

## European Contribution to the Study of Amharic Oral Poetry\*

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### Introduction

Europeans' interest in the study of the Amharic language, its grammar and the various forms of its oral literary texts dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier to this period European travellers and philologists were attracted by the historical, cultural, religious and natural landscape of Ethiopia. And most of the descriptions and publications of these travellers and scholars were mainly based on the information gathered from the local lords, priests and *Däbtära*.<sup>1</sup> According to Ernst Hammerschmidt,<sup>2</sup> the first Amharic grammar by Hiob Ludolf<sup>3</sup> was made possible through the assistance and collaboration of his informant, teacher and friend *Abba* Grigory. Hiob Ludolf is widely acknowledged as the founder and father of Ethiopian studies not only in Germany but also in Europe.<sup>4</sup> As is well known in the history of Ethiopia, priests and *Däbtära* are renowned for their grammatical, philosophical and biblical knowledge since the olden days.

It is probable that the texts of the so-called old Amharic imperial songs<sup>5</sup> were written down by the then chroniclers, most of whom were priests and *Däbtära*, and reached in the hands of Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or probably earlier. As we shall see later, European travellers and philologists established good relations with their Ethiopian counterparts who had acquired a sound knowledge of grammar in

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<sup>1</sup> The *Däbtära*, often translated as 'lay clerics' of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, are distinguished by their superior knowledge who study beyond the primary level required for priests. The *Däbtära* pursue several religious studies including translation and interpretation of philosophical, sacred and spiritual texts in different languages until the highest level. They are also choristers, poets, dancers, herbalists, scribes, astrologists and teachers (s. IMBAKOM KALEWOLD, tr. by MENGHISTU LEMMA, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church School System*, New York 1970, vi).

<sup>2</sup> ERNST HAMMERSCHMIDT, "A Brief History of German Contributions to the Study of Ethiopia", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1, 2, 1963, 30–48, here 30.

<sup>3</sup> HIOB LUDOLF, *Grammatica Linguae Amharicae*, Frankfurt 1698.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., HAMMERSCHMIDT, "A Brief History ..."; ENNO LITTMANN, "Geschichte der äthiopischen Literatur", in: C. BROCKELMANN (ed.), *Geschichte der christlichen Literatur des Orients*, Leipzig 1907, 185–270; EIKE HABERLAND, *Three Hundred Years of Ethiopian-German Academic Collaboration*, Wiesbaden 1986; and SIEGBERT UHLIG, *Hiob Ludolfs "Theologia Aethiopica"*, Wiesbaden 1983 (*Aethiopistische Forschungen* 14); IGNAZIO GUIDI, "Lo Studio dell'Amarico in Europa", *Journal Asiatique* 284, 1909, 67–76, among others.

<sup>5</sup> See ENNO LITTMANN, *Die Altamharischen Kaiserlieder*, Straßburg 1914, 4; G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories of 'Amda Seyon, King of Ethiopia*, London 1965, 38 and the review further in this article.

the traditional church education system. This tradition continued until the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The philological works of German, Italian and French scholars,<sup>6</sup> of which I have attempted to provide here a very brief review clearly show this reality. A summary of their method of the collection, translation and interpretation of several types of Amharic oral literature is provided. Some of those Ethiopians who had established contacts with European scholars travelled to Europe and assisted their colleagues in the study of Gəʿəz and Amharic grammar and translation and worked as language teachers. A good example is *Abba* Grigory's contribution to Hiob Ludolf in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Germany.<sup>7</sup> The works of Eugen Mittwoch on Amharic language and oral literature were made possible with the help of *Aläqa* Tayyä. Mittwoch wrote that in the years 1905–07, *Aläqa* Tayyä taught Amharic in the Department of Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Enno Littmann, August Klingenberg and Ignazio Guidi were assisted by their Ethiopian friends and teachers, Käflä Giyorgis, Dästa Wäldä Maryam and *Aläqa Abba* Saḥəl, respectively. On their part, the Ethiopians had also the opportunity to learn the European languages: German, Italian and French. It is important to note here that most of the works on the Amharic language were intended to serve as textbooks for Europeans to learn and teach the language. In these textbooks, the authors included historical texts and documents such as letters of kings and emperors as well as stories, folk-tales, proverbs, riddles and a variety of poems and songs including dirges, chants, and *qəne*.<sup>9</sup> These oral forms are the focus of this paper that represent the two major genres in the field of oral literature.<sup>10</sup> In all the works discussed in this brief review, the Amharic poems, songs, proverbs, tales and the like are found in the last sections of the textbooks.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Wolbert Smidt who kindly helped me in translating the Italian and French texts included in this article. I have attempted to concentrate more on the available literature in German and in English. This is an attempt to provide a brief review of Europeans' contribution to the collection, classification, translation and documentation of the various forms of Amharic oral literature, which are rich sources of Ethiopian culture and history.

<sup>7</sup> See HAMMERSCHMIDT, "A Brief History ...", 33; UHLIG, *Hiob Ludolfs ...*, 29–31; HABERLAND, *Three Hundred Years ...*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> EUGEN MITTWOCH, "Abessinische Kinderspiele: Amharische Texte", *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen* [Berlin] 2, 13, 1910, 107–41, here 107.

<sup>9</sup> *Qəne* and *säm ənna wärq* are favourite forms of verse in both Amharic and Gəʿəz poetry. Historically *qəne* originated and was developed in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church by the clergy, including priests, *Däbtära* and deacons. However, nowadays it is widely used among the ordinary Amhara people regardless of age, sex, place and time. *Säm ənna wärq* are highly complicated forms of Amharic poetry both in the written and oral tradition, employing a variety of philosophical interpretations, witticisms, and above all having *həbər* (double entendre), that provides the *säm* (surface) and the *wärq* (hidden or secret) meanings. *Qəne* and *säm ənna wärq* are also intended for the expression of obscure messages and symbolic representations to attain a maximum of thought with a minimum of words. See, e.g., IGNAZIO GUIDI, "Strofe e brevi testi amarici", *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen* [Berlin] 2, 10, 1907, 167–84; GETATCHEW HAILE, "Qene Poems in Older Amharic", in: ALAN S. KAYE (ed.), *Semitic Studies: in Honor of Wolf Leslau on the Occasion of his 85<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, Wiesbaden 1991, 1, 521–30; DONALD N. LEVINE, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago 1965, among others.

<sup>10</sup> See GETIE GELAYE, "Contemporary Amharic Oral Poetry From Gojjam: Classification and a Sample Analysis", *Aethiopia: International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2, 1999, 124–41; ID., *Amharic Oral Poems ...*, 38–43.

### Review of the Contributions

The first collection<sup>11</sup> of Amharic oral literary materials published and known to me is found in Zotenberg's *Catalogue* of 1877.<sup>12</sup> There he presents an edition and commentary of the praise poems sung in honour of emperors Yəshaq, ʿAmdä Şəyon and Zärʿa Yaʿqob but without translation.<sup>13</sup> In 1879 Franz Praetorius published a book entitled *Die Amharische Sprache* where he presented a translation of five funeral songs recited to *Däğğazmač* Säbagadis and two narrative songs sung in honour of emperor Yəshaq.<sup>14</sup> The songs which are arranged in two parts – in original Amharic and their translation into German – are provided in the last section of the book under the title *Altamharische Königslieder*. As to the sources of these songs, Praetorius writes the following: “Ich finde diese Lieder jetzt auch noch bei Zotenberg, Catalogue des manuscrits éthiopiens de la bibliothèque nationale, S. 218, woselbst die ersten Verse von jedem Liede mitgeteilt sind”.<sup>15</sup>

In 1891 the French scholar Mondon-Vidailhet wrote an Amharic handbook<sup>16</sup> where he translated and presented the praise songs which had been edited by Praetorius.<sup>17</sup> Regarding the language of these songs and chants, Mondon-Vidailhet wrote that, “*La langue de ces poèmes est intermédiaire entre le ghèze [Geʿez] et l’amharique*”.<sup>18</sup> In his conclusion, the author commented on the state and existence of different genres of the Ethiopian poetry of that time as follows: “Les Abyssins ont cultivé divers genres de poésie: religieuse, guerrière, satirique, etc., mais, au point de vue de la forme littéraire, cet art est encore chez eux en enfance”.

In the fourth section of his Amharic grammar of 1906,<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Mahler provided a list of 27 proverbs, five *qəne* and six funeral songs in Amharic along with their translation into German but without transcription and commentary. Additionally, he translated three Amharic folktales and the praise songs sung in honour of emperor Yəshaq which were edited and published previously by Praetorius. However, Mahler did not acknowledge Franz Praetorius appropriately nor did he mention the sources of these Amharic poems and songs.

In 1907 Eugen Mittwoch, a prominent German philologist, published *Proben aus*

<sup>11</sup> According to RICHARD PANKHURST, “Ethiopian Folk-tales and the History of Their Collection”, *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici* 2, 1981, 34–45, here 38, “The collection of folk tales as opposed to the occasional mention of legends began in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The pioneers in this field were the Italian Geographical Mission which visited Šawa and some of the provinces of Southwest Ethiopia in the 1870s, and recorded interesting folk tales.” See also ENRICO CERULLI, *La letteratura etiopica*, Milan 1968.

<sup>12</sup> H. ZOTENBERG, *Catalogue des manuscrits éthiopiens de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris 1877.

<sup>13</sup> ZOTENBERG, *Catalogue...*, 218–19.

<sup>14</sup> FRANZ PRAETORIUS, *Die Amharische Sprache*, Halle 1879. On pages 499–502 the author provided an interesting translation and commentary on the language of the songs comparing it with Gəʿəz and Arabic.

<sup>15</sup> PRAETORIUS, *Die Amharische Sprache ...*, 499.

<sup>16</sup> CASIMIR MONDON-VIDAILHET, *Manuel Pratique de Langue abyssine (Amharique)*, Paris 1891.

<sup>17</sup> In chapter four of this book, Mondon-Vidailhet presents the praise songs of emperor Yəshaq and the funeral chants of *Däğğazmač* Säbagadis along with translations and footnote explanations in French. Mondon-Vidailhet acknowledges Franz Praetorius on the source of these songs.

<sup>18</sup> MONDON-VIDAILHET, *Manuel Pratique...*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> LUDWIG MAHLER, *Praktische Grammatik der amharischen Sprache*, Wien 1906.

*amharischem Volksmunde*, an interesting article on the various forms of Amharic oral literature, namely, proverbs, jokes, riddles, tales and several types of *qəne* poems and *Azmari* (minstrel) songs.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in 1910 Mittwoch published another important article on children's games and songs in Amharic<sup>21</sup> with transcriptions, translations and commentaries in German. The songs and games of Ethiopian children were collected from or recorded by *Aläqa* Tayyä while he was teaching Amharic in Berlin.<sup>22</sup> The author translated a total of 13 children's games, 50 proverbs, 4 jokes in poetry, 10 riddles, 7 lengthy poems and songs and 4 folktales, and properly acknowledged the assistance offered to him by *Aläqa* Tayyä. Mittwoch also transcribed all the texts of folktales, proverbs, riddles, poems and songs in original Amharic along with an excellent translation and commentary in German. Mittwoch was the first European scholar who intensively studied the various *genres* of Amharic oral literature.<sup>23</sup>

In 1907 the well-known Italian scholar Ignazio Guidi wrote an article on Amharic *qəne* and poetry under the title "*Strofe e brevi testi amarici*."<sup>24</sup> In the introductory note, Guidi mentioned that the Amharic poems and songs were collected with the help of *Aläqa Abba* Sahäl.<sup>25</sup> He also stated that the poems and songs were composed and recited by the *Azmari* and *Alqaš*<sup>26</sup> whereas the *qəne* were composed and recited by priests and *Däbtära*. Guidi presented 25 Amharic *qəne*; and all the poems and songs were translated and with commentaries in Italian. Most of the *qəne* poems referred to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian emperors, kings and nobles touching upon the historical and social contexts of their respective times and reigns.

In 1914, the famous German philologist Enno Littmann edited and published a translation of the so-called old Amharic imperial songs<sup>27</sup> under the title *Die Altam-*

<sup>20</sup> EUGEN MITTWOCH, "Proben aus amharischem Volksmunde", *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen* [Berlin] 2, 10, 1907, 185–241.

<sup>21</sup> MITTWOCH, "Abessinische Kinderspiele ...". Although the work is admirable in dealing with the various forms of children's games and songs in Amharic for the first time, it would have been more interesting had the writer collected the texts from the children themselves instead from an elderly man (*Aläqa* Tayyä) who, as the writer himself admitted, had faced several problems in memorizing and reciting children's songs and games.

<sup>22</sup> See MITTWOCH, "Abessinische Kinderspiele ...", 107; ERNST HAMMERSCHMIDT, *Äthiopistik an deutschen Universitäten*, Wiesbaden 1968, 25.

<sup>23</sup> See GETIE GELAYE, *Amharic Oral Poems ...*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> GUIDI, "Strofe ...". In fact, there are several other works by Guidi on *qəne* in Gəʿəz which I do not consider here as it is beyond the scope and the topic of this article.

<sup>25</sup> GUIDI, "Strofe...", 168.

<sup>26</sup> In the Ethiopian poetic tradition, the *Azmari* (minstrel) and the *Alqaš* (dirge singer) are well known in their popular songs and poems. Other singers and poets include the *Amina* or *Lalibäla* (itinerant or wandering mendicants) who sing without the accompaniment of musical instruments. They can be categorized as freelance-poets or professional singers who can skillfully compose, improvise, recite and sing a variety of songs and poems orally at weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies and at warfronts. See MARCEL COHEN, *Couplets amharique du Choa*, Paris 1924, 10–11; KAY KAUFMAN SHELEMAY, "The Music of the Lalibeloč: Musical Mendicants in Ethiopia", *Journal of African Studies*, 9, 3, 1982, 128–38, here 128; BƏRHANU ABƏBƏ (Berhanou Abebe), "Hamina, distiques amhariques d'après une transcription d'Antoine d'Abbadie", *Annales d'Ethiopie* 8, 89–101, here 89–90; MICHAEL POWNE, *Ethiopian Music, An Introduction: A Survey of Ecclesiastical and Secular Music and Instruments*, London 1968; GETIE GELAYE, "The *Amina* (Wandering Singers) and their Poetry in Gojjam: Performances and Themes", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (forthcoming), among others.

<sup>27</sup> These songs were referred to by European writers in different expressions: "soldiers' songs" and

*barischen Kaiserlieder*. This was the first work which presents a complete collection of praise songs and poems referring to Ethiopian emperors namely ʿAmdä Şəyon, Yəshaq, Zārʿa Yaʿqob and Gälawdewos who ruled the country in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>28</sup> However, Littmann gives us neither the original text in Amharic nor a transcription of the songs. A total of 11 narrative songs are provided in chronological order preceded by brief introductory notes about each song and each emperor. In the introductory section, Littmann indicates that these songs were taken from an Ethiopian chronicler (the name is not specified), who wrote them down and brought them to Europe. He also states that two of the songs were taken from an earlier work of Praetorius mentioned above. Thematically, five of the songs refer to king Yəshaq, his rule, heroism and power; to his soldiers and the war; and to the destruction of churches and monasteries caused by Ahmed Gərañ and his Muslim followers. Two songs refer to the victories of king ʿAmdä Şəyon. One song, the shortest one, refers to emperor Zārʿa Yaʿqob’s fighting against the Muslims. Littmann writes that two other songs do not directly mention the name of a king, but he suggests that they might refer to the reigns and victories of either Zārʿa Yaʿqob or ʿAmdä Şəyon. The last song describes the confrontation between Muslims and Christians that took place during the reign of emperor Gälawdewos.

Littmann further states that the translation of these songs or narrative poems was made possible through the help of Ethiopian monks who were living in Jerusalem. In particular, Kəflä Giyorgis, an ‘educated man’ as Littmann writes, provided him with the necessary explanations on the language of the poems<sup>29</sup>, as well as for his earlier studies on Amharic and Gəʿəz. From the point of view of the history and study of Amharic poetry (both: written and oral), some important questions may arise here; particularly regarding the original composition, recitation or improvisation of these songs and poems.<sup>30</sup> For instance, we can ask the following questions: Were those songs or poems originally composed orally by the kings’ soldiers and by the ordinary people, as mentioned in Huntingford

“war songs” by ALBERT GÉRARD, *African Language Literatures: an Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington D.C. 1981, 10, “imperial songs” and “warriors’ songs” by G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories ...*, 38, and “royal songs” by JOANNA MANTEL-NIEĆKO, “Ethiopian Literature in Amharic”, in: B.W. ANDRZEJEWSKI et al. [eds.], *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys*, Cambridge 1985, 301–36, here 304–07. Recently, RENATE RICHTER published an article on the linguistic peculiarities of the texts of these old Amharic praise songs (“Some Linguistic Peculiarities of Old Amharic Texts”, in: KATSUYSHI FUKUI et al. (eds.), *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Kyoto 1997, 1, 543–51).

<sup>28</sup> See HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories ...*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> See ENNO LITTMANN, “Altamharisches Glossar. Der Wortschatz in den ‘Canzoni geez-amarina’”, *Rivista degli studi orientali* 20, 1944, 473–505.

<sup>30</sup> Actually, in the translation and edition of king ʿAmdä Şəyon’s chronicle by G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, it is stated that the songs composed and recited in honor of the king were not two but rather four. He noted that two of the songs referred to king ʿAmdä Şəyon while the other two described the domain of his reign. Huntingford’s translation and edition of what he calls the “soldiers’ songs” were translated by the Ethiopian scholar Getaččaw Täklä Mariyam (HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories ...*, 38).

(1965:38)? Did the emperors' respective chroniclers write down the songs? Who first wrote down these songs and poems, Ethiopians or Europeans?<sup>31</sup>

As far as I know, Huntingford and Littmann as well as the translators and editors before them did not raise these questions. It may be appropriate to indicate the 14<sup>th</sup> century as a point of departure in the history of the collection and documentation of the first Amharic oral poetry in Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup> Probably these Amharic songs and poems were recited or improvised and passed down orally for several hundred years until they came to the knowledge of European scholars in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his concluding remarks, Enno Littmann criticizes the then educated Ethiopians for not having been interested in the collection, publication or documentation of the different forms of their traditional oral poems and songs.<sup>33</sup>

In 1916, Enrico Cerulli analyzed 18 oral or folk-poetries that he collected from the *Azmari*, the *Amina* or *Hamina*.<sup>34</sup> The translation of the poems is presented only in Italian without the original in Amharic or a transliteration. The poems refer to the historical happenings, important personalities and the political situation of Ethiopia. In 1920/21 M. Chaine wrote an article dealing with an in-depth analysis of the poetic tradition, the *genres*, the *versification* and the sources of the Amharic poems.<sup>35</sup> Chaine presented, translated and analyzed 71 poems<sup>36</sup> that deal with the historical, political, sociological, cultural and traditional aspects of life in Ethiopia. Most of the poems refer to the political administration of the Ethiopian emperors, such as Tewodros, Yohannes, Menelik and other regional lords and local chiefs. The poems can be classified under praise poetry, historical poetry, political poetry, war songs, heroic recitals, funeral poems and love songs, and have

<sup>31</sup> HUNTINGFORD, *The Glorious Victories ...*, 38–39, wrote that the songs were translated and edited from various manuscripts which were used by several European scholars including GUIDI (s. “Le canzoni geez-amariña in onore di Re abissini”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei* ser. IV, 5, 1889, 53–66) and MONDON-VIDAILHET (*Manuel Pratique ...*). He further states that “... the songs were written in a transitional form of Amharic during the period of its emergence from Gəʿəz; the language is often obscure and difficult to translate and some of the allusions are hard to explain.”

<sup>32</sup> For example, ALBERT GÉRARD, *Four African Language Literatures. Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1971, 275, wrote that “... the so-called old Amharic Imperial songs must have been originally oral praise poems of the kind that is so widely spread across most African societies.” I have a similar assumption and accept the idea suggested by Professor Gerard. However, the problem lies in the absence of a clear distinction between the two overlapping fields of Ethiopian literature; namely, the ancient liturgical (religious) literature on the one hand and the modern written and oral literature on the other. For years Ethiopian literature has been studied (even up to now) both by foreign and Ethiopian scholars under titles commonly known as “traditional” and “modern” literature. But we can also collect, classify and analyze the rich and diverse genres of Ethiopian oral literature in Amharic and in many other local languages as a distinct field of research.

<sup>33</sup> His remarks in German read as follows: “*Wer diese Proben kennen gelernt hat, wird bedauern, daß nicht noch mehr erhalten geblieben ist. Die abessinischen Gelehrten hatten keine Muße, keine Begabung und keine Lust, die poetischen Erzeugnisse der volkstümlichen Kunst zu sammeln und zu erklären*” (LITTMANN, *Die Altamharischen Kaiserlieder ...*, 33).

<sup>34</sup> ENRICO CERULLI, “La Poesia popolare amarica”, *L’Africa Italiana* 35, 1916, 172–79.

<sup>35</sup> MARIUS CHAINE, “La Poesie chez les Ethiopiens”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 22, 1920/21, 306–425.

<sup>36</sup> A good number of these poems are verses with more than four lines. Chaine writes that the poems were composed or recited by the *Azmari*, *Däbtära* and housemaids. In addition to the thematic analysis, the author provides an important description about the versification of Amharic poetry focusing on the metrical, rhyme, rhythm and grammatical features of the poems.

some *qəne*. In 1924 we find two works on Amharic oral poetry. The first one by Marcel Cohen focuses entirely on the translation and analysis of Amharic oral poetry from Šäwa under the title “*Couplets Ambariques du Choa*”.<sup>37</sup> Cohen provides an interesting discussion about the poetic tradition of Ethiopians and he acknowledges the sources of the original Amharic poems and songs appropriately. Importantly, Cohen gives a general description of such basic terms as *gəṭəm* (poetry), *qəne*, *zäfän* (song), *Alqaš* (dirge singer), *Azmari* (minstrel) as well as of the accompanying musical instruments such as *bägäna* (harp), *kərar* (a six string guitar) and *masinqo* (a one string violin). Interestingly, the work of *Blattengeta Həruy Wäldä Səllase*<sup>38</sup> entitled: *yäläqso zema gəṭəm (Funeral Chant Poetry)*, which was unknown to most Ethiopians, is also mentioned in Cohen’s study. He then presents a translation and analysis of 34 Amharic couplets of love songs, *qəne*, praise poems, poems on prostitutes in Addis Ababa and some historical poems of 6 to 9 lines, and one very long narrative poem of 90 lines.

The second book published in 1924 was *An Amharic Reader* written by J.I. Eadie.<sup>39</sup> As the title shows the book is intended to help learners in reading and understanding different Amharic texts along with translations and footnote commentaries. Like the previous authors, Eadie presents several folktales, dirges, songs and a total of 36 Amharic oral poems and *qəne*. The author<sup>40</sup> also gives lengthy praise and love poems which were contributed by the poet *Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abher Gila Maryam*.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in the following two contributions of European scholars we find special studies on the characteristics and principles of Amharic poetry, such as accent, metre, rhythm and versification. The first article was written in 1930 by Enno Littmann.<sup>42</sup> The author attempted to provide general remarks on the poetry of Ethiopian languages such as Gəʿəz, Amharic, Təgrəñña and Oromo, and compared them with the forms and poetic features of other Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew. In this article, Littmann outlines a comparative analysis of funeral songs, love songs, heroic poetry and children’s games and songs collected during his extensive research on Amharic, Təgrəñña<sup>43</sup> and Arabic languages.

<sup>37</sup> COHEN, *Couplets Ambariques ...*

<sup>38</sup> As far as Ethiopians’ contributions on the collection, classification and publication of oral poetry are concerned, *Blattengeta HƏRU Y WÄLDÄ SƏLLASE* is the first native scholar who published a book on Amharic oral poetry (GETIE GELAYE, *Amharic Oral Poems ...*, 10).

<sup>39</sup> J.I. EADIE, *An Amharic Reader*, Cambridge 1924, 193–270.

<sup>40</sup> A work like this one by Eadie needs special investigation to identify which poetry is oral and which is not. It is advisable to provide in one’s studies a clear distinction between the oral and the written, drawing basic features and characteristics such as origin, composition, performance, audience, transmission, etc. For details, see RUTH FINNEGAN, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Nairobi 1970, AUGUST KLINGENHEBEN, “Zur amharischen Poesie”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 15, 1959, 5–20 and ENNO LITTMANN, “Abessinische und Semitische Poesie”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 84, 1930, 207–35.

<sup>41</sup> According to JOANNA MANTEL-NIEČKO, “Ethiopian Literature ...”, 311, *Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abher* was one of the pioneers of the Ethiopian press; he was contributing essays, short stories and poems to the first Ethiopian fortnightly newspaper *A’əməro* (Knowledge) that appeared in 1924.

<sup>42</sup> LITTMANN, “Abessinische und Semitische ...”, 207–35.

<sup>43</sup> It should be mentioned here that most of Littmann’s publications dealt with the various forms of Təgrəñña oral literature, such as historical songs, dirges, folktales, proverbs and children games and songs.

The second article written by August Klengenheben in 1959 dealt with the study of the characteristics and principles of Amharic oral poetry.<sup>44</sup> The Amharic oral poems and songs selected for the study include funeral songs, war chants, heroic recitals, love songs, *qəne*, and poems accompanied by the musical instruments *kərar*, *masinqo* and *bägāna*. Klengenheben mentions that these ‘popular songs’ were collected between 1919 and 1925 from an Ethiopian named Dästa Wäldä Maryam who originated from Ankobär. The poems and songs are only transcribed and translated, without their original text in the Amharic script. Considering the features and principles of traditional written and oral Amharic poems such as metre, rhythm, accent and versification, the author concludes that written poetry in Amharic regarding the versification and metrical principles is similar to that of oral poems and songs.

The contributions of the above-mentioned European scholars published at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries still serve as basic reference works. They have inspired Ethiopian researchers and amateur compilers to continue the work of collecting, classifying, analyzing and documenting the various genres of Amharic oral literature. To mention only a few, Afäwärc Gäbrä Iyyäsus, Həruy Wäldä Səllase, Mahətamä Səllase Wäldä Mäsqäl<sup>45</sup>, Alämayyāhu Mogäs, Bərhanu Abäbä, Säyfu Mättafäriya<sup>46</sup>, Taddäsä Mulat, Haylu Arə’aya, Däbbäbä Säyfu, Fäqade Azzäzä<sup>47</sup>, Šibäši Lamma, Admasu Dästa, Assäffa Mammo, Bərhanu Gäbäyyāhu, Mäsfən Mässälä, as well as the author of this article did and continue to do research work in the field of Amharic oral literature in general and oral poetry in particular.

### Summary

Most of the European contributions on the Amharic language dealt with preparation of grammars, dictionaries, textbooks, translations, text editions and commentaries. However, these authors also included historical texts and documents such as letters of kings and emperors as well as stories, folk-tales, proverbs, riddles and a variety of oral poems and songs. This article examines a brief review of the works of major European authors, such as Henry Zotenberg, Mondon-Vidaihet, Franz Praetorius, Ludwig Mahler, Eugen Mittwoch, Ignazio Guidi, Enno Littmann, Enrico Cerulli, Marcel Cohen, M. Chaîne, J.I. Eadie, Carlo Conti Rossini, August Klengenheben, etc., and looks at their methods of collection, classification, presentation, translation and interpretation of Amharic oral poetry. Undoubtedly, the contributions of these European scholars have inspired several Ethiopian writers and researchers such as Afäwärc Gäbrä Iyyäsus, Həruy Wäldä Səllase, Mahətamä Səllase Wäldä Mäsqäl, Alämayyāhu Mogäs, Säyfu Mättafäriya, Taddäsä Mulat, Haylu Arə’aya, Däbbäbä Säyfu, Fäqade Azzäzä, Šibäši Lamma, Admasu Dästa, Assäffa Mammo, Bərhanu Gäbäyyāhu, Mäsfən Mässälä, as well as the author of this paper and others, to do and continue the research work in the field of Ethiopian oral literature in general and Amharic oral poetry in particular. The article is based on library and archival research conducted between 1996 and 2003 on different occasions in Ethiopia, Germany, England, Italy and the USA.

<sup>44</sup> AUGUST KLINGENHEBEN, “Zur amharischen Poesie ...”.

<sup>45</sup> MAHTÄMÄ SƏLLASE WÄLDÄ MƏSQÄL, “የኢትዮጵያ ባህል ጥናት፡ ጅ በለው፡ A Study of the Ethiopian Culture of Horse-Names”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 7, 2, 1969, 195–303; ID., አግርኛ ቅኔ ከነመፍቻው (‘Amharic Qəne With Keys’), Addis Abäba 1958 A.M. [1965/66 A.D.].

<sup>46</sup> SÄYFU MÄTTAFÄRIYA, “የፎክሎር መዝገብ ቃላት ጥንቀራ ቅድመ ዝግጅት” (‘A Preliminary Compilation of Folklore Dictionary’), *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 26, 1, 1993, 73–116.

<sup>47</sup> FEKADE AZEZE, “The State of Oral Literature Research in Ethiopia: Prospect and Retrospect”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 34, 2001, 1, 43–88.