

Recent Developments in Blin Writing (1975 – 1994)

1. THE BLIN LANGUAGE

Blin is one of the nine languages of Eritrea which is spoken in Senhit province. According to the traditional classification of Eritrean languages into Cushitic, Semitic and Nilotic groups, Blin falls in to the Cushitic groups together with Saho, Harendua and Afar. But as far as I can understand Blin, it seems to be remotely related to these languages despite its being a Cushitic language. Arabic Tigrigna and Tigre are the Semitic group in Eritrea. If we take into consideration the ethnic distribution of the languages in the country, Arabic is used only by the Rashaida "ethnic" group as its language. Today, however, Arabic has a special importance in Eritrea because of its position as a co-official language together with Tigrinya. Kunama and Baria (Nara) constitute the Nilotic group.

As a spoken language, Blin is one of the less written languages, like many other Eritrean languages.

But we can find some developments towards that goal, especially for the last two decades. The following article is meant to give a general picture of the recent history of written Blin. Only works that have special significance to the written form of Blin are presented here. Some of the works are strictly speaking not on language but on the cultural activities of the people but since the way the cultural aspects or

¹strictly cultural aspects, are not included.

ceremonies are expressed in language, they are also included in this article.¹ The main developments can be divided into two periods 1975 to 1989 where general works appeared, and from 1990 onwards. The following sections presents those general works that appeared from 1975 to 1989. The third section shortly presents the basic works on grammar, a dictionary and other works. The last section is on religious works or translations.

2. GENERAL WORK ON BLIN (1977–1989)

Five general works are presented in this sub-section.

2.1 Abba Kiflemariam Fadega, (1984), "The Blin Language: a Long Struggle for Survival", a paper presented in the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abeba University, Ethiopia.

This consists of a short description of the situation of the language. The theme of A. Kiflemariam Fadega is that the language struggled for long, resisting death or shift. He argues that the cultural context within which the language survived provided the shelter against disappearance. There are also four poems "gathered directly" from the authors of the poems. A short synopsis of each is given below.

Poem A, Ftuh diduxw brild, by Saleh Nafee. An elder from the village of

Far Aleba, Saleh discusses the socio-economic and political situation of the times in the 1970s and the concept of justice and equality that he would like to see in the society. This is also a poem of factual details in the implementation of justice in the locality where Saleh lived.

Poem B, Enokeyu segnekum, by Mekonen Amanuel. Mekonen assesses, in personified expressions, the self-concept of the language as it exists within the historic linguistic reshuffling in and gives a glimpse of the future.

Poem C and D, were originally sung in the traditional folk poems called *chefera* by Kiflemariam Hamade,

Poem C, Ftuh dixna, the obsolete customs practised in the engagement, wedding, and the honeymoon periods that humiliate young girls and women are strongly criticised, calling for a change towards a more equal and just treatment of both sexes and the youngsters who are unwillingly trapped in the obsolete, cultural "ceremonies". For the young Blin women, and in extension to all Eritrean women, such ceremonies constitute cultural uncontrollables, despite all their yearnings for freedom from this suppression and through their daily poems and songs. It is a theme on the un-equalled relationship between the two genders in the practical life.

Poem D, In Ones Melancholy, Srbebhilay, deals with unfavourable situation of youngsters, caught between an old, uncontrollable culture and a new but undefined opportunity characterised by lack of education and motivation to work, life and the revolution going on in Eritrea at those times (late 70s).

2.2 Mekonen Amanuel, (1984), Blin Primary, Melamed qwanqwa Blin, Asmara. This is an original primary meant for those Tigrinya readers interested to study Blin. Though original and well meant for the times, the work remains unpublished.

2.3 Kiflemariam Hamde, (1986), The Origin and Development of Blin, Blin Language Project, sponsored by Asmara University, Institute of African Studies. (In English)

This is meant to give an outline of the Blin language and its grammatical, lexical and syntactic characteristics. The influence of other Eritrean Languages, especially Tigre and Tigrinya, are also treated. Recent attempts to develop the language are also pointed out. Some of the more recent changes in the language use and shifts in terminology that are taking place in Blin are extensively illustrated, exemplified by folk-poems and practices. 101 pps.

2.4 Kiflemariam Hamade (1989), "Analysis of Some Blin Proverbs", in Ethiopian Journal of African Studies, Volume 5, No 2. Fourteen proverbs are analysed and interpreted with some illustrative examples of the way each proverb is used to describe actual life-situations.

2.5 Kiflemariam Hamde (1989), "Traditional Religious Customs in Blin Society: The Candle Meal and the Matrimonial Contract", Published in Adveniat Regnum Tuum, (Timtsa Mengistike).

Two important customs that are still prevalent in Blin social life are described with a critical discussion on the future of such customary rites. The goal is always to study the present cultural history of the Blin people, a goal that can be extended to the whole

of Eritrean society especially now when the development of Eritrean economic, social and cultural life in the agenda of its own people.

3. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS (THE 1990s): GRAMMAR AND A DICTIONARY

The 1990s can be considered to be a period which so far has shown a step forward to the development of Blin literature. The following are some of the prominent developments in the history of written Blin.

3.1. Translation of primary School Curriculum in Eritrea, Asmara

The 1990's has been a decade of independence for Eritrea that marks freedom in all its dimensions, language included. It has also shown still another promising development on the history of Blin literature. With the liberation of Eritrea in 1991, a progressive educational policy raised all Eritrean languages, in principle, to the status of being media of instruction at least in the primary school level (from first grade to 5th grade). Thus, the Primary School Curriculum of the Ministry of Education was translated from Tigrinya into Blin by interested "scholars" of the language immediately when the regulatory directive was proclaimed by the government in 1991.

The following basic scholarly works appeared on the grammatical construction of Blin

3.2 Goitom Kuflom (1991) blin haleget. The Blin Alphabet. This is also an original work about Blin writing, especially the alphabet and how one can write it in the Latin script. As such it falls into one of bold

suggestions in transforming the language from merely spoken to written form in Latin script.

3.3 Tekleghiorghis Yohannes Aftay (1992), Blinna gaba gug, Blin Grammar, Uppsala., Sweden.

This is an ambitious work that attempts to develop forms of written Blin. It is an original work on several respects. It is very richly written in original Blin terminology and contains good narratives reflecting the daily life of the people in their cultural context. The lack of reference material to the work is supplemented by the uncritical use of phonologically forms that are untenable in the Geez script, such as using two consonants to show stress as in *blinna*; separation of words otherwise indicating the same meaning and the like. Translations of grammatical terms are also provided in last pages of the book. As such, it is, however, a breakthrough in many respects.

3.4 Tekie Alibekit, (1992), Blin Language. Introductory phonetics and Grammar, Blina ktabetdi gbra gabuxwdi, 1st edition, Oslo.

As the author puts it, "the main aim of this book is to contribute to the alphabetical, phonetical and grammatical study of the Blin language, which has been up to now a spoken language only. In its present form, the book is written only in Blin. But it is my hope to translate at least some parts of it into Tigrinya and English in the future" (pp:ii).

The author also includes works on Blin since it was initiated by the German scholar, Leo Reinisch in the 1880s. Reinisch is recognised by people as the father of Blin studies. Twenty reference materials are also given in the final pages of the book. I can say that the book is

methodologically strong and well written. Some translations of Blin grammatical and phonological terminology are provided in English here and there.

3.5 Kiflemariam Hamde and Poulos Zeremariam (eds.), (1992), Blin Dictionary, with translations in English, "Blina qwolata endiba." This was originally planned by a Research Group in Asmara (1978) where 21 members of a special, voluntary research group, called Blin language Research Group (not existing now), contributed more or less to the work until its final appearance in a printed form. It was published by a Blin Language and Cultural Association in Sweden.

3.6 Bogos Goitom, (1992), Enkeli (Love). This is a work that shows the poetic features of Blin as used to express love and love affairs among the youngsters in the Blin community. As a poetry work, it is the first of its kind. The young writer uses expressive words that show the rich Blin values of considerateness (beket), love (enkeli), youth behaviour (wr-zinet) and many others. It is encouraging to see such young writers as Bogos to write on a subject that can be said to be appropriate to that age.

3.7 standardisation of blin writing (1994) This contributes to common usage and Standards in written Blin that attempts to narrow down the honest difference in the above works (2-4) on grammar and the Dictionary, and a work that appeared in October 1994 on primary on numeral in Blin, by Fesahatzion Zemicael. It was a step towards writing subsequent works according to the preliminary agreed upon standards on the pamphlet. These were A. Asfaha Kidanemariam (co-

ordinator), Tekie Alibekit, Fessahatzion Zemicael and myself.

3.8 Fessahatzion Zemicael (1994) Numerals in Blin, Shib blind. This is meant to be primary for beginners on the numerals that are figuratively described.

4. ON RELIGION

Almost all the works presented here are on Christianity although the Blin people are equally divided into Moslems and Christians. In addition to this it is the works that have appeared in the Geez alphabet that are reported here.

Most of these works are translations. Special significance, however, should be given to the translation of the four Gospels into Blin for the first time by an original speaker of the language in 1993. The Gospel of Mark was previously translated into Blin and published, by Leo Reinisch (1882) but it remained outside the reach of the people.

4.1 Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1977), qdase blinid, a translation of the Geez Mass, in collaboration with Blin-speaking students at the Holy Saviors Major Seminary at Asmara, Eritrea (unpublished).

4.2 Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1977) Werena Jar musixw, a collection of traditional prayers and recollections of daily life very much practised by the Blin people.

4.3 Abba Kidane Yebio, (1991), qdase blinid, another translation of the Geez Mass, now in cross comparison with the Geez text, in collaboration with Abba Asfaha Kidanemariam and Abba Tesfamariam Bedihō, Rome (memo). (tksre deleidi)

4.4 Abba Wolde Habtemariam, (1982), Awi mehadxunina? 2d ed. Catechism, originally published in Rome (1944).

5.5 Abba Yaqob Zeru, (1993), Yinadera yesusr wengiel, The Four Gospels in Blin. This was the first translation of the whole Gospel into Blin. The pastoral language of the Catholic Church among the Blin still remains to be conducted in Geez

despite the majority, if not all, of the people do not understand that language. Some people I have met were very positive towards the use of their mother tongue in their religious ceremonies. It took the late Abba Jacob almost a decade to translate that work from different languages into Blin.

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29 December 1995