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## The first Tigre novel: *Ǝmanini* (*«Trust me»*) by Mohammed Ali

Tigre, the Ethiosemitic language spoken by almost one million people in northern and central Eritrea (about 1/3 of the population of the country), is the medium of a remarkably rich oral literature. Only a part of this historical and cultural heritage is known to us<sup>1</sup>. Beginning with the early 20<sup>th</sup> cent., oral traditions of the self-governing groups living by centuries around the የAnsaba valley (Mansāc and Maryā) have been written down by European missionaries and scholars, whose scientific enquiries resulted in the publication of tales, poems, songs and other literary creations<sup>2</sup>. Only in few cases, the direct contact with the Western patterns of culture and the beginning of literacy led native speakers to apply themselves to the composition of written works. Thus, the first steps of the Tigre literature, even if stimulated from the outside, were made possible by the outstanding contribution of one Eritrean learned man, Naffa<sup>c</sup> Wad ደƎtman. Born among the Mansāc, probably in 1882, as the son of a ballad singer, Naffa<sup>c</sup> (*«the useful»*) was educated at the protestant school in Galab, held by the pastor Gustav Richard Sundström. There, he began to collect the traditions of his people and to put them into the written form. At the end of 1905, Enno Littmann, director of the *Princeton University Expedition to Abyssinia*, started to work with Naffa<sup>c</sup> on the Tigre language. During a stay in Strasburg, from 1907 to 1909, the Eritrean learned man “composed” a number of texts in Tigre and thus he produced the bulk of material for the impressive collection edited by the German philologist. When the first volume of Littmann’s *Publications* appeared, in 1910, Naffa<sup>c</sup> had already abandoned Europe and the literary work. He disappeared one night of April 1909, during a ship journey between Naples and Catania, on his way back to Eritrea<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Reference in the text to E. Littmann, M. Höfner, *Wörterbuch der Tigre-Sprache*, Steiner, Wiesbaden 1962 is abbreviated as: *Wörterbuch*.

<sup>2</sup> Sh. Raz, *Source Materials for the Study of the Tigre Language*, in *Ethiopian Studies Dedicated to Wolf Leslau*, ed. by S. Segert, J.E. Bodrogliglieti, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1983, pp. 307-322.

<sup>3</sup> E. Littmann, *Publications of the Princeton Expedition to Abyssinia*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1910,

In the post-colonial setting, dominated by the didactical needs, the use of Tigre as a written language received a new impulse by Musa Aron, an Eritrean teacher, churchman and cultural promoter, who composed works in both major languages spoken in his country. Born in 1930, during his teaching activity at the Evangelical School of Asmara (1948-62), Musa completed the *Robinson Kruso*, a Tigrinya translation of the English novel by Jonathan Swift (first published in 1957, reprinted in 1961). From 1973 to 1978, he was the General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, then he left the country, first for Kenya (1978-89), then for Canada (1989-2001). During his stay in Toronto, in 1994, he published two books: the *Nāy Kətāb Qəddus Kəbt Qālāt*, the Tigre translation of an English «Bible Dictionary» (reprinted in 1996 by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea) and the *Mazgaba Qālāt Səmat Erətrāwəyan* («Dictionary of Eritrean names»), written in Tigrinya, but cataloguing a number of Tigre personal names, too. At present, Musa is working in Asmara as the Director of the «Tigre Dictionary Project», within the Research and Documentation Center of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, with the aim of producing a new vocabulary of the Eritrean language.

Naffa<sup>c</sup> and Musa literary cases both deal with the cultural heritage of the inhabitants of the Eritrean highlands. Yet, Tigre is spoken also by the nearly nomadic pastoral groups of the Sāḥēl and Samhar coastal regions, particularly the Bet Asgade, and in a good part of the Beni 'Amər communities on both sides of the Sudanese-Eritrean boundary, among which the Tigre-Beğä bilingualism is rather widespread. Of these peoples, not only the cultural features, but also the dialects are practically unknown, since no text has so far been recorded. It is sufficient to remember that the existing descriptions of Tigre are based exclusively on the Mānsā<sup>c</sup> and Māryā dialect, and that consequently only a part of the language's complexity is known after the researches by Enno Littmann, Carlo Conti Rossini, Karl Gustav Rodén, Wolf Leslau and Shlomo Raz. Finally, one must recall that the word Tigre can not be used in a cultural or ethnic sense, as the Eritrean Government does for practical reasons. In fact, Tigre is nothing but a linguistic label, derived from an older social denomination and covering a wide spectrum of different cultural and social situations. Indeed, the Tigre-speaking groups do not call themselves Tigre, and the success of this language in contemporary Eritrea is tied to its status of *lingua franca* for several peoples of different origin and institutions.

As a matter of fact, Tigre is still wanting in a true literary tradition, a situation which can be hardly compared to that of other Ethiosemitic languages,

<sup>c</sup> (*Tales, Customs, Names and Dirges of the Tigre Tribes*), pp. XI-XV; Idem, Naffa<sup>c</sup> *Wad 'Etmān*, in *Ein Jahrhundert Orientalistik. Lebensbilder aus der Feder von Enno Littmann und Verzeichnis seiner Schriften zum achttzigsten Geburstag am 16. September 1955*, hrsg. von R. Paret und A. Schall, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 14-25.

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ral heritage of the also by the nearly regions, particularly communities on both Tigre-Bēga bilingual-cultural features, it has so far been options of Tigre are consequently only researches by Enno Pleschau and Shlomo Edelstein in a cultural or reasons. In fact, social denominations, social situations. gre, and the success of *lingua franca*

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like Amharic, Tigrinya and Harari. This historical fact can be explained by a number of reasons: the lack in the region of old cultural centres, the social structure often characterized by foreign leaderships, the economic activities based on frequent movements, the bilingualism with Bēga and Tigrinya, the role of Arabic as a cultural language. During the last two decades, the well-known political developments in Eritrea have stimulated a fresh reflection on the relationship between language and state-building. For the time being, the prevailing ideas are that the linguistic complexity of the country is a value in itself and that the multilingualism is a medium for the inclusion of different social and cultural components into a common home. Among the consequences of this process, one can number the use of the nine "national" languages for the literacy campaigns and the appearance of books written in languages other than the official Tigrinya and Arabic<sup>4</sup>.

In this historical context we must include now the great novelty represented by the appearance of the novel *Ǝmanini*, the first literary work written in Tigre. The author, Mohammed Ali Ibrahim Mohammed, was born in 1966 in the Māryā region, in the lowlands between the Bārkā and the ኈAnsabā valleys, north-west of Karan. Yet, his family originates from a Beni ወAmər community, i.e. from northern Eritrea and from a different cultural setting. At present, Mohammed is a member of the PENHA (Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa), and he is working in Asmara within the Department for Adult Education of the Ministry.

The simple fact that we are dealing with the first work written by a native speaker with literary intentions guarantees the importance of the text. In a few words, *Ǝmanini* is an experiment aimed to create a literary language and, as a consequence, to strengthen the cultural position of those using Tigre as the language of everyday communication. The target of the scientific operation presented here is to provide an edition of the text, a study of its linguistic features, and an evaluation of its contribution to our knowledge. For getting me involved in this important task, I am grateful to Moreno Vergari, executive director of «Ethnorêma», an association for the study of languages, peoples and cultures, and to Mohammed himself, who accepted the project for such edition with enthusiasm and has given me valuable feedback. The research has been funded by the IsIAO of Rome, thanks to the support given by Giorgio Banti.

The difficulties of this work are rather obvious. First, it should be remembered that the text is produced and transmitted by the author as a PC-file written in Geez-Type. This is a problem in itself, since it is a well-known fact that this kind of text transmission is rather sensible and dramatically disposed to

<sup>4</sup> K. Wedekind, N. Dutcher, *Assessment of Mother Tongue Education in Eritrea*, Ministry of Education, Asmara 1996; Tekle M. Woldemikael, *Language, Education, and Public Policy in Eritrea*, in «African Studies Review» 46 (1), 2003, pp. 117-136.

the material mistakes. Second, for every phonetic, morphological, syntactical or lexical feature, the question arises if they are owed to some linguistic rule or dictated by the literary intention of the author, for reasons of expressiveness. So far, Mohammed and me we are in touch via E-mail, and as soon, we will meet in order to discuss thoroughly the different aspects of the edition of his novel.

*Ǝmanini* is the story of Walat, an Eritrean girl who, having assisted to the murder of her family and to the destruction of her village, decides to join the anti-Ethiopian resistance and to become a fighter for the independence of her country. Walat was born in Northern Eritrea, not far from the Sudanese boundary, in a region crossed by the two major Eritrean rivers, ‘Ansabā and Bärkā, and traditionally occupied by the ‘Ad Okkud fraction of the Beni ‘Amər. The idyllic village of Šar’it, at the confluence of the ‘Ansabā river with its tributary Zara, in a fertile region rich in animals and looking like a “Lost Paradise”, is the scenario of the happy and peaceful childhood of the Eritrean girl. Her daily life, running in accordance to both the natural laws and the traditional rules of her community, is suddenly undermined by the contact with a destructive violence. The irruption of the history into a timeless way of life awakens in Walat’s consciousness her new identity as an Eritrean patriot and leads her to the choice of taking part in the resistance, with the fight-name of Sarat («flame»). Her experiences, particularly the dangerous wound suffered during an armed clash and the subsequent medical help received from two villagers, make Walat recover her trust in the human goodness and the persuasion that the people have the power to overcome all the difficulties.

The text of *Ǝmanini* shows a lot of interesting features, which will enrich our knowledge of the Tigre grammar and vocabulary. The first question is: which specific language did Mohammed use for his writing? As already said, *Ǝmanini* is a literary experiment, above all a linguistic one. The language of the novel is not the standard Tigre known from the scientific literature of Littmann, Leslau and Raz. The author speaks the dialect of the Beni ‘Amər, a variety of Tigre called in Eritrea *ħasā* or *ħasā*. This term could be of ancient origin, being used as a people-name already by the Axumite king ‘Ezānā in his inscriptions (4<sup>th</sup> cent.) and by the Arab author Ibn Hawqal in the *Kitāb sūrat al-‘ard* (977/8). From the word *ħasā*, as an adaptation made in a different linguistic milieu, the name *al-ħasā*, «the special (language)», seems to be derived among the Arab-speakers of Kassala, Port Sudan and Tokar to designate the Tigre used by the Eritrean people in Sudan<sup>5</sup>. Yet, the language of *Ǝmanini* is not the spoken dialect, but a language purified and corrected: the rules are more or less the same we know by the grammars of Western scholars, but the

<sup>5</sup> G. Lusini, Note linguistiches per la storia dell’Etiopia antica, in *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of S. Uhlig*, ed. by V. Böll et al., Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2004, pp. 67-77, 73-76.

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<sup>6</sup> Sh. Raz, *Tigre*

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, pp. 71-72

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phonetics and the vocabulary are partially reshaped on the basis of the Beni 'Amər use. This corresponds to the artistic need of giving the text a sort of linguistic flavour. In other words, it is rather the setting of the novel, and not the mother-tongue of the author, that is responsible for this stylistic choice.

Let's comment now upon some features of the language used by Mohamed in *Emanini*, particularly in the «Introduction» (**መጀመሪያ**) and in the prologue of the novel. The transliterations are given according to the rules applied in the grammar by Shlomo Raz. The italic type is used for words having forms or meanings not registered by the *Wörterbuch*. The bold type is used for words completely unknown to the *Wörterbuch*.

እና ደግሞ እና ጥንት ቅስት፣ ታሪክ አውሃን አርተ ነረር ስለ አ  
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ይለል፣ ለተሽሬከ ማስል ቅኩል ተዘ

‘ella dəgəm ‘ella mən fəntit qəssat tārik  
this-FS story this-FS from particular fiction history

‘aw-mā ‘orot nafar latəbaggasat dəgəm ‘ənde ‘itəgabbə  
either ... or one person R-originated-3FS story while is-not-3FS

‘əgəllā ‘ət ertəryā ḡarre la‘ala telal  
to-it-FS in Eritrea existing R-was-3MS reality

latəšarreh mesäl tā  
R-explains-3FS example COP-3FS

«This story, starting from a particular fiction, while it is not a story which originated either from history or from a person, is an example which explains a reality which was existing in Eritrea».

Thus, the story is neither a historical novel nor a biography, but a fiction illustrating a real situation in the past of the country. For this purpose, Mohammed created a new language by exploiting features of the colloquial speech. This stylistic choice is revealed, for instance, by the omission of the prefixes of the verb in the imperfect<sup>6</sup>, as in ḡarre la‘ala, the past progressive form expressed by the imperfect + ‘ala<sup>7</sup>.

The wealth of Arabic loanwords is far from being surprising in a Tigre text, but one has to stress that many of them, as *qəssat* or *tārik*, are not registered by the *Wörterbuch*. In *qəssat* we can easily recognize an adaptation of the Arabic word *qissah*, «tale, story». In the Tigre form the absence of the “emphatic” alveolar affricate /ṣ/ can be explained. The Arabic articulation (pharyngalized

<sup>6</sup> Sh. Raz, *Tigre Grammar and Texts*, Undena Publications, Malibu 1983, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 71-72.

or velarized) is so distant from the Ethiosemitic one (ejective or glottalized) that the alveolar fricative sound /s/ was heard as the most fitting with the original pronunciation.

The contribution of this text to our knowledge of the Tigre vocabulary is shown by the high number of words and forms not registered by the *Wörterbuch*. *fəntit*, reported as «separation» in the *Wörterbuch* (from *fanta*, both verb, «to separate», and noun, «part») here is used with the value and the meaning of an adjective («particular»). *ʔaw-mā* is a different form for *ʔaw... ʔaw*, maybe owed to the negative form of the verb. *telal*, «circuit», is used with the meaning of «reality».

So far, is not easy to ascertain which forms can be considered distinctive features of the Beni <sup>c</sup>Amər dialect. In this group one can range *ʔorot*, a phonetic variant for the numeral *worot*<sup>8</sup> and the form *ʔende* for the conjunction *ʔendo*.

እስጋ ሆኖ፡ እት ለለከን መያ ጉራት ለተዝካዣ ተ፡ እት ከበደን የ  
ምክን በዘመኑ ዓይት ወለመድ ጉዳ ስጋ እርተርዎ ወሰው-ረቱ፡ እገ  
መኩ አዋር ለሀላትን፡

ṣəbbata həyye    ʔet    sala<sup>ʔ</sup>as abāyi gārat latankabā    tu  
its-content-FS as to on three big-P matters-P R-is based-3MS COP-3MS

ʔet kabdan    **yamkən** bəzuḥ ədāt walāmad  
in their-interior-FP perhaps many habits-P and customs

nay **ša<sup>q</sup>ab** ertəryā **wasawratu**  
of nation Eritrea and-its-revolution-MS

lašarreh    ʔamər    lahalle<sup>ʔ</sup>attan  
REL-explains-3MS information will-be-3M-in-them-FP

«As to its content, it is based on three big matters. Among them, perhaps there will be pieces of information which explain habits and customs of the Eritrean nation and its revolution».

Arabic loanwords not registered by the *Wörterbuch* are *ša<sup>q</sup>ab* and *sawrat* (from *tawrah*). *ṣəbbat*, «pledge, bundle», is used with the meaning of «content».

Among the features of the Beni <sup>c</sup>Amər dialect one can tentatively register the form *sala<sup>ʔ</sup>as* of the numeral *sala*, with a non-etymological glottal stop

<sup>8</sup> A. Nakano, *A Vocabulary of Beni Amer. Dialect of Tigre*, ILCAA, Tokio 1982, p. 136.

The first Tigre no

between the  
yamkən, «per-  
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As to *laba*  
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graphical solu  
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la<sup>ʔ</sup>agəddā  
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«As to the  
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An Arabic  
(from *istifāma*  
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<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 142.

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<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 51.

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3MS COP-3MS

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io 1982, p. 136.

between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> radical. A special case is that of the he adverb *yamkən*, «perhaps». In the Mansāc dialect the same function is played by the forms *man ɬammer* and *gabbə*. Thus, *yamkən* is most probably a dialectal form of the Beni Amər (*yəmkən*)<sup>9</sup>, adapted from Arabic *yumkinu* (*ʔan*).

As to *lahalle* *əttan*, the syntactic construction: *halla/čala* + preposition *ət* + pronoun, «there is in...», has not yet been registered by the grammars. The graphical solution of the author is meaningful, since Mohammed wrote the form without a space of typographical separation. The model is given by the construction *halla/čala* + preposition *əl* + pronoun, expressing both the possession (e.g. *əana sanni mas'aliit hallet əlye*, «I have a good camera»)<sup>10</sup> and the idiom «have to», or the modal auxiliary «must» (e.g. *əgəl ɬigis halla əlye*, «I have to go»)<sup>11</sup>. It is to be reminded that in this kind of constructions *čala* is used to express the past tense, the perfect of *halla* stays for the present tense, the present of *halla* stays for the future tense (as in the commented sentence of the novel).

ለኢትዮጵያ ተቻል ማኅድር ተቻል ከዚህ አገልግሎት እንደሆነ ይላል እና አገልግሎት ተቻል የሚከተሉ እንደሆነ ይላል እና አገልግሎት ተቻል የሚከተሉ እንደሆነ ይላል

la'agəddā gərāt həyye hatte tarat šačab ərtəryā  
D-main matters-P as to one-F role nation Eritrea

ət nədal həryat wağarayəm əstəčəmar  
in struggle freedom and atrocities colonization

ətra'əsu ġarre lačala šarreh  
over-it-MS existing R-was-3MS explains-3MS

«As to the main matters, the first explains the role of the Eritrean nation in the struggle for freedom and the atrocities of the colonization which was existing against it».

An Arabic loanword not registered by the *Wörterbuch* is here *əstəčəmar* (from *istī'amār*). *tarat* (probably connected to *tartā*, «row, order»), *nədal* (probably connected to *nadla*, «to pierce»), *həryat* (probably connected to *ħara*, «to choose») and *wağarayəm* (probably connected to *ġarrama*, «to cut into pieces») are not registered by the *Wörterbuch*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*, p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> Sh. Raz, *Tigre Grammar and Texts*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, p. 51.

As to the punctuation, one has to notice that Mohammed regularly uses only two signs: the *naqəb* to isolate subordinates or groups of words (in case followed by a dash), and the *naqʷat* for the end of a whole sentence.

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በሀላት እን ስማራት-ማ፡ ከም በለ፡ ከምስልሁ-ማ አስተዳደር ማል  
ወካዶም ለማ መልክ እንደ አገበኝ፡ ዓይነ፡ የሆኑ ወሰኑት ፍድ  
አያም-ማ፡ መልክ ከም በለ መስፈል፡

kälāyət həyye nədāl ḥeb səlah letā ḥende ḥigabbə<sup>o</sup>  
second-F as to struggle by weapons only while is-not-3MS

ሮብ hangal bāḥəlat ḥeb ṣəṭārāt-ma kəm cāla  
by brain that is by cleverness-too that has been-3MS

kəmsalhu-ma ḥesta ḥemār māl wa'addām letā mallək  
like this-too colonization property and-people only control

ሮnde ḥigabbə<sup>o</sup> nəyat mərād wāḥəsābāt  
while is-not-3MS will conviction and-thoughts-P

nāy ḥaddām-ma mallək kəm cāla massəl  
of people-too control that has been-3MS shows-3MS

«As to the second, while it was not a struggle only by weapons, it shows that it was by brain, that is by cleverness too; like this, while the colonization was not a control only over the property and the people, it shows that it was a control also over the will, the conviction and the thoughts of the people».

*mərād* (probably connected to *mardā*, «be convinced, to be certain») is not registered by the *Wörterbuch*. Among the features of the Beni ḥAmər dialect one can tentatively register *bāḥəlat*, *ṣəṭārāt* and *ḥəsābāt* instead of *bāḥalat*, *ṣəṭārāt* and *ḥəsābāt*, with a different vocalic degree (cp. *yəməkən/yamkən*).

ለባለበ ከፌ ሆየ፡ ተረት አዋልኝ እንተት እት ከሌ በይነት ጽፋ  
ል ተወስኩ፡ ከዘን ከለን እለን ጽዴጥ እን ተርተረት እታ ያግጣም ሲ  
ቻከተበያ እንደ አገበኝ፡ ከለን ፍርር እታ ያሰጣም ከም ህለም  
አትአያም፡

lasāləsāy kəffāl həyye tarat ḥawāləd ḥanəsat  
D-third part as to role young women

ሮት kullu ይ-  
in all-3MS

lākin kullu  
yet all-3FP

latəkattab  
that-are w-

dəgəm kə-  
story that

«As to the  
struggle. Yet,  
in the story,  
tent of the sto

ሮanəsat, as  
Wörterbuch. The  
most probably  
the same func  
meaning «wher

These first  
the value and  
writer provide  
Wedekind), in  
speaking this  
historical setti  
cal and social  
Mohammed /  
Eritrean litera

med regularly uses  
s of words (in case  
sentence.

፡ አብ ተንገል፡  
ስተምር ማል  
ውሕጥት ፍድ

MS

ol

weapons, it shows  
the colonization  
shows that it was a  
he people».

ne certain») is not  
ni ‘Amər dialect  
instead of *bāhalat*,  
*yamkən*).

፡ የይኑት ጽሑ  
አቶ ይግባኝ ስ  
ሙ ክዢ ህለዋ

የት kullu ዓያናት ነዳል ሳርሬ  
in all-3MS kind struggle explains-3MS

ሉክበና ቀረቡ ንቅታት የብ ተጥራት የተደጋመ  
yet all-3FP this-FP points in turn in-it-FS story

ላተኝተባዩያ የንደ የገበያ ቀረቡ የልማት የተደጋመ  
that-are written-3FP while is-not-3MS all-3FP later in-it-FS its-content-FS

ደጋመ ክመ ይሰጣል የተደጋመ  
story that they-are-3FP declare-1S

«As to the third part, it explains the role of the young women in all kinds of struggle. Yet, while it is not that all these points are written one after the other in the story, for all of them I will declare later that they are present in the content of the story».

*የአንድሳት*, as a plural form of *የእስት*, *ዓያናት* and *ነቅታት* are not registered by the *Wörterbuch*. The construction *የንደ* + imperfect, with the meaning «while», is most probably a dialectal form of the Beni ‘Amər. In fact, in the Mansāc dialect the same function is played by *የት* + imperfect (cp. *የንዶ* + perfect, with the meaning «when, after»)<sup>12</sup>.

These first remarks about the language of *Ǝmanini* allow one to appreciate the value and the complexity of the literary experiment. Moreover, the Eritrean writer provided a translation of the novel into Beğä (to be edited by Klaus Wedekind), in order to make the text readable by the Beni ‘Amər communities speaking this Cushitic language as their mother tongue. Thus, as in many other historical settings, in contemporary Eritrea the need of spreading a new political and social message has brought to a great cultural innovation: these texts by Mohammed Ali can be regarded as the foundation stones of two modern Eritrean literatures.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 91-92.