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EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF
ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

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THE BILIN LANGUAGE:
LONG STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

(Poems and a Tale)

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1984

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November 26 — 30, 1984

Background to Abba Keflemariam Fadega's paper

The original type-written paper of the late Abba Keflemariam Fadega (1934-2008) was written both in Blin and English. The Blin Language Forum took the initiative of rewriting the English part of this invaluable paper to post it in our website, www.daberi.org, so that it could be available for all interested readers. The poems and the tale in this paper were translated from Blin to English by Abba Keflemariam himself. Abba Keflemariam was an academic in literature and language.

The Bilin Language: Long Struggle for Survival

Language is the most distinctively human attribute, and as such its survival and development is the same survival of the people who speak it. Bilin language persists to survive in an island-like area by means of its in season and out season folk-songs, poems and tales. This paper confines itself to the Bilin language as it is actually spoken in Bogos (district of Keren).

It is hoped that the following four poems and a tale in Bilin will be a stimulus to others for further efforts to contribute new information on the IES's scope. Such linguistic tools are still the major means whereby Bilin Language is kept alive.

The Bilin poets open their minds and hearts to facts and events which prompt them to utter with remarkable spontaneity speech and include every object and happening that occur in rare and wide horizons of their world at large and in their circumscribed areas in particular. Poetry expresses thought, imagination or feeling in appropriate, containing a rhythmical element and usually having a metrical form. And the poet, being distinguished by imaginative power, insight, sensibility, and facility of expression, must be the master of his language. With this in mind, let us consider what can be learned about Bilin language and character from the following poems and tale.

1. Poems A and B, though from different point of view, deal with strictly human relationship and rights, the transgression of which degrades a man's dignity, disrupts world peace and increases suffering. In all walks of life, there must be justice for peace and peace for justice. The right for both: A. self-expression – and B. mutual respect safeguards the world of men. As to the poem C, see below, whereas poem D tries to remove the screen of the night of the present age that looks gloomy. Worry and anxiety became the rule of one's daily road of living. It is our mentality to consider time as the protagonist of events and situations. Thus, the composer attributes the difficult situation and rather oppressive milieu one is afraid of, to time, in and out of which mankind and his environment are weighed and measured. Though time is that within which something occurs, gets realized or discarded, it seems to limit human possibilities, every human progress or regress is measured in terms of time.

2. The linguistic process Bilin makes is a struggle both for its preservation and development, enhanced by ever enriching means of adapting borrowed words and coining new ones. This seems to be feasible in regard to folk-songs and poetry. Unfortunately, most of the accomplished Bilin poets improvise their poems in Tigre:¹ Firstly, for, Tigre is preferred to Bilin (language), for its poetical, melody; secondly, because, the poets want to impact their knowledge with Tigre-Speaking people. They feel universal and unable to confine their ideas to their own tribe.

Moreover, perusing the poems in Bilin, one can see how language is the ultimate structure toward which all the elements of each poem work. It is the end and goal of all poetic effort, the fruition of insight, somewhat like a human being, who is not a soul looking through a body, but who is a person that disclosed himself through meaningful utterances.

¹Salih Naffe's poem B. "injustice looms ..." is originally composed in Tigre.

A. THE PANG OF NOSTALGIA IS AS STRONG AS LIFE

1. Of the long age that I choose to speak.
Mem'ry of which quite makes me sick.
In what sort of world may I confide
Who have no thing that I would hide?
Indeed no man knows every thing;
So my strange tale I'd gladly sing
Of pilgrimage from cherished Lasta
To northwest place that is called Bekusta.
In former was all I could will;
In latter I felt as on smith's anvil.
Yet pastures long I've safely guarded,
To elders counsels sage imparted,
To youngers often wisdom whispered.
So even halt and weak have prospered.
Brave hearts, sharp minds I would have shun
Whate'er would keep them less than one.
With visions of whence once did start
Bold stalwart forebears ... there rests my heart !

2. My own I've oft with strength endowed,
No faithfulness nor lies allowed,
Nor theft nor infidelity
But guts and magnanimity.
I'd all distrust and begg'ry part
From shy and mild and modest heart.
That evils of the past and now
Would in the future never grow.
In short may character see birth
From wisdom of both heaven and earth.

3. Though once I had a peaceful life
A sudden blow began a strife
From which to hide or even flee
Became impossible for me
Of myriad cries of pain and fear
The memory yet afflicts me here
What pity to sustain assault
Occasioned by no one known fault!
Who to pity: him assailed
Or him whose conscience naught prevailed?

4. I was uprooted, naught retaining
Nor free to see what was reaming---
A pilgrim on a trail unknown
Despoiled of all he'd built and grown
Peace on earth will never be
Till men of enmity themselves most harm
When they to others cause alarm
'Tts honest toil the rule of life
With travel free of any strife
The man who can his daily life,
Supply is he who truly does succeed.

5. In wilderness where frigid night
And sunny days of torrid light
Each man or place was strange to me
Each village showed hostility
Will all men's inhumanity
Ewer takes from us security?

6. In flight I upped and downed shear hills
Traversed ravines, wide plains and rills
Cut paths through under bush and trees
Sought refuge from fierce beast and breeze
In cave, by rock or else thicket
Pursued by lurking foe most wicked
'Neath heaven's eternal do I lay
That free from dreadful hosts I'd pray.

7. At length on very high plateaux
I scanned the unknown vales below
For path to the Merab Melash
Beyond which soon I'd all things statch
Most trusted men I sent ahead
To reckon where the best trail led
In Hamasien they found a place
Of noble folks who'd yield me space.

8. I sewttled there for years of peace
But new foes rose and would not cease
To harass, plunder and constrain
Me then to leave the higher plain
And seek relief in lower lands
Oh high,though, my mark still stands.

9. To mention but a few to see:
Wekidiba, Wasdemba, Halhale
Sheregeqa, Abresciqo, Tilqusic
And other spots....just take your pick.
May those fair names remain for aye
That all may know I there did stay

10. The low land refuge free from struggle
Within th' embrace of mountains snuggle.
Abundant fertile land where camel
Muel, sheep, goat and horse might gambol.
A paradise of fruits: *ayera*,
Ibenkula, guba, sankira,
Medka, guba acatera'
Habina, dira, and derguna
*Ebdera, keda, ashenquta*¹...all
Wild fruits to pick from spring to fall !

11. Peace came but vanished in a flash
When greed and envy did nigh dash
My hope was *Webye's* horde
Thrice came at me with mace and sword.
This whirlwind swept me to the dust
Destroying home and field with lust.
For blood and land and power
But death at last decreed his hour!
What change can man some time decree
Lest sin remains world's malady?

12. Foe much more fierce than *Webye*...
*Kakin, Baden, Shili Deshkli*²...
Swept 'cross my hearths to introduce
Strange characters and then seduce
With manners strange my little ones
But left me still in full command
Why must one still have to expect
Mors foes who' ill not his rights respect?

13. There came a neighbour well to do...
Who lent me funds but at times not few
Made firm demands for recompense
His role to me soon made no sense.
For self respect I had to leave
This shrewd exploiter lest he thief
Me of my birthright to this land
He was an Arab...understand?

14. Compliance born of deference
Begot, in turn, a certain sense of say, inferiority.
This led to what could really be
Obsequious and shameful ways
That cancel thought of trails to blaze
In groups I was too oft withdrawn
Ashamed as those who sometimes fawn

On nobler ones. So Deshkli-Shili,
deemed me shy and craven silly!
Now show once more forefathers' valour!
Let no decay henceforth be ever !

By Mekonen Amanuel (student) 1984

¹Deshkili-Shili means "Tigrigna speaking people & Tigre speaking people". *Kaken* and *Baden* are the languages of the tribes of Beja and Bazen, respectively. These are in the neighbourhood of Bogos.

B. INJUSTICE LOOMS LARGE

1. Oh , Imer of *Far-Aleba* no stir your memory?
You know the erstwhile ruler of this lovely land;
Reknowned Liban, the chief of all Tigray.
Abetted by Meskel Jemil, the Tigrian,
The son of Liban swept with might from land to sea,
Did plunder foes, with kindly hand,
Give aid to folks he chanced to see
In need of help. But how this land
Is Hiabu's, who ruler ne'er was made to be.

2. Miscreant son of Hamde, expect somewheres
The ruler of this land co-swoop apace;
With merely Tigre Neged faltring elders
To determine justice, insure peace.
Such blessings must remain, in truth in sad arrears.
If even ownership of our fare should cease,
We've little choice but for Sudan, it so appears;
But there how can a man's prosperity increase
If here as hite gown's all one wears?
With ESLC success the chances overseas increase;
A lincensed one may dirve a tractor anywheres;
It's time alone will tell if youth's success will cease.

3. I am quite fed up with life oh, what to do?
I want to sleep but can't, so what to say?
It's justice saves the world if rulers allow what's due;
Real peace is here if travellers home can get without dismay;
And calm prevails if neighbours talk when work is through.
One's child will bear his name in future day;
And learning's life's sheer joy if one does books pursue;
And heavens the prize for all who truly pray.

4. The world's avoid with the fool's at ease.
Earth prospers when on crops much rain does fall
To waken grass and thus the flocks well please,
That favour man with food and carry all
His things and house from place to place.
Ah, peace is joy for men when not accused at all,
And health 's the greatest wealth when doctor's care does cease.
But 'tis a hedeous wrong Mohammed caused to fall
On cousin's corpse; as time goes on, might it increase?
He sought besides an unborn cow a bull full-grown and tall ;
If brother Husein sided you, know Allah's help won't cease
For us ! Than yours no greater harm did us befall !

5. It 's Allah's will to bless the good, the bad to flay;
Nor can one hope to 'scape just recompense.
'T were vain to try to have the goat you once did slay.
A mighty curse on what you have or did dispense !
Sad times are these when youth will blandly say
To elderly: " Be still and wait ! " Does this make sense?
Must old folks now submit to youth in every way?

By Salih Nafi' of Faraleba

C. THE HYPOCRICY OF TRADITION

1. Youngsters all assemble and deliberate.
Let's size up the antiquated way
That's surely apt for mar out fate
Speak out, young folks, and have your say.

Don't think it will forever last:

2. What lass is ever asked to state a choice for
Mate by parents of her or likely groom?
Where she is to balk. "Cursed one!" folks would deplore.
If boy did so, he'd face a certain doom.

Don't think it will forever last:

3. To price a human being is absurd
Each dowry item: wedding gown and veil
And ornaments and things were paramount.
The marriage bond itself to less important might pale.

Don't think it will forever last:

4. The fiancée, obliged to fast with care,
Three days before people remains retired
The special cloth of Hema she's to wear
And rings for nose and ears are too required

Don't think it will forever last:

5. By custom bound, the parents settle everything,
While bride in most secluded bed does lie
Enshrined till nuptial songs they sing,
And she's put on a mule or a camel high.

Don't think it will forever last:

6. Young maiden, why submit to suffer such
A paralysing structure under mother's eye?
Bereft of salutary movement that's so much

Don't think it will forever last:

7. Young man, why don't you also chide
Such customs old? Then plan ahead and build
A likely home with fixtures suited for a bride
And groom-friends to celebrate with house quite filled.

Don't think it will forever last:

8. Approve you th'unenlightened ways expressed?
Why not against such customs new inveigh?
Retain all that's true worth, and scorn the rest
Lest illness follow the oppressive way.

Don't think it will forever last:

9. Conceive one healthy laid to bed all summer long
With clots that form to make her most immobile,
Daily roasting till skin's peeled as by a prong
To beautify her perfumed body as a noble.

Don't think it will forever last:

10. Should rheum's ensure "Hitchin", the maid abed?
To Abune Haimanot's medicinal bath is taken,
Or evil ghost is exercised instead.
Let girls henceforth be led in ways more sane.

Don't think it will forever last:

11. Imagine you in tiny smoke-filled furnace,
One blanket-swathed and sweltering so much
That flesh and skin seem transformed into lace.
Was not uncertain death preferred to such?

Don't think it will forever last:

12. Why ruin health and almost starve, Oh Blin youth?
Prefer you not yourself to mount the mule to ride
To grooms' abode, not as a thing rose up unclothe?
Prefer you still to miss a year confined inside?

Don't think it will forever last:

¹ It is not wise to refuse the suggestion of one's parents for engagement, lest one incurs a curse!

² Although the bride is carried as if she is a thing supported by a male man, and thus vulnerable, the mothers at home put on trousers to protect her from any possible intruders (degroriyet). My suggestion was to let the bride sit on herself on the horseback and guide it (or on a camel, or 's or mule).

³ This is a desperate call for a protest by the boys.

13. Does your spouse merit your demise, young wife?
So soon? You'll orphan him and lovely child.
Dear ones and friends hope more of your short life.
Why not renounce now customs seeming wild?

Don't think it will forever last:

14. Young wife, regard your husband now dismayed
To find you thus enfeebled, at death's brink—
Almost divorced from him, almost a shade.
He's to the last been faithful, as you think—
Don't think it will forever last!

By Kiflemariam Hamde 1979 G.C.

⁴ This a suggestion for the boys to first build an appropriate house in which the bride could move freely (and escape confinement)

⁵ By Abune Teklehaimanot is meant an old volcanic remain where warm/hot water springs and the people use as medicine for diverse disease and sickness.

⁶ Some young ladies complain often of evil spirit possession and the primary candidates are those affected by the customary practices (my own observation). I am explaining away the cause of sickness from spirits to customs.

D. ONE IN HIS MELANCHOLY

1. Dull moments now with hopes quite shot.
See parents without ones they once begot;
They've restless nights because of absent ones.
O Peace and justices, comes as you did once

2. Why did I ever see the light of the day?
My mother bore me but to my dismay;
But such is life. Her mind's eye couldn't see
The Future with its stark cruelty

3. Suppose I'd then refused to be yet born;
Could I've escaped from her womb being born?
Had I perceived what's now, I'd surely stayed
Far from this world that is so badly made.

4. Or else I'd have my mother simply urged
To let me pass from life with simple dirge,
So now I might extend a helping hand
To this unsettled God-forsaken land.

5. Tyranny, are you not yet satisfied
With mischief done, the scores who've died,
The youths' desertions, mothers' uncheck tears,
Disheartened screams – through endless years?

6. Why is this young man goaded to take flight?
To caves to pass the cold and sleepless night
From loved ones far, for whom he yearns,
Quite weighted down with life's concerns?

7. Oppressive age that sweeps its youth aside
Who tremble now, and run and hide;
A time of great distrust when one can't know
If one who greets him be true friend or foe.

8. Farewell to you, the joyous youngest boys;
As adolescence comes, play, dance, rejoice,
Soon after time blanch your aging pates;
By then let fickle be gone, O kindly fates!

9. Take heart, young folks; you must avoid distress.
Your spirits let not this transient age depress.
What benefit if anything your record soil?
When liberty shall come, 'twill well be worth the toil!

Background to the poem

This poem was written in August 21, 1979 when the author hid in a cape together with a couple of other boys who escaped the forced military recruitment by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) which had been fighting against Ethiopia since 1961. The ELF, and later on the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), used to capture youngsters from their homes or often from their nightly dancing places in the villages, to join them. These forced military training were abhorred by the youngsters, at least in the localities where the author came from. Parents suffered a lot due to this practice. Compared to those who joined voluntarily, these forced youngsters were also considered to be less loyal to the cause.

After the Ethiopian government, the Dergue, came to power in 1974 by overthrowing the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, it was weakened to the point of losing ground as much of the areas in the country side were semi-or completely liberated by the liberation forces. After 1974, youngsters joined the liberation fronts in tens of thousands, abandoning their school, work, farming, livestock, and even from abroad they flooded to the liberation cause. Because of this, the ELF and the EPLF stopped recruitment as their number increased greatly. However, there was both competition and civil war between the ELF and the EPLF, and many Eritreans hated this, and thus youngsters also were not anymore willing to join them. Consequently, the competition between the ELF and the EPLF, as well as the Ethiopian government shifting ally from the USA to the USSR intensified the war and both fronts also changed recruitment policies, from willingness to force. The ELF which was the leading front until that time felt it to be time to increase the number of its fighters, and thus started to recruit youngsters in what it called a *patriotic call*, (but people called what it was, *gfa*, forced recruitment).

On that specific occasion, August 21, 1979, a younger friend and neighbor called Gebreselasie Wolday was first captured by the ELF squad but he escaped in the darkness of the night, and there was no way the squad could chase him. But his parents screamed loudly to warn other possible victims. Soon afterwards, the squad approached the author's home, and the latter followed suit, and both ran away to bushes, only to discover each other after it dawned up. Both stayed at the cape for two nights, getting nourishment partly in nuts although smaller children smuggled bread pretending to keep their cattle and goats in the mountain. In that occasion of patriotic call (*gfa*), the ELF squad could capture 15 boys in their later teens, four of whom were martyred later on in the civil war between the ELF and the EPLF. Two cousins of the author named Raki Okbay and Mengistu Adalla were martyred fighting the Ethiopian military in 1972 and 1976 respectively, together with six others only from the same village. Those quoted as dead in the Poem refer to them. The poem was sung in a nightly dancing and singing season late in September in 1979. The youngsters who attended the singing season asked for repeating it every night there was a singing session, often outside the village, as is the tradition.

Kiflemariam Hamde (1979)

(The above background to poem D, which was translated from Blin to English by Abba Keflemariam Fadega was provided by Kiflemariam Hamde in 2012. Abba Keflemariam Fadega's notes and Blin tale continues on the following pages.)

Some notes:-

The young writer feels deeply struck by the practice of Bilin customary law and he is convinced of having a common message to tell to all! He lays stress on the negative side effects of the customary practices of which fatal consequences lead to her grave. He pin-points how the young Bilin are engaged and get marriage without their full consent, for, according to the usage, the procedure of the whole marriage affair concerns directly both Parents of the betrothed ones. He explains with strong terms the general attitude of the Bilin to observe such a law as a sacrosanct and to exact whatever it dictates, notwithstanding the great disadvantage it brings about on the psychosoma of the young brides. What seems a bit strange to all is the readiness with which the Bilin youngsters, who pass freely the whole period of their adolescence, submit themselves to carry out whatever is required by the customary law. This occurs at the time when one is expected to take on himself the whole responsibility of his adulthood. Nevertheless, the process of initiation of the young to real family-life, and the awareness of responsibility that limits human freedom make the young Bilin condescend with certain spontaneity to do whatever is decided by the parents. The peculiarity of this consists in giving priority to freedom of the young in his adolescence wherein he reaches maturity of mind and body.

At the start of his adulthood, the youngster has to prove his manly character by showing his good disposition to accept and rely on the authority of his parents. This does not, however, imply lack of maturity, but it stresses the fact that true maturity consists in the reasonable acceptance of life's hardships and in self-mastery wherein lies integrated personality and balanced mind.

Moreover, as far as Bilin language is concerned, the strict observance of the customary practices is of primary importance for the preservation and survival of the language.

Let 's take for instance, the nuptial talk, given on the occasion by the elders, old and new folk-songs, short poems, improvised by nearly all the invited and seated in the Dass¹, are vital feed-backs for the Bilin language development.

Notes:-

1. In poem B. No. 10, there are a series of wild-fruits' names which grow mostly in the Lowlands I couldn't find the corresponding botanical nomenclature for those fruits in English. I didn't even try to describe them.
2. The poems, herein exposed, are directly handed over to my writing by the respective authors. They have more or less the same melody!
3. Conti Rossini C. and Leo Reinisch, in their extensive research work on Bilin language, had collected folk-songs and tales of Bilin people.
 - a) Cf. C. Rossini C., : Raccanti e canti Bileni. (Extrait du Rome II des Actes du XIV^e Congres Internat. De Bonaporte (VI^e). 1907
 - b) Leo Reinisch: Bilin-Sprache. (Mitt interstuzung der Kai. Akademie der Wissen schaften) in Wien. Leipzig. 1883.

¹Dass – a wedding hall, prepared for the occasion.

THE TALE OF TWO ORPHANS

Long ago there was a widower with two very young sons. He loved them very much, doing everything he could for them! For the proper maintenance of the house and for the care of the children, he remarried. He eventually had two sons from the second wife, too.

Unfortunately, the latter lavished much care and love on her own sons only. She openly maltreated the stepchildren, becoming more and harder on them. She forced them to do whatsoever her caprice dictates within and without the family circle. The food she gave them was very poor and badly prepared. Thus, they even were faced with starvation! While things were thus unfortunate, one day as they were looking after their cows, they had an apparition of their deceased mother who told them a secret that at an appointed time and hidden place, they should: “call your own milk-cow whose faecal matter will become porridge and whose urine will turn into butter for you.” This event seemed to them a sheer dream, but they did exactly as they were bidden and all turned out to be true. They ate of the delicious porridge and were exceedingly delighted!

From that day on, they grew stronger and healthier than ever. Their stepmother was puzzled and upset by the incomprehensible outcome of her discriminatory behaviour. In order to solve the mystery she sent her own sons with the stepchildren to spy. The four of them took the cattle to the forest; and when the mysterious lunch time arrived the older two couldn't help revealing the mystery after having obtained a solemn pledge of secrecy from their stepbrothers. They ate their fill!

When they came back home, however, the two spies hurried to reveal the whole secret to their mother! The woman then ordered her step sons to stay at home all the day while her own sons were directed to look after the cattle. The order was carried out; but her own sons couldn't succeed in making the cow yield the prodigious lunch it used to provide the others. The news of that utter failure made the woman mad with anger. She conceived another evil plan, entreating her husband who was unaware of the intrigue, to do whatever she wanted. She then asked him to slaughter the cow. Though reluctant to do so, he killed the cow.

Despair and dismay beclouded the hearts and minds of the two orphans. Once more the ghostly being appeared to the orphans who were ordered to collect and bury the bones of the cow. They did this. The buried bones grew fast in ant-hills which transformed into many cows and camels. The two orphans soon became rich and powerful lords, whereas the stepmother and her sons submitted to become their servants.

Having carefully instructed their stepbrothers how they should behave and cautioning them that in the act of drinking they not let a drop of milk fall on the ground. The young lords gave then bowls full of milk. This milk was so tasty that they drank to excess. When each one emptied the third bowl, a drop of milk fell right on the navel. They bent down with difficulty to lick the milk off their abdomens which, unfortunately, burst! Each of the boys thus suffered a tragic death.

N.B. In this tale, the primary principles of moral teaching are clearly pinpointed and can be summed up:

- a) The helpless, such as the orphan, is the first to deserve the care, love, and sympathy of all his neighbours. Such behaviour is of the nature of justice.
 - b) Divine providence does not abandon the innocent. Hope is required.
 - c) Greed blinds one's conscience and leads to extremes of behaviour. Modesty prevents such disorder.
 - d) He who persists in evil and in harming others will have an evil end. Repentance is required.
-