

**The possible role of Folklore studies in the Research Programme:
Well-being in Developing Countries (WeD)
(Discussion notes)¹**

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1.0. Introduction

In the workshop we had on Tuesday there were presentations on four major topics, namely, the WeD conceptual framework, the reality of poverty, inequality and quality of life in Ethiopia, methods and methodology, and key policy issues etc. in Ethiopia. The short group discussions, the ideas generated in them during the time available were enlightening in many ways. The deliberations of the workshop on issues raised then are known to us who were present. Therefore, allow me to quickly pick up from there and say a few words on how folklore in general and oral literature in particular could contribute to the study of what are referred to, in the research programme here, as “actors”, their “relations”, “local (community cultural) ways of understanding” livelihood, well-being, poverty, wealth, survival; and perceptions of what are presented here as “Human Need” and “Quality of Life” (both objective and subjective).

Information on these topics may be obtained through the usual methods of direct interviews and focus group discussions. However, as I have indicated in other works, written in Amharic and English (Fekade 1970 EC, 1994, 1996, 1991 EC, 1998, 1999, 2000), the data, concerning perceptions and attitudes, extracted from the folkloric materials seem to be more reliable, more

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rich, and closer to reflecting the soul of a community and the individual than the ones obtained through interviews, specially those made during short touristy journeys to rural communities. Since there is often no individual author or poet that can be held responsible for what oral poems and jokes say about land, governance, fertilizers, credits, HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia we can count them as the least censored or most free forms of popular expression. They are performed at wedding and funeral ceremonies, at places where *tälla* and *täjj*² are served, and during other celebrations. We should not also forget these forms existed long before society knew anything about the free press, the free media, freedom of expression, and they still exist today in both urban and rural communities in Ethiopia, and the rest of the world, of course.

Let's not forget also that the individual informant the researcher interviews is an individual with a name, a face, a hut and a family in a *qäbälé*. Let's also remember that members of the community know that an informant is talking to some stranger (be her/him Ethiopian or expatriate). The informant knows that at the end of the interview, the researcher will be leaving safely with his notes and tape while he stays behind to face whatever comes. There is no doubt therefore, that there will be different levels of individual self-censorships even during any one interviewing session. Basically the question is that of trust and survival. There are also things the informant does not frankly talk about since he has to protect his economic interests. He may also be well guarded while answering questions on political issues concerning local administration, the police, the court, democracy etc. Certain cultural values prevent him from openly discussing matters related to sex, religion, and their like with strangers. I am not trying to alarm you. I am only attempting to point out that we must find better ways of conducting and using the information we get from interviews since there are lots of hurdles influencing their quality. The role serious research in folklore plays in this context cannot be underplayed. Before I give some illustration of what I mean, let me explain briefly what the term folklore denotes in this discussion.

²Tälla is homemade local beer, and *täjj* is a home-brewed honey-wine.

Since its coinage in 1846 by the Englishman William John Thoms, from an Anglo Saxon compound “folk-lore”, many folklorists have tried to define the term in short and long articles, and in books. The debate is still on. The operational “definition” I often use is borrowed from the renowned folklorist Richard Dorson (1972). It includes four items: oral literature, social folk customs (festivals, celebrations, folk beliefs, recreations, games, etc.), performing folk arts (folk music, folk dance, folk drama) and material culture (folk crafts, folk art, folk costume, folk architecture, folk cookery etc.). The main area of focus in the discussion, however, is oral literature that largely embraces oral narratives, oral poems, proverbs, riddles, jokes and the like.

I have randomly collected 75 Amaharic proverbs that I at first glance thought depicted ideas related with poverty and wealth. They are collected from various collections of proverbs in the library. I must admit I have not gone through all the Amharic collections, not to mention the collections in other Ethiopian languages. There is no time to discuss each of these proverbs in detail here and now. What I propose to do is to run through the translated versions of 52 of these proverbs, give you some sense of the variety of ideas depicted in them and put my case for folklore. Since the proverbs lose much of their beauty in translation I advise you to focus on their contents. I confess some of the Amaharic versions are known to me as well; they also sound strange in many ways. They may be translations or adaptations from Ethiopian or other languages. It is also important to note that some of the proverbs I know, few of them my favourites, are not included here because of the methodology I adopted for this presentation.

2. Panoramic survey of the contents of the proverbs

According to the proverbs: -

2.1 Destitution is the worst thing that can happen to a person

የችግር ክፉ እህል ማጣት፣ የኃጢአት ክፉ ነፍስ ማጥፋት

The worst form of destitution is lacking food; the worst of sins is killing a human being

2.2. Poverty, payment of taxes and other dues.

ድኃ ይበላው እንጂ፥ ይከፍለው አያጣም

The poor man may lack something to eat; he never lacks something to pay.

ድኃ ይበላው ቢያጣ፥ ይገብረው አያጣ

Even if the poor man lacks something to eat, he never lacks what he pays for tax.

2.3. The archetypal poor man.

ድኃ ምን ትሰራለህ እንጂ፥ ምን ትበላለህ የሚለው የለም።

The question often put to a poor man is, “What are you doing?” Not “What would you like to eat?”

2.4. Population and poverty- the newborn baby is depicted as an agent intensifying the food crisis in the household.

የምበላው ሳጣ፥ ልጄ ጥርስ አወጣ

When I am wanting something to eat, my baby cuts teeth.

2.5. Social life: the poor man is estranged, shunned.

ያጣ ወዳጅ የለውም

The impoverished has no companion

ካጡ የሚወድ የለም፥ ያለመድኃኒያለም

No one loves the destitute, except Mādhanīyalām³.

ባጣ ሸሹኝ ጥንት የሚወዱኝ

Those who used to like me abandoned me, when I became poor.

እኔ ባጣሁ በነጣሁ፥ እንዴት አደርክ የሚል አጣሁ

Because I turned destitute, I lost those who greet me

የባሰበት፥ አህያ ፈሳበት

The wretched was farted upon by a donkey.

የሌለው ሚስት የለው፥ ወዳጅ የለው።

The poor man has neither wife nor friend

Note that most of this is intriguing in light of the communal life we say we were and still are leading. Of course, one should not jump to conclusions at this juncture. Because: - (1) the samples are too few; (2) their contextual meanings are not known yet (3) there is research evidence where folklore items may or may not tally with the culture they exist in.⁴

2.6. Social life: Public image- nobody seems to listen to what the poor man says when he talks in public. Comparing his case with that of the rich person is even more humiliating to him.

ድኃ ሲናገር ሬት ኮሶ፥ ሀብታም ሲናገር የማር በሶ

When the poor man talks [everyone says it is] aloe [it is] kosso⁵

When the rich man talks [everyone says it is] honeyful bässo⁶

ድኃ ቢናገር አያደምቅ፥ ቢጨብጥ አያጠብቅ

³ Another name for Christ, Saviour of the World.

⁴ Mentioning an early work, *Zuni Mythology (1935)*, by Ruth Benedict, Dorson writes she “recognised that ‘tales tally with, and yet do not tally with’ the culture” (1972, 21).

⁵ Suma; a medicinal plant with bitter taste serving as a purgative for tapeworm.

⁶ Roasted barely flour, normally eaten dry, after mixing with a little water and a little salt by gently pressing with the hand.

When the poor man talks, nothing around him is colourful

When he seizes, his grip is not firm.

የሀብታም ንግግር ባይጥምም ይደመጣል

A talk by rich person is listened to even if it is tasteless

ገንዘብ ሲናገር፥ እውነት አፏን ትይዛለች

When money starts talking, truth holds its mouth

ወርቅ የተጫነች አህያ የማትገባበት የለም

There is no place that a donkey loaded with gold cannot enter

2.7. Social life: the poor are depicted as wise- the only positive image I have found in these random collections.

የድኃ ምክር ፍሬ ነው፥ የለም እንጂ የሚሰማው

The advice of the poor is fruitful, [though] there is no one that heeds to it.

ምክር ከድኃ ነበርኸ፥ የሚሰማኸ ቢገኝ።

Counsel, you were with the poor, if you could find a listener

የሚሰማኸ ባገኘኸ፥ ምክርስ ከድኃ ነበርኸ

Had you found someone to heed to you, you [i.e. counsel] were found with the poor-folk

መጠጥ ከጨዋ ልጅ፥ ምክር ከድኃ ልጅ

Drink with the gentlefolk, [take] counsel from the humble folk

2.8. Social life: the horrors of dealing with the poor

ከድኃ ከመበደር፥ ከሀብታም መለመን

Begging from the rich is better than borrowing from the poor

ከድኃ ከመበደር ከሀብታም መስረቅ

Stealing from the rich is better than borrowing from the poor

የድኃ እርጉዝ፥ የድኃ ብድር አይውል አያድር

A pregnant [woman] that is poor, and the debt of the poor give no time.

ከድኃ መጋባት እከክ ዘርቶ ቅማል መልቀም

Getting married to the poor is like sowing itching rash and harvesting lice.

ከድኃ ቤት ሰርግ የባለፀጋ ቤት ሀዘን ደመቀ

The mourning ceremony in a wealthy man's house became more colourful than the wedding ceremony in a poor man's house.

2.9. Social life: personal injustice

ድኃ ተበድሎ ማረኝ ይላል ቶሎ

The mistreated poor man quickly asks for mercy

ድኃ ተበድሎ ራሱ ይታረቃል

The ill-treated poor man takes initiative to make peace

ባለጠጋ በድሎ ይቆጣል፥ ድኃ ተበድሎ ይለማመጣል

The wealthy man wrongs and scolds, the poor man is wronged [but] he supplicates

2.10. How wide spread is poverty? The oral artist seems to know it all.

የድኃ ስልቻ ቢንከባለል፥ እድኃ ደጅ አረፈ

When the sack of a poor man got rolling, it stopped at another poor man's entrance.

የለማኝ ስልቻ ቢንከባለል፥ ከለማኝ ደጅ ይወድቃል

If the sack of a poor man gets rolling, it will drop at the entrance of a beggar's house.

3.0. Proverbs focusing on wealth.

3.1. Wealth the harbinger of respect and self-confidence.

የሰው ክብረቱ፥ ያሰኘዋል አንቱ

A person's wealth brings him honour

ከከበሩ ሰው አይፈሩ

Once wealthy [they] do not respect others.

The Amharic versions are often loaded, and it is not easy to bring this out in the translated versions. For example, the Amharic version just quoted has different underlying meanings. One possible reading of its meaning could be focusing on the suggestion that those who are rich, instead of becoming courteous they tend to be lordly, condescending, patronizing, either in a very vulgar or subtle way, depending on their upbringing.

ባለጠጋ በሀብቱ፥ ደኃ በጉልበቱ [ይመካል]

The rich person [counts] on his wealth

The poor one [counts] on his labour.

3.2. The attitude that one can do everything with money

You can hide your hideous deeds with it

የጉድ መሸፈኛ ሀብት ነው

Wealth covers up shameful deeds

ሀብት ሰማይ ይከፍት

Wealth [Money] opens the sky

ገንዘብ ካለ በሰማይ መንገድ አለ

If there is money there is a way in the sky

3.3. Nothing lasts forever so why bother about money at all? This is a widespread attitude held about material wealth and worldly life in general. It is reflected in almost all forms of Amharic folklore. In the collections of proverbs under consideration this attitude is depicted from various angles. A highly philosophical or perhaps religious rejection of the value of money is expressed in the following proverb:

ሀብት ጤዛ ነው፣ ጠፊ ነው

Wealth is [like] dew, it withers away.

Appreciation of some kind of peace that comes as a result of poverty is expressed in the following proverb:

ፍየል የለኝ፣ ከነምር አልጣለ

I have no goat, I do not quarrel with a lynx

The next one seems to depict riches from a different perspective. It says:

የጨዋ ልጅና ቅል ተሰባሪ ነው

The gentlefolk and the gourd are brittle.

Therefore material wealth is not something that one should really die for since the rich are not, after all, according to the proverb, as strong as the poor both physically and emotionally. The proverb states that they are delicate; they cannot stand hardship. It seems to suggest also, that, if this is what wealth brings why have it in the first place. Combating with adversity, coping with calamities, may have developed as survival strategies in countries like

Ethiopia where all types of hardships kept thrashing the population for centuries. Developing ones endurance may be a more valuable asset to survive in such contexts than trying to create wealth.⁷ The word wealth and rich may be misleading especially to expatriate scholars. As far as the proverbs go they are very good neighbours. Listen to the following examples:

ማግኘትና ማጣት፡ ጎን ለጎን ናቸው

Getting and losing are side by side

ማጣትና ማግኘት፡ እልፍኝና ማድቤት

Losing and earning [are like] the master's bedchamber and the kitchen

ማጣትና ማግኘት፡ ጅሮ ለጅሮ

Losing and earning [are situated as close as] one ear and the other

መሄድና መምጣት፡ ማግኘትና ማጣት

Going and returning, earning and losing [are the same]

What we gather from the above proverbs does not really seem to inspire one to be enterprising in life. There is another angle to it also. The following proverbs stress that not only are poverty and wealth neighbours, the inevitable shift from one to the other involves moral punishment also.

ሲሳይ በእርምጃ ይገባል፡ በሩጫ ይወጣል

Wealth enters pacing about, it exits running.

ሲወጡ እንደ ጦጣ

ሲወርዱ አሳር መጣ

Climbing like monkey [was easy and smart]

⁷By the way, the distinction between the rich and the poor in the rural context is not really as the words 'rich' and 'poor' seem to suggest in English. There could even be debates on what the Amharic equivalents

[But] descent brought misfortune [with it]

ሲወርዱ ይዋረዱ

Descent [brings] humiliation

The examples cited above clearly show that poverty and riches are so close in the community, the shift from one to the other, or for that matter, from powerfulness to powerlessness, from extra-ordinary to ordinary, from being respected to being disgraced is no big deal. We can easily extend this idea to include many other “actors” in Ethiopia, including few of us here, perhaps. Let me pass on to a group of proverbs portraying some interesting theme and conclude my illustrative mission.

3.4. Advice for the enterprising

In this overview of 52 proverbs we have not come across proverbs that seriously indicate the way out of poverty. There are other folkloric materials that encourage hard work and glorify the diligent farmer (these are mainly found in the folklore which I call “farmerlore”) and condemn the one who simply consumes without working. But even here there are no serious considerations of the way out from poverty⁸. On the contrary we easily find proverbs that indirectly discourage the enterprising individual.

ለሀብት መትጋት፥ ሰውነት ያከሳል

Working diligently [to make money] makes one skinny⁹

ተዋርዶ ከማግኘት፥ ኮርቶ ማጣት

Rather than acquiring [wealth] disgraced, [It is better] to be deprived of it dignified. (It is saying that it is better to be poor and dignified than to be rich and disgraced)

of these words mean to various persons.

⁸ See Fekade, 1998: 85-93 for some detailed discussion of this issue.

አስር ያባረረ፥ አንድ አይይዝም

He, who chases ten, does not catch one

አስር የሚመኝ፥ አንድ አያገኝ

He who craves for ten does not get one

ዘመድና ገንዘብ፥ ሳያስቡት ይገኛል

A friend and money (wealth) are found unexpectedly

ላታገኝ አትመኝ

Do not crave for what you can't get

There are also some common proverbs we all know which make luck and God accountable for their general ill and or well-being in life.

Summing up: We have observed that the proverbs we skimmed through deal with many issues. We have seen that the needs expressed in them are not material only. Few deal with the lack of food directly. The rest talk about the consequences of this lack and most of them are spiritual shortcomings of the individual and the community. Many are the impacts poverty has, as expressed in the proverbs, on various aspects of life: it threatens the survival of the individual and disturbs his household, neighbourhood and communal life. The contextual study of each of these proverbs could, however, bring out entirely different interpretations of a good number of the proverbs.

⁹ Though fashionable in the towns and mainly among the youth now, getting lean is not a quality appreciated by the traditional values of bodily shape and weight.

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