New socio-political situation in Ethiopia and its reflection in literature and theatre

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This paper is a study of modern state of literature and theatre in Ethiopia since the nineties of the XX century. The research is based on assumption that the cultural paradigm of nowadays Ethiopian society arises from the conflict and synthesis of Islamic and Christian religion. Some of the most obvious trends in modern Ethiopian fiction are: a) searching of cultural roots in the past centuries of Ethiopian history; b) attempts to find compromise between two faiths and two systems of values; c) growing interest to naturalism and erotic side as a reaction to growing Islamic influence; d) growing of popularity of historical researches. Another considerable tendency in Ethiopian culture is the loss of influence of neighboring and more tolerable Egypt in favour of that of Saudi Arabia.

The strengthening of the Russia’s position on the international arena induces the observers to turn their attention back again to those regions and countries, which were politically and economically closely connected to the previous Soviet Union.

Claiming on the leading role in Northeastern Africa, Ethiopia is one of them. Here settles down the headquarters of the African Union that was built to produce a common position of African countries on global and inner continent politics. Being a coreligionist country of “Black Christians” Ethiopia has a long-lasting spiritual and cultural relationship with Russia, which was almost lost after hasty retreat of Russia from the traditional geopolitical zones of Soviet influence in 1990s.

Today the Russian-Ethiopian relations are being restored. And the expedition of scholars from the Russian Academy of Sciences in September 2006 became a good confirmation of that. The main goals of the expedition were the following: to analyze the attitude of different ethnic and social groups to Russia and to study the interaction between various ethnic and religious groups (by means of questionnaire, interview and observation).

One of the important issues in the research work of Russian expedition in Ethiopia was the nature and evolution of Amhara-Oromo relations. Amhara is an Ethiopian ethnic group, which culture became an essential element all-Ethiopian civilization. Number of Amhara in the past was 40%. Oromo is another (equal the amount of population to Amhara) ethnic group subdivided in some smaller groups – Tulama, Macha, Ittu, Guji, Borena, etc. Gradually Oromo have turned from alien (to Amhara) element to a common ethnic component of the polyethnic state and began to struggle for power and political influence. The number of Oromo is growing to 50% of the country population, while the number Amhara, together with Tigre, makes only 32% now.

In nowadays the intensity between these groups began to decrease. One of the reasons of this process is that there are practically no more “pure” Amhara or “pure” Oromo.

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Modern marriages usually have the mixed character, and it is difficult to find one-ethnic related household now. Besides that the overwhelming majority of Ethiopian ethnic groups share the common feeling of the protest (and even hatred) to the governmental policy of decentralization by a principle “divide and dominate”.

If earlier Ethiopia was divided into 14 equal by territory autonomous regions with different ethnic groups living there, now Ethiopia is reorganized into 9 ethnically based regional states, which borders do not coincide with the boundaries of former 14 provinces (together with Eritrea). There was no unique principle of states’ formation – 5 from them have got their names from the basic ethnic group, spread on this territory (Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Harar, Somali), others are named after several ethnic groups, for example, Benishangul/Gumaz (ethnic groups of the South and Gambella).

The main mistake of new federal division is that one ethnic groups have got waste territories, and others were separated by new administrative borders. For example, a tiny state Harar was established for small ethnic group Harari, while much larger ethnic groups like Gurage and Sidamo remained without “their” states.

Wearisome war with Eritrea (1998-2000), constant intensity on borders with Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, lack of access of Ethiopia to the Red Sea, the mass dissatisfaction with the new federal division of the country, miserable economic policy of the government have led Ethiopia to a pitiable condition. If and earlier it was one of the poorest African countries now it occupies the last place in the world. Living wage per capita - hardly above 90 dollars a year, over 50 % of the population live below the breadline. All this causes a sharp discontent of population with a Meles Zenawi government policy.

The overwhelming majority of answers to a question on the attitude to a policy of the government were sharply negative.

Not less than 37 political parties are registered in Ethiopia. The most influential of them are the following oppositional coalition groups – “Coalition for Unity and Democracy » (established in 2004) and “United Ethiopian democratic forces” (established in 2001) which have won the elections in 2005 and with greater overweight of ruling party EPRDF. Authorities, however, have not recognized the defeat; have organized the falsification of elections’ results and severe suppression of mass manifestations of protest in Addis Ababa. As a result, some dozens of people were killed and some thousand was arrested.

On a background of close connections of Meles Zenawi with the West and his declarative adherence to principles of the western democracy the authoritarian model of domination of one political party and one leader was generated in the country. This political system the observers call as ethnocracy, meaning the domination of northerners ethnic groups - Tigray and fictitious nature of the Ethiopian federalism.

Using scandalous poverty of Ethiopian people and disintegration of the states, the radical Islam more and more involves Ethiopia in its network. Basically, Islamizes appeal to the inhabitants of rural area - southern Oromo who have kept adherence to traditional pagan beliefs till now. The abject poverty frequently pushes people to Islamic countries for mercantile reasons. For example, in Moslem district of Jimma (state Oromiya) one can observe mosques (typical Ethiopian tekula, decorated by Moslem attributes) through every 1000 meters. Observation of the 3-5 minutes lasting rituals in such mosques of shows a conventional attitude of this part of the population to an Islam. At the same time, even in Addis Ababa (a stronghold of Christianity) where 8 mosques were open in 1990, there number increased to approximately 80 today. The
number Koran-study schools under supervision of “Islamic World League” or “International Islamic organization” is constantly growing.

Many Ethiopians (about 100 thousand) seek better jobs in the countries of Arabian Peninsula. The freedom of movement has allowed the Ethiopian Moslems to renew pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). If during the Mengistu period the import of the Koran was forbidden, now it is being sold out in thousands of copies in translation in Amharic. Ten Moslem newspapers on Amharic (an official language of Ethiopia) is being published in now day. In some of them information is given both in Arabic and Amharic.

Arabian business makes serious investments in Ethiopian economy today. The Saudi billionaire Sheik Mohammad Al-Amoudi (his mother is of Ethiopian origin) became for Ethiopian Orthodox a symbol of Moslem domination in a financial system. He dominates in several branches of the Ethiopian market, and many Christians regard him as “new” Ahmad Gran in economy. On the one hand, Mohammad Al-Amoudi has built the most magnificent of Addis Ababa hotels “Sheraton”, (1998), on another – he has anew built up a mosque in Tigray state, so it has insulted a modest nearby church. The artistic and scientific Christian intellectuals look with anxiety at the Moslems expansion. A popular idea is spread among the Ethiopian intellectuals-Christians, that “the Tigray regime’s” policy of decentralization and division of ethnic groups places the existence of Ethiopia under a threat. And that is why they believe in necessary of return to the cultural unity of “old type” which might be the only barrier that will prevent the connection of Ethiopian Moslems with a radical political Islam of the Near East.

In case of Americans leave the region of Big Near East, growth of radical Islam influence in Ethiopia is practically inevitable. It threatens the country with new shocks. These shocks are direct consequence of the USA policy (support of authoritarian regime, loyal to Washington) and present Ethiopian authorities’ incapability to solve social and economic problems since 1991. The basis radical Islam arrival to the country is prepared. The increasing number of Ethiopians believes that it will give them a way out from social deadlock. Time will show who this tendency will reflect on the ancient Ethiopian state. Under such social and economic conditions it is difficult to expect literature and arts to flourish.

But despite the various problems that Ethiopian literature suffers from, the situation should not be regarded as stagnation. Worthy of note the stories written by young prosaist Adam Retta, which rapidly became popular among youth audience. His collection of stories “Mahlet” (1999) was a great success. Different by content, the stories are united by the same theme of sorrow love tied with violence and dependence. For example, the girl named Mahlet (the heroine of the story of the same name) was forced to marry by her father. In despair she runs away from her wedding and spends the night at the neighbors. Then she runs away again from her husband and hides in the village of her mother’s elder brother, because she could not stand sexual abuse from her husband any more. Her suffering did not stop in new place, because she and her mother were raped by the man, who was working for her uncle. She leaves the village and begins to work as a model for a painter, but dramatic story repeats. In rage Mahlet tears her portrait to pieces and calls it “Canvas on rags”.

The beginning of the year 2000 is marked by the revival of documentary literature. The most remarkable example of this revival is the book entitled “The Eritrean Affair” (1941-1963) by Zewde Retta. There are very few political conflicts in contemporary Ethiopia that have so many causes and last for so long. The “Eritrean problem” that exists for 60 years now and went through several political stages is probably one of
them. Zewde Retta makes a detailed analysis of these stages: 1) British occupation of Eritrea (1941-1952); 2) period of sanctioned federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia (1952-1962); 3) Ethiopian-Eritrean unity period (1962-1991); 4) separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia (1991). This book, written by the top political official, who witnessed those dramatic events, could not be published neither during Haile Sellassie I regime nor during Derg ruling period. It also took long time to publish it in now days.

“A Rasta’s Pilgrimage: Ethiopian Faces and Places” by Neville Garrick could also be regarded as a documentary book, but with the opposite conception. This book describes Ethiopian culture and scenery, art and religion as well as its flora and fauna. Neville Garrick shows his appreciation of and respect for Ethiopia, its peoples and their unique history, supplementing his story with beautiful collection of photos. The author is deeply impressed by the Rastafarian faith and philosophy. He spent his youth on Jamaica and came back to the island again after his graduation from college. His dream to explore Ethiopia came true in September, 1996 and he called his pilgrimage “Hidden Empire”. That is how Garrick shares his impressions: “The hospitality and respect the people of Ethiopia showed me will be forever etched in my mind. Recently we have seen Ethiopia portrayed predominantly as a nation of poverty, famine, and civil war. Welcome to my Ethiopia, a world of welcoming people, smiling children, and a wealth of legendary history.”

Sharp social problems, such as scandalous poverty, unemployment and corruption, are revealed in the collection of stories published in English “Fascinated stories” Settu Mammo. Dramatic story of young married couple Bantiwalu Inku and his wife Esset who lived happily until he lost his job.

In the story “Love without money” Settu Mammo describes the futility of Bantiwalu attempts to find a job and impossibility to support his young wife who decided to move back to her parents. Bantiwalu visits his adorable wife from time to time. However time goes, but he is still between jobs. Bantiwalu wears his last suit, often starves, but continues to hope for the best. During one of his visits to his wife he finds out, that people in her parents’ house are celebrating the wedding. To his deepest surprise it is the wedding of his own wife and his best friend! In despair he buys rat poison and kills himself.

There are eight theatres in Addis Ababa, and each of them has its own story. They are Ethiopian National theatre, Patriotic theatre, Municipality theatre, Ras theatre, Mega Amphitheatre, Candles Theatre, Theatre at the Cultural center of Addis Ababa University, Children and Youth Theatre. Both Ethiopian and translated foreign plays (including Russian classics) are put on the stage in Addis Ababa: Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Chekhov, Gogol, Gorkiy, etc. There are very few plays reflecting current political and religious situation. These are themes are very painful for people of the country. Besides that, the strict censorship is being established in Ethiopia and it extends on the theatre in the most severe way. One of the first plays touching religious problems, became the play by Ayalneh Mulatu – famous Ethiopian dramatist and poet.

The religious-allegorical drama “Kedija” (a name of the girl) was performed at rather new “Candles Theatre” (it does not have official status yet), created and established by Ayalneh Mulatu on the basis of Russian Centre of Culture and Science in Addis Ababa. The modern drama reflects the relationship between young Christian man and Muslim girl who felt in love with each other and got married. However an unknown young man (who turns to be Satan) tries to separate them. He becomes the close friend of a newly-married couple, and then kills the husband. The young widow dies delivering her baby.
Then the Muslim servant takes care of the child. Using the device of allegory Ayalneh Mulatu aspires to show an opportunity of the peaceful solution of inter religious contradictions in Ethiopia.

The historical drama “Abeto Iyasu” was put on a stage of the theatre at the cultural centre Addis Ababa University by Aboneh Ashagrie – its author and director, the senior lecturer of the Department of Theatre Arts of the mentioned university. Purposely, Ashagrie has addressed to a figure of non-standard emperor Lij Iyasu (Iyasu V, 1896-1927). Officially Lij Iyasu (being only a youth) became an Emperor in the beginning of 1914 after the death of Menelik. Subsequently in opinion of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church he began to make a set of mistakes, mainly because of his pro-Muslim sympathies. He kept away his Christian wife, Roman, and took up with the daughter of Muslim governor Aus Mohammed Abu-Beikir and has surrounded himself with concubines descendent from different ethnic minorities. Iyasu wished to show his respect to all ethnic groups of his country, recognized their equality, thus, he wanted to strengthen his country by creating its unity. An official Ethiopian historiography and the representative of Antanta called Lij Iyasu “bastard”, trying to approve “that he aspired to turn Ethiopia into Islam and force it to struggle against Antanta. Confirming the opposite point of view in his play, Ashagrie shares the opinion of an outstanding Russian historian of Ethiopia professor Yuri Kobishchanov, who showed in 1958 in unpublished manuscript, that Lij Iyasu policy was quite reasonable and justified by circumstances of that time. Lij Iyasu aspired to expand the base of his power, winning round the non Amharic feudal lords and even Muslims, trying to strengthen the independence of Ethiopia from Antanta. The policy Iyasu maintained seems to be correct as it was repeated by Teferi Mekonnen (Haile Selassie I) – the person who dethroned him. Because of Haile Selassie I in power the manuscript of Prof. Yuri Kobishchanov could not be published in 1960s. For the same reason (rehabilitation Haile Selassie I in now days) Aboneh Ashagrie cannot put on the stage his play at official theatres of Addis Ababa.

The basic idea of the mentioned above drama – the strengthening of connections between various ethnic and religious groups of Ethiopia – does make the play actual today. The students of the Department of Theatre arts of Addis Ababa University are also engaged in plays devoted to traditions and ceremonies of Ethiopian ethnic groups: “Wedding ceremonies of Hammer people”, “Abager” (Amharic traditions of conflicts solution), etc. “Thus, we try to promote a unity of Ethiopia”, – Prof. Assefa Worku (the Department of Theatre arts of Addis Ababa University) noted in the interview data to the author of this paper.

Other theatres of Addis Ababa limit themselves with producing of translated foreign plays, plays of Ethiopian authors (mostly melodramas), concerts of traditional dance and a singing of different ethnic groups of Ethiopia. It is necessary to remind, that censorship plays a huge role in uneasy sociopolitical life of modern Ethiopia, and so, both dramatists and writers have to take it into account.