

# The Rhetorics and Polemics of Humor in Addis Abäba, 2005–2019

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**Declaration on oath**

I hereby declare on oath, that I have written the present dissertation by my own and have not used other than the acknowledged resources and aids.

Hewan Semon Marye

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## **List of abbreviations**

ANDM = Amhara National Democratic Movement

CE = Common Era

CUD = Coalition for Unity and Democracy

EC = Ethiopic Calendar

EPRDF = Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

ETv = Ethiopian Television

OPDO = Oromo People's Democratic Organization

TPLF = Tigray People's Liberation Front

SNNPR = Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region

n.d. = no date

### **A note on conventions**

Data in Amharic has been transcribed according to the conventions of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*. All Amharic words that are written in transcription form are italicized. All Ethiopian names have been transcribed accordingly unless the individuals have works published in English. In that case, their names are written as the authors themselves have written them in their works. Names of Ethiopian institutions are similarly presented in the thesis without transcription.

Where transcriptions occur, the Amharic phrase is presented first, followed by the transcription in italics and the English equivalent in single quotation marks.

In each chapter, each joke and reference is translated into English. The translation is primarily done with attention to the desired meaning of the Amharic phrasing. Most often, each word of the Amharic phrase has been translated but at times, some words may have been abandoned in translation if the meaning achieved in the English is close to the Amharic without them.

On references and citations, all sources by Ethiopian authors have been referenced with the first and surname of the author. As for informants, all who have wanted to remain anonymous have been marked with an English alphabet. All others have been named and their names are provided as footnotes, with details as to the person, their occupation and place and date of conversation or interview listed in the Appendix.

## **Introductory Chapter**

### **1 Introduction**

#### **1.1 Objectives**

The objective of this dissertation is investigating the role of humor in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Abäba, from 2005 to 2019. Addis Abäba has been Ethiopia's capital since 1886 and is today the center from which political and economic decisions of the country are made. It is home to almost three million Ethiopians as of the 2007 census<sup>1</sup> and almost 28% of Addis Abäba's population is of the age 15 to 29.<sup>2</sup>

The time period 2005 until 2019 is selected for research because 2005 marks the year when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) conducted what were considered the first free elections of the country.<sup>3</sup> The relationship Addis Abäba and the EPRDF held following the elections until the end of EPRDF's rule is central to the investigation of humor in the capital city. By keeping this in mind, the dissertation attempts to answer the following questions: what are the ways in which urban Ethiopians use humor, and what can be understood about how they view their lives from their jokes? How are jokes used and what are the contents of the jokes? What can be said about the socio-political and economic realities of urban Ethiopians from their humorous popular expressions, sayings, and discussions? What historical processes led to these realities that are expressed in the humorous expressions of the city's dwellers? Do rulers use jokes to address the public? If so, how? And finally, what can be said about the relationship between Addis Abäba and Ethiopia's government?

#### **1.2 Statement of the problem**

The primary motivation behind conducting this research was that Addis Abäba's entertainment sector, communal life and the political sphere as well were curiously dominated by humorous content in this period. From social media engagements and parliamentary debates to transportation as well as community meetings of both important substance and mere get togethers, humor and laughter were common scenes. Humorous literary works of authors such as Bäwqātu Səyyum and Mähämmäd Sälman are widely read in the capital. Cinematography as well as theatrical productions in Ethiopia are accused of being lazy for their mostly comedic productions. There has also been a growing number of one-man comedy shows that address

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<sup>1</sup> This is the last census that was conducted. Anon. 2019a.

<sup>2</sup> Anon. 2012, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Abbink 2006.

contemporary political and social issues. Spaces such as transport service providing minibus taxis and buses are creatively used to make room for humorous declarations on themes that are at the core of people's lives. Since September 2020, new television competitions for the best joke-tellers also exist. There are also shows where program organizers travel from one neighbourhood in Addis Abäba to another broadcasting the jokes of each community. All the more interesting is how jokes have become sources of news to young urban dwellers as well.

However, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Ethiopian folklore puts men like *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna* on a pedestal for their quick wit and humorous criticisms.<sup>4</sup> The author Aräfa'ayne Hagos calls *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna* a philosopher because of his ability to make playful criticism on any topic.<sup>5</sup> And such criticism appeared central to how comedy is experienced in Addis Abäba. Criticism of social interactions, political situations, economic life, and of one another seemed to take center stage.

Nevertheless, assuming humor is only used as a tool of criticism is a narrow way of conceptualizing the value of humor in Ethiopia. There is also considerable value given to the poetic and aesthetic nature of jokes as joking is considered a form of written and non-written art.

This thesis analyzes the poetic as well as the critical role of humor in Addis Abäba to show how people view their country, their politics, their economic and social realities, and how rulers also use humor when addressing the public, or amongst one another.

## **2 Working definitions for humor and related words: Pun, Satire, Irony, and Wit**

Scholars agree that the term 'humor' is difficult to define. Most hold that it developed its contemporary connotations of jokes, laughter, and amusement in the modern period. The anthropologist Elliot Oring writes the following:

*Humor* is an old word with a new sense. It derives from the Latin root *ūmor*, meaning "moisture" or "liquid," and originally related to the four fluids of the body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. The relative proportions of these fluids [...] determined a person's physical and mental disposition. In time, the term shifted its reference from the fluids to the dispositions themselves, and eventually to the character of an individual as a whole. [...] As character types became the objects of comic fictions, the old meaning of the word gave way to the more modern meaning of humor as something which is amusing and provokes laughter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter one, section 1.4.3 for a discussion on *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna*.

<sup>5</sup> Aräfa'ayne Hagos n.d., 3.

<sup>6</sup> Oring 2010, ix-x.

For the purposes of defining, it can be said that a humorous person is one who has the ability of using language in an amusing way. Drawing amusement takes multiple forms. One can be witty, teasing, ironic and sarcastic, belittling or exaggerating. Humor's techniques are also various; people use puns to draw amusement, or incongruity.

The following four techniques and forms of humor seem to capture the essence of the discussion in this dissertation, and so, working definitions are suggested for them.

### **Puns**

Puns are plays on similar sounding words, or words that have more than one meaning. Jokes that hinge on puns are born out of similarities in sounds, where 'this similarity in sound creates a relationship for the two meanings from which humor is derived'.<sup>7</sup> In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, Debra Aarons argues similarly, saying the 'crucial element in the processing of a pun is that it relies for its humorous impact on listeners' competence, i.e. listeners' tacit knowledge of the rules of their language'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Irony**

The term irony is most often understood as posing contradiction or opposition. Humor scholars agree that there are two types of irony. These are situational and verbal irony.<sup>9</sup> Situational irony deals with contradictions in situations, whereas verbal irony focuses on 'spoken or written *creations* of ironic contradictions, with those contradictions falling typically across an *actual* event, situation, etc., vs. a person's linguistic *depiction* of that event'.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a close relation to irony is sarcasm, which can be understood as a mean-spirited form of irony. Sarcastic utterances most often espouse negativity.

### **Satire**

I suggest defining satire as the use of humor critically in discussing topical issues. The author Emmett Stinson argues that satire has a moral function. He writes, 'satire functions as covert moral instruction' and that 'satiric ridicule serves as an object lesson for the reader, and thereby helps to correct or eliminate similar errors of judgment in others'.<sup>11</sup> In a book devoted

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<sup>7</sup> Aarons 2017, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>9</sup> Colston 2017, 234.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 234–235.

<sup>11</sup> Stinson 2018, 16.

to contemporary American satirical news programs, McClennen and Maisel argue that satire is helping American democracy by creating engaged and active citizens.<sup>12</sup> They hold, '[i]n complete contrast to cynicism and other forms of negative humor, satire is a form of comedy that inspires the audience to ask questions, resist the status quo, and be engaged'.<sup>13</sup> They define satire as 'a unique form of comedy and it depends on creating a cognitive space for the audience that allows them to recognize that things they have taken for granted need to be questioned. [...] Central to satire, then, is a link between entertainment and critical thought'.<sup>14</sup> They also stress that satire is different from cynicism and mockery as it engages people in critical thinking.<sup>15</sup>

### **Wit**

Wit is often considered as the ability of playing around with words and ideas, and often being able to express ideas in limited words. The philosopher Nassim Taleb writes playfully that '[w]it seduces by signalling intelligence without nerdiness'.<sup>16</sup> Willibald Ruch, a psychologist and scholar of humor in psychology agrees, adding that the 'etymology of the term *wit* involves knowledge, mind and reasoning capacity and even today the term wit (like *esprit*) is the humor term showing the strongest semantic link to superior intelligence'.<sup>17</sup> This ability is usually received with praise and is considered a mark of an intelligent individual.<sup>18</sup>

### **3 Humor theories**

Humor is a definitively important part of human interaction. Its theories however are far from definitive, and some altogether avoid theorizing about humor in their works.<sup>19</sup> Others propose

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<sup>12</sup> McClennen and Maisel 2014, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> McClennen and Maisel 2014, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>16</sup> Taleb 2010, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Ruch 2008, 43.

<sup>18</sup> In Ethiopia, young children are trained from an early age to develop the skills of being witty through word games.

<sup>19</sup> Oring writes in the introduction of his book *Jokes and Their Relations* that '[n]o grand theories of humor are put forward. The problem with grand theories is that they tend to offer a single answer to cover all situations'. Oring 2010, x.

using multiple theories in and across various disciplines, claiming ‘the study of humor must be and is a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary field of inquiry’.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.1 Three theories of humor

Generally, there exist three main theories of humor. These are the incongruity theory, the relief theory and the disparagement theory.<sup>21</sup> Incongruity theory is ‘concerned with what makes [objects of humor] funny’, and holds that it is incongruity that makes humans laugh.<sup>22</sup> The relief or release theory on the other hand perceives humor ‘as a release of the tensions and inhibitions generated by societal constraints’.<sup>23</sup> It is interested in the effects of humor and suggests that it ‘provides an outlet for certain unrecognized tensions that might otherwise disturb the organism’.<sup>24</sup> An extension of this is the conflict theory which goes beyond speculating the releasing purpose of humor and rather argues that humor is interpreted as ‘an expression or correlate of social conflict: humor as a weapon, a form of attack, a means of defense’.<sup>25</sup> The third is the disparagement theory of humor which characterizes ‘attitudes between the joke teller (or the joke’s person) and the target of the joke text’.<sup>26</sup> This theory traces a sense of superiority, aggression and a need to ridicule by the joke teller.

Researchers routinely demonstrate an integrated theoretical framework while conducting their investigations. For example, Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is a work considered a psychological study which uses elements of all three theories.<sup>27</sup> His work also showed some consciousness of a social organization.<sup>28</sup> The sociologist Giseline Kuipers argues that it is this intermingling of theories and his introduction of ‘the social relationship into the analysis of humor’ that allowed Freud to address ‘the sociological questions about humor’.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Carrell 2008, 316.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>22</sup> Oring 2010, xi.

<sup>23</sup> Carrell 2008, 313.

<sup>24</sup> Oring 2010, xi.

<sup>25</sup> Kuipers 2008, 368.

<sup>26</sup> Carrell 2008, 313.

<sup>27</sup> Freud 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Davies and Attardo 2017, 473.

<sup>29</sup> Kuipers 2008, 363.



In the field of sociology, there are other theories which are of interest to this research. The sociological theories of humor include the functionalist theory, which stresses how humor ‘maintain[s] and support[s] the social order’,<sup>30</sup> the symbolic interactionist, which argues that humor reframes conversations and dialogues, and the phenomenological theory, which ‘conceptualizes humor as a specific “outlook” [...] “worldview” or “mode” of perceiving and constructing the social world’.<sup>31</sup> The phenomenological theory of humor will be important in the discussion of the jokes in this thesis as jokes are taken to be spaces of understanding social change, dialogue and criticism by constructing a ‘humorous worldview with the “serious” worldview’.<sup>32</sup>

While linguists,<sup>33</sup> psychologists and sociologists use developed theories to work with, neither anthropologists nor folklorists have ‘attempted to articulate a single theory to be tested against a range of humorous stimuli and expressions’.<sup>34</sup> Oring describes what anthropologists and folklorists do instead:

[A]nthropologists and folklorists encounter humor in day-to-day interaction, and their job is to document and explain the humor produced and consumed in those circumstances. The single question that these disciplines repeatedly engage is why does this humor occur when and where it does. This question, however, entails two subsidiary questions: how does the humor function and what does the humor mean.<sup>35</sup>

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s anthropological work on joking relationships theorized that jokes are told between individuals and groups to show ‘attachment and separation’.<sup>36</sup> However, Oring argues that even this theory could fall into the functionalist theory, as it is ‘based upon the view that the social arrangements found in different societies served to enhance the stability

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<sup>30</sup> Kuipers 2008, 367.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>33</sup> There are linguistic theories that are ‘layered on and over-reach’ the three theories of humor. This includes mainly Victor Raskin’s script based semantic theory which was later improved by Salvatore Attardo. But these theories are not used in this thesis. Larkin-Galiñanes 2017, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Oring 2010, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Oring 2010, 184–185.

<sup>36</sup> Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 197.

and well-being of that society'.<sup>37</sup> Others similarly declare that early anthropological works use the functionalist theory of humor in their research.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 Some works on political humor

Central to contemporary Ethiopian jokes is the seriousness with which the EPRDF has taken itself and its developmentalism. After the elections held in May 2005, the EPRDF shifted its gaze towards development.<sup>39</sup> Many report that under the EPRDF Ethiopia had shown 'remarkable economic growth and substantial decreases in poverty'.<sup>40</sup> Between 2005 and 2010, the economy grew 'on average by 11 percent'.<sup>41</sup> But despite these digits, urban Ethiopians jest relentlessly with EPRDF's self-promotion of its development plans and achievements. This self-promotion was visible through media platforms, and public spaces such as billboards on roads, in stadiums, buildings and shops which were dominated with talks and posters of ልማት *lāmat* 'development'.<sup>42</sup> This was in some contrast to realities on the ground in Addis Abāba.

From among several satirical works that emerged in the capital is a collection of humorous stories about life in contemporary Ethiopia titled ፒያሳ፣ ማሕሙድ፣ ጋ ጠብቂኝ! *Piassa: Mahmud Ga Ṭābbəqiñ!* 'Piassa: Wait for me at Mahmud's'. The author, Māḥammād Sālman, addresses this contrast. Here is one of his jokes translated from Amharic:

An elderly man was having problems with his television and so he took it to a technician to get it fixed. Surprised that the chip and board had completely burnt down, the technician asks him what he has been watching on the television set. The man relays what he remembers from watching the state broadcaster Ethiopian Television (ETv) regularly. He says, 'one observer stated that the May 2005 elections were just and democratic'. The technician asks him what else he has watched. The man tells him that ETv had also mentioned how Ethiopia was now a middle-income country but had refused to claim its place out of humility, and that thanks to the government one farmer was able to buy sixty trailer trucks, six villa houses, and was able to save sixty million Birr in a bank. The man also added that ETv announced there was much for the world to learn from the Ethiopian parliament.

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<sup>37</sup> Oring 2010, 186.

<sup>38</sup> Kuipers 2008, 367.

<sup>39</sup> Development is a term that requires careful definition. It is a term that was primarily used to define industrialization and economic growth, and later started addressing issues of poverty reduction and life expectancy. It is now used to broadly address economic and social well-being.

<sup>40</sup> Broussar and Tsegay Gebrekidan Tekleselassie 2012, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Id.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion on EPRDF's political economy and its industrial policies, refer to Arkebe Oqubay 2015.

At this point the technician gives the man his television set back and tells him to take it away. The man, surprised, asks why he was reacting as such, and the technician responds, 'I, myself, am burning'.<sup>43</sup>

Māḥammād coined the term *ETv-yopya*, referring to the developed, prosperous, wealthy and democratic Ethiopia of ETv.<sup>44</sup> This is a perfect case of humor providing relief, and also presenting an alternative lens through which to observe how reality is represented by the EPRDF.

Since this thesis studies Ethiopian jokes that similarly address Ethiopian politics, following this are highlights of some of the ways political humor has been studied and theorized.

In the case of political jokes within relief theory, Freud's conviction is that such humor veils hostility in social interactions, and thus diverts energy from violence. Freud calls these jokes tendentious jokes. Laughter resulting from tendentious jokes, particularly political jokes, serves as an exhaust-valve of built-up frustrations, or emotions in general against those wielding authority.<sup>45</sup>

Khalid Kishtainy, a scholar of humor in the Arab world, has studied how individuals use humor as a subversive political tool. Kishtainy argues, '[h]umor is most required in a nation's darkest hours, for it is at such times that people begin to lose faith in themselves, submit to despair, and descend into melancholy and depression'.<sup>46</sup> His analysis falls on Freud, arguing that laughter is an 'outlet for pent-up emotions' and assumes that it is a helpful way of promoting a sense of community in politically and economically frustrated spaces.<sup>47</sup> Such political jokes may in the end be short-lived as they depend on particular events in history.<sup>48</sup> And they may not actually bring substantial change to people's lives, particularly not politically. But, Khistainy says that '[l]aughter is a collective fraternity'<sup>49</sup>, implying the creation of a community or a shared space over topics of laughter.

Tendentious jokes also fall under the disparaging theory of humor, as their goals can also be to mock, belittle, and poke fun at a particular group. Several works take this explanation of

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<sup>43</sup> Māḥammād Sālman 2011, 74.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>45</sup> Freud 2013, 285.

<sup>46</sup> Kishtainy 2009, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>48</sup> Freud 2013, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Khistainy 2009, 62.

humor to analyze political jokes. For example, Samer Shehata argues that in Egypt during Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak's regimes, when situations did not permit criticisms to be made, jokes provided the space for such expressions. Shehata writes, 'by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, works such as Pi-Sunyer's on Franco's Spain apply this framework to study people's use of political humor as resistance and as criticism. Pi-Sunyer says, '[j]okes become funny when they expose the shallowness and stupidity of regimes'.<sup>51</sup>

As humor is a part of complex power-relations of any given society, politicians themselves might use it to boost their respectability among people. Rebecca Higgin's work on 'celebrity politicians' offers useful insight as she elaborates on how leaders themselves use scripted performances and tell jokes to appear dignified in public.<sup>52</sup> While they may not be scripted in the case of Ethiopia, a leader's public speaking skills are valued—and more often than not, this demands a certain level of entertainment.

Beyond the disparaging and relief theories of humor, there are works such as Amy Becker's that study the role political jokes play when people's trust in their own political efficacy is low. Becker focuses on political shows such as the Daily Show of the United States to show how satirical works assist in increasing people's understandings of political processes. She holds that there is a 'positive relationship between exposure to network comedy programming and political trust' and that this 'dynamic is not fully surprising given that the very nature of political comedy is to simplify complicated matters of politics, making both political successes and failures more understandable for the everyday viewer and average political actor'.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, further away from theories of political humor, there are scholars who have argued that contemporary African countries' ruling elite maintain a convivial relationship with their people. Achille Mbembe used this phrase suggesting that post-colonial relations to power in Africa should go 'beyond categories used in standard interpretations of domination (resistance/passivity, subjection/autonomy, state/civil society)'.<sup>54</sup> The basic meaning of post-coloniality is one that assumes a global shift of power dynamics between a dependent Africa

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<sup>50</sup> Shehata 1992, 75.

<sup>51</sup> Pi-Sunyer 1977, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Higgin 2017, 930.

<sup>53</sup> Becker 2011, 246.

<sup>54</sup> Mbembe 1992, 4.

and an aid-providing western power. Ethiopia, despite not having a colonial history, is undeniably a part of this world today. Mbembe writes, ‘post-colonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension’.<sup>55</sup>

The thesis is structured in such a way that it highlights a convivially tense relationship between Ethiopia’s political rulers and the urban dweller. A convivial relationship with jokes used to release frustrations as well as to disparage others, beyond mere resistance based on tendentious jokes, might better describe the relationship Addis Abäba has maintained with EPRDF. This is all the more the case considering the way the political elite also jest playfully with their critics.

The jokes that will be studied in the coming chapters will be studied for which sort of theory they fall under. They will also be taken as spaces which show Addis Abäba’s residents’ understanding of their realities to demonstrate how Ethiopians express their opinions about one another and their rulers through joke-telling.

#### **4 Methods**

The objective of the research conducted here is investigating the role of humor in understanding the nature of the relationship the Ethiopian urban public in Addis Abäba has had with EPRDF during its leadership over Ethiopia from 2005 until 2019. Both sides, meaning, both people’s and the political elite’s jokes, are taken into consideration for a thorough understanding of this relationship. However, public opinion is often difficult to understand without context, be it historical, political, or social. For this, a methodology that allowed for an analysis which considers the historical context of contemporary Ethiopia, and which also allowed micro-investigation of different factors that influence one another today has been developed.

The thesis is grounded in a phenomenological analysis that draws from the two theories of humor: relief theory, and disparagement theory. Incongruity theory, though the reigning theory of humor, deals with what makes objects of jokes funny and explores the necessary conditions for humor, and so has not been considered for this dissertation which studies the purpose and meanings of the collected humorous expressions. The methodology for a phenomenological analysis is heterogeneous, and combines historical data, textual analysis, and ‘micro-interactionist studies to show how humor constructs and at the same time entails a particular worldview’.<sup>56</sup> This analysis will lean on an anthropological method of collecting

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<sup>55</sup> Mbembe 1992, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Kuipers 2008, 376.

and analyzing jokes. This includes interviews, documentation of jokes, explaining and asking what the jokes mean in Addis Abäba's socio-political and economic context.

To do this, three spaces of Addis Abäba were selected for research and one hundred and forty-six jokes were taken from these spaces for investigation. The first space is the parliament. The parliament houses the political elite and some of the open debates are broadcasted for the rest of the country to watch. On the other hand, there is the theatre house, historically host to Ethiopia's modernized influential class and their ideas, and now the space of entertainment for the urban dweller. Lastly, the public transportation (minibus taxis) and public demonstrations were selected as spaces to observe. Minibus writings were selected because unlike newspapers, books, articles and other published materials, they were temporary, and reflected the un-edited thoughts of young urban youth. They are neither scripted (unlike plays), nor are they filtered (unlike parliamentary discussions). And these writings are often exclaimed out loud to the person who writes them down as posters. Public demonstrations were selected as they overlapped with my field work in the city, and as they happened at a time when EPRDF's rule was coming to an end.

Field research for this dissertation was conducted in Ethiopia at various times in 2018 and 2019. I had travelled several times to Addis Abäba from the months of September up to November of 2018, as well as from October to November 2019 to conduct interviews and hold conversations with various members of Addis Abäba, as well as to access archives of libraries including the Ethiopian House of Parliament, the National Archives and Library Agency, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

For particular research information pertaining to humor at the theatre, I spoke to the then director of the Ethiopian National Theatre, Dästa Asräs, as well as script writers and actors of comedy plays such as Bähaylu Waḡe, the director and script writer of the popular TV comedy show ምን ልታዘዝ *Mən Ləttazzäz* 'what should I be commanded to bring'. The case study for the chapter dealing with humor at the theatre was the play እያዩ ፈንገስ፡ ፌስታሌን *Äyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen*. During research in Addis Abäba, I attended *Festalen*'s viewings at most of the venues it appeared on, and watched videos which circulated the city in people's phones and mobile devices. I also attended other comedy night programs and events held in popular venues, such as Ras Hotel.

Simultaneously, I spent a considerable amount of time doing research dedicated to minibuses in Addis Abäba's *Šəro Meda* neighbourhood in particular, as well as other neighbourhoods. The rest of the research period was dedicated to speaking to and interviewing as many members of three neighbourhoods in Addis Abäba, *Haya Hulät Mazorya*, *Bella*, and

*Ĉarqos*. *Ĉarqos* is the neighbourhood where I also found popular social media comedians. They were helpful in providing me with jokes they shared online, but these have not been incorporated in the dissertation. Their opinions, however, have been quoted and used in the dissertation for their values in expressing certain ideas. The interview questions for the different groups of Ethiopians consulted are found in appendix one at the end of the thesis.

Finally, public demonstrations occurred at *Mäsqäl* Square in June and September as well as November of 2018. I was witness to two of them first-hand, allowing me to gather data in forms of notes and pictures.

During these trips to Addis Abäba, I also held personal conversations with individuals who were at some point members of Addis Ababa University as lecturers of various fields. These included Yəkunno'amlak Mäzgäbu (lecturer in the Linguistics Department at the time), Amanu'el Täsfayye (lecturer in the Political Science Department), Dr. Daññaččäw Asäffa (lecturer in the Philosophy Department). I also had consultations with Ethiopian historians in Europe including Bahru Zewde and Bairu Tafla, as well as with Abiye Teklemariam, who was once a lecturer in the Law Department at Addis Ababa University. These conversations were not in interview format and were generally about the historical aspect of the research, including the issue of modernity in Ethiopia and certain aspects of socio-political life today. These dialogues were helpful in finding research material for the chapters dealing particularly with early modernizers of Ethiopia, and the introduction of the constitution.

## **5 Structure of Thesis**

The thesis is presented in five chapters. It opens with a discussion on modernization, and what Ethiopian intellectuals have said about it. This is crucial as the thematic content of the jokes from chapter two, three and four can all be tied to people's questions about Ethiopia's economic, social and political modernization today. The chapter then introduces a term for humor in Amharic, and then builds up a historical and cultural context for the discussion of jokes and humor in contemporary Addis Abäba. It presents select cases of historians using public opinion in forms of jokes to enhance their arguments, showing how Ethiopians' jokes and sayings are acknowledged as serious sources of information. It then introduces *Aläqa Gäbrä Hännä* as the quintessential example of an Ethiopian humorous individual that is regarded in high esteem. This way it establishes humor as a highly developed and appreciated art in pre-twentieth century Ethiopia. The chapter is based on historical and archival research, and conversation with historians as well as Amharic linguists.

Chapter two deals with parliamentary debates and discussions of the post-2005 EPRDF era. It begins with outlining the historical development of parliamentarian government in the

name of modernization, and the processes that brought about today's EPRDF constitution and its parliament. Then follows a detailed look into one particular parliamentary debate held after 2005 where the major political elite of the country were in attendance. Historical documents, speeches, autobiographies and archival material which include audio-visual material are all consulted for this chapter. The parliamentary discussion selected for analysis is chosen for two main reasons. The first reason is that it was held after the May 2005 elections and close to the upcoming elections in 2010. The second reason is that most notable politicians of Ethiopia were at this session, including leaders of opposition parties who would later be arrested. This session presents an opportunity to see how parliamentarians who view themselves as voices of the people engage with the late Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi through humor.

Chapter three focuses on performance arts in Addis Abäba, and specifically a play called *Festalen*. Performance arts are selected as the past decade has seen spaces of performance emerge as crucial places of people's engagement with politics and social realities. Poets, musicians, and those in the arts use these spaces to mostly share their opinions about contemporary life in Addis Abäba, which are in turn then shared across the city in video and audio formats. Some are very critical. And many use humor, mostly satire, to present their political criticisms. The play *Festalen* was also born from such a performative space, as part of the *Ṭobiya* Poetic Jazz performances. This chapter draws on historical material and sources to contextualize theatrical productions in modern Ethiopian history. It also draws from interviews and personal conversations in Addis Abäba with playwrights, authors of plays, and the performer of *Festalen*. Audios of the play were used for transcription before analysis.

*Festalen* was selected for a case study investigation for three reasons. One, it somehow managed to elude government censorship. The theatre house was closely watched and controlled by governments of Ḥaylā Śellase, Därg and EPRDF alike, and especially after the May 2005 elections in EPRDF's time. Elizabeth Wolde Giyorgis wrote that '[d]espite many threats from state officials to shut down the venue, [*Ṭobiya*] Poetic Jazz has become an important public space where young poets are the voices of dissent against the state's manifold repression of human rights, property rights, and freedom of expression'.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore interesting that such a critical play that began at *Ṭobiya* Poetic Jazz flourished in post-2005 Addis Abäba. Two, it was and remains the most popular play in Addis Abäba post-2005. Three, it is a rich reserve of jokes, sayings, proverbs, and wit, with characters that seem inspired by the famous witty scholar *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna.

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<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth W. Giyorgis 2019, 288.



Chapter four of the thesis deals with jokes of the non-elite urban Ethiopian. Two spaces have been selected to collect and study jokes: public demonstrations and taxis. By taxis, I refer to minibuses of Addis Abäba, and the quotes drivers and helpers decorate their vehicles with. I focus only on these quotes because there is an active role played by drivers in acquiring the quotes they place in their taxis. They supply the sayings and proverbs. Even more interesting is that these quotes are timely and dynamic. They change reflecting people's attention to the quotes they put in their minibuses. These quotes reveal certain realities about the lives of urban youth that aren't necessarily political but are heavily influenced by political decisions of Ethiopia's rulers. On the other hand, the public demonstrations are chosen for the sheer creativity used by Addis Abäbans in their chants and posters. They were also selected as they happened towards the end of the rule of EPRDF proper. These demonstrations present how humor can be used in political demonstrations too. The content of jokes and humorous proclamations of Addis Abäba are important to study, if not for their historical significance, then to highlight the persistence of Addis Abäba's questions for EPRDF throughout its rule.

Chapter five is the concluding chapter. This ties in some of the attitudes people reveal towards their rulers and their lives, and rulers' attitudes towards the ruled from the jokes discussed. It also highlights where jokes from all these cases (parliament, arts, taxis, and demonstrations) overlap, and where we see an indirect engagement between EPRDF and Addis Abäba through humor. The jokes circulate similar ideas from the parliament to the taxis and the theatre houses. Even though there might not be direct conversation, urban Ethiopians are seen responding to their rulers in their jokes. Politicians are also heard acknowledging the questions of the people. Through a thematic exploration of the contents of the jokes, concluding remarks are made about what people's jokes indicate about the contemporary realities of the process of modernization and development in Ethiopia. The conclusion will also show that despite the differences in opinions about the political and economic realities of contemporary Ethiopia, rulers and the general public share a culture of appreciating witty and humorous Amharic expressions. And also that regardless of the fundamental political and socio-economic changes the country has undergone since the nineteenth century, the tradition of using various techniques of Amharic humor to express one's opinion has survived into twenty-first century Ethiopia.

## Chapter One: The Ethiopian Context

### 1.1 Political background of Ethiopia: The modern period

The historian Bahru Zewde proclaims Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855–1868) as ‘Ethiopia’s first modern emperor’.<sup>58</sup> Others state that the modern era of Ethiopian history includes part of the Era of the Princes (1769–1855).<sup>59</sup> Still others contend that it was the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s that was the midwife of Ethiopian modernity.<sup>60</sup> In any case, Ethiopian history starting with Emperor Tewodros is generally studied as the modern period of the country.<sup>61</sup>

Since 1855, the country has undergone substantial political and socio-economic transformations, but this study is interested in some of the modernizing steps taken by Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase I (r. 1930–1974) and the successive governments: the *Därg* (Ethiopia’s Marxist-Leninist military junta consisting of 107 men that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 until 1991), and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, r. 1991–2019<sup>62</sup>).

After Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase’s coronation as King of Kings of Ethiopia in 1930, he introduced a modern constitution in 1931. This replaced the traditional *Fəṭḥa Nəgäst* (Law of the Kings) which was used, to a varying degree, by previous rulers for the administration of the country.<sup>63</sup> The emperor’s primary concern was safeguarding his country’s sovereignty against looming Italian aggression. He believed a modern constitution, among some other steps such as abolishing slavery, would allow Ethiopia to join the League of Nations as an equally sovereign and modern country.<sup>64</sup> He assumed this would protect Ethiopia’s independence.

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<sup>58</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 270, 27–31.

<sup>59</sup> Abir 2011, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Andreas Eshete 2012, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Section 2 of this chapter deals with what ‘modern’ means contextually in Ethiopia.

<sup>62</sup> EPRDF has officially ceased to exist in December of 2019, following the reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s announcement that the party has abandoned its revolutionary democratic principles and is now called the Ethiopian Prosperity Party. See e.g. Goitom Gebreleul 2019.

<sup>63</sup> The use of the *Fəṭḥa Nəgäst* for administration is quite disputed, but in general, refer to Qalä’ab Taddäsä Śəgatu 2018/2019, 27; Erlich 2018, 44–47. For a historical investigation on the development of the *Fəṭḥa Nəgäst*, refer to Sand 2020.

<sup>64</sup> The constitution also introduced some changes which successfully transformed the political landscape of the country. The constitution of 1931 made succession hereditary, bringing the existing military and political

Beyond the constitution, some of the steps the emperor took to modernize his country include working to increase student enrollment in schools, opening the University College in Addis Abäba – the now Addis Ababa University, building a modern military and defense force, and creating an Ethiopian bureaucracy.<sup>65</sup>

After the emperor's overthrow in 1974, the *Därg* replaced him promising to abdicate their power to the crown-prince upon his return from abroad. He never returned, and the *Därg* remained in power for seventeen years, out of which only four were through a legal constitution.<sup>66</sup> The *Därg* under Mängəstu Ḥaylämaryam tried to 'impose a Stalinist revolution', but it was riddled with internal and external war, famine, and hunger throughout its rule.<sup>67</sup> The Marxist-Leninist junta was replaced by the EPRDF in 1991, which then ruled under the strong hand of prime minister Mälläs Zenawi (until his death in 2012), adopting a developmental state political economic structure from 2005 until December 2019.<sup>68</sup> Its motto was development, or *lämat* as the popularized word for it in Amharic is.

These three successive regimes are similar for having experimented with imported ideals of broad-stroke development plans in an attempt to modernize Ethiopia. Though historians such as Haggai Erlich argue that the *Därg* more so than any other regime 'disconnected Ethiopia from its ancient cultures and rich traditions', the emperor and the EPRDF are all similarly influenced by global realities of their time.<sup>69</sup> Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase's rule was rooted in the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty tradition, but his administration had fundamentally changed the way traditional Ethiopia was governed. His attempt to modernize Ethiopia was modelled on Europe, while the modern constitution that effectively transformed the political

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structure of nineteenth century to an end. This effectively pushed Ethiopia's traditional nobility and other contenders of the throne away, since the incentive of one day becoming emperor was limited to the emperor's descendants. For example, *Ras* Kassa was a staunch opponent of this. He could not understand why his sons, or anyone's would have to forfeit their right to the throne. Messay Kebede 1999, 83.

<sup>65</sup> Erlich 2018, 94–95.

<sup>66</sup> Qalä'ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 190.

<sup>67</sup> Erlich 2018, 185. On the adoption of Marxism Leninism by the revolutionary students of Ethiopia, refer to Messay Kebede's extensive discussion in his book *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974*, Messay Kebede 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Clapham 2018, 39, 1155.

<sup>69</sup> Erlich 2018, 185.

landscape of traditional Ethiopia was mostly based on the Meiji constitution of Japan.<sup>70</sup> This was followed by the Därg's adoption of Marxism-Leninism based on the Soviet model that was already favored by the student revolutionaries of the 1960s.<sup>71</sup> Därg tried to also introduce development plans, but the government was primarily occupied with war against its many oppositions in the country and outside.<sup>72</sup> This was in turn replaced by the now defunct EPRDF's developmental state, modelled to some extent on China.

The May 2005 elections were one of the factors that pushed the EPRDF into strengthening its development process as the results showed EPRDF's rulers that they needed to prove their legitimacy through 'benefits derived from [...] developmental success'.<sup>73</sup> Mälläs Zenawi had already attempted to reform EPRDF's stringent ethno-Marxist ideology twice before 2005. When they first came to power in 1991, he attempted to reform the economic and social policy as well as their international relations since the days of radical Marxism had been abandoned. Then followed the party split in 2001, whereby Mälläs drafted a revolutionary democratic ideology for the country. When EPRDF lost the elections in May 2005, the developmental state ideology was made the national governing ideology.<sup>74</sup>

The following is a historical and theoretical investigation of the features of Ethiopian modernity. It is important to establish what modernization meant to the early intellectuals, and rulers of Ethiopia, and what Ethiopian intellectuals today say about the process before investigating jokes of contemporary Addis Abäba.

## **1.2 Modernization in Ethiopia: Amharic equivalents for the word 'modernization'**

Today, two Amharic words are, lamentably, used interchangeably to denote modernization and modernity: *ዘመናዊነት* *zamānawinnät* and *ሥልጣኔ* *śaləṭṭane*. These words are broadly used for the cultural, as well as the political and the economic conditions of Ethiopia. By looking at some dictionary entries for each work, the thesis will proceed to summarize their definitions in an attempt to show the differences and possible reasons for the conflation of the two words today.

According to the Dictionary of the Ethiopian Languages Research Center (ELRC), the Amharic words *zāmānawi* and *śaləṭṭane* have the following definitions.

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<sup>70</sup> Bairu Tafla and Scholler 1976, 9, 487.

<sup>71</sup> Messay Kebede 2008, 158.

<sup>72</sup> Clapham 2018, 39, 1153.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1155.

<sup>74</sup> Personal conversation, Abiye Teklemariam 2020.

**ዘመናዊ:** *zämänawi* «1. በአይነቱ ወይም በሁኔታው አዲስ የሆነ። 2. በወቅቱ ያለውን አዲስ ሁኔታ (የአስተሳሰብ፣ የአኗኗር፣..) የሚከተል» ‘1. which is new in condition or nature 2. one that follows the latest styles (of thinking, living)’.

**ዘመናይ:** *zämänay* «1. ባለጊዜ፣ እንደፈለገው ለመሆን ጊዜ ያመቸው፣ ኑሮው የተሳካለት።»<sup>75</sup> ‘of the times, of which time has allowed to be as he/she wishes, who leads a successful life’.

**ሰለጠነ:** *sälättänä* «1. አደገ፣ ተሻሻለ፣ ዘመናዊ ሆነ፣ ከፍ ወደኋላ የእውቀት ደረጃ ደረሰ፣ ከኋላ ቀርነት ራቀ (ነገር፣ ህዝብ)። 2. አንድን ነገር ማድረግ ወይም መስራት አወቀ፣ ለመደ። 3. ተሻሻለ፣ ንቁ ሆነ፣ ቀለጠፈ። 4. አንድን ሙያ ተማረ፣ ተካነ፣ ትምህርት አገኘ።» ‘to grow, to improve, to be *zämänawi*, to reach a high level of knowledge/education, to move away from backwardness; 2. to learn or to know how to do or make something; 3. to improve, to be aware, to be dynamic; 4. to learn and to know a skill, to acquire knowledge’.

**ሰልጣኔ:** *sälättane* «እድገት፣ ዘመናዊነት፣ ከፍተኛ የእውቀት ወይም የመሻሻል ደረጃ።»<sup>76</sup> growth, *zämänawinnät*, high level of education or improvement.

I have presented the definitions for the same words from the considerably older Dästa Täkläwäld dictionary below. The idea is to see if there’s any evolution in the meanings of the words taking into consideration the difference in the publication dates of the dictionaries. Notice also the difference in the *fidäl* used to write some words such as *sälättänä*, which is written with ሰ above but with ሠ in the Dästa Täkläwäld dictionary. This dictionary pays close attention to the Amharic script’s repetitive alphabets and their proper usages, while the ELRC dictionary opts to abandon such details.

**ዘመናይ (ዘመናዊ):** *zämänay (zämänawi)* «ዘበናይ ባለጊዜ» ‘of the times’.<sup>77</sup>

**ሠለጠነ:** *sälättänä* «አለባበስና አነጋገር አሳመረ ሰበቀለ»<sup>78</sup> ከባለገርነት ራቀ፣ ሥልጣንና ዕውቀት አገኘ ባለሞያ ሾነ፤ ማንኛውንም ነገር መሥራት ችለ»<sup>79</sup> ‘to make one’s clothing and speech better, to be far from rurality, to gain promotion and knowledge, to be with skill’.

<sup>75</sup> Ethiopian Languages Research Center (ELRC) 2001, 443.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>77</sup> Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 496.

<sup>78</sup> Käsate Brəhan defines the word ሰበቀለ *säbäqqälä* as meaning, «በአነጋገሩ ፈሊጥን፣ ብልኸትን ዐወቀ፣ በነገሩ ተደማጭን ሾነ፣ በንግግር፣ በሥራ በሽሉ ነገር ሰበቀለ፣ ዐማረ፣ ተወደደ፣ ቀለጠፈ፣ ንግግርን ጨዋታን አነዛዙ፣ አሰካኩ፣ ደማምን ቀልጣፋን ሾነ።» ‘knows idiosyncratic phrases or proverbs and has wisdom; to have the skill of being listened to; to be beautiful, liked, and to the point in speech, work and all else; quick in his ability to bring together words in speech and *čäwata*’. But this word is not widely used in urban Amharic. Käsate Bərhan Täsamma 1958/1959, 248–249.

<sup>79</sup> Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 885.

ሥልጡን፡ ሰጊጥን «ብልጥ ብልጥ ጮሎ ፈጣን ባለጥያ የከተማ ሰው።» ‘one who is wise, one who is quick, a trickster, one who is with skill, a person from town’.<sup>80</sup>

The ELRC defines *zāmānawī* as something that is new in its type or condition, or someone that follows the times. The word *śālāttānā*, interestingly, is defined as ‘one who grows, improves, becomes *zāmānawī*, is at one with the times, and moves away from backwardness’. *Śālāttāne* is defined as ‘growth, *zamānawinnāt* and the highest level of knowledge or progress’.

Dästa Täkläwäld’s dictionary defines *zāmānawī* similarly to the ELRC – as being of the times. But *zāmānawī* is not used as the definition of *śālāttāne*. Dästa Täkläwäld only equates the word with fashioning one’s manner of speaking and clothing, earning promotion and knowledge, and with being skillful. In Dästa Täkläwäld’s definition, to be modern is simply to be of the times. Yet, Dästa Täkläwäld curiously suggests that *śālāttāne* is inherently opposed to being rural. He also attributes negative connotations with being *śālጥን*, such as being untrustworthy.

There is the category *zāmānawī-śālāttāne* that some scholars have suggested to use defining it as ‘modern civilization’.<sup>81</sup> However, beyond the circles of universities, this phrase is virtually unused in the non-academic world of Addis Abäba. Important for this thesis is that *zamānawinnāt* and *śālāttāne* seem interchangeably usable in the ELRC dictionary which is published in 2001, whereas that isn’t the case in Dästa Täkläwäld’s dictionary. There is no sufficient basis to theorize from this only, but there are observable hints of conflation between the two words that upon further theoretical exploration may reveal a flawed assessment of being *zamānawī* (of the times) and being *śālጥን* (knowledgeable). And today where to be ‘of the times’ is to resemble the West in its many forms (culturally, economically, politically), the word *zamānawī* is also equated to westernization. Equating *zamānawinnāt* and *śālāttāne* then allows us to assume that to be modern is to be western, or at least to try to resemble the West, and not necessarily make the link that to be modern could also be to be competitive in quest for knowledge and skills, against the world, including the West itself. This point was the main preoccupation of early Ethiopian intellectuals.

### 1.3 Modernization according to Ethiopian intellectuals

Modernization is a topic of interest to several Ethiopian scholars from different disciplines. Some like Messay Kebede look at the question philosophically and others like Bahru Zewde

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<sup>80</sup> Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 885.

<sup>81</sup> Bromber 2012, 78.

through a historical lens. Still others such as Elizabeth W. Giorgis use arts to investigate Ethiopia's relationship with modernity.

Though the advent of modernity in Ethiopia is uncertain, Emperor Tewodros II is considered Ethiopia's first modernizing monarch based on a number of reasons. There is the chronological point of view that posits the nineteenth century as the time of the birth of nation states. There is also 'the ascetic spirit of puritan Protestantism, free labor, the rise of towns, modern science, and new opportunities for trade, industrial manufacture and varied new technologies'.<sup>82</sup> The arts and cultural movements of Europe at the time could also serve as global pre-cursors to more reasons Emperor Tewodros is considered Ethiopia's first modern emperor, the emperor preoccupied with acquiring the technological advancements of modern Europe.<sup>83</sup> He wanted to have weapons and other technological machineries that he had heard about. A history of Emperor Tewodros written by an unnamed Ethiopian says the following:

አጤ ቴዎድሮስና የእንግሊዝ ንግሥት በመጀመርያ ስለ ፍቅር ይላላኩ ነበር በምጥዋ የእንግሊዝ ቆንሱል ነበረና አጤ ቴዎድሮስ ሁሲጊዜ ወደ ቁንስሉ ይልኩ ነበር ልመናቸው ሰራተኞች እያሉ የብረት የእንጨት የናስ የመድፍ የጠበንጃ የአረብያ ብልሃት ይህን ታገሬ አወጣለሁ ነበር ምኞታቸው።<sup>84</sup>

'Emperor Tewodros and the queen of England used to write one another at first for the sake of love since there was an English consul in Massawa; Emperor Tewodros always sent to the consul pleas for workers saying that it was his wish to get iron, wood, bronze, canons, weapons and the ways of the Arab world to be developed in his country'.

Beyond the emperor's desire to acquire the skills of production of weapons and their know-how was his restructuring of the Ethiopian army, the church and land holding system. But Emperor Tewodros's reign faced internal challenges that pushed him closer to war and devastation than towards achieving his plans of developing his country.<sup>85</sup> It is towards the end of the nineteenth and at the turn of the twentieth century that Tewodros' dreams could somehow

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<sup>82</sup> Andreas Eshete 2012, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Messay Kebede 1999, 268.

<sup>84</sup> Fusella 1959, 27.

<sup>85</sup> For more on the history of Emperor Tewodros II and his times, refer to chronicles and History of the Kings written by Zännāb 1902, by Wäldä Maryam 1904, and by an unnamed writer, Fusella 1959. Also consider the collection of papers titled *Kasa and Kasa* edited by Taddese Beyene et al. 1990. On the unification of the Ethiopian empire by Emperor Tewodros, refer to Täklä Şadēq Mākuriya 1988/1989. And for letters and correspondences from Emperor Tewodros' times, refer to Rubenson et al. 1994.

begin to be achieved. Let us therefore turn to some early twentieth century Ethiopian intellectuals and what they thought of modernization in Ethiopia.

### 1.3.1 Early twentieth century intellectuals and modernization

Towards the end of Emperor Mənilək II's reign (as king 1878–1889, and as king of kings 1889–1913), two groups of political and intellectual elite had emerged.<sup>86</sup> There were the traditionalists which included Empress Taytu and *Fitawrari* Habtä Giyorgis<sup>87</sup> to mention a few, and those that were known as the progressives, namely *Ras* Täfäri (later Emperor Həylä Şəllase I) and his allies. Among these progressives were the so-called *Japanizer* intellectuals. The *Japanizers* were curious about the similarities between Ethiopia and Japan and argued that 'Japan's modernization had guaranteed its peace and prosperity, while Ethiopia's continued backwardness threatened its very survival'.<sup>88</sup>

Həruy Wäldä-Şəllase and Käbbädä Mika'el are two renown *Japanizers*.<sup>89</sup> Both came of age in the first half of the twentieth century and played key roles in Ethiopian political and intellectual life. Both also demonstrate an awareness of the West's scientific, technological, and economic advancement.

Käbbädä Mika'el was Ethiopia's prominent author and playwright who started writing before the Italian invasion of 1935 and continued in public service until the end of the monarchic rule in 1974. Educated by both traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Church teachers and by non-traditional teachers at the Alliance Française School, Käbbädä rose to receive prestigious nominations and awards both within and outside Ethiopia for his public service and both fictional and non-fictional publications.<sup>90</sup> On the topic of modernization, he has a number of books that highlight what he believed. His book *Ethiopia and Western Civilization* is deemed 'an Ethiopian version of a Hegelian story' by some for the way it historicized Ethiopia and

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<sup>86</sup> For works that discuss the history of Emperor Mənilək II and his times, refer to Marcus 1995; Pəwlos Ņoño 1992; Gäbrä Şəllase 1966/1967; and Prouty 1986. For the last years of the emperor's reign, refer to Märsə'e Həzän Wäldä Qirqos' *Of What I saw and Heard* translation, Hailu Habtu 2004. For works that refer to the modern period of Ethiopian history including Emperor Mənilək II, refer to Bahru Zewde 2001; and Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018.

<sup>87</sup> *Fitawrari* Habtä Giyorgis Dinägede was Emperor Mənilək's trusted minister of war. He is known for his fair and insightful judgements at court as well. Fantahun Engəda 2008, 29–31.

<sup>88</sup> Clarke 2011, 7–8.

<sup>89</sup> See Bahru Zewde 2002.

<sup>90</sup> 'Käbbädä Mika'el', *EAE* III (2007), 315b–316a (G. Balashova).



Africa, placing them behind the West in a linear story of progress.<sup>91</sup> In his other book *ጃፓን እንደ ምን ሠለጠነች? ጃፓን ጅንጅር ለመሰማት ስለሚያስፈልገው* ‘How did Japan Modernize?’ Kābbädä tries to emulate Japan as a source of development and modernization for Ethiopia but stresses the need for ‘development of Christian spirituality and patriotism’.<sup>92</sup>

His stance on westernization is clear in his book *ሥልጣን ማለት ምንድነው? ስለሚያስፈልገው ለመገንጠል* ‘What is Modernization?’. Kābbädä argues that western modernization, along with its scientific and technological advancement, also teaches love for money, materialism and atheism. He calls these three the poisons that come hand in hand with modernization and denounces them. He urges Ethiopians to be careful as they take the scientific and technological knowledge of the West.<sup>93</sup> He highlights the civilization of Ethiopians lies in how people respect humans over money and uphold moral values. He also fears that the country might lose its traditional values while striving for technological and scientific modernization. He writes:

ከዘመናችን ሥልጣን ቴክኒክና ሳይንስን በሙሉ እጅ ሳናደርግ የቀድሞ ቅርሳችንን ብናጣ ከሁለት ዛፍ የወደቅን እንሆናለን።<sup>94</sup>

If we do not adopt the technical and scientific progress of our modern period and if we lose our ancient tradition, we will be like one who has fallen out of two trees.

According to Kābbädä, Ethiopians in the past maintained the country’s independence not just through brave warriorhood, but also through upholding moral standards.<sup>95</sup> Ethiopia’s ancient history and place in Africa positions it to become a model civilization, where humans remain dignified and religious while maintaining technological and scientific advancements. Kābbädä remained concerned that unless this happened, the West would take advantage of less developed African countries, including Ethiopia. His proposal is as much a result of worrying about traditional continuity, as it is about maintaining Ethiopia’s sovereignty. His proposal is to develop the non-scientific and non-technological traditions of Ethiopia so that Ethiopia’s ancient ways of being can survive.

ጃህረ ወልደ ስላሴ was Ethiopia’s leading politician and intellectual of the early Emperor ጃህረ ስላሴ I era. Though he would die in exile during the Italian occupation of

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<sup>91</sup> De Lorenzi 2015, 115.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Kābbädä Mika’el’, *EAE*, III (2007), 316a (G. Balashova).

<sup>93</sup> Kābbädä Mika’el n.d., 66.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

Ethiopia, his name is still revered.<sup>96</sup> Much like Kābbädä, he was trained both in the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Church system and in the time's modern schools. He differs from Kābbädä for his continued contribution to traditional historiography. He has written over twenty works<sup>97</sup> and these include travelogues, catalogue of books found in Ethiopia, books of poetry, history, fiction and nonfiction, as well as ታሪክ ነገሥት *Tarikä Nägäst* 'History of the Kings', a continuation of the traditional writing of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. His book ዋዜማ *Wazema* 'Eve', falls in this last category.<sup>98</sup>

Ḥəruy travelled frequently and was acutely aware of the economic backwardness of his country. He stated that 'Japan was a worthy foreign nation that informed Ethiopians could admire', as he found consolation there in a world he viewed as threatening to Ethiopia's living traditions.<sup>99</sup> However, unlike Kābbädä, Ḥəruy was not just afraid of European aggression. He believed that 'technological and institutional innovations – like printing and public schools – might disrupt traditional values'.<sup>100</sup> For Ḥəruy, traditional continuity and technological advancements were not entirely compatible. However, no serious proposal is made for this, and he simply suggests finding a middle way where Ethiopians would not lose their traditions and cultures and would also benefit from modernization. Though at times critical, he strongly reflects a guided protectionism motivated and rooted in an Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition and education.

In sum, early modernizers of Ethiopia seemed aware of the scientific and technological advancement of Europe but looked towards Japan in awe. Since atheism and materialism were predominant concerns for these two intellectuals, they believed in emulating a model that could allow for an Ethiopian traditional continuity while benefiting from the technical progress of the modernized countries. Despite their reservations, they were optimistic that Ethiopia could achieve both.

Let us now turn to some of the intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century and what they believed about Ethiopia's modernization.

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<sup>96</sup> 'Ḥəruy Wäldä Śəllase', *EAE*, III (2007), 20a–21a (Bahru Zewde).

<sup>97</sup> Bahru Zewde has safely argued that Ḥəruy wrote over twenty books. Those like Molvaer hold that twenty-six books are attributed to him while some claim twenty-eight and even forty-two. Molvaer 1997, 16.

<sup>98</sup> Ḥəruy Wäldä Śəllase 1928/1929.

<sup>99</sup> De Lorenzi 2015, 102.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–110.

### 1.3.2 Intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century

Messay Kebede is an Ethiopian philosopher who was a student at Haile Selassie I University during the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>101</sup> His opinions on modernization are reflections of an Ethiopian who has lived through the revolution of 1974, and the two succeeding regimes. Of the early intellectuals, Messay criticizes those popularly known as the *Japanizers* by arguing that neither they nor the leaders of the time ‘show any determined will to follow the [Japanese] model’.<sup>102</sup> According to Messay, Hərüy was more attentive to tradition and believed in a transformation from above, and Kābbāda was much like the other early modernizers (with the exception of Mākʷännən Ĕndalkaččāw), bent on attacking traditional values and beliefs. Messay argues that none of the Ethiopian intellectuals took up ‘renovating Ethiopian traditional values’ and as a result ‘modernization became Westernization’.<sup>103</sup> To understand what he means by this, let us consider some of his works.

His book *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present. A Philosophical Discourse* is of great value to this discussion. Messay is puzzled as to why Ethiopia has not yet modernized because many attributes of traditional Ethiopia were supportive of transitioning smoothly to modernization.<sup>104</sup> He also argues that even the ability Ethiopians had in borrowing ideas from abroad should have helped.

As stated before, Bahru marks Emperor Tewodros II as Ethiopia’s principal modernizer because of his attempted military, religious, political, and land reforms.<sup>105</sup> Bahru argues, ‘[t]he response of the clergy was as medieval<sup>106</sup> as the emperor’s question was modern’ to Tewodros’s unpopular land reforms on the church.<sup>107</sup> For Messay, Emperor Tewodros’s

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<sup>101</sup> Messay Kebede 2008, viii.

<sup>102</sup> Messay Kebede 1999, 268.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 256–267.

<sup>105</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Bahru does not define what he means by medieval. Others have highlighted what marked medieval Ethiopia. For example, Tsehai Berhane-Selassie remarks that one feature of medieval Ethiopia was that rulers maintained peripatetic or, “wandering capitals”, [and] the monarchs roamed over all the lands to exact tribute and run their administration’ (Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018, 17). But this had considerably halted after Gondar became the seat of the monarchy and continued to be even during the Era of the Princes (*Zāmānā Māsafānt*) as it served as the base of the powerless but symbolic monarchs. Tewodros successfully ended this period.

<sup>107</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 35.

reforms of reducing the church's land holding, trying to separate church and state, and restructuring the army were all 'infringements serving the higher cause of rescue, not radical views disparaging Ethiopian values and social fabric as rotten and obsolete'.<sup>108</sup> Emperor Tewodros had the idea that Ethiopia's survival depended on its modernization. Because of this, Messay argues that upon initiation and in the Ethiopian understanding of modernization, it 'was in no way equated with Westernization; rather, it was a survival option'.<sup>109</sup>

According to Messay, the problem came after the victory of Adwa in 1896. Ethiopians could not emulate Japan because they had seen that they could defend themselves by acquiring weapons. This victory confirmed Ethiopia's rulers' beliefs that if their sovereignty was ever in question again, they could similarly acquire weapons in the future too. By the time Ḥaylā Śəllase I became emperor in 1930, Messay says it was already too late for Ethiopia as the sense of urgency to survive was replaced by the monarch's identification of modernism with autocracy.<sup>110</sup> In addition, the emperor and the *Japanizers* were mostly convinced that Ethiopian society had to be built all over again and did not have the ability to modernize as it were.

The Japanese however had radically structured their society into an arms-producing industrial country and reduced the power of the emperor. While, Messay writes, 'the Ethiopian system went in the opposite direction by concentrating all executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the monarch'.<sup>111</sup> Following this, the Ethiopian nobility withdrew entirely from modernization and was stripped of all its roles. Hence, its only role was remaining an absentee landlord while the newly educated took up governing and administrating the country under the auspices of the emperor. This led to the realities of contemporary Ethiopia, namely, the 'absence of a credible and responsible elite' built on the traditions of Ethiopia.<sup>112</sup> After the revolution, Messay concludes, the student revolutionaries of the 1970s were repeating the same error the first intellectuals made: they considered Ethiopia 'as a society which must be destroyed and built anew'.<sup>113</sup>

Bahru has argued that the issue with modernization has been its ethnocentric bias, as it is closely related to the western experience. To Bahru, this is sufficient to explain why

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<sup>108</sup> Messay Kebede 1999, 270.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

modernization became synonymous with westernization.<sup>114</sup> Messay contends this, arguing that earlier Ethiopians used *zämänawinnät* to denote western civilization and ‘they meant something that time brings and something that is transient. In so saying, they implied that they were not backward; rather, they were temporarily pushed back by a civilization that time brought’.<sup>115</sup>

The largely influential ‘modernizing’ attempt that replaced traditional understandings of history and time was the spread of western education in Ethiopia. Yirga Gelaw argues that since Emperor Ḥaylä Śəllase I there has been a systemic violence against tradition, favoring western education over traditional education and resulting in the uprooting of a whole generation of urban Ethiopians.<sup>116</sup> Similarly Messay argues that the introduction of western education was problematic as it declared that ‘other countries can become civilized only when they follow Europeans as their example’.<sup>117</sup> The cyclical understanding of time and history was replaced by one that suggested that time was linear, leading to European civilization as the end-goal.

What we observe in Messay’s theories is that the early modernizers’ pleas to maintain Ethiopian traditional values while adopting modern scientific and technological tools has not succeeded in Ethiopia. Messay’s overall argument is that a traditional understanding of history and time would have allowed Ethiopians to compete with the West, instead of simply imitating its cultural as well as technical developments. It is Messay’s strong conviction that state-sponsored modernization has led to the failures of modernization in Ethiopia because the onset of western education and the use of modernization for autocratic intentions eroded traditional means of Ethiopian self-understanding.

Messay’s theories on the failures of modernization have lent him several rebuttals. An example is Elizabeth W. Giyorgis and her book *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. Elizabeth agrees with Messay that ‘noncolonized Ethiopia offers a very interesting comparative cultural space to explore the alterity of the colonized, affording a fascinating sociocultural context for the phenomenon of modernism’.<sup>118</sup> Her work draws from colonial and post-colonial studies of modernization, as well as global and African history of imperialism and its link to capitalism.

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<sup>114</sup> Bahru Zewde 2002, 1.

<sup>115</sup> Messay Kebede 2013, 13.

<sup>116</sup> Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2017, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Messay Kebede 2013, 12.

<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth W.Giorgis 2019, 4.

She then investigates modernism in Ethiopia through the works of artists who encountered modernism through the years since the Battle of Adwa.

Elizabeth's book reflects how artistic works continually engaged with modernism and try to make sense of people's realities. When discussing art in contemporary Ethiopia, she mentions Addis Abäba's crippling socio-economic and political destitution. She asserts that '[t]he very nature of modern existence in Addis Abäba, for instance, has created a sense of exile and displacement in one's own country'.<sup>119</sup>

In many regards, her book seemingly falls back on Messay's thesis while offering a complementary understanding of modernity. She provides another angle from which to investigate Ethiopian history of engaging with modernity. However, she presents a critique to Messay's books by suggesting that he had 'simplified the shortcomings of modernity by reclaiming a glorious past, which he implied the modernist interventions of the twentieth century undermined'.<sup>120</sup> Elizabeth's other criticism to Messay's book is that it rooted Ethiopia's cultural history in Orthodox Christianity while ignoring Ethiopians that are not followers of the faith. A similar point is made in a recently published book by Elleni Centime who boldly asserts that Messay's works are written 'to restore what has been lost in Ethiopia by rejecting the legacy of the student movement',<sup>121</sup> adding that 'Messay keeps us mired in a narrow nationalism that is based in counter-factual conjecture'.<sup>122</sup> However, Messay's works neither claim to glorify Ethiopia's past, nor do they reject any actor's legacies. His attempt is to unpack Ethiopian philosophy and self-understanding through the lens of one Ethiopian tradition, a worthwhile experiment.

Elleni's criticism seems to target Messay's book, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974* in which he proposes reconsidering the Ethiopian student revolution of 1974 and asking the reasons behind the radicalization of Ethiopia's students. His theory is that since the most active members of the student movements came from Orthodox Christian backgrounds from northern Ethiopia, this made the now-atheist students yearn for another ideology to replace the faith they had abandoned. The student's uprootedness stems from the modern Ethiopian education system, which allowed them to be gullible devourers of outside ideologies of their times. Angered by the poverty of their country, its economic backwardness

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<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth W.Giorgis 2019, 13.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>121</sup> Elleni Centime Zeleke 2019, 93.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 71.

and their monarch's absolutism, Messay concludes that the students were driven into an ideological radicalism that wished to make Ethiopia the chosen land of Marxism-Leninism, much like their forefathers had made Ethiopia the chosen land of Christianity.<sup>123</sup>

As for Elizabeth's critique, Messay's writings hinge on elite-driven modernization from Haylä Šöllase's time. They are primarily engaged with the traditions and culture of the political elite of Ethiopia, which was heavily influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Elizabeth herself acknowledges the cultural, and socio-political influences of the Orthodox Church by stating, 'the rigid social and cultural hierarchies of the Orthodox Church [...] play an important role in modernism's enunciations and conceptual registers'.<sup>124</sup>

All in all, from studying the philosophical way Ethiopians conceptualize time, the reasons Ethiopian students were radicalized, and his theories as to the failure of modernization in Ethiopia, it is obvious that Messay is not taxed with a futile exercise of 'reviving lost traditions' as much as he is in understanding them and bringing out the wisdom in them. Neither Elizabeth nor Elleni venture far from his own exercises.

A historical look into the political structure of nineteenth century Ethiopia might elaborate the effects of modernization even before the twentieth century, moving the discussion beyond what Messay and his critics are engaged in. Unlike Messay's theories, history presents that the process of modernization had already started fundamentally changing the Ethiopian social and political structure prior to the Battle of Adwa.

### **1.3.3 Ethiopia's socially responsible rulers: Tsehai's historical investigation**

Tsehai Berhane-Selassie's *Ethiopian Warriorhood: Defence, Land & Society: 1800–1941* offers another lens of understanding Ethiopian modernization. She places the question of modernity and its effect on state-public relations on the dismantling of the *čäwa* traditional military-political hierarchy, instead of discussions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and western education.<sup>125</sup> A formidable reconstruction of a political structure long abandoned,

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<sup>123</sup> Messay Kebede 2008, 103–120.

<sup>124</sup> Elizabeth W.Giorgis 2019, 21.

<sup>125</sup> The emperor associated with the dominant power of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today, Emperor Mənilək II, has an interesting relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. No doubt a Christian, Chris Prouty has a humorous remark about how little theological debates mattered to him considering his first wife was found flirting with Catholicism: 'Since [Bafāna]'s convictions would have been no secret to [Mənilək], it shows how little [Mənilək] cared whether Jesus Christ was born twice, or three times, or how the miracle was accomplished' (Prouty 1986, 13).

Tsehai's book forces students of Ethiopian history to shift their attention to the *čäwa*, soldiers that constituted 'a state institution that, in comparison for instance with the judiciary, was alone in employing the tradition of involving people from the grassroots'.<sup>126</sup> These were socially supported, 'self-trained specialists in the art of leadership and in defending not only local people and lands but also a wider political space: the country, [*hagär*], and its people'.<sup>127</sup>

Tsehai shows that Ethiopian emperors and these warriors shared similar upbringings, and this military-political structure supplied Ethiopians with rulers from as lowly as local judges, all the way to the emperor. Tsehai informs readers that 'Ethiopian monarchs saw each individual *čäwa* warrior as a potential competitor for their thrones'.<sup>128</sup> Tsehai investigates land and land holding, childhood games and methods of raising young children, different denominations of the *čäwa* structure, as well as cultural, historical ideals of personal responsibility that can still be traced in Ethiopian cultures today.

According to Tsehai, it was the centralizing monarch's attempts from Emperor Tewodros II onwards that has led to Ethiopia's realities today. She holds, '[w]hile the 'modern' state took over from the [*čäwa*], it failed to adopt their idealized spirit of participation in political decision-making by ordinary local people'.<sup>129</sup> This grassroots institution allowed room for the public to hold its rulers accountable, and made way for the public to express its opinions in verses, couplets, in spaces such as the military banquet, or [*gabär*].<sup>130</sup> But this culture that allowed for public criticism and advanced a socially responsible ruling class did not change only because of Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase or his constitution, as Messay argues. For Tsehai, this changed with Emperor Tewodros and was successfully undermined after the Battle of Adwa. She writes:

the process of marginalizing the chewa was at the core of the policies of Emperor Tewodros II (r.1855–68), but it matured in the days of Emperor Mənilək II (r.1889–1913) and laid the ground for the 'modernity' that Mənilək bravely and wisely introduced. Inadvertently, however, it failed both to bring with it the chewa spirit of two-way communication between state and population.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018, 19.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 211

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 4.



The elimination of this system meant primarily that a state existed that was no longer in touch with rural Ethiopia and was mostly focused on urban Ethiopia. The modern bureaucratic class created by Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase was not necessarily rooted in its locality as before. Since *čäwa* warriors were fundamentally representatives of their localities, they earned their legitimacy based on multiple criteria that could be observed by the locality they represented. An example is their military achievements which included defending territory. This was no longer the case. Ethiopia's modern educated class answered to the emperor instead of the public, leading to a weakening of the ways the public could engage the government in dialogue. This is partly because assuming leadership no longer necessitated a military background, and partly because this new elite did not draw power from land holding rights like *čäwa* members of the previous generation. It is also because an educated bourgeoisie appeared as a result of modern education. They would be hired to serve in government after going through a western-style education, solidifying this alienation.<sup>132</sup>

Tsehai's work is helpful in exploring how rulers became removed from the people they ruled in the second half of the twentieth century but is limited to the early twentieth century and does not address economic aspects of the modern Ethiopian period. The social realities she engages with are different from today's Ethiopian realities. Yet, since the bulk of the investigation in this dissertation is on the relationship between the EPRDF and Addis Abäba, it remains an important contribution to the discussion of modernization and the loss of public-raised representatives without providing their replacement. Without the means to dialogue with the government, the Ethiopian public was further pushed away from political and economic as well as social decisions that would be made by those in power. And this is a double exclusion when considering modernization itself presents 'all too real inequalities that leave most Africans today excluded and [object] them from the economic and institutional conditions that they themselves regard as modern'.<sup>133</sup> This exclusion is key to understanding the value of humor in contemporary Ethiopia.

#### **1.3.4 Concluding remarks**

In conclusion to this section, through the works of Messay and Tsehai, modernization in Ethiopian appears to be a movement that was conceptualized 'in terms of conflict between tradition and modernity, not in terms of modernity going in for the revival and enhancement of

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<sup>132</sup> Erlich 2018, 98–99.

<sup>133</sup> Ferguson 2008, 17, 559.

tradition'.<sup>134</sup> Both scholars agree that regardless of what the process's initiators espoused, a century later, Ethiopia's modernization attempt has resulted in the creation of successive political elites who are not politically responsible to the majority of Ethiopians. It has also created a society where modernization is equated with cultural westernization, and where economic policies have not yet born fruit for the average Ethiopian. The thesis will enable us to observe how contemporary Ethiopians express their place in the modern world and what the flag posts of modernization are in Addis Abäba today.

## 1.4 Humor in Ethiopia

### 1.4.1 Humor in Amharic: Defining *čäwata*

Anthropological approaches to humor stress that humor is anchored in culture and ultimately in language. Mahadev L. Apte, who studies humor through an anthropological approach, writes the following:

humor is by and large culture based and [...] humor can be a major conceptual and methodological tool for gaining insights into cultural systems. Humor is primarily the result of cultural perceptions, both individual and collective, of incongruity, exaggeration, distortion, and any unusual combinations of the cultural elements in external events.<sup>135</sup>

Considering this, it seems important to discuss the language of the humor investigated in this thesis.

Amharic is the *lingua franca*<sup>136</sup> of Ethiopia and has been the country's official language until recently.<sup>137</sup> Several scholars have commented on the nature of the Amharic language. The Ethiopian linguist of the late nineteenth early twentieth century, *Aläqa* Kidanä Wäld Kəfle, has said the following about it:

ያማርኛ ወግ ታሪክ የሚያውቁ ሽማግሌች ለቀድሞ አማርኛ 4 ስልቶች ነበረው ይላሉ። መዝሙራዊው የቤተ ክህነት ሁለተኛው የቤተመንግሥት ሦስተኛው የነጋዴ። አራተኛው የባላገር ነው። የቤተ ክህነት አማርኛ በሰዋሰው ተመሥርቶ ባገባብ የታነጠ በትርጓሜ የተቀረጠ ነው፤ ከግእዝ በቀር ሌላ ባዕድ ቋንቋ አይገባበትም። የሕዝብ አማርኛ ግን ጠባቂ መምህር ግስ እርባ ቅምር ስለሌለው በየጊዜው በየዘመኑ ሌላ ቋንቋ ይጨምራል። በጥፈትና ባነጋገር እየጠፋ እየተለወጠ ከመሔድ በቀር እንደመምህራን አማርኛ ቋሚነት የለውም፤ ዛሬ

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<sup>134</sup> Messay Kebede 1999, 292.

<sup>135</sup> Apte 1985, 16.

<sup>136</sup> Amharic is not spoken everywhere in Ethiopia, though it is considerably widespread. For a discussion on Amharic's place in Ethiopia today, refer to Bahru Zewde's essay: 'The Changing Fortunes of the Amharic Language: *Lingua Franca* or Instrument of Domination?', Bahru Zewde 2008.

<sup>137</sup> 'Amharic', *EAE*, I (2003), 232b (D. Appleyard).

እንደምናየው እንደምንሰማው ሁሉ አማርኛ እጅግ ሰፊ ቋንቋ ነውና ከያውራጃው ከያህገሩ ተለቅሞ ተቃርሞ እንደ ግእዝ ቢጣፍ መዝገበ ቃሉ ከግእዝ ቃላት ቢበልጥ እንጂ አያንስም<sup>138</sup>

Old men who know the history of Amharic say that it is used in four different ways. The first is by the house of clergy (church), the second by the palace, the third by merchants. The fourth is by the people of the country(side). The church's Amharic is defined and founded on grammatical rules, and meanings. No other language besides Gə'əz can infiltrate it. The people's Amharic however does not have a guardian teacher or rules for its verbs and so through the years other languages add to it. It is not static like the clergy's Amharic and it changes both in written and in spoken form; as we see and hear today Amharic is an incredibly vast language. If it was written down from all the districts and continents its dictionary would be larger than a Gə'əz dictionary.

The main idea here is that the language's defining trait is its malleability, and that it continually adopts and expands itself by incorporating words from various languages.

The anthropologist Simon Messing explains the grammar of the language as follows considering the multiple meanings Amharic words have. He says:

[t]he Amharic language lends itself readily to puns and hidden meanings, since many verbs can have double or triple interpretations due to the hidden variations in the basic verbal stem and the absence or presence of gemination of some consonants.<sup>139</sup>

A third remark is made by another linguist, who claims that the Amharic speaker uses the language's faculties for the sake of ambiguity.<sup>140</sup> Marew Alemu argues that especially in matters pertaining to political power and social order, the users of the Amharic language are enthusiastic about hiding meaning.<sup>141</sup> He makes a similar conclusion in an article about Amharic taboo words where he lays out five categories in which Amharic users use replacement words to avoid mentioning things explicitly. These categories are matters of respect, fear, disgust, tongue-twisters, and phrases with sexual content.

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<sup>138</sup> *Aläqa* Kidanä Wäld Kəfle n.d., 103.

<sup>139</sup> Messing 1956, 69.

<sup>140</sup> On the topic of ambiguity, there is another scholar who has published a detailed linguistic exploration of ambiguity in Amharic where he also delves into the ambiguity in Amharic idioms, metaphors and expressions. See Getahun Amare 2001, 34.

<sup>141</sup> Marew Alemu 2020 (personal conversation).

For example, he argues that Amharic speakers hide the actual word for terms such as Holy Communion,<sup>142</sup> giving birth,<sup>143</sup> when calling one another respectfully,<sup>144</sup> and when talking about death.<sup>145</sup> He also mentions how people do not call diseases by their names,<sup>146</sup> nor animals that bring them harm.<sup>147</sup> There are also various words used to describe poverty without calling it poverty, but rather ‘being naked’.<sup>148</sup> The list continues. Considering the vast extent of the replacing words that are used in the language, he concludes that Amharic speakers are drawn to concealing, rather than to explicitly stating ideas. According to Marew, Amharic speakers use the language for the sake of ambiguity.<sup>149</sup> Though this argument is lacking in empirical research that may help the argument, it does come to a conclusion shared by several other scholars of Amharic language and culture.<sup>150</sup>

In the case of humor and language, Victor Raskin introduces the term *bona fide* and *non bona fide* communication arguing that humor ‘unlike lying; another non-bona-fide mode of communication, is cooperative’; he presents humor as though it were playfulness.<sup>151</sup> The Amharic equivalent for the word humor is ጩዋታ *čäwata*, a term broadly invoking playfulness. Before defining this term, it is important to note that the Amharic term for the word ‘joke’ is ቀልድ *qäld*. It is defined as making fun of another, mocking, lying and teasing for the sake of drawing laughter.<sup>152</sup> Yet, the word *čäwata* is the better fit as a character trait, a psychological and social phenomenon, and as being translatable equivalent to the word ‘humor’.

According to the dictionary of Dästa Täkläwäld, the word *čäwata* has the following selected usages and definitions.

**ጩዋታ:** *čäwata* «ነገር፣ ፋጫ ልፊያ ዘፈን ዋዛ ፈዛዛ ሣቕ ሥላቅ፣ ኳስ መወርወር» ‘of talk, racing, playful wrestling (jest), music, banter, laughter, joke (mockery), ball throwing’

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<sup>142</sup> Marew Alemu 2001, 1, 32.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>147</sup> Id.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>149</sup> Marew Alemu 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>150</sup> See Levine 2014.

<sup>151</sup> Aarons 2017, 181.

<sup>152</sup> Käšate Bərhan Täsämma 1958/1959, 351; Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 1060.

**ጨውቴ:** *čäwwäte* «ጨዋታ አዋቂ ሰው» ‘one who knows how to speak’  
**ጨዋታ / ጨዎታ:** *čäwata / čäwota* «የመምህራን ንግግር» ‘speech of teachers’  
**ተጫወተ:** *täčawwätä* «ሥጋዊና መንፈሳዊ ነገር ተናገረ፤ ተላፋ፤ ዘፈነ [...] አላገጠ» ‘he spoke of the secular and the spiritual, engaging in playful wrestling, to sing, to make fun of’;  
 «ተነጋገረ፤ ጨዋታ ተመላለሰ ተለዋወጠ» ‘to have a dialogue, to engage in playful dialogue’  
**መጫወት:** *mäččawät* «መናገር መላፋት መሮጥ» ‘to speak, to wrestle, to run’  
**ጭውውት:** *čəwəwwät* «ንግግር» ‘dialogue’  
**መጨዋወት:** *mäččäwawät* «መነጋገር፤ እንዲህ ሆነ መባባል» ‘to have a dialogue, to speak on what has happened’  
**አጫወተ:** *aččawwätä* «ወግ አወጋ ነገረ አነጋገረ፤ [...] አሣቀ ደስ አሰኘ» ‘to talk, to report, to have others talk about something, to make laugh, to make happy’  
**አጫዋች:** *aččawač* «አነጋጋሪ አሥቂኝ ጥርስ የማያስከድን አለቃ ገብረ ሐናን [...] የመሰለ የጨዋታ ፈላስፋ፤ [...] ቀልደኛ» ‘topic of conversation, one who makes others laugh, one who is hilarious, one who is like *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna*, a philosopher of humor, one who knows jokes’.<sup>153</sup>

The Amharic dictionary by the ELRC defines the word as the following:

**ጨዋታ:** *čäwata* «1. ንግግር፥ ውይይት 2. ልፊያ፥ ድርያ፥ ቀልድ 3፥ የሚያስቅ፥ የሚያዘናና ወሬ ወይም ንግግር»  
 ‘1. speech, discussion 2. jest, wrestling, joke 3. funny, amusing talk or speech’  
**የጨዋታ:** *yäčäwata* «የቀልድ፥ የምር ያልሆነ» ‘of joke, something that is not serious’  
**ጭውውት:** *čəwəwwät* «ወሬ፤ የርስ በርስ ውይይት ወይም ንግግር» ‘talk, dialogue or speech’  
**ተጫወተ:** *täčawwätä* «1. ተነጋገረ፥ ተወያየ 2. ተላፋ፥ ተቃለደ» ‘1. to speak, to discuss 2. to jest, to make jokes’  
**ተጫወተበት:** *täčawwätäbbät* «ቀለደበት፥ አሾፈበት» ‘he made jokes on someone, he mocked someone’  
**መጫወቻ:** *mäččäwäčä* «መቀለጃ፥ ማሾፊያ» ‘one who is joked on, one who is mocked’  
**ተጫዋች:** *tačawač* «ቀልደኛ፥ ጨዋታ አዋቂ» ‘one who knows jokes, one who knows humor’.<sup>154</sup>

Käsate Bərhan Täsämma defines the word *čäwata* and its usages as follows.

**ጨውተ:** *čäwwätä* «(መጫወት) ልዩ ልዩ ዘፈንን ተጫወተ፥ በገናን፥ ሰንጠረዥን፥ ገበጣን ተጫወተ» ‘(to play) he played different songs, he played the harp, chess and *gäbäta*<sup>155</sup>’; «በድኅ ላይ ክፉ ሥራን ሠራ በድኅ ላይ ተጫወተ» ‘he harmed the poor, he played on the poor’

<sup>153</sup> Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 601.

<sup>154</sup> Ethiopian Languages Research Center (ELRC) 2001, 571.

<sup>155</sup> An Ethiopian board game. ‘Gäbäta’, *EAE*, II (2005), 598b–599a (R. Pankhurst).

**ጨወታ:** *čäwäta* «ጨወታን፣ ልዩ ልዩ ጉዳይን በቃል መነጋገር ከጓደኛው ከዘመዱ ጋራ ዐሳብን በንግግር መገለጥ»  
‘to verbally, orally, express thoughts of various matters with friends or relatives’

**ጨወት:** *čäwät* «ኳስን ገና ጨወታን መጫወት፣ ወይም ሰንጠረዥ፣ በገናን፣ ገበጣን መጫወት» ‘to play ball or field hockey or chess, harp, *gäbäta*’

**ጭውት:** *ጭውውት*፤ *čəwwat, čəwəwwat* «የልብ ዐሳብን በንግግር መገለጥ፣ መጨዋወት፣ ወይም የፊደል ቃል ድምጥ ንግግር» ‘to express one’s thoughts in speech, to discuss, or the sound of an alphabet, speech’

**መጫወቻ:** *mäččawäčä* «የልጆች ልዩ ልዩ መጫወቻ፣ ወይም የጨዋ ልጅ መጫወቻ ሰንጠረዥ፣ በገና፣ መሰንቆ፣ ወይም በነገር ተገባቢዎች በጥያቄና መልስ የሚጫወቱበት መጫወቻ ነገር» ‘things children play with, what *čäwa* children play with chess, harp, *mäsänqo*<sup>156</sup> or things they play with in question and answer form’

**ይጫወቱአል:** *yäččawwätu’al* «ሰው ቃል ለቃል ተነጋገረ ተጫወተ» ‘man talked and discussed verbally’<sup>157</sup>

Since the definition for *mäččawäčä* by Käsate Bərhan uses *čäwa*, it is defined to see if *čäwa* and *čäwata* are related. Below are some of the definitions listed for *čäwa*.<sup>158</sup>

**ጨዋ:** *čäwa* «የከበረ የትልቅ ወገንን የኾነ፣ በትውልዱ፣ በግብሩ ጨዋ የኾነ ሰው የጨዋ ልጅ» ‘of great family and lineage, one who is decent by birth or by work, a child of a *čäwa*’; «ያልተማረ፣ የማይጽፍ፣ የማያነብ ጨዋ፣ ወይም መሀይምን ይባላል» ‘uneducated, unable to write, unable to read, is called *čäwa* or illiterate’; «ዕድሜና ዕውቀት ያለው እገሌ በዕድሜው ጨዋ የኾነ ነው ይባላል» ‘one who has age and knowledge, one who has age is called he is *čäwa*’.<sup>159</sup>

And finally, here is the Gə‘əz word for *čäwata* according to Kidanä Wäld Kəfle.

**ጸዊት:** *šäwit* as: «መጮኽ፣ መልፈፍ፣ መንገር ማስታወቅ፣ ያዋጅ የትእዛዝ። [...] መሣቅ መጫወት፣ መንጫጫት፣ የብዙ ሰው። [...] መናገር።» ‘to scream, to broadcast, to tell, to inform, of declaration, of orders, to laugh, to play, to make noise, of a lot of people, to speak’.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>156</sup> Single stringed musical instrument, often used by musicians known as *Azmari* who also use playful poetry and recitations to express opinions. See Ashenafi Kebedde 1975.

<sup>157</sup> Käsate Bərhan Täsämma 1958/1959, 1336.

<sup>158</sup> Kidanä Wäld Kəfle defines the word *ጸዊ* *šewa* as *ምርኮ፣ ምርኮኛ፣ ግዙተኛ፣ የምርኮ ማኅበር፣ ምርኮነት፣ ምርኮኛነት*, ‘enslaved, a community of slaves, being a slave, the condition of being enslaved’. This word was looked up in hopes that it was related to *ጨዋ čäwa*. It appears not. Kidanä Wäld Kəfle 1955/1956, 773.

<sup>159</sup> Käsate Bərhan Täsämma 1958/1959, 1336.

<sup>160</sup> Kidanä Wäld Kəfle 1955/1956, 748.

All in all, the definitions given for *čäwata* are the following: rhetoric, joke telling, playing games, jesting, having knowledge of language, mocking, dialectics, teaching, wit, and causing laughter. Since the definitions indicate a link between humor and oratory skills, the use of humor seems a key aspect of people's speeches, declarations, conversations and persuasive dialogues.

The wide applicability of the word *čäwata* is also demonstrative of how Amharic equips speakers with the ability to state different things at once. This is regardless of whether or not the speaker is being humorous. Take the word *čäwa* for example. It can mean both illiterate and belonging to noble birth.<sup>161</sup> If someone were to call another a *čäwa*, it would be difficult to decipher if it was meant as an insult or a praise.

In addition, irony and sarcasm were defined in the previous chapter. Their Amharic equivalents are ሞጻት *məṣṣät*, አሽሙር *ašmur* or ሽሙጥ *šəmutt*. *Məṣṣät* is irony proper and is a popular Amharic literary technique. It is, like its English counterpart, invoked as an opposition or contradiction to something. Being witty, and knowing the multiple meanings of words, puns, however, are all categorizable under knowing *čäwata* in Amharic. Keeping in mind that satire was defined as comedy of criticism in the previous chapter, it can be safely categorized under *čäwata* as well. We will see in the following two sub-sections that Ethiopian *čäwata* is not mere cynicism and mockery, and that it engages people in critical thinking, much like satire.

In conclusion, the thesis proceeds with the accepted use of *čäwata* as humor's Amharic equivalent. Beyond the language's words which can relay multiple meanings, sophisticated Amharic speakers use *čäwata* for critical as well as persuasive purposes. This is not to mean that humor is the only way of self-expression, but one that is appreciated, and used for social and political functions.

#### **1.4.2 Some *čäwata* from Ethiopian history and historiography: A survey of selected works**

Many writers of Ethiopian history utilize idiosyncratic phrases, humorous anecdotes and jokes in their historical works. Some also use poems and phrases uttered by Ethiopians to show public opinions of the times they are investigating. However, these are used in various forms to complement their historical research but not as serious parts of their historical investigations.

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<sup>161</sup> Members of monarchic families are educated in reading and writing and so it is unclear why the word also means illiterate. For example, Emperor Tewodros is spoken highly of for his education. Empress Taytu, among many things, knew how to read and write Amharic and had mastered Gə'əz well. They might ofcourse be exceptions in light of the vast members of Ethiopian royal families. Bairu Tafla 2020 (personal conversation).

Below is a short assemblage of some notable Ethiopian historians and scholars, and their uses of *čäwata* as historical references.<sup>162</sup>

The first cases to observe are Emperor Tewodros’s chronicles and historical works. One chronicle written by *Däbtära Zännäb* is short and descriptive of only the first five years of the emperor’s reign.<sup>163</sup> Others, written by *Aläqa Wäldä Maryam* and presumably<sup>164</sup> by *Aläqa Lämläm*, are complete works of the emperor’s life and rule. Poems, couplets, proverbs and *čäwata* are particularly present in *Aläqa Lämläm*’s work, but anecdotal and humorous references are present in all three chronicles.

Here is one example from *Aläqa Lämläm*’s work:

4.2.1 ደግሞ አጤ ቴዎድሮስ ሰውን እያስያዙ ሲደበድቡ ሳሉ አንድ መነኩሴ ትምህርት የሌለው ተማርኮ መጣ በል ያዘው ሲሉት ጊዜ ጃንሆይ እግዚር ያሳየዎ ቁስ ነኝ አላቸው ንጉሡም ቁስ ተሆንህ ዳዊት ቁጥሩ ስንት ነው አሉት እርሱም ጃንሆይ ይማሩኝ እንጅ የሜዳ ቁስ ነኝ አላውቅም ሲላቸው ጊዜ ንጉሡ ሳቅ ይዘላቸው አፈዎን ይዘው ዝም አሉ የሜዳ ቁስም ከመደብደብ አመለጡ።  
165

And again when Emperor Tewodros was getting people caught and beaten one monk with no education was captured and brought, when the emperor said to hold him he said ‘Oh Emperor, may the Lord show you, I am a priest’ and the king said ‘if you are a priest what is the number of the Psalms’ and when he responded by saying ‘forgive me Emperor I am a priest of the field I do not know’ [you] the king were in laughter and you held your mouth and kept quiet and the priest of the field escaped from being beaten.

In his book, *History of the Oromo (from 1500–1900)*, ‘Aṣme Giyorgis narrates an amusing tale of two men’s conversation about a battle between the two great kingmakers towards the end of the Era of Princes in the nineteenth century.<sup>166</sup> These are *Ras Ali* of Wällo

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<sup>162</sup> For an analysis of historical writing in Ethiopia, see James De Lorenzi’s *Guardians of The Tradition: Historians and Historical Writing in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, De Lorenzi 2015.

<sup>163</sup> Zännäb 1902.

<sup>164</sup> This assumption is suggested by Professor Bairu Tafla. Bairu Tafla 2020.

<sup>165</sup> Fusella 1959, 24.

<sup>166</sup> The author of this edition, Fəṣsum Wäldämaryam, has replaced *Galla* by *Oromo* as the word *Galla* is no longer in use for its derogatory connotations. The title he gave his edition is የዓፅመ ጊዮርጊስ ገብረ መሢህ ድርሰቶች: የኦሮሞ ታሪክ (ከ1500–1900) (ክፍል አንድ እና ሁለት) *Yä ‘aṣmä Giyorgis Gäbrä Mäsih Dərsätoč: Yä ‘oromo tarik (kä1500–1900) (Kəfl And Ənna Hulätt)* ‘Aṣme Giyorgis Gäbrä Mäsih’s works: The History of the Oromo (from 1500–1900) (Part one and two)’. The original text however is found in two parts. The first part is የጋላ ታሪክ *Yägalla Tarik*



and *Däggäzmač* Wəbe of Səmen and Təgray. He uses their conversation to emphasize the confusing nature of their battle:

4.4.2 በራስ አሊ ዘመን ስሜንንና ትግሬን የሚገዛ ደጃች ውቤ የሚባል በአሮሞች ተቆርቋሮ አቡነ ሰላማን ይዞ ራስ አሊን ሊወጋ ዘመተ ደብረ ታቦር አጠገብ አጅባር ላይ ተዋጉ። ራስ አሊም እስከ የነጃ እስከ ገረገራ ሸሹ። ደጃች ውቤንና አቡነን ብሩ አሊጋዝ ማረካቸው። ድል የራስ አሊ ነበረ። ፩ (1) ሰው ላንዱ ወሬ ጠየቀው መለሰለት ሲል ራስ አሊና ደጃች ውቤ ተዋጉ። እህሳ አለው ራስ አሊ ሸሹ። ደጃች ውቤ ተማረኩ ተያዙ አለው በወግ አታወራም ቢለው እነሱ በወግ ያልሆኑትን እኔ ምን ብዬ ላውጋው አለ።<sup>167</sup>

During *Ras Ali*'s time, the ruler of Səmen and Təgray, *Däggäzmač* Wəbe, upset about the Oromo, took *Abunä Sälama* with him to fight *Ras Ali*. They fought in Ağbar near Däbrä Tabor. *Ras Ali* fled until Yänäğa and Gärägära. *Däggäzmač* Wəbe and the bishop were captured by Bərru Aligaz. Victory was *Ras Ali*'s. One man asked another for news and the other responded saying '*Ras Ali* and *Däggäzmač* Wəbe fought'. And the former said, 'and so', the other responded '*Ras Ali* fled. *Däggäzmač* Wəbe was captured'. The former said, 'come on, narrate properly?', the other man responded, 'how could I narrate properly what they have not done properly themselves?'.<sup>168</sup>

This is demonstrative of how locals make jokes about their political (military) leaders.

'*Aşme* presents another anecdote to highlight the inter-mixed ethnic as well as religious make-up of Ethiopians. Though it appears '*Aşme* is almost lamenting the absence of a proper delineation between the different religious and ethnic groups of Ethiopia, the joke he uses presents the humorous way Ethiopians explain their lives. He writes,

4.2.3 በዚያው ወራት ፪ (2) ሰዎች ዋድላ ገረገራ ከሚባል ሀገር ተገናኙ። ፩ ከቤገምድር ፩ ከየጁ ናቸው። ቤገምድራው የጁየውን ጠየቀው ሲል ምን ጎሣ ነህ ብሎ አባቴ ኦሮሞ ነው እናቴ ክርስቲያን ነበረች ዛሬ ወደ እስላምነት ታስባለች አለው። በጌምድራውም አለው። በዚህ ዘር ሲቆጣጠሩ ተዛምደው ሳሉ ፩፡፩ን (አንዱ አንዱን) ጠየቀው ሲል። ከቶ በፍርድ ቀን በኋላይቱ ዕለት ከክርስቲያንና ከእስላም ማነው ወደ ገነት የሚገባው። ሌላውም መለሰ ከ፪፡፩ (ከሁለቱ አንዱ) አሩን ይበላል አለ ይባላል።

In those same months two men met in a land called Wadla Gärägära. One is from Bägəmədr and one is from Yäğü. The one from Bägəmədr asked the one from Yäğü what ethnicity he is from and the other responded 'my father is Oromo my mother was a Christian but now she thinks of converting

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'The History of the Galla', the second is የሸዋ ነገሥት ታሪክ *Yäšäwa Nägästä Tarik* 'The History of the Kings of Šäwa'. Bairu Tafla combined the two and titled his edition *Aşma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Galla (from 1500-1900)*. Bairu Tafla 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>167</sup> Fəşşum Wäldämaryam 2017, 228.

<sup>168</sup> Bairu Tafla has translated this by using 'seriously' and Tsehai Berhane-Selassie uses 'order'. I have opted to use 'proper', convinced that it is closer to the Amharic original. Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018, 68.

to Islam’. The one from Bāgemædr also told him. As they were counting their lineage, they found out they were related. And one asked the other, ‘upon judgement day, would the Muslims enter heaven or the Christians?’ The other responded, ‘one of the two is definitely going to suffer’.<sup>169</sup>

A third example from ‘Aṣme’s book demonstrates how humor was also used in traditional historiography to rebuke other historians. This itself results in a humorous presentation of the history ‘Aṣme is trying to correct. Here is the history of *Aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl*, the emperor in whose reign Ahmād Grañ would rise and would bring devastation to the king and to Christian Ethiopia:

4.2.4 በኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ አጼ ንብሉ<sup>170</sup> ድንግልን እጅግ አክፍተው ያጸድቋቸዋል ከንጽሕትም ማርያም ጋራ ወዳጅ ያደርጓቸዋል። መልአኩ ራጉኤል መልከተኛ ይሆናቸዋል ኢትዮጵያንም አጠፏት ይላሉ። እንዲህ ሲሉ ባካን እንደ ሴት ደከምን መዋጋት እንዳንረሳ ፊትና ጋረ ገንዳ ሁነን እንዋጋ ብለው ተዋጉ ጦርንም ሊመጣ ለመኑ ብለው።<sup>171</sup>

In Ethiopian history they terribly sanctify Emperor Ləbnä Dəngəl and make him appear as though he were companion with the Virgin Mary. The angel Ragu’el becomes his messenger, and they say he provoked the ruin of Ethiopia by praying for war by saying, we have been pampered, we are weak like women, so that we do not forget battle do send us trouble’.

‘Aṣme is not convinced that this is what actually happened, and his comment is a mockery of the way his predecessors have written this particular history.

Another historian is Märsə‘e Ḥazän Wäldä Qirqos. His book *Of What I Saw and Heard* is a first-hand account of the time from the last few years of Emperor Mənilək II’s until Ləḡ Iyyasu’s rule. It contains a wealth of popular sayings and quotes, which are used to explain primary observations made by the author. Among the proverbs, poems and sayings in the book, there are some witty and sarcastic *čäwata* included. For example, upon the demotion of *Ras* Abate from his territory of Kāmbata, his troops deserted him. Alone now, he returned to Addis Abäba and submitted himself to Ləḡ Iyyasu, the uncrowned ruler of Ethiopia from 1911 until 1916, who imprisoned him. At the same time, *Däḡḡazmač* Abrəha was released from prison and would later become Minister of the Interior. The public, writes Märsə‘e Ḥazän, ‘did not approve of this and so a couplet was composed’.

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<sup>169</sup> Literal translation for this is ‘one of the two will eat excrement’, but the phrase is generally used, until today, to denote heavy suffering.

<sup>170</sup> This may appear to be an error in the text for those used to ልብሉ ድንግል Ləbnä Dəngəl instead of ንብሉ ድንግል Nəblä Dəngəl. But this variant is attested in some instances. Refer to: Solomon Gebreyes et al., 2019.

<sup>171</sup> Fəṣṣum Wäldämaryam 2017, 54.

4.2.5 ከትኩት ብላ ሳቆች ምድር ጥርስ አውጥታ፣ አባተ ሲታሰር፣ አብርሃ ሲፈታ<sup>172</sup>

Sprouting off teeth, the earth laughed heartily; At [Abatä's] imprisonment and [Abrəha's] release

Märsə‘e Ḥazän also has a few poems recited by Empress Taytu upon the death of her husband Emperor Mənilək II. He was not given an open state burial for fear of political tumult following news of his death. The historian Bairu Tafla holds that succession is Ethiopia’s consistently recurring headache.<sup>173</sup> Therefore, Emperor Mənilək had to be buried in secret at Ba’ata Lämāryam church in Addis Abäba with only his daughter Zäwditu, and his wife Empress Taytu present. Taytu lamented:

4.2.6 እምቢልታ ማስነፋት ነጋሪት ማስመታት ነበረ ስራችን፣ ሰው መሆን አይቀርም ደረሰ ተራችን።

Ours it was to command the [*əmbilta*]<sup>174</sup> to blare and the [*nägarit*]<sup>175</sup> to beat; Being mortals though, our hour has come<sup>176</sup>

On Empress Zäwditu (r. 1916–1930), it is worth mentioning a popular couplet about her death that is still in circulation in Addis Abäba today. It goes:

4.2.7 ድሮም ከጥንቱ ድመት አይሆናቸው፣ ንግሥት ዘውዲቱን አነር ገደላቸው

She didn’t like cats even in the past, Empress Zäwditu has been killed by an *anär*

This poetic criticism is a play on the word *Anär* which in Amharic is the name for one species of cats. There was a popular belief at the time that a Swedish doctor called Haner who used to work at the Betä-Sayda hospital was responsible for the queen’s death. The doctor’s name resembles the Amharic word *anär*. Ethiopians used this similarity in pronunciation of a word in two languages to make their theory known.

A third example is listed to show how Märsə‘e Ḥazän uses popular sayings to demonstrate popular understandings of political succession and predictions. After the death of Ras Mäk<sup>w</sup>ännən, Märsə‘e Ḥazän has recorded that people said,

4.2.8 የሐበሻ ሁሉ ማረፊያ ነበረ፣ አልጋውን [መኰንን] ይዞት ተቀበረ።

He was the repose for all of Ethiopia; Mäk<sup>w</sup>ännən is now buried, taking along with him the throne<sup>177</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Hailu Habtu 2004, 106.

<sup>173</sup> Bairu Tafla 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>174</sup> *Əmbilta* is a long trumpet like flute. ‘Əmbilta’, *EAE*, II (2005), 273a–274b (C. T. Kimberlin).

<sup>175</sup> *Nägarit* is a kettledrum. ‘Nägarit’, *EAE*, III (2007), 1104b (C. T. Kimberlin).

<sup>176</sup> Hailu Habtu 2004, 136.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Märsə‘e H̄azän adds that this is an ‘allusion to the popular expectation then that he would succeed Emperor Mənilək’.<sup>178</sup>

The popular expressions in forms of poetry in *Of What I Saw and Heard* are used to scoff at political decisions, and to mark people’s expectations. They were also used by all Ethiopians, including the ruling elite, to express their emotions and lamentations. But again, beyond being the additional information to the main history being narrated, these are not investigated for much else.

Bahru Zewde is the historian who has admitted to our endeavor to study popular opinion carefully, though perhaps unintentionally. He writes the following about *Ləğ* Iyyasu,

The charges of apostasy levelled against [Iyyasu] during his overthrow in 1916 clung to him for a long time, and his playboy manners and inordinate sexual appetites have filled the history books. [...] Popular tradition has been fairer. His handsome features and his oratorical gifts and athletic exploits captured the public imagination. Even his notorious dissoluteness was viewed with considerable indulgence. It was attributed to his youth, and he was expected to shed it and to become more purposeful with maturity.<sup>179</sup>

This is important as it establishes the balancing power of multiple historical sources, and also highlights the value Ethiopians attach to oratory skills.

Perhaps a supplement to this narration could be the popular poem that goes,

4.2.9 አባ ግራኝ ሞተ የሆዴ ወዳጅ፤ የሚያበላኝ ጮማ የሚያጠጣኝ ጠጅ»

*Abba Grañ*<sup>180</sup> has died, the friend to my belly; He used to feed me white meat and *täğğ* ‘honey-wine’

This is still recounted today. In contrast, people also recount the following about *Ləğ* Iyyasu’s successor, Emperor H̄aylä Šəllase I,

4.2.10 በተፈሪ ጠፋ ፍርፋሪ

Even crumbs have disappeared during Täfäri’s time

Contextually, these last two couplets are about the disappearance of military banquets and feasts that were a serious part of the political and military structure of Ethiopia in the nineteenth century. These disappeared for various reasons, among which was the centralizing

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<sup>178</sup> Hailu Habtu 2004, 19.

<sup>179</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 121.

<sup>180</sup> This is one of the horse-names of *Ləğ* Iyyasu. The other is *Abba Ṭena*. Mahtämä-Sellase Wälda-Mäsqäl and Bairu Tafla 1969, 7, 210.

process of the emperors starting with Emperor Tewodros II.<sup>181</sup> This process led to the creation of a state controlled military force which sidelined traditional warriors. Banquets were necessary for feeding the traditional troops. Both became obsolete after Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase's rise to power.

The historian Bairu Tafla's works are also complemented with poetic and witty expressions. For example, consider his article 'Two of the Last Provincial Kings of Ethiopia'. Prior to the Battle of Āmbabo in the Ethiopian winter of 1881, two of Ethiopia's last provincial kings, King Täklä Ḥaymanot and King Mənilək II were trying to expand their territorial boundaries and their political powers as a result. Their generals, *Ras* Dārāso and *Ras* Gobāna respectively, collided. Bairu narrates:

4.2.11 [*Ras*] Dārāso went to [Ĝ]imma in late 1881 or early 1882, to receive homage and collect tribute from the Sultan of the territory, Tulu, often known as Sultan Abba [Ĝəfar]. This coincided with the arrival of *Ras* Gobāna and his army from the north with the same purpose. For a while confrontation seemed imminent but considering the fact that he was too far away from Däbrä-[Marqos] to hope for reinforcement, *Ras* Dārāso withdrew, warning his opponent that he would return better armed sometime in the future. The [Goḡḡam] army left hurriedly, leaving behind the tribute they had collected, and it was at this time that the following couplet was sung in Śāwa:

እንግዲህ ጎጃግኞች በምን ይሰቃሉ

ጥርሳቸውን ጅማ ላይ ጥለው ሑዱ አሉ።

How will the people of Goḡḡam laugh from now on?

They say they went away and left their teeth [ivory] in [Ĝ]imma.<sup>182</sup>

This poem's humorous line rests on the word 'teeth' which can mean both ivory, and human teeth. People were mocking *Ras* Dārāso and his men for fleeing and for having abandoned their booty.

Another historian to consider is Tsehai Berhane-Selassie. Her book *Ethiopian Warriorhood: Defence, Land & Society: 1800–1941* contains perhaps by far the closest a historian has come to highlighting the value of humor to Ethiopians. An example is one of the games young boys play for the holiday of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor. Nationally known as *Buhe* or *Hoyya-Hoyye*, this is celebrated towards the end of the rainy season of Ethiopia. Today, part of the celebration is that young boys go around neighbourhoods

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<sup>181</sup> For a discussion of military banquets and the *čäwa* military-politico structure, refer to Tsehai Berhane-Selassie's *Ethiopian Warriorhood*. Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018.

<sup>182</sup> Bairu Tafla 1973, 11, 37.

making praise-poetry to earn bread or money. In the past, these games were designed to develop children’s ‘sharp wits and a politico-militaristic sense of obedience, loyalty and self-sufficiency’.<sup>183</sup> Tsehai argues that these ‘wet season games trained the young in mental agility, witticism, military skills and politics.’<sup>184</sup> On *Buhe*, Tsehai adds, the lyrics ‘teased and begged for their “usual share” [...] of bread and attention’.<sup>185</sup> The following is still repeated today and is part of the lyrics of *Hoya-Hoye* games:

4.2.12 ሆያ ሆዩ ጉዴ

ጨዋታ ነው ልማዴ

Hoyya hoyye, my woes,

čäwata is my hobby

This is repeated after a particular witty poem, invoked to remind the listener that it was just a joke, a playful remark, and that there is no need to be angry.

Other games are the traditional *gänna* (field hockey) games. Tsehai explains the value of humor in this particular game as follows:

Team leaders took credit and praise for winning and blame for losing, suffering jeering and teasing. Teasing after [*gänna*] games resulted in ‘masters’ and servants insulting each other, and the social impression, especially the jeering that followed the game, remained for a long time, exaggerating players’ actual prowess or weakness. In some contexts, the insults signaled that ‘masters’ and servants were related with each other over these war-like confrontations, and the insults became challenges or threats to their enemies. Poems touching on the looks, social backgrounds or character of people spared neither team leaders nor emperors.<sup>186</sup>

An example is a joke made on Emperor Mönilək’s protruding front teeth after one such game:

4.2.13 በሰማይ የሚጸድቅ በምድር ያስታውቃል

ተከንፈሩ ዘልቆ ጥርሱ ጣይ ይሞቃል

You can tell someone who is going to heaven

His teeth pass his lips to enjoy the warmth of the sun<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018, 145.

<sup>184</sup> Id.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>187</sup> Id.

Even the emperor was made fun of for his looks. And similar to *buhe* games, teasers would add the following lines to remind those being teased not to get angry.

4.2.14 በገና ጨዋታ፣ አይቆጠም ጌታ

In the *gänna* game (*čäwata*); Master does not get upset<sup>188</sup>

According to Tsehai, humorous dialogue, teasing and expressing oneself was encouraged in youth in nineteenth century Ethiopia. This was a trait that developed with them as they joined the military-political hierarchy. It was one of the tools they were expected to use in voicing their communities' concerns to rulers in various public gatherings. Through Tsehai's investigation, students of Ethiopian history are led into a country where a monarchic state made room for grass-roots opinions, often through poetry and humor, and a society that raised its youth with the utmost faith that they will grow up to become *čäwa* rulers who are socially responsible even later as they rise up in rank. One more humorous anecdote from Tsehai's book is an example of the ways humor was used to encourage people to acts of bravery, in battle and elsewhere:

4.2.15 ባትዋጋ እንኳን በል እንገፍ እንገፍ፣ ያባትህ ጋሻ ትህዋኑ ይርገፍ

Stomp around, even if you don't fight; Let the bugs fall off your father's shield<sup>189</sup>

The jurist Aberra Jembere lends us insight into the ordinary Ethiopian's oratory skills in litigation and affairs of the law in his book, *An Introduction to the Legal History of Ethiopia 1434–1974*. Here too, humor plays a significant role as a persuasive rhetoric device. Since his book is a historical investigation of law in Ethiopia, Aberra discusses the infamous road-side courts and litigation of pre-1960 Ethiopia. He presents court cases where women, youth and older men are all engaged in traditional litigation equipped with poetic and humorous Amharic, aided with proverbs, witty remarks, insults, and mockery.

He writes what some have observed about these Ethiopians in relation to litigation: 'Plowden called litigation the favorite sport of young men and children',<sup>190</sup> and 'the humblest Ethiopian seemed able to speak well in court'.<sup>191</sup> Aberra gives examples of Ethiopians using wit in criminal investigations and in court. Jon Abbink has written that in 'nineteenth and early twentieth century travellers' literatures, highland Ethiopians were frequently described as a

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<sup>188</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018, 153.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>190</sup> Aberra Jembere 2000, 32.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 33.

people deeply preoccupied with law, often engaged in litigation, and as imbued with a strong sense of justice and fairness, despite the strongly hierarchical and authoritarian nature of their society and political system'.<sup>192</sup> Aberra is convinced of this view too. He argues that although hierarchy based 'on social standing (nobles vs. commoners and serfs) and on divinely ordained power (monarch) was pervasive and recognized, there was a minimum conception of 'rights', of justice which could be demanded by anyone'.<sup>193</sup>

Here is an example from Aberra's book which presents the value of wit and strong knowledge of Amharic grammar in matters of law:

4.2.16 In a certain place, there were three well-known thieves who brought about untold harm to the people of the community. Their names were [Lämma], [Bitäw] and [Ĝänbär]. They lived in the community pretending to be law-abiding citizens. The people tolerated them quite a long time for fear of vengeance. However, in one of the public meetings, a certain witty man declared that in our community, the thief is flourishing ([lämma]), he better stop it ([bitäw yätäw]), if he does not, are we supposed to be kept on jammed in such a meeting every day ([ġänbär bäsärräqä qutr]).<sup>194</sup>

Another author who has written on traditional litigation is Šibäši Lämman. His book *ተጠየቅ Tātäyyäq* 'Be Asked' portrays traditional litigation as the favorite pastime of Ethiopians.<sup>195</sup> He explains why by saying:

የጥንቱ ችሎት በተነሳ ቁጥር [...] የሚነገርለት አንድ ነገር አለ። ይኸውም ተውኔታዊ ባህርይ የነበረው የከላሽና የተከላሽ አለባበስ፣ አቋቋም፣ ዘንግ አያያዝ፣ የሰውነት እንቅስቃሴ፣ የነገር አቀራረብና ባጠቃላይም ሞቅና ደመቅ ያለው ጥምር የአሞጋገቱ ስልት ነው። ተሟግቶ ለመርታት፣ ረትቶም እርካታ፣ ዝናና ክብርን ለመቀዳጀት በቅድሚያ የተሟጋቹን ንቃት፣ ብልህነትና ብርታት ይጠይቃል። ከዚህም የተነሳ ከሰውነት እንቅስቃሴው ሌላ፣ በተለይ የመሟገቻው ቋንቋ በተዋቡ ቃላት፣ በምሳሌያዊ አነጋገር፣ በተረት፣ በአፈታሪክ፣ በእንቅስቃሴና በመሳሰሉት ዘዴዎች የበለፀገና ለዛማ መሆን ይገባው ነበር። የነዚህ ሁሉ ውሁድ የችሎት ነፃ ትርኢት ነው እንግዲህ። ወጪ ወራጁን፣ አላፊ አግዳሚውን ሁሉ ይማርክና ያማልል የነበረው።<sup>196</sup>

Whenever we mention the old court [...] there is one thing that should be mentioned. The way the accuser and accused dressed, the way they stood, the way they held their sticks, their bodily movements, the way they present their cases and in general

<sup>192</sup> Abbink 2017, 5.

<sup>193</sup> Aberra Jembere 2000, 31.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>195</sup> This *Tātäyyäq* style of litigation process is not limited to the secular realm. There are records where this litigation was used at the council of Boru–Meda that was held to settle the theology disputes of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 1878 by Emperor Yohannes IV. Mängəstu Lämman 2010/2011, 159–160.

<sup>196</sup> Šibäši Lämman 1992/1993, 14–15.



the light-mood and grandeur associated with the litigation had theatrical features. To be able to defeat the opponent, and to gain fame and honor from winning one needed alertness, wisdom, and strength. As a result, beyond the physical movement, one's speech needed to have proverbs, folklore, oral literature, riddles, and other linguistic tools. It is this free show that used to capture the attention of passersby.

In addition, if the cases were not settled in these courts, they could go as far up as the highest court of the land, the imperial court. And the litigation process would be the same – theatrical and humorous. Some like Gäbrähəywät Baykādañ, one of the prominent intellectuals of the early twentieth century in Ethiopia, were not fans of these roadside court spectacles. He proclaimed:

አንዳንድ የውጭ ሀገር ስደተኞችም በልተን እንደር ሲሉ ያገራችን ሹማምንት ዛሬ የያዙትን የስህተት መንገድ እንዳይለቁ ያጠናክሩታል። [...] እውቀት አለንም ብለው ራሳቸው ይዘራል። ውሏቸውም ስራን ትተው በከርከርና በመግት ብቻ ነው።<sup>197</sup>

Foreign migrants who have decided to live for their stomachs encourage the elite's wrong ways. [...] They are drunk with illusions of having knowledge. They spend their days without working, in litigation.

Šibäši Lämna refers to Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl's words about one attribute of Ethiopians being their love for justice to point out that these road-side courts had allowed for a decentralized means of ensuring that justice was never breached. This is important in so far as showing that jokes were a key part of these popular theatrical road-side courts in delivering justice, and also to show that people attended these courts not just for entertainment. It was where communal justice was maintained, where new judges were appointed, and where representatives of the central power could be introduced to the locals.

The road-side courts would for the most part cease to exist towards the 1960s since they were no longer considered as extensions of the state's judiciary organ. According to Šibäši, the process that eventually led to this was initiated by Emperor Mənilək II when the emperor introduced the cabinet of Ministers in 1907, establishing the Ministry of Justice among other nine ministerial positions.<sup>198</sup> This was complemented with the first constitution of 1931 which incorporated articles and proclamations from abroad that diverged from customary procedural laws that such road-side courts were based on.<sup>199</sup> According to Aberra, the road-side courts disappeared as a result of court rules that were introduced after 1942, that changed the

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<sup>197</sup> Gäbrähəywät Baykādañ 1960/1961, 28.

<sup>198</sup> Šibäši Lämna 1992/1993, 14.

<sup>199</sup> Id.

customary procedural rules.<sup>200</sup> One example was how ‘[c]ross examination and examination in chief were exchanged between private complainants and the accused under the traditional mode of litigation’ which was changed in the modern system where ‘cross-examination [was] put forward by the accused or his counsel to the witness and, the witness may be re-examined by the public prosecutor’.<sup>201</sup> And this is one among many rules that changed the way traditional cases were adjudicated. The consequent regimes that came added to this, and affairs of law and litigation became limited to government courts. With this, the art of public litigation has virtually disappeared.

In conclusion to this section, as explored above, humor plays a significant role in historical works and is used as expression of self-understanding, public opinion, and political critique. The jokes also highlight the general public’s following of political and military conditions of their time. The works present humor as a highly developed art, though such jokes have not been collected and studied on their own as valuable historical material. Beyond some university completion theses on satire and the culture of criticizing in Ethiopia, humor remains marginal source material used by historians.<sup>202</sup> There is also Fekade Azzeze’s work on humor during the *Därg* period,<sup>203</sup> as well as a recently published article by Ibrahim Damtṭāw on satirical verses collected from the Səmen and Bāgemədr regions of Ethiopia.<sup>204</sup> Beyond these, ordinary Ethiopians’ verbal humor has not been seriously collected, nor has it been considered for a worthy lengthy disciplinary investigation. This is even though *čāwata* is a powerful and substantial part of day-to-day life in Ethiopia and is evidently used by historians and other Ethiopian scholars in their works.

Beyond the social uses of *čāwata*, it is already mentioned that knowing *čāwata* is considered a commendable ability in individuals. Therefore, the next section discusses a famous Ethiopian scholar known for being humorous, or a *čāwwate* in twentieth century Amharic, and a *tāčawač* in contemporary Addis Abāba Amharic. *Alāqa* Gābrā Ḥanna lived almost a century ago and is known for his use of humor in his self-expressions, and his ‘tacit knowledge of the rules of [his] language’.<sup>205</sup> Today, when discussing social life and humor

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<sup>200</sup> Aberra Jembere 2000, 293.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 293–294.

<sup>202</sup> Tigab Bezie 2012.

<sup>203</sup> Fekade Azeze 2002.

<sup>204</sup> Ibrahim Damtṭāw 2020.

<sup>205</sup> Aarons 2017, 83.

related to it, people bring up *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna*. Almost folkloric, he remains in memory as an iconic Ethiopian cultural and social critic.

### 1.4.3 A *täčawač*: *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna*

According to cultural expert Ashenafi Kebedde, ‘the attitudes of Ethiopian society towards the arts and crafts in general (with the exception of poetry) have often been very negative’.<sup>206</sup> People’s ability to share multiple meanings through poems through a culture called *qəne* generally shows his or her sophistication and critical thinking skills. *Qəne* is a genre of Gə‘əz literature.<sup>207</sup> It has secular and religious purposes today, and *qəne* can be composed in Amharic too. *Qəne* poetry has two components, the *sām* ‘wax’ and *wärq* ‘gold’. The *sām* is the meaning that is apparent immediately, whereas the *wärq* is the hidden or inner meaning of the poem. There are twenty-two different kinds of *qəne*, and over 120 ways of creating it.<sup>208</sup>

The famous Ethiopian *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* was a scholar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and a learned poet, or a *balä-qəne*. *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* is the witty church scholar known more for his Amharic jokes and humorous tales.<sup>209</sup> He belonged to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his jokes are predominantly about Gondär and Šäwa, where the then newly formed capital city, Addis Abäba, was located.<sup>210</sup>

Birgit Mattausch’s book on *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* discusses the nature of ambiguous relationships in the Amharic speaking people of Ethiopia. She argues that social realities including land rights and tenure are non-binary and ambiguous.<sup>211</sup> Today, there are several books on the ambiguous nature of languages which argue that the very essence of languages is their ambiguity. This means that Amharic is not an isolated instance of ambiguous

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<sup>206</sup> Ashenafi Kebede 1975, 61, 51.

<sup>207</sup> For a discussion on *qəne* and a list of resources on the subject, refer to ‘*Qəne*’, *E Ae*, IV (2010), 283b–285b (Habtemichael Kidane); and Mattausch 2006, 91.

<sup>208</sup> Hiruie Ermias 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>209</sup> ‘Gäbrä Ḥanna’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 610a–611a (B. Mattausch).

<sup>210</sup> Mattausch’s collection of *Aläqa*’s jokes seem to be mostly from Šäwa. Mattausch 2006, 5.

<sup>211</sup> One can of course suggest that the discussion on land holding rights that Mattausch presents in chapter one of her book is complicated and that forms of land holding systems which are attributed to the Amhara in the book can also be found in non-Amharic speaking parts of northern Ethiopia. Refer to chapters seven and eight of Aberra Jembere’s book for a detailed account of the various land tenure and land tax systems of Ethiopia, Aberra Jembere 2000; and for more on political authority, land holding rights and ambiguity, refer to chapter seven of Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 2018.

communication but rather, much like any other language, can be understood as being prone to spontaneous interpretations.<sup>212</sup>

Nevertheless, Mattausch's book studies what she deems ambiguity, and communicative indirectness to assess the function of ambiguity in Ethiopia.<sup>213</sup> She argues that people negotiate and renegotiate meaning in their lives as indicated in how cultural and social meanings in form of values, status positions or behavioral norms are neither homogeneous nor static.<sup>214</sup> On *Aläqa* himself, she says:

Ob historische Persönlichkeit oder literarische Figur – sein Name ist noch heute in der amharischsprachigen Bevölkerung Äthiopiens jedem bekannt und steht sprichwörtlich für Schlagfertigkeit und geistreichen Spott.<sup>215</sup>

Whether historical personality or literary figure – his name is still in the Amharic language today known to everyone among the people of Ethiopia and stands for quick-wittedness and witty ridicule.

*Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna is recognized for being a philosopher, an artist, and a learned man in his ability to form quick and sharp responses to various members of the society. He is considered with such high regard because of the honesty depicted in his jokes and the logic of his thoughts. *Aläqa* has almost attained a status of folklore in the minds of contemporary Ethiopians more for his wit than for his scholarship. And very few is in reality known about him, with the following sources supplementing information about the life and character of the scholar.

*Aläqa* Lämna Haylu, an eyewitness and a church scholar born towards the end of the reign of Emperor Tewodros and who had lived until Emperor Haylä Šəllase's time has said the following about *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna:

አለቃ ገብረ ሐና — የሞያ መጨረሻ እሳቸው አደሉም ወይ? የሐዲስ መምር ናቸው፤ ፍታነገሥትን በሳቸው ልክ የሚያውቀው የለም ይኸ የቁጥሩ — መርሐ ዕውሩን አቡሻክሩን — ሁሉ የሚያውቅ ነው፤ ባለሙያ።<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> See for example the discussion about English in McWhorter 2016.

<sup>213</sup> Mattausch 2006, 5.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>216</sup> Mängəstu Lämna 2010/2011, 136.

*Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna — isn't he the epitome of knowledge? He is a teacher of the New Testament; there is no one who knows the *Fəṯiha Nägäšt* like him; the numbers — the *Märḥa* 'Ṫwwur,<sup>217</sup> the *Abušakər*<sup>218</sup> — he knew it all; knowledgeable.

ገብረ ሐናን ማ ይደፍራል? በቤተ መንግሥቱ ክቡር አደለም?<sup>219</sup>

Who would dare speak against Gäbrä Ḥanna? Isn't he respected at the palace?

The late Ambassador Bərhanu Dənqe has written the following about *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna:

እኒያ በቀልዳቸው አያሌ ጊዜ የሚጠቀሱት አለቃ ገብረ ሃና ከጎንደር መጥተው በእንጦጦ ራጉኤል አቋቋምና ዚቅ አስተምረዋል። በኢትዮጵያ የቤተ ክርስቲያን ምሁራን አካባቢ አለቃ ገብረ ሃና የሚከበሩት ከቀልዳቸው ይልቅ፣ በጎንደር «የላይ ቤት» አባባል እየተባለ ለሚጠራው ዚቅ የታወቁ መሪ በመሆናቸው ነው።<sup>220</sup>

He who is known for his jokes, *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna came from Gondär to Ḥṅtoṅo Ragu'el to teach *aqq'aaq'am* and *ziq*. Around the scholars of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, he is known not for his jokes but for being a famous leader of the Gondär *ziq* tradition known as *yälay bet* (upper house).

The writer Danə'el Kəbrät adds that *Aläqa* is valuable for the following reason as well:

እሳቸው ነጻ ጋዜጣ ባልነበረበት ዘመን እንደ ነጻ ጋዜጣም አገልግለዋል። ሕዝቡ ሁሉ አሳቡን በአለቃ ገብረሐና በሚባል ነፃ ጋዜጣ በኩል ሲያስተላልፍ ኑሯል።<sup>221</sup>

He served as a free newspaper at a time where there were no free newspapers. People have since used the free press known as *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna to express their thoughts.

Danə'el states that people have been using *Aläqa* as a 'free newspaper'. Meaning, when people wished to express, voice, and state their concerns in a comic way, regardless of whether or not *Aläqa* actually said it, they would use the '*Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna said this' as a way of sharing their opinions. Danə'el points to a lack of free press or means of sharing people's concerns with their government and secondly, the use of humor by the public as a preferred

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<sup>217</sup> This is 'one of the titles frequently used for the lengthy collected treatises [...] offering instructions for calendaric calculations on the basis of the Ethiopian computes, predominantly to define dates of moveable feasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church'. 'Märḥa 'əwwur', *EAE*, III (2007), 781b (B. Burtea and E. Sokolinskaia).

<sup>218</sup> This is part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's traditional chronology, and it also refers to an 'Amharic-Gə'əz handbook on calendar and chronography' and 'this widely used work [...] contains, along with computus tables, excerpts on world history borrowed from various sources'. 'Abušakər', *EAE*, I (2003), 57b (S. Uhlig).

<sup>219</sup> Mängəstu Lämna 2010/2011, 138.

<sup>220</sup> Bərhanu Dənqe n.d., 12.

<sup>221</sup> Danə'el Kəbrät 2018.

choice of sharing ideas. Danə'el adds, «ዛሬ እሱ ስለሌለ ጠቅመውናል አለቃ ገብረሃና» 'Since, we do not have that (free press) today, *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna has benefited us too'.<sup>222</sup>

*Who did Aläqa criticize or tease?*

From neighbors to rulers, *Aläqa* did not shy away from commenting on things that he considered illogical and unjust. He is also seen disparagingly mocking certain individuals he thinks little of.

The three rulers during whose reign *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna lived, Emperors Tewodros, Yoḥannəs and Mənilək, have each dealt with *Aläqa* in their own ways. Much is known about Emperor Tewodros and Mənilək's relationship with him while little is told about his relationship with Yoḥannəs. The scholar Aräfä'ayne presents the relationship between *Aläqa* and Mənilək as one of mutual care<sup>223</sup>; but he doesn't present Tewodros as having been very kind to *Aläqa* because of the scholar's jokes, though the emperor was fond of him.<sup>224</sup>

According to a letter sent to Antoine D'Abbadie in 1866 by *Däbtära* Asäggahäñ, *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna 'was beaten with a cane by the king. He was disgraced and fled to [Təgray] and Lasta'.<sup>225</sup> The king here is Emperor Tewodros. Folklore maintains that this was after repeated attempts by the emperor to get *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna to stop criticizing and ridiculing members of the clergy, the lords, and Ethiopians around him. Danə'el has stated that Emperor Tewodros had clearly told *Aläqa*, «ፍትሐ ነገሥቱን ጻፍ፥ ፍርድ ስጥ፥ ገንዘብ ያውልህ ቀልድህን ግን ተወኝ።»<sup>226</sup> 'Write the *Fätha Nägästä*, judge, there is also enough money for you but stop with your jokes'. The emperor was not saying that he does not want to laugh, or that *Aläqa* shouldn't make jokes. He was telling the scholar to stop making offensive, ironic and sarcastic remarks at people.

Though *Aläqa* was not heavily critical of Emperor Tewodros, the emperor did not entirely escape *Aläqa*'s verbal jest. For example, after Emperor Tewodros planned a controversial reform of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's clergy, *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna was asked what he thought of the new church of Mädhane 'Aläm that the emperor built at Däbrä Tabor. *Aläqa* responded, «ለሁለት ዲያቆን እና ለሦስት ቄስ በቂ ነው።»<sup>227</sup> 'It is quite enough for two priests and three

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<sup>222</sup> Danə'el Kəbrät 2018.

<sup>223</sup> Aräfä'ayne Ḥagos n.d., 59.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>225</sup> Rubenson et al. 1994, 261.

<sup>226</sup> Danə'el Kəbrät 2018.

<sup>227</sup> Id.

deacons'.<sup>228</sup> The planned reform was to limit the number of church servers. *Aläqa* was criticizing both the size of the new church, and the reform. He called the church small, and also made a passing comment about the limited number of church servers. *Aläqa* was not simply joking for the sake of drawing amusement or laughter; his is serious criticism. He is saying that the reform is not correct; the limiting of the priests and deacons to two and three respectively is too little.

The scholar Reidulf Molvaer also writes that though finally Tewodros told the priest to go far away 'to a land where Tewodros did not rule', *Aläqa* had returned and stayed with him until the battle of Mäqdäla.<sup>229</sup> Molvaer add that '*Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna achieved his greatest fame at the court of Emperor Mənilək II'.<sup>230</sup> The historian Chris Prouty asserts that it was Empress Ṭaytu who was fond of *Aläqa*, and who 'protected him from Mənilək's wrath when he overstepped the bounds of humor'.<sup>231</sup> However, Ethiopian popular culture asserts that Mənilək held great love for *Aläqa* and that it was with the empress that the scholar sustained misunderstandings.

*Aläqa's* verbal humor usually has multiple meanings and is limited to a few words. Receivers of *Aläqa's* jokes are often left confused by his responses; and even many who try to outwit him do not succeed. Below are a few examples.

4.31 *Aläqa* walks in a funny manner and a man comments trying to tease him, '*Aläqa*, you know from the direction of Šäwa, there is a new kind of shoe you could buy' (he was alluding that his feet point in different directions as *Aläqa* walks, by saying the direction of Šäwa), to which *Aläqa* responded, 'አንተ ፊት ግዛና' *antä fit gəzanna*.

This three-worded response is a sarcastic joke playing on the pun of the word *fit*. One meaning is, you buy [the shoes] 'first' whereas the second and intended meaning is buy a new face for yourself instead of telling me to buy shoes. *Aläqa* uses the word *fit* meaning, first and face, to tell the man that he has an unattractive face and that he should worry about his appearance instead of making fun of *Aläqa's* feet.

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<sup>228</sup> This anecdote was referenced in both Luigi Fusella's edited chronicle, Fusella 1959, 24; and *Aläqa* Wäldä Maryam's history of Emperor Tewodros, Wäldä Maryam 1904, 25–26. But neither mentioned the name of *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna.

<sup>229</sup> Molvaer 1997, 170.

<sup>230</sup> Id.

<sup>231</sup> Prouty 1986, 231.

Other times, receivers do not necessarily know that they have been insulted, and people retelling the jokes revel in the brilliance of *Aläqa*'s ability to hide his actual meaning.

4.3.2 *Aläqa* has a neighbor who owns donkeys. He has repeatedly insulted this donkey owner and so, they do not like one another. Once as *Aläqa* was walking he runs into this same man who was with his donkeys. The man says 'እንዴት አደሩ አለቃ' 'How have you [respect version of you] spent the night, *Aläqa*?' To which *Aläqa* responds. 'እግዚር ይመስገን፤ እንዴት አደራችሁ' 'God be praised, how have you [plural version] spent the night?' They then went on their ways.<sup>232</sup>

*Aläqa* used the plural version of you in greeting the donkey owner. By doing so, he put the donkey owner and the donkeys as objects of his greeting. The insult is that *Aläqa* was calling the man a donkey.

Both jokes are examples that fall under the disparagement theory of humor. This theory states that 'malice-, hostility-, derision-, aggression-, or superiority-based [...] characterize the attitudes between the joke teller (or the joke's persona) and the target of the joke'.<sup>233</sup> Regardless of the implications on the social relationships the scholar held, through *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna's jokes, parts of his life and the life of his contemporaries are visible. We also observe the questions that concerned Ethiopians during his time. We see his interaction with emperors and are able to experience them as fellow humans who are targets of *Aläqa*'s jokes.

*Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna is considered a philosopher based on his analysis of situations around him, his choice of words, and composition of his responses to people. Donald Levine, who studied the culture of ambiguous communication in his book *Wax and Gold*, suggests that this encourages a culture of indirect communication filling social relationships with ambiguity and scepticism.<sup>234</sup> I contend that people's appreciation for such communication simply shows an appreciation for complex thoughts and should not be taken to derive psychological meaning for an entire society. Such multi-layered communication is visible in the jokes investigated in the proceeding chapters. Even though it does not suggest scepticism, it does show an appreciation for the choice of words in one's speeches and conversations.

*Aläqa* is still present in the tales and jokes of contemporary Ethiopia, but as a voice through which one criticizes, or remembers Ethiopia's past. He is a symbol of free, logical thought and expression. A random person could be heard commenting on the past through humor by starting with, «አለቃ ምን አሉ መሰላችሁ» «አለቃ ገብረሐና እንዳሉ» «አለቃ አንዴ ምን አሉ ይባላል»

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<sup>232</sup> For more jokes of *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna, refer to Mattausch 2006, 111–146; and Aräfä 'ayne Ḥagos n.d.

<sup>233</sup> Carrell 2008, 313.

<sup>234</sup> Levine 2014, 237.



‘What do you think *Aläqa* had said?’, ‘As *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna said’, ‘It is said that *Aläqa* once said’.

#### **1.4.4 Concluding remarks**

The jokes from the several historical works and the specific study of *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna show that prior to the twenty-first century, Ethiopian humor was already a highly developed form of verbal art. We observe Ethiopians drawing on humor techniques, and the multiple meanings of Amharic words in their jokes. These jokes also demonstrate how humor can be used to relay serious opinions, criticisms and concerns. The anonymous attributions of jokes to *Aläqa* tells of the possibility of speaking truth to power in subtle ways.

When beginning to study contemporary Ethiopian humor, what is expected is a change in the content of the jokes from the times of *Aläqa* and in the Amharic language itself. Changes in the culture of joking are also expected. The assumption is that today’s humor is influenced by the process of modernization that the country embarked upon in the nineteenth century. The hypothesis is that because of a new globally influential language (English) and the influence of western culture, Ethiopian jokes would have expanded to contain new words and phrases considering the established malleability and adaptability of Amharic. Yet, just like the humor presented in the various sections of this chapter, contemporary humor should have continued to reflect people’s opinions regarding the political, economic and social realities the country has been in since 2005. Through humor, we will be able to indirectly compare contemporary Ethiopia to the Ethiopia of the beginning of the country’s modernizing attempts as well.

## Chapter Two: Humor at the Parliament

### 2.1 Introduction

There are memorable people's representatives, politicians, and public figures known for their powerful speeches, witticisms, and their general public speaking skills. As already established in the previous chapter, a skilled orator in Amharic is equipped with *čäwata*, provoking humor and using proverbs, idiosyncratic sayings, witticisms, and plays on words.<sup>235</sup> This chapter presents contemporary Ethiopian politicians using humor in their public speeches. The chapter will investigate humor's purpose as a skill and a rhetoric device used in part to out-wit other politicians, and in part to gain respectability. The Ethiopian parliament's House of People's Representatives has been selected to demonstrate this.

Following a historical introduction of the development of Ethiopia's parliament, its codes of conduct as well as the styles in which previous leaders and speakers presented their ideas to the public and parliamentarians, the chapter will present one parliamentary session where some of Ethiopia's out-spoken public figures are in attendance.

*Čäwata* is a significant tool in the parliamentarians' speeches. Its rhetoric purpose is linked to the orator's talent. It is also a representation of one's serious thought and expression. The late Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi,<sup>236</sup> revered for his oratory skills, is widely recognized and even respected for his entertaining speeches at the parliament. The chapter will investigate in what ways Mälläs Zenawi uses *čäwata*, and how parliamentarians engage with him. The themes of their discussion are among the most salient in the country and span across economic development issues, problems in the education system, election results, term limits of the Prime Minister and general socio-economic and political injustices.

The chapter will then conclude with brief remarks as to why there is laughter in parliament, what the context of humor is, and how political figures use humor. All in all, the chapter will study the use of humor at the parliament as a tool of articulation of ideas by Ethiopia's political elite.

### 2.2 Methodology

This chapter will primarily present a historical overview tracing the history of parliament in Ethiopia since Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase to the EPRDF. The first section contains selected speeches by Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase, and President Mängəstu Ḥaylä Maryam of the *Därg* to

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<sup>235</sup> Hiruie Ermias 2019 (lecture).

<sup>236</sup> He will be addressed simply as Mälläs Zenawi from now on.

show what kind of appearances previous rulers of Ethiopia held, and how they addressed the public. It also highlights the nature of each ruler's constitution and considers some notable speeches made at the parliaments of the previous rulers. These are drawn from historical books and conversations with knowledgeable individuals.

The parliamentary assembly selected for discussion in this chapter was chosen based on a number of reasons. The main reason was that notable parliamentarian figures are in attendance at that assembly. There were also the factors of its proximity to the elections of 2010, and the accessibility of full audio and video recordings of that hearing. This assembly is where Mälläs Zenawi presents a performance report to the parliament. This is followed by two question and answer rounds, where parliamentarians ask Mälläs questions.

The chapter includes a selectively transcribed account of various individuals' parliamentary questions and Mälläs's responses. The selection was done based on whether or not the speech drew laughter within the parliament. These depend on research taken from minutes kept at the library of the Ethiopian House of Parliament, and videos that are uploaded on YouTube. I visited the archives of the Ethiopian House of Parliament in September 2019, where for one week, I was given access to the library which contains print volumes of minutes of parliamentary assemblies since the first parliament was opened. I was only allowed to copy in a notebook data pertaining to the EPRDF parliamentary years.<sup>237</sup> The videos uploaded on YouTube are at times released by the Ethiopian Broadcast Agency and reproduced by individuals. These have been used to complement the data taken from the House of Parliament's archives. Personal conversations with people from Addis Abäba have also been considered for the discussion that follows.

The chapter considers the following questions: does the political body laugh? If so, why? And how do various figures use humor at the parliament? Is humor a tool used by the political elite to criticize and to respond to criticism? Considering parliamentarians know they are being watched beyond the confines of the parliament, what role does humor play in each individual's speech?

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<sup>237</sup> It is to be understood that there is uncertainty that these minutes, which are political documents, carry the original speeches made by parliamentarians. Yet, they are useful representations of what is said and what transpired at the parliament.

## 2.3 Constitution, parliament and *čäwata*: A historical overview

### 2.3.1 Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase<sup>238</sup>

Ethiopia's first modern constitution was ratified in 1931. *Fitawrari* Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam, one of the early modernizers, wrote the draft of the constitution and assumed it would pen the limit of the powers of the emperor as well as future leaders of Ethiopia. Its ratification was not an easy matter as there were serious challenges from the traditional nobility.<sup>239</sup>

Among the many concerns was the point of why the constitution included a clause making succession of power hereditary.<sup>240</sup> This ultimately resulted in the creation of a constitution with two sections. The 1931 constitution was split into two, with a general and a specific part. Regarding the specific part, Aberra Jembere writes that the nobility had 'come up with its own 'Magna Carta', as a counterpart to the official text of the Constitution'.<sup>241</sup> The

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<sup>238</sup> Here are some titles concerning Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase and his historical period: *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia*, Asfa-Wossen Asserate 2015; *Haile Selassie: His Rise, His Fall*, Erlich 2018; *Ethiopia: Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*, Gebru Tareke 1991; *ኢይወቴና የኢትዮጵያ ለርምጃ ከገጠና ላይ* *həwätenna yä'ityopiya ərməğa* 'My life and Ethiopia's progress', Ḥaylä Šällase I 1936/1937; *ቆላርና አብዮት qesar ənna abyot* 'Caesar and Revolution', Bərhanu Dənqe n.d.; *አውቶባዮግራፊ (የኢይወቴ ታሪክ) awtobayografi (yähəywäte tarik)* 'Autobiography (My Life's History)', *Fitawrari* Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 2006/2007; *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, Bahru Zewde 2001; and *ካየሁት ከማስታወሳው kayyahut kāmastawəsäw* 'From What I Saw and Remember', ፤mməru Ḥaylä Šällase 2009/2010.

<sup>239</sup> Prior to the drafting of the first constitution, a heated debate took place among a committee put together to study what would go in the constitution. This committee included eleven individuals who could be grouped into progressives and conservatives. The progressives tried to demonstrate the benefits of a 'modern' constitution by explaining that unless Ethiopia changed its way of administration and modernised, Ethiopia's independence will be taken from them. The conservatives, led by *Ras* Kassa Ḥaylu, responded emphatically by stating that if Europeans wanted to colonise Ethiopia, it was because they wanted resources as well as economic benefits and that they could not possibly be interested in whether Ethiopia was modernised or not. The discussion also shows soul-searching among both conservatives and progressives about what sort of individuals are better placed to care for and make decisions about the larger public. The full content of this debate is presented in Zäwde Rätta 2012/2013, 24–32.

<sup>240</sup> Emperor Ḥaylä Šällase is the first Ethiopian monarch to legally try to limit succession to direct descendants only. Previously, anyone who proved descent from King Solomon would have been able to claim the throne. Səmə'on Marəyye 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>241</sup> Aberra Jembere 2000, 170.

general part was published as the constitution of Ethiopia, while the second was meant to appease the nobility, princes and bishops who were pushed out of power. This specific part was signed to enable power sharing under the title, ‘Specific Provisions’.<sup>242</sup> Among the provisions, the nobility was allowed to hold their explicit rights and privileges regarding land holding and the issue of succession was also settled. However, this did not have any role in guiding law; it only included stipulations regarding succession, territory of Ethiopia and related topics.

The traditional nobility still had to be convinced. Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam made a speech (later turned essay) in the same year as the constitution was ratified, explaining what a constitution was and what it entailed for Ethiopia to the nobility.<sup>243</sup> Interestingly, though Täklä Ḥawaryat stresses the need for a constitutional monarchy in his autobiography,<sup>244</sup> he legitimizes the absolute power of the emperor as written in the 1931 constitution in this essay. It could be because he believed defending the emperor’s constitution in front of skeptical members of the nobility was necessary.<sup>245</sup> It could also be that Täklä Ḥawaryat wanted to defend the monarchy because of his background. He was educated in Moscow and the family he stayed with suffered because of the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>246</sup> He could have wanted to avoid a similar danger in Ethiopia.

In his speech, Täklä Ḥawaryat lays out what he believes are the four major types of administrations seen across the world, and then concludes that the third option is what is best for Ethiopia. The first is one where a supposed king can be omnipotent and whose leadership is influenced by his moods and emotions.<sup>247</sup> The second kind of administration is where a king entertains absolute power but depends on customs and tradition to rule.<sup>248</sup> The third is where a king has a written contract with his people, and also has advisors selected from each region of

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<sup>242</sup> Aberra Jembere 2000, 170.

<sup>243</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 1931/1932.

<sup>244</sup> *Fitawrari* Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 2006/2007.

<sup>245</sup> The scholar-cum-journalist Abiye Teklemariam agrees with this theory, suggesting that Täklä Ḥawaryat would rather be defending Täfäri, who is more of a moderate instead of criticizing him in-front of hard-core traditionalists. Abiye Teklemariam 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>246</sup> This was suggested by Professor Bairu Tafla. Bairu Tafla 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>247</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 1931/1932, 6.

<sup>248</sup> Id.

the country, from both the nobility and the larger public.<sup>249</sup> These advisors would meet in separate groups, depending on their titles. The advisors chosen from the people would work for a limited amount of time and others would replace them in due time. The bill<sup>250</sup> with majority support would then be written and passed on to the king. The king would pass whichever he agreed on.<sup>251</sup> Such a rule also assumes that said ruler is ‘ruler by law, and that his successors will only be direct descendants of the ruler’.<sup>252</sup>

The fourth kind of rule is where people elect their rulers and attach term limits to their administrative periods. The government is the people’s government, and the people have the final say in bringing their rulers to power and in demoting them. Täklä Ḥawaryat says that this sort of administration is only for a learned or modernized people and that even in those modernized societies such a rule is seen leading to bloodshed.<sup>253</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat celebrates the emperor’s choice for Ethiopia, which is the third way.<sup>254</sup> He says:

እንግዲህ ጃንሆይ ቀዳማዊ ኃይለሥላሴ ለኢትዮጵያ አሁን ላለችበት አኳኋን ይጠቅማታል ብለው የፈቀዱላት የመንግሥት አገዛዝ 3ኛው ደረጃ ነው ማለት የኢትዮጵያ መንግሥት ለመቸውም የንጉሠ ነገሥት መንግሥት ሆኖ ንጉሠ ነገሥቱም ባለሙሉ ሥልጣን ሆኖ ዋናው የሕግ አወሳሰን በንጉሠ ነገሥቱ ፈቃድ እየሆነ ለዝርዝሩ ጉዳይ የሚያስፈልገው ለጊዜው በመሳፍንትና በመኳንንት ጉባዔ ላይ እየተመከረበት በንጉሠ ነገሥቱ ሥልጣን እየተፈቀደ እንዲጸና ነው ኋላም ሕዝቡ ሠልጥኖ ለእውቀት የበቃ ሲሆን ለአማካሪነት የሚፈቀዱላቸውን ሰዎች በየወገኑ መምረጥ እንዲፈቀድላት ነው።<sup>255</sup>

It is the third option that His Majesty Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase I has allowed for Ethiopia, thinking it was the most useful for her present conditions. The Ethiopian government shall be under the rule of the King of Kings, while with the King of King’s permission, selected members of the nobility and political elite can hold discussions on detailed topics, until the people are developed enough and educated enough to select their own representatives.

Though he legitimized the monarchy, the above is indicative of the early modernizer’s optimistic sentiments about the possibility of Ethiopians gradually electing their political

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<sup>249</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 1931/1932, 6.

<sup>250</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat uses the word *məḵər* in Amharic which is close in meaning to the word ‘advice’.

<sup>251</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 1931/1932, 7.

<sup>252</sup> Id.

<sup>253</sup> Id.

<sup>254</sup> Id.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 8.

leaders. This is because the constitution led to the creation of an upper house of parliament, the Senate,<sup>256</sup> and the lower house of parliament, the House of Deputies.<sup>257</sup>

After the brief Italian occupation, the 1931 constitution was maintained until it was revised and became effective in 1955, with significant improvements. This constitution allowed the House of Deputies to be elected by the public. And ‘universal suffrage in rural and urban constituencies would dictate selection of representation’.<sup>258</sup> Article 96 of the constitution declared each deputy or candidate could be elected if they resided in and owned property in their electoral district.<sup>259</sup> This was followed by Article 97 which placed term limits of four years on deputies.<sup>260</sup> Bahru Zewde argues that since ‘property qualification<sup>261</sup> for election predetermined the class bias of the deputies’, parliament was not a genuine representation of the majority of the country.<sup>262</sup> Bahru adds that the parliament was ‘a vehicle for self-promotion rather than a forum of popular representation’.<sup>263</sup>

In a speech given on November 2, 1961 titled ‘Modern Ethiopianism’, Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase states the following about the revised constitution and the parliament:

To you, the legislators of the Empire, has been confided the high responsibility of ensuring that the needs and the desires of those who chose you as their representatives are well and truly served in the legislative programs which will be placed before you.<sup>264</sup>

In so speaking, the emperor presents elected parliamentarians as being responsible to the people who elected them. Regardless of the actual role the parliament played for the emperor, elected representatives present accounts where the parliamentarians are observed speaking

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<sup>256</sup> Kassahun Berhanu says, the Senate was selected from ‘the ranks of the aristocracy and persons that have allegedly a proven record of serving the state in high-ranking civilian and military positions’. Kassahun Berhanu 2005, 136.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>259</sup> Anon. 1955.

<sup>260</sup> Id.

<sup>261</sup> Bereket Habte Selassie writes that deputies or those competing in elections had to have, ‘immovable property (situated in the constituency) valued at not less than Eth. \$1000 or moveable property of value not less than Eth. \$2000’. Bereket Habte Selassie 1966, 10, 84.

<sup>262</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 207.

<sup>263</sup> Id.

<sup>264</sup> Anon. 2011, 461.

against the monarch, though such incidents might be rare. For example, *Fitawrari* Amäde Lämman's posthumously published autobiography provides some such examples where the parliament was relevant in debating topics such as land holding rights.<sup>265</sup> *Fitawrari* Amäde served in both the lower and upper houses of parliament during Ḥaylä Šöllase's reign. He explains that there were various discussions held over topics relating to how to increase economic development, taxation, and getting loans from abroad at the parliament. He presents a case of when Italy decided to give Ethiopia aid amounting to 35 million Ethiopian Birr while *Fitawrari* Amäde was serving in the Senate. The lower house accepted it and passed this to the upper house of parliament. But members of the upper house refused to accept it. The problem was that plenty of projects were drafted in the name of aid but these projects were not being implemented or even initiated. The emperor was notified of this and he supposedly responded advising the house to accept this aid. Two members made the following comments:

*Däğğazmač* Šäggaye from Koräm, Təgray said the following:

2.2.1 ልጅ ይልማ ደሬሳ፣ ሂድና አፄ ሃይለስላሴን እርስዎ እኮ የግል መሬት የለዎትም። መሬት የህዝብ ነች። እርስዎ በዚህ ጉዳይ ላይ አያገባዎትም። ብለህ ንገራቸው።<sup>266</sup>

*Ləğ* Yälma Däressa, go and tell Emperor Ḥaylä Šöllase that he does not own any private land. Land belongs to the people. This does not concern you. Tell him this.

*Däğğazmač* Wärqnäḥ from Goğğam added:

2.2.2 ስማ ልጅ ይልማ ደሬሳ ጣሊያን እኮ አስር ሳንቲም አላበደረገም። ላበድራችሁ የሚለው የኛ ሚኒስትሮች እየወሰዱ ጣሊያን ባንክ ያስቀመጡትን የራሳችንን ገንዘብ ነው። እናንተ ግን እዚህ ምክር ቤት ያሉ አያስቡም ብላችሁ ከሆነ ልክ አይደሉችሁም። የኢትዮጵያን ጥቅምና ጉዳት ለይተን የምናውቅ እኛ ነን። ሂድና ለጃንሆይ ብድሩን ሰርዘናል ብለህ ንገራቸው።<sup>267</sup>

Listen *Ləğ* Yälma Däressa, Italy did not lend us ten cents. It says it will give us our money that our own ministers have saved in Italian banks. If you think we, those in this parliament, do not think, you are mistaken. We are the ones who know what is beneficial and harmful for Ethiopia. Go and tell the emperor that we have cancelled the loan.

This is only to show that unlike Bahru Zewde's totalizing claim, there existed bold actors within the parliament who claimed responsibility for the people they represented.

One notable thing about the emperor and the parliament is that the Prime Minister was essentially the liaison between the two, tasked with the duty to present 'proposals of legislation

<sup>265</sup> Amäde Lämman 2011.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>267</sup> *Id.*



made by the council of ministers and approved by the Emperor'.<sup>268</sup> The emperor was represented at the parliament, but not an active member of it. Audio and video clips of the Emperor's speeches at the parliament are mostly unavailable except for one given at the opening of the parliament.<sup>269</sup>

His other speeches such as his League of Nations speech, and speeches at various inaugurations, such as the Haile Selassie I University are underlined by serious tones, an attitude befitting an emperor's position. For example, during the inauguration of the Haile Selassie I University, he said the following:

ይህ ዛሬ መርቀን የምንከፍተው የኒቨርሲቲ በኢትዮጵያ ታሪክና ባህል ላይ የተመሠረተና ኢትዮጵያ በረጅም ታሪኳ ያጠራቀመችውን የታሪክና የባህል ቅርስ በረቂቅ በመመራመር ወደ ኋላ መለስ ብሎ በማስተዋል ዘመን አመጣሽ የሆነውን አተኩሮ በመመልከት የወደፊቱን የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ ታሪክ አቅጣጫውንና የሚይዘውን መልክ ለመምራት የሚቻልበትን ዕውቀት የሚገባበት የት/ት አደባባይ ነው። ዛሬ እዚህ ደረጃ ደርሰን ይህን የኒቨርሲቲ ለመክፈት ያስቻለን ሊቃውንት መምህራን በየጊዜው አጠራቅመውና ጠብቀው ባወረሱን በሌላው ክፍለ ዓለም ላይ በማይገኙት መጻሕፍትና የዕውቀት ሀብት ስለሆነ እነዚህኑ መሠረት ልናደርጋቸው ይገባል።

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This university which we inaugurate today is the field on which students can study the direction on which Ethiopia should proceed by being based on Ethiopia's history and culture and founded on her accumulated historical and cultural wealth. Today, we are able to open this university based on the amount of knowledge gathered and preserved by our scholars and on books and wealth of knowledge the rest of the world has no access to. We should make these our basis of knowledge.

The emperor espoused a continuity of traditional knowledge alongside the modern.

Discipline dictated the emperor's public appearances, markedly different from how Ethiopia's succeeding leaders approached the public. He also spoke slowly pronouncing and enunciating each word. Also relevant to this discussion is that Ḥaylā Śəllase rarely laughed in public. This surprised many of those who saw brief moments of laughter from him forcing them to write them down as events of significant importance. Bərhanu Dənqe and Täklä Ḥawaryat are two examples of those who have noted such events in their books. Bərhanu Dənqe has noted the time Ḥaylā Śəllase was laughing at what Bərhanu said in a commission meeting over a corruption scandal that involved *Kāntiba* Kābbädä Täsämma, the mayor of Addis Abāba at the time.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Bereket Habte Selassie 1966, 10, 86.

<sup>269</sup> A link to this video is found in appendix A.

<sup>270</sup> Ḥg<sup>w</sup>alā Gäbrä Yoḥannəs 2010/2011, 80-81.

<sup>271</sup> Bərhanu Dənqe n.d., 53.

It could be that the emperor followed an imperial code of conduct which prevented him from showing public displays of laughter, joking, jesting, and humor. But it is also a particular character trait. Many remember the emperor as being starkly different from his cousin, *Ləḡ Iyyasu*.<sup>272</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat, says the following upon the demotion of *Ləḡ Iyyasu* and the appointment of Zäwditu as Empress, and *Ras Täfäri* as regent. In a conversation he is having with himself, Täklä Ḥawariyat says:

ተንግዲህ ወዲያ ስለሀገርህ የምታስበውን ሁሉ ለፍጻሜ ልታበቃው ትችላለህ። ደካምህ ከንቱ አልሆነም፤ የቀልድ፣ የዋዛ፣ የብልግና ወቅት ከልጅ አያሱ ጋር ተሻረ። የመሥሪያው ጊዜ ከራስ ተፈሪ ጋር ተሾመ<sup>273</sup>

From now onwards you can achieve everything you’ve dreamed for your country. Your labor has not been futile; the season of jokes, playfulness and vulgarity has been demoted along with *Ləḡ Iyyasu*. The age of working has been promoted with *Ras Täfäri*.

This remark is not that different from how the emperor saw himself. Ḥaylä Šəllase has said the following about his nature: ‘We were loath to amuse Ourselves, to go riding, to play. We didn’t want to waste time on games’.<sup>274</sup>

It does not mean that monarchic Ethiopian rulers did not enjoy humor. But that in cases of public speeches and pronouncements, humor as a technique of speech was rarely used in comparison to how easily the non-imperial succeeding leaders of Ethiopia tell jokes, laugh, and play with words in public.

Finally, jokes about the emperor are mostly recounted by the elderly and found in books written about the time. But these are also not about what the emperor said at the parliament or in public, but characterizations of the king of kings. The two jokes presented below are by men who were not supporters of *Ras Täfäri*.

One joke is by the famous Täsämma Əšäte. He is the first Ethiopian to have his music recorded in Europe and a close ally of *Ləḡ Iyyasu* who said the following about *Ras Täfäri* during a visit.<sup>275</sup> The *Ras* had just become a father of a young boy, and Täsämma said:

2.2.3 እንኳን ደስ ያለዎ [...] ዛሬ ወንድ ወጣዎ<sup>276</sup>

<sup>272</sup> *Ləḡ Iyyasu*’s grandfather Emperor Mənilək II and Emperor Ḥaylä Šəllase’s father *Ras Mäk’ännən* are direct cousins. *Ras Mäk’ännən*’s mother and Emperor Mənilək’s father are siblings.

<sup>273</sup> *Fitawrari* Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 2006/2007, 305.

<sup>274</sup> Erlich 2018, 156.

<sup>275</sup> For more on the life of Täsämma Əšäte, please refer to the book written by his son, Yədnäqacčäw Täsämma 1992/1993.

<sup>276</sup> Fantahun Əngəda 2008, 277–278.

Congratulations, today you have become a man.

The joke rests on the pun of the word *wäṭṭawo* which can make the phrase mean both ‘A boy has been born for you’ and ‘You have become a man’. Täsämma was insulting *Ras Täfari’s* manhood.

Another joke is taken from an *azmari* called *Qäñ Azmač Məsganaw*, who was critical of the emperor’s choice of exile during the Italian invasion of 1935. Here is one of his popular poems:

2.2.4 ያልተገራ ፈረስ ጠቅል እያላችሁ  
ከማይጨው ፈርጥጥ<sup>277</sup> ሎንዶን ገባላችሁ<sup>278</sup>

You’ve been calling an untamed horse ‘control all’,  
He has galloped from Mayčäw and entered London.

This is a sarcastic retelling of the emperor’s exile to Europe when Italy invaded in 1935. Patriots who had remained to fight saw the emperor’s exile as a betrayal of the country. Ḥaylä Śöllase, however, says the following in his interview with Oriana Fallaci in 1972, ‘We would never have left if We had feared We might have to stay in Europe for good!’, asserting that the emperor fled to Europe to help regain his country’s sovereignty.<sup>279</sup>

The emperor would not speak in humorous ways at the parliament or in public, but some individuals do remark that he was witty in private conversations. An example is the following:

2.2.5 When the famous Ethiopian musician Ṭəlahun Gässäsä released a song titled ‘I will raise a dog’, people close to the emperor complained that this was a veiled attack of the emperor who was fond of dogs. The musician was summoned to the palace and asked by the emperor as to who had allowed him to release the song. Ṭəlahun responded by stating that the censors had allowed it. The emperor turned to the accusers and said, «ታዲያ ስደብን ብላችሁ ፈቅዳችሁለት?» ‘and so, have you not yourselves allowed him to insult Us?’<sup>280</sup>

Here is one more example:

2.2.6 The emperor was making one of his surprise visits to schools in the capital city, and he walks into one school in the Kolfe neighbourhood. Since the director was not around when the emperor walked in, the emperor stops to speak to his secretary instead. He asks the secretary what his job is and the

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<sup>277</sup> ፈረጠጠ *färäṭṭäṭä* is defined as ርጠ፣ ሸሸ፣ ጋለበ *roṭä, šäsä, galläbä* ‘run, fled, galloped’. Dästa Täkläwäld 1970, 110.

<sup>278</sup> This couplet is quite popular in Addis Abäba and is recited often in discussions about the emperor.

<sup>279</sup> Erlich 2018, 159.

<sup>280</sup> Hiruie Ermias told me this joke. Hiruie Ermias 2020 (personal conversation).

secretary responds by saying, ‘I write’ indicating that he was a secretary. The emperor asked, «ምን ትጽፋለህ?» ‘What do you write?’. He walked out to a confused secretary who did not know how exactly to respond.<sup>281</sup>

These are revealing of how the emperor also used short, confusing and sharp statements which can be humorous in nature. But these are again not said at the parliament or during public speeches.

### 2.3.2 Mängəstu Haylä Maryam<sup>282</sup>

Haylä Šəllase’s parliament was dissolved by the Därg in 1974<sup>283</sup> and replaced by the National Šāngo in 1987. For thirteen years, Ethiopia was administered without a constitution, under the Provisional Military Government.<sup>284</sup> Once the constitution was passed, the Provisional Military Government proclaimed the country was now called the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE).<sup>285</sup> This was based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology and with a parliamentary assembly, the Šāngo, which would assemble once a year. The Šāngo was a ‘uni-cameral legislature with a membership size of 813 persons’.<sup>286</sup> And the constitution of the PDRE stated that the Šāngo was the ‘highest organ of state power’.<sup>287</sup>

Mängəstu Haylä Maryam was unanimously elected president of the PDRE the same year. This was not without objection. An example is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest

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<sup>281</sup> This joke was told to me by Professor Bairu Tafla. Bairu Tafla 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>282</sup> Here is a selected list of titles concerning Mängəstu Haylä Maryam and his historical period: *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa*, Gebru Tareke 2009; *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, Bahru Zewde 2001; ትግላችን: የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ አብዮታዊ የትግል ታሪክ *təglāčēn: yä’ityopya həzəb abyotawi yätəgəl tarik* ‘Our Struggle: The Revolutionary Struggle History of the Ethiopian People’, Mängəstu Hailä Maryam 2011. For works that study the revolutionary period from the point of view of the student movements refer to, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974*, Messay Kebede 2008; and *Ethiopia in Theory: Evolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* Elleni Centime Zeleke 2019. There are also satirical works that reflect the social conditions of the time: *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, Hama Tuma 1993; and ‘Mengistulore: oral literatures depicting the man, his regime, officials and proclamations’, Fekade Azeze 2002.

<sup>283</sup> Kassahun Berhanu 2005, 168.

<sup>284</sup> Id.

<sup>285</sup> It is interesting that both PDRE and EPRDF have the words ‘people and democratic’ in their official titles.

<sup>286</sup> Kassahun Berhanu 2005, 169.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.,170.

representing the Wällo province, who boldly told Mängəstu to hand over power to someone else immediately at the *Šāngo*.<sup>288</sup>

From interviews, personal conversations and dialogues, it was obvious that most of Mängəstu’s memorable moments were humorous comments from the *Šāngo* or from his public speeches. Despite the amusing sayings from his time in government, his rule was riddled with natural and man-made catastrophes. There was the Red Terror, the title he gave to the urban civil war that lasted from 1974 until 1979.<sup>289</sup> Then there was the Eritrea War, and the Ogaden War of 1977 to 1978 with Somalia.<sup>290</sup> This was followed by the famine of 1983 to 1985.

The following is a presentation of his selected speeches which should be read with the consideration of his disaster ridden administration.

2.2.7 ሁሉም አኩራፊ፣ ሁሉም ነጻ አውጪ ነኝ ባይ፣ ሁሉም ተሳዳቢ እና ተቺ ወርቅ ቢያነጥፉለት ፋንዲያ ነው የሚል፣ ምን አደረጋችሁልኝ እንጂ እኔ ምን አደረግኩ የማይለው ቁጥር ጥቂት ባልሆነበት ሁኔታ ውስጥ ምን ተአምር እንድንሰራ ይጠበቅብናል?

Everybody claims to be upset, everybody claims to be a liberator, everybody insults and criticizes. If you carpeted gold, he would claim it was donkey excrement. What miracle are we expected to perform when many ask ‘what has been done for me?’ instead of ‘what have I done?’.<sup>291</sup>

2.2.8 «ዛሬ [...] ብንጮህ ብንጮህ ቀርቶ እኮ ቁጡን ብንወጋው እኮ እኮ የሚንቀሳቀስ ሰው እኮ እየጠፋ ነው እኮ»

Today, let alone with us yelling and speaking publicly, we cannot find people who will budge if we pierced their buttocks.

2.2.9 «ብዙ ሰው ይኸንን ቦታ ይመኛል ሚሊዮን ይመኛው ግን መሆን የሚችለው ምንም ሆነ ምን አንድ ሰው ብቻ ነው [Laughter at the assembly.] እና እባካችሁን ከዚህ እንውጣ። በቆሎ እና እህል በሚገባ አምርተን የማንበላ ሰዎች ለፖለቲካ ሥልጣን መንጠላጠል እንዴት እንደቀደምን።»

Many people, millions, wish to be in this spot. Only one person can be here. [Laughter at the assembly.] And so please, let us get out of this. We can’t grow maize and other food to feed ourselves, but we are scrambling to get power.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru 2017, 18.

<sup>289</sup> Melakou Tegegn 2012, 10, 250.

<sup>290</sup> Clark 1992, 72, 110–111.

<sup>291</sup> This is reminiscent of J.F. Kennedy’s popular speech, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country’. Kennedy 1961.

<sup>292</sup> The online source to the 2.2.7, 2.2.8 and 2.2.9 is the link found in appendix A.

This last speech is in line with the historically and traditionally accepted belief that there could only be one king or one ruler at a time. Children are raised singing songs that teach them this at a young age. One couplet from a popular song relayed for the holiday of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor (*Buhe*) is ያቺ ድንክ አልጋ አመለኛ፤ ያለ አንድ ሰው አታስተኛ ‘That short bed has a peculiarity, she only lets one-person sleep at a time’. This has multiple meanings, but the main and hidden meaning is that a throne only seats one person at a time. This is besides the legend of the brothers Abrəha and Aṣbəha ruling together, or the era of the princes which saw two kings ruling simultaneously in Gondär, King Täklä Giyorgis and King Iyyasu III.<sup>293</sup>

Unlike his predecessor, Mängəṣtu’s public speeches are incoherent when they’re not based on writings. He uses flagrant and vulgar terms. The prestige of kingship is markedly absent. It is all the more interesting to observe what he says under the stress of internal war against the rebels of TPLF, to whom he will inevitably lose. And yet, he doesn’t fail to draw amusement – mostly through disparaging his opponents. Consider the following example.

2.2.10 በኢትዮጵያ ስታንዳርድ ቀበሌ አይደለም 700 ሰው ነበረበት እኔ እዛ በሄድኩ ጊዜ የነበረው። እዛ ቦታ ላይ ለሚሊተሪ ስትራቴጂ የያዘው ቦታ እና ለውሃ ነው። ቤንዚን አይቆፈርበት፣ አልማዝ አይቆፈርበት፣ ወርቅ አይወጣበት፣ አገር አይደለ ሰው የለበት ናቲንግ። [...] ፈረንሳይ የተረታችበት አይነት ድል ነው አሉ። እና ሌላም ሌላም ነገር ስላለ በጦርነቱ ባሕሪ ውስጥ በሰዓት እና በደቂቃ በሚለወጡ ነገር ውስጥ ወንበዴ የሚለውን ነገር ሁሉ አብረን ስናበቃ እሱ ይናገራል አልተናገረም ስለዚህ የኢትዮጵያ ሚዲያ ውሸታም ነው። እንደዚህ ከተወሰደ ምን አይነት ፕሮፖጋንዳ እንደምንነዛ [...]። ሰው እንደውም ይህ ሆነ ይህ ሆነ ገና ያልሆነውን ነገር ተሰበረ ሲሉ ሞተ እያለ ሲያበቃ ቅድም እንደተናገረው ይቅርታ ይደረግልኝ አዲስ የኢትዮጵያ ባሕል ነው በፍጹም ይሆናል ብለን የማንገምተው ነገር ነው ሱሪውን ያወለቀ አለ። ደሞ የተያዘ አለ ቡታንታውን አውልቆ።

It is not a *qäbäle* according to Ethiopian standards, it had 700 people when I was there. We occupied that area for water and military strategy. You can’t dig it for petrol, or for diamonds, you can’t get gold from it, it isn’t a country, there are no people – nothing. [...] They said it was the sort of defeat comparable to how the French were defeated. And other things that change in hours and minutes because of the nature of the war, based on what thieves say, the Ethiopian media is lying. What kind of propaganda we are meant to spread [...] People in fact are spreading exaggerations; we say ‘he is broken’, people say ‘he is dead’. I apologize, this is a new Ethiopian culture. This is something we cannot believe can happen. There is a man who took off his pants. And another one caught after removing his underwear.

He uses repetitions, jokes, and pauses between sentences for effect. His jokes are however expressions of frustration.

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<sup>293</sup> Shiferaw Bekele 2004, 7.

Mängəstu-isms are common in people’s conversations in contemporary Addis Abāba. Mängəstu’s parliamentary and other public speeches are adopted as popular sayings that mark particular emotions. When confronted with shocking and seemingly unreal situations, people are commonly heard saying, ተንቀናል፣ ተደፍረናል፣ ብታምኑም ባታምኑም በቁም ሞተናል ‘we have been undervalued, disrespected, whether you believe it or not, we have died though we think we’re alive’.<sup>294</sup> In addition, there are several jokes about Mängəstu which revolve around his long public speeches. This is attested in videos where he is heard saying ‘we shall take a break and return soon’ after an hour-long uninterrupted speech.<sup>295</sup> His speeches were distinguishably long, that not only did he get a reputation of being a dedicated speaker, jokes were also created about them. One of the many jokes is this:

2.2.11 በአንድ ስብሰባ ላይ መንግሥቱ ኃይለማርያም ያወራዋል ያወራዋል። ለ1 ሰዓት የተባለ ስብሰባ ወደ 5፣ 6፣ 7 ሰዓት እየገፋ ይሄዳል። መንግሥቱ በሐሳቡ በጣም ስለተመሰጠ ማንንም አያይም ብቻ ያወራል። ድንገት የሆነ ሰው ጉርሮውን በመጥረግ «ዳድ ሊቀመንበር» ብሎ ያቋርጠዋል። መንግሥቱ ስለተቋረጠ በጣም ይናደድ እና «ምንድን ነው» ብሎ አዳራሹን ቢያይ ከዛ ሰው ውጪ ሌላ ማንም የለም። «አይ ዳድ ሊቀመንበር፣ ስትወጣ ቆልፈው ይኸው ቁልፉ»።

In one of his meetings, Mängəstu Haylä Maryam was talking and talking. What was meant to be an hour-long meeting went on for five, six, seven hours. Mängəstu was so invested in his speech that he doesn’t actually observe what’s happening around him. He just talks. All of a sudden, a man clears his throat and interrupts him by saying, ‘comrade leader’. Mängəstu, furious that he has been interrupted snaps back, ‘what is it?’, but sees that the meeting hall was empty except for that man. The man says, ‘comrade leader, please lock the door when you are done. Here is the key’.

What adds to the humor is that no matter how long his speeches are, his tone remains unchanged throughout his speeches, and he is rarely seen taking breaks to rest, or to drink water. His successor Mälläs Zenawi is seen almost always sipping on a glass of water during his speeches.

There is another speech he made at the parliament which can show the kind of leader Mängəstu was, as referenced to in several works about him.<sup>296</sup> He is represented as brutal and relentless in eliminating contenders to political power.<sup>297</sup> He is also presented as immature and

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<sup>294</sup> Abiye Teklemariam 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>295</sup> The source is found in appendix A.

<sup>296</sup> Refer to appendix D where this speech is presented in Amharic and English.

<sup>297</sup> Bahru Zewde 2001, 250.

destructive by others.<sup>298</sup> In this particular speech, he allures to territorial nationalism, uses allegories and metaphors to make his points, and asks humorous rhetorical questions. He is also never in the wrong; him and his administration are always the ones attacked for being unfair and unjust. As a result, his speech is filled with defensive proclamations. It appears the only thing Mängəstu does not use vulgarity about is Ethiopia. This speech shows how Mängəstu saw himself in Ethiopia, and his relationship with the country he ruled. His frustrated yet humorous speech is patriotic, defensive, and appeals to grand ideals of Ethiopia.

Mängəstu fled to Zimbabwe and the TPLF came to power in 1991.

In conclusion to this section, we have thus far seen the differences in public speeches of two leaders. Being the ሥዊመ እግዚአብሔር *Šəyyumä Īgzi'abəḥər* 'Elect of God' entailed being at a respectable behavior at all times, a behavior Mängəstu Haylä Maryam did not assume. In the emperor's parliament, which lasted over 40 years, there is not a single mention of insults, vulgar language, heated exchanges by the prime minister or the emperor himself, in both the upper and lower chambers. The most heated exchanges that are recorded are found to be over serious disputes over bills to pass, or at the beginning of the opening of the first parliament session made by newly elected members who did not understand the code of conduct yet.<sup>299</sup> But these were still not as insulting, and vulgar as some of the utterings made by Mängəstu at his parliament or when delivering speeches.

People in general hold two diverging views about this. A few individuals said that Mängəstu as well as Mälläs, as we will see next, exhibited openness and willingness to entertain the public, which added to their listenability at parliament and beyond. Others suggested that it showed the leader's ንቁት *nəqät* 'contempt' of the people. This will be addressed after investigating the content and style of the humor in Mälläs Zenawi's parliament.

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<sup>298</sup> Erlich 2018, 188.

<sup>299</sup> Amāde Läm̄ma 2011, 85.



## 2.4 Pre-2005 Ethiopia

### 2.4.1 The EPRDF<sup>300</sup> and its parliament

Following Mängəstu's exile and TPLF's rise to power, a parliament was formed as a supreme organ of power for the transition period. The EPRDF<sup>301</sup> 'established a "Peaceful and Democratic Transitional Conference in Ethiopia" to oversee the creation of a new system of government'.<sup>302</sup> A transitional government was set up with the right to 'exercise all legal and political responsibility for the governance of Ethiopia'.<sup>303</sup> While the Därg took thirteen years to ratify a constitution, justifying its absolutist rule by claiming 'the peace and stability of our country did not allow' it, EPRDF would ratify a constitution within three years.<sup>304</sup>

The EPRDF bicameral parliament consisted of the House of People's Representatives and the House of Federation. The upper house, the House of Federation, is composed of 'representatives of nations and nationalities'.<sup>305</sup> 'Nations and nationalities' would be the trademark of Mälläs Zenawi's leadership, the liberator of all the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia who had previously been under Amhara hegemony.<sup>306</sup> It has today become a popular way of addressing one another in Addis Abäba. People are often heard using *ber-beresäbočč*, a play

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<sup>300</sup> For more on the EPRDF and its rule, refer to the following selected works: 'EPRDF's Nation-Building: Tinkering with Convictions and Pragmatism', Bach 2014; *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: the Politics of Authoritarian Reform*, Abbink and Hagmann 2013. On the economic policies the EPRDF adopted, refer to: 'Vanguard Capitalism: Party, State, and Market in the EPRDF's Ethiopia', Weis 2016; and *Made in Africa: Industrial Policy in Ethiopia*, Arkebe Oqubay 2015.

<sup>301</sup> The EPRDF was a coalition of four parties. The dominant party was the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), the rest were the ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement), SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region) and the OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization).

<sup>302</sup> 'Parliament', *EAE*, IV (2010), 119a (C. Clapham).

<sup>303</sup> Fasil Nahum 1997, 39.

<sup>304</sup> Qalä' ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 281.

<sup>305</sup> Kassahun Berhanu 2005, 174.

<sup>306</sup> Merera Gudina 2006, 128. In addition, his government would introduce a system of administration known as ethnic-federalism, based on the idea that ethnic groups were previously oppressed by the Amhara. For more discussions on the foundation of the ethnic-federalism structure introduced by EPRDF, refer to the following: 'New Approaches to State Building in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia's Ethnic-Based Federalism', Kidane Mengisteab 1997, 40; 'Responding to State Failure in Africa', Herbst 1996, 21; and 'Ethnic Federalism and Self-Determination for Nationalities in a Semi-Authoritarian State: the Case of Ethiopia' Aalen 2006, 13.

on *bəher ənna bəheräsäbočč* ‘nations and nationalities’, when calling a group of Ethiopians. The lower house, the House of People’s Representatives, is the highest authority of the federal government.

The parliamentary assembly selected for investigation was held in the third House of Peoples’ Representatives 5<sup>th</sup> year, 24<sup>th</sup> regular session. The House of People’s Representative’s members are elected for one five-year term.<sup>307</sup> The first term was from 1995 to 1999, the second from 2000 to 2004, the third from 2005 to 2009, the fourth spanned from 2010 and lasted until 2014.<sup>308</sup> The final year for EPRDF’s parliament was the parliament’s term from 2015 until 2019.

One parliamentarian of the fourth House of People’s Representatives term (2010–2014), Gərma Säyfu Maru,<sup>309</sup> holds that the first parliament term was one where Ethiopians were just coming out of a transition period and the EPRDF had just ratified its constitution. During this time, Gərma writes that there were very few voices that presented their opposition to the new political rulers. These included the infamous representative of Addis Abäba, *Šaläqa* Admase Zälläqä.<sup>310</sup>

The second term period saw the EPRDF allow free press and media to flourish, although contesting and rival voices were not pronounced.<sup>311</sup> Ethiopia was also immersed in war and its aftermath with Eritrea during this time. The third term limit saw an encouraging political sphere for upcoming politicians. Following the creation of a purely Mälläs Zenawi-led EPRDF with the expulsion of those like Səyye Abräha (veteran TPLF official and minister of defense from 1991 to 1995) from the party, EPRDF’s self-confidence rose and was not threatened by critical voices in the media and in the parliament. At the same time, the period saw the rise of opposition politicians such as Lədätu Ayyalew and Bäyyänä Peṭros. EPRDF had also started flirting with capitalism, as opposed to its once-tightly held attachment with Marxism Leninism. EPRDF adopted ‘white capitalism’, a ‘pure’ version of liberal capitalism, which would also allow civil groups to emerge, and saw the role media played in developing a democratic Ethiopia.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Fasil Nahum 1997, 68.

<sup>308</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru 2017, 23-25.

<sup>309</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru was the only opposition member at the parliament during the fourth term.

<sup>310</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru 2009, 21.

<sup>311</sup> Id.

<sup>312</sup> Habtamu Gərma 2016.

It is after this term that the May 2005 elections were held. The election itself was preceded by electoral debates broadcasted on the national television (ETv). Heralding popular parties such as the Coalition of Unity and Democracy (CUD or *qanāḡḡat*, as known in Amharic), Ethiopia would witness its first political elections.

The parliamentary assembly that is selected for investigation is one held five years after these elections, and right before the coming elections of 2010. During this term, various opposition figures were present. Starting in 2006, increasingly popular print and radio media individuals as well as bloggers emerge in Addis Abāba. These include the editors of the distinguished *Addis Nāgār* newspaper Abiye Teklemariam, Tamerat Negera and Mesfin Negash, sports journalists such as Fisseha Tegegn, and online bloggers such as those of the *Seminawork* blog.<sup>313</sup> This period would also see the fall of opposition parties, arrests and jailing as well as exiles of prominent Ethiopian activists, politicians, bloggers and journalists (including those mentioned above). This was aided by the declaration of the Anti-Terrorism proclamation in 2009.<sup>314</sup> The fourth term that follows (2010–2014) would see only one opposition figure in the entire parliament and bring about an end to a lively and often humorous parliamentary assembly.

#### **2.4.2 *Šalāqa* Admase Zälläqä and the ratification of the 1995 constitution**

*Šalāqa* Admase Zälläqä was a member of the Emperor’s parliament after having retired from the military. The Dārg arrested him for sixteen years with the jurist Aberra Jembere and he was released in 1991 with the change in government. He was part of the constitutional assembly in 1994 and ran for parliament in 1995.<sup>315</sup>

Before ratifying their constitutions, both the Dārg and EPRDF had held a people’s discussion in 1987 and 1993, respectively. Some argue that the Dārg’s constitutional discussions were more open to public opinion than the EPRDF discussions.<sup>316</sup> The discussion of EPRDF’s constitution was held via representatives that came from across the fourteen administrative zones of Ethiopia. One of the representatives of Addis Abāba, which was zone 14 at the time, was *Šalāqa* Admase. *Šalāqa* Admase was the only critical voice at the assembly of the draft constitution. He is remembered for his *čāwata* and also for his defiant stance against

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<sup>313</sup> The blogger Ethio Zagol of *seminawork* blogpost was nominated for the Economist New Media award in 2008. Reidy 2008.

<sup>314</sup> Gordon 2015.

<sup>315</sup> Abiye Teklemariam 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>316</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru 2017, 17.

what he believed was an undemocratic ratification process. Most of his jokes fall in the relief theory of humor, as he is voicing his opinions through them.

Before listing some of the things the renowned *Šalāqa* Admase said, it is important to understand how seriously EPRDF took the process of democratically legislating a constitution. Mälläs Zenawi had said the following at the opening ceremony of the assembly that would eventually ratify the constitution:

በአገራችን በተለያዩ መንገድ ጸድቀው ተግባራዊ የሆኑ ልዩ ልዩ ሕገ መንግሥቶች እንደነበሩ ይታወሳል። ይሁን እንጂ ከዚህ ቀደም ተግባራዊ የሆኑት ሕግጋተ መንግሥት አንድም ያለምንም ሽፋን ከላይ በነገሥታቱ እንደምጽዋት የተሰጡ፣ አሊያም ደግሞ ሕዝብን በፍፁም አምባገነናዊ መንገድ አፍኖ በያዘ አኳኋን የተዘጋጁ ነበሩ። በአቀራረባቸው በሕዝብ ተሳትፎ ላይ ያልተመሰረቱ፣ በይዘታቸው የዜጎችንና የሕዝቦችን የዲሞክራሲ መብቶች የሚያፍኑ ፀረ ዲሞክራሲ ሕግጋተ መንግሥት ነበሩ።<sup>317</sup>

We know that there have been different constitutions in our country. Be that as it may, the previous constitutions that were in use were either given as alms to the people by the monarchs or were ratified by holding the people in totalitarian control. Their forms were without the people’s participation and their contents were anti-democratic holding people’s democratic rights hostage.

He explicitly mentioned that all the previous constitutions were undemocratically given to the Ethiopian people. By doing so, he implies that this would finally be the chance for the people to have a democratic say in the process.

Let us now consider *Šalāqa* Admase’s questions to see what exactly he was critical about. At the beginning of the assembly, *Šalāqa* Admase made the following speech,

2.3.1 የሕገ መንግሥት ማርቀቅ ሂደቱ የሕዝብ ተሳትፎ ያልነበረበት እና ለምሳሌ 17000 ያህል ነዋሪዎች ባሉበት ቀበሌ ብዙ ሺ ጥሪ ወረቀት ተልኮና በድምፅ ማጉያ ተነግሮ የመጣው ሰው 19 ብቻ ነበር፣ 5000 ነዋሪ ያለበት ቀበሌ ለሰብስባ የመጣው ሰው 32 ሰው ሲሆን፣ ሰው ያልመጣባቸው ቀበሌዎችም ነበሩ፣ የቀበሌ ሊቀ መንበር ሚስቱንና ልጆቹን ይዞ የመጣባቸውን ሂደቶች ሕዝቡ ተሳትፏል ማለት የለብንም።<sup>318</sup>

The process of passing the constitution did not see the participation of people. For example, in a *qābāle* which has about 17000 residents, only 19 people attended the meetings that were advertised through speakers and flyers. In a *qābāle* which has 5000 residents, 32 people came to attend the meetings and there were *qābāle* whereby no person showed up. We cannot say that these meetings where the head of the *qābāle* attended with only his wife and kids saw a people’s participation.

<sup>317</sup> Qalā’ ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 316.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 318.

Other members of the assembly denied *Šaläqa* Admase's humorous accusations and claimed that people in their respective areas had come in mass to discuss the draft of the constitution. For example, Kuma Dimäqsa stated that in his zone (zone four) '90% of people had come out to vote'<sup>319</sup> as a direct response to *Šaläqa* Admase. *Šaläqa* Admase continued to make a speech about land lease, the issue of the Ethiopian flag and other related issues that the new constitution was about to consolidate. The minutes of the assembly have recorded the following lengthy report of *Šaläqa* Admase's speech before he urged the assembly to not even accept the draft of the constitution for discussion.

2.3.2 ሕዝቡ በሕገ መንግሥቱ ፅንሰ ሀሳቦች ላይ ሲወያይ እርሳቸው ከተመረጡባቸው 20 ቀበሌዎች ውጭም ተዘዋውረው ሂደቱን መመልከታቸውን፣ ነገር ግን በቀበሌ አመራር የሚሰጠው ግምገማና ሕዝቡ ተሰብስቦ የሚናገረው የተለያየ መሆኑን፣ ለዚህም በምሳሌ ሲያስረዱ በቀበሌ ግምገማ የራስን ዕድል በራስ መወሰን እስከ መገንጠል መሬት በመንግሥት ቁጥጥር ሥር እንዲሆንና ሰንደቅ አላማ እንዲሻሻል ሕዝቡ መደገፉን፣ በሌላ በኩል የክልል 14 ፕሬዚዳንት ባሉበት ሕዝቡ ተጠርቶ በሰጠው አስተያየት መሬት በግል ካልተያዘ ነፃነት እንደማይሰማውና ሊዝ ከታወጀ እንደ ኤ[ድ]ስ እንደሚቆጥረው መናገሩን ገልጸው ሕዝቡን ወይንስ የቀበሌ አመራር ስለሕዝብ ሆነው የሚነግሩንን እንስማ? ሲሉ ጠይቀዋል።

አያይዘውም በአዲስ አበባ ከተማ በወረዳ 12 ቀበሌ 06 የሕዝቡ ብዛት 17,700 ሆኖ ሳለ ለሕገ መንግሥት ፅንሰ ሀሳቦች ውይይት የተገኘው 19 ብቻ መሆኑን፣ ከእነዚህ ውስጥም አብዛኛዎቹ ወጣቶችና ሕገ መንግሥቱን በመደገፍ በፖሊስ ሠራዊት ለመቀጠር ብለው እንደመጡ የገለጹላቸው መሆኑን ጠቁመው ሕዝቡ በሂደት ያለውን ተቃውሞ ባለመሰብሰብ መግለጹን፣ ረቂቅ ሕገ መንግሥቱ ህዝብ ያወገዘው የአንድ ፓርቲ ሥራ እንደሆነ አመልክተዋል።

አስከትለውም ሕዝቡ በሪፈረንደም ቢጠየቅ 10,000 አንድ እንኳን የመንግሥት ጭሰኛ ልሁን ወይም ንብረቴን መሸጥ ልክልክል የሚል እንደማይገኝና መንግሥት ዕውነተኛ ዲሞክራሲ የሚፈልግ ከሆነ የሕዝቡን ሀሳብ በቀበሌ ሳይሆን በሪፈረንደም ቢጠየቅ የተሻለ እንደሚሆን አስረድተዋል።

ቀጥለውም ምርጫውን በተመለከተ ተቃዋሚን አስሮ ውድድር ማካሄድ በአንድ ፈረስ ለብቻ ጋልቦ እንደማሸነፍ እንደሚቆጠርና ኢ-ዲሞክራሲያዊ መሆኑን በሂደቱ የመንግሥትና የሕዝብ ፍላጎት ቢጋጭ እሳቸው ሕዝቡን እንደሚደግፉ የኢህዴግ ተወካይ ግን የድርጅቱ ፍላጎት ከሕዝቡ ፍላጎት ጋር ቢጋጭ የድርጅቱን እንደሚመርጥ ጠቁመው ጉባኤው ረቂቁን ለመወያየት እንዳይቀበለው ጠይቀዋል።<sup>320</sup>

When the people were discussing on the ideas of the draft constitution, he had gone beyond just the 20 *qäbäle* that were under his representative jurisdiction to observe these discussions. However, what the *qäbäle* administrators report and what the people say are different. He gave an example of how people have agreed that the articles that deal with secession, land ownership of the government should be improved. He added that when people gathered to discuss with the

<sup>319</sup> Qalä' ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 319.

<sup>320</sup> Anon., 1994, 20.

president of zone 14, they had stated that they are not comfortable with the government owning land and that people would consider it as if it were AIDS if land lease was declared. And he asked who should be listened to, the people or their *qäbäle* representatives?

He also added that in Addis Abäba's *wäräda* 12, *qäbäle* 6, the number of residents is some 17,700 but that only 19 people attended the discussion on the constitution. And from this number, most were youth who told him that they were there to secure a job in the military by supporting the constitution. This was because people were expressing their discontent with the constitution by not showing up for the talks and as a result, the constitution is a one-party document that is totally rejected by the people.

He continued to express that if there was a referendum not a single person from 10,000 individuals would ask to be a serf to the government by being refused to sell his land and that if the government truly wants to uphold democracy, it would not use the *qäbäle* to ratify this constitution but call for a referendum.

He continued to say that regarding the election, holding elections by arresting opposition figures is like winning a horse race where there is only one rider and that it is anti-democratic. He also added that when the people's and government's opinions clash, he will stand with the people; but that EPRDF's members will stand with the party. He urged the assembly to not accept the draft of the constitution even for discussion.

With only one other supporter who shared his concerns, *Šaläqa* Admase was alone and the draft was accepted for discussions. Nonetheless, he continued speaking by using *čäwata* at the following discussions, though members of the assembly attacked him relentlessly. The humor in his speeches allowed to de-escalate the tension that his remarks sparked. The minutes say the following about how *Šaläqa* Admase saw his role at that particular assembly.

2.3.3 አያይዘውም ሻለቃ አድማሴ ዘለቀ ስለ ራሳቸው ሲገልጹም በጉባኤው አሳቸው ባይኖሩ ኑሮ ማን እንደሚሰደብና እንደሚተች እንደማያውቁና በዚህም በኩል ለጉባኤው ባለውለታ እንደሆኑ<sup>321</sup>

In addition, *Šaläqa* Admase Zälläqä said the following about himself: if he were not at the assembly he would wonder who would be insulted and criticized; and that the assembly is indebted to him for his presence and for allowing everyone to have someone to attack.

One topic that inspired *Šaläqa* Admase's repeated outrage was the topic of land. *Šaläqa* Admase kept on reminding the assembly of the students' revolution of the 1960s that demanded 'land to the tiller' and how there are students who chanted those slogans present at the assembly

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<sup>321</sup> Qalä'ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 368.

now asking for the constitution to hand over land to the government. *Šaläqa* Admase was criticizing the inherently contradictory stance of the revolutionaries who ousted the monarchy and the Därg, but who are themselves disregarding people’s opinions about similar matters.

2.3.4 በቀበሌ ሕዝቡ ሊዝን ደግፎታል የተባለውን በተመለከተ ለቀበሌ ግምገማ ቀርቦ «ኢየሱስ ወንጀለኛ ነው።» ቢባል እንኳን «እውነት ነው» እንደሚልና ነገር ግን ሁሉም ብሔር ብሔረሰብ በሚሰበሰቡበት ኳስ ሜዳ «ሊዝ ትፈልጋላችሁ ወይ?» ተብሎ ቢጠየቅ «እግዚአብሔር ያውጣን» እንደሚል<sup>322</sup>

About the indication that people have supported the government’s land-lease policy through the *qäbäle*, even if people were asked to assess the claim ‘Jesus is a criminal’ through the *qäbäle*, people would say ‘it is true’. But if people were asked again at the place where all the ethnicities converge, the football stadium, ‘do you want government land-lease?’, they would say ‘May God get us out of that!’.

This joke deserves a contextual reminder of the time it was stated. A foundation called *Säw lä Säw* ‘people for people’ organized a concert to collect money for regions that were affected by drought and the concert was held at the stadium in 1994. The Prime Minister of Ethiopia at the time, Tamrat Layne, walked into the stadium and the public started booing and resorted to singing the national anthem of the Därg period. Tamrat had to leave the concert.<sup>323</sup> This was the background to *Šaläqa* Admase’s comment about people stating their true feelings at the football stadium.

A final example is listed below to show what *Šaläqa* Admase thought about the creation of a parliamentary system instead of a presidential system in Ethiopia.

2.3.5 ፕሬዚዳንታዊ ስርዓትን እንደሚመርጡ ምክንያቱም በርካታና ትልልቅ ድርጅቶች በሌሉበትና 85% የአንድ ድርጅት አባል ባለበት ባሁኑ ጊዜ ፓርላሜንታዊ ስርዓት መመስረት በተዘዋዋሪ መንገድ ግርማዊ ቀዳማዊ አፄ ፕሬዚዳንትን መመስረት ነው

That he prefers a presidential system where there aren’t several more parties, and where 85% belong to one party, forming a parliamentary system is like indirectly creating a ‘His Imperial Majesty King of Kings President the first’.<sup>324</sup>

Finally, there is a popular joke that is told about *Šaläqa* Admase at EPRDF’s parliament.

2.3.6 He made a comment about food, and an overweight parliamentarian called Hasän Ali mocked *Šaläqa* Admase stating that reactionary people like him constantly worry about food. *Šaläqa*

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>323</sup> Abiye Teklemariam 2020 (personal conversation).

<sup>324</sup> Qalä’ab Taddäsä Šəgatu 2018/2019, 395.

Admase answered: ከቡር አፈ ጉባዔ፤ አሁን ምግብ የሚያስጨንቀው ማን ይመስላል? ‘Honorable House Speaker, who appears [between the two of us] to be worried about food?’, mocking Hasän Ali.

*Šaläqa* Admase is still remembered as a bold and defiant hilarious orator who did not shy away from commenting and expressing his views in front of rulers. His character is much like *Aläqa* Gäbrä Hännä’s; both use humor to point out illogical and irrational actions. Entirely characterizable under the relief theory of humor, *Šaläqa* Admase’s *čäwata* has earned him respect in Addis Abäba. He is one of Ethiopia’s prominent parliamentarians of the twentieth century, revered for standing by the people and expressing public opinions. *Šaläqa* Admase singlehandedly confronted the glaringly obvious campaigns of disinformation at the heart of the assembly to pass the draft constitution of EPRDF. And he did that through *čäwata*. At the parliament, the examples cited above indicate that there was not a topic he would shy away from. From questions of legal affairs, to land leasing issues, to government bureaucracy, and democratic legitimacy, *Šaläqa* Admase took his job at the parliament seriously. He was there to question and scrutinize government decisions and present public opinion to the government.

He is also a reminder of Addis Abäba’s discontent with the constitution from early on and of the possibility that the process may not have been as democratic as championed by Mälläs. Dr. Nägaso Gidada, the president of Ethiopia from 1995 until 2001, was the chair of the constitutional assembly at the time.<sup>325</sup> He had declared that the process ensured a fair election of representatives from each zone and included the opinions of all Ethiopians without discrimination, essentially calling the whole process ‘democratic’. Years later, Dr. Nägaso Gidada would apologize for this statement, claiming that history will reveal that the process was far from democratic.<sup>326</sup> Considering this, it appears that in all three of these Ethiopian regimes, the constitution was exactly what Mälläs accused of the previous regimes of: nothing but ‘legitimizing agent[s] of the status quo’.<sup>327</sup>

The 1994 constitution remains disputed to-date on the same topics that *Šaläqa* Admase raised. His mockery of the *qäbäle* is an all-too-common theme of jokes repeatedly present in the coming chapters. More topics are those of secessionism granted by the constitution to any federal region of the country, the issue of land-lease and government ownership of land, the Ethiopian flag, and the ethnic-federalist system of administration. These are addressed by urban Ethiopians through jokes. Ultimately though, the question of justice surfaces as his primary

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<sup>325</sup> Anon. 1994, 2.

<sup>326</sup> Gərma Säyfu Maru 2017, 20.

<sup>327</sup> Kassahun Berhanu 2005, 180.



disposition throughout the discussions. *Šaläqa* Admase's pre-occupation is simply: why aren't people's concerns taken into consideration, and where is the justice in that?

Through his *čäwata*, *Šaläqa* Admase raises questions and confrontations that reveal the reasons popular opinion in Addis Abäba holds that there is little difference in style of leadership beyond change of individuals in Ethiopia in the second half of the twentieth century.

## **2.5 Čäwata at the parliament: Mälläs Zenawi**

A few months before the 2010 elections, Mälläs Zenawi presented a performance report to the Ethiopian parliament, particularly to the House of People's Representatives. Certain aspects of the parliamentary discussions are important to note.

The code of conduct dictates that each parliamentarian is to be addressed as *yätäkäbbäru* 'honorable'. And when parliamentarians address one another, they have to adopt the respectful form of the personal pronoun of the second and third person. Each is given time to speak by the House Speaker who is allowed to intervene and stop speakers. This is if they, according to the House of Peoples' Representatives Regulation article 23, clause 5, '[contravene] the procedure and Code of Conduct provided in this Regulation'.<sup>328</sup> Article 29 of the regulation prohibits calling and winking at guests,<sup>329</sup> and bans 'murmuring, shouting, clapping, whistling or any other misbehavior'. It does not prohibit laughter or humor at the parliament.

Concerning the performance report that Mälläs presents in this parliamentary hearing, it is according to Article 76 of the Regulation which stipulates that reports have to be presented by the Prime Minister. Clause 3 states,

The Prime Minister of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic shall, according to a schedule made for him, present reports regarding the general operation of the government to the House twice a year; However the Prime Minister may submit a report to the House at any time he deems it necessary.<sup>330</sup>

During this assembly, Mälläs Zenawi reads the report<sup>331</sup> and then the house proceeds to receive questions from parliamentarians. Since each individual's question is answered by Mälläs Zenawi, they are presented here in the order of how they were asked, instead of being grouped thematically. Mälläs's report is not presented since the questions reveal some of its contents.

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<sup>328</sup> Anon. 1998. This stipulation is also unaltered in the 2005 version.

<sup>329</sup> Id.

<sup>330</sup> Id.

<sup>331</sup> The link to the online location of this is found in appendix B.

As for the parliamentarians, after the May 2005 elections, the leaders of CUD were arrested and those who were not arrested disagreed as to whether or not to join the parliament with the people's votes they had won at the elections. Four groups emerged. One group led by Ato Tämäsäng Zäwde,<sup>332</sup> stated they would join the parliament to raise awareness about the arrested political figures. The second group refused to join the parliament of EPRDF. The third group was led by Ato Lädätau Ayyalew,<sup>333</sup> and these were no longer representing CUD but their own party, the EDP (Ethiopian Democratic Party). A fourth group was led by other members of the CUD which also joined the parliament, but they were supposedly bribed by the EPRDF. Beyond those associated with the CUD, there were other notable parliamentarians including Dr. Merara Gudina<sup>334</sup>, and Bulča Dimeqsa.<sup>335</sup>

The first person who presents questions, and comments to Mälläs is Dr. Merara Gudina. Merara is known for his wit and comical jabs in political debates and public speeches as well as at his university lectures. He says the following:

2.4.1 «የዛሬው ሪፖርት ዋና አጅንዳ ስለ መጪው ምርጫ ስለሆነ በሱ ልጅምር። ሪፖርቱ መጪው ምርጫ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሰላማዊ እና በሕዝቡ ዘንድ ተዳግኒነት ያተረፈ እንደሚሆን ማድረግ ይላል። ለኢህአዴግ ካልሆነ በስተቀር ከዚህ በኋላ ተአምር ካልተፈጠረ በስተቀር እየተገፋበት ባለው መንገድ ከተገፋ ነጻ እና ፍትሐዊ ምርጫ መስፈርት የሚያሟላ በኢትዮጵያ ሁኔታ በአገራችን ጨርሶ ይኖራል የሚል ግምት የለንም [...] የመንግሥት ድጎማ የተባለው እስካሁን እንዳየነው እጅግ በጣም አነስተኛ ሲሆን ኢህአዴግ ከእኛ አኩል ተሰልፎ የወሰዳት 9ሺህ ብር [Laughter.] [...] ስለዚህ እንግዲህ ይህ ነው ያለው በምርጫው ሁኔታ ለምን ሰላማዊ ነጻና ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሊባል እንደሚችል ተአማኝ ሊሆን እንደሚችል በምን ተአምር ሊሆን እንደሚችል ኢህአዴግ ብቻ ነው የሚያውቀው።»

Today's report is mainly about the coming elections, so let me start with that. The report suggests making the coming elections democratic, peaceful and having the trust of the people. Unless it is for EPRDF, and unless there is some miracle, by the way we are going, we have absolutely no assumption that there will be any sort of free and fair election in Ethiopia from now on. [...] We have heard of government support in the elections, but it is almost of negligible value and EPRDF

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<sup>332</sup> Tämäsäng Zäwde was once the chairman of the CUD.

<sup>333</sup> Lädätau Ayyalew is one of the politicians who was a part of the CUD party that had major support in Addis Abäba in 2005. He was representing the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) at the parliament.

<sup>334</sup> Merara Gudina is a lecturer at Addis Abeba University, and a previous member of MEDREK party. He is now leader of the Oromo Federalist Congress and was arrested for charges including dealing with terrorist groups in 2016.

<sup>335</sup> Bulča Dimeqsa is an economist and the founder of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement. Anon. 2019b.

has lined up just like the rest of us to take that nine thousand Birr. [Laughter.] [...] This is it regarding the elections. Why it could be considered peaceful and democratic, or just; through what miracles this will happen, EPRDF is the only one who knows.

2.4.2 ከዛ ቀጥሎ ሪፖርቱ ለ7ኛው ጊዜ 10 በመቶ በላይ የኢኮኖሚ እድገት እየመጣ ነው ይለናል ሕዝቡ እኮ ኢህአዴግን መንግሥት ለ18 ዓመታት እኮ ባዶ ተስፋ እየመገበው አሁን አሁንከ ኢህአዴግ የሚያወራው ተረት እየመሰለው መጥቷል። አሁን እንደዚህም አንዳንድ ጊዜ መብራት በፈረቃ ምግብ በፈረቃ እየተባለ ነው። [...] ኢህአዴግን የምደግፍበት አንድ ነገር ማግኘቴ ደስ ብሎኛል ስለ መሬት ዝርፊያ እና ሕገወጥ የሚለው ነው። ኢህአዴግ እንደዛ ማስቀመጡ በጣም ደስ ብሎኛል። ስጋቴ ግን ከቡር ጠቅላይ ሚኒስቴር ስጋቴ ግን ታላላቅ አሳዎች ላይ ሳይሆን ትናንሽ አሳዎች ላይ እንዳይሆኑ ስጋት አለኝ። ታላላቅ አሳዎች ላይ ሳይሆን ትናንሽ አሳዎች ላይ እንዳይሆኑ ስጋት አለኝ። የትምህርት ጥራት ተብሏል የትምህርት ጥራት በኢትዮጵያ ዘመናዊ የትምህርት ታሪክ ውስጥ እንዳሁኑ የወደቀበት ጊዜ እና ሁኔታ የለም። ይህንን አስተማሪ ስለሆንኩኝ በደንብ አውቃለሁ።

Following this, the report says for the seventh time that there is development of 10%, the people have been waiting for EPRDF for 18 years with empty hopes and now the people think EPRDF is speaking fables.<sup>336</sup> Now, it is being said ‘electric power in rations, food in rations’. [...] I am happy I found one reason to support EPRDF. The part about illegal selling of land. I am happy that EPRDF has said that. But my fear is, Honorable Prime Minister, my fear is that that will be enforced on the small fish and not the large fish. I fear it will not be on the large fish but the small fish. Education quality has been mentioned: in the history of Ethiopia’s modern education there is no other time than today that the quality of education has hit rock bottom. I know this because I’m a teacher.

Merera’s questions are about why Mälläs Zenawi calls the forthcoming elections free and democratic in his report. Though the script does not seem to indicate humor, Merera’s smile as he makes his points indicates a sense of humor in play. ‘Unless it is for EPRDF, [...] we have absolutely no hope that we will see any sort of free and fair election in Ethiopia from now on’, he says smiling. The joke here requires contextual and historical knowledge of Ethiopia’s May 2005 elections, where opposition parties claimed the results were rigged.<sup>337</sup> Three months after the elections, it was declared that the incumbent had won 327 seats of the parliament, with combined opposition figures winning 174 seats. Many ‘CUD and other opposition members initially boycotted parliament, though [...] by March 2008, about 150 had taken their seats’.<sup>338</sup>

Merera also makes a sarcastic joke following this when he says that perhaps there is a different meaning to the word ‘democracy’ when used by EPRDF. It could be that ‘democratic

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<sup>336</sup> *Tärät*; refer to chapter three, where there is a discussion on Abbabba Tesfayye, the popular fable teller.  
<sup>337</sup> Abbink 2006, 105, 176.  
<sup>338</sup> Anon. 2010.

elections’ does not mean the same thing to EPRDF as it means to opposition parties, or the Ethiopian population. Merera also uses the word ‘miracle’ repeatedly to express his hopelessness in regards to Ethiopia ever holding credible elections. He uses the feminine pronoun to speak about EPRDF, and he exclaims, ‘EPRDF has lined up just like the rest of us’, again sarcastically, expressing discontent about why the government would get support for campaigning just like the other opposition parties for the upcoming elections.

He then speaks about another theme of the report: Ethiopia’s economic growth rate. He calls EPRDF’s development a *tärät* ‘fable’, and as providing empty hope. He follows this by providing a popular saying from Addis Abäba, ‘electric power in rations, food in rations’, showing that he draws from public jokes in his parliamentary speech. In a way, he is presenting public opinion at the highest political organ of the country. Most importantly however, he tries to show that the public is, much like the MPs, unconvinced by talks of growth and development. This is clear in the use of the word *färäqa* ‘rationing’. Rationing food is a grim portrayal of life in Ethiopia, depicting people being forced to skip certain meals or cutting down on their food in-take. The joke is meant to be that EPRDF claims growth while people are now using the word *färäqa* to food as well.

Finally, he adds in a cheerful tone that he is genuinely happy that he found one thing that he agrees on with the EPRDF. This is itself a dark joke; it is depressing that Ethiopia’s opposition figures and the government do not have at least one thing to agree about. His final comment about education quality gets a striking response from Mälläs to which Merera responds in complete sarcasm in the second round of questioning. What we observe here is the relief theory of humor in action. Merera is expressing his opinions about Mälläs’ report and in general about Ethiopia’s reality through his *čäwata*.

Then Lädätau Ayyalew speaks. He talks about consensus issues and speaks about the numbers the government relays as economic growth rates – which was at the time a 10.1% rate. But his speech lacks distinctive humor and is not marked with striking rhetorical devices. As an example, here is part of his speech:

2.4.3 ሌላው መመለስ አለበት ብዬ የማምነው ይህ አይነት ሪፖርት ሲቀርብ በጣም ግልጽ የሆኑ የማያሻሙ መልሶች ሊሰጡ ይገባል ይህ በስድ ንባብ መልክ ነው የቀረበው ሪፖርቱ። ስንት አዳዲስ የሥራ እድል ተፈጠረ ሃገሪቷ በእርሻ ጥገኝነት ምን ያህል ፐርሰንት ተቀነሰ ጥገኝነቷ ስንት የገበሬ ቁጥር ተቀነሰ የውጭ ንግድ ሚዛናችን በስንት ፐርሰንት ተስተካከለ ወይንም ቀነሰ እነዚህ እነዚህን የመሳሰሉ ጉዳዮች በፋክት እና በፊገር መገለጽ አለባቸው። በስድ ንባብ መልክ ነው የቀረበው። ይህንንስ እንዴት ያዩታል ነው።

Another thing that I believe needs to be answered is that when such reports are presented there needs to be a presentation of direct, unambiguous answers instead of long proses in which this report is

presented. How many new job opportunities have been created, how much in percent of a decrease has the country seen in regard to its dependence on farming, is there a decrease in the number of farmers, is our foreign commerce scale finding a balance – these things need to be presented through facts and figures. This is written as a prose. How do you see this?

Läggäsä delivers the next almost poetic speech. He speaks about development. Mälläs Zenawi later responds to this through jokes and anecdotes so it is important to see what exactly was said.

2.4.4 ባጠቃላይ ሲታይ ምናልባት የሹማምንት እድገት ወይ የባለሥልጣኖች እድገት ካልሆነ በስተቀር የአገሪቷ እድገት የለም። መንገድ ሰፍቷል ሆኖችን ጠቧል። ፎቆች ተደርድረዋል ነገር ግን ዳቦ ስኳር ሊሆን አይችልም ናፍጣ ሊሆን አይችልም ኤሌክትሪክ ሊሆን አይችልም። ባጠቃላይ ሲታይ ግን እድገቱ ከቁጥር አላለፈም። ማኅበራዊ ጉዳይን በተመለከተ ጤናም ሆነ ትምህርት ቤት ግንባታዎች አሉ የውስጥ ቁሳቁሶች አልተሟሉም በቁጥር ላይ የተመሠረተ ሳይሆን ስንቱ ጠገብ ስንቱ ተመረቀ ስንቱ ሥራ ያዘ ስንቱ ሥራ አጣ የሚለው መሠረታዊ ነገር መሆን አለበት አመሰግናለሁ።

What is seen in general is that there is no development in the country, perhaps there is development for those in power or the political elite. The roads have gotten wider, but our bellies have shrunk. There are buildings lined up, but they cannot be bread, they cannot be sugar, or petrol; they cannot be electricity for us. Conclusively, the development is limited to numbers. Concerning social realities, hospitals and schools; there are building constructions, but the internal supplies are missing. Development should not be about figures, it should be about how many of our people have full stomachs, how many graduated, how many have secured jobs, how many are unemployed—these must be fundamental. Thank you.

Läggäsä’s speech is marked with poetic expressions. He says, ‘roads have gotten wider, but our bellies have shrunk’. He moves between metaphors, saying buildings can not be bread, or sugar. He challenges EPRDF’s attachment to numbers and says our priorities should be people, not digits.

Following this, Tämäsgän speaks. As a trained economist, he starts his speech by claiming that he does not understand how the Ethiopian government claims to have controlled the inflation and developed the economy without using a fiscal and monitoring policy. He then adds the following.

2.4.5 በየትኛው የኢኮኖሚ ፕሪንሲፕል ነው ይህኛው ኪይኔዥያን ቲዮሪ ነው ወይስ ሌላ አዲስ አብዮታዊ ዲሞክራሲ ኢኮኖሚ ቲዮሪ አለ እኛ የማናውቀው? ይህን እንዲገልጹልን እንፈልጋለን። [There’s brief laughter at the provocative tone.] ይህ ውጤታማ አለመሆኑን በስኳር ገበያ እናየዋለን። አሁን ስኳር ከየት እንደምንገዛ በምን ያክል እንደምንገዛ ከማን እንደምንገዛ እየተነገረን ነው። በአንድ በኩል ደግሞ ነጻ የገበያ ኢኮኖሚ እያካሄድን ነው ይባላል። ይህ የ‘ዕዝ’ ኢኮኖሚ ነው እንጂ የነጻ ኢኮኖሚ አይደለም። የነጻ ኢኮኖሚ እንደዚህ አይሠራም። የነጻ ኢኮኖሚ በፍላጎት በአቅርቦት በዋጋ ላይ የተመሠረተ ነው።

እና ሊገለጽ ይገባል። በነገራችን ላይ እኛ መንግሥት ያቋቋምነው ስኳር እንዲነግድ አይደለም። ስኳር መከፈት ሁኔታ የሰሙና መከፈት ሁኔታ የዱቄት መከፈት ሁኔታ መንግሥታችን በዚህ እንዲሳተፍ አይደለም። መንግሥት ደንበር እንዲጠብቅ እና የወጭ ጉዳይ ፖሊሲያችን እንዲያስፈጽምልን ነው መንግሥት የሾምነው። ምናልባት በሚቀጥለው ምርጫ ከተሳካልን ይህንን እናስተካክላለን።» [Laughter. Mälläs is seen laughing too.]

Which economic principle is this? Keynesian theory or is there a new revolutionary democratic economic theory that we are unaware of? We would like for you to please explain this. [There’s brief laughter at the provocative tone.] We see that this is unproductive through the sugar market. We are told where we buy sugar today and how much we buy it for and from where. On the other end we are also told that this is a free market. This is not free market; it is controlled market. Free market economy does not work this way. Free market is based on demand and supply. This needs to be stated. By the way, we did not set up a government, so that it sells sugar. We do not want our government to be selling sugar, selling soap and flour. We appointed a government to secure our borders and manage our foreign policy. Perhaps if we are successful in the next elections, we will fix this. [Laughter. Mälläs is seen laughing too.]

Tämäsġän’s speech is interesting for a number of reasons. He asks Mälläs serious economic questions and wonders if the EPRDF has come up with its own economic theory and makes a joke here by calling that theory, Revolutionary Democratic theory. This is a jab at EPRDF’s development plan. Prior to the elections of 2005, Ethiopia had declared that it would adopt white capitalism. After 2005, the EPRDF, concerned with the increasing frustration of urban Ethiopians and the election results, abandoned liberal capitalism and looked towards Eastern Asia. This shift was towards the developmental state, which was according to some economists, much more in line with EPRDF’s revolutionary democratic political outlook.<sup>339</sup>

The other reason why this speech is interesting is because he is indicating what the role of a government is. Just like some of the emperor’s parliament members did, parliamentarians are reminding Mälläs to simply attend to the tasks required of him. He delimits the role of the government when he jokes that the government is not a merchant. He says the government should not be running a business and that its job is to secure the borders and manage foreign policy.

The third joke that Tämäsġän makes is, in actuality, sad. He says, ‘perhaps if we get lucky in the next elections, we will fix this’. This gets laughter from various members of the parliament including Mälläs himself. The laughter from both parliamentarians and rulers shows an acceptance of the façade of elections in Ethiopia. This is based on the pretext of the contested

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<sup>339</sup> Habtamu ġärma 2016.

May 2005 elections. The laughter reveals defeated hopelessness of seeing change in Ethiopia's political leadership through elections. This again falls in the relief theory of humor, where the joke-teller reveals something he has been holding on to. But in doing so, Tāmāsgān shows the theatrics of the Ethiopian parliament. Everybody is aware that Ethiopia will not be holding democratic elections; it will only hold elections. And the members of the parliament that laugh do so for different reasons. Those who share Tāmāsgān's sentiments laugh out of hopelessness. Those like Mälläs, out of indifference.

Ali, member of the EDP along with Lädātu Ayyalew, then presents a serious commentary about the education system following Tāmāsgān. But his response to Mälläs Zenawi later is more important to this discussion.

Bulča Dimeqsa, an economist who has worked at the World Bank internationally and as deputy minister of the Ministry of Finance of Ethiopia during the emperor's time,<sup>340</sup> says the following comment after mentioning that Merera had already spoken most of what he had wanted to say.

2.4.6 አንዳንድ ጥያቄ ብቻ ለመጠየቅ እፈልጋለሁ። ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትሩ መንግሥቱ ደጋግሞ ደጋግሞ ኢትዮጵያ በ100 10 በ100 11 አድጋለች ይላሉ። እኔ እሳቸውም የኢትዮጵያ ኢኮኖሚስቶችም ያውቃሉ በ100 11 ማደግ ማለት ተአምር ነው። ይህንን ተአምር የሠራችው ቻይና እንዲያውም አሁን እየሠራች አይደለም ታይዋን ደቡብ ኮሪያ ናቸው። እንዴት ኢትዮጵያ [Puts hands on mouth to show disbelief.] በ100 11 ... [Here laughter engulfs the parliament.] ኢትዮጵያ እንዴት አድርጋ ነው በ11 ያደገችው? አንጎላ አሁን በ100 12 እያደገ ነው። አንጎላ ለምንድን ነው በአንድ ጊዜ ብዙ ዘይት አገኙ ብዙ ዘይት ያገኙ ሰዎች ወይም ሌላ ነገር ያገኙ ሰዎች በ100 10 በ100 11 ቢያድጉ አይገርምም። ለዓለምስ እንዴት ብለን ነው ምንገልጻው በ100 11። ቅድም እንደተባለው የዓለም የገንዘብ ድርጅት ኢትዮጵያ እና ሌሎች ምሥራቅ አፍሪካ አገሮች ቢበዛ በ100 6 ያድጋሉ ብለዋል። እኛ ግን እምቢ ብለን «አስራ አንድ ነው!» አንላለን። ይህ ተገቢ ነው ወይ?

I just want to ask a few questions. The Prime Minister and the government are repeatedly heard saying Ethiopia has grown at a rate of 10 from a 100, and 11 from a 100. I, the Prime Minister and Ethiopia's economists all know that it is a miracle to grow at 11%. This miracle is done by China, and that even not anymore. It was seen in Taiwan, and South Korea. How could Ethiopia? [Puts hands on mouth to show disbelief.] How did Ethiopia grow at eleven percent? [Here laughter engulfs the parliament.] Angola is now growing at 12% but that is because Angola found oil. It isn't shocking if those people who found oil or other things grow at 10%, 11%. And how are we going to tell the world this? Earlier, we heard that the IMF stated Ethiopia and other Eastern African nations grow at most at 6%. But we refuse, we say 'it is 11%'. Is this necessary?

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<sup>340</sup> Fantahun Engeda 2008, 252.

Bulča’s speech is marked with repetitions, physical movements, mimicry and changes in tone whenever he is quoting Mälläs. Just like Merera, Bulča uses the word ‘miracle’ to describe the government’s reported growth of 11% annually. The parliament erupts in laughter when Bulča says ‘how could Ethiopia’ and places his hand on his mouth while rotating dramatically in his chair to show his shock to the rest of the parliament leaving his question hanging. He also exclaims, ‘how are we to explain this to the world’, in an embarrassed way. This is reminiscent of the traditional Ethiopian road-side courts. Those debating at the traditional court would appeal to listeners to side with them theatrically. Bulča is doing the same.

His embarrassment, his look of concern as he makes his speech all hint at a serious tone underscoring his words. But why does the parliament laugh? For one, Bulča’s animations, his gestures and his facial expressions are humorous. For another, it is indicative of the general disbelief of the report presented by Mälläs Zenawi. And one way to challenge this is through jokes. Bulča’s disbelief may be shared and recognized by the house. Most importantly, he has posed a serious question for Mälläs in a non-combative way. He is expressing and relieving his shock and advising that all of this stubbornness is not necessary.

The first round of questioning is over and Mälläs responds to each question. His first response is to the question of development and exaggerated IMF figures. He says that IMF’s reports have similar conclusions and adds the following line:

2.4.7 ኢህአዴግ እንደዚህ አለ ተብሎ መለጠፍ የተለመደ ነው። አይ ኤም ኤፍ ግን በምርጫ ተወዳዳሪ አይደለ [Laughter.] ስለዚህ አይ ኤም ኤፍ ያላለውን ብሏል ብሎ በዚህ ምክር ቤት ደረጃ መግለጽ ምናልባት የምክር ቤቱን ክብር የሚነካ ስለሚሆን ነው።

It is common to make allegations that the EPRDF has said things. But the IMF is not running in the elections. [Laughter.] Suggesting the IMF said things that it didn’t is below the standards of this parliament and might even be insulting to the honor of the parliament.

Mälläs’s statement is to mean that parties frequently accuse the EPRDF of lying or for saying something it didn’t. He is defending his party in this instance. He then makes a joke that the IMF will not be running in Ethiopia’s elections. This draws humor principally because naturally, the IMF would exaggerate numbers if it were contending at the election. The idea is that one would have to pay attention to IMF’s figures since they have little stake in Ethiopia and have no reason to fabricate data.

Mälläs says the following to Tämäsgän.

2.4.8 ፊስካል እና ሞነቴሪ ፖሊሲ ሳይጠቀሙ የዋጋ ግዥቦትን ተቆጣጠርኩ ብለዋል ጠቅላይ ሚኒስቴሩ የሚል አስተያየት ተሰንዝሯል። ፊ ዚ ካ ል ሲሉ እንደገባኝ ፊስካል ለማለት መሰለኝ። [Light laughter.] ፊስካል ፖሊሲ የሌለው በጀት የሌለው መንግሥት ግን እንኳን መንግሥት ሽፍታም ቢሆን በበጀት ነው የሚንቀሳቀሰው።»



There was a comment about how the Prime Minister said he controlled inflation without using a fiscal and monetary policy. When [Tämäsgän] said ‘physical’, I think he meant fiscal. [Light laughter.] A government without a fiscal policy, or budget – even rebels have budgets, let alone a government.

Mälläs’s comment to Tämäsgän’s detailed questions about fiscal and monetary budget is a mockery of his accent. This humor falls under the disparaging theory of humor, where the joke teller is reproachful. Mälläs is also refusing to answer the serious question by redirecting and mocking the accent of the questioner. He belittles the man instead of responding and brushes it off by saying even rebels run on budgets – a nod to his own past as a rebel and of Ethiopia’s past and current rebels. An example is Emperor Tewodros, one of Ethiopia’s formidable rebels.

On the topic of sugar and electricity shortages, Mälläs defends them. He says shortages are victory signs because they imply goods reaching more people than initially planned. He does not address the question of the government officials selling sugar and the government acting as a merchant. This is what he says:

2.4.9 ስኳር እድገት አጋጥሟል ትክክል ነው የምናመርተው ስኳር በከፍተኛ መጠን ጨምሯል። አንድ። ከዚህ በፊት ወደ ዉጪ እናወጣ የነበረው ስኳር አቁመናል ኤክስፖርት ማድረግ። ሁለት። ከዉጪ በከፍተኛ መጠን ስኳር ፍጆታ ስለጨመረ ነው። ለምን ቢባል ስኳር ቀምሶ እማያውቀው አርሶ-አደር መቅመስ ስለጀመረ ነው። የድላችን ውጤት ነው። እድገት ካለ የስኳር አጥረት አይጋጥምም የሚል ተረት ሊኖር አይችልም። አጥረት ኢንቨስትመንትን ይጋብዛል [...]

There is growth in sugar production, yes, the amount we produce has greatly increased, one. We have stopped exporting sugar, two. This is because we import more sugar. This in turn is because the farmer who has never before tasted sugar has now tasted sugar. This is a sign of our victory. There is no fable that suggests if there is development, there will not be sugar shortage. Shortage invites investments [...]

His response here highlights some important things about how he makes a speech. Mälläs numbers his points so that they are clearly understood by listeners. He also manipulates emotionally. By saying, ‘he who has not tasted sugar before, the farmer’, he is forcing listeners to sympathize with Ethiopia’s farmers. After making this sentimental point about non-urban Ethiopians, he calls it a *tärät* ‘fable’ that Ethiopia would not encounter shortages when developing. He says shortages encourage investments. But this was the exact point that was raised by Tämäsgän; the issue is that investment is getting hijacked by government officials who are acting as merchants. The investment is not necessarily reaching the larger Ethiopian public. But Mälläs moves on.

The next response goes to Merera. He says,

2.4.10 የትምህርት ጥራትን በተመለከተ የተነሳ ጉዳይ አለ። ዶክተር መረራ ያነሱት ነው። ኢኮኖሚ እድገት አለ የሚባለው የሕልም እንጀራ ነው ብለዋል። ጥሩ ነው። አሜሪካኖች አንድ አባባል አላቸው ‘ሰዎች የየራሳቸውን አመለካከት የመያዝ መብት አላቸው የየራሳቸውን ፋክት የመፍጠር መብት ግን የላቸውም’ ይላሉ። [Laughter.] የራሳቸውን አመለካከት ቢያስቀምጡ ችግር የለውም። የራሳቸውን ፋክት አሃዝ ለመፍጠር ሲሞክሩ ግን በተለይ ለመምህር በተለይ ለአስተማሪ ያስተዛዝባል። ምን አልባትም የትምህርት ጥራት መጓደል ከዚህ ጋር የሚያያዝ እንዳይሆን ጥያቄ ያስነሳል። [More laughter. Dr. Merera is also seen laughing here.] ስነምግባሩ የጎደላቸው መምህራንን ከመኖራቸው ጋር የሚያያዝበት ሁኔታ ሊኖር ስለሚችል።

There is a topic raised which concerns quality of education. This was raised by Doctor Merera. He has suggested that economic development is ‘*Engära* of dreams’. Good. The Americans have a saying. They say ‘people have the right to have their own opinions but do not have the right to create their own facts’. [Laughter.] It is okay to state an opinion, that’s no problem. But when they create facts, especially for a teacher, an educator, that’s disheartening. Perhaps then the low quality of education is linked to this? [More laughter. Dr. Merera is also seen laughing here.] Because there might be a link to there being teachers who fail to meet ethical standards.

Multiple rhetorical devices are used in his ironic speech. He repeats the popular saying which was also used by Merera, ‘*Engära* of dreams’. This phrase simply means an unachievable goal, something that one can only dream of. He then adopts an American saying about opinions and facts. This saying is presented to the parliament in an Amharic translation. He then takes this proverb to make a point about teachers and why the Ethiopian education system is poor today, i.e. since teachers are teaching students baseless opinions as facts. This is an attack on Merera who is a teacher himself. He is accusing Merera of fabricating facts and indicating that the failure of the education system is not just to be blamed on the government. Mälläs’s tendentious humor makes us wonder if he is nudging listeners to question Merera’s ethics as an educator.

Mälläs continues.

2.4.11 ተደብዶብን ተቀጠቀጥን የሚለው ወሬ ለመጀመሪያ ጊዜ ዛሬ የሰማነው አይደለም። እርስ በእርሳችሁ ተቀጣቅጣችሁ ስታበቁ [Laughter.] ኢህአዴግ ቀጠቀጠን ብላችሁ ስታወግዙ እጅ ከፍንጅ ትይዛችኋልና»

This is not the first time we hear of the ‘we were beaten up’ news. When you have beaten one another up, [Laughter.] you go ahead and say ‘EPRDF beat us’ – and you’ve been caught doing it too.

Here, Mälläs is deflecting from admitting or recognizing that there is a problem that opposition party members are facing from security forces. He avoids this question by making a joke and stating that it is not just EPRDF that does this but other political parties themselves too. The sarcasm here is used as a method of deflection. He is dodging the question while also letting listeners know that the political parties may not always be honest in their accusations.

Following this, a second round of questions begins, and Merera speaks. He initially complains about how the allotted time of two minutes is not enough to respond to Mälläs's answers. He then makes a few points that cause laughter in the House, one of which is the following.

2.4.12 ስለ ትምህርት አንስተዋል ስነምግባር ስላላቸው ስለሌላቸው አስተማሪዎችም አንዳንድ የእኔ ተማሪዎች እዚህም ውስጥ ያሉ ይመስሉኛል ስነምግባር ካላቸው እና ከተመሰገኑ መምህራን እንደምገኝ እርግጠኛ ነኝ ሪፖርት እንዳልዎት [Laughter.]

You have spoken about education and teachers who have ethics and those who lack ethics. Some of my students are in this parliament and I am sure you know or have reports that I am one of the revered teachers of today. [Laughter.]

Merera is not responding to the report but rather to the joke Mälläs made about his role as an educator. The air of dialogue about the report has been suspended. Merera defends himself in a joking manner. Culturally, bragging about one's accomplishments is generally looked down upon. And so, his confidence in defending himself adds to the humor of his speech. He also doesn't just say it but adds that there are other witnesses to this, his students in parliament and possible reports that Mälläs might have. Mälläs's attack is what prompted this personal response.

Läggäsä then responds to Mälläs's remarks about the IMF.

2.4.13 ኢኮኖሚክ እድገት ጋር በተያያዘ የአፍ ወለምታ ነው ያሉት ይህ ነገር አንተም አጣራው እንዳሉኝ ሁሉ እርሶንም የኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ባንክ የሚሰጥዎት አሃዝ እና የኢትዮጵያ ስታቲስቲክስ ባለስልጣን የሚሰጥዎትን ቁጥር ከዓለም አሁን ካለው ተጨባጭ ሁኔታ አብረን እናየዋለን። [Laughter.]

You have suggested that I carefully study the point about the economic development by claiming it was a 'twist of the mouth'. Just like you told me to clarify it, together, we should see the numbers the Ethiopian National Bank and the Ethiopian Statistics Agency gives you as well as the world-wide figures. [Laughter.]

Läggäsä's response is humorous because of the breach in an accepted order of hierarchy at the parliament. The phrase, 'twist of the mouth', is adopted from bone twisting and indicates an error or a mistake made when one speaks. By claiming to see the numbers together, he is speaking to Mälläs as though he'd speak to a friend that he just had an argument with. The conversation has shifted from being about IMF figures and more towards showing confidence in what one is saying in an act of proving the other wrong.

The next speaker is Tämäsgän. He says the following and eventually has to be cut off by the House Speaker for 'not following the code of conduct of the parliament'.

2.4.14 እኔ የተጠቀምኩት ኤፍ ፊስካል የሚለውን ነው እንደርስዎ ባላፈቅቁትም። ፊስካል የሚለው ነው። [House Speaker interrupts to say አቶ ተመስገን ስነ ሥርዓት ያድርጉ and Tämäsgän responds: እኔም የሕዝብ ተወካይ ነኝ የተከብሩ አፈ ጉባኤ። The Speaker says: ስነ ሥርዓት ስነ ሥርዓት ያድርጉ and Tämäsgän continues.] ፊስካል ፖሊሲ እና ሞኒቶሪ ፖሊሲ የለዎትም ነው ሁለቱንም አጣምረው ከሥልጣን ጥማት ደረጃ እየተጠቀሙበት ነው። የጠየቅንዎት ጥያቄ አንዱንም አልመለሱም። ስለ በጀት ደፊሲት ተናግረው ነበር። ስለ ባላንስ አፍ ፔይመንት ተናግረው ነበር። ስለ ከረንት አካውንት ደፊሲት ተናግረው ነበር። ስለ ናሽናል ዴት ተናግረው ነበር። አንዱንም አልመለሱም ወዳሉበት ደረጃ ዝቅ ብለን ለመናገር ያስቸግረናል ጥያቄ ስንጠይቅዎ ጥያቄዉን ከመመለስ ይልቅ በተራ አተካራ ነው ጊዜዉን ምንፈጀው ቡ- [He is interrupted by the Speaker, and the platform is given to someone else because Tämäsgän is not following the proper code of conduct.]

I used ‘F’ in fiscal. Only because I don’t whistle the word like you do. [House Speaker interrupts to say: ‘*Ato* Tämäsgän, be disciplined’ and Tämäsgän responds by saying ‘I, too, am a people’s representative Honorable House Speaker’. The Speaker says: ‘Discipline, be disciplined’ and Tämäsgän continues.] You don’t have a fiscal policy and monetary policy; you have united those out of thirst for power. You have not responded to a single question we asked. I had spoken about budget deficit. I had spoken about balance of payment. I had spoken about current account deficit. I had spoken about national debt. You haven’t responded to a single one of these. It is difficult for us to stoop to your level to speak. When we ask you a question, instead of answering the question we kill time with useless banter. [He is interrupted by the Speaker, and the platform is given to someone else because Tämäsgän is not following the proper code of conduct.]

It is obvious that Tämäsgän is hurt by Mälläs’s comment about his English pronunciation of the word ‘fiscal’. His response is marked with accusations about how Mälläs doesn’t answer questions but spends time on useless banter. The House Speaker steps in to stop Tämäsgän from being rude (disrespecting House standards of speech) but did not show the same reaction when Mälläs was making similar jokes. This sentiment is expressed by Tämäsgän when he says, ‘I, too, am a people’s representative’, almost saying he deserves to be treated better than the way he was responded to by Mälläs. The parliament’s code of conduct is itself brought into question as the House Speaker is seen allowing some members a certain privilege over the regulations, in this case Mälläs.

Tämäsgän uses repetition to stress his point. And he uses words such as *atākara* ‘banter’, to expose what Mälläs is doing at the parliament. Certainly, it is obvious at this point that Mälläs has successfully redirected the parliament from discussing the performance report, to disparaging one another. The parliament session had now turned into a show of who can outwit the Prime Minister. Those who are not entertained by him, like Tämäsgän, scold him for wasting their time.

Bulča returns for one more comment to Mälläs. Again, his speech is aided with his gestures, intonations and subtle mimicry of others (particularly of the PM).

2.4.15 እኔ በአክብሮት ጠቅላይ ሚኒስቴሩን የምጠይቃቸው ነገር አለ። ባለፈው ዓመት በሰፊው በዓለም አቀፍ ደረጃም በኢትዮጵያም «እኔ አልቀጥልም እተዋለው። እተዋለው» ብለው ተናግረው ነበር። ይህ ንግግር ብዙ ኢምፕሊኬሽን አለው። እያንዳንዳችን ሁሉም ሰው ጥላን ያደርጋል የሳቸው ጥላን እኔ እንደዚህ አስብያለው ብለው መናገራቸው የብዙ ሰው አስተሳሰብ እና ጥላኔንም ይለውጣል። እኔ አሁን የምለው ምንድን ነው እሳቸው ለፓርላማም ለኢትዮጵያም ፕሬስ ወይንም ለገዛ ለራሳቸው ፕሬስ ለምን እሳቸውን እንደለዋወጡ አልነገሩንም። የኛ ጠቅላይ ሚኒስቴር ናቸው። እሳቸውን የሚመለከት ጉዳይ ሁላችንንም ይመለከተናል። ለምንድን ነው ይህን ያልገለጹት ከቻሉ ዛሬ ይግለጡልን ነው» [Laughter.]

I have a question I'd like to respectfully ask the Prime Minister. Last year, both internationally and in Ethiopia, you had said 'I will not continue. I will stop. I will stop'. This speech has a lot of implications. Each one of us, everybody, plans ahead; and the fact that the Prime Minister said that influences people's thoughts and plans. What I am saying now is that the Prime Minister has not stated to the parliament, or the Ethiopian press or his own press why he changed his mind. He is our Prime Minister. Whatever concerns him concerns all of us. Why has he been unable to explain this to us; if he is able can he explain this today? [Laughter.]

Mälläs is put in a problematic spot here. He cannot say he will not respond to the question and so the idea is to see how the Prime Minister will get out of this situation. In a way, the parliamentarians are jesting with the Prime Minister. Bulča's question is not a follow up to Mälläs's response about economic growth. He uses this opportunity to ask another question in his usual animated way. His whole question is simply, 'when will Mälläs Zenawi resign' and 'if Mälläs Zenawi has changed his plan of resigning from power, can he tell us why'. And his slow, deliberate pauses in between his sentences, his fake outrage and his smile all arouse laughter. What Bulča isn't saying is of more interest than what he is saying. By tying the Prime Minister's plans to the nation's plans, Bulča is pleading for Mälläs to explain what he is thinking so that people can know the final verdict and move on to planning their lives, if he will not resign.

Ali is the last person to speak before the second round of questions is over. He reads the following from a piece of paper quickly, so as not to run out of time. The speed with which he reads and the seriousness of what he is saying together add to the humor of it.

2.4.16 ምርጫን በተመለከተ ቅድም ስለተካሄደው የግንቦት 97ን ምርጫ ስናስታውስ እኛ የፓርላማ አባላት በወቅቱ በመመረጣችን ፓርላማ ሥራውን በጀመረበት አለት የሕዝብን ድምጽ አክብረን ፓርላማ ገብተን በፓርላማ ቡድን ሥያሜ ሕዝባችንን እያገለገልን መገኘታችንና አሁንም በአገራችን በሚካሄደው በአራተኛው ዙር ምርጫ በራሳችን ፍቃድ ገለልተኛ መሆናችን የማንወዳደር በመሆናችን ታሪካዊ ወሳኔ ወስነናል። ተምረናል [Laughter.] ከምርጫ በፊት እኔ አሸንፋለሁ ብሎ ማደናገርም «መብላቷን ሳታውቅ እጇን ታጠብቻለሁ» አመሰግናለሁ። [Laughter.]

Considering the elections, when we remember the May 2005 elections, we parliamentarians were elected then. Respecting people's voices, we joined the parliament and have been serving since. And now for the upcoming fourth round of elections, we would like to state that out of choice, we will refrain from competing in the elections. This is a historic choice we are making. We have learned (our lesson). [Laughter.] Won't claiming it will win elections and confusing people simply be like the saying, 'she washed her hand without knowing if she will eat'? Thank you. [Laughter.]

There are two notable things in this speech; one is his use of proverbs to show that EPRDF is bragging about winning elections before the elections are even conducted. The other is that he sets up his speech as though leading to an obvious conclusion, by saying that members of his party were elected to parliament and have been serving the people. But he concludes by saying that they have made a historic decision not to run for re-elections because they've learned from their past. This incongruous joke veils regret at participating in the May 2005 elections. Ali was showing the futility of engaging in elections because of their past experience as opposition parties, but also in general because he believes there is no point in the elections. His joke buttresses the serious connotations of this. MPs are aware that elections are undemocratic, and that engaging in them bears no fruit. However, they still ask questions.

In the end, Mälläs gives a few more responses and the 24th regular meeting is finished. It closes with clapping.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

By observing the parliament, it becomes obvious that the culture of using *čäwata* in speeches has survived into twenty-first century Ethiopia. Proverbs, idiosyncratic phrases, popular expressions are all in use by the many parliamentarians. Foreign sayings are also adopted into speeches, and English words are commonly spoken showing the malleability of the Amharic language. Examples are the words, 'democracy', 'fiscal', 'economy'. Speakers are not always direct in what they're saying. This particular assembly does not necessarily represent the peak of humorous parliamentary debates and discussions, but it shows how notable opposition members confidently engaged with Mälläs Zenawi in parliament. This is a preview into how vibrant parliamentary debates can be even in non-conducive environments.

The Ethiopian parliament in post-2005 Ethiopia is a space where parliamentarians raise serious points humorously, to which Mälläs responds in kind. Though not explicitly stated, the legitimacy of EPRDF as Ethiopia's government is itself questioned as well as its economic and political policies. This particular session is marked with direct questions from MPs regarding the Prime Minister's term limits, food and electricity shortages in the capital, development

issues, and concerns about poor education quality among other points. All speakers are jesting with Mälläs in one form or another, playfully letting it be known that most have given up on democracy in Ethiopia and that be that as it may, the country still deserves answers about economic and social questions. We observe how seriously parliamentarians pay attention to what Mälläs says in their questions; and that Mälläs also listens to them attentively. Each listens to one another; but Mälläs ultimately has the power to disparage speakers and ignore their comments.

We also observe a recognition of a power structure at the parliament. The prime minister wields a lot of power as even the House Speaker is seen exempting him from codes of conduct to which others are subjected to. Whenever parliamentarians speak and use humor, there is a brief reversal of this power structure. Mälläs Zenawi's humor in his speeches has certainly enabled him to be listened to and respected by people. Though he might have been condescending and often dodging questions, he was listened to because of his wit, humor, and level of articulation. We also observe him responding kindly to some parliamentarians, and dismissively to others. And *čäwata* definitely plays a role in this.

Those like Bulča are skilled at performing and are able to present their questions with gentleness. Bulča's humor is respectful and does not disparage Mälläs. Mälläs also seems to have a soft spot for him. He is seen laughing at Bulča's comments. In this instance, humor softens the blow of Bulča's serious criticisms, whereas Tämäsgän and Mälläs's back and forth are filled with tendentious jokes and this leads to a tense atmosphere. We may conclude that the issue with Tämäsgän was that unlike Bulča, he was not interested in Mälläs's *čäwata*. As an economist, he wanted serious answers to his questions; while Bulča was almost advising the Prime Minister. It could be because Bulča has served in the emperor's government, has experience with other rulers and that he had already accepted he would not be getting serious answers from Mälläs. Despite this speculation, in the dialogue between Bulča and Mälläs, there is an intellectual play where the former resists the latter but not through disparaging humor. Mälläs and Tämäsgän do not have this patience with one another.

Just like the Prime Minister, most of the speakers use humor for purposes of being listened to and respected. There are parliamentarians who have seemingly given up on democracy in Ethiopia. Jokes of those like Merera are defeatist, sarcastic, and ironic. They are using jokes to show their discontent and contempt, and to highlight the differences in reality and expectation. They use humor to relieve their worries and to express their hopelessness about the state of Ethiopia and its political and socio-economic realities. These jokes fall under the relief theory of humor. Some like Lädätu ask questions without the use of jokes, while

Mälläs Zenawi uses jokes to maintain an upper hand, to deflect questions and otherwise to discipline some critical members. His jokes fall under the disparaging theory of humor.

Furthermore, from the onset, the ratification of the constitution leads to a general similarity between Mälläs, Mängəstu and Həylä Šəllase. None appears to have taken democracy seriously. And despite Mälläs's speech during the assembly that shows his hopes of finally ratifying a constitution democratically, Šalāqa Admase's queries are indicative of a disregard to people's opinions. Through the humorous jokes and questions discussed in this chapter, we can conclude that all three rulers used the constitution and parliament for the purpose of consolidating personal power in Ethiopia. And all three, as Ethiopians who use Amharic, also used wit and humor in their speeches, albeit differently.

The chapter has also showed that there are individuals who claimed responsibility and spoke boldly, at times even delimiting the purpose and role of the government. The absolutism of Ethiopia's rulers does not prevent responsible representatives from speaking up. And humor allows for a soft and indirect way of stating these opinions.

Considering the rulers, there are a few things that distinguish Mälläs from his predecessors. Unlike the emperor and Mängəstu, Mälläs was greatly admired for his public speaking skills and is still remembered for his *čəwata*. He does not present long speeches like Mängəstu, and he does not hold himself to imperial standards when speaking, i.e. he uses *čəwata* in public. He also avoids vulgar and uncouth sayings, again, unlike Mängəstu. Part of the respectability Mälläs still holds is due to his quick wit, and ability to appear more intelligent by teasing, making jokes, and mocking people at the parliament. Therefore, the parliament can also be seen as a space of consolidating personal respectability. This explains why members get upset when mocked by the Prime Minister as these sessions were televised, and the public was watching. Mängəstu and Mälläs use humor out of frustration and for sake of disparaging others, respectively. In the case of Mängəstu, he is tied down with internal and external war, and has little peace in the country he is administering. His speeches show how troubled he is. Mälläs on the other hand is the ruler supreme of Ethiopia and he uses humor to demonstrate his power. *Čəwata* is used in all these different ways.

In conclusion, as was Messay Kebede's concern, the questions raised at the parliament show that Ethiopia has not yet modernized; neither politically nor economically. Täklä Həwaryat's hopes of Ethiopians electing their rulers has also not yet been achieved. Sky-rocketing prices for food and basic living necessities, low living standards, poor quality of education, the government's rhetoric of development, and poverty, are topics that are raised by representatives. Parliamentarians are seen attempting to hold the government responsible by



demanding answers from the EPRDF. And though Mälläs' wit and humor may have allowed him to answer some and avoid most of these questions, they are repeated in other spaces. These themes and topics of discussion are recurrent in the following chapters. The next chapter presents how the urban arts community uses humor in contemporary Ethiopia, and how these exact points raised by the parliamentarians are also raised elsewhere.

## Chapter Three: Theatre as *Ĉawata*

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with parliamentary debates and discussions by Ethiopia's political elite and the value of humor in that sphere. The art of being skilled in the manipulation of verbs and having an excellent grasp of Amharic grammar allows leaders to get some validation as competent heads of state. The ability to conceal meaning as well as entertain have social capital. It is why Mälläs Zenawi was admired as a great orator and his successor Haylä Maryam Dässalāñ scorned for his inability 'to at least entertain'.<sup>341</sup> This chapter investigates if Addis Abāba's artistic space is also dictated by attention to language and *ĉawata*.

The Ethiopian author and poet Solomon Deressa writes in his essay 'Letter from Addis Ababa' of the embarrassing position censors and critics of Amharic literature were facing in Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase's time. He says they were unable to tell 'what did who mean and what is who reading into what?', attributing the confusion to 'the mainstay of traditional Amharic literary technique, double-entendre and intricate symbolism'.<sup>342</sup> Though Solomon mentions this as an embarrassing occurrence, this chapter attempts to show how this intricate symbolism and Amharic's literary techniques allow urban Ethiopians to dodge political censorship while presenting social and political critique in their artistic productions.

The arts in general and the play in particular has since its inception been a tool of discussing and proposing nuanced considerations of public matters in Ethiopia. In a rigorously democratic culture of administration, artists are called upon not simply to act as vanguards of a certain opinion, or to be moral and ethical guides. 'Artists work at a societally constituted site [is] where exploration, presentation, and creative interpretation make all the difference'<sup>343</sup> and where 'it would become apparent that society as a whole benefits from having trained and gifted practitioners who explore, interpret, and present nuances in culture and society'.<sup>344</sup>

This chapter studies the use of humor in a selected theatrical production, አዖዩ ፈንገስ: ፌስታልን *Āyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen* 'Āyyayyu Fängäs: My Plastic Bag', and how it portrays the lives of urban Ethiopians. It investigates the play's jokes to explore and interpret socio-political realities while studying what role artists have in the capital city today, and how humor aids their productions.

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<sup>341</sup> Informant A 2018.

<sup>342</sup> Solomon Deressa 1969, 2, 62.

<sup>343</sup> Zuidervaart 2011, 225.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

### 3.1.1 Method

This investigation draws from a range of data collected in Addis Abäba from 2018 until 2020. These include interviews with the actor of the play *Ëyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen*, and the director of the National Theatre of Ethiopia as well as other individuals informative about the urban arts scene. It also draws from historical records and books about the introduction of a European style play in Ethiopia in the twentieth century and its development afterwards. It looks at rulers of modern Ethiopia and their relationship with the theatrical arts. This historical investigation is useful in the analysis of the features of the popular plays of contemporary Ethiopia. Following the historical investigation is a presentation of the play *Ëyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen*. It was first transcribed after repeated attendances at the theatre house in Addis Abäba in 2018. The data analysis and the discussion about the play are based on this transcription. In addition to this, for complementary data relating to theatrical performances and videos, YouTube and similar search engines were used to locate audio-visual materials.

### 3.1.2 *Ëyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen*

The play that is selected for investigation is the comic tragedy one-man play *Ëyyayyu Fängäs: Festalen*. *Ëyyayyu Fängäs* began showing in Addis Abäba in March 2014. It was first staged nine years after the May 2005 elections. At its conception, it was designed to be performed as single episodic twenty-five to thirty minute long shows. These were performed at Addis Abäba's poetic-jazz event held at Ras Hotel on the first Wednesday of each month. The show is comprised of jokes on various topics pertaining to the economic and political life of urban Ethiopians. Heavily leaning on philosophical discussions of the character's tragic life, it was also a show of exhaustive social critique.

Contemporary Ethiopia, unlike pre-EPRDF Ethiopia, does not depend heavily on theatre as a major source of entertainment because other forms of entertainment are readily available. New media platforms such as blogs and social media, online websites where books, newspapers, magazines as well as music and movies are easily accessible, as well as television and radio programs all swamp the entertainment sector. *Ëyyayyu Fängäs* grew into a play after its popularity encouraged both the playwright and the actor. The actor of the play, Gərum Zännäbä, says the following about it: 'for a 6 pm show, people started lining up outside Ras Hotel at noon, so we thought *Ëyyayyu* could be larger than just his half hour-long

performances’.<sup>345</sup> *Festalen* ‘my plastic bag’ is what the theatrical production of *ጃሃሃሃሃ ፈንጎስ* was called.

*ጃሃሃሃሃ ፈንጎስ* was able to complete twenty-eight individual episodes, each with its own separate theme, since its first performance in 2014. And the play *Festalen* came into being thirteen episodes later. *Festalen* was first performed after the 2015 elections. Because the short episodes came with a lot of heavy political jokes as well, Gərum and the playwright Bäräkät Bälaynäh had to wait a few months after the elections to officially open the play for public viewing.<sup>346</sup> Since then, and until September 2018, *Festalen* boasted over 220 performances in Addis Abäba alone, and over 251 performances internationally.<sup>347</sup> The difference between the episodes and the theatrical production is that the content and basic structure of the play *Festalen* never change, whereas the contents of the *ጃሃሃሃሃ ፈንጎስ* episodes are seminal and topical. The link between the episodes and the play is the main character, ጃሃሃሃሃ, and the other characters belonging in his world.

*Festalen* engages critically with topics such as social hyper-consumerism, and its effects on cultural values, presenting plays as forces that attempt to redirect society.<sup>348</sup> And though *Festalen*’s jokes are moralist in nature, the general humor is dark. Most of the jokes represent an oblique reality of life in Addis Abäba. They are also tendentious,<sup>349</sup> and aimed at belittling, scoffing at or making fun of the urban Ethiopian and politicians alike. In general, *Festalen*’s jokes fall into the relief and disparaging theories of humor.

This chapter will analyze selected jokes from the play to study humor as a tool of criticizing society. It will also demonstrate some features of urban spoken Amharic to see if there are major digressions from Amharic proper.<sup>350</sup>

### 3.1.3 Precedents: humorous creative productions

There are notable books and theatrical productions with *čäwata* from Ethiopia’s early modern period. Books like Zännäb’s መጽሐፈ ጭዋታ ሥጋዊ ወመንፈሳዊ *Mäṣḥafä Čäwata Śəgawi Wä Mänfäsawi*, ‘Book of Play: Secular and Religious’ are experimentations of using humor to

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<sup>345</sup> Gərum Zännäbä 2018 (interview).

<sup>346</sup> Id.

<sup>347</sup> Id.

<sup>348</sup> Zuidervaart 2011, 207.

<sup>349</sup> Freud 2013, 127.

<sup>350</sup> Textbook Amharic is what is referred to as Amharic proper.

teach moral lessons. This book was first written in 1857 EC.<sup>351</sup> The author uses *čäwata* to dictate moral and strictly religious values. It is a short work of religious dogmas infused with humorous and philosophical word play.

The book is divided into two sections; the first part contains jokes on non-theological aspects of life and the second is comprised of humor in the service of teaching about Christianity. In the first section of the book are jokes like the following:

ነጭ ሸንኩርት ምነው ይሸታል ይተኩሳል ቢሉ እርሱማ የጠባቹን ክፋት አውቆ እራሱን ወደምድር ቀብሮ እኖራለሁ ቢል ና ውጣ እያላችሁ እናንተ ብታስገድዱት ምን ትጠቀማላችሁ።

If they say, ‘why does garlic smell bad?’, garlic – knowing its nature – tried to bury himself in the soil, but you force him to emerge [and show his nature].<sup>352</sup>

The second part contains seemingly sarcastic but religiously reinforcing *čäwata*, as follows:

እግዚአብሔር ፈሪ ነው እኛ ብንበድለው ልጁን ልኮ ቀስ ብለህ ተዛምደህ ና ብሎ በልጁ ታረቀን

God is a coward; He sent His Son to slowly be related with us because we were being unkind to Him, and He made amends with us through His Son,<sup>353</sup>

እንደ ይሁዳ ያለ መልካም ነጋዴ የለም የዘለዓለሙን ምግብ በ፴ ብር ሸጠልን።

There isn’t a merchant as great as Judah, he sold us eternal food for 30 Birr.<sup>354</sup>

Zännäb also attempted to define what laughter is by suggesting a meaning:

የደስታ ላንቃ ነው።

It is the roof of happiness.<sup>355</sup>

The book is remarkable for being the earliest example of a humorous creative piece of writing. This book, and the witty scholar *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna form the bulk of what is recorded (orally and in written form) as *čäwata* of the intellectuals of nineteenth century Ethiopia.

In the twentieth century, Ethiopia witnesses the production of comedic plays that were written for the purpose of teaching morals, discipline and as guides towards modernity. *ፋቡላ የአውሬዎች ተረት* (*Fabula – Yä Awrewočč Tärät*, ‘Fabels – Fables of Animals’) is acclaimed as

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<sup>351</sup> Zännäb 1932/1933.  
<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 11.  
<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 22.  
<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 25  
<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 6.

the first Ethiopian modern play.<sup>356</sup> *Fabula* was first written by Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam to teach *Ləḡ Iyyasu* responsibility and was later made into a play during the reign of Empress Zäwditu.

Aboneh Ashagrie writes that *Fabula* which was ‘staged in 1920–21 had criticism against [Zäwditu] to which the queen banned theatre until the end of her reign’.<sup>357</sup> This is contrary to what Täklä Ḥawaryat himself has written on the first page of the second edition of *Fabula*, that it was written for the purposes of teaching *Ləḡ Iyyasu* manners.<sup>358</sup> For Täklä Ḥawaryat, theatre’s main goal was to ‘correct and return people from their mistakes’.<sup>359</sup> Notably, his play is a comedy written in poetry format, divided into acts and scenes.

Theatre continued to be used as a didactic, propagandist, and a moral as well as religious guide through the first half of the twentieth century with a few experimental plays making it to the scene. During Emperor Ḥaylä Şállase’s reign, intellectuals developed the art in an attempt to educate the populace about the need for education, for modernization and economic development.<sup>360</sup> It was essentially used as a means of educating and relaying the hopes and aspirations of educated Ethiopians. The next section gives an overview of what the inception and growth of theatre in Ethiopia looked like.

### **3.2 Background: Theatre in Ethiopian history**

#### **3.2.1 Inception: Theatre as modernization**

At its inception, theatre was a site used for instructive purposes in Ethiopia. And it remained the sole means of popular entertainment until the advent and expansion of radio, television, cinema entertainment, and later new media. Theatre’s role in shaping, questioning, analyzing and presenting public and popular<sup>361</sup> concerns and customs was immense. Aboneh Ashagrie

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<sup>356</sup> Molvaer writes the following about the author Täklä Ḥawaryat: ‘he possibly wrote the first play known to have been written in Amharic’ (Molvaer 1997, 48).

<sup>357</sup> Aboneh Ashagrie 1996, 24, 32–33.

<sup>358</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat Täklä Maryam 1921/1922, 1.

<sup>359</sup> Yoḥannəs Admasu 2012/2013, 57–58.

<sup>360</sup> Zerihun Birehanu Sira 2013.

<sup>361</sup> Popular here means social. The word is derived from Mathew Arnold’s discussion of the ‘Populace’. However, while Matthew Arnold used the term to denote a group that is considered ‘uncultured’ in the standards of nineteenth-century England, this paper uses the word to mean popular, of majority, and non-elite. Refer to the volume edited by Storey, Williams 2009, 6–12, 495–630.

says, '[e]ver since its emergence in Ethiopia, theatre to the utmost has been raising socio-economic and political issues, thereby rendering partisanship to popular causes'.<sup>362</sup>

It does remain unclear if staged theatrical productions could have existed in pre-nineteenth-century Ethiopia. There are indications of theatrical performances such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church liturgy services, the military processions during banquets, as well as the traditional road-side court spectacles to mention a few. The writer and poet Yoḥannəs Admasu writes:

የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ የበለጸገ የንግግር ድራማ ቅርስ እንዳለውና በጠባዩም አገላለጥ እንደሚገኝ አይጠረጠርም። በትናንሽ መንደሮች ውስጥ ሕዝቡ በቀልድ ጨዋታ በኩል የታወቀ ሲሆን በጭውውቱና በአነጋገርም ያለው ከፍተኛ ችሎታ በየሥራው በግልጥ የሚታይ ነው።

It is undoubted that Ethiopians have had a well-developed spoken word drama tradition and that [people] carefully observe [one's] expressions. People are known to use jokes and *čäwata* in small neighbourhoods and it is clearly visible the high level of oratory skills in [all sorts of] employment.<sup>363</sup>

Yoḥannəs adds, «ትያጥሮን የሚለውን ቃል አለቃ ኪዳነ ወልድ ክፍሌ አመጣጡን አመልክተው የተረጎሙት እንደሚከተለው ነው። «ትያጥሮን ([...] ቴአትሮን) ፤ የሣቅ የጨዋታ ቤት፤ ብዙ ዐይነት የጥጋብ ጨዋት ምሳሌና ተረት ምትሐትና ውሸት።» 'Theatre exists in the dictionary of Kidanä Wäld Kəfle with the following definition: the house of laughter and playfulness, a house of sayings, proverbs, plays, and lies'.<sup>364</sup> A historical look at early Ethiopian theatre shows the lack of a strict performative structure. Jane Plastow comments that in Emperor Ḥaylä Śəllase's time, 'early plays stage directions are often indistinguishable from the dramatic script, many are in verse form, and some, [...] were simply unperformable'.<sup>365</sup> What was crucial to early performances was not the stage direction, or the presentation of the plays, but rather the ideas that were meant to reach the audience. The early Ethiopian play provided space for writers and for the few educated<sup>366</sup> to express their ideas and present moralistic guidance. And *Fabula* set the structure of what a play should look like in Ethiopia.

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<sup>362</sup> Aboneh Ashagrie 1996, 24, 32.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>364</sup> Yoḥannəs Admasu 2012/2013, 53.

<sup>365</sup> Plastow 1996, 198.

<sup>366</sup> Educated to mean both traditional-school educated, as well as modern-school educated, and those that were socio-politically influential.

Täklä Ḥawaryat was invited to watch one of the first staged productions of the country, or a *čäwata*, at Teras Hotel upon invitation by the director of the Addis Abäba municipality at the time, Hərüy Wäldä Šöllase. Täklä Ḥawaryat writes the following about this first attempt:

የቲያትር ጨዋታው በሃገራችን ከዚያ በፊት አልተጀመረም ነበር። ስለዚህ እኔም አጀማመሩን ለማየት ቸኩዬ ሄድኩ ነገር ግን ከፋኛ ተሳቀቅሁ። አዝማሪዎች ዘፋኞች ወንዶችም ሴቶችም ተሰባስበው አታሞ መሰንቆ ክራር እየመቱ ሲዘፍኑና ሲጨፍሩ አየሁ። የልጅ እያሱ አስተዳደግ በምን አይነት እንደተመራ አይቼ አልነበረምን። አሁን ደግሞ የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ በምን አይነት ወደ ስልጣኔ እንደሚመራ አየሁና የባሰውን አዘንኩ። ይህንኑ አመራር ማቅናት አስፈላጊ መሆኑን ያንጊዜውኑ ተገነዘብኩት ወዲያው አንድ የቲያትር ጨዋታ ለምሳሌ ያህል ለማሰናዳት ተመኘሁ።

Theatre had not been staged in our country before then. So I went to see how it would look like, but I was embarrassed. I saw musicians, men and women alike together singing, playing and dancing to the *atamo, mäsänqo, kərar*. Have I not seen how *Ləğ İyyasu* was raised? And now I witnessed how the Ethiopian people are going to be led to modernization and I became really sad. I decided it was necessary to straighten the road and immediately wished to prepare a play to be used as an example.<sup>367</sup>

It was his disappointment at watching both male and female musicians on stage which in part motivated him to write the play *Fabula*. And since Täklä Ḥawaryat had watched how carelessly *Ləğ İyyasu* acted, surrounded by entertainers and nobody to guide him properly, he was similarly concerned about the lack of discipline in the first attempt of a staged play. This concern stems from his belief that theatre should be used in educating Ethiopians a host of different lessons. Holding the European model as an archetype, he felt the play was crucial to show Ethiopians the correct way towards modernization.

### 3.2.2 Growth of theatre

Täklä Ḥawaryat's *Fabula* play was first staged at Teras Hotel and it was censored immediately afterwards. From the 3000 copies that were printed, all were taken by *Ləğ Mäk'ännən Īndalkaččäw* save the three hundred left with the playwright.<sup>368</sup> After this, according to a lecturer of Theatre at Addis Ababa University Daññe Abbäbä, plays were not staged for six

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<sup>367</sup> Täklä Ḥawaryat *Täklä Maryam* 1921/1922, 3–4.

<sup>368</sup> Daññe Abbäbä 2019, 269–270.



years until those like *Qäñ geta* Yoftahe Nəguse<sup>369</sup> started hosting plays performed by students at Mənilək II school in July 1927.<sup>370</sup>

However, the newspaper *Bərhanənnā Sālam* says the following:

በ፳፩ የካቲት እሁድ ዕለት ማታ ከ፫ሰዓት ተኩል ጀምሮ እሙሴ ግሌዝ ሆቴል ደስ የሚያሰኝ ጨዋታ በሥርዓት የተማሩ ሰዎች ሲጫወቱ ለማየት ብዙ ሰው ተሰበሰበ። ተጫዋቾቹም ተሰናድተው ይጠብቁ ነበርና፤ ያማረ ያማረ ጨዋታ እየተጫወቱ ሰውን ደስ ያሰኙት ጀመር። [. . .] እንዲህ ያለ ጨዋታም በሙሴ ግሌዝ ሆቴል ርብና እሁድ ማታ ያደርጋሉ።

On Sunday February 28, 1926 evening starting at 9:30 many people gathered at Muse Glez Hotel to watch a pleasant play (*čäwata*). The actors, having been prepared, entertained the gathered people very well. [...] Such plays are hosted at Muse Glez Hotel on Wednesday and Sunday evenings.<sup>371</sup>

The hotels and non-traditional schools of Addis Abäba fostered an environment where *Fabula-esque* plays continued to be performed and staged. Theatre slowly developed in the already present modern infrastructure of the time. These included the modern Ethiopian schools and hotels of early twentieth century and were complemented by the construction of the Hagär Fəqər Theatre, the Haile Selassie I Theatre (the later Bəherawi (National) Theatre) and the Mäzzägağa (Municipality) Theatre in Addis Abäba.<sup>372</sup>

By the 1930s, plays of the prominent playwright known for his patriotic and educational plays, *Qäñ geta* Yoftahe Nəguse, show a move from unperformable to directed stage performances with accompanying folk music, dialogue among several characters and an organized story narration divided by scenes. For example, Yoftahe’s አፋጀሽኝ *Affağgäšəñ* ‘You’ve made me fight with others’ was written to instill patriotism in Ethiopians in regard to the Italian invasion. It was written while Yoftahe was in exile in the Sudan during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. It is among the patriotic and propagandist theatre pieces that were staged after the occupation. This play also engages with themes of development, modernization

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<sup>369</sup> *Qäñ geta* Yoftahe Nəguse is the renowned Ethiopian playwright, and poet (*balä-qəne*) whose fame in the history of Ethiopian theatre is only rivaled by *Fitawrari* Täklä Hawaryat alone. He was an Amharic teacher at Mənilək II and Täfäri Mäkännən schools, and later served as director of Qəddus Giyorgis school prior to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. He has written several plays. Fantahun Engəda 2008, 627–628.

<sup>370</sup> Daññe Abbäbä 2019, 270.

<sup>371</sup> Anon. 1926, 9, 71.

<sup>372</sup> Zerihun Birehanu Sira 2019.

and how best to approach these for the sake of maintaining sovereignty.<sup>373</sup> Themes that still pre-occupy the arts today.

Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, playwrights such as Tsegaye Gebre Medhin<sup>374</sup> and Mengistu Lemma<sup>375</sup> dominated the theatres. Mengistu's ያላሮ ጋብቻ *Yalačča Gabəčča* 'Marriage of Unequals' is an example of a comedic play questioning Ethiopian cultural and social structures. It includes topics of women rights, the place of housemaids in the household and problems with aristocratic ways of classifying people. Such theatrical works were predominantly attentive to the spoken word. Plastow writes:

Performance was not what was important. These plays were literary exercises in the didactic tradition of church writing by a generation who were experimenting with modern imported literary forms, but who saw them as both an extension of church writing and a new way of developing traditionally highly valued rhetorical skills.<sup>376</sup>

The notable change in Ethiopian theatre from the days of Täklä Həwaryat to Tsegaye Gebre Medhin and Mengistu Lemma would be the shift from characters that focus on the royal to the ordinary. According to Plastow, this was in many ways thanks to Tsegaye Gebre Medhin. She says, the 'greatest single innovation of Tsegaye's work was the placing of ordinary people

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<sup>373</sup> Central to the play is the discussion about an offer provided by three individuals representing Italy. They proposed to help develop Ethiopia. The characters then discuss this proposal by arguing that what they have offered is to destroy things that Ethiopians had built. They agree not to accept the offer or to sign the contract the Italians brought. What the character who plays a priest says sums it up: ገበሬም አርሶ ቄስም ቀድሶ ወታደርም ዘምቶ እንደ አባቶቻችን እንኖራለን እነሱም እዚአው ሐገራቸው ይበቃቸዋል ሐገራቸው ሰፊ ነው። 'Farmers will farm, priests will pray and celebrate, soldiers will march, and we will live as our fathers lived. Their country should be enough for them; it is wide enough'. Anon. 1965, 20.

<sup>374</sup> Tsegaye Gebre Medhin is a prominent playwright and poet of twentieth century Ethiopia. He has dozens of plays, translations and original works alike. He is also remembered for his anthology አላት ወይ አበባ *Isat wäy abäba* 'Fire or Flower'. Fantahun ጅጅጃ 2008, 720.

<sup>375</sup> Mengistu Lemma is an author, poet, playwright, translator and painter contemporary of Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin whose satirical poetry are among the most memorable. An example is ባሻ አሽብር በአሜሪካ *Bašša Ašäbär bā Amerika* 'Bašša Ašäbär in America'. His works range from plays to anthologies. He is also remembered for a historical book prepared from a personal dialogue with his father, *Aläqa Lämna*. Fantahun ጅጅጃ 2008, 114–117. This book is a fount of humorous tales, anecdotal references and stories about Ethiopia's modern emperors, the church scholars of the day and other Ethiopians in his father's life. Mängəstu Lämna 2010/2011.

<sup>376</sup> Plastow 1996, 198.

at the centre of many of his plays'.<sup>377</sup> The shift in attention is important to note as the play in discussion in the coming sections of this chapter revolves mostly around the lives of ordinary Ethiopians. Tsegaye was given the 1967/68 award for showing the ups and downs of the public in his plays from the Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase I awards company.<sup>378</sup>

In addition, the emperor's period was encouraging for the development of theatre in Ethiopia. An example is the case of the renowned playwright Täsfaye Gässäsä, who would work tirelessly for the growth of theatre in Addis Abäba and beyond.<sup>379</sup> Täsfaye was a law student while at the University College of Addis Abäba when during his fourth year he performed on stage with Emperor Haylä Śəllase present. The emperor was impressed – so much so that Täsfaye was invited to the palace, given a hand watch and told by the vice minister of education that 'the Emperor wanted him to "study theatre" and offered to send him abroad for this purpose'.<sup>380</sup>

### 3.2.3 Därg and EPRDF

An experimental phase of Ethiopian theatre blossomed during the transition period from the emperor's rule to the Därg. Initially, following the 1974 revolution, the elite used plays to discuss potential roads the Ethiopian political landscape could take.<sup>381</sup> Theatre was the space that allowed participation from the intellectuals. This period of freedom fostered the emergence of experimental plays. Since it was immediately unclear what sort of political ideology the new leadership would pursue, political, ideological and experimental plays came to the fore. Plastow argues that there were experimentations in style, ranging from the 'first musicals, [...] to those investigating alternative political systems, to Täsfaye Gässäsä's absurdist *Ḥqaw* 'The Thing', and epics on the beginnings of revolution, such as Tsegaye's *Ha Hu Bä Sədəst Wär* 'ABC in Six Months'.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Plastow 1996, 96.

<sup>378</sup> Bärhun Käbbädä 2000, 540.

<sup>379</sup> Täsfaye Gässäsä is a prominent playwright, poet, author, and director of the Haile Selassie I Theatre until later he started running the Haile Selassie I University's Creative Arts Center where he directed plays, formed Orchestra Ethiopia and a yearly International Film Festival. Sebhat Gebre Egziabher 1969, 19–21. Also refer to Molvaer 1997, 224–254.

<sup>380</sup> Molvaer 1997, 229.

<sup>381</sup> Molvaer 1997, 149.

<sup>382</sup> Refer to Jane Plastow's wide discussion on Därg period theatre. Plastow 1996, 144-163.

Once it consolidated power, the Därg maintained control and influence over the flourishing of theatre and the styles, forms and contents of plays. This is not unlike the emperor's time.<sup>383</sup> The emperor himself regulated the content of staged plays.<sup>384</sup> Under the Därg, though theatre fell into state hands as a propaganda tool, it was still the main source of entertainment in Addis Abäba. The opening of the Department of Theatre Arts<sup>385</sup> at the Addis Ababa University, the construction of Ras Theatre in addition to the three theatre houses built during the emperor's time,<sup>386</sup> and the beginning of the *kinät* 'arts' groups are among some of the developments of the Därg period. The *kinät* groups were an ensemble of performers often performing the various cultural music of Ethiopia and some sketches.<sup>387</sup> The playwright Täsfayye Gässäsä had wanted to create similar theatre groups in other parts of the country too, initiating the creation of the Lalibäla, Bahär Dar and Gondär theatre groups.<sup>388</sup> *Kinät* groups often performed at local *qäbäle* centres, making them locally accessible sources of entertainment.

Since propaganda restricts imagination temporarily but does not destroy it, playwrights found ways to escape direct censorship by turning to social comedy and staging foreign translations.<sup>389</sup> Relaying opinions about political reform and focusing on the lives of ordinary people allowed comedy to become the chosen tool for playwrights expressing political and socio-cultural criticism.<sup>390</sup>

In post-Därg Ethiopia, several factors significantly minimized the role of theatre from being the main space for public discourse. One was that while the Därg used the arts and participatory theatre for its own propaganda use, like other totalitarian regimes, the EPRDF did not necessarily encourage the use of plays and theatrical performances for its purposes. This could be as a result of one major transformation in the city. Though two more theatre houses

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<sup>383</sup> Plastow 1996, 100.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>385</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between the Därg and the University, and the way the department contributed to the growth of theatre, refer to Plastow 199, 212–224.

<sup>386</sup> Yonas Hailemeskel 2005.

<sup>387</sup> Zerihun Birehanu Sira 2019.

<sup>388</sup> Molvaer 1997, 241–242.

<sup>389</sup> Plastow 1996, 230.

<sup>390</sup> Aron Yeshitila 2010.

were built, the Mega Amphi-Theatre and the Children and Youth Theatre,<sup>391</sup> the period had newspapers and print media flourishing at the beginning of EPRDF years,<sup>392</sup> as well as broadcast entertainment via television and radio which were becoming increasingly accessible in people's households. Several amateurish television and radio dramas, comedic skits and sketches reached the public via these broadcast mechanisms.<sup>393</sup> The advent of the CD player in the 1980s also meant that several dramas were being produced independently from the state broadcasters or from already established playwrights, though they were mostly video recordings of on-stage performances.<sup>394</sup> Among the notable comedy sketch-artists and performers as well as producers of the early period of the EPRDF are Aläbbaččäw Täkka, Lämänäh Taddäsä, Ängädazär Nägga, and the duo Däräğğä and Habte. These performers would perform on stage but also have their performances recorded and distributed commercially through CDs.

Until 2005, performance artists enjoyed relative autonomy and Addis Abäba witnessed a rise in artistic experimentation. Plastow has remarked on the weary approach of playwrights at this time. She argues that there was a culture of self-censorship concerning politics by writers given the 'experience of the [Därg] and the enormous suspicion of the new government'.<sup>395</sup> However, the entertainment sector of pre-2005 Ethiopia was politically and experimentally vibrant. Musicians flirted with modern<sup>396</sup> music productions and theatre houses became venues of comedic sketches and stand-up comedies. There was room for artists to experiment with themes and concepts that did not focus solely on the political or the moral.

An example of experimental and non-didactic stage production is the group effort titled የተጨቆኑ ቀልዶች *Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoč* 'Repressed Jokes'. This was a collection of comedy performances including stand-up comedy acts recorded from the National Theatre and distributed via cassettes and CDs. Its performers were critical of the EPRDF government, but

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<sup>391</sup> Aron Yeshitila 2010.

<sup>392</sup> Tigab Bezie 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Thomas 2018, 16.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>395</sup> Plastow 1996, 230.

<sup>396</sup> Modern here is used to refer to sexually explicit music video productions that young artists were experimenting with during this time. An example is the rapper Samvod. A YouTube link is provided in appendix B.

also experimented with styles and ideas venturing out to even satirize most respected individuals of the urban public life.

A notable sketch is the pastiche version of አባባ ተስፋዬ *Abbabba Täsfayye* ‘Father Täsfayye’. *Abbabba* Täsfayye was a story telling character played by the towering figure of Ethiopian performance arts, the actor Täsfayye Sahlu. He was a TV sensation that was aired every Saturday and Sunday on the national television as part of an hour-long children’s program called የልጆች ጊዜ *Yäləğğočč Gize* ‘Children’s Time’. *Abbabba* Täsfayye narrated *tärät* or ‘fables’ usually based on folk-tales and mostly with anthropomorphic animals as characters. Lions, monkeys, foxes, turtles, tigers, and birds appeared in these stories.<sup>397</sup> He was also known for hosting children on TV with him. *Abbabba* Täsfayye was single-handedly the most respected children’s moral guide for three generations of Ethiopians, revered as observed in the way children watching his show would rise from their seats when *Abbabba* Täsfayye came on screen and wait standing until he allowed them to take their seats.

*Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoč* contains a critical performance of *Abbabba* Täsfayye’s show. The sketch performed at the National Theatre was played by a young girl who narrated a story replaying both *Abbabba* Täsfayye and a young boy from the Čärqos neighbourhood of Addis Abäba. It is one of the poorest neighbourhoods of the capital city. This young boy from Čärqos is called ዛፉ ዘንበል *Zafu Zänbäl*. The name means ‘a tree which is not growing straight’, allegorically implying a child who is not being raised correctly. The on-stage conversation between Zafu Zänbäl and *Abbabba* Täsfayye goes as follows:

**አባባ ተስፋዬ:** ማሙሽዬ ስምህ ማን ነው?

**ዛፉ ዘንበል:** ዛፉ ዘንበል፤ እምማረው የኔታ ጋር የኔታ ጋር

**አባባ ተስፋዬ:** በጣም ጥሩ ዛፉ። እስቲ ለሕፃናት ምን ይዘህ መጥተሃል?

**ዛፉ ዘንበል:** ለሕፃናት? [...] ጩቤ

**አባባ ተስፋዬ:** በጣም ይገርማል። ምን ነካህ ዛፉ? እንዴት ለሕፃናት ጩቤ ስለት ነገር መጥፎ አይደለም እንዴ?

ሌላ ተረት ተረት እንቆቅልሽ ዘፈን

**ዛፉ ዘንበል:** (opens his eyes widely nods his head and says) ተረት ተረት አለኝ

**አባባ ተስፋዬ:** እስቲ አቅርብልን

**ዛፉ ዘንበል:** ተረት ተረት

**አባባ ተስፋዬ:** የላም በረት

**ዛፉ ዘንበል:** ሆዶት ይተርተር በጋለ ብረት

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<sup>397</sup> This is just like *Fabula*: the characters seem to have similarities: the fox is witty, the lion is brave, the monkey is cunning.

*Abbabba* Täsfayye: What is your name?

Zafu Zänbäl: Zafu Zänbäl. I study with *Yäneta*<sup>398</sup>

*Abbabba* Täsfayye: Wonderful Zafu. So, what have you brought with you for the children?

Zafu Zänbäl: For the children? A blade.

*Abbabba* Täsfayye: This is woeful. What is wrong, Zafu? How could you bring a blade for kids? Children are not meant to be around sharp items. Don't you have fables, stories, songs or riddles?

Zafu Zänbäl: (opens his eyes widely nods his head and says) I have stories.

*Abbabba* Täsfayye: Present it to us.

Zafu Zänbäl: Stories

*Abbabba* Täsfayye: Cow-shed<sup>399</sup>

Zafu Zänbäl: May your (2nd person respect form) stomach be opened with hot iron<sup>400</sup>

This is among the few mild jokes of this particular comedy-act, with more jokes with sexual content and obscene remarks made by the child. The acting is completely removed in the script transcription of the joke, and this takes away the movements of Zafu Zänbäl as seen on the stage. He appears to be swaying from one foot to the other, unable to sit still, is fidgety and demonstrates his words with his body, much like any child. But even this is unique to Zafu Zänbäl because children who appear on *Abbabba* Täsfayye's shows are unusually still, unmoving, and obedient in their answers.

Zafu Zänbäl's character was made to be from Čärqos because of the popular belief that Čärqos children are undisciplined, vulgar, and raised without proper parental guidance. In the jokes, it is assumed that young Čärqos children would pick up swear words and speak disrespectfully to older people – which are all things looked down upon. As a result, Zafu Zänbäl was a serious criticism to the children's show. *Abbabba* Täsfayye's weekly shows present a group of strictly disciplined children. In fact, it is a popular point of joke today to suggest that someone was once on *Abbabba* Täsfayye's show if they act in a stringently moral way in their daily interactions. The children who appear on his show might not necessarily be

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<sup>398</sup> This is a name given to a priest who teaches.

<sup>399</sup> Amharic children's stories begin by the storyteller saying, ተረት ተረት *tärät pärät* and the listeners responding by saying የላም በረት *yälam pärät* at times with variations, such as የመሠረት *yämäsärät*. The word *yälam pärät* means cowshed and *yämäsärät* means belonging to someone called Mäsärät. This dialogical exercise is always repeated before stories are narrated.

<sup>400</sup> The YouTube source for this is found in appendix B.

as quiet and obedient as they appear on television. The re-make plays on the fact that *Abbabba* Täsfayye’s program upholds a strict disciplinary attitude, often making children act unnaturally. It also criticizes the program for not presenting children with lives and backgrounds like *Zafu Zänbäl*. *Zafu Zänbäl* was not meant to mock *Abbabba* Täsfayye, but to highlight that children are not necessarily like they appear on the program and to present a dramatized and exaggerated example of how children with various backgrounds may act when allowed to be themselves.

Besides such performances that challenged socially respected individuals, *Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoč* also included political jokes. These varied in nature. At times they relied heavily on the linguistic errors, mispronunciations and grammatical errors Ethiopia’s new rulers (the TPLF led EPRDF) made while speaking Amharic, and other times they were critical of the ability of Ethiopia’s new rulers to rule the country. There were several jokes about Eritrea’s leaders too, as the jokes were performed at a time when Ethio-Eritrean relations were hot topics of the day.

One political joke played on the public assumption that most of the guerrilla fighters of the TPLF were uneducated and had to enroll in schools upon entering the capital city in 1991. This joke was performed by a man who was acting both as ታጋይ *tagay* ‘guerrilla warrior’ and አስተማሪ *astämari* ‘teacher’. The teacher is teaching mathematics:

**አስተማሪ:** 23 ሲቀነስ 19 ከ3 ላይ 9 መቀነስ ስለማንችል ከሁለት እንበደራለን

**ታጋይ:** ዋይ! ዘጠኝ አለበድርም ካለስ አንተ?

**አስተማሪ:** አይ ጌታዬ

**ታጋይ:** (interrupts the teacher angrily) አለበድርም ካለስ!

Teacher: 23 minus 19... Since we cannot subtract 9 from 3, we will borrow from 2.

Guerrilla fighters: Oy! what if nine refuses to lend?’

Teacher: ‘No, my dear sir...’

Guerrilla fighter: (interrupts the teacher angrily) What if it refuses to lend!

This is a presentation of TPLF’s soldiers as obstinate men who refuse to accept simple mathematical logic. The joke is a disparaging joke belittling the guerrilla fighters.

In both cases of jokes from *Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoč*, what we have are stereotypes of different groups of people being re-enforced, and artists experimenting with satire. The political joke belittles TPLF fighters, thinly concealing some sort of contempt for the political group even before 2005. The social joke publicly reveals a fault with *Abbabba* Täsfayye’s children program.



It was not long before the actors were persecuted,<sup>401</sup> and the CD that sold their jokes was taken off market. The only testimony to *Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoç*'s existence is some of the play's presence online on YouTube and in some video shops across Addis Abäba. The most notable thing about this production was its break from the traditional, didactic and moralist performances of staged plays.

After 2005, the political shake-up that followed the May elections changed the form of the artistic productions of the city. On the performative arts community, comedians and performers were exiled, and artists were forced to halt critical and experimental works. Comedic productions dominated the theatre spaces of the city.<sup>402</sup> Beyond the performance arts, some politically critical authors came to the fore using satire in their works.<sup>403</sup>

By around 2010 and 2011, urban Ethiopians were flocking online to engage in public discourse that had died down offline. Mainstream media activities in Addis Abäba saw an increase upon the death of Mälläs Zenawi in 2012. On top of the emergence of social media and the death of the most powerful man of contemporary Ethiopian politics, one more significant factor emerges during this time. A majority of Ethiopia's population comes of age at around the same time. Contemporary Ethiopia's median age is 18, with about 28% of its population between the ages of 15 and 29.<sup>404</sup> As a result of all of these factors, the offline public sphere also awakened, slowly and skeptically, from its dormancy. It was as if the passing of the most influential man in Ethiopian politics, the coming of age of a large segment of Addis Abäba, the emergence of social media as powerful as mainstream media inspired those in the arts. Meaning, the artistic scene of the capital city, including theatre, cinematic arts, music, and literature, seemed to have had a re-awakening.

These are of course prone to influences from commerce and politics. But post 2012, there emerged plays, stand-up comedies, films and other performance arts which were begrudgingly involved in national questions, and moralist views instead of the styles of the productions such

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<sup>401</sup> Other comedians who attempted to produce humorous sketches and sell them as CDs were also prosecuted. As the crackdown on civil liberties grew after the May 2005 elections, several were even sent into exile, or faced severe state repression. An example is the comedian Kəbäbäw Gäda whose satirical stand-up comedy shows, and cinematic experimentations distributed for commercial purposes through CDs were among the most famous of the first decade of the third millennium.

<sup>402</sup> Plastow 2020, 254.

<sup>403</sup> Authors such as Bəwqātu Səyyum and Mähämmäd Sälman became popular for their satirical writings.

<sup>404</sup> Anon. 2017.

as *Yätäčäqqonu Qäldoč*. Eyyayyu Fängäs' *Festalen* is a child of this period, and its jokes, questions and comments are in tune with this hypothesis.

Following this, *Festalen*'s jokes will be presented. The dominance of tendentious jokes, as well as the predominant themes of the jokes will be taken into consideration in assessing the cultural and socio-political realities of urban Ethiopia. The jokes will also be studied to present the peculiarities, and significant parts of spoken Amharic today. The analysis will highlight the grander questions, commentaries, fears and realities of contemporary Addis Abäba, adding weight to the chapter's cultural study. The chapter will conclude with remarks as to the value of humor in the public sphere in moralistic performances and the linguistic sophistication of Amharic in play, or *čäwata*.

### **3.3 *Festalen*: Social or political critique?**

*Festalen* is a play about the man Eyyayyu, a once-upon-a-time teacher, who lost his wife and daughter tragically to unknown diseases and factors relating to poor hospital services in the capital city. The only other Ethiopian reference the producers had of a one-man theatre was the forty-five-minute one-man play written by Tsegaye Gebremedhin and performed by Wägayyähu Nägatu titled ጥቅፍው ጆሮ *Məqäñaw Ğoro* 'The Spiteful Ear'. Gərum admits that it took time to understand how a single man can hold the audience for two hours and forty minutes.<sup>405</sup>

The producers also admit that 'there are times where the public is far ahead of the comedian artists. In the history of Ethiopian comedy, never have ordinary men become more hilarious than the artists in the field. We are forced to read and observe to be above the humor of the city'. Gərum Zännäbä further compares the jokes of contemporary Ethiopia to poetry and admires the power of humor in its ability to level the playing field of leaders, politicians, policy makers and the elite with the general public. He adds, 'they bring down what you may have been afraid of'.

Yet, *Festalen* was a roaring success in the capital. This can be attributed to its studied content. Upon asking Gərum what exactly contributes to the content of the play, he responded by stating that Eyyayyu's power lies in his ability to call out, scold, tease, philosophize and present alternate interpretations of the values the urban dweller has accepted and is now living with. 'Political satire is of course a part of it, but that was and is not the main focus', he adds. The goal is to force the public to think about the realities it faces and its reactions to the features of contemporary life in Addis Abäba.

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<sup>405</sup> Gərum Zännäbä 2018.

He admires the creative activity behind the formulation of jokes and stresses that Eyyayyu Fängäs's *Festalen* is not simply a satiric play, but that it is a philosophical work attempting to use tragedy and humor to interpret and express the various realities of life today.

*Festalen* is an experiment in a political culture with a weakened civil society. It is innovative as it managed to escape direct political censorship. This could be because, 'the goal is to educate the public and not actually pose political critique'.<sup>406</sup> It presents itself as art that examines, re-interprets and challenges publicly accepted social realities. It is a play that engages critically with topics such as hyper-consumerism, drug addiction, poor education quality, corruption, injustice and unemployment and their effects on cultural values, presenting theatre as a force that attempts to redirect society. The target is the public. It is an attempt to push people to not be by-standers in the fate of their individual and collective lives. This morality was the central point that guided the play for six years now.

And while the stated objective of the play was to present social critique, its jokes have elements of political satire that made it appealing to the urban public. Theatre attendees have confirmed that they watched Eyyayyu Fängäs because it provided an outlet for their political grievances. 'There was nothing besides Eyyayyu that consistently and for a long time described my reality and my life under EPRDF'.<sup>407</sup>

### 3.3.1 Introducing the play: *Festalen*

*Festalen* is a two hours and forty-minute-long play of four acts separated by a few minutes of interlude in between the acts. In the capital city, the play has been performed on various stages starting with the National Theatre, and at cinemas including Alem and Adot cinemas. It was performed three to four times each week on these various stages.

It is heavily dependent on the spoken word. There are no dialogues with other characters and the sole active character is Eyyayyu. He has to explain and portray the different people in his life himself, as though the audience were reading a book with the main character narrating his life. This is in some contradiction with what Ethiopian scholars have to say about plays. Zärihun Asfaw, the author of the book የሰነድ ስርዓት መሠረታዊ ድንጋጌዎችን *Yäsənäṣəhuf Mäsärätawəyyan* 'The Basics of Literature', writes the following about theatrical productions.

ተውኔት ገጸባሕርያቱን በመድረስ ላይ በማምጣት ራሳችንንና ተግባሮቻችንን በአይናችን እያየን እንድንታዘብ ውስጣችንን እንድንመረምር ማንነታችንን እንድናውቅ በአጠቃላይ ሕይወትን ከበፊቱ ይበልጥ እንድናጤን

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<sup>406</sup> Gərum Zännäbä 2018.

<sup>407</sup> Informant B 2018.

የማድረግ አቅም ያለው ኪነጥበብ ነው። ይህን ሁሉ ሲያደርግ ግን እንደ ረጅም እና አጭር ልቦለድ ስለገጸባሕርያቱ ድርጊት አያውራም፣ አይተርጉም። በገሃድ በእንቅስቃሴ ያሳያል እንጂ።<sup>408</sup>

Theatre allows us to see our actions on stage and to question and investigate our lives through its characters. When it does it, it does not narrate the story of the characters as in novels and books, but rather shows us through their actions on stage.

The whole point of plays, for Zārihun, is that characters are understood by their performances, dialogues, and actions on stage and not through narration as in books or novels. *Festalen* then may not entirely fall into the genre of theatrical production according to this definition. But *Festalen* is in some ways dialogical since ሿyyayyu narrates his life, and the lives of the other people on stage are told and recounted via his jokes and stories which are often repeated in dialogue format. It also takes close observation of how ሿyyayyu acts on stage to get a deeper understanding of his character. The idea that a play should not have long descriptions about characters read out fails to capture the play.

In addition, *Festalen* is described as a tragic comedy by the producers. To introduce tragedy as understood by Ethiopian theatre students and scholars, Zārihun Asfaw writes, it ‘is based on crucial points that the society places on a pedestal. Characters of tragedy plays are ones that do not give up hope and refuse to be swayed from their goals’.<sup>409</sup> Zārihun also adds, ‘modern tragedy is one that focuses on the lives of the non-elite, the lower class’.<sup>410</sup> This can apply to *Festalen*; the tragedy of the play is not just for the main character but also for the society he depicts in his play, i.e. Addis Abāba.

On comedy, Zārihun writes, it ‘is based on particular aspects of people’s lives that can change. Since this is true, tragedies outlive comedic theatres’.<sup>411</sup> This is true in so much as political and contextual jokes are concerned. *Festalen* might not be as popular in a few decades as it is now since most of the jokes are situational. Such satirical comedy is required for a particular purpose of making fun of leaders and situations that people are in at the moment.

To introduce the main character, the first sentence ሿyyayyu speaks when the play commences is about his name ሿyyayyu *Fāngäs*.<sup>412</sup> He says the following to explain how he got the name *Fāngäs*:

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<sup>408</sup> Zārihun Asfaw 2012/2013, 261.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>412</sup> *Fāngäs* has been rendered this way and not in its English way because the term is considered an Amharic loan-term in relation to the play, pertaining to Fungi or Fungus.

እያዩ እባላለሁ። እያዩ ፈንገስ! ፈንገስ የአባቴ ስም አልነበረም. . . (ሃሃሃ) ፈንገሶቼ ናቸው ፈንገስ እያሉ የሚጠሩኝ። ሰዋዊ ውድቅታችንን ሰዋዊ ዝቅታችንን የምጠራበት ክፉ ስም ነው። ፈንገስ። (ሃሃሃሃ) ይኸው! የእኔው መጠሪያ ሆኖ አረፈዋ!

My name is Eyyayu. Eyyayyu Fängäs! Fängäs was not my father’s name...(hahaha) it is the Fängäs who call me that. It is a demeaning word I chose to show the decay of our humanity, the levels we have reached. Fängäs. (Hahaha) There you have it. It ended up being my own name!

Throughout the play, the audience is introduced to other members of Eyyayyu’s world via the jokes Eyyayyu chooses to narrate to prove this particular point that urban Ethiopia has undergone a cultural and social decay. Some of the characters of the play are given allegorical names describing the kind and nature of their personalities. Others are named.

### Plot

This is the basic storyline of *Festalen*: after Eyyayyu’s wife and daughter die, he is forced to evacuate from his house and start life on the streets of Addis Abäba. The only property he owned were the contents of his *festal*, ‘plastic bag’, which he loses one night as he returns from visiting a friend. The play’s title is itself a hidden question, ‘where is my plastic bag?’. The belongings of the *festal* are listed as follows:

አራት የሽንት ጨርቆች ከእነ መዓዛቸው፣ አንዱን እግር አይጥ የበሰው የሕፃን ልጅ ዳንቴል ካልሲ፣ ጡጦ ክዳኑ የተሰነጠቀ፣ ድርያ ከድሬዳዋ ፊልድ ስመለስ የተገዛ፣ ተረከዙ የሳሳ ነጠላ ጫማ፣ ሁለት የሴት ፓንቶች እና ቀዩ አጀንዳዬ። የእኔና የብዙ ሰዎች ሐሳብ ሰፍሮበት የነበረው ቀዩ አጀንዳዬ።

Four diapers with their smells, one pair of a baby’s cotton socks with holes on one sock created by mice, a baby bottle with a fractured cap, a dress bought when I returned from field work in Däre Dawa, a worn-out pair of slippers, two lady’s underwear and my red agenda. My red agenda which contained my and many peoples’ thoughts.

When he wakes up and realizes that he had lost his *festal*, Eyyayyu assumes his property was taken as trash by the neighbourhood’s cleaners and he goes to look for the *festal* in the near-by dump. The following day, he goes to the sub-city’s trash dump. Still unable to find his *festal*, on the third day, he makes his way to the capital city’s major dump, the ቆሽ ተራ *qoše tära*.

After each of his trips, Eyyayyu narrates what he saw and what happened to him. It is only when he gives up his search that he understands what had actually happened to his belongings and the play ends with him acquiring new belongings. However, his life barely changes. He remains a homeless man throughout.

Through his misgivings and adventure, the play’s bold character makes social critique and re-interprets economic and political life in contemporary Addis Abäba. Beyond the

political jokes, *Festalen* redirects people to carefully study their lives and often moralizes about consumerism, the development of a materialist culture, the absence of people's fear of God and other related points. These are reminiscent of the early modernizers' questions about some of the faults of western culture.<sup>413</sup>

### *Stage*

*Festalen*'s stage is equipped with few props. ሿyyayyu himself carries items on stage to help him advance his thoughts but the stage is generally representative of the life ሿyyayyu leads. He is a homeless man, with little worldly possessions. The stage presentation of the play and the world within which the character dwells have much in common. Both are minimalist. While at the National Theatre, the stage was simply decorated with black curtains, and a chair on which ሿyyayyu could sit during his performance. For a first-time viewer, the stage almost refuses to give away what kind of character ሿyyayyu is or what the play is about. This digresses from other stage productions, where the stage itself plays a significant role in the whole presentation of the story at hand.

At Alem Cinema, the stage was sometimes decorated with fences to show that ሿyyayyu lived on the streets outside fences of people's homes. ሿyyayyu himself wears worn-out sweatpants, two different types of socks, plastic sandals and a shirt for the first three acts of the play. He also has messy hair. The last act, act four, sees the character's transformation but even then, not so much material props are used.

### *Characters*

While ሿyyayyu's character is understood by what he does and speaks on stage, a significant part of the play is dependent on characters that are never seen.

The first character viewers are introduced to is ገሻ ቆፍጣጥው *Gaš* Qoፉannaw, the witty and brutally honest neighbor who doesn't take kindly to liars, pretentious people and local administrators. *Gaš* Qoፉannaw's witticisms, brilliant come-backs, and lack of fear in the face of authority is strikingly similar to the famous *Aläqa* Gäbrä ሿanna.<sup>414</sup> The name is constructed out of two words: *Gaš* is an endearing way of addressing older men while Qoፉannaw means bold, unwavering, honest and blunt. This represents the character of the old man. *Gaš* Qoፉannaw is admired and espoused as the epitome of human dignity, and of a life lived on principles. ሿyyayyu says the following to describe *Gaš* Qoፉannaw:

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<sup>413</sup> Refer to section 1.3.1 of the thesis.

<sup>414</sup> For more on *Aläqa* Gäbrä ሿanna, refer to section 1.4.3.

በነገራችን ላይ ቆፍጣናው ማለት የሰፈራችን ደረጃ አንድ ታጥቦ የተከሸነ ሙጢ ማለት ነው። ኤክስፖርት ደረጃ ምላሳም [. . .] ፊት ለፊት ተናጋሪ እና ሐቀኛ ሽማግሌ።

By the way, *Qoftannaw* is our neighbourhood’s best prepared, groomed, humorist. His tongue is export level [...] a straight shooter and an honest old man.

He then adds:

በጋሽ ቆፍጣናው ምላስ እየተከላከልኩ ነው ይህንን ሰፈር የምችለው

It is through *Gaş* Qoftannaw’s words (tongue) that I defend myself from this neighbourhood.

He adds a final praise «ቆፍጣናው ለዘላለም ይኑር።» *Qoftannaw lä-zälaläm yänuru* ‘may Qoftannaw live forever’.

He continues with a praise poem for the old man,

ቆፍጣናዬን ጥሩት፣

ምሬቴን ንሬቴን በማር ይለውሰው

ኑሮዬ አይጣፍጥም እሱ ካልቀመሰው።

Call on my Qoftannaw

Let him mix my woes and pain with honey

My life has no flavor if he doesn’t taste it.

The first quote has an adjective, ታጥቦ የተከሸነ *taṭbo yätäkäsäññä*, which refers to any long exhaustive process of dedicated craftsmanship that goes into the preparation of any creative produce. It is often said about how the famous holiday dish *doro wät* (chicken stew) is prepared in Ethiopia. ሙጢ *muṭi* is urban slang for someone who is witty, and skilled with words. In this case, *Gaş* Qoftannaw is made to appear particularly as an impressive, witty, old man. Eyyayyu also uses the phrase ‘export level talkative’ by referencing the quality of Ethiopian export goods (coffee, flowers and the sort). It is often the case that export level products are high quality goods. He then adds that the old man is direct, and honest concluding his praise with a poem.

That poetry is already a part of the production a few minutes into the play speaks of the value of poetry in Ethiopian rhetorics. The poem’s nature is metaphorical. He asks to call on the brave man, Qoftannayye. But Eyyayyu is not simply calling on his neighbor at this instance since Qoftannayye can be attributed to any honest and bold person. The rest of the poem alludes to how *Gaş* Qoftannaw is the seasoning to an otherwise dull and tasteless life. Through Eyyayyu’s second praise, we see the value of humor, wit and jokes in withstanding the plight of living in that neighbourhood. He compares *Gaş* Qoftannaw’s tongue to a shield that protects him and allows him to continue living.

His third statement is repeated a number of times throughout the play and is a rendition on the infamous ‘May Ethiopia Live Forever’,<sup>415</sup> a patriotic sentiment heard on the media, and used by the public and politicians alike. Eyyayyu does not mean to hope for *Gaş* Qoftannaw to live forever, but it is the virtues of the old man that he is hoping will stay eternal.

Eyyayyu lists examples of the jokes and witticisms of *Gaş* Qoftannaw after introducing the character. Here is one example:

*Gaş* Qoftannaw’s wife buys a chicken but the chicken does little more than sleep.  
*Gaş* Qoftannaw calls on his wife and says, «እኔ የምልሽ ምልጃዬ፣ ዶሮውን ፓራላማ ነው እንዴ ያገኘሽው?» ‘I say, Məlgayye, did you get the chicken from the parliament?’.

*Gaş* Qoftannaw uses a common way of addressing others, *ʿIne yämməlaš* when he starts his comment. It directly translates to ‘I say’ or ‘I’ll tell you what’, but the words are meant to express something close to ‘here’s what I am thinking’. He calls on his wife in an endearing way, adding a -yye to her name Məlgā. He disparages the Ethiopian parliament and introduces viewers to the idea of members of the parliament falling asleep during the parliament sessions.

It is through *Gaş* Qoftannaw and his jokes that the audience is introduced to most of the characters of the play. There are ጋሽ ለማ *Gaş* Läm̄ma, ወይዘሮ አክሊሊ *Wäyzäro* Aklilä, ጋዜጠኛው *Gazetäññaw* ‘the journalist’, ተቃዋሚው *Täqawamiw* ‘the one who opposes’, ሙሉ ጅቤ *Mulu Ĝäbe* ‘full hyena’, አለቃ *Aläqa* ‘boss’, ንፋስ ወዳጅ *Nəfas Wädaḡe* ‘the wind my friend’, እሱባለው ካሳዬ *ʿIssubaläw* Kassaye, and the rich man with the electric-fences.

*Gaş* Läm̄ma is the neighbourhood’s traditional doctor, a ወገኛ *Wägeša*. *Gazetäññaw* is a journalist who works at an unspecified TV station, and he is repeatedly blamed for reading lies as news. We can deduce that he might possibly represent journalists of the state broadcaster, the Ethiopia Television (ETv). *Täqawamiw* is the neighbour who is meant to represent Ethiopians who oppose the government, i.e., members of opposition parties, bloggers and the like.

The character *Mulu Ĝäbe* is also referred to as የሰው ንኡስ *yäsäw nə’us* ‘sub-human’, አጠቃላይ ጅብ *aṭäqallay ḡəb* ‘complete hyena’, የቀን ጅብ *yäqän ḡəb* ‘daytime hyena’,<sup>416</sup> ነጥብ *nätəb*

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<sup>415</sup> This is sensationalized by Sheger Radio which uses the phrase at the closing of most of its programs. But it is an expression that was also used during the emperor’s time. See for example, Bär̄ihun Käbbädä 2000, 389.

<sup>416</sup> This phrase had been used by PM Abiy Ahmed upon his rise to power to refer to the TPLF rulers. In fact, he also refers to other corrupt figures as such. Interestingly, this is not the only phrase that has contributed to Abiy’s speeches from *Festalen*. Eyyayyu has a soliloquy where he goes on to express how even though he has



‘full stop’, and አዝባር *həzbar* ‘the symbol slash’ (/). His insignificance is denoted by the insults *həzbar* and *nätəb* as the man is equated to punctuation marks that are rarely used in the Amharic alphabet. Using the symbol *həzbar* as an insult can also be drawing on the symbol’s slanted appearance; it could be that Mulu Ğəbe is being accused of being twisted, or disingenuous. The other names he has denote his love of money and food as hyenas are known to be greedy by nature. *Yäsāw nə’us* marks Əyyayyu’s judgement of the man, as one who is beneath other humans. From the play, we realise that Mulu Ğəbe represents corrupt administrators and officials of the local administrative units known as the *Qäbäle* and *Wäräda*. This is because it does not appear that this character works in a higher government position as he spends his days in the neighbourhood seemingly unburdened by a job. Of course, this is also meant to further show the man’s incompetence as a government body worker.

The other characters are notable too. There is the rich man with electric fences who appears a few times in the play and remains unnamed. He is only referred to as the man with electric fences and is representative of the new urban elite who live in gated communities and houses. This is to highlight the culture of individuality that has taken root in neighbourhoods and to make a remark about some gated communities of the city.<sup>417</sup>

Aläqa is the name given to God in the play. Əyyayyu often looks up towards the ceiling of the theatre-house and engages in dialogue with an un-responsive character and eventually, it becomes clear from his words that it is the name for God. Aläqa itself means boss. Əyyayyu calls on the wind to read out lines from his agenda, making the wind a character of the play. Əssubalāw Kassaye is also another character that Əyyayyu mentions; he is his dead poet friend. Əyyayyu usually asks the wind to read Əssubalāw’s poems out loud for him.

Finally, there are three named characters that play a crucial role in the events of Əyyayyu’s life. These are his wife and daughter called ዘውድዬ Zäwdəyye and የአብሥራራ Yä’absəra, and a girl called ህያብ Həyyab. He came to know Həyyab as her and her friends were about to enter a local house of chewing *qat* owned by Mulu Ğəbe. Əyyayyu fell on his knees and begged them to return to their homes as he saw they were too young to start an addiction to this drug. Həyyab listened to his advice and returned home. She became his friend afterwards.

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been bent, he has not been broken; and though he has been ill, he has survived. PM Abiy uses the same exact phrases to discuss Ethiopia in several speeches. Links to PM Abiy using some of these are found in appendix B.

<sup>417</sup> The absence of such gated communities until recently has been remarked as one possible reason for there being a low crime rate in the city. Fasil Ghiorgis 2012, 58–59.

The play depends on recollections of dialogues from Ḥyyayyu’s memory. There are a few times in which Ḥyyayyu engages with the audience, asking rhetorical questions and waiting for the audience to respond. For example, Ḥyyayyu might ask, እንጠርጥር እንዴ? ‘Should we be skeptical?’, to which the audience, aware of an incoming joke, answers by saying አዎ *awo* ‘yes’ in unison. The other times we hear dialogues are when Ḥyyayyu speaks to the wind-his friend, Nəfas Wādaḡe or to Alāqa. At one point, Ḥyyayyu asks Alāqa to give his dead wife the oranges that he took to her grave in commemoration of her eighth year since she died.

His conversations to the wind or to Alāqa allow the audience to come to terms with the reality that Ḥyyayyu might be mentally unstable. This is in addition to other signs that reveal this, such as Ḥyyayyu’s constantly fidgeting two fingers of his left hand with the other fingers bent and unmoving. It is not a far-removed speculation. Amharic proverbs do exist remarking about how only the crazy can speak their minds honestly without fears of repercussion. An example is, እብድን ማን ይነካዋል? ‘Who will touch the crazy?’.

The following section includes jokes selected from the play. The jokes are grouped into two categories. The first is the category of jokes pertaining to social life and then follows the category of jokes entertaining Ethiopian politics. Each sub-section has a selection of eight jokes each to demonstrate the various topics covered by Ḥyyayyu.

### 3.3.2 *Festalen*: Jokes on social life

These jokes are selected in so far as they mainly involve the social dynamics of the characters of *Festalen* and have little political content. Analyzing these jokes might help highlight realities about the organization of urban life in contemporary Addis Abāba. Beyond allowing us to explore the social life of urban Ethiopians, the jokes selected present various ways of joke-formulation techniques and highlight cultural as well as social indicators of what is humorous and what is not.

3.3.2.1. *Gaš Läm̄ma* is the neighbourhood’s *wāḡeša* (doctor), whose motto is የተሰበረ ቅስም ሳይቀር እንጠግናለን ‘We fix everything, including broken morale’. *Gaš Läm̄ma*’s children on the other hand are all muggers. *Gaš Qofānnaw* says the following about his neighbor to Ḥyyayyu: እያዩ እሱ እኮ እናቴ<sup>418</sup> ፋሚሊ ቢዝነስ ነው የሚሰራው። ማታ ማታ ልጆቹ ይሰብሩለታል ቀን ቀን እሱ ጋር ሊታከሙ ይሄዱለታል። ‘Ḥyyayyu, he is running a family business. At night his children break people for him, and during the day those broken go to him for treatment’.

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<sup>418</sup> እናቴ *annate* is used as a means of addressing one another. It comes from the word *annat* which means mother. But people say the word to mean my dear.

This joke supposes that the concept of family businesses is already known by the audience and that a logical consideration of a family business would assume something that doesn't involve risking the lives of customers. The breach in the logic of this is what makes this joke funny. It is a disparaging joke that mocks the family of *Gaš Lämna* and their source of income.

3.3.2.2. Eyyayyu narrates about the Addis Abäba city light railroad.<sup>419</sup> At the time, it was publicly announced that the trains were ready for operation. However, there was a time lapse between the day of announcement and the day the trains actually started providing service. *Gaš Qoftannaw* and Eyyayyu discuss this,

Eyyayyu: ይህ ባቡር ተመረቀ አይደለም ለምንድን ነው ታድያ ሥራ የማይጀምረው? 'The train has graduated hasn't it, so why doesn't it start working?'

*Gaš Qoftannaw*: አይ እያዩ ተመርቆ ሥራ ማጣት እዚህ አገር ብርቅ ነው እንዴ? 'Ay, Eyyayyu, is it a surprise to be unemployed after graduation in this country?'

The joke lies in the metaphorical representation of the city train as a young college graduate in Addis Abäba via the play on the word *mämmäräq*. This word means to graduate, to be blessed, and also to be inaugurated. The pun on *tämmärräqä* allows for the train to be thought of as a graduate. This joke falls under the relief theory of humor as it expresses the plight young graduates face in the city.

Eyyayyu continues with another joke about the train after the light rail system started operating. He laments, ድሮ ከሱቴድየም ፒያሳ ሃያ ደቂቃ የሚፈጅብን አሁን በአዲሱ ባቡር ሁለት ሰዓት 'What used to previously take us twenty minutes from Stadium to Piassa, now takes us two hours via the new train'. And *Gaš Qoftannaw* responds, ሕዝቤ መዋያ አገኛ! 'Then my people found a place to spend their days!'

There are two jokes in this narration. The first is the one about it taking longer to get from the neighbourhood Stadium to Piassa by train than by walking. The joke is not even stated as a full sentence, perhaps because as the joke is spoken, the speaker assumes the audience understands what the punch line is. It is comparing two different means of transportation and claiming an impossibility as truth. It falls in the relief theory of humor since people were complaining about how slowly the trains travel at the time and how they only serve the needs of people travelling long-distances. It can also be taken as a disparaging joke mocking the efforts of politicians to provide transportation services.

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<sup>419</sup> The Addis Abäba city light railroad was inaugurated in 2015 to help alleviate urban transport congestion. Anon. 2016.

In the second joke, there is a word that is used: ሕዝቤ *həzbe* ‘my people’. This word is in recent years how Ethiopians talk about and refer to other Ethiopians when making general, often ironic, statements. In such instances, people rely on lexical processes such as conventionality, frequency, familiarity of different senses of words to influence their understanding. Since the ironic connotation of the word *həzbe* is frequently encountered in communication today, upon using the word, an ironic meaning of it is initially accessed.

*Gaš Qoftannaw* is indirectly saying urban Ethiopians have nothing to do with their lives that a two-hour long train ride would amount to a successful way of spending one’s day. መዋያ ማግኘት *māwaya magñät* is used in general conversation to mean to find some place to work, and some way of being productive during the day. This is a joke that falls under the relief theory of humor as it points to the issue of unemployment in the capital city.

3.3.2.3. In this joke, ጃይሃሃህ tells a tale about Addis Abäba’s birds. One Addis Abäba bird listens to a government announcement that states mobile networks will all be distributed in a wireless way and that the telecommunication wires that are hanging across the city will soon be obsolete, and thus removed. The bird responds, ውይይይይይይ እኛንም እንደሰዉ ማረፊያ ሊያሳጡን ነዋ! ‘Oh No! They’re going to deny us a place to rest much like they did with the people!’. After the audience is given time to react to this joke, ጃይሃሃህ adds in mock surprise, ወፉ ሳይቀር እንደዚህ አሽመረኛ ይሁን? ‘Even the birds have become this sarcastic?’.

The bird’s comment, in line with traditions of anthropomorphous animals narrating tales and playing a major role in Ethiopian folk tales, is meant to present shock. It falls under the relief theory of humor as the bird is worried that much like the people of Addis Abäba, it will soon have no place to rest. It is not specified who the implied ‘they’ are in this case, but the audience may assume it is referring to the government. The actual reason for this joke may include resettlement plans as a result of urban reconstruction, inflation rates, unemployment and such related issues. The most important thing for this category is ጃይሃሃህ’s final commentary on the entire joke. He notes in a tone of bewilderment how even the birds have become sarcastic in today’s Ethiopia. An exaggeration, this sentiment betrays a disparaging mockery of the urban dweller. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor as ጃይሃሃህ is claiming that the city’s sarcasm has become limitless.

Gərum, the actor of the play, says during an interview that comedians are unable to keep up with the jokes of Addis Abäba’s laymen and women. ጃይሃሃህ reiterates this point in the play several times by repeating the phrase, አሽመረኛን ሰማይ ደርሷል ‘Our sarcasm has reached the sky’, indicating an increased level of Amharic humorous wordplay going on across the city. Listeners consider stereotypically sarcastic comments as more negative in comparison to

directly negative commentary made about similar situations as sarcasm invokes mockery and laughter. *Festalen* has several sarcastic jokes. Consider the following.

3.3.2.4. Eyyayyu narrates a story of students sitting for an exam. One student finds the exam incredibly difficult that it is impossible for him to even answer a single question. So, he turns in his exam sheet without answering a single question and walks out of the exam hall. Outside, he finds his classmate standing. He asks, shocked and surprised, ‘did you finish your exam?’ to which the other responds, ‘No no, it was too difficult. I just handed in an empty sheet to the examiner and walked out’. The first student then gets incredibly worried and says, እንደኔ?! ወይኔ ጉዳችን። ተኮራርጀው ነው ይሉናል። ‘Like me?! Oh our woes. They will say we cheated from one another’.

The joke is that the student is more concerned about being caught cheating than he is about the fact that he obviously failed the exam. The concern here is an assumed absurdity of ineffective checking rules and suspicion by authorities. But Eyyayyu is being sarcastic about the student’s priority of concern. Eyyayyu adds a commentary saying, ‘you have already hit rock-bottom, what are you worried about?’. This is a joke that falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

3.3.2.5. Another social phenomenon Eyyayyu jokes about is the issue of water supplies in Addis Abäba. He says: በዚህች ትንግርታ አላልቅ ባለን ሀገር የእጅ መታጠብ ቀን ይከበራል። እጅ መታጠብ! ... ልንበላ እኮ ነው! ‘In this country, a country that never fails to baffle us, we now celebrate hand-washing day. Hand washing! ... As if we’re going to eat’.

In the Amharic version, Ethiopia is referred to as a ‘She’. And Ethiopian dining custom dictates that people wash their hands before eating as food is eaten by hand. The joke is about a government announcement of a national holiday of washing hands to help improve public hygiene. If the phrase of the punch line was simply ልንበላ ነው *Lənbäla näw*, it would have meant ‘we are going to eat’. The term እኮ *əkkō* is thrown into the sentence, adding an ironic twist to the phrase. The logical expectation of the joke’s narration is that one washes one’s hands to eat. However, since Eyyayyu added *əkkō*, irony is achieved, and the phrase becomes ‘as if we are going to eat’. Eyyayyu is highlighting the irony of the government announcing a hand-washing holiday while people don’t have anything to eat. He makes the celebration appear almost luxurious and privileged. This dark joke falls under the relief theory of humor presenting lack of access to food as a contemporary phenomenon of the city.

3.3.2.6. This following joke is about a man who tells an *azmari* to recite poems for him. The *azmari* are musicians who usually recite poetry with multiple layers of meanings. They are today found in the confines of *täg* ‘honey-wine’ serving houses and traditional entertainment venues. They recite

their own conspicuous poems while also allowing people to ‘give’ them poems to sing. This one man tells the *azmari* to recite the following:

ይበላል በገንዘብ

ይጠጣል በገንዘብ

ይኖራል በገንዘብ

ከየት ይመጣል ገንዘብ

With money, it is possible to eat

With money, it is possible to drink

With money, it is possible to live

Where will money come from?

The poem above is an aesthetically poor recitation. But that the lines are below par adds to the humor of the joke. It is a simple and short poem that can pass as prose. The man is declaring an economic question in just four lines. It is rhetorical of course, but one that indicates that basic necessities that money achieves are rendered unachievable by the fourth stanza, ‘where will money come from?’. Listeners are brought to the question: how do people live in a city where they have no money to eat, drink and live? The joke is not rendered futile by the lack of poetic beauty. In fact, it rather gives the joke depth and a way for Ḥyyayyu to make a sarcastic commentary about the economic plight of the urban dweller. This again falls in the relief theory of humor.

3.3.2.7. After Ḥyyayyu returns from his trip to Qoše Tära (the city’s largest dump), he brings back a bag of items with him. He puts his day’s collection on stage and starts narrating about his adventure. He exclaims that half of the dump is filled with plastic bottles. He then says he has a fundamental question: ይህ ሁሉ ላሱትክ ውሃ ነበረው ወይ? አዎ ከሆነ መልሱ ከፍተኛ የሎጂክ ጥያቄ ይነሳል። አዳጜ የከተማሽ ውሃ ታሽጎ እየተሸጠልሽ ነዋ ያንዲህ ውሃ የሌለው? ‘Did all of these plastic bottles have water? If the answer is yes, then a great logical question is raised. Is it because your city’s water is being bottled and sold to you that your taps don’t have any water?’.

The way of speaking which uses the feminine way of addressing, for example: እየተሸጠልሽ *əyyätäšäṯälläš*, is a way of communication that has become typical to Addis Abäba, though not foreign to some parts of Ethiopia.<sup>420</sup> Friends address one another as አንቺ *anči* ‘you’ (second person singular feminine), in dialogue playfully. The word አዳጜ *addame* is another popular

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<sup>420</sup> For example, in Sämen Šäwa, men of all ages are addressed as *anči* ‘you (second person singular feminine)’ by family and friends. Sämə‘on Maräyye 2020.

way of addressing a group as a singular feminine when one is about to make a humorous remark, or a snide statement about a group. A similar lexical effect as seen in the use of the word *həzbe* applies here with the term *addame*. People are automatically aware of an ironic comment because of the repeated use of the word for ironic or sarcastic purposes. The group addressed by this joke is the audience, or even a larger public group that is not confined to the spaces of the theatre. One speculation is that *addame* is linked to the name Adam. It is used with a verb ending in the second person singular form although the word always addresses and refers to a plural number of individuals and is therefore a collective. Examples are,

አዳሜ መስሎኛል ‘It seems to ... you’

አዳሜ አግኝተኛል ‘You ... have gotten’

አዳሜ በልተኛል ‘You ... have eaten’

Referring back to ሿyyayyu’s joke, he asks two questions: the first is ‘did all these bottles have water?’ and if the answer is yes, he asks, ‘is it because they’re selling your tap water as bottled water that you do not get water via your taps anymore?’. Among the basic government service provisions of any city is access to usable water. For almost a decade now, Addis Abāba has faced severe shortages of access to clean tap water. And when there is water, people do not drink it because it is often unhealthy. ሿyyayyu is making a connection from this contextual knowledge to what he sees at the dump, asking if the government is making money by turning off this service that is meant to be provided for cheap. This falls under the relief theory of humor as well.

Another joke along a similar theme is the following: አደባባይ ላይ ትልቅ ስክሪን ተክለው የለ? ማደንዘዣ...የዉሃ ወረፋቸውን ቢጫ ጄሪካናቸው ላይ ጉብ ብለው በስክሪን የሚተላለፍላቸውን እየኮመኮሙ የምን ማስታወቂያ ቢመጣ ጥሩ ነው? የዉሃ ‘Didn’t they fix a large screen at the square? tranquilizer... people waiting in line to get water, sitting on their yellow jericans, are staring at the screen, and guess what advertisement comes on? Water’.

He makes fun of the road-side screens first, calling them ‘tranquilizers’. A disparaging joke, he is hinting that the screens were placed around the city to manipulate the public and to keep people from thinking critically. He then presents an ironic situation of people waiting in line to get water watching an advertisement to buy bottled water. He uses slang such as *gub bäläw*, a poetic and playful way of expressing a sitting position. The joke presents the dichotomy of official portrayal of life and the social realities people have to live under. ሿyyayyu’s sarcasm is embedded with deeper questions of equity, and social justice: is it fair to flaunt water advertisements in a city where the majority are not provided with its basic supply?

3.3.2.8. This next joke is taken from a dialogue between *Gaş Qoftannaw* (whom *Ëyyayyu* calls his *anbässa* (lion) and the journalist *Gazeṭäññaw*. *Gazeṭäññaw*, who lives in *Gaş Qoftannaw*'s compound, buys a forty-two-inch television. As he walks in with his new television, *Gaş Qoftannaw* says to him: በአስራ አራት ኢንች ቤት አርባ ሁለት ኢንች ቴሌቪዥን 'A forty-two-inch TV in a house that is fourteen inches wide'.

The joke plays on an absurdity. You can't possibly fit a forty two-inch wide tv in a fourteen-inch wide house. But this is resolved upon understanding the characters themselves, *Gaş Qoftannaw* and *Gazeṭäññaw* and upon contextual social realities. This joke is a tendentious joke that falls under the disparaging theory of humor. It is to show, as *Ëyyayyu* later admits, the lack of prioritization visible in individuals of Addis Abäba. Through the joke, *Ëyyayyu* is targeting the consumerism that has engulfed the city. He doesn't dwell much on what causes such behavior. There is enough room to speculate why people buy televisions when they don't have houses. However, this joke is not intended to allow for understanding of complex processes that shape the life of individuals. Tendentious jokes simply expose and belittle.

He adds the following phrase after delivering this joke: አዳሜ ኑሮዋን መቀየር ሲያቅታት በሪሞት ቻናሏን. . . ጠቅ. . . ጠቅ 'When *addame* can't change her life, she changes her channels through her remote controller "click click"'. He seems to briefly touch on the issue of being unable to change one's life which drives people into consumerism.

### 3.3.3 *Festalen*: Jokes on political realities

3.3.3.1. This is a dialogue between *Gaş Qoftannaw* and *Ëṭayye Aklilä*. *Gaş Qoftannaw* buys sheep for a holiday and his neighbor, *Ëṭayye Aklilä*, realizes that the sheep doesn't make a lot of sound.

*Ëṭayye Aklilä* says: በዓል ማለት እኮ ጭሳ ጭስ እና ድምጻ ድምጽ ነው. . . ይኼ በግ ምን ሆኖ ነው እንደዚህ ድምጽ አልባ የሆነው? 'Holiday means smells and noise... this sheep is surprisingly quiet, why?'

(*Ëyyayyu* adds a commentary here: ጋሽ ቆፍጣናው አርቀው ተኮሱ 'Gas Qoftannaw fired long-range')

*Gaş Qoftannaw* responds: እኔንኛ እንግዲህ አከሊልዬ ገዝቼው ስመጣ በምርጫ ቦርድ በኩል አልፎ ነበር... ድምጹን ሰርቀውት ይሆን? 'I do not know Akliläyye, after I bought it we passed by the election board, perhaps they stole his voice there?'

The context of the joke is a cultural remark on social celebration of holidays. ጭሳ ጭስ *časa čas* (burning of incenses, firewood for making bread and food create the holiday aroma) and ድምጻ ድምጽ *dəmsa dəms* (referring to the sounds from chicken and sheep as well as other cattle purchased for food, and holiday music) mark festivities before holidays in Addis Abäba. The question the neighbor asks is crucial for the joke. This is a similar exercise to trying to



understand a multiple-layered *qane* poetry where one has to identify the crucial words that are the gates to the multiple intended meanings. These are known as *həbrä-qal*; and in this joke too, the phrasing mentioned by *Ἐῤῥῃῃῃ Aklilä* is important for the punch line. It is a pun on the words *dəms alba*. This phrase means to be without a voice. *Gaş Qoftannaw*'s use of this word is to make it directly related with the political elections of Ethiopia. The joke is political in that it is satirizing the possibility that people's votes are 'stolen', or 'silenced', by the election board. It is a joke that falls under the relief theory of humor as it expresses frustration about lack of democratic institutions that would allow people to vote for their rulers and representatives, or for their choices to be honored. This joke demonstrates how the artistic community can use humor to speak up against political dishonesty.

In addition, *Ἐῤῥῃῃῃ* expressed what *Gaş Qoftannaw* does when responding to his neighbor by saying, *araqäw täkkosu* 'they fired long-range'. This is to denote that the target of the joke is far from what was being discussed in the joke.

3.3.3.2. As *Gazeṭäññaw* walks into his room in *Gaş Qoftannaw*'s compound, *Gaş Qoftannaw*'s dog starts barking at him relentlessly. *Gazeṭäññaw* is surprised, and he says to *Gaş Qoftannaw*, ምንድን ነው ይኸው ወሳሪ ሌላ ቀን እኮ አይጨክንብኝም። ዛሬ ምን ሆኖ ነው እንደዚህ? 'what is wrong with this dog, other days it does not act cruelly towards me. What happened today that it is doing so?' (*Ἐῤῥῃῃῃ* adds a commentary here expressing what *Gaş Qoftannaw* said next: አንድ ዙር ሄዱለታ 'He went one round around him') ቅድም በቴሌቪዥን ያነበብኩትን ዜና አይቶት ይሆናል 'Perhaps he saw the news you read earlier on the television'.

This joke can fall both into the disparaging and relief theory of humor. It connects two incongruous ideas. The dog barking, and *Gazeṭäññaw*'s news report on ETv. But *Gaş Qoftannaw* relates them. The punchline reveals a contempt towards news reporters, possibly hinting at dishonesty or lack of integrity that makes even dogs bark at journalists and reporters.

Since these jokes are written down from a performed act, *Ἐῤῥῃῃῃ*'s personal comments are added in between the dialogues to signify who is responding. His choice of words is also a demonstration of linguistic craft; *and zur hedulläta* means to go one full round, often on a racetrack. He uses it here to mark the power of *Gaş Qoftannaw*'s wit.

3.3.3.3. The following is a joke about Obama's visit to Ethiopia in July 2015. It includes multiple ironic and sarcastic jokes. *Ἐῤῥῃῃῃ* narrates the story:

አቤከስ ጭንቅ ሲለው. . . የእናት አንጀት ሆኖበት እንዴት ነው በልቶ ያድራል ወይ ኢትዮጵያ ይተኛል ወይ ይጠጣል ወይ. . . ሊያይ አልመጣም? አንድ ለዚህ ጋዜጠኛ የተሰጠች ነች [ . . . ] ይህ ጋዜጠኛ እኮ ነው ምን አለ መሰላችሁ «አባጣ እኮ የመጣው እኮ አሁን ነ? እንዴት እንዴት አይነት ገዳይ ገዳይ ስልጥን ያሉ ተኳሽ ተኳሽ ገዳይ ገዳይ ጠባቂ ይዞ ነው የመጣው» ይላቸዋል. . . «ሟቸሽ ይዞ መጥቷል? እኛ እንደሆነ የለን! በሃገራችን በባህላችን በጣም ነውር ምግባር ነው. . . » «ምን?» ይላቸዋል «ሬሳ ላይ አይተኮስም»

Obex, worried, his mother-like instincts kicking in, was wondering if people eat well, sleep well in Ethiopia, if we drink well... and didn't he come to see? This was one given to this journalist [...] This journalist, you know what he said to *Gaş Qoftannaw*, 'Obama came surrounded by many skilled killers'. *Gaş Qoftannaw* said, 'did he bring people to be killed? Because we obviously aren't alive. It is blasphemous in our culture, in our tradition'. 'What is?', the journalist asked. *Gaş Qoftannaw* responded, 'you don't shoot at corpse'.

Irony and particularly sarcasm filled with mocking and belittling humor are at play here. A serious cultural thought is mentioned to demonstrate the joke. Obama is first ironically depicted as a figure who cares about Ethiopia. A metaphor with the mother is invoked, and he appears to care about whether or not the people of Ethiopia have enough to eat, and drink. The joke is a sarcastic remark made on an awareness of the relationship between global superpowers and countries like Ethiopia.

*Gaş Qoftannaw* is here presented as more of a critical thinker than the journalist regarding Obama's visit. It is nonchalance towards Obama's visit *Ëyyayyu* brings to stage and within which context this joke appears. The conversation also demonstrates a cultural taboo. One does not shoot on a dead body, or a *resa*. But Ethiopians are presumably called *resa* by *Gaş Qoftannaw*. *Resa* is a serious insult in Addis Abāba. It means to signify a person's inability to act, speak, and think independently. Lack of courage and confidence, and an overall sense of living an undignified life by being unable to demand rights and pose questions is what it implies. Since it is a political joke, it could also be a connotation of being unable to resist leaders.

This falls under the relief theory of humor but can also belong to the disparaging theory. Since *Ëyyayyu* is expressing sarcastically that Obama does not in fact care about the people of Ethiopia, this part of the joke re-defines international relations for the audience. What is disparaging is the statement which unequivocally calls Ethiopians *resa*.

3.3.3.4. *Ëyyayyu* mentions a dialogue he had with the cleaners of his neighbourhood. When he asks them for his items, they say, ironically, that he should go report to the Institute of the Ombudsman, to which *Ëyyayyu* responds: አይ እምባ ጠባቂ ኮሚሽን - አይ! መጠበቅን ትተው ማስለቀሱን ባቆሙ አሉ. "“Oh! The ombudsman—Oh! they'd rather abandon trying to protect people and try to stop making them cry” someone said'.

This joke contradicts the purpose and aims of the Ethiopian ombudsman.<sup>421</sup> Its construction is in such a way that *Ëyyayyu* uses a variation of *alā* to end it. This is one way of

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<sup>421</sup> The proclamation of 2000 expresses the purposes of the Ombudsman. Anon. 2000, 1367.

paraphrasing someone or quoting a saying that someone has in their head but is unable to cite the sources of. Attributing and acknowledging a different, albeit an unknown, source of what has been said shows reliance on allusion as a technique. *Aye* or *ay* is used in a humorous sentence almost always preceding the subject that is to be made fun of and ridiculed. *Ayi*, *Ahehe*, *Ahe*, are renderings of a similar expressive group.

Eyyayyu's joke renders the commission as useless to the goals it set out to do. An ombudsman institution is set up to protect civilian rights and to ensure the government does not abuse its powers with maladministration and injustice. The joke falls under the relief theory of humor as it is implying that rights violations and maladministration are rampant, so much so that the ombudsman should not worry about correcting that. The word for the ombudsman in Amharic is one that ensures people do not shed tears. And the joke is precisely that the institution should not try and protect people from crying anymore; it could try and do the bare minimum and not cause people to cry. The ombudsmen themselves are seen as adding to the tears of people. The joke implicates the institution that should have been independent of the government as adding to the political injustices of the country.

3.3.3.5. Eyyayyu claims that the following joke is told to him by his friend Eṣsubalāw Kassaye. Eyyayyu calls it a ዘላለማዊ *zälalāmawi* 'eternal' joke. It goes like this:

ሦስት እስረኞች ናቸው። የታሰሩበት ቦታ ላይ ቁጭ ብለው እየተጠያየቁ እያወሩ ነው እና አንደኛው አንተ ምን አድርገህ ነው የታሰርከው ይባላል። ታምራት ላይኔ ጸረ-ሕዝብ ነው ብዬ ነው የመጣሁት። አንተስ ተባለሁለተኛው። እኔ ታምራት ላይኔ የሕዝብ ልጅ ነው ብዬ ነው የገባሁት። ሦስተኛው አንተስ ሲባል፤ እኔ ... እኔማ ታምራት ላይኔ እኮ ነኝ!

These are three prisoners. They were sitting where they were arrested and talking, and one of them was asked what he did to end up in prison. He says 'I said Tamrat Layne was against the people'. The second one was asked, and he says, 'I stated that Tamrat Layne was a son of the people'. The third one was asked, and he says, 'Me ... I am Tamrat Layne'.

Eyyayyu adds a commentary, ይልሃል እሱባለው ካሳ<sup>422</sup> ደግፍም፣ ተቃወምም፣ እርሱንም ሁን አታመልጥም! 'Eṣsubalāw tells you, you can support him, oppose him or be him himself; you will not escape'.

The joke appears contextual since it mentions the brief rule of Prime Minister Tamrat Layne. In addition, most political jokes are situational as they pertain to a particular time in history. And political jokes that are directly related to a particular period of history risk expiry. This particular joke was stated years after Tamrat was demoted from his position. But the

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<sup>422</sup> እሱባለው ካሳዬ Eṣsubalāw Kassaye and እሱባለው ካሳ Eṣsubalāw Kassa are used interchangeably by Eyyayyu throughout the play.

context that may change with time is the culture of mass undeserved arrests in urban Ethiopia by the EPRDF. As a result, it is almost unnecessary to know the background of Tamrat Layne in detail. What is relevant to understand this joke is an understanding of political repression in Ethiopia and that Tamrat was a controversial figure. The absurdity of the situation is crucial for the formation of the joke's delivery. It highlights the chaotic nature of political realities in Ethiopia, and falls under the relief theory of humor.

3.3.3.6. Eyyayyu continues and narrates, ባለፈው እኮ ነው። ባለፈው ሰዎን የጸረ ወረቀት ቀን የጸረ ወረቀት ቀን የሚባል በዓል መጣ ተባለና በል እንግዲህ 'ዘመኑ የቴክኖሎጂ ነው . . . የወረቀት ዘመን ይብቃ' የሚል መዓት የፖስተር እና ፍላጎር በወረቀት አባዛተው. . . በዛ ደመኛው በሆነ ቴሌቪዥን «በመሠረቱ የዘንድሮ በዓል ከሌሎች በዓላት ለየት የሚያደርገው ስለ ጸረ ወረቀት ግንዛቤ የሚያስጨብጡ ከ2 ሚሊየን በላይ በራሪ ወረቀቶች...» 'This is from one of the past days. Past days... Anti-paper day. There was an anti-paper day declared and they printed a lot of flyers and posters saying 'it is the age of technology...end to the days of paper'. Then they came through that sworn enemy of his, the television, and broadcasted 'Fundamentally, what makes this year's celebration unique from the rest is that over 2 million papers explaining the need for an anti-paper day have been distributed...'. '

Eyyayyu here is telling a multitude of ironic jokes. First, he makes fun of the printing of hundreds of flyers that decree 'it is the age of technology. The age of papers should end'. He then calls the Television a ደመኛ *dämmäñña*. A *dämmäñña* is someone's sworn enemy. Here we have a human behavior attributed to an inanimate object; Eyyayyu calls the tv people's blood-enemy. Finally, he pretends to enact a news reporter's report on the celebrations of the anti-paper day holiday and mocks them for their lack of ability to grasp the contradiction in the way they were celebrating it. The celebrations undermine the whole point of the decree. The incongruity driving the joke, and essentially the celebration, is even more illuminating of the superficiality of the holiday. Through this joke, we are reminded of the rise in state-led holidays in Ethiopia as well. But most importantly, the joke mocks news reporters, officials and all others who were involved in such fiascos for their lack of logical thinking. It is a disparaging joke.

3.3.3.7. Here is another joke: ወደቤት እየገባ ሰውየው ወደቤት. . . እሳት የላሱ ማጅራት መቼዎች አያገኙልኝም? ቁጭ አረጉት... «ገንዘብህን ሰውዬ ገንዘብህን አምጣ» ያስባኩታል «ማን እንደሆንኩ ታውቃለችሁ?» «አይ አይ አይ... ገንዘብህን ነው የተባልኩው ሰውዬ ገንዘብህን» «የክፍለ ከተማው ሥራ አስፈጻሚ እኮ ነኝ»... «አረ?! እንደዛማ ከሆነ ገንዘባችንን አምጣ!» The man was going home, home and dangerous muggers find him. They sat him down... 'Give us your money, your money', they scare him. 'Do you know who I am?' he says. They respond, 'No no no...you're asked for your money, your money'. He says, 'I am the sub-city's director'. To which they respond, 'Oh really?! In that case, give us our money then!'

In this joke, an inference is made. Being an administrator of a sub-city entails ruling over multiple *wärädäs* of the city. These administrators are not as removed from the public they administer as the mayor and those higher up in the administration hierarchy. Implying that these sub-city administrators are thieves shows a deep lack of trust on people's immediate administrators.

When the thieves realize who the man is, they immediately say *አረ? Ärä?*, an intonation that veils surprise and shock in a questioning tone. It means 'is that so?' in this case. The joke is in the change of the suffix of *ገንዘብህን gänzäbhän* 'your money' to *ገንዘባችንን gänzäbaččänän* 'our money'. The general point is to make government officials appear as thieves, and the gratification is felt by the crowd as the muggers are seen as effectively settling the public's anger with corrupt government workers by demanding to get their money back. The humor is also in the realization that actively mugging thieves felt they were being robbed by the sub-city administrator.

This joke falls under the relief theory of humor as it also suggests that there are socially irresponsible political administrators that rule with impunity. It expresses a deeply problematic feature of urban administration, which leads with injustice, and people's lack of trust in the efficacy of one's political institutions.

3.3.3.8. The final joke selected for discussion is one where *Ëyyayyu* goes on to sarcastically make fun of Addis Abäba's fear of the government, the EPRDF. He titles these series of jokes, *አዲስ አበባ እና ፍርሃቷ* 'Addis Abäba and her fear'. One joke goes as follows: *አውቶቢስ ሙሉ ሰው አህ አህ አህ አህ ይለዋል። ድንገት ጸጥ ካለ የት ደርሰው መሰለህ? ቤተ መንግሥት* 'A bus full of people would be talking "ah eh eh ah"... If the bus goes quiet all of a sudden, you know where they have reached? The palace'.

'*Ah, eh eh ah*' are often used in Amharic dialogues when retelling about a large number of people talking to one another at once; it denotes conversations. *Ëyyayyu* asks a question to an un-identified male (single person), which is a common way of narrating a story. And then he responds to his own question. The joke is to show the physical demonstration of the fear of Addis Abäba and how simple day-to-day activities can reveal this fear. People behave in a self-conscious and self-censoring behavior that has developed within the capital city. It is both a disparaging and also a relieving humor. In one way, Addis Abäba's Ethiopians are mocked for their fear. In another, *Ëyyayyu* expresses a deep-seated fear the city has developed.

Another one of these jokes is a narration of a man who rushes to get to work in the morning but finds a long line of people waiting for taxis already. These taxi lines were a daily headache for people as the city was witnessing transportation service shortages. Considering what to do, the man raises his right fist and yells from the back of the line, *ድል ለሰፊው ሕዝብ*

‘victory to the masses’. The people in the line, visibly shocked, slowly disperse to get away from him. And he successfully gets rid of the line and waits for a taxi alone.

This joke was stated to make fun of Addis Abāba’s dwellers for their fear of being associated with anything political. This fear surfaced after the May 2005 elections saw a violent reproach from the government. A disparaging joke, Ἐyyayyu is holding a mirror to the urban dweller who is afraid of getting involved in politics and lives without demanding for basic services and rights. It is also a jab at the confidence people showed in attending the play while being generally afraid of political involvement. This series of jokes demonstrates how artists can use humor to demonstrate the way people are behaving towards their rulers.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

*Festalen* nurtured and helped in the re-awakening of the public sphere, engaging viewers and politicians alike, scrutinizing the realities of contemporary Ethiopia without it facing government censorship. Unlike the remark made by Solomon Deressa in the introduction, *Festalen*’s humor is not veiled with multiple layers that would allow it to escape government restriction. Most of Ἐyyayyu’s jokes are easy to understand as directly hostile jokes. They are aggressive, and satirical. They disparage people, politicians, and the audience as well.

The play generally strives to stimulate critical awareness and provides questions for self-reflection for the audience. People are encouraged to ask why they do not have tap water in their homes and if that is really linked with the water business monopolies of the city. They are pushed to question on what grounds unemployment became the norm in the city and what will happen to their city’s unemployed youth. The play inspires people to laugh at the absurdity of staying quiet in a bus that is going by the palace and to question what created this fear. In essence, through the honorable characters of the play, people are pushed to think about justice in all aspects of their lives.

The artist’s role is to find meaning out of the day-to-day lives of people, and *Festalen* does that through humor. The *čāwata* in *Festalen* show an attempt at creating social and political meaning through Ἐyyayyu’s existence. This is not limited to just Ἐyyayyu but also includes his neighbors, who on further thought are clear representations of various members of the urban public.

On another level, what *Festalen* has achieved is that it shows individuals aren’t alone in what they experience in the city. Lack of access to water, not being able to afford proper housing, and similar questions pertaining to poverty and injustice are brought up and teased. The play touches upon the increase in income gap between the wealthy and the poor of the city and makes fun of those who live in gated houses and communities. This is unlike the previous

settlement feature of the city, as, unlike ‘most African cities, historically Addis [Abäba’s] social fabric had been mixed, where, until recently, rich and poor lived in the same neighbourhood’.<sup>423</sup> And through laughter at these social points, a sense of community is created at the theatre.

Through *Festalen*, we also observe rhetorical devices and techniques, such as repetition, that urban Ethiopians use in dialogue. We notice that it is for a reason ፤yyayyu appears mad; in line with the common belief that only mentally unhealthy people can speak their minds openly and face little retribution from officials. There are also traceable yet subtle cultural phenomena, such as the buying of chicken and sheep for holidays, the neighbours’ interactions with one another and the survival of traditional institutions in neighbourhoods such as the traditional hospital.

There are also continuations from the early twentieth century. Primarily, much like early Ethiopian plays, *Festalen* is a play where performance is not as important as the spoken word. It goes without saying that the play was staged in theatres built since the emperor’s time. The play, as a modern cultural phenomenon in Addis Abäba is also still popular, even with cinema and other sources of entertainment readily available. This means that the theatre is still one of the city’s identification in comparison to other cities of the country. Another notable remark is the value given to the virtues of people like *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḥanna. Being witty, and unwavering in one’s stance for truth is a skill that is still admired. Another continuation from the pre-EPRDF years is the play’s engagement with questions about modernization.

Ethiopia’s early modernizers were discussed in previous chapters engaging with ideas of how to modernize the country and what to avoid. Those like Käbbädä Mika’el had explicitly mentioned accepting unwanted western values such as materialism as a potential danger. *Festalen* shows playwrights discussing these similar ideas, but the difference is that Addis Abäba is now home of these side-effects. *Festalen* is presenting the effects of consumer culture and capitalism that seem to be eroding social values. His repeated jokes about the lack of food, water, and housing, the three basic necessities for people to lead their lives, suggests the hopes of early modernizers have not been achieved.

As depicted in the play, Ethiopians in Addis Abäba do not have equitable resource management, access to basic necessities as well as rights to elect their government bodies. For example, when considering housing problems, the EPRDF had designed the Integrated Housing Development Program in 2005, which attempted to construct public housing, locally

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<sup>423</sup> Fasil Ghiorgis 2012, 58.

known as condominiums, for low- and middle-income residents of the city. As of 2019, 175,000 units of these condominiums have been built.<sup>424</sup> There are also private housing developments that are recorded, but there is still a ‘massive shortage of housing in Addis [Abäba]’.<sup>425</sup> This is related to dramatic population growth as well as immigration of Ethiopians from rural areas to the capital. The condominium distributions were also riddled with corruption and unfair methods which have yet to be answered.<sup>426</sup> In addition, the poorest still can’t afford down payments for the condominiums, let alone face the ‘skyrocketing market prices for houses’.<sup>427</sup> In addition, one report from 2004 declared that about eighty percent of the inner city houses of the capital ‘need replacement because of dilapidation’, and that ninety-two percent of the population were poor and faced critical shelter problems including ‘housing shortage, poor housing quality and poor living and working environment’.<sup>428</sup> In 2018, the number of urban dwellers who still resided in poor neighbourhoods and faced shelter problems was at seventy-two percent.<sup>429</sup>

Often, *Ëyyayyu* is a moral guide on stage. Previously in Ethiopian history, it was the state that censored content of theatre and guided playwrights into crafting moralist theatre. And experimental theatre often came about during the transition periods between regime changes. Now, it is the playwrights themselves—who are to a certain degree acting under some restraint of self-censorship—who are seen producing such productions. *Festalen*’s value is this ability to take up social responsibility and scrutinize urban life, by studying all involved in life in Addis Abäba, the politicians and the rest alike.

*Festalen*’s popularity might then be because of the weakening of institutions that had hitherto been upholders of social values, i.e. religious institutions, schools, and government bodies as well. The play presents criticism against a capitalist, money-driven social reality taking root in urban Ethiopia which has eroded people’s sense of virtue and moral values as well as some sense of a fear of God. For example, there are jokes that discuss gullible children who are being invited to drug addiction by Ethiopians who only care about making money. *Festalen* reminds the audience to reconsider this lifestyle through jokes and humor. The

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<sup>424</sup> Larsen et al. 2019, 8, 4.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>426</sup> Anon. 2020.

<sup>427</sup> Terefe Degefa and Djamba 2015, XI, 132.

<sup>428</sup> Azeb Kelemework Bihon n.d., 8.

<sup>429</sup> United Nations 2020, 120.



absence of jokes that play on sexuality or experiment with religious questions are further evidence for this. What is also expressed in the play is the presence of an irresponsible political elite, and a public so afraid of the government that it does not even demand for the basic of services. The play repeatedly mocks the pretense of democracy and negligent politicians and administrators. *Festalen* is an example of the arts community ringing an alarm bell for Ethiopians to rethink their lives in Ethiopia. All in all, the play presents a confused city with a host of problems to deal with. On a grander scale, the play directs people's attention to questions of justice, equality and democratic rights.

*Festalen* is also a presentation of how urban Ethiopians use Amharic in dialogues and the features of spoken Amharic in the capital city. The play makes it clear that *čäwata* in form of sarcasm and irony are a major feature of the city. This could be an indication that people have resorted to humor to express themselves in the absence of spaces to be properly heard. As discussed in the previous chapter, the elected people's representatives of Ethiopia were mostly unable to hold serious dialogue at the parliament with the rulers of Ethiopia as the late Mälläs Zenawi would often side-step direct questions or mock and belittle parliamentarians by using humor. Much like Ethiopia's rulers mock and belittle, characters of the play in this chapter do the same. The questions being discussed in both spaces are similar, but there are no serious discussions as to how to solve the predicament Addis Abäba or even the country is in.

The jokes of *Festalen* are similarly dominated by tendentious jokes. Tendentious jokes expose and tease. There is very little chance that Əyyayyu's jokes could do more than just make people laugh while at the theatre. These jokes do not necessarily allow for interaction and communication to take place, things that play an important role in working towards understanding complexities of why things are the way they are. If the play is representative of social life in the capital city, it can be deduced that the public sphere seems to lean towards mockery. However, as an attempt, the play has upheld its artistic responsibility. In a space where such critical voices were absent, *Festalen* dared to expose, ridicule, re-imagine and re-assess urban Ethiopian life.

In conclusion, *Festalen* is not experimental like the plays and performances of pre-2005 Addis Abäba as it moralizes instead. And yet, it is still a popular venue of artistic expression. The wide-ranging reach of the play is also demonstrable in how the new prime minister Abiy Ahmed incorporates phrases and sayings from this play into his speeches. This is to mean that the arts are watched by the urban dweller as well as the political figures of the country. Finally, it is notable that the topics discussed through jokes at the parliament are similarly discussed through the jokes of this play (which is in turn watched by the political elite of the country).

The thesis has thus far investigated humor at the parliament and in spaces of performative arts. The next section will now present the humor of non-political and uncontrolled spaces of Addis Abäba.

## Chapter Four: Humor and Dissatisfaction in Addis Abäba

### 4.1 Introduction

We have thus far explored the use of humor at the parliament, and the theatre of contemporary Ethiopia. Humor is invaluable in these spaces for expressing opinions about complex realities facing Ethiopia, as a tool of disparaging opponents to show superiority or in assisting the delivery of moral guidance. Political elite, for example, joke to show their supremacy over others. Mälläs Zenawi is a prime example. He uses humor in his speeches at the parliament to assert dominance by belittling, mocking and teasing opponents sometimes, and to present his ideas in articulate ways other times. Opposition figures speaking to him are seen using word play to provide their ideas the strength and power to be heard so their opinions aren't made disposable. Others who lacked this skill of articulation were in comparison given little respect as orators. In fact, some of the interviewees stated the following about Mälläs' successor, Prime Minister Haylä Maryam Dässaläñ<sup>430</sup> when asked about parliamentary debates and discussions.

ጨዋታ ነገር እንፈልጋለን። ኃይለማርያም እኮ በቃ፤ መለስ ሞተ፣ ተተካ በቃ። ተረሳ። ግርማ ሞገስ የለውም ሲናገር አያዘናናም አያምርም እንደ ሀገር ያሳፍራል። ሥልጣን ሲለቅ ነው ሥልጣን ላይ እንደነበረ ትዝ ያለ<sup>431</sup>

We want some sort of playfulness. Haylä Maryam... Mälläs died, and then he was replaced. That's it; Haylä Maryam was forgotten. He doesn't have grace; he doesn't entertain when he speaks. His way of speaking is not pleasing. He's embarrassing as a country. I remembered he was in power when he resigned.

This chapter presents an ethnographic study of humor in Addis Abäba. The point is not so much to prove the value of humor, but to show the various ways *čäwata* is used in the day-to-day lives of Ethiopians.

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<sup>430</sup> Prime Minister Haylä Maryam Dässaläñ ruled Ethiopia from the time of the death of Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi, up until his resignation in 2018.

<sup>431</sup> Nati 2018. Nati is a University of Gondar graduate of 2020, raised in two neighbourhoods of Addis Abäba, Lädäta and Haya Hulät Mazorya.

The first stage of research primarily involved observation of youth and their interactions in the neighbourhoods of Haya Hulät Mazorya<sup>432</sup> and Bella.<sup>433</sup> This was supplemented by observations of social life in the 18 *qäbäle* of Haya Hulät Mazorya, drawing on consultations with elders (both women and men) and observation of their social events, including weddings, funerals, *əddər*<sup>434</sup> and *əqqub*.<sup>435</sup> In addition, I also took into consideration people's interactions in cafes, bars, public transportations, markets and coincidental political demonstrations. Social media humor is not a part of the investigation here as it requires its own sort of data analysis and methodology. This stage's data collection mainly consists of notes taken down about laughter, jokes told by people and the frequency and use of humor in people's interactions in various settings.

The second stage of research was interview based, with individuals from the same two neighbourhoods. These interviews were mostly with young people aged fifteen to twenty-six, aided with some controlled interviews with women and men older than the age of fifty.

After the interviews and personal observations followed data collection from two public spaces of the capital city. The first space that was selected is Addis Abäba's public transport providers.<sup>436</sup> The research here consisted of collecting exposed texts in the minibuses of Addis Abäba. The presentation of this data includes a historical look into the introduction of the automobile in the early modern period of Ethiopia, and the beginning of public transport services in the capital. The relief theory of humor and the disparaging theory of humor are

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<sup>432</sup> Haya Hulät Mazorya is the neighbourhood found in Bole sub-city that is located in the southeastern part of the capital city. The neighbourhood is located in between the landmark churches of Qəddus Ura'el, Yäkka Mika'el and Bole Mädhane 'Aläm.

<sup>433</sup> Bella neighbourhood is among the earliest founded neighbourhoods of Addis Abäba located close to the French and Italian Legations. It is found in the Yäkka sub-city of the capital, resting on the north-eastern end of the city.

<sup>434</sup> *Əddər* were initially funeral associations, and have now grown into social help associations found in most neighbourhoods of the capital. 'Əddər', *E Ae*, 2 (2005), 225a–227a (D. Bustorf and C. G.H.Schaefer).

<sup>435</sup> *Əqqub* is 'a popular traditional credit association [...] and has a strong social and economic value since it brings people of common interest together for the main purpose of saving money without going into the banking system'. 'Əqqub', *E Ae*, 2 (2005), 346b–347a (C. G.H.Schaefer and Amsalu Aklilu).

<sup>436</sup> Even though these quotes are also found on other means of transportation, I will proceed to use 'minibus quotes' for the reason that I have mostly spoken to minibus drivers and their helpers about the writings in their vehicles.

again used to discuss the ninety minibus quotes which are presented in this chapter. In addition, since a significant number of the minibus taxi quotes are proverbial in nature, a discussion of some of the theories of proverbs by scholars of Ethiopian history and languages has been included.

The second sources of data are the public political demonstrations that took place in Addis Abäba from July to November of 2018. This second source provides humorous quotes and sayings that were written on posters, as well as orally expressed as chants. The discussion of public demonstration adds to the discussion of youth disenfranchisement in Addis Abäba.

The first reason these two sources were selected is that both taxi quotes and public demonstrations contain jokes that are written or performed by the broader urban Ethiopian public. The country's political elite justify their political decisions pertaining to Addis Abäba in the name of this group. Artists draw inspiration for their plays, and other creative productions from this same group. In asking where urban Ethiopians, in close proximity to the Ethiopian political elite, share and voice their opinions, the minibus writings are one of these spaces, while political demonstrations are another.

Another reason is that the thesis assumes humor is an important tool used by members of Addis Abäba to interact with power (be it political or social). Studying these spaces may give us insight into a continuity of discussions among the public, and between the public and the political elite. Taxi quotes are crucial for this for two reasons: one, the quotes are expressions of the politically and economically marginalized youth sections of Addis Abäba. And two, unlike plays and parliamentary debates, these expressions are meant neither for social redirection, nor for demonstrating political might.

The thesis has thus far tried to demonstrate how humor is appreciated in both spoken and written forms in urban Ethiopia. Studying the humor of the public is itself an exercise in studying contemporary Addis Abäba. Taxi-quotes, unlike the humor of *Festalen* or the parliament, are free and open ways for transport service providers to express themselves. They are unbounded spaces for self-expressions that young taxi drivers and their helpers use to share their opinions about their lives. This is the same for public demonstrations, where urban Ethiopia indulges in freedom of expression.

#### **4.1.1 Addis Abäba speaks about *čäwata***

The interviews and discussions held are important to show the value placed on playful and humorous interaction in people's social lives. Jokes are an intrinsic part of urban Ethiopia's existence, be it in the homes of the bereaved where young men and women go to console family members of the departed, or at weddings, and joyous events. Serious matters of discussion are

highlighted with *čäwata* from all members of society, as well as friendly group gatherings in cafes, bars and in the streets of neighbourhoods. The *čäwata* include proverbs and aphorisms, political jokes and non-tendentious humor. Older Ethiopians almost always recite witty proverbs and sayings as an adage to their points.

From the interviews conducted with older men and women of Haya Hulät Mazorya, a distinction appears in how they understand joking. They claim there are useful jokes, and unnecessary or harmful jokes. These categories are similarly mentioned by youth, but they attach slightly different meanings to them.

Useful jokes according to the elder members of Haya Hulät Mazorya are jokes that are told to add to, and to contribute to conversations and speeches. This is an appreciation for humor as a rhetoric device, or as an anecdotal reference to supplement people's dialogues. Word play is often appreciated, short and concise witty word play, all the more. At times political jokes are also considered to be useful jokes. On the other hand, unnecessary jokes are those that fuel envy, hatred and other negative emotions in discussions. Teasing is considered a part of this. These seem like jokes that fall under the disparaging theory of humor.

An elderly woman from Haya Hulät Mazorya was asked if humor, or joking has value to her and she responded as follows:

ሳንስቅ ሳንጫወት መዋል? እንዴት ሁኖ? ጨዋታው መልኩ ያማረ ግን መሆን አለበት።<sup>437</sup>

‘Spending the day without laughing and without *čäwata*? How would that be? The humor has to be proper, of course’.

Older Ethiopians also identify useless banter as unnecessary, actively mentioning that they notice this habit among the youth of Addis Abäba.

In Haya Hulät Mazorya and Bella, young people identify useful jokes as jokes which allow them to look past their daily struggles, political and economic as well as social life. These appear to be jokes that predominantly fall under the relief theory of humor. Harmful jokes are repeatedly expressed as ‘jokes that belittle religion and ethnicity’. When asked to respond to the older generation's statements, Mo'a Wube, a seventeen-year-old from Haya Hulät Mazorya said:

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<sup>437</sup> Informant C 2018. This conversation was held at her house in Haya Hulät Mazorya. Informant C was a migrant to Addis Abäba from Wällo in the 1970s.

ሲጀመር እኮ እኛ ውሎአችን ቀልድ ነው። ቁምነገሩን ከምናወራው ይልቅ ቀኑን ሙሉ ስንስቅ ነው የምንውለው<sup>438</sup>

We basically spend our days joking. More than we discuss serious matters, we laugh all day long.

Yoftahe Haylu from Bella neighbourhood said the following as to why he thinks this is:

ኑሮን ቀለል አርገን ስለምናይ ነው። በሚኒመም መኖር ስለምንችል ይመስለኛል። ሰው ፊቱ ላይ ፈገግታ አያጣም አንዴም እየበላ።<sup>439</sup>

It is because we have an easy way of dealing with life. We can live on the minimum. You see people smiling even though they may only eat once a day.

Yoftahe proceeded to recite a joke about his neighbourhood which he said demonstrates what life is like under EPRDF:

አንድ የቤላ ሰፈር ትልቅ ሴትዮ ተክለው ያሳደጉትን ዛፍ ለመቁረጥ ፈልገው ሲቆርጡት የሰፈር ደንቦች እያለፉ ነበር እና ሴትዮዋ ጋር ሄደው «የተተክለ ዛፍ መቁረጥ ሕገ ወጥነት ነው። 500 ብር ቅጣት አለብዎ» ብለው ይሄዳሉ። ያ ሊቆረጥ የተጀመረው ዛፍ ታድያ በነጋታው የጎረቤት አጥር ላይ ወድቆ ያፈርሰውና ምን እናርግ እየተባባሉ ሳሉ በድጋሚ ደንቦች ይመጡ እና «እርስዎ ሴትዮ ዘንድሮ በጣም አብዝተውታል። መንግሥትን ሳያስፈቅዱ ምንም አይነት ግንባታ ማድረግ እንደማይችሉ አያውቁም? ሌላ 500 ብር ቅጣት» ብለዋቸው ይሄዳሉ። በሦስተኛው ቀን እኚህ ሴትዮ የወለደች ላማቸውን እየጎተቱ ቀበሌ ሄዱ። ሲደርሱ የቀበሌው ሠራተኞች «አንዴ አንቱ በጤናዎ አይደሉም ዘንድሮ። ሰሞኑን ሲቀጡ ከርመው አሁን ደግሞ ላም እየጎተቱ ያመጡብናል? ምን ፈልገው ነው?» ሲሏቸው፤ «አይ፤ ልለባት ወይ?» ብለው ጠየቁ።<sup>440</sup>

One old woman of the Bella neighbourhood wanted to cut down a tree she planted. As she was doing this, the neighbourhood patrol known as *dänb* were passing by and they heard her. They went and told her that it is illegal to cut down any tree and that she faces a fine of 500 Birr. The next day, the half-cut tree fell on the neighbor’s fence and as the neighbors were discussing what to do, the *dänb* returned again. This time they said ‘woman, you are causing too much trouble. Do you not know that you cannot build anything without consent from the government? You face another 500 Birr fine’ and left. On the third day, this woman went to the *qäbäle* with her cow that had just given birth. When she got to the *qäbäle* the workers said ‘you must not be healthy this year, woman. Weren’t you being fined the past few days and now you have brought your cow to us? What do you want?’. The woman responded, ‘May I milk her?’.

<sup>438</sup> Mo’ a Wube 2018. Mo’ a is born and raised in Haya Hulät Mazorya and is a third-year student at Arba Minch University.

<sup>439</sup> Yoftahe Haylu 2018.

<sup>440</sup> There are more jokes listed in appendix C. These jokes were all written down during field work in Addis Abäba.

This joke falls under the relief theory of humor, expressing how people felt suffocated by the government, to the point that they assume they have to ask for permission to milk their own cows.

Another respondent, Haylä Gäbrə'el, a 16-year-old from Haya Hulät Mazorya, added a clarification about the joking culture as he sees it:

ከሁሉም ጋር ዝምብለሽ አትቀልጅም እኮ። ትውውቅን ይጠይቃል ያለበለዚያ ድፍረት ሊሆን ይችላል።<sup>441</sup>

You don't just joke with everyone. You need to know one another on some level, or it might seem disrespectful.

Mälaku Bärhun, a respondent found in Haya Hulät Mazorya but originally from Čärqos<sup>442</sup> neighbourhood added that he agrees with what the older Ethiopians have said:

ሼባዎቹ<sup>443</sup> ልክ ናቸው። እናለምጣለን እንጂ አንቀልጅም እኮ። ሙድ መያዝ ነው በተገኘው አጋጣሚ።<sup>444</sup>

The old people are correct. We don't joke; we mock sarcastically. All we do is make fun of things at any given opportunity.

Young recent migrants to Addis Abäba from various parts of Ethiopia had similar opinions to what a barista at Maläda Cafe in the neighbourhood Arat Kilo<sup>445</sup> said about Addis Abäba's social life:

እርድና ነው መሰል ሰቆ ማደር። ከልቡ አይሰቅም ግን ያሾፋል፣ ይቀልዳል። እኛ አገር ጎንደር እንዲህ ያለ ማስመሰል የለም። አዲስ አበባ አየሁ ማስመሰል።<sup>446</sup>

I guess it is being sly, laughing to get through your days. He doesn't laugh genuinely, but he makes fun of things. In our country in Gondär, such kind of pretention doesn't exist. I witnessed pretention in Addis Abäba.

A general research question can then be formed to guide a proper study of humor of the public of Addis Abäba: what does Addis Abäba laugh about? Understanding this allows us to hypothesize the reasons the city's public spaces are dominated with humor and laughter. Is it a

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<sup>441</sup> Haylä Gäbrə'el 2018.

<sup>442</sup> Čärqos is one of the sub-cities of Addis Abäba and is located in the city center. This neighbourhood was mentioned in chapter three, section 3.2.3, as the neighbourhood of the character Zafu Zänbäl.

<sup>443</sup> ሼባ Ṣeba is an urban slang that refers to old people.

<sup>444</sup> Mälaku Bärhun 2018.

<sup>445</sup> Arat Kilo is the neighbourhood where many Ethiopian government buildings such as the parliament, Ministry of Education as well as some Addis Ababa University campuses are located. It is also where the Holy Trinity Cathedral lies, where Emperor Haylä Šöllase, and Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi are buried.

<sup>446</sup> Informant D 2018.



cultural phenomenon? Or is it as some argue ‘a great weapon of survival’ and that which the ordinary Ethiopian has perfected as art?<sup>447</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Modernization and the automobile: Transport in Addis Abāba

As already mentioned, Ethiopia’s modernizing emperor, Tewodros II, wanted to acquire Europe’s technological advancements. By Emperor Mənilək’s time, several of these were being introduced into Ethiopia. One of the many is the automobile.

The first automobile was brought to Ethiopia from England in 1907/1908 during the reign of Emperor Mənilək II.<sup>448</sup> When the automobile was presented to the emperor, he asked «ለመሆኑ ገበያ ደርሳ ለመመለስ ምን ያህል ጊዜ ይፈጅባታል? አየህ፤ እኛ በበቅሎ ከዚህ ገበያ ደርሶ ለመመለስ ግማሽ ሰዓት ይበቃናል።» «How long would it take it to get to the market and back? You see, on a mule, half an hour is enough for us to get to the market and return’.<sup>449</sup>

The automobile made a trip to the market and returned in six minutes. The emperor then climbed into the vehicle and sat next to the driver disregarding the pleas of his ministers and advisors to dismount. The emperor asked for his wife to join, but Taytu was indignant. The automobile started moving and gaining speed; and the emperor’s entourage (both on foot and on horses) followed in speed. Emperor Mənilək became the first Ethiopian to ride an automobile on the road to Addis Alām town.<sup>450</sup> The emperor would soon learn to drive the automobile himself. But at the time, the emperor was upset that other Ethiopian ministers or officials and other people at his court were not willing to try driving or riding in the vehicle. He lamented, «ሁሉን ነገር የኔ አገር ሰው ቢያውቅልኝ ደስ ይለኝ ነበር። ግን አይሆንላቸውም። በጅም አይሉም።» ‘I would have loved if my country’s people learned everything. But it won’t work for them. They do not want to’.<sup>451</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, automobiles would grow to be symbols of elite power that they had even become matters of international relations. For example, upon his return from exile in 1941, Emperor Haylä Šəllase entered Däbrä Marqos where the ruler of Goğgam *Ras* Ḥaylu Täklä Haymanot presented himself for surrender coming late to the meeting in his Alfa-

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<sup>447</sup> Hama Tuma 1993, x.

<sup>448</sup> The full details of how the car was brought and by whom is found recorded in Pāwlos Ñoño 1992, 272–287.

<sup>449</sup> Pāwlos Ñoño 1992, 284.

<sup>450</sup> Other authors write that the witty musician and craftsman Täsämma Ǝšäte was Ethiopia’s first licensed automobile driver. Yədnāqaččäw Täsämma 1992, 1.

<sup>451</sup> Pāwlos Ñoño 1992, 287.

Romeo car. The car was an Italian make, and it was testimony to the fact that the *Ras* had ‘collaborated with the Italians’ during the emperor’s five years of exile.<sup>452</sup>

This is not the only case where the West was using automobiles as part of its relationship with Ethiopian rulers. After the Second World War, as Ethiopia turned her face towards the United States, the emperor received ‘four military jeeps’ from them. This was followed by the British sending in a ‘brand new Rolls Royce’ car to woo the emperor, which was outdone by the Americans flying in a ‘luxurious long Cadillac’ to Addis Abäba.<sup>453</sup>

#### **4.1.3 Addis Abäba’s transport System**

The introduction of the automobile is important for this chapter in so far as it helps present the transformation of the capital city in just over a century. Some of the ruling elite of Emperor Mənilək’s time who were too afraid of automobiles were still alive when the automobile became a matter of imperial as well as elite power. Those with the money and means to drive automobiles could do so, while the poor could not. Today, the automobile is not necessarily a symbol of power and wealth; but it is the main way of transportation for the people of Addis Abäba. Mules, and carts pulled by animals are no longer the main means of transportation.

Part of the urban transport system is the public transport that provides service for the general public for a fee. In Addis Abäba, though public transport is vital for the vast majority of the population, it is especially essential for low-income groups who may not have ‘access to private transport’.<sup>454</sup> As of 2014, 2.2 million people of Addis Abäba use public transport services which include the minibus taxis and the Anbässa city busses.<sup>455</sup> Anbässa busses<sup>456</sup> are state owned while minibus taxis are private owned. There are about 10,000 minibus taxis all seating 12 people at a time, and 487 Anbässa busses that can carry about 100 people all together (both seated and standing).<sup>457</sup> While there are other newly introduced city transportation

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<sup>452</sup> Erlich 2018, 80.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>454</sup> Tilahun Meshesha Fenta 2014, 2, 121.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>456</sup> Anbässa busses began their transport services during the Italian occupation of the capital. Bärühun Käbbädä 2000, 513.

<sup>457</sup> Id.

providing busses, these two remain the most used in the city as of today.<sup>458</sup> In addition, the popular minibus taxis employ about 50,000 Ethiopians.<sup>459</sup>

The first taxi providers were known as the *sayčento* (i.e. Italian *seicento*, that is, ‘six hundred’), the small four seating taxis that provided transport services during Emperor Haylä Śəllase’s time for twenty-five cents. These were later replaced with the Fiat and Lada taxis.<sup>460</sup> In an article titled ‘The Seicento Menace’ Worq Aferahu Kebede writes that the *sayčento* is ‘a 600 c.c. vehicle to the mini-car manufacturing Italian firm’ which was introduced to help the urban transport problem in 1959.<sup>461</sup> Worq Aferahu adds:

despite the variety of mischief that the seicento drivers are practicing, they provide an important service for the public. Considering the time factor involved in waiting for a bus and the slowness and lack of comfort [the seicento] have been the best alternatives to buses for the last decade. Although the General Ethiopian Transport Company may not like to admit it, the introduction of seicentos to the capital forced considerable improvement in the standard of urban buses. It was only after the Italian-made seicentos hit the streets of the capital that the bus company began to import German-made Mercedes buses in greater number for public use.<sup>462</sup>

Similar small taxis are still in service today but are expensive as drivers set the prices themselves. These are mostly used by individuals who can afford to pay these prices and they are also different from buses as they go to wherever the payer wants to go.

The other taxi service providers introduced during the Därg period are those known as the *wəyəyyət* ‘dialogue’ taxis.<sup>463</sup> They are so named because of the way people sit in these taxis, facing one another. These service providers were then replaced by the minibus taxis which are among the fundamental ways of going around the city today.

Minibus taxi providers were not primarily restricted to routes as the Anbässa bus drivers. Only in 2011 was a law introduced forcing the minibuses to carry signs known as *tapela* which would indicate the neighbourhoods each minibus was allowed to operate in.<sup>464</sup> 259 routes were

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<sup>458</sup> This is disregarding the peripheries of the city which still use animal carts and three wheeled vehicles generally referred to as the *bağəğ*.

<sup>459</sup> Tilahun Meshesha Fenta 2014, 2, 123.

<sup>460</sup> There was one woman driver during the emperor’s time who provided transport service in the male dominated field. Bairu Tafla 2020.

<sup>461</sup> Worq Aferahu Kebede and Kyriazis 1969, 1, 24.

<sup>462</sup> Worq Aferahu Kebede and Kyriazis 1969, 1, 26.

<sup>463</sup> Səmə‘on Marəyye 2020.

<sup>464</sup> Taddäsä Gäbrä Maryam 2011, 34, 5.

registered for these minibuses. This declaration entailed other stipulations including: ‘all minibuses will provide services from Monday until Saturday from 7 am until 8:30 pm in their routes; on holidays and on Sundays they are allowed to rest or work outside the neighbourhoods registered on their *tapela*’.<sup>465</sup> However, minibus service providers do not necessarily stick to these laws or their routes on their *tapela*. This and other related problems were reported on an audit report written three years after this law took effect.<sup>466</sup> Despite the law, the minibus taxi system remains, to a certain degree, a ‘demand-driven public transport system that operates without routes maps, timetables or central co-ordination’.<sup>467</sup>

This is in contrast to the Anbässa bus service which has 112 routes identifiable by numbers known to its users. An example is bus number twenty-two, Haya Hulät in Amharic, which ends its route in what is now the neighbourhood of Haya Hulät Mazorya. The neighbourhood was named after this end point, as the bus would turn back and return from there.

The transport service providers are woefully inadequate for the city, and minibus drivers are often speeding across the city trying to reach their destinations as quickly as they can so as to provide as much service as possible. Early morning and evening rush-hours are often the times that are difficult to get transportation services, and these are the times minibus taxis are seen finding creative routes across the city to avoid traffic congestion and to maximize profit at the same time. This added by the mostly young age of the drivers has created a tense relationship between the minibus taxi service providers and urban dwellers. They are often regarded as being reckless. They are also accused for ‘loading extra passengers’ and having ‘bad behavior’ which ‘make taxi transport difficult’.<sup>468</sup>

This is similar to the accusations the *sayčento* drivers faced in the 1960s. Referring to Addis Reporter again, Worq Aferahu lists accusations made against the *sayčento* over five decades ago. He writes,

[t]o the city traffic cop [the seicento] is still the untamed coyote that needs some domestication; to the motorist it is no less than a daily menace and to the pedestrian the seicento is merely tolerated as a beast of burden. Since the seicento drivers started to dominate the Addis street scene about 10 years ago, nothing much has changed in their [behavior]. [...] A bank employee had to sell his car to pay court costs after

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<sup>465</sup> Taddäsä Gäbrä Maryam 2011, 34, 5.

<sup>466</sup> The details of this are found in Anon. 2013, 16.

<sup>467</sup> Anon. 2013, 16.

<sup>468</sup> Mintesnot Gebeyehu and Takano 2007, 10, 32.

being sandwiched between two seicentos in a narrow street in the Fit Ber area and somehow coming off in the wrong.<sup>469</sup>

In addition, he gives a humorous presentation of the relationship *sayčentos* had with traffic police. It is interesting that this depiction applies to contemporary taxi drivers and traffic policemen as well.

Since one of the main prerequisites to be a taxi driver in Addis [Abäba] is a thorough knowledge of the streets and the areas where the traffic police are on the watch, catching a cab driver red-handed in a violation is a rare ‘luxury’ for the police. Granted that the seicento drivers have the same right as any other motorist ‘you cannot charge any cab driver just because you may suspect that he has violated some traffic rules somewhere else’.<sup>470</sup>

Explaining why the taxi drivers drive recklessly, he writes that a *sayčento* driver disclosed that ‘every seicento driver has a murderous temper when a fellow taxi driver overtakes him, since any slackening of speed means a loss of a [*səmunī*]<sup>471</sup>’.<sup>472</sup> This is the same accusation that is put about the minibus drivers of Addis Abäba today with the same logic behind it. But empirical research conducted in Addis Abäba shows cases where ‘younger, less educated drivers reported more safe driving behavior than older, more educated drivers’.<sup>473</sup> A possible explanation given for this was that since younger drivers did not own their vehicles, they were more careful. This theory could also apply to the minibus taxi service providers who work on vehicles owned by other individuals on a salary. In fact, data also shows that minibus taxis are in high demand as they are convenient, and often reach their destinations quickly.<sup>474</sup> For inner city travellers, the only way bus services happen to be a better option is considering affordability.<sup>475</sup>

And yet, there are very few research papers that explain or attempt to investigate how minibus taxi service providers view themselves and their role in the city, or how they interact with the people they provide services for. One way of doing this is studying the exposed texts they place in their minibuses; exposed in that, they are written for the public service users.

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<sup>469</sup> Worq Aferahu Kebede and Kyriazis 1969, 1, 24.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>471</sup> *Səmunī* is the name of twenty-five cents.

<sup>472</sup> Worq Aferahu Kebede and Kyriazis 1969, 1, 26.

<sup>473</sup> Newnam et al. 2014, 68, 3.

<sup>474</sup> Mintesnot Gebeyehu and Takano 2007, 10, 43.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 43.

#### 4.1.4 Discussion concerning proverbs

Several interviewees mention what they believe the late prime minister Mälläs Zenawi said when asked about humor and proverbs: እኔን የመረረኝ የአማራ ተረት እና የአፋር በጀት ነው። ‘What I am tired of is the proverbs of the Amhara and the budget of the Afar’.<sup>476</sup> Whether or not Mälläs, known for his humor and sarcastic proverbs in public speeches, said this is not important. It reaffirms the belief that the Amharic speaking people of Ethiopia use proverbs in their speeches. The satirist Hama Tuma has said, ‘armed with proverbs, the Ethiopian faces his grim reality’.<sup>477</sup>

A significant number of the exposed texts in minibuses are aphorisms or proverbs; and they are predominantly playful and humorous. The Lebanese American philosopher and mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb says that ‘[a]phorisms, maxims, proverbs, short sayings, even, to some extent, epigrams are the earliest literary form – often integrated into what we now call poetry’.<sup>478</sup> He adds that beyond the various uses aphorisms have, the speakers are often heralded for compressing ‘powerful ideas in a handful of words’.<sup>479</sup>

The scholar Jon Abbink defines a proverb as a ‘short, often metaphoric, statement about human behavior expressing local “wisdom” and socio-cultural values prevalent in the social group or society of the speaker’.<sup>480</sup> But he is not convinced that proverbs should be accorded credit as carriers of ‘normative ideas or values or worldview of a particular society or cultural group’.<sup>481</sup> He writes:

they cannot be taken too literally as a guide to [...] values and norms. One can defend almost any viewpoint – be it progressive or reactionary, patriarchal or gender-sensitive, humane or oppressive – on the basis of certain proverbs in one culture: they are opportunistic and situational, and thereby contradictory. Proverbs are thus not necessarily ‘age-old wisdom’, but rather succinct syntheses of pragmatic insight, of momentary life injunctions that under certain conditions serve as mediating flag-posts in social interaction. [...] One might even go further and contend that in the flow of conversation or argument, proverbs also often act as ‘conversation stoppers’,

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<sup>476</sup> Nati 2018.

<sup>477</sup> Hama Tuma 2020.

<sup>478</sup> Taleb 2010, 152.

<sup>479</sup> Id.

<sup>480</sup> Abbink 2017, 6.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 7.

i.e. as pithy truisms they stop an argument dead in its tracks, because they generate no opposition and summarize a shared assumption of the speaker.<sup>482</sup>

Abbink's stance is that proverbs are essential in persuasion and pragmatics but not necessarily as holders of a society's wisdom.

It has been established thus far that renowned Amharic rhetoricians and public speakers use humor as well as sayings, often called *sənä qal*, *abbabal*, *tärät*, *məssaləyawī annägagär*, in their deliveries. Chapter one explored some of the ways poetry and poetic proverbs were relayed by notable individuals and the rest alike to express events, occurrences and opinions. Proverbs are a useful source of information about particular opinions held by people. And knowing proverbs is an admired skill in speech. A proverb is as much a rhetorical device used for persuasion purposes, just like *čäwata*. *Balä qəne* Hiruie Ermias suggests that 'individuals that can suitably state proverbs are genuinely proud of themselves'.<sup>483</sup> Hiruie also holds that proverbs are 'transmitted orally from generation to generation' and recited by people of all ages in dialogue and conversation.<sup>484</sup>

By drawing from both Hiruie and Abbink, the preceding section will investigate if the proverbs posted in minibuses are humorous in nature, and what they allude to. It will also be interesting to see if, as Abbink says, proverbs are often contradictory and show momentary synthesis rather than age-old wisdom.

#### 4.2 'Where else will we be heard?' — Public transportation quotes

«ሌላ የት እንሰማለን?» 'Where else will we be heard?' Dagəm, a young driver from the neighbourhood Šəro Meda responded to a question about why his taxi's interior is covered with sayings and quotations.<sup>485</sup> His response indicates the minibus is a space where he can be heard. From such an expression, taxi service providers appear to be experimenting with crafting their own spaces of freedom of speech having been denied other spaces where they can be heard.

Beyond what Addis Abäba's minibus taxi drivers say about themselves, popular opinion across the city holds that they are in sum reckless drivers and disrespect traffic as well as social rules. They are accused of 'bad driver behavior, excessive fares, and high accident rates'.<sup>486</sup> As a result, tension abound between these service providers and the city's transport users. The

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<sup>482</sup> Abbink 2017, 7.

<sup>483</sup> Hiruie Ermias 2020, 12, 28.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>485</sup> Dagəm 2018.

<sup>486</sup> Mintesnot Gebeyehu and Takano 2007, 10, 31.

city's taxis are however crucial to the urban dweller, without whom getting around would be unimaginable. They are essential. And taxi drivers operate with this knowledge of their crucial value in Addis Abäba.

It is in this social relationship that this section will present and discuss quotes and sayings taxi drivers and their helpers post in their vehicles. These quotes present unfiltered opinions of Addis Abäba's youth, mostly young people who came of age under EPRDF.<sup>487</sup> It is a revealing exercise as these quotes, written and thought of by these same young Addis Abäbans, expose their understanding of their places in the capital, their relationship to power, authority and rulers as well as their relationships with other members of Addis Abäba. All in all, these sayings present an all too necessary window into the lives of young contemporary Addis Abäbans.

Part of the task is to explore the sayings of minibuses and trace their origins. This does not imply finding the original source of their expressions, but to see if the quotes placed in open spaces of Addis Abäba are evolved from previous sayings or if at all they are creations of the contemporary period. Popular individuals' speeches, music poems, books as well as other sources supply Amharic sayings. As Abbink suggests, proverbs may not represent grand ideas about the society that uses them and are often used in dialogue for persuasion purposes. But when written in text form and put-on display in open spaces of a city, it is safe to assume that they do reflect opinions and thoughts of individuals who put them there.

This section does not rival other works that are collections of Amharic proverbs,<sup>488</sup> but it does contribute towards understanding sayings of an essential service providing group in Addis Abäba. Some of the sayings collected from minibuses are not necessarily proverbs, but sarcastic jokes, which are often demeaning. But to some like Taleb, sarcasm is a measure of intellectual sophistication.<sup>489</sup> To targets of these tendentious jokes, they may not necessarily appear so. While whether or not sarcastic aphorisms mark one's intellectual prowess is another discussion, as many minibus writings have been gathered and presented as spaces of expressing opinions.

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<sup>487</sup> 71% of Ethiopia's population is under the age of 30. Megquier and Belohlav 2014.

<sup>488</sup> A well-known book of proverbs is Mahtämä Šellase Wäldä Mäsqäl's የአባቶች ቅርስ Yä Abbatoč Qors which provides over three thousand proverbs. A list of similar works is provided in Hiruie Ermias 2020, 12, 29–30.

<sup>489</sup> Taleb 2010, 154.



A point of disclaimer is necessary, when studying taxi-quotes and sayings, the data collected disregards decorations of minibuses, including pictures of famous and religious figures. Declarations of faith are also disregarded.

#### 4.2.1 Quotes: Presentation and discussion

‘Golden Boy Bruk’ is the name of the author of most of these collected quotes. Many taxi drivers on the route from Šəro Meda to Mäsqäl Square claim that they buy their quotes from him around the Addis Abäba stadium.<sup>490</sup> Some say that they supply their own quotes, and he writes them by hand on film paper. Others say that he also has his own sayings already written and prepared for sale. These taxi quotes are written on film paper not bigger than a dimension of 15 cm by 15 cm.

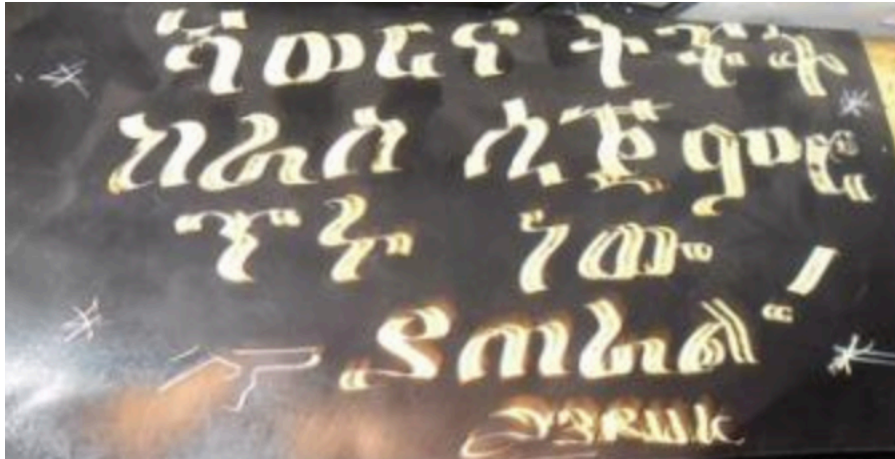
Though not all quotes are written by him, Addis Abäba’s minibuses’ interiors are decorated with sayings printed on similar film-paper. Today, other forms of digitally written and printed quotes are also noticeable in taxis. The most notable thing about the form of these quotes is their limitation of space, forcing people to come up with short and concise sayings. In general, the longest quote in the collection below has seventeen words, and the shortest one has four. Yəkunno’amlak Mäzgäbu, an Addis Abäba University lecturer of linguistics until 2018, stated that the Amharic language strives on short sentences and one who grasps the language well is expected to achieve a high level of sophistication in a few words.<sup>491</sup> Youth of Haya Hulät Mazorya explained a similar sentiment when asked about what constitutes being funny or humorous, «ነገርን ለመግለጽ የምትጠቀሟልው ቃል ይወስነዋል። እንደ ቅኔ ቢሆን ይመረጣል። አጠር መጠን ብሎ ብዙ ሲናገር።»<sup>492</sup> ‘It depends on the word you use to describe a situation. It’s better if it’s like *qəne*, short and saying a lot of things’. Even young Amharic speakers give value to concise statements that can relay strong and deep messages. Here we also observe the continuity of spoken word cultures such as *qəne*.

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<sup>490</sup> I was unable to find Bruk.

<sup>491</sup> Yəkunno’amlak Mäzgäbu 2018.

<sup>492</sup> Eliyas 2018.



**Image 1:** Picture taken in an Addis Abāba minibus – headed from Kasañcis to Haya Hulāt Mazorya. It reads, «ከወርና ትችት ከራስ ሲጀምር ጥሩ ነው — ያጠራል!» ‘It is good when showers and criticism begin at the head – it clears!’

The texts selected for discussion are taken from written and documented quotes during fieldwork in Addis Abāba, from countless minibus rides across the city. Ninety of them are presented below, categorized in broad groupings for the sake of presentation and analysis. Some are proverbs and aphorisms; others are funny statements and commands. One category was created for quotes that could be traced to another proverb or are proverbs themselves. Three other categories were formed based on the thematic nature of the quotes. The texts of these three categories can be generally understood as humorous expressions.

All in all, the four categories are namely: (1) renderings of popular sayings, (2) confrontational or rude statements, (3) social commentary and (4) political commentary.

#### 4.2.1.a *Renderings of popular sayings*

This category contains taxi-quotes that are simply copied from popular sayings or are renditions of proverbs and sayings. Instead of grouping these into thematic categories for analysis, each saying will be considered individually as each is representative of imaginative continuity of a culture of proverbial expressions.

##### 4.2.1.a.1 ፍቅር ካለ ታክሲ ባስ ይሆናል ‘If there is love a taxi becomes a bus’

This is a play on the proverb ፍቅር ካለ አንድ እንጀራ ለአምስት ይበቃል ‘If there is love, one *angära* will be enough for five people’. It does keep the original quote’s idea that love creates a sense of abundance of things. It is funny because it is meant to express the taxi service providers’ insistence that more than twelve people can fit in a taxi. They’re using *čäwata* for persuasive purposes.

4.2.1.a.2 ባለጌና ዋንጫ ከወደ አፉ ይሰፋል ‘A rude person and a trophy (cup) widen towards their mouths’

This is an actual saying. It is humorous for the imagery it provokes. They denote someone who is a *baläge* – here meaning someone who is rude and insulting – with having a wide mouth. Taxi drivers deal with many kinds of individuals daily and some might insult them or engage in arguments with them. It could also apply generally to people who are rude outside the taxis as well. This quote disparages such individuals.

4.2.1.a.3 ኤች አይ ቪን እና የጫማ ሽታን በጋራ እንከላከል ‘Let us prevent the spread of HIV and bad shoe odor’

When the HIV epidemic engulfed Ethiopia, the late Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi led a campaign to mitigate its spread. One of the ways was using catchphrases, among which was: ኤች አይ ቪን በጋራ እንከላከል ‘let us prevent the spread of HIV together’. Youth have added to this saying in a playful way, by campaigning to eradicate bad shoe-smell. It is funny, but also serious. For the taxi service providers, people with smelly shoes and feet are a serious problem to their job. Hence, this joke falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.a.4 ማንቸስተር ያሸንፋል አርሠናል ለዘለዓለም ይኑር ‘Manchester will win, may Arsenal live forever’

This is a rendering and a play on a popular saying ‘ኢትዮጵያ ለዘለዓለም ትኑር’ ‘May Ethiopia live forever’. This is about the English Premier League and is humorous as Arsenal fans are accepting their fate as supporters of a club which seems to never win, but they still show their allegiance to it. This humor falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.a.5 ለሰው ቅን ሁን እንጂ ቅንቅን አትሁን ‘Be sincere to people, not annoying’

A play on the saying ‘ለሰው ቅን ሁን’ ‘be sincere to people’, the author of this text found a word close to ቅን *qəñ* ‘sincere’ with an opposite meaning and attached it to the original saying. This is a disparaging joke giving a lesson on virtue to those who may read it.

4.2.1.a.6 የባሰ አለና ባለህ አታማርር ‘Do not complain about what you have; there is worse’

This is not a joke but was among one of the most commonly spotted quotes in various taxis. It advises people to be grateful with what they have. It could be seen as a coping mechanism for life in general.

4.2.1.a.7 እንኩር ብለን ነው እንጂ መሞት አያቅተንም ‘We strive to live, but to die is not difficult’

This is a play on a popular means of expressing reasons as to why people are quiet, patient, humble: እንኩር ብለን ነው ዝም ያልነው ‘We are quiet for the sake of living’. This is the response many Addis Abāba Ethiopians state when asked why they don’t speak up about various societal, economic or political issues. Youth have put a grim turn on the saying declaring that they can die, it is just for the sake of living that they don’t. It is a joke that mocks the original saying, while subtly describing helplessness. The quote makes dying a simple affair. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.a.8 አንገትክን ከተቆረጥክም ዋናው ጤና ነው ‘Even if your neck is cut off, the main thing is health’

The popular saying ዋናው ጤና ነው ‘Health is the most important [thing]’ is similarly mocked here. It seems youth are teasing people’s repeated use of this phrase by adding ‘even if your head is cut off’ to the famous aphorism. It is funny considering the countless times older women and men repeat this phrase in conversations. It is often invoked to comfort people from giving up hope in desperate situations of poverty, loss of property and the like. It can be categorized as a relief theory joke as it shows how people comfort one another in difficult times.

4.2.1.a.9 ምክረው ምክረው እምቢ ካለ በሴት አስመክረው ‘Advice him, Advice him, if he refuses to listen send a girl to advice him’

The original saying is ምክረው ምክረው እምቢ ካለ መከራ ይምክረው ‘Advice him, advice him, if he refuses to listen then may the suffering advise him’. They’ve made sure the rhythm of the proverb hasn’t changed in this new rendition. But they’re expressing something akin a feeling that young boys will only listen to girls. This *çäwata* can fall under the disparaging theory of humor as it teases young men.

4.2.1.a.10 አባይን ያላየ ሄዶ ማየት ይችላል ‘The person who hasn’t seen the Abbay (Blue Nile) may go and see it’

The actual proverb is አባይን ያላየ ምንጭ ያመሰግናል ‘The person who hasn’t seen Abbay will praise a small stream’. The proverb is itself a jab at people who praise small achievements while disregarding major ones. The rendition seems impatient with the old phrase as the new saying is dismissive. The humour lies in this disparaging trait of the quote, ‘if you haven’t seen it you may go see it’.

4.2.1.a.11 ንጹሀ ጎሊና ምቹ ትራስ ነው ‘A clean conscience is a comfortable pillow’

This is an aphorism that is not changed from the original.

4.2.1.a.12 ሰውን አትናቁ ሰው እንዴት ይናቃል፤ ቅማል እንኳን ባቅሙ ሱሪ ያስወልቃል ‘Don’t judge people, how could you judge anyone, even a flea will make you remove your pants’

This is a poetic proverb that isn’t changed from the original. The poem itself is also amusing in the metaphor it draws. It reminds people to not be contemptuous.

4.2.1.a.13 መሃይም ሀብታም ደሃን የፈጠረ ይመስለዋል ‘An uneducated rich man believes he created the poor’

Here is an expression of frustration to uneducated rich people who assume they’ve created, and thus own the poor. It disparages how some rich people may act towards the poor of Addis Abāba. It falls under the relief theory of humor as minibus service providers are expressing their discontent about how some treat others. They are reminding people that nobody is God and that they did not create, and do not have a say over the lives of the poor. They are stating that the rich and poor are equally human.

4.2.1.a.14 ውበት ያለ ምግባር ከንቱ ነው ‘Beauty without discipline is useless’

This is a popular proverb. It moralizes about virtue and beauty.

4.2.1.a.15 አንድ ማፍቀር ግድ ነው ሁለት ማፍቀር ንግድ ነው ሶስት ማፍቀር ግን ኮንትራባንድ ነው ‘Loving one is mandatory, loving two is a commercial activity, loving three though is contraband’

This saying exists in its original form without the part about the contraband. The meaning of the original hasn’t changed, but youth are trying to make it funny by adding a phrase to it that makes the act of loving three times almost illegal. It describes youth’s opinions about love and romantic relationships. This mockery falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.a.16 ጎንበስ ቀና ብዬ ባገለግላቸው፣ ከወንዝ የተገኘ ድንጋይ መሰልኳቸው ‘I served them going up and down, now they think I’m a rock they found in a river’

This is also not changed from its original expression. The playful poem can be considered a relieving humor as it expresses the plight of someone being kind to others but being treated as worthless. The text expresses disappointment about others taking advantage of one’s sincerity.

4.2.1.a.17 ሻወርና ትችት ከራስ ሲጀምር ጥሩ ነው — ያጠራል ‘It is good when showers and criticism begin from the head – they clear’

This here was originally ትችት ከራስ ሲጀምር ጥሩ ነው ‘Criticism is best when it starts from the self’. The joke hinges on the word ከራስ *kāras* which has two meanings. One is ‘head’, and the other is ‘oneself’. They’re turning a simple phrase into a *qəne* in this instance. In addition, the word ያጠራል *yaṭāral* which is added in the end helps complete the *qəne* as it works for both meanings of the phrase: a clear head through self-criticism, and a clean self through showers.

4.2.1.a.18 መደሻ ጭንቅላት ያለው ሰው ሁሉም ሚስማር ይመስለዋል ‘A person with a hammer for a head assumes everyone else is a nail’

This is a well-known proverb posted in a taxi without any changes to it. It is humorous as it mocks aggressive people by suggesting they can only solve problems through violence. It is a disparaging joke.

4.2.1.a.19 መልክ ጥፋን በስም ይደግፉ ‘You support an unattractive person with praises’

This is also another proverb which hasn’t been changed from its original. It is, again, disparaging.

4.2.1.a.20 ሰው ነው ለሰው መድኃኒቱ ‘A person is another person’s medicine’

This is yet another proverb without any change rendered to it. The wisdom of it lies in expressing how people need people to live. Another interpretation could be that the author is referring to people supporting one another in contexts that involve bureaucracy and other official matters. The proverb could be about knowing people who can help when such circumstances arise.

4.2.1.a.21 መልካም ምላስ ቁጣን ታብርዳለኝ ‘A good tongue appeases anger’

This is an original proverb as well. It denotes how sincere and well-meaning utterances can de-escalate situations. This proverb allows us to see people’s attitudes to violence, and conflict and how to solve them.

4.2.1.a.22 ከማይረባ ጉልበት ይሻላል ልብ አርጉልኝ ማለት ‘A statement asking for others to notice what is going on is better than showing unnecessary power’

Again, here is another proverb that isn’t changed which is about one’s use of violence.

4.2.1.a.23 ምክረው ምክረው እምቢ ካለ ቃሊቲ ይምክረው ‘Advise him, advise him, if he won’t listen let Qaliti advise him’.

Qaliti is where one of the prisons of Addis Abäba is located. This joke is similar to the text listed on number 4.2.1.a.9. Only this time, it is not replaced by a girl’s advice, but rather by Qaliti prison. The *čäwata* falls under the relief theory of humor as it reminds people of the prison conditions since the author of this text equates *mäkära* ‘suffering’ from the original proverb to Qaliti.

4.2.1.a.24 ኑሮ ካሉት ፍሪጅም ይሞቃል አለች ኮካ ኮላ ‘If you call it life, even a refrigerator will feel warm – says Coca Cola’

ኑሮ ካሉት መቃብርም ይሞቃል ‘if you call it life, even a grave is warm enough’ is here hilariously changed to a Coca-Cola’s opinions of life in a refrigerator. The joke is a description of leading a metaphorically cold life but claiming that it is alright because it is one’s life. It falls under the relief theory of humor as it presents a way people deal with their lives and how humans accept misfortunes.

4.2.1.a.25 ቀን ጥሎ ጊዜ ቢጥላት፤ የቤታችን ድመት አይጥ በላት ‘Because the times changed on her, our house’s cat was eaten by a mouse’

This is a play on the common expression of time as a cyclical reality.<sup>493</sup> What rises must fall, what is born must die. The expression ቀን ሲጥል<sup>494</sup> *qān siṭal* ‘when the day drops someone’, is a popular phrase referring to changing times which can lead to one’s luck running out. People who were once successful will no longer be successful when the day comes. Those who were at the bottom will get their chance at luck. This is what is described in the case of a mouse eating the cat. An order is disturbed, and it implies that anything can happen when the time comes. This is not a tendentious joke as it has no other purpose than to invoke a wise saying through humor. Youth are rephrasing a popular aphorism without distorting its meaning.

4.2.1.a.26 ቀስ ብሎ ማደግን ሳይሆን ቁሞ መቅረትን ፍራ — አለች ባጃጃ ‘Do not fear growing slowly, fear staying in the same position – says the *baḡaḡ*’

An inanimate object is speaking in this case. The joke is regarding the size of a *baḡaḡ*; its size is necessary for the joke to work. This image of a *baḡaḡ* mourning its inability to grow is funny. The quote without the ‘the *baḡaḡ* said’ at the end is expressing something deeper. The quote is saying, ‘be afraid of remaining where you are, do not fear slow growth’. By changing it into a joke, they make a serious quote a playful expression.

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<sup>493</sup> For more on this understanding of life, refer to Messay Kebede 2013.

<sup>494</sup> This expression is now commonly said about the end of TPLF’s rule.

#### 4.2.1.b Confrontational or Rude statements

Confrontational quotes and sayings are statements transport service providers are making to customers. They're often in response to assumed questions customers may have. Dagəm says that these are in response to what people say to them in taxis daily, things such as «መልስ አምጣ፣ ሞልቷል እኮ እንሂድ፣ ቸኩለናል፣ የያዘኩት አይበቃም፣ ቀስ ብለህ አትነዳም ወይ»<sup>495</sup> 'Give us change, it's full let us get going, we are in a hurry, the change I have isn't enough, why don't you drive slowly?'.  
These first collection of jokes are concerned with payment transactions and change.

4.2.1.b.1 ጤፍና በርበሬ ሲወደድ ችላችሁ፤ ምነው ታክሲ ላይ ታማርራላችሁ 'You've been silent when *Tef* and *Bärbäre* 'pepper spice' prices increased, why do you complain over taxi prices?'

Here a transport service provider appears to be responding to complaints about the rise in taxi-fares. In 2018, taxi transports cost 1.30 Birr for short distances, 2 Birr for medium distances, and 2.70 Birr for long rides.<sup>496</sup> Whereas a quintal of *Tef* cost 1700 Birr to 3000 Birr depending on the kind of *Tef*, and a kilo of essential spices such as the *bärbäre* cost about 300 Birr. The posting of this quote shows how people had been concerned with taxi fares; even though the price might seem cheap. The reality is that countless Ethiopians still find these prices expensive. Especially considering the several times one has to take a taxi during a day.

The quote is a two-line poem which challenges people's silences when it comes to serious price increases on food items. They are disparaging Ethiopians who show their frustration on taxi drivers and not where it actually matters. It can also be categorized under the relief theory of humor since it relieves the author of an opinion about price inflations and accuses others of their misdirected complaints.

4.2.1.b.2 የታክሲ ከሌላህ ወርደህ በባስ ሂድ 'If you don't have enough for a taxi, get off and take a bus'

Recall the research article stating that lower income inner city people preferred buses to taxis because of their affordable prices.<sup>497</sup> Sometimes people would get into the minibus and tell the helper that they do not have enough money for the ride. This quote is a response to such confessions. It seems the quote is referring to the *Anbässa* city bus since it is the cheapest, but it is not clear. A bus ride only costs about half the price of a minibus taxi ride and it is mostly

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<sup>495</sup> Dagəm 2018.

<sup>496</sup> Id.

<sup>497</sup> Mintesnot Gebeyehu and Takano 2007, 10, 45.



the elderly and people of low economic incomes who take the buses. This is a hostile jab at the urban poor. It hints at a division based on income levels, and falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.3 ሒሳብ ሳይከፍሉ ሒሳብ አይጀምሩ ‘Don’t start sharing your thoughts before paying’

Here is a poetic expression dedicated to people who complain about tariff prices. The play is on the words ሒሳብ *hisab* which can mean both ‘mathematics’ as well as ‘bill’ and ሒሳብ *hasab* ‘thoughts’, which share the same root word. This is another disparaging playful command that presents a power dynamic within the minibuss space.

4.2.1.b.4 ለታላቅ መልስ አይሰጥም ‘Responses aren’t given to an elder’

This joke rests on the word መልስ *māls* which has two meanings. One is ‘change’, and the other ‘response’. Helpers in taxis sometimes forget to give change back to the people and this creates a lot of heated conversations in many taxi rides. By posting this quote, taxi drivers and helpers are mocking people who insist and nag them about change. They’re partly refusing to engage because one shouldn’t respond to one’s elders as per culture and tradition. But they’re also acknowledging knowledge of their reputation across the city as young people who sometimes steal unless confronted. It is also a play on a popular expression used by older Ethiopians to silence young people. The taxi service providers have used the pun on *māls* to alter the meaning of the whole expression.

4.2.1.b.5 ለወሬኛ እና ለአምስት ሳንቲም መልስ የለንም ‘We don’t give five cent changes and we have no change for talkative people’

This is similar to the previous quote but here they’re using a humorous lable, ወሬኛ *wäreñña* ‘talkative’. This word describes people who can’t stop talking. Taxis are saying that these people will not get change back as much as they will not be giving change back if that change is only five cents. The latter is a serious admission: taxis rarely give back five cents for rides to the despair of customers, mainly the elderly. The former is a joke. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.6 መልስ ለረሳ ማትሪክ ላይ እንመልሳለን ‘For those who have forgotten their change, we’ll respond on the matriculation exam’

Once again, here is another mockery about *māls*. Sometimes people forget to ask for their change. This joke is a response to those people. The quote reads that they will give a response

during the matriculation exams, for those who forgot them. Again, this rests on the word's double meaning.

The following quotes command people to make room for more users.

4.2.1.b.7 የሰው ትርፍ የለውም — ተጠጋጉ! 'There is no extra of a human – move over (make room)'.<sup>498</sup>

This here is a play on the word ትርፍ *tərf* 'extra'. It is illegal to hold over fourteen people in the minibuses of Addis Abäba including the driver and the helper. Any individual found in the taxi beyond this limit is commonly referred to as *tərf*. Taxi drivers are making an almost philosophical explanation here by saying that no human being is an 'extra'; each individual is by his/her own right a full being and thus this law doesn't apply to the taxis. They demand customers to make room through a humorous re-interpretation of the word. This also shows how taxi service providers make fun of official law. One can imagine what sort of relationship exists between traffic police and taxi service providers.

4.2.1.b.8 ታክሲና መንግሥት ሰማያት ሞልቶ አያውቅም 'Taxi and heaven have never been full'

This here is humorous because of the exaggeration. They're comparing their taxi to heaven and stating that similar to heaven, Addis Abäba's taxis also never get full.

4.2.1.b.9 እባክዎን የአባይ ቃል ስላለብን ጠጋ ጠጋ ይበሉልን 'Please, since we have promised to contribute to Abbay, make room'

This joke refers to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).<sup>498</sup> Taxi service providers are saying that since they had promised to contribute to the construction of the dam, they need to pack their taxis with as many people to fulfil their promise. As the GERD is a fully self-financed Ethiopian project, such statements show one of the ways in which national projects influence the day to day lives of urban Ethiopians. It is humorous as it draws on the political to make the mundane seem excusable. The word choice of *əbakkwon* is also interesting as it is the respectful version of 'please'. The quote is respectfully asking people to break the law and make room so more people can fit in the minibus. This falls under the relief theory of humor if we assume what is being admitted is that the service providers are unable to fulfil their promise if they only worked along the restrictions of the law. But it can also be considered

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<sup>498</sup> The GERD is a self-financed dam Ethiopia is currently constructing on the Blue Nile, with hopes of using the dam for electricity generation among other expected benefits. See for example, Wheeler et al., 2020.

disparaging since it is mostly unlikely that people were seriously contributing to the completion of the GERD and that the taxi driver and helper just want to find an excuse to pack as many people into their minibus.

4.2.1.b.10 ጠጋ ጠጋ በሉ!! በኛ ታክሲ ተዋውቀው ብዙ ሰው ተጋብቷል ‘Make room!! A lot of people have gotten married after meeting in our taxi’

This is another attempt to justify breaking the law. It is alright to move over and let more people in because a lot of people have been married after being introduced this way. They’re almost making their taxis appear as though providing a second service beyond just transportation. The joke commands people to make room, and then tries to provide an excuse for people to abide by this command.

4.2.1.b.11 መስኮቱን በመክፈት ለትራፊክ ፖሊስ አያጋልጡን ‘Do not expose us to the traffic police by opening the window’

This joke is an admission of breaking traffic laws. A taxi that is meant to seat only twelve passengers is usually filled with eighteen to twenty people. Customers complain that taxi drivers do it for the sake of making more money, but the reality is that since people are desperate for transportation most willingly become extras in minibuses. Some sit on space made by people making room; others stand and crouch. This is legally frowned upon, and often times traffic police officers are on the lookout for minibuses that break this law. They stop minibuses and take away the drivers’ licenses for transporting over the limit of the lawful number.

There are ways this can be avoided: if it is rush-hour, traffic police will not stop minibuses from doing so because of the mutual understanding that people need the transportation. But this depends on whether or not the traffic police are feeling compassionate enough to turn a blind eye. Other times, minibus drivers communicate with one another informing each other of where traffic police are standing so they can find another route to take to avoid them. This has led to some hilarious scenes in the capital, such as traffic policemen hiding behind parked vehicles to catch minibuses. In this environment, people are asked to close the windows of the minibuses hindering the traffic police from seeing the inside of the vehicle.

4.2.1.b.12 መብትዎ ታክሲ ላይ ትዝ አይበልዎ ‘Don’t be reminded of your rights on a taxi’

This is a joke that is similar in tone to 4.2.1.b.1. They’re asserting respectfully that people shouldn’t remember their rights only on taxis. It is a reflection on how people take out their economic, and socio-political frustrations in taxis. The taxi drivers are reminding people that

it is also a problem that people only remember their rights in a taxi, and not direct them to the government or their leaders. This joke can fall under both disparaging theory and relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.13 ባለጌ ሰው ዜብራ ላይ ወራጅ አለ ይላል ‘A rude person says he has to get off on a zebra line’

ወራጅ አለ *wäraḡ allä* ‘there is someone who has to get off’ is the most common way of telling the minibus driver that one has reached their destination and wants to get dropped off. The joke is disparaging mannerless people who ask to get off while the taxi is crossing a zebra line. The law is that cars are not allowed to park on zebra lines. The joke also redefines what it means to be a *baläge* or an unmannered person in terms that apply to the minibus taxi experience.

4.2.1.b.14 ነገረኛ ተሳፋሪ አደባባይ ላይ ወራጅ አለ ይላል ‘An argumentative passenger will say he has to get off on a roundabout’

This is similar to the previous joke but differs as it is difficult to imagine why anyone would want to get dropped off on a roundabout. Both this and the previous joke show how youth define behaviors based on their daily experiences and lives. There is another meaning for the word *addäbabay*. Traditionally, the *addäbabay* is where court is held. Therefore, it can also mean that an argumentative passenger wants to get off at the place where litigation is going to take place. Nonetheless, both interpretations make the joke fall under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.15 እራስህ አርፍደህ አታቻኩለን? ‘Don’t hurry us because you are late’

This is amusing because all customers can rightfully expect to be taken to their destinations quickly. Drivers however face several problems. Taxis make several stops to collect travelers on their way, and most drivers wait until the taxi is full before starting the journey. This quote is a disparaging joke to late travelers who are impatient with the service providers.

4.2.1.b.16 ሰው አካውንት ይከፍታል አንዳንዱ አፉን ይከፍታል ‘People open accounts, some open their mouths’

The joke goes deeper than showing some one is a loudmouth. It also goes the extent of showing how useless being a loudmouth actually is since they are not achieving anything. This is a disparaging joke.

4.2.1.b.17 ሹፌሩን መጥበስ ክልክል ነው — በነገር ‘It is illegal to roast the driver – with arguments’

The joke rests on the word *mätbäs* which means two things, one is to flirt, and the other is to roast. Without the word *bänägär* at the end, the text would simply mean ‘it is illegal to flirt with the driver’. But with the final word of the statement, the meaning changes to mean ‘it is illegal to roast the driver with arguments’. This humorous command states that minibuses drivers would not mind flirting. It also suggests that they get passengers who argue with them and so falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.18 ሞባይል ለጣለ ሲም እንመልሳለን ‘For those who lost their phones, we return sim cards’

It is common to lose cellphones in minibuses. Either pickpockets take them, or passengers drop them unknowingly. The text admits that phones are stolen by the service providers. This text says the owner can get the sim-card back. What is left unsaid is that the owner will not be getting their phone back. The joke reveals that theft is a part of minibus rides.

4.2.1.b.19 ሰው ብቻ ነው የምንጭነው በስህተት የገባ ካለ ይውረድ ‘We only carry people; if there are those who entered by mistake, get off’

It could be the case that the service providers are disparaging those who don’t comply to their commands in their minibuses. For example, some might refuse to make room for extra travellers. This is a disparaging joke as they’re calling such individuals ‘non-human’.

4.2.1.b.20 ታክሲ ለሚጠቀሙ ብቻ ‘Only for those who use taxis’

This contains a similar sentiment to the previous text. But it is playful since we can ask, ‘who else but people who want to use the taxi, would get on a taxi?’. It is an innocent joke simply for the sake of amusing.

4.2.1.b.21 ክቡራን ተሳፋሪዎቻችን በአገልግሎት አሰጣጣችን ላይ አስተያየት፣ ቅሬታ፣ ትዝብት ወይም መሻሻል አለበት የምትሉት ነገር ካለ አንቀበለም!! መውረድ ይቻላል ‘Our dear customers, if you have opinions, concerns, or anything that needs to be improved, we will not accept them!! You can get off’

This is a stern declaration. Service providers who have this posted in their vehicles might have placed it as a play on the statement customer service providers use, i.e. ‘please give us your feedback’. But the taxis are demonstrating an almost authoritarian stance. It is unclear if this is a political joke or not. Nonetheless, it falls under the disparaging theory of humor as the

minibus drivers are claiming that they will not respect or listen to anybody's thoughts and criticisms.

4.2.1.b.22 ማስተካ የሚታደል መስሏችሁ አፋችሁን እንዳትከፍቱ 'Don't open your mouths thinking there are chewing gums being handed out'

This is similar in tone to the previous text. It is a double entendre that hinges on the word *mäkfät* 'to open'. The text says that there is no gum so no need to open your mouths, but the point is to stop argumentative people from speaking. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.23 ጥብቅ ማሳሰቢያ ለክቡራን ሌቦች — ሒሳብ ሰብስበን ሳንጨርስ ሥራችሁን መጀመር አትችሉም! የማይስማማ ሌባ ካለ መውረድ ይቻላል። 'Stern declaration to our honorable thieves – you can't start your work before we finish collecting the payments! If there are thieves who don't agree, they can get off'.

This is a joke on assumptions people have that thieves use taxis as spaces to steal. It is also humorous in that the taxi service providers seem to be considering thieves as serious workers. They're even asked to consent to the law of the taxi before doing their job. It reveals a consideration of petty crime as an accepted part of minibus rides. It falls under the relief theory of humor for this.

4.2.1.b.24 ብትፈልጉ ግቡ ባትፈልጉ ተውት 'If you want to, get in; if not, leave it'

As public service providers who depend on people using their taxis, taxi drivers and helpers should be treating customers with patience and kindness. Here the quote shows a complete disregard of this etiquette. The attitude is of defiance, a hilarious stand to take as a taxi driver or assistant. Yet again, this reveals the awareness taxis have of their indispensability in the city. They seem to say, 'you need us, we don't need you'. This sarcastic joke is categorizable as a joke that expresses how minibus taxi service providers view themselves and disparage the city's users.

4.2.1.b.25 እባክዎን ወይ ስልክዎን ወይ ጆሮዎን ያስመርምሩ. 'Please, either get your phone, or your ears checked'

Often, older Ethiopians speak loudly on their phones, a) on the assumption that the person on the other end can't hear them and b) because some genuinely have ear problems. The joke doesn't explain any of this, but simply suggests people to either fix their phones or to please see a doctor. The respectful way it is phrased makes the insincere statement seem almost sincere. It is a disparaging joke that creates an image of a bothered public service provider. It

is also amusing as it draws an image of people being loud in a confined space such as the minibus.

4.2.1.b.26 እባክዎ ታክሲ ውስጥ ሲገቡ ስልክዎን ያጥፉልን በጣም ይዋሻሉ – ያስገምታል። ‘Please turn your phones off when you get on the taxi, you lie a lot – we are judging you’

This respectfully phrased *čäwata* is about how some people lie about where they are when answering phone calls in minibuses. People lie about where they are so as not to appear too late for their appointments. The quote implies others are embarrassed about the lies people tell. This is a sarcastic comment but reveals an acknowledgment to deceit involving tardiness.

4.2.1.b.27 ታክሲው ሳይቆም መውረድ ይቻላል ‘You can get off the taxi before it stops’

The joke is a mean joke directed at people who are annoying the service providers. It is disparaging as it is telling people that they can take the risk and jump off the minibus before the often-speeding minibus comes to a halt.

4.2.1.b.28 ሹፌሩን በፍቅር ማሳቅ እንጂ በነገር ማሳቀቅ ክልክል ነው ‘You can entertain the driver with love, but scarring him with quarrelling is prohibited’

*ነገር nägär* here means quarrel or argument. This is a command as it ends with ‘it is forbidden’. What is prohibited is terrifying the driver with arguments. It is among the many orders youth make towards customers, again showing the relationship between the young minibus workers and urban Ethiopians who use these taxis. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.b.29 እውቀት ውቃቤ አይደለም መጥቶ አይሰፍርብህም ‘Knowledge is not an evil spirit; it doesn’t come and possess you’

This hilarious joke plays on a metaphor. It suggests that knowledge is not like an evil spirit that settles on people randomly. The quote is saying that knowledge and wisdom take time, energy and dedication. It is suggesting that one should not assume they are always right. This can be considered a disparaging joke as the metaphor is purely sarcastic, but it has wisdom. It forces people to reflect about themselves.

#### 4.2.1.c Social Commentary

The third category is a collection of quotes that make commentaries about the social life of the people of Addis Abäba. These are not renderings of popular proverbs and aphorisms, but rather ‘intellectual properties’ of those who authored them.

The first three are not jokes, but it seemed necessary to present them since they are found commonly posted on many taxis.

4.2.1.c.1 በፍቅር ዓለም የማትሰለች እናት ብቻ ነች። ‘The only person you can never tire of loving is a mother’

This is a quote about motherhood most commonly found in taxis. Not only are they expressing love for their mothers, but they’re also placing motherhood on a high pedestal to which no sort of other love could compare. This is a tribute to mothers.

4.2.1.c.2 ምንም ድሀ ቢሆን ባይኖረውም ሀብት፤ ከደጅ ሲቀመጥ ደስ ይላል አባት ‘Even if he has no wealth and is poor, it is pleasant seeing a father sit in the compound’

This is a description of the symbol a father holds – he may not have money, and maybe poor, but just his existence in the compound is plenty. The poetic quote implies that a father is respected regardless of his wealth.

4.2.1.c.3 እናት ለምን ትሙት ትሒድ አጎንብሳ፤ ታባላ የለም ወይ በጨለማ ዳብሳ ‘Why should a mother die or go with a bent back; doesn’t she feed, using her hands in the darkness’

Here is a description of a mother’s struggles to feed her children in a poetic way. They create an image of a mother using her sense of touch in darkness to locate food. They’re saying a mother does all of this and doesn’t deserve to die or to suffer under old age.

4.2.1.c.4 የቅንድብ ፀጉር እና ምቀኛ አያድጉም ‘Eyebrow hair and spiteful people do not grow’

The quote makes a comparison between the hairs of one’s eyebrows and a spiteful person. They’re using a true fact, that eyebrow hairs do not grow very long, to define the character of a vindictive person. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.5 ቁም ይዞ አንድነት ሴሽ ይዞ ስፖርት በርጫ ይዞ ስኬት. . . አያስቡት ‘Unity when holding vengeful thoughts, doing sports when smoking, success while doing *bärça* (*čat*) ... do not think of it’

This is a funny explanation of contradictory things that taxi drivers say can’t possibly happen. They say that unity is unachievable while remaining bitter, as it is pretentious. They also say doing sports while smoking cigarettes<sup>499</sup> is futile and also add that trying to be

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<sup>499</sup> The text uses the Addis Abāba slang for the word which is ሴሽ *seš*.



successful while chewing *čat*<sup>500</sup> is unimaginable. This is because many spend time and energy on this addiction.

4.2.1.c.6 ለዓለም መቀት መጨመር መንስኤው ጭቅጭቅ ነው። ‘The reason for global warming is quarreling’

This text is aware of the problems of global warming. But the author suggests that the actual cause of it is quarreling. This is a disparaging joke at people who quarrel. The idea is that since they create heat and tension unnecessarily, they contribute to global warming.

4.2.1.c.7 በፍየል ዘመን በግ አትሁን ‘Do not be a sheep in the age of goats’

This is a humorous rendition of common-held beliefs about how to live. The quote suggests people be goat-like in their approach to life, instead of sheep-like. The Christian symbols of the sheep as unassuming and kind, and the goat as unpredictable, and non-caring are used but in reverse. The joke suggests that many have become like goats in contemporary Ethiopia; and falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.8 ጭቅጭቁን ትተን ምነው ብንፋቀር፤ ሁሉም ቅርብ ወራጅ ነው ከፈጣሪ በቀር ‘why don’t we stop quarreling and love one another; everybody is a soon-to-get-off, except the creator’

Here is a *qane* poem which uses the expression used in taxis ‘ቅርብ ወራጅ’ *qarb wärağ* as the anchor of the double-entendre. *Qarb wärağ* is used to warn the driver to get on the driving lane best suited for stopping vehicles so that passengers could get off. One meaning of the poem is that everybody will get off the taxi soon, but the deeper meaning is that all will eventually get off the wagon called life and die. Therefore, quarreling and arguing should not be the defining factors of our lives. It gives advice; and expresses concern over people’s inability to abandon quarreling.

4.2.1.c.9 ደሃ ነው ችሰታ ነው ብለሽ ትይኛለሽ፤ ጭንፍ ዳሌ እንጂ አንችሰ ምን አለሽ? ‘You say to me that I’m poor and have no money, what else do you have besides hips’

Here is a poem expressing a man’s sentiments to a woman who makes fun of him for being poor. He says that it makes no sense why she’d mock him because the only thing she has that he doesn’t are hips. He’s expressing both of their poverty, but this reveals a sense of social burden placed on men to be rich. This can be categorized under the relief theory of humor.

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<sup>500</sup> The word used here is another slang for Khat, በርጫ *bärča*.

4.2.1.c.10 ፍቅረኛዬን አጣሁ ብለህ አትጨነቅ ታከሲም ማጣት አለና ‘Don’t be sad that you lost your lover, you can also not find a taxi’

This is a comparison of heartbreak to the difficulty of finding transportation in Addis Abāba. The text shows that taxi service providers as being aware of their high demand in the city. They even make heartbreak seem less troubling than not finding a taxi. This is also telling of the problems of transportation in Addis Abāba. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor as it indicates the minibus service providers assume superiority.

4.2.1.c.11 ብቸኝነት ደስ የሚለው ሽንት ቤት ብቻ ነው። ‘Solitude is nice only in the rest room’

The quote reveals a communal value – that being single is looked down upon. It can also apply to life in general and not just romantic relationships. It could be frowning upon loneliness anywhere. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.12 ሚች ከመሞቱ በፊት ፍቅረኛውን ዜብራ ላይ ይስም ነበር። ‘The deceased, before he died, was seen kissing his lover on the zebra line’

This is a spin on news reports of deceased people by the police which start their reports with ‘ሚች ከመሞቱ በፊት’ (the deceased, before he died). The quote has taken this serious phrase and used it in a mocking way by drawing upon stories of traffic accidents. The joke is even funnier when understanding that drivers are required to make way for pedestrians on zebra lines. To add to the *čäwata*, what was the man doing before he was hit on the zebra line? He was kissing his lover. The joke achieves full realization when this is considered in light of how drivers do not actually make way for pedestrians on the zebra line in Addis Abāba. The taxi drivers are admitting that they do not follow this traffic law. Understood in this way, the joke becomes an admission of the carelessness they show towards respecting driving laws. But it is not clear if the man was hit because he was kissing in public, which is a taboo act. Or if he was killed because he was on the zebra line. It remains open to interpretation. Regardless, it is a play on a popular expression by the Ethiopian transport authority, and falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.13 በልታ የምታበላ ሚስት ይስጥህ ‘May He give you a wife who, after eating, feeds you’

This can be both an endearing expression about the kind of wives people want, and a sarcastic expression stating that the author’s wife finishes the food herself before feeding him. If it is the latter, the joke falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.14 ከጫት ሙቀት እንጂ አይገኝም ዕውቀት ‘You only get heat from *čat*, not knowledge’

Some minibus transport service providers chew *čat* ‘khat’. In fact, the taxi driver who had this quote in his taxi was chewing khat himself. The quote might serve as a self-deprecating statement, or as a humorous, poetic jab at users of the drug who often claim that it helps them read, study or concentrate on tasks that require their attention. The text appears to be an admission of the futility of chewing *čat* and is a disparaging joke.

4.2.1.c.15 ጨብሶ<sup>501</sup> ከመቃጠል በልቶ መመዘን ‘Better eat and weigh on the scale, than drink and burn’

This is a poetic text making fun of alcoholism. The quote is a playful reminder to eat instead of drinking alcohol considering burning as a danger of alcoholism. It could be referring to alcohol burning one’s organs. It falls under the relief theory of humor as it acknowledges the problems of alcohol consumption.

4.2.1.c.16 ከሠራህ ትበላለህ ካልሠራህ ሲበሉ ታያለህ ‘If you work you eat, if you don’t work you watch as others eat’

This is a pretty straightforward analysis of working to provide food for yourself. They’re emphasizing the value of working.

4.2.1.c.17 አምላኬ 100000000 ዶላር እና ጤንነቴን ስጠኝ ‘My God, give me 100000000 dollars and (also) health’

In this text, people are begging God to give them a hundred million dollars, and health. This falls under the relief theory of humor since people are indicating that they’d rather have money and health, and not health only. This is another play on the popular proverb that suggests all people need is health.

4.2.1.c.18 ደሃ ከፍ ብሎ የሚታየው ባስ ላይ እና እራሱን ሊሰቅል ሲል ነው። ‘The poor is only seen on a pedestal while on a bus and when he’s about to kill himself’

This is a disturbing quote that seems to be quite popular. It admits a number of points: that the poor are invisible, that the poor use buses, and that the only time a poor person is seen is when he lifts himself high enough to place the ropes around himself before committing

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<sup>501</sup> *Čäbbäsä* is an Addis Abäba slang referring to the act of drinking alcohol. *Čäbaso* is one form of the same verb.

suicide. This dark joke doesn't even suggest that poor people become visible after committing suicide. They only rise for a brief moment. The bus part is funny, but the overall quote is desolate and falls under the relief theory of humor. It shows how poverty makes people invisible and tugs at a question of equality for the poor.

4.2.1.c.19 እግዚአብሔር ደሃን ማስደሰት ሲፈልግ አህያውን አጥፍቶ እንዲያገኘው ያደርጋል 'When God wants to please the poor, He hides his donkey and lets him find it'

Here is a playful saying only because it posits God hiding and revealing a poor man's donkey to make him happy. It conjures the image of a children's game where adults hide items to let their children revel in the joy of finding them. There could be a hidden meaning here: the author of the text may be questioning why God doesn't really help the poor. This is a relieving joke, that shows people begrudgingly thinking of God and their lives.

4.2.1.c.20 በዚህ ደህነቴ ሆኔ ዝም ብሎ ይርበዋል 'My stomach simply gets hungry, while it knows how poor I am'

This is a truly sad remark about poverty in Addis Abāba. It is written to be a joke because one's stomach not understanding one's poverty is a funny image. But it is a heartbreaking admission by Addis Abābans about their lives. The author of this quote is saying that his hunger has not disappeared though it knows he has no money. This is a joke under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.21 ሕይወታችን በገንፎ ተጀምሮ በንፍሮ አለቀ ማለት ነው? 'Does this mean our life starts with a *gänfo* and ends with *näfro*?'

This plays on the culture of preparing food called *gänfo* when a child is born, and of preparing *näfro* for after the funeral services when someone dies. This relieving humor forces people to think about what else there is to life, between *gänfo* and *näfro*.

4.2.1.c.22 ትምህርት በዱላ ቢሆን ኖሮ አህያ ፕሮፌሰር ትሆን ነበር 'If education was achieved by getting hit, a donkey would have become a professor'

There are numerous texts involving donkeys, which shows that the donkey is a part of urban Ethiopian life. It is still visible across the city today as inner-city farmers, and people who run mills own donkeys. The reputation of the donkey is one that is stubborn, stupid and silently accepts ill treatment.

The quote relates the life of Addis Abāba's students who would get beaten by teachers and states that if hitting would work – a donkey would become a professor. The idea is to

broadcast teacher-student abuses but adding the donkey part allows youth to make fun of the otherwise unpleasant experience. This can be categorized under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.c.23 እንዴት ጫት አትቃሙ ይባላል፣ ሰርቶ የማይዝናና አህያ ብቻ ነው ‘How can people say don’t chew *çat*, only donkeys work without relaxing later’

The text uses a metaphor of donkeys that work without rest to explain the point of chewing *çat*. The logic seems to be that donkeys work but cannot have fun and since people are not donkeys, they need entertainment, i.e. *çat*. There is an underthought that people suffer working like donkeys, and hence, this falls under the relief theory of humor.

#### 4.2.1.d Political

These quotes are selected for having political content. They have been chronologically categorized as quotes pertaining to politics prior to the rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in April 2018, and immediately afterwards.

Here are some political minibus texts prior to the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister.

4.2.1.d.1 ጡትና መንግሥት ጊዜውን ጠብቆ መውደቁ አይቀርም ‘Breasts and governments will fall with time’

This is a metaphor comparing women’s breasts falling with age to governments changing. The thought of the cyclical nature of life comes to mind again as the quote funnily depicts the end of a regime in power as inevitable. It can also be assumed to indicate that people believe any government will fall with time, with or without their agency. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.d.2 ሥልጣን የሕዝብ ማስተዳደሪያ እንጂ ማስፈራሪያ አይደለም ‘Power is meant to serve the people not to scare them’

This quote is directed at the government or people in government positions. It expresses that the role of those in power is to serve the public. The humor is in the repetitive sounds of the Amharic words *mastädadärya* and *masfärarya*. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.d.3 መንግሥትና ተሳፋሪ ሊወርዱ ሲሉ ነገር ነገር ይላቸዋል ‘Government and passengers feel like arguing when they’re about to leave’

The joke is a play on the words ሊወርዱ ሲሉ *liwärdü silu* which can mean both ‘about to leave power’ or to ‘get off something’. This is a relieving joke as it is suggesting that a government becomes annoying towards the end of its rule. This falls under the relief theory of

humor as the author seems to be reflecting on some of the annoying things the EPRDF may have been doing.

4.2.1.d.4 ታክሲ ውስጥ መጨቃጨቅ አሸባሪነት ነው ‘Quarrelling in a taxi is an act of terrorism’

This joke is on the liberal way the government uses the term, labeling people such as journalists as well as actual terrorists both equally terrorists. By using it to describe quarrelling in taxis, the quote reveals a sarcastic tone towards the government’s anti-terrorism declaration.<sup>502</sup> It is a disparaging joke which labels argumentative people as terrorists that terrorize the minibus, which also shows how anybody can be called a terrorist since the term isn’t specifically defined.

4.2.1.d.5 ምን ጊዜው ቢረዝም ቋንጣና ወያኔ መውረድ አይቀርም ‘Regardless of how long it takes, beef jerky and *Wäyane*<sup>503</sup> will come down’

This text is quite bluntly expressing a hope for the end of the EPRDF. It compares *Wäyane*’s rule to beef jerky that is usually hung on ropes. As an expression of some people’s harbored thoughts, this falls under the relief theory of humor.

The following are political minibus texts posted in minibuses after the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s popularity soared in his first few months in government, especially after his first parliamentary speech of June 18, 2018.<sup>504</sup> Addis Abäba’s euphoria is reflected in the taxi-quotes that were written about him. In addition, the quotes show how minibus service providers update the quotes they place in their minibuses based on changing realities around them.

4.2.1.d.6 እኛ ተደምረናል እናንተስ? ‘We have been added, how about you?’

This joke is a play on Abiy Ahmed’s *mäddämär* ‘to be added, united’ rhetoric. He has defined it as an all-encompassing label for pan-Ethiopian unity. Using it represented support for Abiy. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.2.1.d.7 ይህች ታክሲ እና ዶ/ር ዐቢይ የሕዝብ አገልጋዮች ናቸው ‘This taxi and Dr Abiy are servers of the public’

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<sup>502</sup> The Anti-Terrorism Declaration was announced in August 2009. Sekyere and Asare 2016, 12.

<sup>503</sup> This is another popular name for the TPLF.

<sup>504</sup> The YouTube link for this is listed in appendix B.

This quote makes the Prime Minister Abiy and the minibus equal servants of the people. The joke lies in the knowledge that taxis seem to hold a sense of arrogance regarding the service they provide. It could be that PM Abiy's speeches that rulers are 'servers of the public' shifted the way minibus service providers also viewed their role in the city. More importantly, what is visible is how minibus taxi service providers redefine political figures through their own lived realities. This joke can be categorized under the relief theory of humor for showing an acceptance of PM Abiy.

#### 4.2.1.d.8 ከቀን ጅቦች ይሰውራችሁ 'May he hide you from daytime hyenas'

Here is a reminder from the chapter on arts and theatre, where the phrase የቀን ጅቦች *yäqän ḡäboč* 'daytime hyenas' is used by ሿyyayyu to call local *qäbäle* administrators. This phrase was popularized by PM Abiy, and is here being recycled and re-used by the public. The joke is a play on a blessing 'ከክፉ ይሰውራችሁ' *käkəfu yäsäwwəraččəhu* 'May He protect you from evil'. The author has rephrased the first half of the blessing with PM Abiy's popular depiction of what would come to be understood as the TPLF.

#### 4.2.1.d.9 ለኤርትራውያን 50% ቅናሽ አድርገናል 'We've made 50% discount for Eritreans'

This joke is a play on the political events that led to the opening of the Ethiopian-Eritrean borders in September 2018. The borders opened after they were closed following the Ethio-Eritrean war that broke out in 1998. It is a non-tendentious, affectionate humor meant to show care for Eritreans who may have come to Addis Abäba following this. The reality is of course that there is no discount; it is just paying lip-service to the historical event. This again goes under the category of the relief theory of humor.

#### 4.2.1.d.10 መለስ በመከፋፈል ዐቢይ በመደመር 'Mälläs by dividing Abiy by adding'

Here is a poetic and relieving joke at the late Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi. *Mäddämär* and *mäkkäfafäl* are mathematical terms close to 'addition' and 'division' respectively. The quote expresses the author's belief that Mälläs ruled by dividing; Abiy rules by uniting.

#### 4.2.1.d.11 መለወጥ እንደ ኢቲቪ 'Change, like ETv'

After PM Abiy's rise to power, the city saw a transformation of its attitude towards the Ethiopian Television (ETv). The state broadcaster earned a reputation of being honest and trustworthy in Addis Abäba, which was a dramatic shift in attitude for the organization. The jokes about ETv in the play *Festalen* showed what its reputation was. People were visibly glued to ETv across the city, awaiting news of PM Abiy and the latest things he might have said.

PM Abiy's rise to power allowed ETv to distance itself from the old EPRDF. The shift in attitude it received from the public shows how people were quick to identify ETv without TPLF as an independent organization that was only gullible to state manipulation previously. This relieving joke suggests that the problem was the TPLF and not ETv.

4.2.1.d.12 ጥያቄዎቻችንን ዐቢይ ስለመለስ መልስ የለም። 'Because Abiy has answered our questions, we have no change for you'

This final minibus quote plays on the word *māls*. But this time, the service providers are refusing to give back change because PM Abiy has answered everyone's questions. The double meaning of the word shows that Abiy has answered all the questions Ethiopians may have had; but the joke is realized as the author links it back to taxi transactions. This falls under the relief theory of humor as it expresses people's questions have been answered by the new Prime Minister. It relays hope.

#### 4.2.2 Concluding remarks on taxi-quotes

The chapter started out with interviews and observation insights for the purpose of showing the value attached to joking (humor) in Addis Abäba. The taxi quotes are evidence to this showing how youth use humor to express themselves. They use playful quotes to define and share their experiences, and to command, belittle and mock others as well.

Beyond just being funny though, basic observations of these quotes reveal multiple things about the lives of young taxi drivers, owners and helpers. There are generally sarcastic jokes used to address dire poverty, and suffering. It is also interesting to see how minibus service providers interact with the service users, knowing the problems of transportation in the city. The quotes show how the service providers consider their minibuses as spaces where they govern, and where the customers are supposed to obey their rules and commands. In addition, their interaction with the law and law enforcement is also interesting. Minibus service providers seem to consistently disregard the law about only carrying twelve people. Service providers may be bold enough to ignore this law as a result of the shortage of transport services in the city.

These exposed texts also show strong knowledge of poetry, and proverbs as well as the skill of using them to fit their lives. Old proverbs are rendered and made to travel across generations in humorous ways. And *qane* remains a big part of the taxi-quote culture. Yet, though some of the proverbs relay wisdom, it is clear that they are at times self-contradictory, like Abbink theorized. The humorous and non-humorous proverbs posted in minibuses are useful in showing how youth understand their situations. They are circumstantial and not



always necessarily reflecting long standing philosophies about life. This is also seen in non-proverbial quotes as sometimes quotes denouncing khat addiction and then expressing why it is important to use the drug are posted in the same minibus.

Most importantly, there is much more focus on social and economic interactions instead of political commentary. Minibus taxi service providers have curated their minibuses into being spaces to express their opinions and thoughts. By doing so, they show that they are willing participants, shapers and inhabitants of Addis Abäba. These quotes also demonstrate how humor allows people to survive and cope with their realities. The exposed texts of Addis Abäba's minibuses show that economic poverty is a serious challenge of the city. Some express severe poverty and indicate a growing income gap between the poor and the rich of the city. Other quotes demand that the poor are treated equally with the rich while expressing that the reality is the opposite. They present questions pertaining to social and economic justice. From the interviews, it is clear that the mere fact of having the space to express these opinions helps young Ethiopians get through their lives. That they use humor to express them is all the more revealing of the power of *čäwata* in releasing built up frustrations.

The quotes also show how political statements make it to the public and are recycled. An example is the *qän gəboč* declaration popularized by PM Abiy Ahmed but first publicly used in the *Festalen* play. We observe how informally many groups of Addis Abäba listen to one another through how they use one another's utterances. Another such example is the use of the term 'terrorist' in the minibus setting.

Finally, though political humor is often disparaging, what is seen in the political jokes collected here is that they were often used to express opinions. In the case of prime minister Abiy, they are even endearing and full of admiration. The political quotes in the minibus taxis were room for people to express their thoughts about the government.

Let us now turn to humor in public demonstrations for a wider discussion of political jokes in Addis Abäba. This will allow us to explore if disparaging political humor is relayed in other public spaces of the city.

### **4.3 Public Demonstrations in Addis Abäba**

The late politician and geographer Professor Mäsfən Wäldämaryam was among the few public intellectuals residing in Ethiopia with first-hand experiences in the administrations of the past three regimes (Emperor Haylä Šöllase, Därg and EPRDF). An educator, an author, a blogger, a politician and a long-standing political critic, Mäsfən enjoyed comparable status in Addis Abäba with some of the city's notable politicians.

Mäsfən postulated a political theory that he argues defines the psychology of the Ethiopian mass based on how they consistently behave towards their rulers. He called the phenomenon ማድፈጥ *madfät*.<sup>505</sup> The word means ‘to lurk’. He says *madfät* includes people’s foot-dragging as small day-to-day resistances to the government but is mostly understood as awaiting the fall of the incumbent, although people are not necessary the ones that bring about its collapse. He says this is a skill that was born out of millennia-aged political repression.

He argues that Ethiopians who have little say in their country’s political and economic policy making use *madfät* as a tool to survive. His idea is that instead of engaging openly and directly with politicians, Ethiopians have developed a habit of dealing with political leaders by waiting until time removes them from power. He defines the term primarily as an individual or personal trait that later develops into a public behavior. He says, «ዜጎች ሁሉ ዕለት በዕለት አገዛዙ የሚያደርስባቸውን ግፍ እየተመለከቱና እያዘኑ ከአገዛዙ ጋር ያላቸውን ግንኙነት እንዲጠሉትና ከፉ እንዲመኙለት የሚያደርጋቸው ስሜት ወደ ማድፈጥ ይገፋቸዋል»<sup>506</sup> ‘Citizens notice sadly the day-to-day injustices the incumbent makes them go through, and grow to despise and wish ill upon the government leading to the sentiment of *madfät*’.

*Madfät* is highlighted by laughter and celebration at the government’s demise as an expression of revenge when the time comes. «ማድፈጥ ቀኑ ሲደርስ አገዛዙ የከፋና የበለጠ ጉልበተኛ ጠላት አጋጥሞት ሲያሸመደምደው ከዳር ሆኖ አልል!...»<sup>507</sup> ‘*Madfät* is to wait and celebrate from the side-lines as the day comes for the incumbent to face a much stronger force’. Mäsfən adds that this isn’t constructive:

በልቡ ደብቆ ያኖረውን ቁም ይዞ ለየብቻው ለበቀል የሚወጣበትና ግፈኛው መግቢያ መውጫ ሲያጣ እያየ አንጀቱን የሚያርስበት ትእይነት ነው፤ የመጨረሻ ዓላማው ጉልበተኛን ከሥልጣን ማውረድና ማዋረድ፤ ማጥቃት እና ማሰቃየት ነው፤ ከዚያ ያለፈ ተልእኮ የለውም፤ ያለፈውን ግፍ ከመበቀል ያለፈና ለወደፊቱ የተሻለ መሠረትን የሚጥል ሐሳብም ተግባርም አያሳይም፤ አንዱን ጉልበተኛ አውርዶ ያሸነፈ ሌላ ጉልበተኛ አልጋው ላይ ሲወጣ ያያል፤ አንዱን ጉልበተኛ አዋርዶና አስወግዶ ሌላውን ጉልበተኛ አክብሮና አስከብሮ፤ ቁሙን ተበቅሎ፤ ሲደሰት ውሎ ቤቱ ይገባል።<sup>508</sup>

It is the scene of watching the cruel ruler not know how to get out of a tough situation, the final goal is to remove the powerful and to make fun of him, to attack and to torture. It has no further goals; beyond a vindictive approach for past grievances, it lays no ground, neither theoretical nor practical, for a better future. People watch as a new powerful figure comes to replace the old, and go home after expressing

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<sup>505</sup> Mäsfən Wäldämaryam 2017/2018, 27.  
<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 33.  
<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 34.  
<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

vengeance, celebrating the demise of the old ruler by mocking, belittling and making fun of him, and after praising and allowing others to praise the new powerholder.

In his book, except for a few examples of popular poems and some public demonstrations and rallies, Mäsfən failed to explain on what basis he coined the term. The book is about the history of Ethiopia's collapse into a poverty-ridden, economically and politically unsuitable nation, and it reads as an assessment of the political elite of the past seventy years of Ethiopia. But considering Mäsfən makes claims about the social psychology of Ethiopians, the book could have used solid research into popular culture, sociological studies of people's ways of engagement across at least Addis Abäba, and historical research into how people reacted when government changes happened previously. In short, Mäsfən makes normative statements that beg for research data.

Mäsfən's theory of *madfät* seems applicable to the demonstrations as jokes were the main tools of expressing one's opinions. Posters, and public chants included humorous content. But further investigation into what was expressed at these demonstrations is needed to see if his theory holds.

The time of fieldwork for this thesis coincided with changes in the leadership of the EPRDF which were followed by massive political demonstrations of people from July 2018 onwards and not just in Addis Abäba

Following this is a presentation of a selection of chants and posters taken from two demonstrations, i.e. the political party Gənbot Säbat's welcoming demonstrations at Mäsqäl Square in September 2018, and PM Abiy Ahmed's support rally on July 24, 2018, also held at Mäsqäl Square. The July 2018 support rally was organized in Addis Abäba following the new prime minister's first report to the parliament in June 2018, in which he boldly admitted problems with the EPRDF and promised to work towards a democratic Ethiopia among several things.<sup>509</sup>

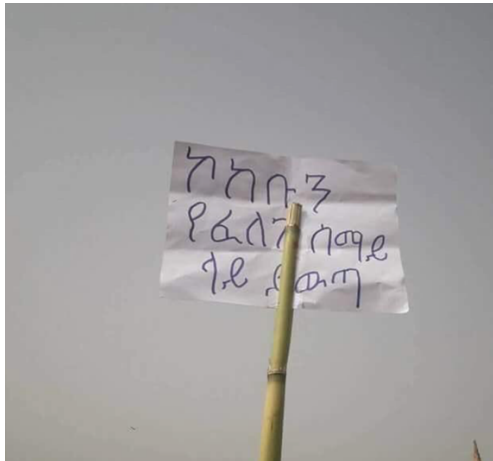
The following section also presents pictures which were personally taken images unless otherwise stated. The posters are presented first, followed by chants and sayings.

### **4.3.1 Posters**

Here is a selection of posters taken from the two demonstrations.

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<sup>509</sup> Details of this parliamentary speech can be found in the summary report by Amdissa Teshome 2018.



**Image 2:** ኮከቡን የፊለገ ሰማይ ላይ ይውጣ ‘You can go to the sky if you want the star’

Even though no official regulation was passed to change the flag of Ethiopia, people were seen carrying such posters assuming the end of TPLF would mean a change of the Ethiopian flag. The star that is alluded to here is the emblem of the EPRDF that is placed on the Green Yellow Red Ethiopian flag. This is a sarcastic and disparaging joke, but one which follows the logic that stars are found in the sky.



**Image 3.** የአራዳ ልጅ ሀገር እንጂ ብሔር የለውም ‘The child of the *Arada* doesn’t have an ethnicity, he has a country’

This isn’t a hilarious joke per-se, but it is a word play about identity politics. *Arada* is a word often associated with people who are raised in the inner city (often around the old center which is Piyassa) of Addis Abāba. Today it is largely conflated to mean cool, hip, and is associated with people of Addis Abāba. It is a cultural term which is here visibly turned into a political identifier as well. The writing states that an Arada doesn’t have a *bəher* or an ethnicity,

essentially provincializing ethnic identities as being used by people who aren't cool. It shows how some Addis Abäbans believe they cannot be boxed into an ethnicity.



**Image 4.** እግር ኳስ ተጫዋቾቻችን የታሰረው እግራቸው ይፈታ ‘May our footballers’ legs [also] be released’<sup>510</sup>

In this picture, young boys are playing on the pun of ይፈታ *yaffäta* which can mean two things. One is to release, and the other is to untie. Since PM Abiy Ahmed had released political prisoners, the boys are asking that the country’s footballers’ feet also be released. This is a



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<sup>510</sup> Picture was taken by Birrkan Fanta. The link is found in appendix B

sarcastic joke that presents criticism on the Ethiopian football scene. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

**Image 5.** እንኳን ለአብይ ለዘይትና ለሰኜርም ተሰልፈናል... Lol ‘We have been standing in line for sugar and oil, let alone for Abiy... Lol’

To stand in line has two meanings in Amharic; one is to stand waiting for something and the other means to go out for demonstrations. This humorous writing printed on t-shirts presents a social dilemma where people have to wait in line for sugar and oil because there are shortages. They are here saying that PM Abiy is bigger than these crucial items needed to make food. They’re almost making it seem that the country’s affairs are as important as basic necessities.



**Image 6.** የክሰሩ ፖለቲከኞች ተደራጅተው ፓርኪንግ ይጀምሩ. ‘May our fallen politicians get together and start a parking job’

This is taken during a rally in September a few months after PM Abiy’s support rally. Bäräkät Səmə'on<sup>511</sup> and Lədətu Ayyalew<sup>512</sup> are seen on the poster, with people advising them to get together and start a parking job. EPRDF used to advice youth in Addis Abäba to መደራጀት, *mäddäraḡät* ‘to get together as a working group’ and to create job opportunities for themselves. People are now turning the table around and advising EPRDF members and some like Lədətu

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<sup>511</sup> Bäräkät Səmə'on was widely recognized as PM Mälläs Zenawi’s right hand man and served as the communications minister of the EPRDF, which he also helped found. He was member of the Amhara National Democratic Party of the EPRDF. He is now facing six years of prison over corruption charges. Alfa Shaban 2020.

<sup>512</sup> Lədətu Ayyalew has already been discussed in chapter two.



to take their own advice. The joke is implying that these politicians will be unemployed. It can be categorized under the relief theory of humor.



**Image 7.** ከሽሮ ሜዳ ቀ.19 ወጣቶች ለአቶ በረከት ስምኦንን ቤት ይሰጣቸው ‘From Šero Meda *qäbä*le nineteen youth: Give a house to Bäräkät Səmə‘on’

This is a humorous response to Bäräkät Səmə‘on’s claim that he did not own a single house on a live broadcast. People assume he was lying but go on to sarcastically suggest that he is given housing. The poster from Šero Meda youth is a mockery. This falls under the disparaging theory of humor.



**Image 8.** ክህደቱ አያሌው በ1997 ያስጨፈጨፈን ‘Kəhdātu Ayyalew the man who got us killed in 2005’

Here is a play on Lədātu’s name. When the first letter is changed to ‘k’ it means ‘traitor’. He is considered as a sell out by some Ethiopians and the accusations on him range from claims

that he abandoned his political party members who were mostly arrested after the 2005 elections, to joining the parliament after the political party organization he run under, the CUD, had refused to join. Chapter two shows he was in parliament. In line with what professor Mäsfən said about Ethiopians not forgetting and begrudgingly waiting to express themselves, in this quote here, youth are blaming him for being the reason that many Addis Abäbans lost their lives in the post-election violence of 2005. This contains word play but isn't necessarily humorous.

Here are more declarations taken from posters.

4.3.1.1 ኢትዮጵያ ለዘልዓለም ብትኖር ችግሩ ምንድን ነው? 'What is the problem if Ethiopia lives forever?'

This joke presents those carrying it to appear puzzled. It seems people do not understand why EPRDF found it problematic to speak well of Ethiopia, or to support popular ideas of patriotism and nationhood espoused in the declaration 'may Ethiopia live forever'. It can fall under the relief theory of humor.

4.3.1.2 ፈጣን ለውጥ ከETV እንማር 'Let us learn rapid change from ETV'

This humorous joke is exactly like the one in number 4.2.1.e.11 of this chapter. It shows that people have noticed a change in ETV.

4.3.1.3 እንኳን ለአብይ ለባለ ራዕዩም ተሰልፈናል፤ ድንቁም ባለ ራዕይ 'We've gone out to support the visionary, let alone Abiy; as though he was a visionary'

This is a similar one to image five, but here people are admitting to having been out on the streets to support Mälläs, the ባለ ራዕይ *balä ra'äy* 'visionary' as he was called by his party after his death. The joke comes at the end as people show how they do not actually think of Mälläs as a visionary even though state propaganda made him seem like one. This falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.3.1.4 አበል ተከፍሎን ሳይሆን የኢትዮጵያ ፍቅር ፈንቅሎን ደምሮን ነው 'We are not here because we were given money to come out, it is the love for Ethiopia that inspired and united us to come'

This is a funny admission that people used to get paid to take to the streets for various demonstrations the EPRDF wanted to hold. Paying people to come support initiatives, to attend *qäbäle* meetings and the like were political tools of the EPRDF.<sup>513</sup> People are saying that they did not receive payment to take to the streets like they used to do before. This *čäwata* helps

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<sup>513</sup> Informant B 2018. This informant has admitted to having received 50 Birr to attend *qäbäle* meetings.



express feelings about an experience that people may have kept to themselves, and thus, it falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.3.1.5. የሰው ልጅ በዘር አይወከልም ‘We are not pulse’, ዘር ማለት በቆሎ ስንዴ ጤፍ ወዘተ Pulse are corn, wheat, *tef*, and so on.

‘You can’t identify a human based on ethnicity ‘We are not pulse’ Pulse are corn, wheat, *tef*, and so on’

This final quote from a poster is written in both Amharic and English. They are playing on the word ዘር *zär* which can mean both ethnicity, and seed. They use humor to state that ethnicity should not be used to identify humans. The boys carrying this poster were maintaining a political stance similar to image three. It seems that a generation of urban Ethiopians are almost refusing to be defined by ethnicity, the fundamental way EPRDF structured the federation of the country. It could also be argued that it is the politicization of ethnicity in politics that they are speaking against. Regardless, ethnic politics is something that is mocked and ridiculed, highlighting distaste to it through such jokes. This again falls under the relief theory of humor.

#### 4.3.2 Chants

Chants include popular songs, war cries, and statements that were repeated by people during public demonstrations. While posters only contain writings and pictures, these chants were live demonstrations of people celebrating, dancing, singing and reciting lines together. All of the chants below are taken from the September 9, 2018 rally at *Mäsqäl* Square. The political party Gənbot Säbat took its name from the day of the May 2005 elections in the Ethiopian calendar where they believe to have won the elections. Its prominent member is Dr. Brəhanu Nägga, who was elected to be Addis Abäba’s mayor in 2005 but was soon arrested and then exiled. The demonstrations were held the day this exiled group was returning to Addis Abäba. This was possible because PM Abiy Ahmed forgave all political prisoners and exiled figures.

4.3.2.1 In a circle with a few men and women leading the songs, a few youth sang

*ያህ — ያህ*

*ያህ — ያህ*

ባንተባበር ይበሉን ነበር

ባንተባበር ይሸጡን ነበር

*‘Yaho — Yaho*

*Yaho — Yaho*

If we didn’t work together, they would have eaten us

If we didn’t work together, they would have sold us’

The image of being eaten and sold, with the implication that it is the TPLF who would have done this is not necessarily humorous. But it does foster a sense of community based on the understanding of this common fear. This isn't humorous, but it is an adaptation of a traditional folk song. This malleability of chants is also seen in the other cases. Traditional songs are reappropriated as long as poems can be made to fit in the structure of the songs.

4.3.2.2 Running in a group of about 20 individuals, young boys and girls were heard singing

አደገኛ ቦዘኔ አራሱ ወያኔ 'Dangerous vagabond, *wäyane* itself'

After the election of May 2005, PM Mälläs Zenawi claimed that the violence in Addis Abäba was only because of አደገኛ ቦዘኔ *adägäñña bozäne* 'dangerous hooligans, vagabonds' of the city. Thirteen years later, Addis Abäba's youth chant using the same phrase but now against the TPLF. People had not forgotten the exact phrase the late prime minister used.

4.3.2.3 This same group then switched to singing the following,

አባይ ፀሐዬ

ስኳር ሰርቀሃል ጨው ይቀርሃል

'Abbay Šähaye

You've stolen sugar, you forgot the salt'

Abbay Šähaye<sup>514</sup> was among the prominent figures of TPLF, who had supposedly been smuggling sugar when the country was facing dire shortage. It is also necessary to state that in chapter two, a speech was made by a parliamentarian reminding the prime minister that the government was not set up to sell sugar. Image five of this chapter reminds us that there were sugar and oil shortages in the city. People are here mocking Abbay Šähaye through sarcastic joke stating that he should now steal salt too.

4.3.2.4 Another group of young boys holding a poster showing which neighbourhood they came from, *Bella*, repeated in unison: «መለስ ዜናዊ! አፈሩን ሚጥሚጣ ያርግብህ!» 'Mälläs Zenawi, may the soil be *miṭmiṭa* (chili pepper spice) for you'

This chant falls under the disparaging theory of humor as it is wishing ill on someone who isn't alive anymore. Youth are wishing the soil to turn into *miṭmiṭa* so it burns him in his grave. It can be understood that Mälläs and Addis Abäba had a difficult relationship.

4.3.2.5 A group of boys wearing a Bunna Football Club T-shirt and carrying a large Ethiopian flag without a star on it led a large group of people into singing:

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<sup>514</sup> Abbay Šähaye was declared dead on January 13, 2021. Anon. 2021.

መለስ ዜናዊ፣ አንተ መላጣ፤  
ኮከብ ካማረህ ሰማይ ላይ ውጣ።

Mälläs Zenawi, you bald man  
if you want the star, climb to the sky

This poetic joke is similar to the one in image four. People are calling out Mälläs by name, and calling him bald, perhaps to make the poem rhyme. Then they are telling him to go look for the star in the sky. This is a revocation of the emblem the EPRDF placed on the Ethiopian flag. The disparaging theory of humor is at play here.

4.3.2.6 Others chanted in a group nearby: ከጠፋው ከተሰረቀው ኮንዶሚኒየም ለበረከት ስምኦን ቤት ይሰጠው ‘Bäräkät Səmə’on should be given one of the lost, stolen condominium houses’.

Similar to the poster in image seven, young boys and girls demanded that Bäräkät be given a condominium house. What makes this a joke is that they’re reminding listeners that several condominium houses hadn’t been built even though they were reported to have been completed. The joke is that they want Bäräkät to get an apartment in one of these ‘disappeared’ condominium housings. They’re teasing him, much like they believe that Bäräkät was making fun of people when he claimed he had no housing. This falls under the relief theory of humor as it expresses several beliefs about the condominium housing scheme of Addis Abäba.

4.3.2.7 A group of boys and girls standing on the back of a pickup truck and carrying a large Ethiopian (star-less) flag sang traditional wedding and funeral songs in a slightly modified way. They chanted: የዛሬ ዓመት የዛሬ አመት አባይ በእስር ቤት ‘Next year, next year, Abboy in prison’.

This is a wedding song that has been changed into a political expression. In the wedding song, people predict the birth of a child the following year. Here, people are expecting the arrest of ‘Abboy’, Abboy Səbhat, another prominent leader of TPLF. This falls under the relief theory of humor as young people are expressing their hopes.

4.3.2.8. They then sang a funeral song,

ዋይ ዋይ ተለያየና  
ዋይ ዋይ ከላይ ወደታች  
ዋይ ዋይ ወያኔ ሞተ

Way Way we are separated  
Way Way from top to bottom  
Way Way wäyane is dead

Here are young people using sarcasm to gloat about the end of TPLF’s rule. Typically repeated by women as they say their goodbyes to the departed, this chant has been used to say

a mock goodbye to *wäyane* at the demonstration. This mockery also plays on the fact that most of the TPLF members had at the time left Addis Abäba and fled to Mäqäle. It falls under the disparaging theory of humor.

4.3.2.9. Another group ran past them singing and broadcasting a song from the Därg period:

ሀሁ ኢትዮጵያ ትቅደም

ሀሁ ወያኔ ይውደም

ተነሳ ተራመድ ከንድህን አበርታ

ለሀገር ብልጽግና ለወገን መከታ

*Ha Hu* – May Ethiopia be first

*Ha Hu* – May *wäyane* collapse

Rise and walk strengthen your arms

For the country's prosperity and for your people's defense

Some boys repeated this Därg propaganda song to sing about the demise of TPLF. The song isn't originally about TPLF, but people had replaced some phrases to make the song applicable to them. What is interesting is that the people chanting these Därg songs were either too young to remember the Därg or not even born until after its rule over Ethiopia. This isn't a joke, but it seemed important to show the extent youth go to express what they feel about EPRDF.

4.3.2.11 ጉቦ የለመደው ጉቦ የለመደው አብይ መጥቶ አርበደበደው 'Abiy came and scared him who was used to corruption'

This here is a chant taken from the Addis Abäba football stadium. Ethiopian Coffee F.C. (also known as the Bunna Football Club) fans sing this at the stadium to make fun of corrupt clubs, and unfair plays. It has been brought here to make a playful political statement. It creates an image of a corrupt figure frightened because of PM Abiy. It falls under the relief theory of humor.

4.3.2.12 The following is about Brəhanu Nägga

ብሬ አበባ ብሬ አበባ

ወያኔ ሌባ

ጀግናው በበሌ

ሌባው መቀሌ

Bre,<sup>515</sup> the flower, Bre, the flower

*wäyane* the thief

The hero in Bole

The thief in Mäqäle

This poetic joke highlights political tension. TPLF members were in Mäqäle as those TPLF once exiled, like Brəhanu Nägga, were at the time returning as heroes to Addis Abäba. It falls under the relief theory of humor.

#### 4.3.2.13 ይበላሃል፣ ይበላሃል ጅቦ ‘The hyena will eat you’

This joke is again a play on the popularized ‘daytime hyenas’ phrase. Youth are singing this about TPLF. It can mean many things, but most importantly it implicates TPLF members as greedy and hungry figures. This can fall under the disparaging theory of humor.

#### 4.3.2.14 ጉሮ ወሽባዬ ጉሮ ወሽባዬ ጉሮ ወሽባዬ ወሽባ ብሬ ድል አርጎ ሲገባ ‘*Guro Wäšäbaye Guro Wäšäba, Guro Wäšäbaye Wäšäba* Bre returns having conquered’

This is a celebratory folk song, previously used for warriors who had gone for hunting or battle expeditions and who had returned successfully. Brəhanu Nägga’s name has been placed in the chant, praising him as a man who has won. This is not a joke but praise folk poetry.

#### 4.3.2.15 እንሂድ እንሂድ በጫካ፣ አያ ጅቦ ሳይመጣ አያ ጅቦ አለህ? አዎ የት ነህ? መቀሌ ‘Let us go in the forest, before the hyena gets here. Are you here, hyena? Yes, where? Mäqäle’

In this case, a children’s song has been transformed into a political song. The original song’s basic make-up is a conversation kids are having with a hyena, asking him what his morning routine is. It ends with the hyena telling the kids that he’s hungry and the kids dispersing before it gets to them. The boys chanting this were sitting in the same way children would sit to prepare for the game. Their use of hyenas, again, is because of the popularization of the phrase ‘day-time hyenas’. This is a disparaging humor, teasing and belittling old TPLF members and mocking them for fleeing to Mäqäle.

### 4.3.3 Brief conclusion

These chants were thought of by people who came out to the various demonstrations. There was no orchestration by the government or command to take to the streets. The chants and posters both show people making fun of TPLF. Granted, these jokes do not paint a full picture of what the public demonstrations were like. They only show when and how humor was used. But the jokes present deep-seated resentment against the former EPRDF, and especially the TPLF. People express themselves through humor and most of their self-expressions are things

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<sup>515</sup> Bre is the endearing version of Brəhanu Nägga’s name.

they have kept to themselves for years. It could be that the political changes, coupled with what PM Abiy had said in his first few public appearances overwhelmed individuals. It seems however close to the idea of Mäsfən Wäldämaryam's *madfät*. This is a clear demonstration of a city making fun of, belittling and releasing built-up resentment against a powerful government body who had reduced itself to the confines of a small town like Mäqäle in light of a new powerful ruler in town.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

Taxi quotes, sayings, chants and posters have been used in this chapter to express the value of humor in self-expression in urban Ethiopia. It is true that sarcasm and tendentious jokes dominate the majority of the jokes collected throughout the chapter. However, beyond this nature of the jokes, the contents of the jokes have been used to highlight some of the realities of contemporary Addis Abäba marking this chapter as an attempt towards social ethnography. The jokes indicate some limitations of life in the capital city, and an almost defeatist acceptance of the nature of things. Beyond this, we notice that there are little to no ethnicity jokes, sexual jokes or even jokes on religions. This is not to say religious texts were not noticed. Declarations of faith from the three dominant religions and religious denominations, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Islam and Protestants, of the city are clearly visible on the minibuses, but none could be classified as jokes.<sup>516</sup> All the jokes are almost transcendent and only mock individuals as individuals. Youth are responsibly careful in what they post in their minibuses so as not to offend flagrantly.

When it comes to Mäsfən Wäldämaryam's theory, the reasons behind the culture of *madfät* could be what Tsehai Berhane-Selassie suggested, i.e. that Ethiopia has not been able to raise accountable political elite that are responsible to the ordinary Ethiopian. In an absence of such a political culture, what average citizens can do would be to wait until they are allowed to express themselves (in the case of public demonstrations), or curate and modify spaces to share their opinions. We observe this latter case in how minibuses have been transformed into spaces of self-expression.

However, we also realize that humor is not just a tool of resisting politicians. It is an appreciated way of living with one another in Addis Abäba. The attention given to word-choice, the culture of using *qəne* and double-entendre, witticisms, plays on puns, sarcasm and irony are all testament that *čäwata* is a deeply appreciated skill. Hence, the skill of joking politicians use and the jokes people in the arts make are not exceptional to life in Addis Abäba.

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<sup>516</sup> For a discussion on polemical religious bumper stickers and texts, please refer to Kindeneh Endeg 2014.

Joking and joke telling is dominant in the non-formal, non-political spaces of the capital city as well.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

This dissertation has presented various uses of humor in contemporary Addis Abäba. It primarily introduced the Amharic word *čäwata* as the equivalent for the English word humor and used the word to describe the phenomenon of joke telling and humorous conversation in the succeeding chapters. Chapter one discusses *čäwata* in Ethiopian historiography showing how humor is a part of Ethiopian oral culture that has not been previously independently collected and studied. Chapter two, three and four discuss humor in three venues. These are the parliament, the theatre and the public spaces of Addis Abäba, respectively. In each chapter, a particular case study is taken for discussion of the sort of *čäwata* and its purposes in that venue. Each of these chapters begins with a historical investigation to contextualize the venue under discussion, after which the jokes are presented, translated and discussed. On a micro level, all of the jokes of these three chapters have been individually discussed for the sort of humor theory they categorically fall under. The relief theory of humor and the disparaging theory of humor have been used to discuss the effects and purposes of the jokes collected.

The value of the research undertaken is in showing that though there is a serious written and documented political culture in Ethiopia, the relationship between the Ethiopian government and the general public can also be studied from Ethiopians' oral cultures. Disregarding the jokes discussed beyond the case studies, the number of jokes in this thesis total to one hundred and forty-six. Taken from a mix of each joke's micro analysis, participant observation, and historical investigation, as well as theories and conjectures, each chapter has made an analysis of the political and social realities of contemporary Addis Abäba. The *čäwata* studied in this dissertation illuminate an informal and often elusive sphere of communication between the government and the public. Some aspects of the relationship of Addis Abäba with EPRDF, especially post 2005, are highlighted in the jokes made both by the ruling elite and by the urban dweller.

The thesis has outlined the use of humor in the pre-EPRDF Ethiopian political and social sphere. Figures like *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna* and the book *Mäšhafä Čäwata* are cases of the use of *čäwata* for educational purposes as well as for speaking truth to power and also for amusement. In the case of *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna*, his jokes are often used to point out logical inconsistencies. His jokes use several techniques such as *qane* which lend his humor the sense of mysteriousness. His humor is greatly aided by the Amharic language, whose words often hold multiple meanings. *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna* is remembered today as an archetype of using humor to voice critical opinions to rulers, as well as for being a witty scholar who entertains, jokes and makes fun of individuals.



And yet, the thesis has shown that *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* is not unique in his ability to skilfully use *čäwata* in communication. From the historiography presented in chapter two, *čäwata* was a serious mode of the road-side courts, the *čäwa* military games, as well as how individuals dialogued with one another. This means that there is no indication that *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* was alone, or that humor is a peculiar feature of a selected period of Ethiopian history.

### **5.1 Role of humor in Addis Abäba**

The question that led to this research was, what role does humor have in contemporary Addis Abäba? The chapters have presented the purpose of humor as a self-reflective activity, as a means of speaking truth to power, as educational or didactic, as negotiation with power across political elite and with the general public, and finally as a source of entertainment.

Humor as a self-reflective activity is visible mostly in the fourth chapter, where minibus quotes from young urban dwellers are discussed. Beyond the political and economic comments observed in these humorous texts, we observe young Ethiopians reflecting on their social relationships with other Ethiopians, their roles in Ethiopia, and their self-understanding and imaginations. Some of these jokes are disparaging in nature, while others are emphatic expressions of their observations. Their jokes are sometimes ambiguous, *gene*-esque in nature and other times sarcastic and ironic. These are windows into the world of young Ethiopians. We observe how they see their jobs as indispensable to the city and how they espouse an air of superiority for their services. Championing a moralistic attitude at times, they eschew alcoholism and other related addictions, promote respect of the Almighty's plans, disparage argumentative individuals, and frown upon corrupt and rich individuals. They take on social responsibility to use their minibuses to speak about injustices the poor of the city face, and express what they believe love and romantic relationships should be like. All the same, we read quotes and expressions that hilariously support the case of chewing khat and promote breaking traffic laws. We also see how they preemptively mock and belittle people who may haggle about the price of transportation or argue about fare changes. As a result, these jokes should be considered as expressions of what young Ethiopians may be thinking about at a particular time.

In chapter three, there is a character called *Gaš Qoftannaw* who uses humor to push people towards reflecting about their place in the city so that urban Ethiopians become active shapers of their lives. Since the humor of this chapter is derived from a play which is fundamentally designed to teach critical thought to viewers, it can be argued that the general humor of the play is conclusively educational. There are characters that present political and economic critique, and those like *Gaš Qoftannaw* who resemble *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna* and use jokes to disparage some individuals while speaking to power all the while. The most interesting

aspect of this is that Ethiopian plays went from a period of experimentation to that of moral didacticism in the post-May 2005 election period. This shift highlights artists and those in the performance arts stepping up to fill in a role they assume has been neglected. That they use comedy for this is all the more indicative of how jokes allow artists to elude government censorship as they speak their minds to both the government and the public.

When discussing government censorship and humor in power relations, chapters two, three and four show how *čäwata* is the space of informal communication with power in Ethiopia. Broadly, the themes of jokes that are directed at the government are pertaining to democracy, and economic questions. At the heart of these are questions that generally pertain to justice. And this is not only directed at EPRDF's rule. Such questions are presented in the form of jokes to the monarchic rule of Haylä Šällase, as well as the totalitarian Därg. Through the jokes at the parliament, we observe how parliamentarians accuse the EPRDF for its authoritarian grip over Ethiopia. Questions of rigged elections and exaggerated economic development figures are presented through jokes. The first chapter has presented how the late Prime Minister Mälläs Zenawi responds to these questions, also through humor. The post-2005 Ethiopian parliament demonstrably becomes a space where EPRDF's leadership expresses its might by skilfully belittling, mocking and disparaging other parliamentarians and where parliamentarians use humor to persistently present questions though they may not receive satisfactory answers. Some parliamentarians joke to create a convivial atmosphere, while others who have no patience for this game are reprimanded by the House Speaker. Through this we notice a hierarchy that exists at the parliament.

From the jokes about politics in chapter three and four, one thing becomes apparent: the May 2005 elections mark the turn of the relationship Addis Abäba had with EPRDF from a tolerable to a bitter one. Rigging of elections, the use of state media (ETv) to preach development and growth, government corruption, rampant police violence against young Ethiopians in the capital city as well as persecution of those in the media are targets of the political jokes presented in this thesis. In chapter three, we even observe how artists make fun of Addis Abäba for not speaking directly to power anymore. An otherwise tense relationship between the EPRDF and the capital city is lubricated by humor and jokes. Beyond relaxing the atmosphere of the city, for a historian, this shows the continued use of humor to speak to power and to maintain a relationship with one's rulers. I use 'relationship' here because the three chapters are taken from different venues that different groups of Ethiopians frequent, but the themes and content of the humor in all the chapters overlap. The content of what is spoken at the parliament is seen in a minibus taxi in a different form. After the anti-terrorism law

discussions at the parliament, for example, minibuses posted similar decrees calling individuals who argue with the driver ‘terrorists’. This shows that the public and the ruling elite pay attention to one another.

To reiterate, at the heart of the political jokes is a question of justice and in fact, of invoking justice, and voicing the need for justice. These come in various forms; there are individuals at the parliament who demand justice of representation like *Šalāqa* Admase, who is discussed in chapter two. The jokes from the minibuses and play ask about a just and equitable economic distribution. There are also jokes that pertain to justice in the sense of freedom of expression and speech.

## **5.2 Modernization and humor**

Contemporary Ethiopian history is studied as a part of modern Ethiopian history. And this modernization was embarked upon by Emperor Tewodros. This process has significantly altered and affected the course of Ethiopian history since. The structure of the government has changed from one of a monarchy, to a parliamentary system. With this change, Ethiopia’s leaders have adapted as well. By observing the jokes of the public, one may assume that the administrative structure of Ethiopian governments has changed but the style of governing with a few group of individuals ruling the country with a strong hand has not. Arguably, though the proximity to power of the general public under EPRDF is higher that it would have been under Emperor Haylä Šallase’s time, the means of holding these rulers accountable for their policies, and ideas have not really grown or developed. In this vein, joking has remained as a way of speaking to power in Ethiopia.

In the jokes of chapter three and four, people do not necessarily address the process of modernization, but rather the micro level conditions they live under. As indicated in some of the darkest jokes of chapter four, there persist serious economic problems in Addis Abäba, and possibly the rest of the country. Jokes are used to express these realities in an environment where the city does not have elected representatives to speak about its problems. Addis Abäba has grown in size and infrastructure since Emperor Mənilək’s time, but over a century does not appear to have been enough to elevate people from dire poverty. It could be that it is difficult to achieve sustainable growth in a country that has not undergone an industrial revolution as some postulate. Nevertheless, the jokes show grave poverty is a big problem. This is visible in the *čäwata* about lack of access to clean water and food, lack of electricity, shelter, increasing income gap, poor education quality, and rise in unemployment rates. The role of jokes in this instance is in expressing problems the city faces.

As entertainment, all three venues also include jokes made for the sake of merriment and laughter. The fundamental political and socio-economic changes the country has undergone since the nineteenth century have not changed the tradition of using various techniques of Amharic humor to respectably express one's opinion in twenty-first century Ethiopia. At the level of the government, there are the historical funny individuals such as *Aläqa Gäbrä Hanna* and *Näggadras Täsämma Ǝsäte* as well as the contemporary *Bulča Dimeqsa*, *Šäläqa Admase*, Dr. Merara Gudina and the like whose jokes entertain. At the theatre, the play is in comedy form and though it has serious social and political commentary, it also entertains. The minibuses are similar, as they also carry jokes that serve to make others laugh. Most importantly, though the EPRDF and the capital city may have held differences in opinions about the administration of Ethiopia, rulers and the general public shared a culture of appreciating witty and humorous Amharic expressions.

### 5.3 Cultural change and continuity

The historical and historiographical culture of using *čäwata* has been discussed in chapter one of the dissertation. Humor plays a fundamental role in litigation, in expressing power rivalry while mocking the emperor at a game of *guks*, in suggesting, criticizing, or rejecting ideas of rulers, and in creating laughter in communal settings. Those who use humor and poetic proverbs to express themselves are respected for their oratorical skills. These are all still visible in Addis Abäba. If there have been fundamental changes in political and socio-economic structures of the country, twenty-first-century Addis Abäba shows that the culture of using humor has not changed very much.

There are adaptations and one notable change is seen in the Amharic spoken in the city. The most important being that English is a fundamental contributor of loan words to the spoken Amharic of today. A sample list from the jokes collected are the following English words: democracy, fiscal, economy, fungus,<sup>517</sup> agenda, field,<sup>518</sup> export, family, business, plastic,<sup>519</sup> logic, jerrican,<sup>520</sup> screen, board, commission, poster, flyer, shower, contraband, zebra,<sup>521</sup> sport,

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<sup>517</sup> It is mentioned in chapter three that this word is rendered *fängäs* in spoken Amharic.

<sup>518</sup> Ethiopians use field to refer to fieldwork.

<sup>519</sup> Interestingly, in vernacular Amharic plastic is not used – the word ‘lastic’ is used instead to mean the same thing.

<sup>520</sup> This was a liquid container made from pressed steel, but the name is used in Ethiopia to refer to large liquid containers in general. These are also often plastic and not necessarily made of steel.

<sup>521</sup> Zebra is used in Amharic to refer to the zebra crossings on roads.

professor, account, and taxi. The Amharic language was discussed as being malleable, as it is open to accepting words and expressions from other languages. The jokes show this malleability. Ethiopians of the capital city appropriate words and phrases from the English language and transform them to sometimes create new meaning for them, and other times to use them as they are. There are also new words that are unique to Addis Abäba mostly observed in the minibus writings. An example is *šeba*, meaning old man. Such words demonstrate the growth of the language in Addis Abäba, and though these words are not a part of the Amharic used by scholars or those who write, they exist in the spoken Amharic of a dominant group of the city, i.e. youth.

From the jokes studied, it can also be said that Addis Abäba's humor does not break the taboos of the society. There are very few cases of publicly stated sexual jokes, or jokes that make fun of identity and religion. It is not that these jokes are non-existent, but that they are not present in public spaces. And though all three of the case-studies of this dissertation study public spaces of Addis Abäba, the author of this thesis did not come across jokes that made fun of these topics.

There is one peculiar occurrence of twenty-first century Ethiopia. This is presented in chapter four through the collection of jokes versed and carried at demonstrations. This was not seen at the end of the rule of previous rulers of modern Ethiopia. There are no precedents for Ethiopians saying goodbye to their rulers through jokes and humor in mass demonstrations. This should be understood as a particular case of the way the change in leadership came in 2018, instead of simply as a reflection of the relationship between EPRDF and Addis Abäba.

#### **5.4 Remarks**

Finally, part of the limitation of the research conducted here is the scope of research which is confined to Addis Abäba and to the Amharic language only. Other regions of the country and how they relate with power, and whether or not humor is a significant part of their lives have to be investigated to make a wholesome conclusion about Ethiopians' use of *čäwata*. Though figures like *Aläqa* Gäbrä Hāanna are not from Addis Abäba and historiography shows that wittiness is not unique to the capital, it would still be important to do independent research outside the capital city. Another interesting topic of further investigation is social media humor which requires its own separate methodology and tools of analysis. The ever-growing prominence of social media in the political lives of Ethiopians is indicated in the number of government officials and government offices who have Twitter and Facebook accounts, and who interact with people at times through humor. Further research could be done on the multiple functions of humor in this space as well.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Interview questions

All the questions written here are in the masculine pronoun for the sake of ease of presentation.

#### *Interview questions for people of various neighbourhoods*

1. ቀልድን እንደ ሥራ ነው የያዘከው? ትተዳደርበታለህ ወይ? ('Are you a professional comedian?')
2. ቀልድ ምን ጥቅም አለው? ('What is the value of a joke?')
3. ጨዋታ ምንድን ነው? ፌዝስ? ('What is *čäwata*? And *fez*?')
4. ከሰው ጋር ትቀላለዳለህ? ('Do you joke with people?')
5. ሳትቀላለድ ትውላለህ? ('Can you spend a day without joking?')
6. በቀን ስንቱ ትቀልዳለህ? ትጫወታለህ? ('How many times a day would you joke?')
7. ለምን እና በማን ላይ ትቀልዳለህ? ('Why and on who do you joke?')
8. ሰው ባንተ ቀልድ መሳቅ አለበት? አላማህ ሰውን ማሳቅ ነው? ('Do people have to laugh at your jokes? Is your purpose to make people laugh?')
9. በቅርቡ የሰማኸው ቀልድ እና የወደድከው ጨዋታ? ('What is a joke you heard recently and liked?')
10. አንድን ቀልድ ከየት ታመጣለህ? ('Where do you get a joke from?')
11. ቀልዶችህን ምን ይወስናቸዋል? ('What inspires your jokes?')
12. ጊዜህን ከማን ጋር ታሳልፋለህ? ('Who do you spend your time with?')
13. ቀልድ እንደ ሕዝብ በሀገራችን ምን ቦታ አለው ብለህ ታስባለህ? ('What if any do you think is the value of joking in our country and as a people?')
14. ቲያትሮችን ታያለህ? ('Do you watch plays at the theatre?')
15. ሌላ ምን መዝናኛ አለህ? ('What other forms of entertainment do you have?')
16. ከተማ ውስጥ ሰው ጨዋታውን በምን መልኩ ያስተላልፋል? ካየኸው እና ከታዘብከው? ('From what you've seen and observed, how do people share their *čäwata* in the city?')
17. ከኢትዮጵያ መሪዎች መካከል ትዝ የሚሉህ መሪዎች የተናገሯቸው ነገሮች አሉ? ('Are there any memorable things said by Ethiopian rulers?')
18. ከተማችን ውስጥ ምን አይነት ቀልዶች ናቸው የሚነሱት በብዛት? ስለምን ይቀለዳል? ('What sorts of jokes are dominant in the humor of our city? What do people joke about?')

#### *Interview questions for those who work at theatres*

1. በዚህ ቲያትር ቤት ውስጥ ምን ያህል ጊዜ አገልግለሃል? ('How long have you served at this theatre?')
2. ተውነህ የምታውቅ ከሆነ - በዘርፍህ ስንት የኮሚዲ ሥራዎችን ሠርተሃል? ('If you have performed, how many comedy plays have you performed in?')

3. ሰው በብዛት የትኛዎቹን አይነት ቲያትሮች ያይል? ('Which sorts of plays do people watch a lot?')
4. ከፋቡላ ጀምሮ ቲያትሮቻችን በኮሜዲ መልክ መምጣታቸው ስለኢትዮጵያውያን እና ከጨዋታ ጋር ያለንን መልክ የሚያሳይ ይመስልሃል? ('The first play *Fabula* is in comedy form, what do you think that says about our relationship with humor as Ethiopians?')
5. ሕዝብ ዘንድ በብዛት ተቀባይነት ያገኙ የመድረክ ሥራዎች መካከል እያዩ ፈንገስ አንዱ ነው። ለምን ይመስልሃል? ('*Äyyayyu Fängäs* is among the popular plays. Why do you think that is?')
6. ከተማችን ውስጥ ምን አይነት ቀልዶች ናቸው የሚነሱት በብዛት? ስለምን ይቀለዳል? ('What sorts of jokes are told in our city? What do people joke about?')
7. ቲያትር ላይ ቀልድ ከሕዝብ ይመጣል ወይንስ ጸሐፊው ተውኔቶች እራሳቸው ይፈጥራሉ? ('Do playwrights borrow jokes from the people or come up with them themselves?')
8. ሕዝብን ያስቃል ተብሎ የሚታመን ነገር በምን መስፈርት ይፈረዳል? ('What are the criteria for judging if something makes people laugh?')
9. በሕዝብ የቀን ተቀን ኑሮ ውስጥ ቀልድ ምን ቦታ አለው ብለህ ታምናለህ? ('What do you think is the value of humor in people's day to day lives?')
10. አሁን እዚህ ቲያትር ቤት ስንት ቲያትሮች ይታያሉ? በዓመት? በተደጋጋሚ የቀረቡስ አሉ? ('How many plays are showing at this theatre at the moment? Yearly? Are there plays that are repeated?')
11. ቋሚ ጸሐፊያን አሉ? ('Are there playwrights who write permanently?')
12. አንድ የቲያትር ጽሑፍ ወደ መድረክ እስኪቀርብ ምን ምን መካሄድ አለበት? ('What is the process that goes into staging a script?')
13. የሳንሱር ሕጎችህ ምን ይመስላል? ('What is your censorship law like?')
14. አሁን ላይ ምን ምን እየታየ ይገኛል? ('What is currently showing at your theatre?')
15. እያዩ ፈንገስ እዚህ ብሔራዊ ቲያትር ይቀርብ ነበር። አሁን የለም። ለምን ያህል ጊዜ ቀረበ? ('*Äyyayyu Fängäs* was showing here at the national theatre before. Not anymore. For how long was it staged?')

*Interview questions for lecturers at the university*

1. ማን ልብል? ምን ታስተምራለህ/ትሠራለህ አሁን? ('What is your name? What do you teach or do currently?')
2. ሳቅ፣ ጨዋታ፣ ፌዝ ምንና ምን ናቸው ለአንተ? ('What do laughter, *čäwata*, *fez* mean to you?')
3. የኢትዮጵያ ባሕል እና ጨዋታ ብለን ማገናኘት እንችላለን? ('Can we speak of Ethiopian culture and *čäwata*?')
4. ሳቅ እንደ ፍልስፍና እና ሳቅ እንደ ኑሮ ዘይቤ አስበኸው ታውቃለህ? ('Have you thought of laughter as philosophy and laughter as a way of life?')
5. ከፖለቲካ አንጻር ጨዋታ ምን ሚና አለው? ('In terms of politics, what role does humor have?')
6. የምትከታተላቸው ኮሜዲያኖች አሉ? ('Are there comedians that you follow?')

7. ጨዋታ ምን ጥቅም አለው ኢትዮጵያ ውስጥ? ('What role does *čäwata* have in Ethiopia?')
8. የብሔር ቀልዶች አሉን ወይ አሁን? ('Do we have ethnic based jokes today?')
9. የሰፈር እናቶችን እያናገርኩ ነበር እና ኑሯቸው ከበደም አልከበደም «ሰው ሳይሰቅ ይውላል እንዴ» ይላሉ ብብዛት። ለምንድን እንዲህ የሚሉ ይመስልሃል? ('I was speaking to the elderly mothers and most were saying regardless of how difficult or easy their lives became 'how can one spend a day without laughing'. Why do you think they say this?')
10. ጨዋታን እንደ ማስተማሪያ አስበኸው ወይ ተጠቅመኸው ታውቃለህ? ('Have you thought of *čäwata* as a pedantic tool or used it as such?')

*Interview questions for those involved in the production of Festalen*

1. ስም እና ሥራህ ('your name and work/occupation')
2. የቀድሞ ሥራህ ምንድን ነበር? ('What was your previous occupation?')
3. እያዩ ፈንገስን ለመሥራት ምን አስወሰነህ? ('What made you decide to create *ፘይሃሃህ ፈንገስ*?')
4. ሌሎች ሥራዎች አሉህ? ('Do you have other productions?')
5. እያዩ ፈንገስ ምን ያህል ጊዜ መድረክ ላይ ቆየ? የት ቦታዎችስ ቀረበ? ('For how long did *ፘይሃሃህ ፈንገስ* stay on stage? Where has it appeared?')
6. መጀመሪያ ሥራው ለመድረክ ከመቅረቡ በፊት ምን ያህል ጊዜ ወሰድብህ ለመለማመድ? ('How long did it take you to get used to the character before it was staged?')
7. የእያዩ ቀልዶች እና አመለካከቶችን በረከት ነው ሙሉ በሙሉ የሚጽፋቸው ወይንስ አንተም ሐሳቦችን ታብረክታለህ? ቀልዶቹ ከየት ይመነጫሉ የሚለው ጋር ለመድረስ ነው። ('Does *Bäräkät* produce all of *ፘይሃሃህ*'s jokes and commentaries or do you also contribute? Just to see where the jokes emerge from.')
8. እያዩ ለምን ተወዳጅነት አገኘ ብለህ ታስባለህ? ('Why do you suppose *ፘይሃሃህ* got this popular?')
9. ጨዋታ እና ቀልድ እኛ ጋር ምን ጥቅም አለው ብለህ ታስባለህ? ('What role do you think *čäwata* and jokes have for us?')
10. አንዳንድ መውጫ ቀዳዳ ስናወጣ ነው ይላል፤ ሌላው ሥራ መፍታት ነው ይላል። ላንተ ምን ጥቅም አለው? ('Some say it is how we create an escape route; others say it is a way of disregarding one's responsibilities. What purpose does it have for you?')
11. እያዩ ዕብድ ሆኖ ለምን ቀረበ? ('Why is *ፘይሃሃህ* presented as a mad man?')
12. እያዩ የሚጠቅሳቸው ገጸ ባሕሪያት ሕዝቡን ይወክላሉ? ('Do the characters *ፘይሃሃህ* mentions represent real life people?')
13. አንተ እያዩን እየተወንክ እኛ ተመልካቾችህ ምን የሚሰማን ይመስልሃል? ('What do you think we the audience feel when watching you on stage?')
14. የእያዩ ዓላማ ምንድን ነው? ማዘናናት? ('What is the purpose of *ፘይሃሃህ*? Entertainment?')

15. ተውኔቱ ውስጥ የማይቀየሩ ጨዋታዎች አሉ። በየጊዜውም የሚገቡ ነገሮች አሉ። መሠረታዊ ቀልዶቹ የትኞቹ ናቸው? ('There are *čäwata* that do not change in the play. There are also timely commentaries sometimes. Which ones are the fundamental jokes?')

16. ሊሉኝ ቲያትሮች አሉ እንደ እያዩ እናንተን ተከትለው የመጡ? ('Are there plays inspired by *Eyyayyu* that have appeared?')

17. የኮሚዲ ሥራዎች ሚና ምንድን ነው አዲስ አበባ ውስጥ? ('What is the role of comedic productions in Addis Abäba?')

18. እያዩ ላይ ስለአዲሱ መሪዎችን ቀልዶች አሉ? ('Are there jokes related to our new ruler in *Eyyayyu*?')

19. ፌስታሌን የት የት ቀርቧል? ('Where has *Festalen* appeared?')

20. የታክሲ ውስጥ ጥቅሶችን ታያለህ? ('Do you observe quotes in taxis?')

21. አንተ የምትወደው ቲያትር? ('Which play do you like?')

22. በግልህ ቀልድ ምን ቦታ አለው በሕይወትህ? ('Personally, what value does joking have in your life?')

## Appendix 2: Notes for each chapter

### Chapter one

#### *Appendix A: Personal conversations*

Abiye Teklemariam, scholar and journalist of Ethiopian socio-politics, personal conversation, Europe (September 2020)

Bairu Tafla, professor emeritus of Ethiopian history, personal conversation, Hamburg (June 2020).

Hiruie Ermias (PhD), scholar of Gə'əz language, personal conversation, Hamburg (September 2020).

Marew Alemu, linguist at Bahir Dar University, personal conversation over Zoom (August 2020).

#### *Appendix B: Videos*

Danə'el Kəbrät. ስለ አለቃ ገብረ ሐና ያልተሰሙ በጣም አስቂኝ የሆኑ ታሪኮች ከ ዲ/ን ዳንኤል ከብረት (*Sälä Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna yaltäsämmu bätam asəqiññ yähonu tarikoč* 'Unheard funny stories of *Aläqa Gäbrä Ḥanna*') available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcFZaL2x6w4&t=211s>, Accessed on April 2018.

## Chapter two

### *Appendix A: Videos*

1. British Pathé video: ‘Haile Selassie Opens New Parliament And Then Sees Display Of Folk And Tribal Dances AKA Haile Selassie Opens New Parliament 1955’. British Pathé. [www.britishpathe.com/video/haile-selassie-opens-new-parliament-and-then-sees](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/haile-selassie-opens-new-parliament-and-then-sees), accessed June 2019.

2. YouTube Video of Mängəstu’s speeches in Parliament: ‘ለመሆኑ አማራ ማለት ምን ማለት ነው? ጓድ መንግስቱ ሃይለማርያም ድንቅ ንግግር Mängəstu Haylä Maryam Speech About Amhara.’ <https://www.youtube.com/Watch?v=OZAunylMbo8>, accessed January 2019.

3. Links to the performance Report of 2009/10:

- a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTvnGBC011A>
- b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPIUhGhT8f4>
- c. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae2uSCrJVpM>
- d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gPz6x9lpII>
- e. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSwmXA9zhBw&t=520s>
- f. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VcJHDGCWI0>
- g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy0sUrWXQHA>
- h. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yoz-T1GDI6I>
- i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFqlAGr07fI>
- j. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVMUkmSo4Ok>
- k. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naW4wK1GUCE>

### *Appendix B: Personal Conversations*

Abiye Teklemariam, personal conversation (April 2020).

Bairu Tafla, personal conversation (May 2020).

Hiruie Ermias, personal conversation (September 2020).

Səmə‘on Marəyye 2020, resident of Addis Abäba, personal conversation (February 2020).

### *Appendix C: Lectures*

Dr. Hiruie Ermias, lecture at University of Hamburg 100<sup>th</sup> year celebrations. June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

### *Appendix D: Mängəstu’s speech listed in section 2.2*

- 2.2.f ለኛ ኢትዮጵያ ማለት ለመለያ እና ለመጠሪያ ያህል የሚያገለግል የሀገር ስም አይደለም። ለኛ ኢትዮጵያ ማለት በተፈጥሮ ሀብት እና ልምላሜዋ በጣም የታደሉት አለባበስ ኩል ወይም ሜካፕ የጎደላት ግን እጅግ ውብና እጅግ ቆንጆ ፍቅሯ የማይጠገብ ገና ወጣት እና ድንግል እናት ነች። [...] ኢትዮጵያ

በዚህ የዓለም ክልል ማለትም በምስራቅ አፍሪካ እና በአባይ ሳሃራዊ ክልል ከቀይ ባሕር ባሻገርም ከደቡብ አረቢያ እስከ ማዳጋስካር ድረስ ከዛሬይቱ ኢትዮጵያ ግዛት ክልል እጅግ የሰፋች ብቻ ሳይሆን በሰው ዘር ምንጭነት በሃይማኖት፣ በስነ መንግሥት እና ስነጽሑፍ በስልጣኔ ቀደምትነት በጦር ኃይል በነፋሻ የአየር ንብረቷ ድንበር ዘለል በሆኑ ታላላቅ ወንዞቿ እጅግ ስትራቴጂካዊ በሆኑ የባሕር ደጆቿ ብቻ ሳይሆን የባሕር ግዛቶቿ ጭምር በዓለም ሃያላን ከነበሩ ጥቂት አገሮች አንዷ ነበረች። ይህንን ስል ኢትዮጵያ በአለም መንግሥታት ማህበር ና በአፍሪካ አንድነት ድርጅት ቻርተር ፍጹም ተገቢ እንደመሆኗ መጠን የግዛት አለኝታ ጥያቄ ለማቅረብ እና የመስፋፋት ስሜት ለመግለጽ ሳይሆን ኢትዮጵያ የምትባለው ሀገር እና ኢትዮጵያዊ የተባለው ሰው ታሪክ ሐቁን ለዛሬው ትውልድ ወገኔ ለማስታወስ ብቻ ነው። [...] ይህንን የተመለከቱ በቀጥታ እና በእጅ አዙር ዝንታለም አይነተኛ ተግባራቸው አድርገው ሲታገሏት እና ሲገዛገዟት የዚህች አገር ተወላጅ የዚህ ሁሉ ጸጋ የዚህ ሁሉ ረጅም አኩሪ እና ገናና ታሪክ ባለቤት የሆንን ልጆቿ ሌላው ቢቀር ሌላው ቢቀር ወይም ሌላ ማድረግ ባንችል - ቢያንስ ቢያንስ - እኛን የቀረችውን ድንበራችንን ካባቶች የተረከብነውን ነጻነታችንን አንድነትና ሉዓላዊነታችንን ጠብቀን እና አስጠብቀን ለተከታይ ትውልድ ለማስረከብ ከተስፋፊዎች ከእድገት እና ከአንድነቷ ጸሮች ጋራ መታገላችን ጦረኛ፣ ጸረ ሰላም ያሰኘንና ወንጀለኛ ሊያደርገን ይገባል?

To us Ethiopia does not represent an identification label. To us, Ethiopia is a beautiful, young, virgin mother who is rich with natural wealth, who may not have eye-liners or make-up but is beautiful nonetheless and full of love. [...] In this side of the world, Ethiopia has previously incorporated eastern Africa and Nile Sahara region, beyond the Red Sea until Southern Arabia and Madagascar. She was historically much larger in size compared to contemporary Ethiopia and is also known for being the land of human origins, and the land of ancient religious political and literary civilization as well as for her military might, good weather conditions, cross national rivers, her strategic sea ports and also was known for being one of the powers of the world. When we say this, we are not speaking of territorial expansion, we do abide completely by the United Nations and Africa Union charters. We are only mentioning this to teach the current generation about what Ethiopia was and who Ethiopians are. [...] Those who have observed this, have made it their task for several years, directly or indirectly, to fight and disturb her. We the owners of all of this grand history and past, if we can't do anything else, at least – the fact that we try to defend whatever is left of our territory, should we be labeled as anti-peace and war mongers for doing this?

**Chapter three**

*Appendix A: Interviews*

Informant A, resident of the neighbourhood Haya Hulät Mazoriya, August 2018, Addis Abäba.

Informant B, resident of the neighbourhood Haya Hulät Mazoriya, September 2018, Addis Abäba.

Gərum Zännäbä, actor of the one-man play *Festalen*, September 2018, Addis Abäba.  
Səmə' on Marəyye, raised in Sämen Šäwa, October 2018, Addis Abäba.

*Appendix B: Youtube Guide*

1. Samvod music video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-IGJYnB62Y&ab\\_channel=NatosTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-IGJYnB62Y&ab_channel=NatosTube) , accessed October 2020.
2. The sketch of *Abbabba* Täsfayye and *Zafu Zänbal* in *Yätäčäqgonu qälđoč*:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueh04EBLZj4&ab\\_channel=NileTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueh04EBLZj4&ab_channel=NileTube),  
accessed June 2020.
3. An example of PM Abiy Ahmed using sentences from *Festalen* in his speeches, የቀን ጅቦች *yäqän ġəboč* 'daytime hyenas': <https://de-de.facebook.com/OBNAmharic/videos/652979338371023/>, accessed May 2019.

**Chapter four**

*Appendix A: Interviews and conversations*

- Bairu Tafla, personal conversation, Hamburg (October 2020).  
Informant C, interview, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood (September 2018).  
Informant D, interview, Arat Kilo neighbourhood, (August 2018).  
Dagəm, minibus taxi driver, interview, Šəro Meda neighbourhood, (October 2018).  
Eliyas, resident of Addis Abäba, interview, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood, (September 2018).  
Hama Tuma, satirist author, personal conversation, Paris, (May 2020)  
Haylä Gäbrə'el, youth of Haya Hulät Mazorya, interview, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood (September 2018).  
Mälaku Bärühun, resident of Addis Abäba, interview, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood (September 2018).  
Mo'a Wube, youth of Haya Hulät Mazorya and student at Arba Minch University, interview, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood (September 2018).  
Nati, University of Gondar graduate of 2020, raised in two neighbourhoods of Addis Abäba, Ləđäta and Haya Hulät Mazorya, Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood (September 2018).  
Səmə' on Marəyye, personal conversation, phone call to Addis Abäba, (December 2020).  
Yəkunno'amlak Mäzgäbu, current director of the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency of Ethiopia, personal dialogue, Addis Abäba, (March 2018).

Yoftahe Haylu, youth of Bella neighborhood who currently resides in Kotebe, interview, *Bella* neighbourhood, (August 2018).

*Appendix B: Links*

Image 4 was taken by Birrkan Fanta and the link to the image is here: <https://twitter.com/BirrkanaF/status/1010574826044579840>, accessed April 2019.

PM Abiy Amhäd's speech to parliament, June 2018:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvcb5-cjkh0&ab\\_channel=MinilikSalsawi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvcb5-cjkh0&ab_channel=MinilikSalsawi), accessed October 2020.

*Appendix C: Some jokes collected during fieldwork in 2018*

1. የጨርቆስ ልጆች አንዴ ቀብር የሰፈር ልጅ ሞቶ ሲሄዱ 8 ሰዓት ላይ ነበረ — በርጫ ሰዓታቸው ላይ ነበር። ከዛ ቢጠብቁ አይመጣም ሬሳው። 9 ሰዓት ሆነ እና ተበሳጭተው «ይሄ ሞቶም ሰው ያንገላታል» ሲሉ ሬሳው ደረሰ። ምን አሉ ታዲያ «ዕድሜው ረጅም ነው ስናነሳው ደረሰ።» ‘Youth of Čärqos neighbourhood were at a funeral for one of their neighbor’s son. The time was 2 pm in the afternoon — their time for chewing *čat*. They kept waiting and waiting but the corpse doesn’t arrive. When it became 3 pm they started angrily saying “Even when dead, he makes us suffer”. As soon as they said this, the corpse arrived for the funeral service and they said “Ah, he will have a long age, he appeared when we spoke about him”’.
2. ቴዲ አፍሮ 70 ደረጃን ሲዘፍን፣ ፀሐዬ ዮሐንስ ማዘጋጃ ቤት ሄደና ያልተዘፈነበት ሰፈር ስጡኝ አላቸው። ከዛ ቀበናን ሰጡት። ‘When Tedy Afro sang the song *säba därağa*. Šähaye Yoħannəs went to the municipality and asked them to give him a neighbourhood that hasn’t been sung about. They gave him Qäbäna’.
3. አንዱን ዘጠነኛ ክፍልን ማለፍ ያልቻለውን ልጅ ኤቤረዲ አሉት። ኤቤረዲ ባትሪ ድንጋይ ላይ 9 ቁጥር ውስጥ የተያዘች ድመት አለች። ‘They called a student who keeps failing the ninth grade, Everädi. Everädi battery has an image of a cat who is stuck in the number nine’.
4. ቀጣዩ ጠቅላይ ሚኒስቴር ከብአዴን ነው የሚሆነው ምክንያቱም እስካሁን ሥልጣን ለመረከብ የሚገደረደረው ጎንደሬ ቢሆን ነው። ‘The next prime-minister is going to be from the Amhara National Democratic Party. The man must be a Gondäre for refusing to accept power even though he wants it’.
5. ለበዓል የፈረንጅ ዶሮ ሊገዙ ሄደው ሴትየዋን 400 ብር ሲላቸው «አግብቶ ይወስደኛል ወይ» አሉት። ‘A woman who went to buy a non-Ethiopian bred hen was told the price was 400 Birr. The woman asked the seller, “Will it marry me and take me abroad?”’.
6. ‘Are there serial killers in Ethiopia?’ ‘No, the government has not privatized the sector yet’. (This joke was told to me in English).



7. አንዱ እንጨት ተሸከሞ ትልቅ ጋራ እየወጣ ይሄዳል። ሥራ የፈታ ሰው ቆሞ እያየው «ምንድን ነው የተሸከምከው?» ሲለው ተሸካሚው ተናዶ «ትፈነዳ እንጂ አልናገርም» አለው። ‘One man was carrying a pile of wood uphill. A man who was standing idly watching him says, “What are you carrying?”, the man carrying the visible wood angrily responded “You may explode, I will not tell you”’.
8. ጥያቄ፡ በምን ታሰሩ? መልስ፡ ባክህ ያኔ ኮማንድ ፖስት በየአይነቱ በልተህም አረንጓዴ ቢጫና ቀይ ብቻ ነው ብሎ ያስርሃል። ታዲያ በአንባሻ እንብላው? ‘Question: What are you arrested for? Answer: The command post was arresting people eating *bäyyaynäitu* because it had green, yellow and red. Should we eat it with *ambaša* then?’ (*Ambaša* is a small round. It is also what the star emblem of the Ethiopian flag was labelled in the city).
9. አንዴ ፌዴራል ወጣቶችን ቅጥቅጥ አድርጎ ይደበድብና አንዱ አልቻለም ያስመልሰዋል። ያስታወከው ታዲያ ሲታይ አረንጓዴ፣ ቢጫ እና ቀይ ይበዛዋል። ፌዴራሉ ብሽቅ ይልና «ኮከቡስ?» ‘Once a federal police was beating up young boys and one of them starts throwing up because he couldn’t handle it. And what he threw up mostly had green, yellow and red color. The federal got angry and asked, “What about the star?”’.
10. ምርጫ 97 ጊዜ ፌዴራሎች በየሰፈሩ እየዘሩ ወጣቶችን ሲያፍሱ አልነበር? ታዲያ የአንድ እናት ቤት ይገቡና ሲፈትሹ ወንድ ልጅ የለም። ግን የሄንሪ ፎቶ ተለጥፎ ነበር። አንዱ ፌዴራል በቁጣ፡ «አምጡ ብያለው አምጡ» ይላቸዋል። አረ ማንን ነው ማንም የለም እኮ ስሉት «ታዲያ ይህ የማን ልጅ ነው? አሁኑኑ አምጡት» ‘During May 2005 elections, weren’t the federal police going around neighbourhoods rounding up youth? They went into a mother’s home and couldn’t find a son. But Thierry Henry’s picture was posted on the wall. One of the federal police said angrily ‘Bring him’. The mother tells him that there is no one, to which he says ‘Then whose son is this? Bring him at once’’.
11. ጠ/ሚ ኃይለማርያም «ሁሉንም ሕዝብ በአንድ ዓይን ነው የምናየው» ሲል ሕዝብ «እና በሰንት ልታየን ነበር?» ‘When Prime Minister Haylämaryam said “We regard all the people with one eye”, people responded, “With how many were you going to see us?”’.
12. ሐኪም፡ በደምዎ ውስጥ ስኳር ተገኝቷል። ታካሚ፡ ሰንት ኪሎ? ‘Doctor: There is sugar in your blood. Patient: How many kilos?’.
13. «ሄሎ የተጋነነ የዋጋ ጭማሪ ካለ ጠቁሙን ብላችሁ ነበር።» «አዎ ጌታየ፡ ጥቆማዎትን ይቀጥሉ» «እኛ ሰፈር ስኳር አንድ ኪሎ 70 ብር እየተሸጠ ነው።» «በእናትህ ሳያልቅ 2 ኪሎ ግዛልኝ?» ‘Hello, you had told us to inform you if there were exaggerated price inflations’. “Yes sir, go on and tell” “They are selling one kilo of sugar for seventy Birr in our neighbourhood”. “Please buy me two kilos before it runs out?”’.

14. «ግንቦት 16 ቀን ቁርጥ ቀን ነው። በማለዳ እነሳለሁ... በነፃነት መብቴን ተጠቅሜ ኪዳነምሕረት ተሳልጜ እመለሳለሁ።» ‘Gənbət 16 is a decisive day. I will wake up early... freely use my rights to go to Kidanäməhrät church and return’. (Gənbət 16 was an election day).

## Dissertation Summary

This dissertation primarily introduced the Amharic word *čäwata* as the equivalent for the English word humor and used the word to describe the phenomenon of joke telling and humorous conversation throughout the dissertation. Chapter one discusses *čäwata* in Ethiopian historiography showing how humor is a part of Ethiopian oral culture that has not been previously seriously collected and studied. Chapter two, three and four discuss humor in three venues. These are the parliament, the theatre and the public spaces of Addis Abäba, respectively. In each chapter, a particular case study is taken for discussion of the sort of *čäwata* and its purposes in that venue. Each of these chapters begins with a historical investigation to contextualize the venue under discussion, after which the jokes are presented, translated and discussed. On a micro level, all of the jokes of these three chapters have been individually discussed for the sort of humor theory they categorically fall under. The relief theory of humor and the disparaging theory of humor have been used to discuss the effects and purposes of the jokes collected.

The question that led to this research was, what role does humor have in contemporary Addis Abäba? The thesis has presented the purpose of humor as a self-reflective activity, as a means of speaking truth to power, as educational or didactic, as negotiation with power across political elite and with the general public, and finally as a source of entertainment.

The value of the research undertaken is in showing that though there is a serious written and documented political culture in Ethiopia, the relationship between the Ethiopian government and the general public can also be studied from Ethiopians' oral cultures. Disregarding the jokes discussed beyond the case studies, the number of jokes in this thesis total to one hundred and forty-six. Taken from a mix of each joke's micro analysis, participant observation, and historical investigation, as well as theories and conjectures, each chapter has made an analysis of the political and social realities of contemporary Addis Abäba. The *čäwata* studied in this dissertation illuminate an informal and often elusive sphere of communication between the government and the public. Some aspects of the relationship of Addis Abäba with EPRDF, especially post 2005, are highlighted in the jokes made both by the ruling elite and by the urban dweller.

## Zusammenfassung der Dissertation

Diese Dissertation führt das amharische Wort *čäwata* als Äquivalent des englischen Worts *humor* ein und verwendet es zur Beschreibung der Phänomene des Witzeerzählens und der humorvollen Unterhaltung. Kapitel 1 behandelt *čäwata* in der äthiopischen Historiographie und zeigt, dass Humor ein Teil der äthiopischen mündlich überlieferten Kultur ist, der bisher nicht ernsthaft gesammelt und untersucht wurde. Kapitel 2, 3 und 4 behandeln Humor in drei Begegnungsorten: Parlament, Theater und öffentliche Räume in Addis Abäba. In jedem Kapitel ist eine Fallstudie Grundlage für die Untersuchung von Art und Zweck von *čäwata* im jeweiligen Begegnungsort. Jedes Kapitel beginnt mit einer historischen Einordnung zur Kontextualisierung des jeweiligen Begegnungsorts. Daraufhin werden die Witze vorgestellt, übersetzt und untersucht. Alle Witze dieser drei Kapitel wurden einzeln in Hinblick auf die Humorthorie, der sie zugeordnet werden können, untersucht. Die Folgen und Ziele der gesammelten Witze wurden anhand der *relief theory* und der *disparagement theory* untersucht.

Die Frage, die zu dieser Arbeit geführt hat, lautet: Welche Rolle spielt Humor im zeitgenössischen Addis Abäba? Diese Dissertation stellt den Zweck von Humor als Aktivität der Selbstreflexion, als Möglichkeit, den Mächtigen die Wahrheit zu sagen, als pädagogisch oder didaktisch, als Verhandlung der Macht zwischen politischer Elite und Bevölkerung und schließlich als Quelle der Unterhaltung dar.

Der Wert dieser Forschung liegt darin zu zeigen, dass die Beziehung zwischen der äthiopischen Regierung und der Bevölkerung trotz des Vorhandenseins einer ernsthaften geschriebenen und dokumentierten politischen Kultur in Äthiopien auch durch die mündlich überlieferte Kultur der Äthiopierinnen und Äthiopier untersucht werden kann. Die Anzahl der Witze in dieser Dissertation beträgt 146 (ohne die Witze, die außerhalb der Fallstudien diskutiert werden). Jedes Kapitel analysiert die politischen und sozialen Realitäten des zeitgenössischen Addis Abäbas durch die Verbindung von Mikroanalyse der Witze, Beobachtungen der Beteiligten und historischer Erforschung, wie auch von Theorien und Konjekturen. Die in dieser Dissertation untersuchte *čäwata* wirft ein Licht auf einen informellen und häufig schwer fassbaren Kommunikationsbereich zwischen der Regierung und der Bevölkerung. Einige Aspekte der Beziehung zwischen Addis Abäba und der EPRDF, vor allem nach 2005, werden sowohl in den Witzen der regierenden Elite als auch der Stadtbewohnerinnen und Stadtbewohner hervorgehoben.