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Specimens of the Popular Literature of Modern Abyssinia.

—By Dr. ENNO LITTMANN, Princeton University, Princeton, N. J.

AMONG the popular works written in the modern Semitic languages of Abyssinia, there are many which are of interest to us, while some are even of considerable importance. I give here extracts from a few compositions of this nature, written in dialects of Northern Abyssinia.

The first of these is a small book in the Tigrai language, entitled, “Story of the Journey of an Ethiopian from Ethiopia to Italy,” which was printed in the year 1895 in Rome. It is a very simple and natural tale of an African who never had left his country before. Its scientific value is mainly philological, but it interests us also from a human standpoint. In order to give an idea of the style in which the author, Fesha Giorgis, writes, I translate the passage where he describes his departure (p. 6, l. 10–24); adding, however, that in a few places the translation is not absolutely certain:

“Then I took leave of my friends and acquaintances. Some of them tried to keep me back(?), and some of them said unto me: ‘You have been persuaded.’ But I, having now decided to go, replied nothing to the talk of the people. And in the evening I started, according to the order of the major, to go to the steamer. And some of my friends accompanied me and came to the seashore, and there we took leave of one another. But when the separation took place, my nature trembled, and two of my friends began to weep together. When that happened we embraced each other again and I stepped into the boat. Until I reached the steamer, they stood on the seashore, to see me off. But I then, while turning my face towards them, until I came to the vessel, was not embarrassed. And when I had come on board the vessel, I waved to them with a white handkerchief. And they went away sad.”

Going on, he describes his experiences in the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, where he has a very queer and disagreeable feeling, called with us sea-sickness; and finally in Naples and Italy.

Of quite a different character are two collections of texts in the Tigrē language, which are of great interest both for the history of the Semitic languages and for the history of Semitic thought and civilization. In the first place, a collection of tribal legends (Stammessagen) of the Tigrē people was published by Dr. Conti Rossini, in the *Journal of the Italian Asiatic Society*, 1901, under the title, "Tradizioni storiche dei Mensa." The reading of these texts reminds us strikingly of the tribal legends of the Israelitic clans in Canaan. Each tribe derives itself through a long line of ancestors from a heros eponymos, who in a manner is a personification of the tribe. This is shown also in an interesting way by a fact of grammar, as follows: two prominent tribes of the Tigrē are Mensā' and Māryā, but their tribe heroes are Mense'āy and Māyrāy; that is to say, the adjective form expressing derivation or appurtenance is employed, just as though we had יוספי' or יעקובי' as names of persons, instead of יוסף and יעקוב, in the Old Testament. The single heroes are then as usual brought into relation to each other as brothers, cousins, father and son, and so forth. We see thus before our eyes, and in a mainly Semitic people, a process in development which in a similar way took place many centuries ago in the Hebrew nation. Of course traditions more or less like these are spread over almost all the earth, and on the other hand it is a little dangerous to compare times so remote from one another. But the Semitic character is so tenacious, and the elements of Semitic civilization, such as found for instance with the Bedouins, change so little in the course of time, that we are led to comparison wherever we find similar traces.

As a specimen of the Tigrē traditions I give here the story of Mense'āy and Māyrāy, the ancestors, or better, the representatives, of the Mensā' and Māryā:

"Mense'āy and Māyrāy, without dividing the estate of their father, left [their brothers] Tōr'āy and Ḥazōtāy and went to Haigat. And after that, they went out from Haigat to spy out the land, saying: 'Which will be the best for us?', [and they went] to Erōtā. And after they had gone to Erōtā, Māyrāy said unto Mense'āy: 'In this Erōtā let us dwell, it is good.' And after that said Mense'āy: 'How can we dwell in this drought in preference to the two rainy seasons and the two harvests and the

two birth-times of the kine, [which are in Haigat]?’ So he went down [thither] with his brother. And after that the mule of Māyrāy strayed, after they had gone down to Haigat. And Māyrāy and Mense‘āy sought for the mule both of them together. And when they went after her, she was waiting for them in Erōtā. Māyrāy said unto his brother: ‘Thus hath the mule brought us again to our goal; let us dwell [here].’ And as he did not yield to him, they parted. Māyrāy settled in Erōtā and Mense‘āy returned to Haigat. And each of them in his place begat children and grew rich. And when Mense‘āy longed for his brother, he went to see Māyrāy; and Māyrāy likewise longing for his brother, went to see Mense‘āy; and they met in Kadnat. And in the dark, each believing the other an enemy, they struck each other [with their lances]. But crying: ‘This is my man, I am Mense‘āy!’ and: ‘This is my man, I am Māyrāy!’ they recognized each other, and embracing they expired together. And they were buried in Kadnat.” The end of this story is based on the same element as the widespread legend of the two fighting brothers,¹ very closely related to that of the battle between father and son (Rustem and Zohrab, Hildebrand and Hadubrand).²

The second of the Tigrē collections is found in a manuscript sent to me this winter from Abyssinia containing 214 songs in the Tigrē language. It is the first collection of any size of Semitic popular poetry, excepting those in the Arabic language. Like the “*dīwān benī Hudhail*,” we might call this a *dīwān welād Tigrē*. The poems furnish very valuable material for linguistic, metrical and ethnological studies. The first texts in Tigrē—the translation of the Gospel of St. Mark and of some Psalms, the *Tradizioni* published by Conti Rossini, and also these poems—are all of them the fruit of the industrious zeal of the Swedish missionaries.

Mr. Sundström, one of these energetic and indefatigable men, sent me also an introduction in Tigrē and Swedish to the first

¹ Cf. Eteokles and Polyneikes, Hildibrand and Asmund, and the Scotch ballad, ‘The two Brothers’ (Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, No. 49).

² Cf. the exhaustive treatment of these questions by Dr. Busse, *Sagen-geschichtliches zum Hildebrandsliede*, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, xxvi., Halle, 1900.

poem, and copious notes in Swedish on the poem itself. Of introduction and poem I present here an English translation:

After the death of a certain chieftain, named David, a quarrel arose about the leadership; for the surviving son (Maḥammad) was said to be a weakling, whom they did not desire for a chieftain. It is a custom for the chieftain to have a special strong-sounding drum, at the sound of which all the male population of the village must gather at the council place, if any important matter is to be transacted. Without this drum no one can rule. Therefore the rival party succeeds, after some intrigues, in getting the chieftain's drum; and, while the legitimate successor is sleeping, installs its man as chieftain, and the drum sounds. The son of David wakes up, seizes the formidable sword Qaṭṭān, jumps over the enclosure of his house, and stands suddenly on the council place. He cleaves the poor drummer with the flashing Qaṭṭān, and then turns around to the bard, who is just singing the praise of the newly installed chief. Death before his eyes, the bard now sings, to save his life, the following song:

1. Not shall be despised in songs this Maḥammad, the son of Ġadāl.
2. His mother is not a slave, nor is his father a serf.
3. His mother is the legitimate wife and a princess; his father is king and ruler.
4. He is the offspring of Fekāk, the offspring of Nāwed; he takes tribute from the free as well as from the tributary.
5. He is the offspring of Claudius, the offspring of Theodoros; he keeps back warriors, horse and foot.
6. He is the offspring of 'Eġēl, the offspring of Ekked; the offspring of the strong owner of Qaṭṭān, [the precious sword].
7. He is the offspring of Ġāweġ, the offspring of Fekāk; the offspring of the strong chief, whom all obey.
8. He is a dark shouldered lion's whelp, no lynx nor hyæna.
9. He is [like] an irritable camel, that does not allow his nose to be pierced.
10. He is [like] a strong high-humped camel, that snorts wildly.

11. [Strong] like Mafarraḥ's boat and like the firm house of Gaḥtān's son.
 12. He is [like] the moon in the firmament; and [if he were] flour on the millstone,
 13. Who could make it to bread and eat it? It were a deadly poison.
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After the manuscript of the preceding had been sent in to the editors, I received a more complete version of this same poem, with more notes and a Tigrē-Swedish vocabulary by M. Sundström. An edition of this very valuable piece of work with a translation of the whole into German will soon be published.