

The Irob 'Adar': Literary criticism

In 2013, Berhe Zigta collected some of the popular Saho-Irob poems (adar) in a book form. The Saho poetry, belonging to an oral tradition, suffers from poor memory in transmission, and the initiative took 'Irob Adar' one-step out of memory in the right direction even if compilation is not a substitute for the scholarship.

However, very little or no criticism is written on Irob-saho poetic tradition and this is an attempt in literary criticism. Giorgio Banti and Moreno Vergari have done more than, almost, anyone to understand the culture and language of Saho with more emphasis on the Eritrean Saho and marginally touching upon the Irobs. For Banti and Vergari "Adar (cadar) is aimed at achieving a political or social effect, as an instrument of war or peace and reconciliation". Similarly, the authors say that adar, "is also used for debating social issues or for praising one's clan or oneself" and associate the tradition with great oral poets such as Farhekoobe and Salih Hindago. The authors fail short of engaging the Irob-Saho poetic tradition on the Southern border, which offers an equal wealth of wisdom and illumination.

And yet, the authors do not address what constitutes greatness in saho poetry. Well, like any art, not all 'adar' is of the best quality. Some are cheap praises conferred upon the person who happens to host social events. The praises are mostly unrelated to the achievements of the person but rather an attempt to detect prestige in some distant distinguished ancestors. But then there are other poems that "surprise our

senses, shake us awake, stir our emotions, and startle our imagination". Scholars in poetry tell us that, among other things, the good metrics to measure a poem is by its "cognitive strength, originality, and linguistic inventiveness".

If the Irob-Saho poetic tradition is put to such a test some of the stars with outstanding verbal skills would include Lemelem Hagos, Sibhat Emanmali, Tesfay Woldu (Zereba), Awala Medhin, Fitwerar Tesema, Weldu Agab, Hailu Gura, Sibhatu Fussih, Sibhat Saricoma, Abraha Weldu, Sibhat Fidino, and so on. But this, of course, is a non-exhaustive list as if touching the tip of an iceberg. And then there is a poet's poet: Michael Gebray. But before the works of Michael is discussed, considering the work of his fellow luminaries is in order. Take for instance the case of Hailu Gura who criticized the Irob patriarch for his choice of arid land for settlement.

Sumey ko-abaroli; Naw ni-misinay do-balih; Latt ni-misinay do-balih; Boluk ni-habe de-ela-lih.

The poet expresses his anger at the Irob ancestor (Sume) for lack of vision. Hailu thinks Sume is a cursed man and expresses his wish if the ancestor had a better imagination. He says Sume should have chosen either highland fit for agriculture or selected low lands close to the sea. None happened and the poet regrets that he left the descendants on the cliff infested with baboons. The poet is not interested in how to overcome the geographic and climatic challenges but he expresses his anger at what he is a witness to. The poet does not appear to be sympathetic to the patriarch and assumes Sume had a choice. Also, the land may not be as bad as it appears now.

Also take the case of Fitawrari Tesma who employed poetry to make a political message to his opponents who jailed his daughter. In the 1970's Zebib was captured and taken to Sengade and Silah (Irob grazing districts) by the EPRP fighters and he had this to say:

Enni Zebib yiwaye hini; Sangadel obetemko te di'k kini; Silah obtemko te di'k kini; Sana balih te'due-le gini; Wilim ed tekemko sabab kini.

The poet says it is no big deal that she is taken to those places as long as she is not harmed. More precisely he says, "if she is whisked away to Sangade, that is her land; if she is taken to Silah, that too is her land. As usual, she will be protected by the spirits; but if she is abused, there will be consequences". The poet indicates confidence that his daughter will be safe in the hands of her jailers not because of their kindness but because the victim, his daughter, will be protected by the spirits. This is very interesting, as poetic voice does not invoke God but some spirits akin to Jinni. It appears perhaps, the poet believed in some sort of non-Christian god as the poem is infused with some superstitious elements. With confidence also comes a warning that in the event of bodily or psychological damage to his daughter there will be accountability. The poem reveals a very calm person in the face of calamity who trusts supernatural intervention and if that fails has developed a plan to fight back.

Similarly, oral poems by Tesfay woldu are popular. Tesfay is known to deploy poetry to attack political, religious, and social institutions. Perhaps he is one of the early social justice activists who located most problems at the institutional level. For instance when the priest failed to arrive to administer the last rites for a patient his anger was reflected in the

following poem threatening conversion to Islam.

Fad'do yolmina halie, Nabsi Fithat malih yue-luwe; hintenimko endil akasilye.

This must be one of the earliest protest poems targeted to the dominant institution. He says he doesn't need the last rites at his funeral and contemplates conversion to Islam moving to the place called Endeli. At that time it took rare courage to say something offensive about the church and its leaders. As a result, most of Tesfay's poems may be categorized as poems of resistance, and protest. When the intellectuals who were supposed 'to speak truth to power' were under the influence of the power or ignoring its existence, the poets took the responsibility of the intellectual. In fact the true poet is the intellectual. Sibhat Emanmali is also an artist known for his energy and spontaneity who utilizes poetry to condemn dictatorship and occupation. His talent was well displayed during the Ethio-Eritrean war. Eulogy and grief are handled pretty well in his poems.

And then there was Michael Gebray also known as Abb Eyob Michael (አብ ኢዮብ ሚንካኤል). He was born and raised in Daya village not far from Traditional Irob capital, Alitena town. Though he did not receive a formal education, they say he was an exceptionally gifted man with photographic memory and power of noticing minute details of himself and the society. He had also striking talent in tracing family trees (genealogy). Most Irobs, like other Saho tribes, are experts at ascertaining their ancestry. The ability to trace distant ancestors is an important skill that can determine access to land and other resources. And so, Micheal knew the long twists and turns in the Irob family tree. With expertise in genealogy comes respectability but not necessarily monetary benefits.

As a result, Michael was not a well off peasant. Most often, the vocation of an artist and farming does not align. Besides, the land in Daya village is not known for its soil fertility. With difficulties in ensuring steady livelihood and the desire to expand his artistic talent, Michael had to leave the Irob land and move to Addis Ababa in the early 1970s. Initially, he was quite happy with cleanliness and access to services of urban space. He even composed some 'Adar' lines in paying homage to the city life. He got married and was employed as a guard in the auto repair shop (Garaj) for some years. However, to raise a family from the income as the watchman was always a struggle. After staying a decade or so in Addis and failing health he decided to go back to Daya around 1988 and died after one year. Two of his children survived him; One (Eyob) from the first relationship and another from the second marriage.

His talent as a poet was revealed in various occasions. He was the strongest proponent of the Irob origin story as promoted by Adoumar Goish. The Irob origin is a contested matter but the dominant story links the Irob ancestry to Queen Sheba and Meneilik the 1st who are associated with King Solomon. While anti-Semitism was widespread in the west, the obsession with the Ethiopian state with Jewish lineage is telling. Was the move instrumental in that it confers legitimacy for indefinite political power without the need for elections?

At any rate, Michael was full of praises for Adomar Goish for tracing the origins and he has this to say:

Goish basoka mahasaba; Sume da-lemi'd Goesh naba; Irob ke awropa saolti Aba; Dulum 'dal labha ni-mela aba; Usuk sodem Musie-d raba.

The poet says that Goish, as the father of Adoumer, is the greatest among descendants of Sume. Adoumer ended becoming an outstanding oral historian of his generation. The poet justifies conferring the status for the historian's ability of link Irob ancestry to Europe and the Jews people and back to the tribe called 'dulum da-l labha'. The poet faults Adumar for only one error of not knowing details around the death of Moses.

And yet, close reading indicates irony in the poem. For the poet, the historian knew everything except one aspect of Jewish history. The narrator makes it seem knowledge of Moses's death as the last frontier of knowledge. But then Moses's death remains "one mystery of the Torah" and the poet knows it and forgives him tacitly, concluding his guru knew everything. It is true Adomar Goish was one of the early giants of Irob elite who understood the 'sweetness and light' of education. To his fellow pastoralists and farmers, livestock raring and subsistence farming was not a good option for livelihood improvement. In his view, children should not repeat the occupation of their parents. He is known for the epithet, 'laa' giroboh, ero mihro' (slaughter the cattle, and send the kids to school) discouraging child labor. He knew that the time and energy required to raring livestock impeded schooling.

Announcing greatness of an individual always comes with a risk especially when powerful people compete for greatness. After long years, Michael was asked why he said Goish was the greatest Irob ever lived and he defended his position saying that "by locating your ancestors, Adoumar Goish, in a way, created you. He forged your identity and gave you respect and that is why he remains supreme" he insisted.

Furthermore, Michael was also known for his fair-mindedness and struggle for justice. He loved to stand on the side of the truth despite

challenges to remain so. A story is told about his visit to Gabihar, a village in Northern Irob. It was said that family feud was running between a relatively richer and poorer family. The powerful family served the poet with honey and meat to influence his mediation roles. During the luncheon Michael composed the following oral poem:

...Gabiharo Bagi Haroye; Baska benado Kiraroye; Subah benado kiraroye; Hake yanam busa eraroye; Dirab nemko naaroyee; Ni-kabre hinto mabaroye...

Loosely translated: You the people of Gabihar are deceitful; If we eat honey, it is tasteless, if we consume butter, it is also tasteless. The real wealth of a man lies in telling the truth; If we tell lies, our eyes will turn blind; the shovel hoe will refuse to dig our graves".

This poem is an exercise in moral education. In western literature telling lies makes one's nose grow, ' just like children's favorite Pinocchio'. But according to Michael telling lies is more consequential than a mere increase in nose size: it makes one blind. Blindness for him is physical as well as psychological. The conscience becomes blind and a man without purity of conscience has lost everything. The poet also thinks the people of Gabihar are worthy to be told the truth than deceive them. The last line is even more theatrical. The poet dramatizes that the hoe has its brain. It can identify bad guys by refusing to obey the laws of physics. For this poet, overcoming flaws in moral character is the ultimate achievement a man can hope for.

There is a gem of wisdom and practical advice in the works of these artists. Listening to these voices is more instructive than reading dozens of self-help literature. The poet, W.B. Yeats was not wrong when he said that we consult the poets to make our souls. And yet, these days, adar of

the Irob people is dying a slow death and its luminaries are perishing one by one. Unless the universities, the media, and local institutions support this art form by way of recognizing individual talent and their contribution, the community will lose "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" faster than one thinks.

The oral poetry of the saho community still matters and needs to be preserved. By the way, who has been appointed as the poet laureate for the Irob worda in the year 2020? And who received an award for the best poetry of the year?