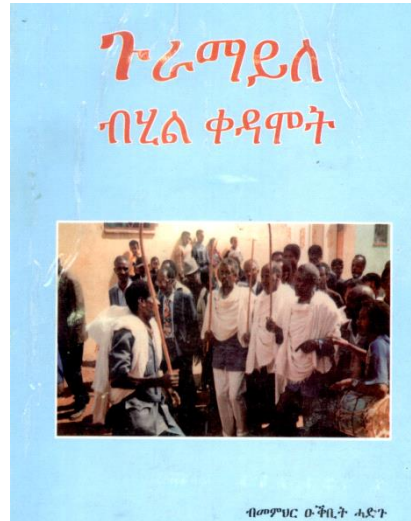


Guramayle-Bhil Qedamot:

A Mosaic of Beautiful Oral Stories

By: Abrahaley Habte



Young, people tend to look outwardly, but as they mature, they tend to look inwardly. I have observed that many young people often do not appreciate their culture-their literature, customs, songs, and dances. It is the foreign that steals their heart and often it is the foreign that they seek with all their heart. As they mature, they start looking inwards, reflecting on what is theirs and value their culture. They start seeking their selves. Though they continue to appreciate and learn from other languages and cultures, they realize that their literature and culture have a special place in their hearts and their lives. The songs they listen to touch them in ways songs from other cultures do not. They see hidden meanings in the poetry they hear recited and the stories they read, which they don't in stories and poems from other countries. I approached Gurmayle, by Memhir Ogbit Hadgu, in such a spirit, to discover that it has shaped the Tigigna and enjoy the beauty of their oral literature.

It is appropriate here to say a few words about the title, Memhir, which non-Eritreans may find strange. In western cultures, people do use their titles before or after their names, whether they doctors, members of parliament, judges etc when they introduce themselves through writing. But not teachers, unless they are college professors. In Eritrea it is different. Teachers often add, Memhir (a teacher) before their names and no one thinks this to be out of the ordinary. It shows how highly Eritrean society regarded teachers, who were the equals of the village priest or the

sheik, and the mislene, the village administrator, who were respected and held in high esteem. The priest and the sheik were respected as God's/Allah's representatives on earth. The mislene derived his respect from the power he wielded as a representative of the government of the day. The teacher had his place among them due to the fact that he was a source of knowledge.

Memhir Ogbit Hadgu Ghebretsadiq, as his brief biography at the back cover shows, was born in 1935 in a village named Mai Mechaqat. He studied his elementary and middle school in Adi Quala between 1948 and 1954. He then went to Luul Mekonen Secondary School (today's Asmara Comprehensive Secondary School) and completed his high school there. He got hired as a teacher and served as a school teacher and school director in various Eritrean schools. Later he got his diploma in social sciences from the University of Addis Ababa through summer and evening school.

Memhir Ogbit Hadgu won three literary contests (in Tigrigna) organised by the Teachers' Association of Eritrea. He contributed writings on Eritrean customs and culture to Dimxi Hafash Ertra, (the Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea). Moreover, he wrote on Tigrigna proverbs, quotes, and songs to Haddas Ertra (the Tigrigna daily newspaper). Due to his curiosity and desire to know about the past, he got interested in Tigrigna oral poets. He knew Tewelde Measho personally because Memhir Ogbit hails from the same area as Tewelde Measho, and he had heard the poet recite his poems in person and had the opportunity to meet the poet in person.

Guramayle is a collection of Eritrean anecdotes, stories, oral poetry, and proverbs. The book also includes anecdotes about famous people and quotes from other lands. Roughly, it is divided into four parts: stories and anecdotes from Eritrea, Tigrigna wedding customs, and Tigrigna oral wedding poetry, Tigrigna proverbs, and anecdotes and quotes from other countries.

The First part is a collection of stories, anecdotes, and short oral poems from Eritrea's past. It has about 180 stories, some real life stories, some fictional, and other poems composed to express the observations of people involved in the situation that inspired the poems. Some of the stories make us laugh, some make us wonder, but most of them make us think, and teach us how life should be lived. The stories and anecdotes show the wisdom that guided our forefathers and encourage us to learn from their shortcomings. Through these stories, to some extent, Memhir Ogbit has shown us the richness of our oral literature.

Reading the second part, one gets better informed about the wedding traditions and customs of the Tigrigna. The author briefly describes the activities carried out before the wedding day. He describes what the Tigrigna call miqntat, brewing suwa, beer of the Tigrigna, erecting the

wedding tent, helfot, the dancing and singing on the eve of the wedding day, and other activities. Half-way through the section, he gives a long example of chefera songs, which one of the people in the helfot sings to give people from the dancing and singing that has to resume after the chefera. Here, he has brought together for us chefera and wedding songs, which have existed for hundreds of years.

Another issue which gets much coverage in this section is the wedding day activities, which include the marriage contract conducted according to Tigrigna traditions and traditional laws, and the honeymoon. Once again, Memhir Ogbit gives much coverage to the songs sung by Tigrigna young women (some of them close friends of the bride) as they see the bride off to her husband's house, and the young women from the groom's village as they welcome him and his bride. As part of the Tigrigna culture, though it may sound rude to foreigners, young Tigrigna girls are allowed to sing insulting songs intended to shame the bride, when she is welcomed to her husband's village. Similarly, young girls in the bride's village sing songs aimed at shaming the wedding party, but particularly, the groom and his father. Some people try to shoo the girls away, but often people tolerate such songs and do not mind much.

The Third Part has about more than one thousand Tigrigna proverbs. Here Memhir Ogbit includes brief explanations on the meaning of the proverbs for people who may not have any clue about their meanings. Moreover, he adds at what occasions they are used so that people may know when they may use them.

Quotes and anecdotes from around the world completes the book. They include anecdotes about Napoleon, Winston Churchill, George Washington, Confucius, and other famous people from around the world.

From the materials presented one can understand that the author's intentions were many, and not one. From the essay on Tigrigna wedding, one can see that the author wants to inform his readers about Tigrigna wedding customs. The stories and anecdotes are meant not only to entertain his readers but make them think, and influence their behaviour as well. Wisdom seems to have been in his mind as he collected the quotes and proverbs, for quotes and proverbs distill the experiences of individuals and societies and present their wisdom, which may stretch for hundreds of years through short and often memorable maxims.

Entertaining and enjoyable as they are, I have found some of the stories lacking in adequate information. Memhir Ogbit related the stories in such a way that you find some of the stories difficult to understand. They are rushed and do not give much background information be it on the characters or the context, which readers badly need if they are to appreciate them. The oral poems, however, are wonderfully written and show the creative skills of the people who composed them.

I am happy that Memhir Ogbit has taken this difficult task of collecting our proverbs into a book. I appreciate his efforts and I have great respect for the things he has accomplished related to Tigrigna oral literature. However, I am not happy about the way the explanations were given. Some of the explanations do not explain the proverbs well. In many cases, Memhir Ogbit gives a phrase which enlightens very little, let alone give a satisfactory explanation. I think if an explanation was thought necessary, a proper explanation should have been given.

I also think that it was not a wise decision to include the final part in the book. I don't know what made Memhir Ogbit add it to a book that deals with Eritrean literature and culture. After all, that part is a very short one, and its significance negligible. In addition, readers interested in quotes and stories from other countries can find such material in the internet. Without it, the book would be a book about Eritrean oral literature, and would maintain unity of content: a wonderful guramayle (a mosaic of poetry, anecdotes, stories, and proverbs). I think, the inclusion of non-Eritrean material marred this beauty, like background noise that creeps into and spoils a beautiful music.

I know Memhir Ogbit can't single-handedly explore the richness of Tigrigna oral literature (our stories, poems, proverbs, puzzles, etc). What he has achieved so far is truly commendable. And I have great respect for his work for to take initiative and achieve what he has so far requires great courage. My hope is that he will be able to inspire young writers, who will take the initiative to research our oral literature and follow in his steps.

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