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The Amharic Letters and Articles of Sayḥ Sayyid Muḥammad Ṣādīq (1897-1977)

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*The Amharic Letters and Articles of Šayḥ Sayyid
Muḥammad Šādīq (1897-1977)*

Endris Mohammed*

Šayḥ Sayyid Muḥammad Šādīq is an Ethiopian scholar with some academic background as he was a teacher at elementary school in Däs^{ye}, Wäyzäro Səhin School, from 1938-1950. So far, the researcher has found a document that confirms his training as a teacher.¹ Otherwise, he is a man who thought himself with various modern subjects and European languages (ENDRIS 2007: 19-20). His legacy on Ethiopian history, astrology, geography, ethnography and politics attest that he was a versatile scholar (GORI 2005: 83-85). He is among the leading Muslim scholars of Ethiopia with tangible leadership and literary contributions in the annals of the Muslims of Ethiopia.

The present researcher has collected thirty nine letters and nine unpublished articles and eight published articles produced by Šayḥ Sayyid Muḥammad Šādīq written since early 1930s until the last days of his eventful life as part of his MA thesis preparation (ENDRIS 2007). However, only a few letters and articles were included in the previous studies so far produced by the same researcher except casual quotations and an eye bird's view of their contents. The present study is a humble attempt to introduce some of his Amharic letters and an article aiming at diversifying the record and documentation of his legacy thereby demonstrating the contribution of the scholar in the development of Amharic literature,² the evolution of Muslim political consciousness and issues of national integration.³

The letters the article selected here are written in the 1960s in which the Ethiopian new generation especially radical students emerged in the autocratic system of Haylä Səllase. However, little is known about the contribution of Ethiopian Muslim scholars in this important preamble to the Ethiopian Revolution in addressing some of the problems facing the nation at the time. This is an attempt to address some of the heretofore letters and articles of Šayḥ Sayyid Muḥammad Šādīq in this regard too (ENDRIS 2007: 172-174).

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¹ He scored a high grade although he attended very few classes as mentioned in his grade report.

² Šayḥ Sayyid is one of the translators who played a key role in the translation of the Holy Qur'an into Amharic published in 1969.

³ The writer has so far written his MA thesis (2007) reviewing the textual legacy of Šayḥ Sayyid and made his doctoral dissertation (2012) on one of his Arabic work.

It is to be noted that the author, unlike most of his contemporaries, used to write in Amharic extensively and contributes to the development of Amharic literacy. The space allowed is limited and we are here to introduce two letters and an article. The letters are fully produced with English translations and annotations wherever necessary.

The texts: description and analysis

A. Letter to the Crown Prince Asfaw Wäsän

The letter (see Fig. 1 in annex) is written by handwriting of the author which is written in what is called at the time *qum šəbəfāt* (erect writing). It is dated, duly signed and is written in a modern paper. There are marginal notes written below the end of the letter which are not related to the subject matter but only show a list of names that notes persons probably settled in a plot of land in Wärrä-Babbo.

To the Imperial Ethiopia Crown Prince,

The Beloved Prince, Asfaw Wäsän Haylä Səllase.

His Excellency, the Prince,

Qādi Muhağab is made currently the President of the Supreme Šari'a court. He is seated in such high position by chance though he does not know the Amharic language which is the tradition of the country; he is not respecting the trust of the government and does not have the spirit of judgment and administration claiming to be the prince of Muslims without restricting himself either by the law or the Šari'a, giving verdicts according to his own whims; punching a table against the petitioners and forcing them to leave by guards is confirmed; the Ethiopian Muslim mass is in great disaster with regard to the Šari'a court verdict. Therefore, since I am the first person to assume the responsibility before and hope that I can accomplish the duty in good faith I humbly apply so that you bring me the permission from his majesty to assume the responsibility.⁴

2 Hədar 1950 (11 November 1957)

Your servant,

Sayyid Muḥammad Šādiq.

⁴ Other letters written by the author substantiate his claim as the foremost man to introduce a modern Šari'a court in Däse after the restoration of the monarchy (ENDRIS 2007: 24). It is an issue of grievance until today that the Šari'a court is mishandled both in its organization and efficiency although it has a long history of pious arbitration long before the attempt to forge a modern seat for it especially in the rural Ethiopia by the pious leadership of the 'Ulama.

B. Letter to the Security Chief, Lt. Col. Wārḳənāh Gābäyyāhu

This is a two page Amharic letter, a kind of summary report, hand written with a pencil and dated of 17 Säne 1952 EC (24 June 1960) (see. Fig. 2 in annex). It bears the name of the writer at the end. It is addressed to the head of Security, Lt. Col. Wārḳənāh Gābäyyāhu. The author was an employee of the security department from September 1958 to May 8, 1964 as an analyst and translator of Arabic productions that concerns Ethiopia, particularly documents of national concern written in the Arab Press (ENDRIS 2007: 25). The letter shows how a Muslim security officer manages to balance between his Islamic identity and cause vis-à-vis with his political role as an Ethiopian in a country where Christian ethos prevail. It hints on the religious and political climate in Mecca, Mina and Jeddah of Saudi Arabia during the Ḥaḡḡ season in 1960. Šayḥ Sayyid conducted his pilgrimage in the same year. The letter is important as it reviews a full report written to the key person in the private cabinet of the Emperor and Chief of the Security Department, about the very issues of national concern to Ethiopia by a learned devout Muslim and yet a nationalist, who does not compromise the political interest of his country. The speech allowed to Šayḥ Sayyid at the Saudi Royal palace in Mina (5 km from Mecca) before King Sa‘ūd bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz demonstrates his key role in the Ethiopian Muslim affair of his time (ENDRIS 2007: 104). On the other hand, it shows how the Imperial regime was anxious to get an insider view of the situation in the Arab and Islamic world. The researcher keeps a photocopy of the original Amharic letter that is here carefully typed for clarity.

17 Säne 1952 EC (June 24, 1960)

To His Excellency Lt. Colonel Wārḳənāh Gābäyyāhu

Deputy Chief of Staff, Private Cabinet of His Majesty and Chief of the General Security

Addis Ababa

Your Excellency,

I explain that the enclosed report herewith has the following major ideas:

1. Since it is the first time, it guides the performances of the pilgrimage and the precincts in which the pilgrimage is made as well the places in which a political assembly is made.
2. It mentions the high ranking politicians who participated in the performance of the pilgrimage in the year such as the Secretary general of the Arab League ‘Abdul Ḥālīq Ḥasuna, the permanent resident representative of the Arab diplomats: Mr. Kāmil ‘Abdurāḥīm, the Minister of Endowments of the Arab League, Mr. Aḥmad ‘Abdallāh Ṭadima who headed the 380 men constituted from different countries funded by the league as scheduled. The Eritrean leader ‘Uṭmān Šalīḥ ‘Umar and the Somali leader Ḥassan ‘Abdallāh Farāḥ were among the group. The report also addresses that Al-Azhar University has sponsored 150 pilgrims.

In addition, it tells that the interior Minister of the Sudan, Amīr Allay Aḥmad Al Mağzūb Al Bahāri came as the head of pilgrims; the Nigerian paramount ruler came with 15 thousand pilgrims; the Muslim missionary Ustād Sayyid Ramaḍān and the Syrian Minister Dr. Maʿruf al Dawālī have also attended. It also mentions the presence of a senior member of the Indian Islamic Daʿwa Committee, Šayḥ ʿUbaydullāh Al Bilyāwi.

3. It also elaborates that 750,000 men gathered at ʿArafāt Mountain and the highest temperature was 52 degree centigrade. The death toll does not exceed 665, which means one in every thousand. There were 98 thousand [pilgrims] from Iran, 50 thousand from United Arab, 33 thousand from Yemen, 20 thousand from India, 15.5 thousand from Nigeria, 9 thousand from Pakistan, 345 from Ethiopia, 425 from Somalia. There were 565 on board from the airline at Addis Ababa, for the purpose of pilgrimage.⁵

4. In 1955 it was under the custody of the king Saʿūd that Islamic Unity Conference was held. This year the first meeting was called by the Ambassador of Pakistan in Jeddah, Mr. Akbar ʿAlī Ḥjan. He held a dinner invitation in his place at Mina on 10/12/ 1379.⁶ He reminded that since the religion of Islam does not exclude politics, we should utilize such a gathering and reinstate the honor of Islam when we go back home. The Nigerian Prime Minister also made a speech through his translator and was applauded after each sentence he uttered.

5. It [the report] elaborates that King Saʿūd welcomes the Ḥağğī missions from his palace at Mina on 11/12/[13]79 but since we do not have head of the Ḥağğī missions the liaison officer of the Embassy could not present us officially. However, the Ambassador, his secretary and all in all seven men approached his Majesty King Saʿūd and I made a speech in his presence that has got a great applause from the audience as the report details.

6. The heads of the Ḥağğī missions of the Sudan and the Arab League have made a dinner and tea reception in Jeddah followed by the Šayḥ ʿAbdallāh Madanī⁷ who organized a big reception in Mecca in which the third Secretary, Riḍwān ʿAbdallāh, asserted that the Ethiopian King during the time of the prophet, welcomed the Muslim refugees and refused to deliver them to their enemies shows that not to repatriate refugees is a secular law introduced by Ethiopia. The visit of his majesty Haylā Səllase I to the Arab League, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia; and currently the visit of the king of Jordan, his Majesty Ḥusayn, to Ethiopia all shows that the incumbent Ethiopian Emperor has a spirit emanated from the great Nağāšī.

7. There was also a leaflet that agitates to boycott the commodities of France and avoid any transaction with its banks as the country was oppressing Algerian Muslims; there appears also a flyer disseminated without a signature that blames Ethiopia for abusing the UN mandated federal state of Eritrea and the Ethiopian

⁵ See also ERLICH 1994.

⁶ 4 June 1960.

⁷ He was an Ambassador of Ethiopia to the Saudi Kingdom.

Muslims. The Ethiopian Information Department has distributed a magazine that asserts the situation of Ethiopia holding the picture of the His Majesty at the back which shows how we were aware of each other on the issue.

8. It indicates the situation of Saudi Arabia, Jeddah, Mecca and Medina and how the princes of the family of Sa'ūd are intending to monopolize the eastern trade to their country after they secure finance because they have three companies that extract what is called black gold, petroleum, and make in their custody the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

9. Although not according to geographical standards [the report holds] a map that indicated the topography of Mecca and Medina as well as the following suggestions:

1. Mecca is a site of gathering for many nations. Even non-Muslim governments like India, China and Germany have their own health corps and it is recommendable that Ethiopia also sends a health mission as it builds its heroic image.

2. Many Kingdoms erect large tents at Mina to welcome their citizens. If the Ethiopian Embassy too erects big tents and hospitalizes [its pilgrims]; in such a way the compatriots will be immune from the propaganda of foreign nationals.

3. It is said that since the Eritrean immigrants could not get any support as [countries] responded not to meddle into the internal affairs of a country, they are to mobilize people and attempt demand the United Nations claiming that they had been federated unfairly. Thus, it is advisable to be cautious so that the people move into a walkout.

4. It also explains that in order to counterbalance the opposition abroad, the officials in each governorate should call and tell Muslim notables so that to refute the propaganda.

S/M/S

C. *Opinion*

This is a 4 page letter (see. Fig. 3 in annex), a kind of article, written in Amharic and is type written entitled: አስተያየት ‘Opinion’. It is dated, 12/02/54 EC, corresponding to 22/10/1961 AD, and the name of the author is clearly mentioned, with signature, at the end. The paper (modern) is 29.6 x 21 cm, single column, 12-29 lines. It is paginated and in good condition. The article is a response to anti-government media protests abroad concerning the government’s relationship with Islam and Ethiopian Muslims.

October 2, 1961

Opinion

I have seen the attached 12 pages herewith. In the last two years, leaflets that accuse Šayḥ ‘Abdallāh Madanī and the Ethiopian government for mistreating the Ethiopian Muslims have been here translated. Their sources are not certainly known: [it might be] from Eritrean immigrants, students exiled in Cairo and Arab countries or from the political men of the Somali government who intend to defile the image of the Ethiopian government.

The Ministry of Information has responded, in the presence of Šayḥ ‘Abdallāh Madanī himself, to the paper released in the first year. A leaflet circulated last year entitled as *Oppressions against the Muslims of Habaša* is translated and a copy is preserved at the Security Department. I do not know what measures are taken then after. It was much wider than the previous leaflet. It states that the King of kings of Ethiopia has formulated 14 programs to destroy the religion of Islam; Muslim schools are being closed while the endowments of the Mosques are discredited; it supported various missionaries, established a radio station named the Voice of the Gospel to disseminate the religion; he has translated booklets defiling Islam. It also elaborates that he [the Emperor] has brought teachers known for their hatred of Islam. In addition, the families of Amīr ‘Abdullah, Amīr Yūsuf and his son, as well as his nephew were poisoned and pushed to death within fifteen days in 1941 and 42 by Däggazmač Ṭassāw, by mere fear of the Muslim gentry would instigate appraisal of the Muslim mass.

Ras Mäsfin Säläši has also killed the spirit of the families of Abba Ğifār. Abba Dulla is made to salute him in public letting him to stand in front of him in dry sunlight and rain. The inheritor of the throne, ‘Abdullah Abba Ğobir, is imprisoned and faced harassment. At last he is forced to remain at home and is severely under surveillance. They have segregated the Muslims from the Christians by alleged charge of being an enemy of the country. They have christened many Muslims. It states that the minority Christians are able to rule the majority Muslims following a colonial custom of a minority rule by getting a financial and armament support from the crusader governments. Emperor Mənilək, in alliance with Portugal, Italy and French has militarily conquered Muslim regions since 1886. It [the leaflet] agitates to separate the regions in

which the [Emperors] were able to be called king of kings, Harär, Arusi, Bale, Gurage, Wällo, Ğimma, from Ethiopia. It also predicts that France will evacuate from Djibouti; British from Kenya and Aden. What I think to be important is the following:

1. According to the study made in twelve pages, there should be a response in radio and the press.
2. If it is not written before, the Sa'udi government should be reminded to be cautious so that a place of worship shall not be a political field.
3. Closing the door of grievance is much better than anything else. That is, the Muslims here, the immigrants and the students abroad too feel that they do not get their right properly. Thus it is incumbent to address such sentiments in actions. I do not think that the response in words could bring any benefit.

From what I read of the grievances in newspapers and magazines, I remember one that states the Ethiopian administration do not endorse any overt law that discriminates the Christians against the Muslims, however, the Muslims of the world believe that there is such a law covertly. A weekly newspaper published in Hargeysa blames His Majesty (Haylä Söllase) as a priest king. During the Italian times, two journalists argue each other in that the first one said that there is a law that accepts religious discrimination in Ethiopia while the other argues that this is the claim of none other than you. He responded that we have a document disseminated by Ethiopians themselves in which they claim to have overthrown the king who lived in 1916 because he has accepted Islam. This shows that being a Muslim is a crime that could claim a throne. Here are the details of the grievances:

1. Though it is known that the Muslims comprise 60 or 70 % of the population, it is only from Eritrea and Ogaden Muslims that a puppet and idle office holders are appointed for political consumption. They criticize that adhering by the pretext of Muslims illiteracy; the names of the Muslims are not seen from the list of officials.
2. It is the Muslims that contribute much of the education tax, and yet their children are barred from the main educational training, if not with special arrangement. They criticize also that only few Muslim students name is included among those who are sent abroad.
3. The missionary may proselytize in countries where there is no religion whereas in Harär, Wällo and Ğimma various missionaries are allowed to be disseminated. On the other hand, scholarly missions from Al-Azhar and others are banned from entering into Ethiopia and are not allowed to open schools. The certificate of the Al Azhar University is considered as insufficient. However, as observers comment the religion of Islam inflames like a fire or melts like butter when it is provoked and resulting its wide dissemination.
4. Christians were assigned to live in the fertile lands of Härär, Wällo, Ğimma and other Muslim regions. In Wällo, in particular, because of a land tenure known

as *Yä Galla märet* [the land of the Oromo], priests and officials coming from other governorates are assigned and made us tenants in our own region of birth. People appeal for being taxed in the name of the gentry and in Ğimma when Ras Mäsfin Säläši entered Ğimma 90% of the land was at the hand of the Muslims, while he left Ğimma being a millionaire, holding 5000 *gaša* and only 25 % of the land remained in the hands of the Muslims. If the oppression burdened on Ğimma, the confiscation of land and the fatigue during the harvest time of coffee, were distributed to all Africa, it would have been a continent of tears and drought.

5. They criticize that the Italians were able to transfer the wealth of the country to the compatriots in three years whereas the Ethiopian government, ministers and officials impoverished us by trading in collaboration with the Arabs, Indians and Europeans.

6. The government being led by priests is closing the doors of government offices against the Muslims. As a result many Muslims remove their headdress, which is a symbol of being a Muslim. There are people who murmur that we are forced to build a church that we do not confess.

7. During the holidays of *‘Aid al-Fiṭr*, *‘Aid al-Ada* and *Mawlid* since the government offices are not closed, courts penalize us [in case of absence at court appointment].

8. It is only incapable *Qaḍis* that are deliberately appointed in every office who are at the same time few in numbers. In terms of allocating sufficient salary, the *Qaḍi* at province is not like the judge at province; the *Qaḍi* at district is not like the judge at district. Reshuffling of judges is a rule but the *Qaḍis* of the Supreme Šari‘a Court are not reshuffled for fifteen years.

The emigrants of Harär wrote that in a village called Qul(u)bi, located 45 km away from Harär live very innocent people and believe that the Holy Spirit of Gäbrä‘el has shown itself there. As a result, Christians gather there every year and make a holy oath to annihilate the Muslims. Lest the Härärge people stand to oppose, a fund of 3 million birr is collected every year in order to fight them.

Conclusion

The letters and articles discuss issues of national concern, the dilemma of being a Muslim in a staunchly non-Muslim political and social environment. The problems that caused social crises, the author believes, were the result of inept administration and bureaucratic maneuvers. The author emphasizes the multi facets of the problems of the Ethiopian society giving emphasis to the class nature of exploitation and religious discrimination. He suggests that only a just and competent system could solve the inherent problem of the country rather than a system that utters mere and hallow flattery words.

Linguistically, the author uses what can be described by the time as a refined Amharic literature. He uses short and powerful sentences with their own melodies, although there are instances in which the sentences are not fully constructed. It is also observable that the language of the author is probably edited more carefully when it is

typed as compared to the hand written letter. The letters and pieces of articles are useful contributions to Amharic literature, by an author who was an expert on Arabic literature. He came from a Muslim community that used to observe Amharic literacy, as a liability to its identity and cultural future.

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[Handwritten text in Amharic script, consisting of approximately 15 lines of dense cursive writing.]

Fig. 2: Page 2 (of 2) of a hand-written letter to the Security Chief, dated 17 Säne 1952 EC (24 June 1960)

ከ ስ ተ ያ ዓ ት

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17 ሥተ የፖለቲካ ሰዎች ከገደሁት በክርግጥ ያይኖሩ ፡፡

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የተሰረዘ ገቢ ፡፡ በውስጡ የኢትዮጵያ ገገግ 17 ሥተ የክስሎች ገጠሞች
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በ1942 ዓ.ም የካህናት ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ
= ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡

ረሰ = ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ የአገጣጠሙን ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ
ከፊት አያሰነቡ በወሰኑ በዚህ ገቢ ከገደሁት በ-12 ገጽ ገደላዎች ፡፡ የተፈጠሩ
ወረሽ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡
= ፍጥነት ተጠያ በተጠያ ይከተላቸዋል ፡፡ ክስሎች የካህናት ወሰን ፍጥ
በሚል ስተ ገላ ከክፍሎች ጋር ለያይዘውት ፡፡ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ
ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡
የታላቅ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡
በሆኑት የሰጠው ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡
ረዳው ገቢ ይላል ፡፡ ከፊት ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ስተ ገላ ፡፡

Fig. 3: 1st page of a 4-page type-written article entitled ከስተዮት 'Opinion', dated 12/02/54 EC (22/10/1961)