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**Article**

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Mohammed Ali, 'Imanini ("Trust me"): Linguistic features of a novel in Tigre

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The Tigre language has had its share of scholarly attention since the second half of the 19th century. In 1865 Werner Munzinger published his Vocabulaire de la langue tigré as an appendix to the Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae of August Dillmann1. This collection of words gathered in Massawa by the Swiss politician, diplomat and explorer can be regarded as the first scientific work in the field of the Tigre lexicography. In 2005 Musa Aron, an Eritrean teacher, clergyman and educator, completed and sent to press his Kabt-Qalát Ḥagyayá Ṭagré, a monolingual dictionary of the Tigre language2, which is the most recent and remarkable step in the research field unveiled by Munzinger. In the one and a half centuries between those two milestones such prominent scholars as Enno Littmann, Carlo Conti Rossini, Karl Gustav Rodén, Wolf Leslau and Shlomo Raz contributed to the study of the Ethio-Semitic language spoken by almost one million people in northern and central Eritrea. They produced collections of oral literature, grammars and vocabularies a great part of our knowledge about this language relies upon3. However, all these scientific efforts, culminating in 1962 with the Wörterbuch der Tigre-Sprache by Enno Littmann and Maria Höfner4, were focusing on the linguistic variant of Tigre spoken by the Mansà and the Márya, living in and around the ‘Ansabà valley. In fact, due to the presence of the Swedish Evangelical Mission in the area around Galab, north of Karan, and the linguistic fieldwork accomplished in the same region by Enno Littmann as the director of the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, this part of the Tigre linguistic area was the one Europeans became familiar with since the beginning of the 20th century.

1 Werner Munzinger, Vocabulaire de la langue tigré, in appendix to August Dillmann, Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae, Lipsiae, T.O. Weigel, 1865.
2 Kabt-Qalat Ḥagyayá Ṭagré, őb Musa Aron látadallá, [Asmárá], Aḥtamí Ḥadri (Hdri Publishers), Terri 2005.

Ever since the time of Munzinger it has been known that there is a distinct dialect of Tigre spoken by the Beni ḌAmūr, the group of Beḫa origin inhabiting the northern Eritrean lowlands between the rivers Bārkā and Gāš and the Sudanese belt from Kassala to Port-Sudan and Tokar. Among the Beni ḌAmūr sections and clans, partially still depending on sheep-breeding, the use of Togrāyat (the most correct spelling for Tigre) is widespread, even if accompanied by bilingualism in Hadārab, i.e. the Cushitic language called by its speakers tu Beḏawī or ti Beḏaawīe and commonly known under its Arabic designation Beğa. The linguistic variant of Tigre spoken by the Beni ḌAmūr is little known. In 1982 Aki’o Nakano published *A Vocabulary of Beni Amer Dialect of Tigre*, a collection of words belonging to this language called ḫasā or ḫāsā in Eritrea, and al-ḥassā, “the special (language)”, by the Arabic speakers of Kassala, Port Sudan and Tokar.

A chance to greatly improve our knowledge of Tigre, specifically its dialect spoken among the Beni ḌAmūr, is now offered by the new novel *Imanini* (“Trust me”) by Mohammed Ali Ibrahim Mohammed, the first work written in Tigre by a native speaker, and therefore a true literary and linguistic experiment. The author, born in 1966 in the Māryā region, in the lowlands between the Bārkā and the ḌAnsābī, north-west of Karan, to a family originating in northern Eritrea, speaks and writes the Beni ḌAmūr dialect of Tigre. My ultimate aim is to prepare a translation and a scientific edition of the novel, while in this paper I will present some preliminary results of my study of Mohammed’s work. During my recent research visit to Eritrea (April–May 2006) I had the opportunity to meet Mohammed and to discuss with him many questions arising in the work process.

The novel tells the story of Walat, an Eritrean girl from a small village of Ġar not far from the Sudanese border, in the region crossed by the two major Eritrean rivers, ḌAnsābī and Bārkā, and traditionally occupied by the ḌAd Okkud fraction of the Beni ḌAmūr. Her untroubled life is disrupted by the sudden contact with war and violence. After she has to witness her family being killed and her home village destroyed, she discovers her new identity as an Eritrean patriot and decides to part in the anti-Ethiopian resistance, with the fight-name of Sarat (“flame”). Her experiences, however, let her eventually recover her trust in humanity and in power of the people to prevail over all hardships.

The literary principles of Mohammed’s work are described synthetically in the introduction to the novel (*a anlaşılak*), which I commented upon in an

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5 Munzinger, *op. cit.*, p. iv: c’est dans le Barka que le Tigré possède beaucoup de racines particulières.
earlier paper. From the very beginning, the author declares the intention to produce a historical novel set in modern times: “This story, starting from a particular fiction, while it is not a story which originated either from history or from a person, is an example which explains a reality which was existing in Eritrea.” Yet, the ‘Amanini is also a political piece, a reflection over the material and cultural changes occurring in the African country: “As to its content, it is based on three big matters. Among them, perhaps there will be pieces of information which explain habits and customs of the Eritrean nation and its revolution.” The ‘Amanini is certainly a work of propaganda as well, a contribution to the recently acquired Eritrean independence, with a special attention to the role of women during the war for independence: “As to the main matters, the first explains the role of the Eritrean nation in the struggle for freedom and the atrocities of the colonization which was existing against it. As to the second, while it was not a struggle only by weapons, it shows that it was by brain, that is by cleverness too; similarly, while the colonization was not a control only over the property and the people, it shows that it was a control also over the will, the conviction and the thoughts of the people. As to the third part, it explains the role of young women in all kinds of struggle.” Finally, the ‘Amanini is a didactic book meant for all Tigre speakers, including schoolchildren and all those lacking higher education, a fact that explains the instructive tone adopted by the author at the end of the introduction: “Yet, while it is not that all these points are written one after the other in the story, for all of them I will declare later that they are present in the content of the story.”

The language of the novel shall significantly enrich our knowledge of the Tigre grammar and vocabulary. The numerous phonetic, morphological, syntactical and lexical peculiarities of the text require a close scholarly attention and genuine research that would reveal whether they are dictated by linguistic constraints, whether lexico-semantic, grammatical or pragmatic, or have been chosen by the author as stylistic devices for reasons of expressiveness. In fact, the Tigre of the novel is neither a standard language nor a vernacular, but an idiom purified and corrected: whereas the grammar rules are largely the same as described by Western scholars, the choice of phonetic and lexical elements is often made in accordance with the Beni ‘Amar use.

In this paper I would like to comment upon some of the language features of the prologue of the novel, describing Walat’s happy childhood in the pastoral paradise of her idyllic village, in the fertile region abundant in

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flora and fauna at the confluence of the ‘Ansabā river and its tributary Zara. In keeping with the standard established in my previous publication, the transliterations are given according to the rules applied in the grammar by Shlomo Raz. Words used in forms or meanings not registered by the Wörterbuch are italicized; those completely unknown to the Wörterbuch are in bold type.

Since Šar’it is the meeting point of the rivers Zara and ‘Ansabā, and likewise it is the joining place of the regions Lower Bärkā and Sāähl as well, it is a wealthy and well-known abode of cattle. As it passes through the slope which is the meeting point of the rivers Zara and ‘Ansabā, penetrating in its interior, however, the stream gives it particular wealth and vegetation.

Orthographies like lata’atrākkob and lata’atgāmānn are worth mentioning. According to the grammar, we should expect latatrākkob (from atrākkaba, ‘at-C = AT₁) and latatgāmānn (from ‘atgāmā, ‘at-C = AT₁), respectively. Since the pronunciation is in any case latatrākkob and latatgāmānn, the inser-

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tion of a glottal stop between the person marker and the verbal prefix reveals the author’s intention to apply his own convention, i.e. a graphic separation between the two grammatical categories. It must be noted that the dictionaries report neither ‘atrākaba from rakba (W 156–7, K–Q 66), nor ‘atgānna from γamma (W 588; not in K–Q). Moreover, in the second case, the relationship between γamma and the derivative stem ‘atgānna is not sure, since the basic form means “to exceed the measure, to be impetuous, haughty, obstinate”, so that possibly we have here two different roots. As a matter of fact, earlier in the same work Mohammed makes use of the form salā’as for the numeral sālas “three”, with a non-etymological glottal stop between the 2nd and the 3rd radical. If this can be seen as a feature of the Beni Ḥumār dialect, it should be registered together with forms like ‘orot, a phonetic variant for the numeral worot “one” (Nakano 136) and ‘amde for the conjunction ‘ndo (W 23, K–Q 185; Musa reports both variants).

Frequently words and forms employed in the novel are not registered in the Wörterbuch, or are registered with different meanings. Such is the case of the verb ṣagga “to penetrate”, reported by Musa with another meaning (K–Q 96: ‘at ‘akānu batra, ‘ob kahalaṭ ṭsabbara “to remain in his own place, to suffer with patience”). ḥālīl was already known with the meaning of “orifice of the teat, the urethra” (W 53; not in K–Q), but not with the value of “stream”. fantit, reported in the Wörterbuch as “separation” (W 667), is regularly used here with the meaning and function of fantuy “particular” (in K–Q 280 it is treated as a synonym of the participle matfantay).

The dictionaries register neither ḥayye, “however”, different from ḥayye, “also, now” (W 23, K–Q 6), nor gamālat, as a synonym of the participle gāmil (from gamla: W 567, K–Q 250). On the complex ‘ābbā kābdā “in its interior” (W 411–412, K–Q 194) it must be noted that the normative grammar gives only the form ‘at kābd “in(side)” (Raz 84), e.g., ‘at kābdān “in their interior”.

The use of the word sabbat (“reason, cause”) as a subordinating conjunction (“as, since, because”) is reported both by the normative grammar (Raz 91: sabbat dāngarko bōhōl bal ‘alye, lit. ‘because I was late, excuse me’) and by the Wörterbuch (W 184, K–Q 77; Musa treats it as a synonym of matān, ‘at ‘akān “instead of, at the place of”), but here we must take note of two different syntactic uses. In the sentence ḥālīl ... sabbat laballaf ... ḥayyeyḥābā ..., “the stream ... because passes through ... it gives ...”, the general rule is observed: sabbat is followed by the verb. However, in the sentence Šar’it ... lata’atraikkāb ... sabbat tā ..., “Šar’it ... that it is the meeting point ... is the reason ...” we find a more elaborate syntax: a relative clause comes first and sabbat is followed by the copula. This analytical construction, with sabbat in the postposition to the verb, has not been registered before.
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A spring which does not change in rainy and dry season, flowing into the stream, with the vegetation surrounding it on its right and its left – the ‘obal, the ‘addāy, the šalsalā and the wadmāy – while doing “čačaš kaškaš” here and there, like the summer corn as long as a cool wind hits it when it is ready, gives to it a particular beauty.

The writing ‘onde (l)zarre reveals the assimilation of the dental stop before the alveolar fricative. The contact between the two sounds is allowed by the omission of the prefix of the verb in the imperfect (Raz 56). For (l)zarre it should be recalled that Musa writes the basic stem of this kind of verbs with a final first order (zara, K–Q 228), the same adopted by the normative grammar (Raz 62). This use diverges from the Wörterbuch, where the final consonant of the verbs with etymological final semivowel appears always in the fourth order (zarā, W 497; so the verbal form coincides with the derivative noun zarā “flowing water, stream, brook”; māy latafaggār ‘akān “place which makes a water come out”, according to Musa). Being a general rule, the same can be observed for the verb whose form is here la’ī(l)fanta “which does not change”, listed as fantā by Musa (K–Q 280), but as fantā in the Wörterbuch (W 667).

Incidentally, for quadriradical verbs with etymological final semivowel, like the same fantā, Musa clearly reports a three-tense system fantā (perfect) (l)fante (imperfect) lfantē (jussive), while the normative grammar only gives one form lfantē for the imperfect/jussive (Raz 65).

An important feature of the language of Mohammed, and possibly of the Beni Āmar dialect, is the use of “long” forms of prepositions and adverbs, resulting from the addition of a long vowel –ā (apparently the feminine pronominal suffix) at the end of the “short” forms, with the consequent redu-
plication of the last consonant: ‘agogalā, ‘atthā, ‘abbā, mansollā, kommā. Several examples of these “long” forms are also given in Nakano’s vocabulary (e.g., ‘attā: Nakana 6,41; 8,46; 8,49; 12,73; 13,78 e 81; 22,126; ‘abbā: 9,57; 17,109; and so on), but it seems that we are only dealing with an alternation between free variants.

For lakallabāyu the Wörterbuch gives kallaba “to expect, to hope, to wait, to care” (W 391; not in K–Q). Here, however, we are dealing with kellaba “to surround” (W 422), confirmed by the example given by Musa (K–Q 200: ’at dāwār bet wok laga’at ’akān laštənaddaq baći mandaq “a short wall which is built around a house or in some other place”). One should take into account the possibility that kallaba is nothing but a derivative (Q 2 = B) from the quadriradical verb kellaba (Raz 66), so that the writing kallaba would be a mere graphic variant of kellaba, both forms being phonetically equivalent. A similar alteration between different vocalic orders can be seen in naqa’ “spring”, a word which is reported as naqā by the Wörterbuch (W 328), but as naqā by Musa (K–Q 150). Likewise, kabba is reported by the Wörterbuch as “to clean a milk-vessel on the fire”, and its derivative stem kāba (Q 3 = C) means “to butt, to assail” (W 409); in the novel the same basic stem kabba means “to hit” as registered by Mohammed (K–Q 194, with reference to kamha, K–Q 189).

Of the four plant names mentioned in this sentence three are known: ‘obal (W 469, K–Q 227: ’at ḡafar maḥāz labaqqol rayāyom ‘axay “long trees which grow on the borders of the rivers”, i.e., the Tamarix nilotica), ‘addāy (W 485, K–Q 221: ḡdns ‘aqālāt ‘axay na’aqās “kind of plants, being small trees”; i.e., the Salvadora Persica); and wadmāy (W 430, K–Q 210: ’at dayn maḥāz labaqqol ḡdns sa’ar “kind of herbs which grow on the shores of the rivers”, lit. “water sons”, i.e., the Cyperus sp.); only ṣalṣala is not registered as a noun by the Wörterbuch (W 205), but it is reported by Musa (K–Q 72: ’at ḡafar maḥāz labaqqol qānċi lamassol qaṭṭiin ḡaxay “thin trees, looking like the halms of the durra (qānċi), which grow on the borders of the rivers”, i.e., the Pennisetum unisetum).

In the subordinate clause ‘akal šamāl kabhayukā one can notice the syntactic complex resulting from the conjunction ‘akal (W 375, K–Q 175), followed by –kā postponed to the verb (possibly to be compared with ka–; W 389, K–Q 187), a construction not given by the dictionaries. The adverb dawbe “here and there” is attested for the first time in Mohammed’s work. About ḡamam “ready, mature”, not registered before, both dictionaries give the verb compound ḡamam bela (or waddā) with the meanings “to be apathetic (on account of morning or sickness), to be silent” (W 548) and sa’ana, ḡamqa, taḵna, hilat, ḡagla “to be tired, to be weak, to be sick, to want in strength” (K–Q 244). We can reconstruc an original idea of “complete,
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ended, exhausted (gamam), from which several verbs expressing the lack of strength arose.

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ended, exhausted (gamam), from which several verbs expressing the lack of strength arose.

It seems that even the hills accompany the stream of the rivers Zara and ʿAnsabā; while surrounding it on its right and its left, they distribute the shadow alternatively in the evening and in the morning.

The verbal form (la)sārrāb “accompanies” exhibits a couple of features: one phonetic, i.e. the vocalic change o > a (from mid-central to low-central) before the pharyngeal k, a fact not registered by the normative grammar (Raz, 11 and 60); and one morphological, i.e. the assimilation into the 3rd person under the influence of lamassā “it seems”, in spite of the plural subject karabbit “hills”. The same assimilation can be seen in the following kallabā “surrounds”, while the grammatical accordance between subject and verb is provided only by laʾaddalā nabbar “distribute”. The adverb lamma is not registered by the dictionaries, neither is the adverbial complex šallāl laʾaddalā nabbar “distribute (FP) AUX”.

The middle reason is owners of camels and goats much prefer(MP) +P(FS) with this-too for abundant water vegetation trees and groves, which is explained by Musa as ʿab hilat šat’ā (ʿogol lobbās, ʿogol waraqāt) “to rend/tear with strength (dress or paper)”, without a reference to ʿab tartarā/at or similar (K-Q 139).

the reason is cattle many is produced(MS) in+P(FS)
Garìit, for the reason that it is the centre of the ascending to the highlands and of the descending in the Sàhàl, the owners of camels and goats prefer it very much. Moreover, because it is known for the water abundance, vegetation, trees and groves, a lot of cattle is produced there.

The preposition ḡahat “toward” is not registered by the dictionaries, neither is the word compound ḡalisa‘ar “groves”. Musa registers the entry dàlì soňa as ‘āb ḡay wašläba latagalboʻa ‘ard, “earth which is covered with trees and forests”, with the gloss “madar dàlì meaning ‘ard ṭabo‘a‘, “land of forests” (K–Q 240).

The form kullara‘om exhibits important phonetic features: the form kullā instead of kulla, possibly a feature of the Benā ‘Amār dialect; the articulation ra‘ instead of rā‘, owed to the presence of the following pharyngeal fricative (Raz 11). For the word rā‘ the Wörtberbuch gives only the religious meaning “spirit, soul” (W 158), while Musa (K–Q 70) reports both “breath, life, soul” (tafṣās, ḡayot, nafs) and body (garob). The words kəsusan and kamkarra are not registered by the dictionaries.
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sök an šar'it hāḍārab watagré-mā man gabb'ō ṭot daggehom dwell šar'it Ḥāḍārab and Ṭagre-too though are(3MPI) in village+P(3MPI)

The dwellers of Šār'it, though they are both Ḥāḍārab and Ṭagre, saying positive and negative things, celebrating and enjoying, deciding and discussing in their village, they have habits in common.

The natives of Ĺar wthalayat ṭot ḍaballo dol Ḥāḍārab native šar'it Badāyet and Ḥāśayat while speak(3MPI) once Ḥāḍārab wadol ṭagrāyayat ṭoḡal lathāggaw Ḥāddis ṭotom ḫikon and once Ṭagrāyayat that talk(3MPI) unusual for+P(3MPI) N+COP

In this sentence one can remark the use of two couples of synonyms: Ḥāḍārab and Badāyet to indicate the Be'ga language (in Bedawie or ti Be'dawie), Ṭagrāyayat and Ḥāśayat to indicate Tigré. As a matter of fact, Ḥāḍārab and Ṭagrāyayat are the more common words used by the Tigré speakers, while Badāyet is an adaptation of a word of foreign (Be'ga) origin, and Ḥāśayat is made from the word Ḥāša (indicating properly the Beni 'Amor dialect), constructed with the suffix for the names of the language, the same employed in Ṭagrāyayat and Badāyet.

In dancing-two young girl and young men in one

and while ḍahābaraw wahibōč somyā ṭakās ᵃšālil doni

and R-seem(3MPI) while mix(3MPI) dance(3MPI)
So, even when they dance, young girls and young men, while they join all together, they play dances while mixing ṭḥiboč, somyā, ṛakās, šalīl, doni and so on.

The ṭḥiboč, the ṛakās and the doni are peculiar to the Beğa communities, while the somyā and the šalīl are dances of Tigre tradition. In the last sentences, one can recognize a typical attitude of Mohammed Ali, an author deeply interested in unveiling the common cultural features of the people of northern Eritrea. Whether they speak Beğa or Tigre, no matter if they are nomadic pastoralists or sedentary agriculturists, in the first place they share a common land since thousands of years, and this is more important than any linguistic or cultural difference.

Summary

The novel ‘Amanini (“Trust me”) by Mohammed Ali Ibrahim Mohammed (born 1966) is the first work written in Tigre by a native speaker. This is a true literary and linguistic experiment, which will greatly enrich our knowledge of the Tigrayt grammar and vocabulary, specifically its little known variant spoken among the Beni ‘Amar. Several phonetic, morphological, syntactical and lexical peculiarities of the text are here examined in order to reveal whether they are dictated by linguistic constraints (lexico-semantic, grammatical or pragmatic), or have been chosen by the author as stylistic devices for reasons of expressiveness. Passages of ‘Amanini are here published, translated and commented.