

Dannyachew Worku in "Black Lion" - An Overview

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In our tediously long history, unnumbered Abyssinians were guided or driven abroad to meet their Destiny. In a similar but reversed style some foreigners came to Ethiopia to keep their appointment with Destiny.

1. One of these was Donald Levine. He went and lived two years among the farmers of Menz. He lived exactly like one of them, doing the same work, eating the same food, going to the same church, and so on. And he wrote "Wax and Gold," which is an affectionate but objective portrait of the Abyssinian culture.

Because he was a foreigner, he could see our culture both from the outside and the inside. It showed us our own culture and customs in a dimension we would not have seen because we could only see it from the inside.

Levine had love and hope for Ethiopia, as is evident from, his other book, "Greater Ethiopia". He sees the future with optimism. He sees the basic contribution thus: from Tigray comes the myth and legend and the national identity. Shoa, due to its central position and protracted contact contributes realpolitik. The Oromos, because they are formed by their gada system contribute to the democratic system. And we're all set to build the Greater Ethiopia, to which all the other nationalities will contribute, each one in its own unique fashion. For example, the Gurage people have already contributed the iqub and the iddir, which are socio-economic associations of mutual insurance in a society which has a subsistence economy. What the individual cannot save by himself, the associations with their iron rules, save as a group.

2. Another foreigner whose Destiny is to serve Ethiopia is Radulf K. Molvaer, author of Black Lions, which is a milestone in the history of Amharic literature. It is sub-titled "The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers". It tells of the lives and works of thirty-two men of letters, starting with Hiruy Wolde-Sillase and coming down to he present.

I read what he wrote about the authors whose works I am familiar with. He is highly informative, very perceptive and straight forward. Reading him gives you the impression that here is a man whose body was born in Norway but his soul is Abyssinian. This page will present brief summaries of some of these lives.

The first one I read is entitled Dannyacchew Werqu: Experimenter and Innovator in Literary Style and Language. Dannyacchew was the master who taught me that Amharic can more than adequately express our contemporary life. He read my manuscripts and gave me a lot of technical advice. I had deep respect and affection for him. I looked up to him as an elder brother. So, naturally I started reading Black Lions with the chapter on Dannyacchew.

What a great deal of information I found there about my friend! Because I had no intention to write about him there was much that it did not cross my mind to ask Dannyacchew about himself. For example, I never asked him about his father. Molvaer opens his story thus:

"Dannyacchew gave me my first copy of *adefris*, a book that took me several months to read and understand, in the process using a dictionary oftener than has been the case with any other book in any language."

To me it reads "Like father, like son."

Let Molver speak for himself.

"Good Literature reflects the life and spirit of a people. A society finds expression through its authors, and in this way it is the co-author of literary works. Writers life histories can not explain their art or what makes them art is it or creative writers, but such background information does reveal why they write about what they actually do write. Their society, their physical surroundings, and the times they live in provide their themes and, to a large extent, their viewpoints. Still, neither-the society, the surroundings, nor the times can explain art, or what gives birth to an artist (in spite of the peculiar fact that some ages seem to produce a number of great artists).

I do not pretend that a series of biographies of creative writers will explain Amharic fictional literature, but these life histories do throw light on the society, the surroundings, and the times in which Amharic literature was born and treated. I was encouraged by Ethiopians to write I about Ethiopian Authors after the appearance of my book *Tradition , and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amhalic fictional literature 1930- 1974* (Leiden, Holland,

E.J.Brill, 1980). In 1985, while working for the United Nations, I started collecting information for this book. This task was completed by 1989 when I left Ethiopia after a second extended stay. I have added some further information after the interviews were held whenever I was able to record something of interest.

I had left in 1989 at the end of a second extended stay in the country, this time of over four years making time spent in Ethiopia amount to 14 years altogether had then taken an interest in Ethiopian Literary life, for over 20 years (from a few years after I arrived there for the first time on January 7, 1965).

Dannyacchew werqu's story starts with his father perhaps in a deeper sense than it does for most people, at least in Dannyacchew's own view. His father, Werqu Bezzabbih, was adventurous in his youth and an extraordinary person in many respects, as Dannyacchew told me his story. In 1914 he went to France via Dire Dawa and Djibouti, and in France he was recruited into the army to fight the Germans during the first world war. He was slightly wounded three times, but he went on fighting until the end of the war, participating in battles in or around Paris and Marseilles and in Belgium. He became fluent in French during his stays abroad. He came from a simple peasant family, and he had no kind of (formal) education before he went to France. There he learned to read and write Amharic (in Paris!) and to speak and read French. He was born at Agam Berr in Yifat in 1897 G.C. In France and Belgium, he found employment in mines, and in France also in a liquor factory. Later he became a waiter, and when Ras Teferi (the latter Emperor Haile Silassie) visited Paris as crown prince and regent, Werqu was one of the head waiters where the crown prince stayed. Among other things, he used to tie the ties for the crown prince and others accompanying him, as they did not know how to put on ties. Werqu himself was one of the first Ethiopians to wear ties, Dannyacchew said. When Werqu refused to be educated at Ras Teferi's expense, the crown prince asked him to return to Ethiopia, and he was promised title, etc. Werqu also refused those, and to refuse such an offer from such a person is very rude in Ethiopia. As result, Werqu would suffer in later years. Others told him never to return to Ethiopia after such a refusal. When he later did return, he had to flee to the country side to hide from Ras Teferi.

Dannyacchew was always restless and difficult to control, he said. Once he ran in to the dirt road when an Italian came galloping the North; The Italian grabbed Dannyacchew -who was running into the way of the horse -thus saving him from being run down. His father was called and beaten for not looking after his son, and Dannyacchew saw him being beaten. His mother was also kicked for letting her son out of her sight and into the road.

His parents had a strong influence over Dannyacchew during the first 12 years of his life, until he left home for further education. His father loved work and got up -with Dannyacchew- every morning at 6.30, his mother told folk-tales at home as long as Dannyacchew started to write

poem at an early age, he wrote many poems while still in elementary school, and he also wrote down folk tales that his mother told - but here wrote the endings according to his "fantasies". His parents were "Liberal and Tolerant." He was allowed to catch and keep the dogs and cats and other animals and keep them at home - and he liked "wild cats from the forest" rather than "tame cats". His mother was "Simple and Loving." His father had a gramophone and danced with him and "had some style.

The family lived generally harmoniously together till they "Started to Scatter." His father insisted that Dannyacchew should have education; he checked his exercise books and followed his progress. His mother objected to his teacher beating her son, "But the teacher did not care." If it had not been for his father, Dannyacchew thinks that he might have turned out some one else."

Just before the end of the 5th grade Dannyacchew got diphtheria and was severely ill for two or three months. He was brought to the Menelik II School clinic, but they did not have any medicine to cure him. His throat was totally blocked, and he could not take any food. His parents were called, and for about a month and a half, they expected him to die. He also expected to die - he "knew" he was dying, and this made a lasting impression on him. Nobody was allowed near him, even his parents. He could only see through a glass pane. Then new medicines were discovered and used for testing on critical cases. This cured Dannyacchew, and he survived: It was like coming "out as from a tomb," it was "like being born again " he commented.

Dannyacchew "grew up with all nationalities in Yifat, " and he said he had "No tribal feelings.," He thought that there is no pure tribe in Ethiopia, but tribal identity goes by language." Most of his family " Seems to be Amhara.. " But he said that his father's mother spoke the Oromo language fluently, although she was brought up in Gamu Gofa and she may have been (wholly or partly) Oromo.

Dannyacchew received a three year scholarship to study creative writing at an "International writers workshop" at Iowa university in the United States. It was a course for prospective professional writers ("Not teachers"), and most of the students had English as their mother tongue, with only a few having as their second language; among these latter was Dannyacchew. It led to a Master of Fine arts degree and part of their requirements was to write a manuscript that was publishable.

That was Dannyacchew the author as seen by Reidulf K.Molvaer; a scholar who knows and understands modern Amharic literature as only a person who deeply loves the subject can know and understand it. In our next issue I propose to give you a personal portrait of Dannyacchew, friend and mentor.

