AN AMHARIC WAR-SONG OF EMPEROR TÈWODROS’S SOLDIERS

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AN AMHARIC WAR-SONG OF EMPEROR TĒWODROS'S SOLDIERS

R. Pankhurst

in collaboration with Girma-Selassie Asfaw

Captain Tristam Speedy, a sometime British officer in India, visited Ethiopia on four separate occasions. The first was in 1861 when he attended the court of Emperor Tēwodros II who asked him to assist in the training of his soldiers. (1) Speedy, who had something of a flair for languages, acquired a modest understanding of Amharic as was recognised by the anonymous chronicle of Emperor Tēwodros which states that he "spoke it and spoke it well." (2) He later drew up an Amharic - English and English-Amharic vocabulary in three volumes which was prepared for the 1867-8 Anglo-Indian expedition against Tēwodros, in which he participated - but was never published.

During his first, and perhaps most interesting, residence in the country, in 1861-2, Speedy had the opportunity of hearing several soldiers' songs which were sung after victories. On such occasions, he explains, the men would utter war cries, calling themselves Ya Tēwodros bareya, or "slave of Tēwodros," and would boast of the numbers they had slain. Horsemen who had distinguished themselves in battle would "dash up at full gallop before the King's tent, suddenly reining in their horses," while foot-soldiers, "brandishing their swords or quivering their lances," would "go through a war dance, and as each in turn recounts his deeds of prowess, his comrades confirm his boasts by crying out wunat wunat! (4) it is true etc. while the women raise the elelta or cry of victory. (5)

One of these songs was composed in honour of the mighty Emperor Tēwodros, but seems on occasion to have been embroidered in praise of other soldiers. One version, which referred to Speedy himself, so caught his attention that he memorised it, and sung it in a series of public lectures on Ethiopia which he gave in Britain on returning from his third visit to the country in 1884. (6) The texts of these lectures are preserved in two of Speedy's by no means always easily decipherable notebooks (7) which cite two slightly different versions of the song in an unfortunately far from accurate transliteration, and also contain a rough translation of one of them. Variations in the text are scarcely surprising, for the song would not have been written down, and was doubtless subject to considerable impromptu adaptation and variation.

Speedy's texts, though by no means scientific, are of interest in that they constitute the only known record of the song, one of few such compositions for the period prior to the time of Menilek for which even an approximate record has been preserved. (8) The present authors are most grateful to Captain Speedy's grand-niece, Jean Southan, for making the Englishman's papers available to them, and thus enabling them to attempt a reconstruction of this historically and culturally most interesting composition.

*The Editors of JBS would like to record here their shock at the sudden and tragic death of Ato Girma Selassie Asfaw in a plane crash on January 13, 1987 and to express their condolences to his family and friends.
SPEEDY'S DATA

Speedy's data on the song is scattered in a large ledger and a small black notebook both of which are devoted largely to his lectures. The first of four attempted transliterations of the song is given in the ledger on page 68. The text is set out in three columns comprising seven four-verse stanzas, a total of 38 verses. This transliteration runs as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tedrus farras</th>
<th>Jagena so</th>
<th>Gerrad aggaj</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kachin gullo</td>
<td>iggir issat</td>
<td>inchageral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasu Tigre</td>
<td>ChâNKKA bîrtu</td>
<td>kedatich kajj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jirat Wollo</td>
<td>Yellim ferhat</td>
<td>bicha nural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aho aho</td>
<td>aho aho</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egzier askal</td>
<td>Teodrus belai</td>
<td>alkerram sink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ersachu wand</td>
<td>Enyen betach</td>
<td>Ba Dembya melash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twor Zellal</td>
<td>Ya tûrk gâdai</td>
<td>Tangageralich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And shi Kend</td>
<td>dînk miserach</td>
<td>And mangerash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aho ahai</td>
<td>aho hi</td>
<td>Aho ahai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty pages later, on page 88, Speedy sets down a slightly different version of the song which is now given in a single column, and consists of two sections, each comprising four two-verse stanzas, on a total of 28 verses divided into two iambic dimeters. The text reads as follows:

Tedrus farras kachin gullo
Ras Tigre jirat Wollo
  aho ahai
Jagna sau iggir issat
ChâNKKA bîrtu yellim ferhat
  aho
Tedrus bellai enyen betach
Turk gaddai dînk misrâch
  aho
Gisier askal ersachu wand
Twor izellal and shi kend
  aho
Felika sau kumat tallâk
Ganzab sitto wubat malâk
  aho
Jagna sau iggir issat
ChâNKKA bîrtu yellim ferhât
Garad azzaj ichagerâl

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Kedatich kaj bicha nural
Aikeram sink abai fasãsh
Magibu dink, kayin Azmâch
aho ahai aho

The principal difference between the above and the version previously cited is the substitution in the final stanza of the words "abai farash" for "Ba Dembya melash," and the omission of the last phrase lines "Tangagarâlich" and "And mangerâsh." The only other differences relate not to the song itself, but to Speedy's attempt at transliteration. They involve several small modifications of spelling. "Rasu" in the first stanza on p. 68 has thus become "Ras" on p.88, "Egzier" and "zellal" in the second stanza are now "Gizier and izellal," "so" in the third has become "sau", and "sao" in the fifth is likewise "sau".

Two slightly modified versions of the above text as given on p. 88—which would appear to be the one Speedy preferred—are also found in the notebook. Both consist of seven instead of eight stanzas. This reduction is occasioned by the deletion of p. 88's sixth stanza beginning "Jagna sau," which, it will be perceived, was a refrain already used in the earlier text as the second stanza.

The first of the two versions in the notebook is given on page 78. Headed "War song" it reads:

Tedrus farras kachin gullo
Ras Tigre jirrat Wollo
Aho ahai
Jagna sau iggir issat
Chanqka birtu yelim ferhat
Aho ahai
Tedrus bellai enyen betach
Turk gaddai dink misrach
Aho ahai
Gizier askal ersachu wand
Twor zellal andshi kend
Aho ahai
Encore
Felika so kumat tallak
The above text, apart from the omission of the refrain commencing "Jagna sau," is thus virtually identical to the notebook version on p. 88. The only other differences are entirely minor ones: "jirat" appears as "jirrat," "izellal" as "zellal," "and shi" as "andshi," "sau" as "so" and "abai" as "Abai."

Speedy's fourth, and final version, which appears on page 92, once more contains only minor variations. The refrain "Aho ahai" is thus omitted after the second, third and fourth stanzas, "andshi" in the fourth stanza is more correctly rendered as two words "and shi", and "so" in the fourth has become "saw," while the final refrain has been lengthened from "Aho ahoi" to "Ahoi aho aho! aho!"

In addition to his four transliterations Speedy also jotted down a rough English translation which he put into verse, thereby unfortunately somewhat obscuring the original sense. This text appears on page 89 of the ledger, opposite the second transliteration.

Entitled "Translation" it reads:

Theodore's steed, yellow & thin
Has head in Tigre & tail in Bilen

A muscular man surefooted too
With backbone of steel, who fear never knew

God alone knows, that he's a man
Can he not throw one thousand spears

He is far over us, we are below
How he has conquered, all the world knows
(or all of us know)

Felika dear surpassing in height
Lavish of goods, no angel so bright
A muscular man swift footed too
Backbone of iron, who fear ne'er knew

Garrad the steward oh what a pest
Cut off supplies thus empties the nest

Good time is coming by the Blue Nile
In the King's Camp enjoying his smile

The above text, it should be emphasised, was not conceived as being a literal translation. Moreover Speedy, whether intentionally or not, departed from the verse sequence followed in his transliteration. The third stanza of translation thus corresponds to the fourth transliterated stanza, and vice versa. To achieve a rhyme the place-name Bilen in the second line has moreover been substituted for that of Wallo.

LINGUISTIC COMMENTS

The four transliterations present a number of difficulties, for though they embody meaningful sentiments their grammar is at times highly improbable, with no indication for example of personal pronouns and the omission of several verbs. There is no way of telling how far such deviations from normal Amharic practice are due to Speedy's ignorance of the language, or carelessness of transcription, and how far to "poetic license" in the original. Ethiopian songs of the kind under consideration are sometimes not entirely grammatical and have been known to contain some meaningless "jingle-jangle" included merely for the sake of the rhyme.(9)

The following comments on Speedy's transliterated text, as given on page 88 of the ledger, are offered by Girma-Selassie:

Verse 1. One would expect a possessive marker for "Tedrus farras", i.e. Ṭewodros fărās, which should thus read "yā Ṭewodros fărās", or "horse of Tewodros."

Verse 2. "Ras" should read "Rasu", as given indeed on page 68 of the ledger, and thus mean "his head."

Verse 2. "Jirat," i.e. "jerat," should similarly be "jeratu," and thus be translated as "his tail."

Verse 4. "Changka," i.e. "çanga," should probably be "ìangaw," and thus mean "his shoulder."

Verse 8 "Twor," i.e."twor," should probably likewise be "tworū", or "his spear."

The verb "to be", which is nowhere indicated in the text, must moreover, rightly or wrongly, be taken as having been understood, and has thus to be inserted in several parts of the translation.
RECONSTRUCTION

The following represents a tentative reconstruction of Speedy's transliterated text, together with and as far as possible word-for-word translation. These are based partly on Speedy's transliterated texts, and partly on his own rough translation. The authors are the first to recognize that their rendering is far from authoritative and that in several places alternative reconstructions are possible. It is, however, hoped that the lines here presented do not do too much injustice to a long forgotten song composed at an important period of Ethiopian history in honour of one of the country's most notable rulers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>የ предложения</th>
<th>የ ከ喹vu</th>
<th>የ ከ喹vu</th>
<th>የ ከ喹vu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yä Tewodros</td>
<td>fáräs</td>
<td>ሁጊን</td>
<td>gullo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twodros's horse (is)</td>
<td>slender (and)</td>
<td>brown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(translated by Speedy as "Theodore's steed, yellow & thin")

The name gullo was, it should be noted, often used for a brown, or chestnut-coloured, horse. One such animal had only a few years earlier been ridden by the Emperor's father-in-law Ras Ali Alula, who, Guidi records, was in consequence known as Abba Gullo. (10)

Rasu  Tegré  jeratu  Wällo

Its head [is in] Tegre [and] its tail [is in] Wallo (translated by Speedy as "Has head in Tigre & tail in Bilen," the latter place name having been presumably substituted to rhyme in English with "thin")

Jägna  sàw  ēger  ēsat

Heroic man [whose] feet [are like] fire

(loosely rendered by Speedy as "A muscular man, surefooted too").

Čangaw  bértu  yálléwum  férhat

His shoulder strong he has no fear i.e "His shoulder is strong, he has no fear" (very loosely rendered by Speedy as "With backbone of steel, who fear never knew").

Tewodros  bálay  ēññan  bátäč

Tewodros above we below

(translated by Speedy as "He is far over us, we are below").
The next verses, which were perhaps impromptu lines, are addressed to Speedy who was known in Ethiopia as "Fälläqä, or, as he renders it, "Felika".(11) They would seem to run as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>አዲት</th>
<th>እሆኔ</th>
<th>ከስሎ</th>
<th>የለልወ</th>
<th>እንድ</th>
<th>ከሆኔ</th>
<th>የዛለል</th>
<th>ከስሎ</th>
<th>ከሆኔ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fälläqä</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>gämätä</td>
<td>tallaq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speedy [is] the man [of] height tall

(Translated by Speedy as "Felika dear surpassing in height").

It should be recalled that the Englishman was in fact extremely tall. No less, according to one account, than six feet six inches in height he was described in a British press report of one of his lectures as a man of "extraordinary height",(12) which had caused a recent writer, Darrell Bates, to refer to him as "huge".(13)
The above line is, as it stands, obscure, but probably implies that Speedy had much money, or gave it away generously, and therefore had the beauty of an angel - an interpretation supported by the traveller's own translation: "Lavish of goods, no angel so bright".

The following two verses, as already indicated, constitute a refrain on lines 3 and 4 above.

Jägna

Käja

Heroic

man [whose] feet[are like]

fire

Čangaw

bertu

välläwum

rerhat

His:oulder

strong

he has no

fear

The next part of the song refers to Tewodros' nephew Garad Kenfu, a famous rebel who killed British Consul Plowden in 1860 - a death which the Emperor shortly afterwards avenged.(14)

Garad

azzaï

yeqaggäräl

Garad [as] a commander is lacking

i.e. "Garad is lacking as an azzai, or commander."
(This is rendered colloquially by Speedy as "Garrad's the steward oh! what a pest").

The ensuing two verses as given by Speedy are particularly difficult to follow. They seem to read:

Käja

Kaj

beeka

nororal

From below(?) betayers only existed

Senga

Abbay

fäsäx

Will not be lacking provisions [as the] Blue Nile flows
(Speedy seems to have translated the two above lines together, and renders them, inexplicably, and very loosely, as:

58
"Cut off supplies thus empties the nest"  
"Good time is coming by the Blue Nile".

(The last of the above verses, it will be recalled, were replaced on page 68 of the ledger by an entirely different ending.  The penultimate stanzas of this version would seem to read:

Ayqärem
[There] will not be lacking provisions

Dambeya
from Dambeya as far as

i.e. "from as far as Dambeya".

Then, somewhat inexplicably, follow the following two lines:

"Tanagaralich"

i.e. "it has been reported about you [feminine]."

And mangerasì

i.e. "Oh! who has tamed you [feminine]?

Apparent confirmation of the authenticity of the song roughly recorded in Speedy's notebooks is found in the existence of a dirge composed only half a decade or so later, at the time of Tewodros' death.  This work opens in similar vein with a reference to the Emperor's guilo, or brown horse, which was apparently so named.  The first verse, as preserved by Guidi, ran as follows:

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Of Tewodros horse the large Tataq the small Gullo

i.e. "The large horse of Tewodros [is called] Tataq, the small one [is] Gullo".

The second verse likewise recalls the earlier song, though the geographical allusion, has been reversed. The line thus declares:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ጥድራ Dropsi</th>
<th>ዓይ ጫርስ</th>
<th>ጭላፋq</th>
<th>ያንንፋq</th>
<th>ጫ巴士q</th>
<th>ጋሎ Güllo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeratu</td>
<td>Tegre</td>
<td>Gembaru</td>
<td>Wallo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Its tail Tegre its head Wallo

i.e. "Its tail [is in] Tegre, its head [in] Wallo"

There the similarity between the two compositions ends, for by 1868 the time for rejoicing as expressed in the song preserved by Speedy had passed, and the concluding verse explains that Tewodros, whose prowess had been praised in the earlier song, was dead.

The equine symbolism employed in both works was, however, later used by the twentieth century Ethiopian author Afawäq Gabrä Iyäsus. His history of Emperor Menilek, who was of course far more successful than Tewodros, proudly declares that the head, legs and other limbs of the ruler's horse covered several provinces, among them Jemma, Kàffa, Wàlläga and Čarrä, as well as Säwa and Wallo. The animal, we are told, thus browsed in the whole country from the Indian Ocean to the Sudan. (17)
NOTES


4. i.e. *wata*.

5. Speedy, ledger, p. 88.


9. Examples of this are to be found in M. Cohen, *Couplets amhariques du Choa* (Paris, 1924).


15. The Term mejas was applied to territory as far as a designated locality, *Melas Dambeva* was thus the
country as far as Dambeya, just north of Lake Tana. Guidi, *op. cit.* cols. 54-5.


The authors are indebted to Ato Shibeshi Lemma for transcribing the Amharic text.