

Orality in the Chronicle of King Tewodros II

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The somewhat paradoxical importance of orality in a literary genre as the royal chronicle has not been analyzed although it weakens the artificial division made between written and oral texts. Along with this specific prosodic contour, the chronicle uses simultaneously different levels of language. Colloquial (even uneducated expressions) are side by side with literary forms, as archaism or dialectal variants are with standard language. This use of oral poetry in a written genre as the chronicle is part of a time-honoured tradition going back to the ancient Imperial songs (14th and 15th centuries).

There are three chronicles published about King Tewodros II (1855-1868). The first original Amharic text (*Yä Tewodros tarik*) was edited by Enno Littmann with the title *The chronicle of king Theodore*, 1902, Princeton) followed by an Italian translation by Martino Mario Moreno². The second and most complete from a biographical point of view, since it narrates the entire life and reign of Tewodros until his death, was edited by Casimir Mondon-Vidailhet (1904). It was the first translation ever made in French of an Amharic book³. A third and latter chronicle, which author is unknown, was published by Luigi Fusella⁴. These chronicles have naturally attracted the interest of historians, but also of the specialists of Amharic since they mark a turning moment in the development of the language and its literature as pointed out by Tamrat Amanuel when he divided the evolution on Amharic in three periods: 1344-1607, the period of panegyric types glorifying the kings; 1607-1855, the period of religious disputes; 1855-1941, the raising of modern Amharic which begins with the above mentioned chronicles written in the Amharic of Shoa⁵. Thanks to these written sources, one should also note the fame gained by *ase* Tewodros in novels and plays⁶, even if there is an on-going debate on the mental health of a king who is considered as the most violent of all the monarchs of Ethiopia⁷.

¹ LLACAN, INALCO, CNRS, 7 rue Guy-Môquet, 94801 Villejuif Cedex (France).

² “La cronaca di re Teodoro attribuita al dabtara ‘Zaneb’”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, vol. 2 (1942): 143-180.

³ *Chronique de Théodoros II, roi des rois d’Ethiopie (1853-1868) d’après un manuscrit original* [written by *aläqa* Wäldä Maryam, from Shoa], transl. Mondon-Vidailhet C., 2 vol., Paris, E. Guilmoto éditeur, 1904.

⁴ “La cronaca dell’Imperatore Teodoro II di Etiopia in un manoscritto amarico”, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, VI-VIII, 1957-1959.

⁵ ሰለ፡ኢትዮጵያ፡ደራሲያን፡፡ *Bulletin de la Maison des Etudes éthiopiennes*, n°11 (July 1997). Probably written in 1936 E.C. For a recent analysis, see Taye Assefa and Shiferaw Bekele, “The Study of Amharic Literature: an Overview”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. XXXIII, n° 2 (November 2000): 27-73.

⁶ Taye Assefa, “Tewodros in Ethiopian historical fiction”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. XVI (July 1983): 115-128. Paulos Nöno, አጤ ቴዎድሮስ [Emperor Tewodros], 1985 [E.C.], Addis-Abäba.

⁷ McCann J., 1978, “The Ethiopian chronicles as documentary traditions: description and methodology”, *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, session B, Chicago, Northwestern University, The University of Illinois: 387-396. Crummey D., 1971, “The violence of Téwodros”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. IX, n°2 (July 1971): 107-125.

said: ‘O my Creator! Look what you have done to me! Let me die quickly that your creatures will finally have some rest!’ And all those who had to be burnt when coming to him, he freed them and let them go back to their country.

Any Amharic native speaker has in mind that verbs as ‘to say’, ‘to ask’, ‘to advise’ are not used with indirect style through subordinate clauses but introduce direct quotations without quotations marks as said, so that difficulties in finding where the quotation begins and ends is primarily the weak point of the beginner in Amharic.

Along with this specific prosodic contour, the chronicle uses simultaneously different levels of language. Colloquial (even uneducated expressions) are side by side with literary forms, as archaism or dialectal variants are with standard language. As such the text appears as bilingual, mixing two ways of expressing through the strong stylistic opposition between short sentences in the direct style (using pronouns *I, you*) and long and complex subordinate sequences. As far as we know Prof. Goldenberg has been the first to underline these peculiarities in Mängästu Lämman’s chef d’oeuvre which provides us the longest transcription of spoken Amharic ever recorded from the same person, *aläqqa* Lämman Haylu, author’s father¹⁰.

This mixing of colloquial and polished style first appeared in royal chronicles making what has been said, or even sung in laments (ልቅሶ) part and parcel of the historical narration¹¹:

በዚህ፡፡ዘመነ፡፡መቅደላ፡፡ገብተው፡፡ጥቂት፡፡ቀነ፡፡ሰነብ፡፡ቱ፡፡ወደ፡፡በጌ፡፡ምድርም፡፡ወርደው፡፡ተቀም፡፡ጠ
 ው፡፡ሲኑ፡፡ወይዘሮ፡፡ተዋበች፡፡ሚስትዎ፡፡ታመሙ፡፡¹²፡፡በዚህም፡፡ጊዜ፡፡ከበጌ፡፡ምድር፡፡ተነስተው፡፡ወ
 ደ፡፡ወረሀ፡፡ይመኑ፡፡ወጥተው፡፡ደረቅ፡፡ወይራ፡፡ሂደው፡፡ሲሰፍሩ፡፡እቴጌ፡፡ተዋበች፡፡አረፋ፡፡በዚህ፡፡ጊዜ
 ፡፡በሣፊነ፡፡አድርገው፡፡በአልጋ፡፡ወደ፡፡ግሸነ፡፡ለመቃብር፡፡ሲያገዙ፡፡ነጉሡ፡፡እነዲህ፡፡አለቀሱ፡፡
 እስቲ፡፡ጠይቁልኝ፡፡ርቂ፡፡ሳትሔድ፡፡
 እቴጌ፡፡ተዋበች፡፡ሚስትኛ፡፡ገረድ፡፡
 እጅግ፡፡ስር፡፡አዋቂ፡፡ትላነትኛ፡፡ሞተች፡፡
 መድኃኒቱ፡፡ነ፡፡ምሳ፡፡ታበላኝ፡፡ነበረች፡፡አሉ፡፡
 ራስ፡፡አሊም፡፡የይተጌ¹³፡፡ተዋበች፡፡አባት፡፡ወደየጁ፡፡ቁላ፡፡ተሰደው፡፡ይኖሩ፡፡ነበርኛ፡፡ይህነን፡፡የልጅ
 ምነ፡፡ሞት፡፡ሰምተው፡፡
 ጠጅ፡፡አማረኝ፡፡ስላት፡፡ማሩነ፡፡ታስጭኛላች፡፡
 ራብኝም፡፡ስላት፡፡እህሉነ፡፡ታስጭኛላች፡፡
 በረደኝም፡፡ስላት፡፡ሸማ፡፡ትሰዳለች፡፡
 ሌባዬ፡፡ተይዞ፡፡ባልጋ፡፡ትሂዳለች፡፡
 የት፡፡አባቷነ፡፡አውቃ፡፡ታሳዝነኛለች፡፡በለው፡፡አለቀሱ፡፡

At that time, he [the king] stayed few days in Mäqdäla and went on his travel toward Bägemdär. While he was establishing his residence, his wife Wäyzäro Täwabäč went ill. The king left Bägemdär and repaired to Warrah Yimanu and settled his camp at Därräq Wäyra when the queen passed away. The queen was put in a coffin and carried on a bier to be buried in Gäšan. During this, the king composed this lament:

*Please, ask me before she goes away
 If Itege Täwabäč was not a good spouse and servant
 She who knew many secrets has died yesterday
 She who used to bring me my meal as a remedy to my worries.*

¹⁰ Goldenberg G., 1981, ‘Les mémoires d’Aläqqa Lämman et l’étude de l’amharique parlé’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXXVIII: 41-56.
¹¹ *Chronique de Théodoros II* (excerpts from pp. ፳፩-፳፪).
¹² Note the absence of punctuation between the two sentences.
¹³ Note the difference in orthography with እቴጌ (line 6)

Ras Ali, Itege Täwabäč’s father who at that time was in exile in the lowlands of Yäggu when hearing his daughter’s death composed a complain:

*When I said ‘I like hydromel’ she ordered to bring some to me
When I said ‘I am hungry’ she ordered food for me
When I said ‘I am cold’ she ordered blankets for me
Taken by my thief, then she goes in a bier
Knowing her father, how can she cause him so much sorrow?, said he.*

One can see here the many facets of a genre which alternates narration and quotations chosen in order to oppose king’s sincere grief and queen’s father more studied one with a possible pun: ሌባዬ *ʾēbae* ‘my thief’ and ልቤ *lābbe* ‘my heart’: *with my heart deprived, she goes in a bier*¹⁴. The text offers many instances of variability in tonality going from sophistication to familiarity (እስቲ፡ጠይቁልኝ፡) which doesn’t breed contempt but strikes the exact balance of what is happening in the context of the conversation in educated circles. One can see the coexistence of two registers in the same written text, the high and serious one with literary references and the colloquial one as used between relatives. Such is the following distich with religious background:

**ጌሹ፡እነደ፡አርዮ፡አሊ፡እነደ፡ዳዊት፡
የጥነት፡አይደለም፡ይ፡ተልኮ፡መሞት፡።**

Gwoshu is like Uri, Ali is like David
Is it not the way he sent him once to death?¹⁵

These verses come just after the following anecdote in prose¹⁶:

**ወይዘሮ፡ተዋበች፡ነ፡አግብተው፡አማች፡ሁነው፡ሲኑሩ፡መድኃኒት፡ቀምሰው፡እራቴ፡ነ፡በለ
ው፡ቢልኩ፡ወርች፡ሥጋ፡መጣልዎ፡።ልጅ፡ካሳም፡ወርች፡ሥጋስ፡አልበላም፡ገምቦኛም፡አይደ
ለሁ፡¹⁷፡በለው፡መለሱት፡።ወይዘሮ፡ተዋበችም፡ሚስትዎ፡አገር፡ያለህም፡ነ፡ታጠቅ፡እነሂድ፡
ቢሉ፡ምነው፡የለኝ፡በለው፡ይዘዋቸው፡ቋራ፡ወረዱ፡አባ፡ታጠቅ፡ተባሉ፡።**

After marrying Wäyzäro Täwabäč, being [ras Ali’s] son-in-law, he stayed in his house. One day he had to receive his medicine and said: ‘Bring me my lunch’, he was served with poor meat. Ləḡ Kasa having said ‘I don’t eat poor meat, I’m not a servant’, he sent it back. Wayzäro Täwabäč, his wife saying: ‘The land you say you have, better would be to prepare us to go? — How, no land? said he, and he took her to Qwara and was called Abba Taṭäq.

The word *gämbonya* ‘the servant which carries the water or the hydromel in a jar *gambo*’ is side by side with what will be the name of war (‘name of horse’) of the king. There is an obvious contrast between the political importance of this new name and the circumstance through which it has been chosen. What begins like a joke between a man and his spouse (ታጠቅ፡እነሂድ፡ቢሉ...አባ፡ታጠቅ፡ተባለ) is publicized as a message addressed to the Nation: *taṭäq* ‘be ready!’¹⁸ Even more surprising, the chronicle discloses a situation in which Kasa, feared by everyone in public, is somewhat mocked in private.

¹⁴ There is also a possible play on the word አልጋ ‘bed’ or ‘throne’ (penultimate verse).
¹⁵ *Chronique*: ፪. The distich recalls an alleged love affair between *ras* Ali and *däḡaz* G^woshu’s wife. Note the swifty pronunciation አይደለም፡ይ for አይደለም፡ወይ፡።
¹⁶ *Chronique*: ፪.
¹⁷ Instead of አይደለሁም.
¹⁸ Mondon-Vidailhet (*Chronique*: 83, note 10): ‘Le mot *tät’aq* pourrait se traduire: « en donnant des marques de respect, » c’est-à-dire en portant la toge enroulée au-dessous des bras, à la façon d’un

ሺህ፡ፈረስ፡በግራው፡ሺህ፡ፈረስ፡በቅኙ፥
ሺህ፡ነፍጥ፡በኋላ፡ሺህ፡ነፍጥ፡በፊቱ፥
ይህ፡ነ፡ሳታይ፡ሞተች፡ኮሶ፡ሻጪ፡እነቱ፥
ይኸነነ፡ሲሰማ፡ያጎራል፡ላመሉ፥
ማነነትም፡ቢላችሁ፡ምነትዋብ፡ነት፡በሉ፡።

*A thousand horses on his left, a thousand on his right,
Thousand rifles behind and thousand in front;
His mother the koso-vendor died without seeing this.
If he hears this mentioned he will roar like a lion;
If he asks about his mother, say she was Məntəwwab.*

Naming is an Epiphany and conveys the core of the message, since choosing a new name means taking the power. The importance of the name explains why the question is raised at the very beginning of the chronicle:

'ነጽሐፍ፡መጽሐፈ፡ታሪክ፡ዘቴዎድሮስ፡ነገሠ፡ኢትዮጵያ፡እግዚአብሔር፡ይህ፡ነ፡ዓለም፡ከፈ፡
ጠረው፡ጌሺከ፡ገጠኛ፡ዓመት፡ሲሆነ፡በዘመነ፡ማቴዎስ፡ልጅ፡ካሳ፡ሲባሉ፡ሸፍታ፡ሁነው፡ወጡ፡የ
መነግሥት፡ስምዎነ፡ኃላ፡እኛመጣዋለን፡።

We write the chronicle of Tewodros of Ethiopia. During the year 7345 of the Creation of the World, in the year of Saint Matthew, he whose name was *ləḅ Kasa*, went into rebellion; we will give after his royal name.

The royal name which announces a new political order is easy to remember for a largely illiterate population. Songs, especially laments (**ልቅሶ**), with sometimes a double meaning, are included in the chronicle, such as²⁵:

ይህ፡ነ፡ጊዜ፡አስለቃሽ፡ አዲ፡ቴዎድሮስ፡እጅግ፡ተዋረዱ፡ የሸዋነ፡ሰው፡ሁሉ፡እጅ፡ነ፡ሥተውት፡ሄዱ፡ አለች፡።	At that time a wailer: “ <i>Aṣe Tewodros has been humiliated After saluting the Shoa people he left</i> ” said she
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A song which, Mondon-Vidailhet comments, had to be understood as: *Aṣe Tewodros has been humiliated / After cutting off the hands of the Shoa people he left*, referring to the mutilation of 500 men in Ankobär. This use of oral poetry in a written genre as the chronicle is part of a time-honoured tradition going back to the ancient Imperial songs (14th and 15th centuries), which are the first examples of oral written Amharic²⁶. Their precise status is still in question but the political function of Amharic was already that clear, deserving its name of **ልሳነ፡ነገሥ** ‘king’s language’.

²⁵ Gubäña (1961. E.C.).
²⁶ *Chronique*: ጳጳ.
²⁶ Guidi I., “Le canzoni geez-amareñña in onore di re abissini”, *RRAL*, sér. 4, 5 (1889): 53-66.