THE ORIGIN OF AMHARIC

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1. INTRODUCTION

As Stewart in 1968 has pointed out, one of the characteristics of a standard language is «historicity» : having a respectable ancestry. Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, is in the process of standardizing: it certainly has vitality and autonomy, thus meeting the remaining three criteria for a standard language. I do not question that Amharic has historicity also: although it has no international status and no world-recognized literary masterpieces, it does have a significant historical and literary background. But the «origin» of Amharic - insofar as that term has any meaning for something which grows out of preceding stages, e.g. English out of Germanic, Germanic out of IndoEuropean, etc. - is shrouded in mystery. If Amharic is not one of the «daughters of Giiz» (the ancient Ethiopian Imperial language), then what is its ancestry and is it respectable ?

1.1 Amharic is clearly a Semitic language: its basic word stock is up to 75% recognizably Semitic, containing such universal Semitic items as «bite, blood, bone, die, eat, eye, hand, hear, long, mouth, name, sea, short, spit, what». In morphology, the Semitic verbal prefix system is seen clearly in Amharic i-, ti-, yi-, ni-, ti-, yi- 1, 2, 3 sg. 1, 2, 3, pl. respectively, ignoring gender distinctions); Semitic prepositions are foundf: la-, «for, to», ba- «in, by); passive intransitive ta- is found, also active-transitive verbs with doubled penultimate consonant, etc. Tradition has it that Amharic and the other modern Ethio-Semitic languages are descended from Giiz, undeniably a Semitic language, and that Giiz in turn goes back to South Arabia, linking up with Epigraphic South Arabian and thus with Arabic and the other classical Semitic languages.

How, then, could anyone question the Semitic ancestry of Amharic? It is true that in basic lexicon some non-Semitic items have crept in: wiha, water; perhaps t'at' t'a, drink; joro, ear; asa, fish; perhaps gaddal-kill; siga, meat. But this is not unusual: consider Swahili, a Bantu language, but with plenty of non-Bantu lexical items even in basic lexi-, con: lakini but, karibu, near. The fact remains that if a language has, well over half of its basic lexicon in common with a family, it cannot be borrowing; such massive borrowing of basic vocabulary does not occur

In morphology, besides prepositions, there is the extensive use of post-posed particles: a very un-Semitic pattern. But most of these are recognizable Semitic roots, e.g. wist , inside; lay, up; tac' down; fit face; hwala, behind; zuriya, around. Some of the common Semitic verb markers are lacking: prefix n- and prefix s- are preserved in traces only, and the function of the doubled penultimate consonant is quite different from the pattern productive in old Semitic. But enough morphology remains to make Amharic unquestionably Semitic: who would grant that a language could borrow so much in grammatical formatives?

It is in syntax that Amharic presents a truly un-Semitic appearance. The syntax is much more like Oromo, Somali, Welamo and other languages of neighboring Cushitic and Omotic groups than it is like Tigrinya, Giiz, or Classical Arabic. In fact, it is much more like Japanese, Bengali, or Turkish than Semitic. Ullendorff (The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia) says «all conceptions of Semitic syntax are in total dissolution» (in the modern Ethiopian Semitic languages). It is the un-Semitic syntax which has aroused the doubts of scholars, and led to endless speculation about the unorthodoxy of Amharic. The solution generally proposed is that Amharic is built on a «substratum» of Cushitic or more specifically Agew (also Sidamo), since Amharic presumably developed in a situation of imposition on Agew-speakers. The same or a similar solution must then be proposed for the other Southern Ethio-Semitic languages, since Harari, the various Gurage languages, and the extinct Gafat show the same general characteristics.

1.2 Are there any parallels in world languages whose histories are better-documented, so we can see how the present situation came about?

One oft-quoted analogy is that of Giiz corresponding to Latin, modern Ethio-Semitic to modern Romance languages. I think this is not a bad parallel, even the further extension to Amharic: French, Tigrinya: Italian, Tigre: Spanish strikes me as reasonable. But then also, modern Romance is supposedly descended not from textbook classical Latin, but from spoken Vulgar Latin, about which we know little.

Similarly then, Amharic and other modern Ethio-Semitic would be descended from «Vulgar Giiz.» What was this «Vulgar Giiz»: did it develop local varieties in Eritrea, Tigre, and Wello, as did Vulgar Latin in Italy, Iberia and Gaul?

Neo-Melanesian might provide another passable analogy. It is a special kind of English - or rather several special kinds, since it varies from New Guinea to the Bismarck Archipelago to the Solomon Islands, etc. (Robert Hall: Melanesian Pidgin phrase-Book and Vocabulary). The lexicon is English, though often enough the pronunciation differs enough from standard varieties to make it not at all obvious, and many seman-

tic shifts have taken place. Morphology is practically nil, and syntax is like that of Melanesian languages. From historical records, we know that Neo-Melanesian is a product of English-Melanesian contacts: essentially a grafting of English lexicon onto Melanesian grammar.

If Neo-Melanesian, e.g. the Solomon Islands variety, were to survive for the next few centuries and become the standard language of a community, how would it change and what would it look like? If we had no access to historical records of the development of the new language, would we recognize it as a hybird of English (which will also change in the meantime) and a local Melanesian language (also changing)? Before considering this question any further, some definitions are in order.

Pidgins and creoles are two phases of the same linguistic process (this and the following definitions from David deCamp). A pidgin is a contact vernacular, normally not the native language of any of its speakers. It is used in trading or in any situation requiring communication between persons who do not speak each other's native languages. It is characterized by a limited vocabulary, an elimination of many grammatical devices such as number and gender, and a drastic reduction of redundant features (simplification). Pidgins are generally shortlived: few last as long as a century.

Unlike a pidgin, which functions only as an auxiliary contact language, a creole is the native language of most of its speakers. Therefore its vocabulary and syntactic devices are like those of any native language, large enough to meet all the communication needs of its speakers. A creole, like a pidgin, tends to minimize redundancy in syntax. For example, pidgin English bas no plural marking for nouns, while Creole has a plural suffix-dem (from English «them»). But this is not used when plural is otherwise marked.

Franklin Southworth made the point that one must make use of both socio-historical and linguistic clues in looking for evidence of pidginization/creolization, since it is a process which requires «requisite social circumstances» and characteristic linguistic effects.» Proposals for the nature of the requisite social circumstances include the promising ones proposed by Sidney Mintz and Keith Whinnom. Mintz emphasizes «co-existence of interdependent but distinct hierarchically arranged social groups.» This seems to have been the case in the various Caribbean Slave communities, in the Philippines, and in Melanesia, to mention three cases where the process has occurred. Southworth shows that the condition is very strongly met in the multi-caste villages and countryside of the Marathi-speaking area of India. Presumably, pidginization/ creolization could not occur in an egalitarian setting such as among gathering-hunting peoples or sedentary agriculturalists without stratification such as the Tiv of Nigeria.

Whinnom's condition is even more compelling: existence of a «target Language and two or more substrate languages» (my emphasis) the pidgin arising to fulfill the needs of communication among speakers of the various substrate languages: thus pidgin English arose along the South China coast among speakers of mutually unintelligible Chinese languages; similarly in Melanesia, West Africa and in the Caribbean. Thus, Robert Hall's idea of a pidgin arising every time a tourist and guide improvise a means of communication would not fit this criterion. The tourist make-shift is a «nonce language,» to coin a phrase. It does not grow into a pidgin-it is transitory, evanescent, and used only by the two individuals in question.

2. A SKETCH OF ETHIO-SEMITIC LANGUAGE HISTORY

2.1 According to Robert Hetzron (Ethiopian Semitic: Studies in Classification.) the old idea that Giiz was a language imported from South Arabia and that Amharic and the other modern Ethio-Semitic languages are linear descendants of Giiz is too simplistic. However, there are features of Giiz and the modern languages which set them off as a group from the South Arabian languages. These include loss of the voiced velar fricative/s/ found in both ancient and modern South Arabian languages, absence of the suffix -n as a definite article, use of a prefix (Amharic ind-) before nouns meaning «like» and before verbs with the meaning «in order that», and existence of compound verbs using the verb «to say», e.g. Amh. zimm bel !. lit. quiet say, «Be quiet!»

Similarly, Giiz can be set off from the modern languages by several features. Among these are: Giiz has a unique form of the object suffix pronoun in the third person plural, having -o- rather than - -, the Semitic negative morpheme al- is not found in Giiz but is found in the modern languages, Giiz has no trace of a main-verb marker morpheme, a descendant of Semitic indicative markers, which are found in South Ethio-Semitic, Giiz does not have the infinitive marker m - found in the modern languages. Hetzron argues that these differences are too great for Giiz to have been the direct ancestor of the modern languages.

In fact, he argues that one South Semitic language was brought into Ethiopia from across the Red Sea, that it was influenced by Northern Agew and maybe Beja, and that it was the ancestor of all the Ethio-Semitic languages, including Giiz. Grover Hudson has raised serious questions about the beginnings of Semitic speech in Ethiopia: maybe it was original in Ethiopia and was carried from there to South Arabia and then back again. But I am concerned here with developments much later in time, and African or Asian origin is really not important in this.

When is Semiti speech first attested in Ethiopia? The oldest inscriptions are dated at about 2500 or 2700 B.C., although there is evidence that South Arabian had come over much before this. Sergew Hable Sillase (Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270) tells of a recently discovered document (Gedle Asfe) which places the founding of Yiha in Eritrea by South Arabians at about 4000 B.C. These earlier dates fit with the linguistic evidence: both grammatical and lexical differences among the modern languages indicate a longer period of separation than the older idea of 1200 years (since the decline of Aksum) permits.

Hetzron's speculations about Ethiopian language history include the idea that some Semitic speakers had already gone south from Eritrea before the language of the North had separated into Tigre (influenced by Beja), Tigrinya (influenced by Agew) and Giiz, the language of a high culture. The departed Southerners passed through Agew-speaking territory, and this meant Agew influences on the language also. The picture gets more complicated: a vanguard group went far south and this migration led to the eventual development of most of the «Gurage» languages, with Highland East Cushitic being the main «substratum». From an unspecified center further north, at a later date, another group moved southeast and split into two: one section went south and under Sidamo or Somali or other influence gave rise to Harari and East Gurage languages: the other group remained in touch with the old northern civilization and inherited it when the northern empire collapsed. These were the Amharas, or at least the people who brought Semitic speech to the Amhara region.

2.2 The next questions are: where were they and when did they get there? Jean Doresse mentions the building of a monastery on the shores of Hayq (a lake in Wello Province) in 637, the end of Aksum coinage following Muslim reprisals for a heavy assault on Jidda in the year 702, the building of the monastery of St. Stephen on an island in Hayq in 850, the capital moving to a place called kabar in 872 (this was probably near the Red Sea coast north of Aksum). The Gudit affair took place sometime during the reign of the Patriarch Cosmas in Cairo (921-933), the sacking of Aksum in the 970's and the destruction of seven mosques by the Ethiopian Emperor in 1080.

According to Tadese Tamrat (Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527), the Orthodox Church was already securely established in the heart of Agew country (near the source of the Tekkeze in Wag and Lasta)-by 625. By 825, the church had moved beyond the highlands of Angot (South of Lasta. NW of Hayq) and there were already military capmp

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aigns to the South in the ninth century. One of the most characteristic aspects of the expansion was the establishment of military colonies in the newly conquered territories. Agew were the inhabitants of all the country north of Jema River: in fact, it was precisely the area north of the Jema, east of the Abbay, and east and south of the Bashilo which formed the emerging region of Amhara. This means that the Amhara were Agews who were taking on the language and other cultural traits of their conquerors. Taddese says this may be started in pre-Christian times, at least by the time of Ezana, i.e. mid 4th century. By 850 there was already a distinct population on the upper basin of the Bashilo river.

It is important to note that the picture is not simply Semitic conquering of Agews. Taddese says the «Sidama» were already tributary to the Christian king, and that these «Sidama» were the older inhabitants of the Shewa plateau. These so-called «Sidama» may have been Gonga, i.e. Kefa-group speakers (Conti Rossini). Also, Taddese notes that the Agew from Lasta arriving in Agewmi'drr in Gojjam drove out people who were called ‹Shanqilla» by them: these may have been the «ancestors of the Gumuz» (Conti Rossini, Grottanelli). This was probably about the first half of the sixth century.

Other evidences of linguistic diversity are found. e.g. much later (ca. 1530) Ahmed Gran's chronicler mentions the formidable «El-Maya» people of the area of Wej (south of the Mugar River in Western Shewa). Somewhat earlier than this the «Werjih pastoralists» are mentioned (at least as early as 1128) - they were located in the lowlands along the Awash River east of the Shewan plateau. I have found no clues to identification of their language: could they have been Afar-Shao? An unidentified people called «Gobah» are said to have been converted to Islam by 1108: these may have been the Argobba - what was their original language? The Damot, south of the Abbay and east of the Diddesa were said to be «Sidama» - this could mean Kefa-group or some other Omotic group, but perhaps also Cushitic. Taddese says that military settlements among «Sidama» groups account for the origins of the modern Harari, Argobba, «Gurage» (all Gurage?) and Gagat. It is apparent that the Christian conquest of Shewa and neighboring areas meant contacts with linguistically diverse peoples. It is also apparent that local languages were not given up at once: e.g. the Lasta people still used Agew outside the church in the twelfth century. After all, pockets of Agew survive to this day in Keren (Eritrea), Deqota (extreme northern Shewa) Agewmidir (Gojjam), and elsewhere in Semitized lands.

To summarize: Amharic or pre-Amharic came into being in the Bashilo River basin area known as Amhara during the period beginning in about the 4th century, probably being a distinct variety by the middle

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of the 9th century, and being first attested in the 14th century. The social setting was one of a foreign colony-religious and military-imposing itself on an Agew-speaking population, but in frequent contact with neighboring peoples speaking several other languages, very likely including both Cushitic and Omotic ones (Nilo-Saharan is more doubtful, but possible).

3. THE SOCIAL SETTING IN THE GENESIS OF AMHARIC

Richard Diebold has argued that pidgins did not arise in Spanish-Indian contact situations in Mexico because the socio-logical conditions were not right: Either bilingualism developed or the Indian language died out. Here, I argue the opposite point of view with respect to Semitic-other language contact in medieval Ethiopia, ie. that the necessary conditions for pidginization/creolization were met by Amhara: the old Ethiopian province where Amharic originated. The argument cannot prove that the conditions were sufficient, we need independent historical or linguistic evidence that Amharic is descended from a creole, that Ahmaric has «a pidgin in its past.» In fact, DeCamp (and others) state that at present there is no certain way of identifying as a creole (or post-creole, it obviously follows) a language whose history is unknown. Thus it may not be possible to prove that Amharic has a pidgin past: only (if we accept the Mintz and Whinnom or other necessary conditions) that it is possible or not.

Regarding the condition of Mintz (existence of distinct independent hierarchies) the case is not as strong as it is for the multi-caste villages of India or for the Caribbean. In fact, Hailu Fulass reminded me that Ethiopian society is quite fluid, and that the kind of hierarchies found were quite unlike those of India or many other places in the extent of mobility and the nonhereditary nature of group assignments in general. Nevertheless, hierarchies did exist, continuing those of ancient Aksum. Levine (Greater Ethiopia) mentions that the religious and political spheres were both hierarchical, and relatively autonomous, thus admirably meeting the condition of Mintz. Furthermore, castbound artisans in leather, metal, and potting are found, besides which hunting of big game e.g. hippos, is caste-bound.

The second condition (Whinnom: multilingualism) has already been documented, though it is not clear how it applies to Amhara directly. Hailu Fulass has given a lot of thought to the questions of Ethiopian language history, and he emphasizes the importance of the military campaigns in the south. The conquerors followed a historically attested

policy of recruiting soldiers from different areas and ethnic groupings (e.g. Hadiyya, «Gurage»). This creates an ideal situation for development of pidgins and/or creoles.

Another piece of evidence is that of the way in which the Semitic-speaking invaders exerted their influence on Amhara and other regions: how much was displacement of peoples, how much was assimilated by the host people during and after military conquest? I have frequently heard the statement that the Amhara are essentially Semitized Agews. More recently many Amharized former speakers of Oromo, Sidamo, etc., have been added to the «melting pot». This makes a lot of sense in terms of present day phenotypes. i.e., the physical appearances of present-day highland plateau Amhara are quite varied, but certainly are in the range of what Amharized Agews would presumably look like. Trimingham (Islam in Ethiopia) says the non-Semitic element is 80% in Tigre and Amhara. Unfortunately we do not have much genetic data on the various peoples concerned to get a deeper look - Hiernaux's Peoples of Africa has little to say about it, but Hiernaux does accept Northeast and North Africa as the only area of significant Caucasoid admixture with African populations.

Historically, it makes sense also. Gamst (The Qemant) describes the process of assimilation of the Agews by a proto-Amahra elite as he envisions it, based on his work among the Kimant in western Begemidir. He stresses the reciprocal nature of this process: Christian religion, but including many pagan and Hebraic Agew elements, agriculture of South Arabian type, but dominated by crops developed by the Agew. There was a period of Agew uprising and political control of Ethiopia (1137 to 1270 the Zagwe period.). But nevertheless, fusion gradually gave way to assimilation of the Agew by the Amhara as Agew numbers dwindled.

We have little documentation of Amhara during its earliest centuries, but it might be illuminating to look at later observations. Levine mentions that by the 16th and early 17th centuries, Amhara had several subject regions, also speaking Amharic. Almeida mentions Amharic as the lingua franca of an area having a multitude of languages.

Hailu suggests that the «earliest Amharic documents» (14th century praise songs in honor of the kings) may be samples of Amharic-based pidgins or creoles. This would explain the difficulties Amharic specialists have had with these earliest documents, although once again this is a sufficient but not a necessary explanation.

It might be well to investigate the Amharic now spoken in the area which was the old Amhara Province. Hailu observes that the variety taken as the model of present day Amharic is that of Addis Ababa, and that this is really a rather special variety: it is more innovative than «upcountry» varieties. E.g. Addis Abeba bəzzih, bəzziya, «at this, that place», compares to rural bəyyih, bəyya, the retention of -z- being perhaps a result of «Gurage» influence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, let me summarize a possible history of Amharic. In the first three centuries A.D., Semitic-speaking people were building a «South Arabian» type of civilization in Eritrea, later centering about Aksum. As early as the middle of the fourth century, military expeditions may have reached the area later known as Amhara. By the mid-ninth century, four centuries later, a distinctive Amhara region was recognized. The conquering Semitic-speakers spoke a language which was perhaps only four to seven centuries removed from a common origin with Giiz. This pre-Amharic may have been as similar to Giiz as Icelandic is to Norwegian, or even more so. But meanwhile an interesting process was taking place among the subjugated peoples. The military forces were drawn from a number of diverse ethnic groups: perhaps largely Agew, but with significant numbers of speakers of Omotic and Cushitic languages - they may have had Nilo-Saharan speaking servants, slaves, and artisans. A lingua franca based on «Cushomotoc» syntax (i.e. verb-final) and Semitic lexicon was being used for communication in the ranks and among many of the Agew peasants of Amhara.

This situation may have persisted for centuries, as have similar situations in the Caribbean and elsewhere. In short, a complicated diglossic situation had been created, with the ruling elite speaking a slowly-changing Semitic tongue out of old Aksum, the military ranks using a creole based on Semitic (plus use of their own native tongues) and the peasantry using the creole and also Agew. As the Agew slowly began to fuse with their conquerors, and military and missionary campaigns extended ever further west, south, and east, other linguistic groups were added to the creole brew and it was shifting but ever based on Semitic lexicon and «Cushomotic» syntax.

The Agew rise to power came after upwards of seven centuries of this diglossic situation. It meant a resurgence of Agew, but also meant an acceleration of the process of the creole impinging on the standard Semitic language. By the fourteenth century, the standard would be as far removed in time from its common origin with Giiz as present-day

English is from that of Alfred the Great. Here is the most puzzling problem I see in my analysis: how did the standard get done in by the creole? Was it simply a process of submersion by greater numbers, e.g. like that of Germanic English being heavily influenced in less-than-basic lexicon by Norman French? Or was a replacement of the old ruling elite by creole-speaking upstarts, especially during Zagwe days? I ask for advice.

Thus multilingualism created a creole which became a post-creole, and by the accidents of history became the dominant language of Ethiopia. It could have been Tigrinya, Oromo, or something else, given the proper historical circumstances.

As mentioned too often, perhaps, this is probably a sufficient expanation of the origin of Amharic. But, is it necessary? Could Amharic be simply a linear descendant of that language brought to Amhara by the Aksumites? After all, is Amharic sufficiently unorthodox to requere special explanation? Obviously, I would not be writing this if there wire not some reason for thinking so. To take a deeper look at this, one must go to the linguistic evidence. It is not an encouraging prospect to try to demonstrate something which many (recall DeCamp) consider impossible. At this point I feel it is wise to postpone the issue for a possible future technical paper, for which I have already done an extensive preliminary tryout, following the admirable lead of Southworth of Marthi. However, I am not sure I am qualified to do the job, and the results so far serve mainly to confirm the difficulty of the problem. Indecisiveness is the course of work of this kind, and I have lots of it to offer at some future date.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

If it is true that Amharic developed in the manner sketched above, there are several practical implications of considerable importance for language planning in Ethiopia, and by extension, elsewhere.

i) the trecognition that all languages are hybrids and that language his ory is more complicated than usually assumed;

ii) the recognition that language history is already «written» (i.e. that there is an objective reality to it, not subject to ideological tampering); therefore, it must be recognized that many people (Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, perhaps Nilo-Saharan) have built Amharic and other languages;

iii) the choice of national languages should not be based on chauvinistic considerations, e.g. who conquered whom, who is now located where, etc, i.e. language planning should be ruled by the head, not by the heart.

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THE BEAMING, BULGING BALL OF FIRE

Dr. N. P. Singh

The beaming, bulging ball of fire
peeped
through the dark curtain
of a fern
rooted
within flirting distance from my writing desk.
The beaming, bulging ball of fire
burst into a blaze of splendour
crimsoning the fern,
dispelling darkness
and gloom,
broadcasting
brash, brazen dust-beams around me.
The beaming, bulging ball of fire
stooped
entered
and kissed me into life.

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