

SUSANNA BERG ROAMNDO

Ethiopian Amharic Proverbs. By Fisseha G. Demoze and William H. Armstrong. United States of America: privately printed, 2019. Pp. 15.

Fisseha G. Demoze's and William H. Armstrong's *Ethiopian Amharic Proverbs* is the only Amharic proverbs collection with English translations currently available. Armstrong and Demoze began collecting proverbs in the late 1960's to aid Armstrong in his Amharic language and culture learning; Armstrong was living and working in Ethiopia and asked his language teacher, Demoze, to help him collect and translate proverbs, appreciating the perspectives into Amharic Ethiopian life that the proverbs provided him. Through this collection of 441 Amharic proverbs, Demoze and Armstrong offer these perspectives to a wider audience.

As stated in the introduction, this collection is intended for both Amharic and non-Amharic speaking audiences. As such, each proverb includes a variety of formats: the proverb, first given in Ge'ez letters (e.g. ምሳሌ), is followed by a transliteration in the Roman alphabet and then by an English translation. A further explanation in English follows in italics if the authors decided it was needed, and this is the greatest strength of this collection for non-Amharic speakers. The explanations clarify the meaning and/or intended use of the proverb as well as certain key words that are specific to Ethiopian life; from these, one learns key words for certain plants and foods, drinks, animals, or types of clothing. For example, *Tef* is a staple crop of Ethiopia (44, 404), *Tej* is Ethiopian honey mead (20, 383), *koso* is a bad tasting medicine used to treat tapeworm (61), and a *shema* is a finely woven piece of cloth (12), while donkeys and hyenas are commonly referenced animals. These then help to explain the metaphor being used or the customs related to the proverb. For proverb 95, for instance, the explanation first gives the meaning of *shash* as "a small, thin, white piece of cloth such as priests wrap around their heads" before giving a further brief explanation on burial customs and how this leads to

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two possible contradictory meanings of the proverb. Proverb 49 states, “For a person whose day is dark with troubles, the road of life is long, tedious, and narrow.” The more literal translation is “the road of life is *zeng*,” the explanation informs the reader that *zeng* is “a long thin stick with a forked end used to lean on or ward off dogs,” allowing the reader to understand the metaphor being used. The explanations also sometimes provide understanding for certain idiomatic expressions, e.g. 123: “The upper lip is for argument; the lower lip is for testimony.” The explanation tells the reader that ‘the upper lip’ is equivalent to statements used for argument that aren’t true, while the lower lip means “from the heart.” These explanations give further understanding not only of the proverbs but also of the culture from which they come.

Having Ge’ez letters and the transliteration keep the proverbs culturally and linguistically rooted. Having the transliteration also gives clues to the verbal artistry in the proverbs’ composition. The transliteration for 62 is “daget ’rmu, meda wend’mu”; this allows even a non-Amharic speaker to see rhythm and end rhyme in the formation of the proverb. However, the English translations do not always keep the structure of the proverb, so much of the verbal artistry is lost in translation in favor of giving a clear meaning.

A short English introduction orients the reader to the collection and gives an apologia for the proverbs as something enjoyable in themselves as well as expressions of both universal wisdom and culturally specific meanings. The introduction is followed by some information on keystrokes for Ge’ez letters, with more in an appendix. An Amharic speaker would be better suited to comment on the usefulness of this appendix. Some more information on Amharic as a language and the pronunciation would be a useful addition for non-Amharic speakers. The authors include some traditional Ethiopian pictures to begin and close the book which give culturally rooted visual depictions.

The system for ordering the proverbs is unclear, if one was used. An appendix where proverb numbers are grouped based on topic or a keyword would make proverbs easier to find or reference for those using the book for an academic purpose. The purpose of the book, however, was to provide a collection of Amharic proverbs usable for Amharic speakers while giving translations and explanations in English to clarify the meaning for non-Amharic speakers and cultural outsiders. The book fulfills this

purpose and provides explanations to reveal aspects of Ethiopian Amharic culture that the proverbs are drawn from, thus providing insights that would otherwise be easily missed.

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