some of the poems discussed above, one can realize that the theme depicting the anguish, pain, distress and miseries of people in famine, is expressed among others, through the images of the woes and cries of hungry children and the indifferent attitude of injera towards those desperately in need of it. It is also reflected through the helplessness of parents to assist or support their own hungry children.

Though the poems are in couplet forms each containing few words, they are capable of expressing profound feelings of those on the verge of death or starvation. At times, the poems do censure the actions of society by the employment of double meanings in the 'wax and gold' style of Amharic gene.

4.2 Insecurity

The following poems express the helplessness and unstable situations of people in famine, beset by fear and anxiety.

These emotions seem to be best expressed mainly through poems using the image of a mother.

Under normal circumstances, when food is available, mother is the one who feeds the family. The death of a mother creates a sense of insecurity in the family. When a normal pattern of life is disrupted, it affects the whole society, and this in turn creates uneasiness, and the members get socially unstable. This feeling of loneliness also leads to the feeling of insecurity and

the need for comfort and protection becomes of great importance. Therefore, mother figuratively turns into a symbol of shelter and security.

Such comfort and protection can only be found in tender hearts and generous hands, whose property they are surely of mothers only, as the following poem indicates:

አባባሽ እና ተ እራቤን ተቀጠው
አንገን ይፈረሻል ስትገላግላቸው::

Please mother, reprimand my hunger,
For it will listen to you
When you frown at it. (13)

The way the anonymous poet, in hunger, addresses his mother, "please mother", evokes the emotions. It not only makes us think more about the deep affection and attachment existing between mother and child, but also focuses our attention on the helpless situation of the famished, who wishes to regress back to his childhood through his imagination and cry out for her to relieve him of his burden.

Such emotional attachment to a 'mother' is even stronger and more long-lasting, in poverty-stricken societies like ours, where interdependence among family members or kinsmen is essential for survival. Thus, the idea that mothers in particular as being the unifying factors, and sustainers of families has always been maintained and highly valued. That is why the loss or absence of a mother symbolizes the ever-lasting misery and torture for those

who rely on her even in their imaginations.

እራቤ በሆኔ በቀሉ ዘረዘረ
እና ተሞ በተሆን ታዲያን ነበረ::

Mine hunger,
Sprouts and tassels in my belly.
Had my mother been at hand
She would have mowed it down for me. (14)

The time it takes for hunger to be conceived to be born, and to grow to maturity in the belly of the defenseless person throws light on his continuing misery and helplessness.

The poem gives us a powerful account of the situations where misery is reigning in the absence of any one to avert it.

But the one in a crisis keeps on desperately seeking for the assistance of the dear mother to relieve him from his nagging and persistent hunger.

ራቤ ተቀጥ ተሆኖብኝ ቁጠተ
እስገድዳው ልምጣ ከናት ዓለም ቤተ::

Intense is my hunger
That gnaws at my belly.
Let me go to mother's dear home
Where I may have it subdued. (15)

Both the above poems, i.e., (14) & (15) stimulate our imagination to look deep into the problems and find out the reasons for ourselves why those caught by hunger pangs get so insecure.

Here is another poignant poem which is evocative of the absolute helplessness and insecurity of the starved man:

እናት ተጡት ለሉ እናት አንደሰቡ
ፕጋር ገደ ሠር ተ የዎታፈር ሰቡ::

Mother,
Capable of dismantling
The cottage of hunger
Is sentenced to death
As if she were a human being. (16)

These poems, i.e., (13), (14), (15) and (16) are organically linked. They move progressively to a climax. In this last piece however, the poet elevates 'mother' to a status of a divine being. He reproaches the imaginary judges who passed a death sentence on her for bringing her down to the level of an ordinary mortal human being. But he tells us she is not a human being because, she annihilates hunger which no other human being can. Now that she is sentenced to death; the feeling of helplessness and insecurity is apparent on the part of those who desperately seek for her comfort and protection.

The theme of insecurity is also expressed in poems other than those which dwell purely on issues relating to mothers.

Recurring and cyclical drought has been disrupting the life of the Ethiopian peasant farmers for ages. Failure of rains means no ploughing or sowing and eventually no harvesting.

Such a hostile climatic condition has always created a sense of insecurity and anxiety among the Ethiopian rural population.

In the poem that follows, for example, such fear and worry among the rural population in general, is reflected in the following simple and vivid manner.

እስከ መላ ምቹ ይሰጥላቸው መላ ነቁ
በታሰብ ተርባን መቼ ለንባላ ነቁ::

Look out for means and ideas
For ideas themselves may render partial means.
If we are hungry in the month of Tahsas⁵⁴
When are we ever going to have a bite? (17)

Because of drought and other disasters, Tahasas at times fails to be the month of plenty. The rural people, on such occasion, will have no means of satisfying even their usual minimal subsistence needs, which adds up to the already existing problem. Such a threatening situation, of course, creates uneasiness and feelings of insecurity among the masses as expressed in the above couplet.

Such shortage of food among the rural community and the emotional disturbance people felt as a result, is best expressed further, by the following poem of an earlier origin:

እሀል ታላላ ለሉ ሄደን እንየው
የግደ ተርፍ አንደሀን እኛ አንደን ቀደመው::

They say, Mr., Grain has fallen sick
Let us go and pay him a visit.
For, if he is not going to survive
We should surely be the first to die. (18)

The symbolic sickness of the crop magnificently projects the doom of the peasant-farmers.

⁵⁴December, the month during which Ethiopian farmers collect their harvests.

The inevitability of social disintegration has also been felt, and before this happens people have to supplicate.

አባክህ ጌታይ ሰጠኝ ልሰጣት
የሰጧትን ስናት በጣጣት አልፍታት::

Please, my Lord,
Endow me with good luck,
So that, I may not divorce
My children's mother
Because of hunger. (19)

Unlike poem(34) to be discussed under the major theme of gratitude, the poet here seeks divine assistance, to avoid the breaking up of his family due to poverty and hunger.

The poems discussed in this section, point out the anxiety and worry of people in crisis of food shortage. When the victims lose hope they get so insecure to the extent that they regress in their imagination to their childhood period when they used to seek for the assistance and protection from mother and the grownups.

4.3 Disillusionment

By disillusionment is meant here disappointment, frustration, displeasure and dissatisfaction as a result of unfulfilled expectations.

Almost all of the poems in this section are divine-oriented declarations, indicating loss of direction and indecisiveness in the face of disaster.

Even the Almighty
Like the frail human beings,
Makes false assertions.
For, when I asked Him for an injera
He said, "you die, for I've nothing
To give out."

thus changing the meaning entirely.

This is a highly loaded couplet. The anonymous poet is blaming none other than the Almighty Himself. He accuses Him of telling a lie, and condemning him to death. One could not think of a more concentrated and a more poignant expression in the face of the omnipotent power which metes disaster unto His helpless creature, man.

In this simile, God, the Creator is reduced to the status of human beings, in an indirect way.

Such a move taken by the starved people, in a way, is a beginning of a departure from their beliefs and customs.

There are some other sad stories to be told against God, which add to their frustrations and disappointment.

ዘናቡን ስታዘንብ የእሳህ የእሳህ
ጣ ዩን ስታጠጣ የእሳህ የእሳህ
ተዘራጩ እንደሁ ቀብቀቡ ያጩሁ::

You send the Rains
That flood, O God!
And the Sun's heat
That scorches
There it is, my tilled land, for you
To sow it yourself. (21)

This is a direct criticism of God by farmers who were forced against their will, to abandon their usual agricultural activities, because of the imbalance of nature. The message of the couplet indirectly presupposes the abandonment, and destruction of communities.

The following poem which makes another explicit reference to God, tells how communities ended up in total chaos and destruction.

እገዢ ይበላገላህ፣ አዎላክ ይበላገላህ
ተገባባተ አገሪሁ ባዶ ቤተ ያዕላህ።

To heck with You, Lord
To heck with You!
If that is what You desire
There is my abandoned house for You. (22)

In the following poem, in a surprising turn of fancy, famine itself seems to get worried about its own prey's plight. But the victims look at the solution put forward by him with scorn and distrust.

ሽዋ እንሂዱ አለኝ ወይ ራሴ ዋኝ
አዚያ እገዢ የለዎ ወይ፣ አዚህ የሚያውቀኝ?

My foolish Conrade Hunger
Asked me to accompany him to Shoa.
Doesn't he realize that,
The same God who knows me here
Also exists there? (23)

Such pessimism on the part of victims, asserts their growing disappointment with divine providence.

Those still in the drought regions, unlike the others who have been moved out and resettled in the other parts of the country, have their own doubt in the existence of God, 'Allah', as the following topical poem from a Muslim community reflects:

ቀኝ በየ ገ የቡ ሰጣዩ ቀላለኝ
አላሌዎ ሠፈራ ወረደ ወሰለኝ::

Looking up in the sky,
No trace of cloud I see.
No trace of majesty
Heaven seems to be abandoned.
May be, Allah too
Has been taken away and resettled. (24)

All the characteristics with which God is presented in the poems discussed above, testify to the disillusionment of destitutes with the divinity. Their unending miseries lead them to ever more daring statement against God, for nothing has come out of the love and respect they had for Him.

እኔ አላሰገድላሁም ይሰገድላሁ አሁን
አንተው ስጦታው የቀደረህን ያሁን::

I don't bow to you God
Let the grain do it instead.
For you have provided it
With that power of Yours. (25)

This poem, indirectly and yet profoundly suggests that, it is God who delegates power to grain, to carry out His cruel acts against mankind. Thus, grain to the starved man assumes the

proportions of a God. However, there seems to be not the slightest reason for victims to bow for someone who condemned them to death. But, still, the belief that, God is power, is maintained. This clearly indicates that, although destitutes get dissatisfied with their 'Creator', they have not completely abandoned /distrusted/ Him.

Perennial instability, absence of institutional mechanisms to protect the peasant against looting and plunder by shiftas⁵⁵ and raiding troops have kept the farmers on the verge of starvation. A minor crisis would thus lead to famine situation.

Aware of this factor, the peasants have always been expressing their bitterness against harrassment and suppression through their oral literature.

ለበሰንዎ ወሰደው ለበሰው እርዘኛ
በረዩንዎ ነፃው አረደው ነፍጠኛ
እህሉንዎ ዘረፈው በላው ቀለበ ተኛ
ንጉሥ የቀረዎ ጥቂት አጣርኛ
ዎ ነው ሀድ አይዘርፈ አርፌ እንድተኛ::

My garments were confiscated
And worn by the marauders
/Claiming to be ill-clad./
My ox was driven away
And slaughtered by the neftegna⁵⁶
My granary was emptied
By the prince's henchman.
O, your Majesty,
You have forgotten just one thing:
My stomach!
Why don't you rob that too?
And let me sleep in peace. (26)

This poem is said to have been composed at the time of Emperor Theodore (1855-1868) who, in order to punish the people of a region

⁵⁵Outlaws.

⁵⁶A soldier of a prince in feudal Ethiopia.

in revolt, had given orders to his troops to plunder and pillage the entire countryside. Entire communities were then devastated and famine had set in as a result.

This poem is of high quality building up detail by detail to strong climax. It is a testament to the sufferings and injustice sustained by the poor peasant during the oppressive regimes of feudal Ethiopia.

The condemnation of the masses is thus, not limited to celestial powers only, as expressed in couplet(25). It condemns earthly powers as well, as reflected in the above poem.

The theme of disillusionment is also manifested through the victims reaction against friends or relatives. This happens mainly when the tradition of mutual assistance fails to benefit those in crisis.

እሁለና ዘናብ ቆቀረን ይረደረ
ከተ ቃን ሊሆን ነፁ ወዳጅ የበደለ::

Nature resumed its cordiality
What is going to happen to those
Who mistreated friends
During hard days. (27)

Here the past wound seems not to heal very easily even at times when nature resumes its generosity.

The peasants' response to drought and famine situations, is manifested through various emotional reactions, as seen from the poems treated so far. The theme of disillusionment, which is predominantly divine-oriented, as is the case here, shows one of the fundamental features in the cultural life of the Ethiopian rural population. The implicit and explicit references to God, in times of grief and disaster, show people's preoccupations with religious beliefs.

This in turn explains the fact that, God is viewed by the peasants as the power who interferes in their affairs, - God as the cause for both successes and failures.

4.4 Resentment

Poems included in this category express feelings of indignant displeasure, dissatisfaction or unhappiness.

These poems are predominantly topical, dwelling on the country's ongoing resettlement programme, set up to alleviate the sufferings of disaster victims, through the utilization of available resources.

The following poem, however, which is not related to settlement or resettlement issues, and yet capable of explaining the resentment of people at their misfortunes in general, is worth citing here.

እርስ መረብና ተካሥ መሻተ
እያደር ይረጃል እንደገር እሻተ::

Tilling land, and
Suffering from hunger,
Shooting with a gun, and
Missing the enemy
These are incessant torments
Like fire burning the soles of our feet. (28)

Here, the theme of resentment is enriched by concrete images. The farmer who fails to benefit from his labour is like the warrior who misses his shots.

Another couplet, which is also not resettlement - oriented is the following one which shows the damages wrought by drought and the kind of emotional feeling created among its victims.

Inadequacy or absence of rains has always conspired against the efforts of farmers in the agricultural activities. Farmers whose crops fail or get damaged due to such calamities have this ironic way of celebrating Easter:

እኛ ዎን ቸገረን ፋሰካ ቢጠጣ
እንሸንጻለን በሰጠሊት ቋንቋ::

Who cares for Easter feasts?
We will enjoy ourselves
With grain that has missed
Its ripeness
/because of drought/ (29)

The Easter holiday which concludes two months of fasting for the Christian Ethiopians turns into a day of sorrow for the starving peasant.

The Amharic term Sefera, (meaning 'settlement' or 'resettlement') has been a popular topic of discussion, mainly among the drought and famine-victims, since recent years. The measures taken by the government to move out people from the drought-prone regions of the country and resettle them in the more fertile areas have attracted not only the attention of drought-victims themselves, but also the world community at large.

Because of social, cultural and other factors, the resettlement programme set up, with the hope of benefitting a segment of peasant farmers has **at** times seems not to have received positive responses from the beneficiaries themselves.

Out of the collected poems for the study, there are those which purely dwell on this issue of settlement or resettlement.

The following couplet reflects how a famine-victim being assisted in his place of origin at Wello, views the resettlement effort.

የሰጣቸውን ሰንዳ ጣጡ ጥሩ ነበር
ጭላጭ አያይሩ ሰፈሩ ጣሳ ነበር ::

Full of flavour is the
Relief Commission's wheat
Were it not used eventually
For resettlement. (30)

Here, the relief recipient at Wello is worried about the eventuality of being resettled in one of the new rehabilitation sites, which of course, he is not familiar with. Although 'full of flavour', he took the relief aid he has been receiving from the Commission as a bait for resettlement. This establishes his negative view against the rehabilitation programme, which involves the moving out of people from their places of origin to a quite new environment.

Some consider the programme unfit for respectable people. They see it as undignified and unworthy of proud people, as the following couplet which compares the resettled peasant to chicken, demonstrates:

የገደብ ሠፈራ ደር ይመስል
ወሰደን ሰር ጭጃ ከወንድ ሠፈር::

What is life re-settled?
Like chicken idly perched.
Take me to the battlefield
To join the warriors instead. (31)

To the Amhara, more importance is given to fighting and defending the mother-land than to rehabilitation issues.

The views of resettlers at the new resettlement sites, do not seem to differ much from those who stay at their places of origin, as regards the rehabilitation programme. The following topical poem, from one of the resettlement sites at Bale region illustrates this point.

አደጃ ሆኖ ወርቅን አየጠፋች
አገደብ ስናገራት ሰባት አየመለሰች
የሰደደችን አባት ባሌ ጭጃ አረፈች::

Mending her rugs,
Sitting in front of her house.
For every word uttered
Triple was her accusative reply,
What a terrible predicament for the man,
He had no choice
But to run away
And join the Bale resettlement area. (32)

Here, family dispute is taken as the cause of resettlement. The man has opted for being resettled not because he is in favour of the resettlement effort, as the tone of the poem suggests, but because of the absence of warm and smooth family relationship at the place of origin.

The deep attachment of the Ethiopian people to symbols of territory, language and religion is also one other determining factor for the peasant's outlook towards the rehabilitation effort.

አይቻልም ያለሽ፣ ይቻላል ጠከራ
ባሉ ከረዎኩላሽ ተኮርኮ ጋራ::

Haven't you said my dear, that,
Misfortunes were unbearable.
But no! I did bear them
And thus I disproved you
When I settled
With the Oromos in Bale. (33)

Here, the new settler is lost in the middle of a new culture and environment. He sees himself a misfit among the new community.

According to the message of this couplet, the cultural cohesion between the Christian settler from northern Ethiopia, and the Oromo of the south, seems not to gain a firm ground yet.

With the exception of poem(28) in this same category, the other poems are topical, discussing issues of recent events. The reference to 'settlement' or 'resettlement' in these poems gives an idea about the possible date of their composition, definitely after the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, since it was after the establishment of RRC that resettlement programmes were highly intensified. Hence, these poems are also important for their historical and sociological values besides their contributions in the field of oral literature.

4.5 Gratitude

Poems under this section express feelings of thankfulness, appreciation and gratefulness.

It is very customary among the Ethiopian population, the peasants in the main, to thank and bless all those with helping hands. The people show such feelings of appreciation usually with much humbleness and sincerity.

There could be various explanations for such widely exhibited habit among the peasantry. But one thing is obvious. Because of their lowly position in society, their only available wealth with which to reciprocate is their sincere words of thankfulness and gratitude.

Here is a poem, popular among the Amhara society, which elucidates the above points.

ያበላጁን ይበላ ያጠባጁን ይጠባ
ያን ይበጃን ነበር ሁሉ እንደ ኔ ቢያጣ::

Let those be fed
Who fed me.
Let their thirst be quenched,
Who quenched mine.
What would have been my lot
If all of us were
In the same predicament? (34)

The deeper meaning of this poem, however, goes beyond the mere expression of gratitude. It reflects the tradition of mutual assistance. The poem tells us that if everybody was deprived, it would result in universal destitution. It expresses in so few words man's dependence on man in time of direst needs.

There are other verses of similar nature dwelling on famine emergency-aid programmes.

The following poem puts on record, how an organized government relief assistance benefits famine victims.

የረብ አባት ገባ ተ መንገዱ ሲያለግ
የመንገዱት ዐርዳታ ደርሶ ፈጠረኝ።

The fire of hunger,
Drove me on to the high road.
And I was saved
By the government's aid. (35)

The poems show us the severity of the drought in terms of a rampant fire imagery.

The government's aid is likened to the fire squad which reaches the emergency spot and averts danger before it spreads out.

The poems expressing feelings of gratitude not only indicate the inflictions of people resulting from the 'fire of hunger', but also the root causes for such inflictions, - failure of rains in this particular case.

ዘናባቸን ቁር ተ ደ-ገገር ገር ሰለን
ተባህሩ ጭዶ ሰንጻ ወጣለን::

When the rains failed
Havoc reigned.
Wheat from abroad arrived
And our lives were saved. (36)

Like in verse(35), assistance rendered in times of direst need is the best manifestation of solidarity. The very mention of 'wheat' coming 'from abroad' also indicates that the task of saving famine victims fell not only on the nation but also on the international community as well.

In the next couplet, the expression of gratitude is direct and specific.

ጭሉሰ ባደጣጣፍ ካናዳው ባደረገ
ወደቀን ቁር ተን ነበር ስንጻጦር ለገንጻ::

Hadn't it been for Wello's appeal,
And Canada's positive response.
Ours would have been
The fate of the dead,
Stalk in the dry season. (37)

This poem of course, shows the deep appreciation of foreign aid, of Canada, in particular. But more than that, it expresses indirectly the deep feeling of misery felt by the community in general.

Another poem, which also pays tribute to those who came to avert the crisis goes thus:

እርባን እርባን ረሄ ሰተጠጣ
የጃጣን ዐርዳታ እኔን ይዘተ ጠጣ::

I was choked by hunger,
And in the clutches of death.
And so! Japanese aid
Pulled me out by the hands. (38)

Both poem, i.e., (37) & (38) stress the inevitability of death due to hunger, had it not been for the assistance rendered by foreign countries. So, the sincerity of words of appreciation on the part of aid-recepients is unquestionable. The imminence of death due to hunger is again reiterated in the first two lines of the following poem. However, the succeeding lines show, life instead of death, plenty instead of starvation.

እኔን ጠቆ ነገር አፈር ነጭ ቀለቤ
ሰጠኝ ከረዎኩን ቁጣ ዩን ጠቆ::

Certain was I
That Earth was to be my meal
To my surprise, however,
I subsisted on bread and butter. (39)

/Bread and butter which was of course
supplied from abroad as there were none
available in the country./

In this poem, 'bread and butter' connotes the availability of nutritious food which was out of reach of the peasants even during normal times. Thus, the outbreak of droughts and the famine that subsequently resulted seems to be a blessing in disguise as expressed in the poem composed by the aid-recepients themselves.

The famine victims left no stone unturned in an effort to put on record the contributions of those countries and organizations. The assistance rendered not only saved lives, but also helped in facilitating the reunion of family members, which were previously dislocated because of the calamities.

The following verse reflects this fact.

ራብኛ ቸገር ካገር ያባረረሽ
ባላሽን ታረ ቁ ስሜሽን መባላሽ::

Listen to me,
You who fled your village,
Come back and re-join your husband
For the Relief Commission
Is on your side. (40)

The poems discussed above generally emphasize not only the tradition of mutual assistance, but also such traditions as being symbols of life instead of death, social cohesion instead of social disintegration. Since they dwell more on actual happenings, i.e., on events at a certain time in the life of the famished, their value lies more in their historical or sociological significance, rather than in their literary or artistic qualities. The inclusion of new or alien terms in these poems also indicate the penetration of foreign aid into the country, and thus point to the approximate time of their composition which must be recent.

4.6 Tenacity

Poems under this last category express determination, strong will, self-reliance and persistence.

It has time and again been said that hunger has always been a constant visitor of the Ethiopian peasants. It therefore, comes as no surprise to find that, for peasants familiar with the cruelties of hunger, food production is their constant pre-occupation. This pre-occupation is well expressed through their oral traditions.

The peasants chant or sing these verses as they work, as they plant the crops or harvest them. These poems stress not only the importance of hard work and self-sufficiency, but also warn against possible dangers of hunger.

Here is a poem to elucidate the above points.

ገባዝ ለንግረቸሁ ገባዝ እርሻ እረሱ
እየወለዳቸሁ ልጄ አታሰለቅሱ::

Gobez!

Listen to my advice.

Listen to my advice

Work hard on your farms.

Work hard!

Or else, you won't be able to withstand

The tears of your offsprings. (41)

It starts out by calling 'Gobez' - a word which means 'the brave' or 'the strong'. It also connotes integrity and comradeship.

The poem is a warning to people that unless they apply themselves seriously to farming, food crisis would definitely set in. The 'Gobez' who are expected to help out anybody in danger, must not compromise themselves to hunger and to the tears of their children. The call for hard work cannot be more succinctly expressed than in the above couplet.

በሰነድ ጣይ ፈረ ገምሌ ዝኖሮ ፈረ
ሰኞ ለገገሩ ቢላው በገብ ለሰረረረ::

He who advances lame excuses,
Of the Sun's heat in June,
And of the downpours in July,
Frightens his kid,
Demanding injera,
By the story of
An approach of a devouring hyena. (42)

The couplet gives us an insight into the troubled hearts of those people who, out of negligence or laziness, fail to work hard and are eventually overwhelmed by problems, the solutions of which are out of their reach.

ጣረሰ ነው ለገገ ለርፍ ለሰተላውጥ
ያሰደ ነገጣላ መሰብ ሲገለጥ::

One has to plough
The land with vigour.
Else, fearful will it be,
When one ends up
With an empty bread basket. (43)

The imagery of the empty bread basket symbolizes destitution, hunger, and the eventuality of death by starvation. Hence, the need for hard work is given great emphasis.

Some, with little or no foresight, might think that famine could be avoided very easily. The next couplet indirectly exposes such a false view, and advocates the correct solution:

እኔስ እርሳሁ አሰጠረርዎ
ቸጋር በጠገናዬ አይባረርዎ::

I plough the land
Moan I not.
For, hunger can't be
Chased away with a sling. (44)

This is another couplet which in only two lines states that, no weapon can vanquish famine except hard work. It also teaches that no amount of self-pity would help against famine. The only way out is to farm and to farm and to farm. One has to sweat even on religious holidays, violating the long-lived tradition as the following couplet proposes:

ዎነፁ ቀዳዎ ቢያርሱ ዎነፁ እሁዱ ቢያርሱ
ከባለፀገ ቤተ ክፍለሰላሱ

Better to farm on Saturdays
Better to farm on Sundays!
Rather than running after handouts
From the affluent. (45)

Saturdays and Sundays, and the numerous Saints' days have been observed for millenia in christian Ethiopia. Violating them is tantamount to breaking a taboo, because any one who does so could very well be excommunicated. It has been held throughout the centuries that working on these days would bring disaster not only on the individual but also on the community as a whole. But the message of the above couplet is precisely to break this ancient tradition. To commit this sacrilege is deemed to be much better than to humiliate oneself by begging for a piece of bread from the 'haves'.

The couplet is a revolutionary call for hard work and self-reliance.

The last couplet showing the fruitful life obtained through hard work runs thus:

የፈረረ ቁጥፍን በረቱ በራ በራ
ወስከረዎ ይነጋል ወፍጧው አያገራ::

Sharp are his ploughs
And his oxen of a bora colour.
And his grinding mill ceases not to roar
Until well into Maskeram,⁵⁷ the new year. (46)

Even during periods of good harvest, there are lean months. But in the above poem is a hardworking peasant, whose labours are rewarded by plentiful results that his grinding mill roars even throughout September when most others remain silent.

The couplets cited so far in this last section of the chapter, express the need to overcome hunger through hard work. They agitate the society to be industrious. Underlying these couplets; there is a call for a spirit of self-reliance, for tenacity against hardship and for doggedness in work. They also carry a message to fight against fatalism.

The last poem to conclude the discussion with, is chosen because its optimistic content and realistic solution to the problem of hunger which can be, in the final analysis is self-reliance and hard work.

⁵⁷December(?)
September

C O N C L U S I O N

In the preceding discussion of the dominant themes of famine-inspired Amharic poems, the study has attempted to bring into focus the plight of the hunger-stricken Ethiopian people, the peasant masses in the main, and their responses to the misfortunes meted out to them.

Although these responses that got their expressions through oral poetry are treated under separate headings, the general impression we get from them is that the majority of Ethiopian rural masses have lived under food crisis situation for ages, and thus, in constant preoccupations with the acquisition of their daily bread.

Factors directly responsible for the outbreak of famine in Ethiopia are usually identified as drought resulting from unfavourable climatic conditions. But major causes of famine have their roots in the country's socio-economic system and in the low-level of productivity of peasant farmers, which has been pointed out in chapter two of this study. The archaic land tenure system, human settlement pattern, primitive techniques in food production and land use, to mention some, have been the big stumbling blocks for proper development and for self-sufficiency in food. Thus the Ethiopian masses have lived for ages in an environment where food crisis has been raging constantly.

The oral traditions have not failed to register the problems and miseries people have been facing for ages. The poems classified

under the theme of anguish for example, express this face of life through the woes and cries of hungry children and the never-improving food situation for those with desperate needs to satisfy their hunger. Anxiety and helplessness in the face of disasters is expressed by couplets under the theme of insecurity. Because of their difficult positions, people have also been forced to condemn not only the earthly power, but also the celestial as well, which further shows their disillusionment with humanity as well as divinity.

Poems under resentment theme show people's displeasure and dissatisfaction in life; to the extent of disregarding some of the efforts made to improve their own lots.

The poems have also registered the contributions made by the world community at large, to alleviate problems of famine.

Tenacity, which is the last theme in the analysis of the poems, is very optimistic, and a revolutionary call for hard work and self-reliance. The need to overcome hunger through the concerted efforts of all those concerned is highly emphasized.

The couplets included in this study have attempted to register the collected experiences of famine-victims in so few but effective words.

They are valued not only for their literary merits, but also for their historical and sociological significance as well.

There is no doubt that, for a deeper understanding of Ethiopian society, a more concerted and institutionalized collection of oral literature of the Ethiopiaⁿ people in general is needed.

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D E C L A R A T I O N

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