

Theatre from a Political Fabulist: Teklehawariat Teklemariam and the First Ethiopian Play: *Fabula: Yawreoch Commedia* (Fable: The Comedy of Animals)

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This article looks at an Ethiopian fantasy play produced in 1921. It is a play that draws on both European and African influences to create a story utilising anthropomorphic animal characters. In his introduction to *Fabula: Yawreoch Commedia* (Fable: The Comedy of Animals) (English translation, Belayneh Abune, 2010), the writer, Teklehawariat Teklemariam (1884-1977), mentions three fabulists; the ancient Greek of possibly African extraction, Aesop, the French La Fontaine and the Russian Ivan Krylov, whose stories he had loved as a boy and who had inspired his fantasy writing. Teklehawariat came to theatre after being brought up in Russia during his teenage years and this was also where he encountered animal fables; neither form having been part of his earlier Ethiopian religious-focused education. However, from Ethiopia the play took both a range of biblically inspired animals representative of ideas of good and evil, the poetic form, *qene*,¹ which was the main mode of oral creativity in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the linked concept of *samena worq*² (wax and gold), whereby an outer story conceals alternative, deeper layers of meaning. Teklehawariat used this form in the hope that the animal characters would entertainingly engage his noble audience while simultaneously veiling his covert but scathing condemnation of incompetence and corruption in the Ethiopian court so that he would not provoke the ire of the ruling Empress Zauditu.

Fabula was Ethiopia's first and, very nearly, its last play. It appears superficially a somewhat disconnected animal fantasy story about a herd of religious sheep trying to fend off various enemies, particularly in the English translation analysed here, which cannot encompass the many *double entendres* and subtleties of expression with which the Amharic is replete. However, watched by an educated, noble audience, schooled in the nuances of Ethiopian poetry and rhetoric seen as central to polite, cultured society, the play was immediately

¹ *Qene* comprises a series of poetic forms. Developed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *qene beitoch* (poetry houses) were centres where for up to seven years young men would study to become oral poetic virtuosos.

² An understanding of *samena work* has been seen as key by scholars such as in Donald Levine's, 1972, 'Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Amhara Society', to appreciating the ambiguities and complex levels of not just Amhara literature, but of society as a whole.

recognised as a piece of *samena worq*. At least some in that audience also understood that the inner meaning consisted of an attack on the incompetence and venality of the city-based court, in contrast to praise for an idealised picture of rural life under the leadership of the previous monarch, Emperor Menelik. Although Empress Zauditu was not at the show, someone must have quickly explained to her what was going on. After a single performance in a leading city hotel, the play was banned, the Empress sought to confiscate all copies of the play, and for the rest of her reign she eschewed any idea of theatrical production.

Teklehawariat Teklemariam

To understand the unique form, content and achievement of writing Africa's first indigenous sub-Saharan language drama it is necessary to appreciate the life of the playwright. *Fabula* was written by a man with an extraordinary life-story, whose intellectual ability, complemented by his opportunity to live and study abroad as a youth, gave him a unique perspective on his homeland. His loving (for Teklehawariat was a great patriot), yet highly critical (as he was also an inveterate moderniser), perspective, would motivate all the playwright's diverse activities in adult life.

Teklehawariat Teklemariam (Ethiopians always use first, given names, the second name being the father's given name) was born in 1884 into a well-regarded clerical family (Lealem Berhanu and Mahlet Solomon, 2014, 276-286).³ This was important. In Ethiopia the Orthodox Church and the imperial power had for hundreds of years had a symbiotic relationship, each bolstering the other's power and prestige. Moreover, access to learning was almost exclusive to the church. Teklehawariat proved to be an avid learner. His priest father had died three days before he was born, but his uncle, also a cleric, took charge of the boy's education, enrolling him at the age of six, as was common in priestly families, in a church school. Here Teklehawariat learned to read and write both the liturgical language of Ge-ez (which holds a place very similar to Latin in the Catholic church tradition) and Amharic, the vernacular of the ruling Amhara people who made up around a fifth of the empire's population. He studied the gospel, various Ethiopian apocryphal scriptures and memorised huge chunks of prescribed prayers (Challiot, 2009). In the extraordinarily short time of three years, Teklehawariat completed the basic church school curriculum, and at the age of nine he was consecrated as a deacon.

³ Nearly all my information on Teklehawariat's life comes from an article by Lealem Berhanu Terega and Mahlet Solomon. 2014, 'Religious, political and cultural influences on the first Ethiopian playwright, Teklehawariat Teklemariam and his play *Fabula; Yawreoch Commedia*', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 276-286.

For this event the boy travelled for the first time to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. Here he was there taken under the wing of his much older brother, Gebretsadik, who had a position as secretary to Emperor Menelik's cousin, the powerful Ras (Lord) Mekonen, who was father to Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. Gebretsadik was a man of great culture, a poet and artist as well as a diplomat and priest. He sponsored his young brother to undertake specialist studies in the composition of religious poetry (*qene*) and music (*zema*)⁴. He also introduced Teklehawariat to Mekonen and to his wife, the lady Yeshiembet⁵. The brilliant boy became a family favourite, kept close both at his sponsors' home in the southern city of Harar and when Mekonen undertook travels, most especially in his capacity as a military commander.

In 1895 it was desperate military need that took Mekonen, Gebretsadik and Teklehawariat north to battle Italian invasion. The Italians had been buying, bullying and battling their way into possession of the area nowadays comprising Eritrea since 1869, but the prize they really sought was Africa's only free nation, imperial Ethiopia (Miran, 2009). It was in 1895 that a full-scale invasion, complete with the use of mustard gas, began, with Mekonen as leading commander on the Ethiopian side, supported by an alliance with fellow Orthodox Christians from Russia.

It is helpful if one understands that elite Ethiopians at this time, and for many years after, did not really see themselves as African. Since the 7th century the spread of Islam across the northeast of Africa had gradually isolated the highland Christians, who had for centuries looked down upon and even enslaved, their darker, non-Christian neighbours. When Islamic jihad threatened the empire in the 16th century, it was to their co-religionists in Europe that Ethiopia had turned for help, finally receiving it in the form of six hundred Portuguese knights.⁶ As European colonial ambition in turn threatened in the 19th century, the Ethiopian ruling class became all too aware of the technological and military superiority of the continent and some, at least, saw it as necessary that Ethiopians be sent abroad to imbibe the new learning to subsequently bring home and lead in the modernisation of the nation. With

⁴ Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religious music (*zema*) has a unique notation developed by St Yared in the 7th century and is central to religious services.

⁵ Yeshiembet suffered many miscarriages before finally giving birth to the boy who would become Emperor Haile Selassie in 1892. She then died when her son was in his infancy.

⁶ Islam slowly displaced Christianity as the dominant religion across the Horn of Africa, having reached the region as early as the 7th century. By the 16th century highland Ethiopia was cut off from most of its co-religionists, and when Ahmed Gran swept up from Somali territories in the mid-sixteenth century in what looked like a conclusive jihad, only the support of Portuguese knights in a campaign in the 1540s, prevented the eclipse of the Christian Ethiopian Empire.

Western Europe, Catholic and Protestant, now firmly committed to African colonisation, Ethiopians turned to the international Orthodox church, seeking help further east. So it was that when, in January 1896, Gebretsadik was killed in the Battle of Mekelle, Mekonen promised that: “If we are spared from this battle and return home I will send this boy to Europe and make him learn there. He will take his brother’s place after that.” (Teklehawariat, 1997, 106).

On March 1st 1896 Ethiopian forces won a decisive victory over the Italians in the Battle of Adwa, becoming the only African polity to successfully resist colonisation (Marcus, 1995). Mekonen kept his promise. He introduced his protégé to Ethiophile and military commander Nikolay Stepanivich Leontiev and asked him to take the boy to Russia to educate him in the European mode. And so, aged thirteen, Teklehawariat travelled to St Petersburg.

Significantly for *Fabula*, it was through fables that Leontiev began teaching his charge Russian on the long journey home. Teklehawariat loved the stories and hoovered them up. Then, when he arrived in Russia, he was adopted by Colonel Malihanoff, Leontiev’s superior. The colonel’s mother was great aunt to Leo Tolstoy, who Teklehawariat claimed to have met. She was also related to Sergei Volkonsky, a leading Russian playwright of the period. Teklehawariat adored the highly devout and cultured woman he came to call grandmother, and she seems to have returned the feeling, furnishing him with a suite of tutors prior to his entry to the prestigious St Michael’s military academy.

The young man who returned home on completing his schooling in 1909 was passionate about a number of matters: religion, literature, theatre and urban, military and agricultural reform. He found, however, that his homeland had little interest in changing its feudal mentality. He therefore quickly set off again for Europe, this time to study French and English as the two main diplomatic languages of the time. Significantly he explains in his memoir that much of the learning was accomplished by attending the theatre. He made a final return to Ethiopia in 1912.

Teklehawariat then devoted himself to what must often have seemed a thankless task, seeking to convince his resolutely feudal countrymen of the urgent need for social and economic reform and European-style modernisation across a wide swathe of activity in order to enable them to resist Western invasion. His learning and the patronage of nobility gave him access to the elite of Ethiopian society, and he spent the next twenty years, often fairly fruitlessly, trying to engage an intensely conservative leadership with his ideas.

The Fable – From narrative to drama

Fabula Yawreoch Commedia is unlike any other creative work produced in Ethiopia. Not only did the writer never produce another creative work – although he frequently toyed with the idea but when theatre began to develop in elite modern schools and for the Ethiopian court in the 1930s, the creative influences on the playwrights were notably different from those affecting Teklehawariat (Plastow, 2020, 149-153). When the playwright decided to utilise the fable form for his fantastic story he did so simply because he wanted to appeal to a teenager, and he remembered that when he was that age fables were the stories which spoke most powerfully to him. The teenager in question was the Emperor Designate, Lij (child) Iyassu.

Soon after Teklehawariat arrived in Ethiopia to stay the old Emperor, Menelik, died. His heir was his teenage grandson who had been given the position in 1909 after Menelik suffered the first of a series of debilitating strokes. However, Iyassu was a source of grave concern to the court. In his Introduction to the second edition of the play, Teklehawariat says Iyassu had been ‘merrymaking, misbehaving and roaming around town’ (2010, 154). His advisors were worried about more serious matters; that the adolescent appeared more interested in boys than girls and above all that he seemed to have a serious inclination to become a Muslim.

Many were anxious about the prospect of this young man as leader of an Orthodox Christian empire, but rather than lecturing him in conventional style, Teklehwariat thought he might get through to Iyassu using entertainment. He would write an Ethiopian fable, pointing out what was good in society and warning of the dangers of being misled, and he would sweeten the pill by framing the whole as an allegorical fantasy with a cast of anthropomorphic animals. In its first form this was a narrative, and to get an audience to read his story Teklehawariat utilised the services of a fellow Westernised artist, Tessema Eshete, who had trained to become Menelik’s chauffeur in Europe and who was close to the Emperor Designate.

Fabula appears to have resonated not at all with its intended audience. Iyassu subsequently spent most of his time away from the capital, indulging in sight-seeing, slave-raiding, and visiting neighbouring Islamic states. As a result Teklehawariat joined the elite establishment in plotting to overthrow the never-crowned Emperor. In 1916 they convinced the Abuna (the Ethiopian church leader) to declare Iyassu an apostate and so have grounds to depose him.

So might have ended the attempt to introduce the fable to Amhara society had it not been for an invitation to Teklehawariat, issued some years later, to a social event. Teklehawariat explains what happened.

One day [...] I received an invitation letter from Ato Hiruy, the Mayor of Addis Ababa. It said, ‘Tonight we are going to present a theatre performance at Ras Hotel and we kindly request your permission to come and see our show.’

There had never been a play in our country before. Therefore I went eagerly and in a hurry to see how they had managed to stage the performance. What I saw was a band of singers and dancers (men and women) singing and dancing accompanied by a drum, *masinko* and *kraar*.⁷ I had been saddened observing the upbringing of Lij Iyassu. Now I got more sad watching how Ethiopians had been led up to the road of modernity. I immediately realised the need to straighten up such leadership. I wished there and then to write an exemplary play. [...] Suddenly, an idea occurred to me. The idea was that it could be easily directed and presented if I used the animals in my earlier composition of *Fabula* as characters and gave them dialogue to speak to each other. I did that within a short time and was able to show it in the presence of the crown prince, Ras Tafari at Teras Hotel. That helped the printed books to be sold. Many people were looking for them and within one day about 300 books were sold. (2010, 155)

The tone of this writing gives us a window into Teklehawariat’s outlook on life. Theatre for him must be given in European, dialogue form. The performance of *kinet*, Ethiopian traditional dance and song, to which he is treated, he sees only as evidence of national backwardness and ignorance. As in a range of reformist endeavours in future years, the writer is convinced he can educate and ‘straighten up’ peoples’ ideas and that it is his duty to give an ‘exemplary’ demonstration of modern (read Westernised) best practice. In a typical example of how Teklehawariat approaches promoting change, he promptly leaps into enthusiastic action. Time and again, in a range of government posts we see the same *modus operandi*, and time and again we see the man knocked back; sacked and even imprisoned for his unwonted independence of mind in an empire where loyalty to one’s superiors was the supreme virtue⁸. As Haile-Georgis Walda-Mikael, who was his boss when he was seeking to

⁷ The *masinko* is a single string bowed lute, while the *kraar* is a five or six string lyre.

⁸ Numerous sources have attested to the fact that loyalty tended to be rated much higher than competence in the Ethiopian empire. See especially Ryszard Kapuscinski, 1978, *The Emperor*.

reform the running of Addis Ababa, expressed it: ‘What I want is a box that closes when it is closed and opens when it is opened. I have no need of someone like Teklehawariat who opens and closes of his own volition’. (Teklehawariat unpublished autobiography, 341)

It was also typical of Teklehawariat that simply demonstrating to his superiors how one should go about creating a play was insufficiently ambitious. As with the attempt to influence Lij Iyassu, this creation was an irresistible opportunity to lecture; on how the court entirely failed to understand proper concepts of Western order, on the rule of law and on how parliaments should be run. Adding mockery of the court to the mix was possibly the writer’s most undiplomatic move.

***Fabula* - The Story - Wax**

The story of *Fabula* comes in two parts and, in English and without understanding of the inner (gold) of the text, the outer (wax) tale seems both rather simplistic and somewhat baffling. The story begins on a rural hillside where a flock of sheep are peacefully grazing. They are humble, devout animals, but are threatened by a raft of predatory animals: a wolf, a snake, a fox and a crow. However, they have protectors. A herdsman and his sheepdogs guard the flock under the overall care of the shepherd – until he is fatally bitten by the snake. This tale of religiously philosophising sheep and the dangers they face, complete with various bizarre jokes about lambs with legs bitten off and crows gorging on afterbirths, takes up some two thirds of a text which runs in English to some twelve pages. The slapstick, even crude, comedy regarding the lamb and the crows is an interesting pre-figuring of similar slipping-on-a-banana-skin kind of laughter which would be an integral aspect of Ethiopian comic theatre over many following decades (Plastow, 2020, 19–20) and seems to indicate that this form of humour was, and is, an embedded aspect of Amhara culture.

The tone changes when a goat enters. He comes to tell the rural sheep what has been going on in the city where the rats have taken various ideas from abroad and used them to create a kingdom, complete with a parliament and a constitution. The sheep find this hilarious since they see the rats as agents of chaos.

To destroy one’s house is their unique nature.

They are clever at distraction.

They have never been productive, except at smelling filth. (2010, 164)

The goat goes on to discuss how the rats propose to deal with their great enemy, a cat who has already decimated their army. They want to tie a bell on its tail or neck but can find no rat brave enough to attempt the task. The goat concludes with a story about a monkey who has been appointed judge and has corrupted the judicial system by taking bribes.

Fabula – The Story – Gold

To create his inner meaning Teklehawariat used not only the European fable form but drew extensively on religious iconography and allegory. This is a hugely rich corpus of material. With most of the population until recently illiterate, many orthodox Ethiopian churches are lusciously painted with stories from the Bible, from more apocryphal sources unique to Ethiopia and from national stories of great, religiously inspired secular leaders. As a result, much imagery and certain signifiers would have been widely understood.

The sheep who frame and chorus the play are representative of both Christian Ethiopia as a whole and of the humble, ordinary people. The biblical reference to humanity as sheep would have been universally understood. The dogs and herdsman are then the Ethiopian military who so recently defended the people from foreign invasion at the Battle of Adwa. The shepherd is the man Teklehawariat and Ethiopian Orthodox tradition saw as closely related to the biblical shepherd, Jesus. As in many Christian traditions, the monarch was believed to be divinely ordained, a representative of God on earth. Here the shepherd signifies Emperor Menelik, a man who expanded his empire in his lifetime by a third and who uniquely rebuffed a serious European invasion force. He is the model of a leadership; based in the land, concerned for his people, devout and pure. The threats he rebuffs; (fox, crow and wolf) are folk symbols – and literal – predators, while the snake who brings him down is of course a prime Christian symbol of devilry and evil (Lealem Berhanu & Mahlet Solomon, 2014, 283).

No one in Teklehawariat's audience would have had a problem with this, the major part of his play. Given its original purpose of seeking to influence an irresponsible leader, Lij Iyasu, one can see why the writer spent so much time emphasising the qualities of an ideal national leader and discussing his duties. However, once the goat comes onstage, the target of Teklehawariat's teaching moves. He is now looking not to a rural, feudal idyll, but at a court and government he reads as incompetent, cowardly and corrupt.

Unlike part one, the story of the court is not shown on stage; that, the playwright must have thought, would have been too incendiary. Instead, the goat regales the sheep with a story all

find incredible and hilarious. As soon as the inner meaning had been perceived, the choice to designate the government/court as rats would obviously have been read as massively insulting even before the sheep glossed them as destructive, smelly and unproductive. A number of specific crimes are alleged. Firstly, the goat says that the government has taken a number of ideas about modern governance from abroad, for which read Europe, but since they are stupid they have not understood or implemented them properly. Secondly, and very seriously in a feudal, martial nation, the nobility are accused of cowardice. Their plan to put a bell on the neck of the cat who has already massacred many of their number is thwarted because:

All rats had been asked, all made excuses,

All shunned tying the bell, what a daring council! (2010, 165)

The final accusation is of corruption in the justice system. Goat says that ‘during our forefather’s time, Anyone who did wrong got what he deserved’ whereas now the judge ‘takes a bribe openly’ (20210, 166). Throughout this section the tone is one of mockery; but behind it we feel the real anger of the writer at what he evidently sees is a wholesale abrogation of responsibility by the nobility for effective leadership of the state.

The rural and the urban

It would be pushing a point to seek to argue that thinking about city life was central to Teklehaimanot’s play. His target is much grander, the whole governing establishment. But, the writer did, among his generous panoply of interests, have a real concern with urban planning.

Ethiopia’s contemporary capital, Addis Ababa (New Flower) had only been founded in 1886 and designated the capital in 1892. Following the sacking of the former capital, Gondar, during civil war in the 1860s, Ethiopia had been in search of a stable centre and Addis Ababa, well-watered and surrounded by good agricultural land, was where Emperor Menelik chose to build his palace. In this imperial state Emperor and court constituted the centre of all things. Nobles built large houses and their retainers huddled in shacks surrounding them. Churches provided points of beauty, but town planning was non-existent and roads and tracks were mud, with most houses constructed from the same material and sanitation entirely absent.

Teklehawariat did not approve of the ramshackle city. As in so many other areas he was keen to modernise, or rather, in this case, to introduce, the idea of town planning – I have found no other example of any thought being given to urban plans in Ethiopia prior to Teklehawariat concerning himself with the matter. His very first administrative role on his second homecoming was to head up the Addis Ababa municipality. Working with a French engineer, he came up with plans for street naming and numbering, improving sanitation, and organising medical check-ups for prostitutes (Bahru Zewde, 2002, 59). As would be the case with many of his government jobs, Teklehawariat was found to be too energetic and independent minded and dismissed. His interest was not ephemeral: his subsequent appointments, to Jijiga in southern Ethiopia in 1917 and in the 1920s to Charchar, a little further north, saw the ever-assiduous reformer drawing up town plans, digging wells, and even founding a new settlement, Asaba Tafari (Bahru Zewde, 2002, 60-61). Teklehawariat was by no means anti-urban, but as in so many other areas of life he wanted planning, order and management brought to bear.

It is therefore unsurprising that while *Fabula* gives us no specific description of the city, we are told that this is where the rats live; with ‘no law, or a good social system’ (2010, 164). The imagery here is of foul smells; of loud noises of bells and people arguing and of chaos, with no-one able to agree with another.

Notably, these negative images of metropolitan disorder are contrasted with a picture of natural perfection. Indeed, the very first lines of the play are a pean to the righteous order of nature.

Nature has made such unperverted law
Between the animals, the wild, and us
To share day and night often in the raw
The sun, stars, the earth and the sky
Alternate in timely fashion, counting their hours. (2010, 156)

Here Teklehawariat prefigures writers who follow him across the continent. In early, modern writing coming out of Africa, much of it from the first post-colonial generations in the 1960s, one can see, time and again, the city cast in the role of seductive destroyer, luring young people with its glamour and promises of wealth and well-being, only to corrupt their morals – frequently enticing them into disastrous sexual relationships and making them mercenary and selfish – before often spitting them out sadder and sometimes wiser as they return to the countryside. Looking at just the most major figures, we can point to Kenyan Ngugi wa

Thiongo's play denouncing slum living, from 1968, *This Time Tomorrow*, while Nigerian Chinua Achebe's second, 1960 novel, *No Longer at Ease*, tells a tale of creeping urban corruption. Just because it escaped colonisation Ethiopia did not avoid the awful-warnings-about-city-living trope. Her leading playwrights from the 1960s had exactly the same preoccupations as their fellows in previously colonised lands. The most famous Ethiopian theatrical figure of them all, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, gained much of his early fame from his *Yekerma Sow* (A Man of the People) (1965), a bleak tale of two brothers living in urban squalor and corruption who are visited by an uncle seeking to bring them back to the countryside. The almost equally renowned comic playwright, Mengistu Lemma, set his 1963 romance, *Yelecha Gebecha* (Marriage of Unequals) in a village. Here our hero has fled the city believing it is only amongst rural villagers that he will find purity and goodness.⁹

Many of the first generation writers came to urban life only when they attended university or graduated from it, and they were then themselves significantly tempted by opportunities for a more materialistic, hedonistic and self-indulgent lifestyle than might have been possible in villages and schools where one was constantly under the eye of the community and the supervision of elders. Their struggles, deciding whether they should go back to the village and help from there; as many community members expected and hoped, or whether they would become urbanites, negotiating the opportunities, pitfalls and frequently perceived dangers of becoming more Westernised and less a true 'son of the soil',¹⁰ are the context for many of these writings. *Fabula* in many ways prefigures these debates which would emerge elsewhere only as nations decolonised and African writers had a chance to write without constraint.

Performance and Repercussions

Fabula was not only written but also directed by Teklehawariat, and the actors were all schoolboys. Both writing and rhetoric had long been honoured in Ethiopia, but performance was quite another matter. Amongst highland, Orthodox Christian Ethiopians, physical labour of any kind, except farming and fighting, was despised. Moreover, there was a traditional performing caste group, the *azmari*; musicians, singers and dancers, who were delighted in

⁹ See Plastow 2020, 166–170 for more extensive discussion of these works.

¹⁰ This term is often used in various African nations, to approvingly designate one who has maintained contact with the land and their roots.

and often retained by noble households whilst being personally seen as almost untouchable outcasts from respectable society (Ashenafi Kebede 1975, 47-57). The *azmari* were oral performers, illiterate and so unable to learn Teklehawariat's script. He therefore turned to schoolboys.

The first modern European-style school, the Ecolé Imperiale Menelik, had been established in Addis Ababa in 1908 to provide upper-class boys with an education combining Ethiopian and European forms of learning, and the country's first theatre would be created in this school in 1934 (Plastow 2020, 151–152). These were the boys who were recruited to perform *Fabula*, establishing a tradition which still has some force to the present day, where playwright/directors are greatly honoured for their thought and rhetorical artistry, while actors are despised, seen as socially inferior and mere tools of the writer's brilliance.

The form of the play was poetic. Given Teklehawariat's familiarity with the plays of such as Shakespeare and Racine we know he had plenty of European models, but as an Ethiopian writer he would have been hugely influenced by his training in *qene*, the most revered of indigenous art forms, which all the following generation of playwrights would see as the bedrock of their art. Indeed, the early identification of Ethiopian theatre with this hugely beloved and honoured form had, I think, much to do with the ready acceptance of the craft at all levels of society. Words undoubtedly dominated the show, but a high point must have been the performance of a *fukera*, a traditional war dance, celebrating the defence of the sheep against the wolf which represented Italy.

The single evening performance to a noble audience was evidently a success. Teklehawariat says that the very next day he sold 300 copies of the play, having privately printed a total of 3000. However, he goes on to tell us that Empress Zauditu wrote to Ras Tefari demanding that he rein in his protégé. So Teklehawariat was summoned before the crown prince and told to hand over both all copies of *Fabula* that he had in his possession and to inform his patron who had bought copies so that they could be confiscated. The writer says: 'I was able to hide 300 copies and I handed over all the rest' (2010, 155).

No further punishment was meted out. Here we have to take into account the writer's relationship to his patron. Having spent a significant proportion of his childhood in the care of Ras Tefari's parents, Teklehawariat had a strong awareness of the debt he owed the family. Moreover, the two young men were near contemporaries, and the future Emperor nurtured a

reputation as a moderniser which meant that the two saw themselves on the same side in contrast to the conservative court of Zauditu. By all accounts the Empress had no love for Tefari, but his family power meant that she had to make him her heir apparent. She could demand that he hold the controversial writer to account, and Tefari had to take notice of her demand, but so long as honour was satisfied, the punishment could be fairly tokenistic.

In 1930 Zauditu died and Ras Tefari came to the throne as Emperor Haile Selassie. He poured honours on Teklehawariat, who helped write Ethiopia's first constitution, was for a while Minister of Finance; then Ethiopian representative to the League of Nations and then a key planner of the defence of the empire against Italian invasion. It was over the Italian invasion that the two men fell out. Like many Ethiopians Teklehawariat saw the Emperor's flight to Britain in May 1936 as an unforgivable betrayal of his divine and imperial responsibilities. He himself later went into exile for some twenty years, moving from Djibouti to Aden and finally to Madagascar where he stayed until 1955, returning home to live out his final years as a gentleman farmer.

Enduring Influence

If Zauditu had had her way it is likely that theatre would have been stillborn in Ethiopia; but she made an error in commissioning Ras Tefari with responsibility for expunging Teklehawariat's efforts. Very shortly after he came to power the new Emperor gave back to the writer all the copies of his work that had been confiscated and started himself commissioning and supporting playwrights. Haile Selassie had learnt from Zauditu's experience. By sponsoring playwrights to create work for a number of imperial events (birthdays, weddings, and even for the coronation), he would ensure that theatre was not now in opposition to the crown but served as an extension of it, praising and elevating its status. The first writers who followed Teklehawariat were schoolmasters who came to the form through working with international teachers putting on dramas at the new Western-style schools. They did not produce animal plays, but in works such as Yoftahe Negussie's *Yehod Amlaku Qetat* (The Punishment of Bellyworshipper), produced for Haile Selassie's birthday in 1932, the favoured mode was allegorical with The Right Man (the Emperor) pitted against the greedy Bellyworshipper (one Ras Hailu who had attempted to spring Lij Iyassu from jail) (Plastow 2020, 149–153). In the same year Yoftahe mounted a triple bill of plays which included two of his own short pieces and a revival of *Fabula*. Teklehawariat's theatrical rehabilitation was complete.

The acknowledged father of Ethiopian theatre was immensely important in a number of ways. Firstly, and as far as I am aware, uniquely in Africa, it was an African who brought the theatrical form to the country rather than colonists as was the case across the rest of the continent. This had a number of significant repercussions. Perhaps the most obvious was linguistic. Whereas elsewhere a privileged few came to modern drama via European language elite schools and often continued to write in those languages, making theatre an alien, irrelevant Western form for the majority, in Ethiopia theatre was and is almost always produced in the language of the capital, Amharic. As a result Addis Ababa today has the strongest theatre culture of any African capital. In April 2016 I took a snapshot of theatrical offerings and twenty-one professional plays were showing across the city (Plastow 2020, 259–266). Plays are toured to a range of towns and cities, though in a country with dozens of languages there is no significant theatre culture in any of the others.

Secondly, although Teklehawariat insisted that it was a European idea of drama he was importing, and in many ways this was true: with a scripted text, scenes and acts and a rigid separation of actors and audience across a proscenium divide, in other ways the work was profoundly Ethiopian. The use of *qene* poetic form was something all playwrights I know of well into the 1970s would see as a foundation for their creativity, and led to a theatre which valued above all fine rhetoric and clever, subtle use of language. It was also a theatre rooted in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian sensibility and strongly linked to the imperial court (Lealem Berhanu & Mahlet Solomon 2014, 281, 283–285). Yet, this theatre was to be syncretic, often borrowing in indigenised ways ideas from the West and later translating and adapting many Western plays for popular performance on the Ethiopian stage. I argue that it has been this synchronicity, uniquely undertaken always on Ethiopian, not colonial or Western, terms as elsewhere in Africa, that has made Ethiopian theatre a vibrant relevant urban form for just over a hundred years.

Finally, but crucially, we have to take into consideration Teklehawariat's close relationship with the man who became Emperor Haile Selassie. Over many years spent researching aspects of Ethiopian theatre, seeking to understand how, while it has often been politically controversial, the theatre has continued to flourish in Addis Ababa as it has in few other African cities, I came to a quite simple conclusion. The theatre grew, flourished and became embedded in urban society because the Emperor was a fan. There are no imperial statements or documents supporting my contention, but the circumstantial evidence is everywhere.

As Ras Tafari, the young lord gave strong support to Teklehawariat; allowing him to print *Fabula*, attending the first performance, holding on to the copies he had confiscated at Zauditu's behest and returning them soon after her death. He then went on to commission plays for major imperial events – and notably it was only this art form that was so honoured. The Emperor did not commission poetry, art or music; only theatre. A strong sign of his favour was that after the restitution of the monarchy when the Italians had been defeated, in the 1950s many leading nobles turned their hands, with often dubious artistic success, to penning plays, which became something of an elite fashion. The Emperor, notoriously parsimonious, also invested in theatre. He donated a hall as the first professional theatre in 1942, and for his silver jubilee in 1955 a major building project was undertaken, the construction of the 1400-seat Haile Selassie Theatre, still today operating as Ethiopia's National Theatre in the centre of the capital. Even when, in the 1960s, playwrights began to use the stage to critique an imperial rule grown increasingly distant from, and irrelevant to, changing contemporary society, in a society where dissent was not allowed not one playwright suffered any serious consequences. Plays were banned or closed, but even some of the most contentious works were patronised by Haile Selassie in person and leading writers such as Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin and Mengistu Lemma became almost untouchable national treasures revered across the nation. All this patronage laid the strong foundations on which Amharic theatre has continued to flourish ever since. It was thanks to Teklehawariat that the Crown Prince ever encountered the Ethiopianised concept of drama that enabled him to appreciate and endorse what has become a major national artistic form.

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