

## Massen Melqesn Qedamot -a Storehouse of Excellent Tigriña Oral Poetry

Written by Abrahaley Habte  
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I remember a few years when a television series captivated Eri-TV viewers. Based on and adapted from a traditional Eritrean fairy-tale, the movie related the story of a young woman, whose parents wanted her to marry her brother. It was not a new story for most viewers as it is a popular story.

Why did the movie catch the hearts of the viewers? People value what is theirs, their culture and customs, and appreciate stories that reflect their lives, it was suggested. In addition, it was suggested, the story was told in a language they understand well. Moreover, the movie raised an issue that arouses the people's interest: How is the young woman to overcome this problem? But, I think the fact that the story was part of the people's culture explains the movie's success to a great extent.

Solomon Tsehaye's book, *Massen Melqesn Qedamot* (Volume 1) had a similar thrilling effect on me when I read it a few years ago. Its effect has not worn off three years later, and I still enjoy many of the poems in the book. If I had lived at the time of these magical poets, I would certainly have behaved in the same way some of their audiences had, asking people to be quiet, and telling mothers to quiet down their crying babies so that they would enjoy the recitation.

*Massen Melqesn Qedamot* brings the works of 35 poets, and nearly 350 masse and melqs. In a separate part, probably for his international audience, Mr. Solomon writing in English says this: "The earliest masse I have found dates back to around 1765. The author is a master oral poet named Feleskinos, born about 1735. Thus, my research, covers nearly 250 years of masse and melqes that have been handed down from one generation to another through the power of memory and the spoken word." (*Massen Melqesn Qedamot*, 541). But Mr. Solomon notes that he had come across a Tigriña traditional song as far back as the 1650s.

It is obvious that the researching, editing, and compilation of the oral poems couldn't have been an easy task. It was not. To research and edit this anthology, Mr. Solomon interviewed hundreds of people from various parts of Eritrea. He met some of his subjects more than once as some of the information needed sifting, checking and rechecking. Often, he had to check the authorship of some of the poems because different sources (different subjects) gave conflicting

information.

The first 150 pages of the book are introductory in nature. In these pages, the author discusses oral poetry in Tigigna and the different genres of oral poetry in the language, explaining each genre using examples. The author handles this part of the book so successfully that one stops and thinks: if the introduction is so interesting, how more enjoyable would the main part be? Not only is the introduction very interesting but informative as well.

Mr. Solomon has done his best to make the poems, which contain many archaic Tigigna words and obscure backgrounds, as accessible as possible. The poems would not have been as accessible and as enjoyable if he had not included background information on the political, economic, or social context that inspired the poets to compose their masse or melqes. Mr. Solomon's editing, which included explaining obscure and hard Tigigna words and providing useful information about the context helps the reader to understand and appreciate the masse and melqes presented well.

In their poems the poets raised a range of issues including history, colonialism, life and death, riches and glory. The book has many melqes poems (composed to laud or mourn the fate of a dead person); a great number of the poems included in the book are about death and life. Often, these poems have a religious tone, and have as their purpose to remind people about the afterlife (heaven and hell), and how they should avoid the latter. In the masse poems, the poets laud their subjects citing their heroic deeds, generosity, kindness, or beauty, if the subject is a woman.

The book is a store of excellent oral poetry in Tigigna. The reader is presented with a gem of a poem on almost every page, and before he has finished his admiration of the poet's skills, he is presented with another excellent masse or melqes. Someone said this about Negash Sagla, one of the oral poets: "When Negash Sagla starts reciting his melqes it looks as if even the wind let alone human beings, stops blowing." I don't think it would be an exaggeration if the same thing were said about all of the oral poets because their poems are so powerful.

However, I have found some more powerful than others, very irresistible pieces, and for this reason, I have read them more than thrice. One of the poems, Rekibeya Tewelide, (I Had to Because I am a Relative) by Blata Debessai Chirom is a masterpiece. The poet makes the reader feel sorry for the dead and the man who had to bury five relatives on the same day, and how abandoned he felt. The poet also makes his audience feel a shock at the cruelty of the

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Italians in executing innocent people, after their defeat in Adwa, accusing their victims of sabotage.

“I sent my message of death and mourning to Hamassien

But no help came

I sent my message of death and mourning to Seraye

But no help came

I sent my message of death and mourning to Akeleguzai

But no help came

I tore my netsela to pieces, and covered my dead

And I kept watch over them

Having made a bonfire;

I buried them one by one

I had to because I am a relative.” (Massen Melqesn Qedamot, 190)

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Another masterpiece is Ghebrekidan Sahli's, Abxihen Mergemen, (Their Imprecatory Prayers Have been Heard). It is a comment on the discrimination the Eritrean askari suffered, the outcome of WWII, and the poet's understanding of how the Italian defeat in the war came about.

"Eritrea's young have worked very hard

The young have been promoted to Muntaz,

But not to Lieutenant

Italian soldiers have worked very hard

They have been promoted to Bluqubash

But not to Gubtan

The young men of our country have worked very hard

They have been promoted to Shumbash

But not to Major

Mussolini became cruel and merciless

But overbearing pride has proved useless

Our mothers' children were snatched from their embraces

The mothers' imprecatory prayers have been heard.” (Massen Melqesn Qedamot, 360)

Though I understand Shum Ogbit Ghirmu's feelings when he composed, Beal Ento, (The Wrong Doer) I could not believe that a man could compose such a poem in the 1880s. The Tigrigna were and still are very religious. For this reason, one doesn't expect a poem like Beal Ento, in which Shum Ogbit criticizes the Almighty for his wife's death, in a sharp contrast to the way the other poets concluded their melqes.

Shum Ogbit Ghirmu composed this poem out of a personal tragedy. After his wife died, he went to the village meeting place, as men usually do when they don't go to work. After the meeting, everyone (but Shum Ogbit) went home to his wife. Shum Ogbit, who couldn't go home to his wife, recited the poem to express his feelings of injustice at God's work. Aba Jigo is the name the Tigrigna give to the Almighty.

“Aba Jigo is a wrong doer

May His wife die like mine has

That he may have little of his food

That he may have little of his roasted grains

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That he may have little of his boiled milk

That after everyone has gone home

He may not return home [to his wife]

And linger in the village meeting place.” (Massen Melqesn Qedamot, 176)

How successful were the poets? Elsewhere in the book we find anecdotes of their success, and their tremendous influence on their audiences. Often, some oral poets received rewards such as a cow or an ox for their masterful composition and rendering of a poem. Using their skills effectively, some others turned unfavorable situations to their advantages and the advantages of others. Still others, through their poems, influenced individuals or communities into action. In short, they shaped the attitudes and views of the society they lived in like no other person.

As an anthology of major Tigrigna oral poets, I believe Massen Melqesn Qedamot will be a significant influence on future Tigrigna poets. I have not read any poetry anthology that has brought such a big number of Tigrigna poems together. No other Tigrigna book has also attempted to describe oral Tigrigna poetry so successfully. Mr. Solomon Tsehaye has done oral Tigrigna poetry such a great service by bringing our gems of oral poetry to light and salvaging them from extinction. He has given us a monumental work. He has also given our seasoned oral poets a platform where they can extend their mentorship and influence. Its influence will be felt in the future.