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Gianfrancesco Lusini

Enno Littmann, scholar of the Tigre language

No one has contributed to the knowledge of the Tigre language more than Enno Littmann. This Semitic language of Northern Eritrea is till now known mainly thanks to the publications of the German orientalist. It is sufficient to recall that the only valuable dictionary of Tigre, the *Wörterbuch der Tigrē-Sprache. Tigrē-Deutsch-Englisch*, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1962, has been accomplished by Maria Höfner on the basis of the lexical material gathered by her teacher. Littmann's interest in Tigre dates back to his student days, when he first planned and attempted to write a grammar of the northernmost Ethiosemitic language (see Littmann 1897, 1898, 1899)

The scientific reasons for this special attention are clearly explained in the "Preliminary Report of the Princeton University Expedition to Abyssinia" (Littmann 1907). Littmann is attracted by the contemporary role of Tigre, which is used as a *lingua franca* of Northern Eritrea by several communities, although they have different social structures and follow different cultural patterns. Moreover, he considers Tigre as "the most archaic of the present Semito-Abyssinian languages", not descending directly from Gəʿəz (the Classical Ethiopic), even if it highly resembles the ancient language of the Kingdom of Aksum. The original plan of studying thoroughly the grammar of Tigre was hindered by the insufficient general knowledge of the living tongue, and by the shortage of linguistic and literary material. In fact, until the beginning of the 20th century, when Littmann started to work intensively on this language, the only published documents in Tigre had been a few texts edited by Swedish Protestant missionaries for catechetical use, and therefore totally extraneous to the culture and the linguistic practice of the Tigre speakers (for a survey, see Raz 1983). The patronage of the Princeton University and the personal

financial support of Robert Garrett allowed Littmann to achieve his goals. Thus, during the trimester October-December 1905, the German scholar accomplished the well-known expedition in Northern Eritrea, whose linguistic results were later published in the 4-volume publication Littmann 1910-1915.

This monumental work was made possible by the cooperation of Revd. G. R. Sundström, living in Gäläb, who helped Littmann in gathering new texts and later contributed with a series of articles to the knowledge of the Tigre language and literature. Some years before the Princeton expedition, Sundström already had sent to the scholar a Tigre text containing a special version of the legend of Menelik's birth from Azeb and King Solomon. The text was published by Littmann in a small and elegant booklet Littmann 1904 (the volume is dedicated to "R. Sundström, missionary and scholar").

A decisive event was the meeting and the personal friendship with Näffa' Wäd 'Ītman, a Tigre learned man who worked for two years with Littmann in Germany. His assistance enabled the scholar to reach a high competence in the language and to write down hundreds of new texts, both prosaic passages and poetic compositions. Littmann's debt of gratitude to Näffa' was later declared on several occasions, from the dedication of the first volume of the *Publications* "to the memory of Näffa' 'Ītmān / mäsqädi näffa' wäd 'ätman ləgba" to the biographical sketch "Näffa' Wäd 'Ītmān", *Der Neue Orient*, 2, 1918: 587-591, reprint in *Ein Jahrhundert Orientalistik. Lebensbilder aus der Feder von Enno Littmann und Verzeichnis seiner Schriften, zum Achtzigsten Geburtstag*, hrsg. von R. Paret / A. Schall, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1955, pp. 14-25.

The collection of Tigre prose, edited and translated into English in the first two volumes of the *Publications*, includes a hundred of fables,

tales, legends and traditions, generally designated *dəgəm* (“stories”). They are short texts following a typical folkloric genre, characterized by a moralistic target. Six of these tales were left apart from the *Publications* and edited somewhat later in the article “*Tigrē-Erzählungen*”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 65, 1911, pp. 697–708, containing the Tigre texts in Ethiopic characters and in phonetic transcription, the German literary version and the word-by-word translation. Of the greatest importance are the texts telling about traditional customs and beliefs, called *sərat* (“rites”), and informing about a way of life now on the way to disappearance. Another representative kind of texts is the list of personal names, together with a tentative interpretation (*Publications*, voll. I-II, no. 86). These pages have been largely exploited by Musa Aron in his *Məzgäbä qalat səmat ʿerətrawəyan təgrəññan təgrän*, [*Dictionary of the Eritrean names in Təgrəñña and Tigre*], Toronto, [Musa Aron], 1994, written in Təgrəñña by the author of the *Kəbt-Qalat Həggya Təgre*, [*Dictionary of the Tigre language*], [Asməra], Aḥtəmti Hədrī (Hdri Publishers), 2005, a monolingual Tigre dictionary.

About Tigre poetry, Littmann’s collection is again the first and up to now the largest ever made. It includes more than 700 folk-songs, edited and translated into German, with a clear indication of the poets’ names. They are grouped according to their original community: Mänsaʿ Bet Abrəhe (*Publications*, voll. III-IVA, nos. 1–265), Mänsaʿ Bet Šaḥaqan (*Publications*, voll. III-IVA, nos. 266–302), Bet Ğuk (*Publications*, voll. III-IVA, nos. 303–314), Marya (*Publications*, voll. III-IVA, nos. 315–391), ʿAd Təmaryam (*Publications*, voll. III-IVB, nos. 392–479), ʿAd Həbates or Həbab (*Publications*, voll. III-IVB, nos. 480–535), ʿAd Takles (*Publications*, voll. III-IVB, nos. 536–598), and other minor communities, included the Bəlen, a group of Cushitic-speaker living south of Kärän and using Tigre as the literary language (*Publications*, voll. III-IVB, nos. 599–717).

Of a special interest are the dirges, about 40, in the majority from the Mänsaʿ Bet Abrəhe (*Publications*, vol. I-II, no. 110). These funeral compositions, called *sarur* (“lamentations”), are traditionally sung by women on the occasion of the death of their husbands (*sarur ənəs əgəl sab*, “lamentations of women

for men”), and they are of the same kind as the Hebrew *qinā*, the Arabic *martiya*, the Greek *threnos*. Defining the genre, Littmann exhibits a certain degree of empathy for this kind of literature, because of the deep feelings and the strong emotions it expresses. His attention for this form of African creativity reveals the sensitivity of a scholar interested in the cultural comparisons, within and beyond the Semitic frame. The clearest expression of this attitude is given by the book *Abessinische Klagelieder. Alte Weisen in Neuer Gewandung*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1949, containing the phonetic transcription and the translation of a number of Tigre funeral dirges, commented from the literary and metric point of view. As a matter of fact, the consciousness of the human frailty in front of irreparable losses and the interest for the poetic expressions of mourning is an important aspect of the philological and the philosophical research of Enno Littmann, man and scholar of the Tigre language.

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