Amhara Oral Traditions: The Urgency of Rescuing a Cultural Heritage

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All human societies devise ways to filter and preserve memories of their past, since the complementary abilities to forget and remember are essential parts of their heritage and guarantors of their collective identity. The use of oral forms to narrate past events, and to make sense of the society's position in the world, is widespread; their style, their subject matter, and their relation to other forms (written, painted, built, or otherwise) varies widely. Inasmuch as they tend to be very selective and also prone to transformation reflecting temporal changes, localized perceptions and group sensibilities, oral traditions are therefore both a complex and challenging support for expressing cultural heritage.

When processes of urbanization and social-economic change intensify, the threat of memory loss in societies and communities that have built their heritage on the preservation of such traditions becomes acute. Everywhere in the world, folklorists and ethnographers have systematically collected, transcribed and catalogued an influx of oral narratives that has in some way helped preserve traditional cultural ideas and perspectives of societies that have since been profoundly reshaped. This effort has become an important step towards the establishment of new interpretive paradigms that value the riches of the oral medium, and even of recreation of oral memories via the rereading of those traditions that were once written down for the effect of preservation.

The more or less systematic collecting and registration of oral literature through written transcriptions, but also through audiovisual recording, has thus been a staple procedure of the study of hunter-gatherer, rural, pastoral, and fishing communities for more than a century, in all continents. These procedures, notwithstanding the enormous range of methodological variations and the expected differences in quality, offer a more or less

stable set of principles that give it the essence of a documentary corpus.

As would be expected, such endeavours are not unknown in Ethiopia. But, unlike what has happened in the great majority of cases where highly rural communities in different national settings have been targeted by foreign and indigenous collectors going about their business of recording and studying oral traditions of distinct kinds, irrespective of the presence or the absence of written forms of preservation of collective memory, here matters show some curious intricacies and idiosyncrasies.

The overwhelming hegemony of what anthropologist Wendy James calls the Prester John myth characterising the highly cosmopolitan area of Ethiopian studies (James 1990: 134) acts as an important limiting factor for ethnographers and folklorists gathering oral histories in the country's highland regions, the southern lowlands being a much preferred ground for this kind of research. The sad result of this biased contrast (the North as a literate environment, the South as the land of orality) is that insufficient attention has been directed toward the need for a systematic collection and study of oral traditions, and especially oral histories, in the so-called "historical" Highlands. It's not that these traditions are unrecognized, unmentioned, and unrecorded. But they tend to be seen by researchers of different disciplines as minor productions in face of a rich, and no doubt equally selective, body of written documentation, both of indigenous and foreign provenance.

Ethiopian studies are indeed a cosmopolitan regional field of research, its development bearing some similarity with Egyptian studies. What makes this field unique, within the African context at least, is that there isn't one visibly hegemonic foreign national tradition of research influencing it. In the particular case of Ethiopia, the configuration of the historical and ideological ties between the old Abyssinian Christian kingdom and the West prevented European powers from attempting a successful colonial takeover during

the nineteenth century and concurred in Ethiopia's own territorial extension towards the South. Consequently, national research has steered through a composite set of distinct influences that have nonetheless always converged on one point: that of a largely imaginary divide between a literate North and an illiterate South.

As already mentioned, oral data have been actively gathered in the Ethiopian Highlands, mainly in a supportive role to the construction of historiographic accounts based on written and archaeological materials. It's not rare to find instances or traces of oral inquiry in the organization of historical and literary materials, a tradition whose origins we could actually pinpoint in the vast bibliography produced by the 16th-17th centuries Jesuit missionaries who established themselves in Tigray and later in Gojjam and Gondar. But there has never been a systematic and integrated program of research at a regional level to build a coherent, structured, comprehensive, catalogued, indexed, and easily accessible archive of narrative oral traditions of rural and urban origin, spanning the different fields of popular belief, legendary discourse, sung poetry, etc., and covering the rich linguistic, ethnic, and religious mosaic that makes up the age-old and densely populated Ethiopian Highlands.

I have, for some years now, been collecting oral legendary traditions in Gondar and Gojjam, relating to the establishment of the royal Christian court in these areas since the 16th century, as part of a loose joint project with a group of anthropologists, historians, art historians, and archaeologists concerned with the re-appreciation of the interactions between Ethiopian and European documental materials on this region and period. The richness and variety of local oral legendary productions in the places that I have been visiting since 1999 has never ceased to impress me, and my feeling towards them is that each story that I hear and record is a fraction of an immense and dynamic process of woven memories, or as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss proposes, of a multidimensional kaleidoscope in which all parts rearrange themselves at each rotation of the device.

Likewise, my feeling is that this heritage is largely ignored, misunderstood, and undervalued by a great number of

people, be they researchers, administrators, and, in many cases, the keepers of the traditions themselves. Its rapport with written literary materials (namely the *gaddla*, the *sinksars*, the *tariks*, but also the lay historians' accounts) is rarely subject to any functional or structural analysis, and its inner meaning lies largely dormant within a process of degradation and memory loss caused by all sorts of social, cultural, and demographic changes that the rural and urban areas have been undergoing since 1974 at least. If some of the stories and motifs are "known" beyond local and regional boundaries (the theme of the "Portuguese" builders of Gondarine royal palaces, or that of the princess sent from Rome to marry the Ethiopian king, for instance), many others tend to cause genuine surprise to many people living in urban settings and showing interest in regional historical matters. My overall perception is that, as these traditions decay and wither away, they carry with them important keys to the understanding of the history and culture of the region, resulting in a clear state of impoverishment for future generations.

Hence, the present working proposal for the implementation of a plan to systematize collection and management of oral heritage for the Amhara region. This proposed plan is based on the notion that there is a rich and little known tradition of oral literature in Northern Ethiopia, and that, due to recent development that has brought about significant changes in the value of cultural heritage, that tradition is being erased at a rapid pace. Furthermore, it is assumed that most recording and documentation activities in the field of oral literature and oral history, as well as ethnomusicology, have being carried out either by foreign researchers or by Ethiopian university students and researchers, both preferring to publish the results of their activities abroad, and working in a disparate and uncoordinated way. It is also assumed that, unlike what has happened in many other countries, and even in other Ethiopian regions, systematic collections of oral traditions are nonexistent in the Amhara region, and that knowledge about oral traditions in this

region is very limited, scattered, unorganized, and inaccessible for most Ethiopians.

CONSTITUTION OF THE TEAM

The team dedicated to collecting, preserving and managing Amhara oral traditions is to be established through an agreement between Amhara Region Culture and Development Research Center (ARCDRC) at Bahir Dar University and the Bahir Dar Regional Culture Bureau, under the auspices of the Ethiopian federal Authority for Research and Conservation of National Heritage.

Composition of the team:

- Administrative head
- Coordinator of the research
- Researchers
- Local assistants
- Collaborators and advisors – specialists working or having worked in the field

A Scientific committee, formed by recognized national and international senior researchers, will guarantee the quality and continuity of the work, supervise the various tasks, and assess the progress of the overall process. The number of available researchers will necessarily condition the duration, intensity, and scope of the collection.

1ST STEP: PRELIMINARY DOCUMENTATION PROCESS

The team, in collaboration with the Scientific Committee, is to define the geographical region and cultural area where the collection of data is to be carried out. The first step is to gather information in archives and libraries – to create a database of previous collections, detailing:

- Genres
- Themes

- Abstracts
- Transcripts, when available

The narratives of this preliminary database must indicate source, location, date, purpose, characteristics of the transcripts, and also names of the informants (this is particularly helpful for recent collections, since the informants can be contacted again for further collection by the team). A critical bibliography of previous research, as well as a list of researchers, detailing their affiliation and contact information, is also crucial, since those still alive may be of help in the second stage of the research. At this stage, an effort is also to be made to collect data on genres and themes, and to copy transcripts from areas adjacent to the one to be researched.

2ND STEP: FIELD DATA COLLECTING

A list of all the locations to be researched is to be drawn up, and areas distributed to the members of the team according to availability and priority. The preferred profile of the informants is to be established according to each genre and theme (gender, age, position, status: i.e., man or woman, church elder, specialist singer, etc.). Note: the team must resist the temptation to rely solely or mainly on priests as informants and should look for alternative authorities (even if of low social status and position). An intensive course should be given for practical preparation of the researchers in the techniques of collecting, transcribing, and editing oral traditions. This can be taught by specialists indicated by the Scientific Committee.

Tools and equipment
Videographic equipment should be used, depending on the genre of the materials to be collected. In any case, there should always be a redundancy system of double or even triple checking of the accuracy of the recording.

Basic equipment:

- 2 sound recording devices (tape, minidisk, or mp3 recorders)
- 1 notebook

Ideal equipment:

- 1 video camera (miniDV)
- 2 sound recording devices (tape, minidisk, or mp3 recorders)
- 1 notebook
- 1 digital camera

Collecting tasks

The use of a notebook is very important for keeping complementary information about each recording session, and for carrying out simultaneous transcription of a recorded oral tradition as a third redundancy check (to overcome data loss due to recording problems: noise, low voice, etc.). A log file for each session should be made. This is to include the name of the informant, date and place of birth, biographical information, and traditions collected (with indication of genres and themes).

To spark the recall of memorized oral traditions, the researcher must be instructed to use first lines of songs, legends, etc., previously collected or previously researched (in an archive or library). References to titles, first lines, heroes, and circumstances are important mnemonic devices to spark an oral flow, be they of the same regional area, same genre and theme, or not. Authorization for divulging the collected data should be unambiguously given by the informants in writing (a proper standardized form may be produced for the use of the researchers).

3RD STEP: TRANSCRIPTION, INDEXING, AND CATALOGUING

Transcription of recorded materials

Transcription procedures are very time consuming but are a fundamental part of the project. They permit safe storage of the original recording, and, after indexing and cataloguing, they offer the means for study and publication of the recorded oral tradition.

Indexing, cataloguing, etc.

After transcription, a number of other procedures must be carried out for proper editing treatment of the collected data:

- *Logging* - creating a log of the transcription work, in relation to the recording session file or log.
- *Indexing* - using descriptors or keywords to describe the transcribed collected materials, by genre, theme, geographical-linguistic-ethnic area, informant, source language, version, etc.
- *Cataloguing* - inputting, logging, and indexing data in a catalogue for subsequent searchability.
- *Translating* - if and when possible, transcribed materials are to be translated into English for universal access.

Source data are to be safeguarded according to international standards for the preservation of the recording materials, to prevent degradation, erosion, rot, and wear. Copies are to be made, preferably in digital format.

4TH STEP: INFORMATION SHARING

According to the type of recording (video, sound), the kind of data (genre, theme, regional location, etc.), different interrelated sharing options may be considered. They include:

- Publication of catalogues
- Publication of transcripts
- Online availability of video and sound files, as well as transcripts and their translation
- Production of DVDs and CDs
- Publication of a journal or series dedicated to the diffusion of the collected data

It is important to promote further data collection in adjacent and related geographical, linguistic, and ethnic areas. It is also important to establish a methodology for the proper correlation and comparison of the data by genre, theme, location, region, etc., in order to establish analytical guidelines for further study of the data by the scientific community. Returning to the field and to the published documentation to revise and refine collecting criteria, methods, and results is to be considered an integral part of the project.

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