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*Máakuti t'awá shuultáa: Proverbs Finish the Problems: Sayings of the Alaaba (Ethiopia)*. Ed. Gertrud Schneider-Blum. (Verbal Art and Documentary Literature in African Languages, 28.) Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag. 2009. Pp. 102.

Though Ethiopia is rich in proverbs, even proverbs about proverbs (e.g. “A conversation without proverbs is like stew without salt” in Oromo), it is amazing how few Ethiopian languages have had their proverbs collected and published. Book-sized collections of proverbs are only available for less than 10 of Ethiopia’s +80 languages. This one is a welcome addition, especially since it is from a lesser-known community.

The Alaaba community of Ethiopia was little-known until Gertrud Schneider-Blum wrote her grammar of the language (2007). The Alaaba are approximately 200,000 people living in south central Ethiopia, speaking a Highland East Cushitic language that is most closely related to Kambaata. Schneider-Blum (S-B) edited this collection of 418 Alaaba proverbs, most collected by Shukuralla Mohammed, a local leader who had been collecting Alaaba proverbs before she arrived.

The proverbs are listed in alphabetical order. Each proverb is given in Alaaba (in a phonemic transcription), then a word-by-word translation, with the suffixes identified. This is followed by a literal translation of the proverb in sentence form, often explaining idioms, e.g. “enthusiastically (*lit.* with the stomach)”. This is followed by an explanation, such as “Be careful when choosing friends.” This sometimes also has a note about usage, e.g. “Said to somebody who should show more respect.” In addition, there are sometimes cross-references to other proverbs with similar meanings or forms. In these ways, S-B’s book is far superior to most published collections of proverbs, which are far too often simply translated lists, sometimes without even translating the literal form of the proverb.

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Listing proverbs in simple alphabetical order works well in a language like Alaaba that seems to have no prefixes. In this way, all the proverbs that begin with a particular word, e.g. “donkey”, all appear together (nos. 203-213). S-B cites the proverbs in a phonemic form, but then carefully gives a breakdown of affixes, showing the underlying forms of roots and suffixes. For example the root of ‘be better’ is *k’oh-*, and when it is followed by the suffix *-táa*, the pronounced surface form is *k’okkáa*. This sort of morphophonemic complexity is familiar to those studying East Cushitic languages, but is fascinating for other readers with a linguistic bent. Also, she points out a linguistic complexity that readers would otherwise miss: some verbs given in the perfect form must be interpreted as imperfect in English, e.g. “the one who stands (*lit.* stood) beside the donkey”. Those who want to mine this book for linguistic data will find much fascination.

The topics of the proverbs are generally familiar. They support loyalty to family, fulfilling one’s responsibilities, coping with difficulties, avoiding of extremes, etc. As is so often the case, we find some proverbs offering contradictory advice, each proverb to be used in the appropriate situation.

The proverbs were gathered by a community insider, but sometimes leave outsiders wondering “What exactly is a proverb?” Most of these are instantly classifiable as proverbs, but some are labeled as a “blessing”; are these truly proverbs? The insider’s judgment is authoritative.

Because Alaaba has extensive suffixing, rather than prefixing, rhyme at the ends of words is generally the result of grammar, not poetic artistry. Instead, the anonymous poets who created these proverbs artistically used word initial alliteration of both single consonants and entire syllables (or more). One common pattern is to do this with two adjoining words, usually the first and second words of a proverb: “toomá torréeni...” (p. 85). Another frequent pattern is to do this with the first words of the two halves of a couplet: “moggú... moogú...” (p. 75).

About 10% of the proverbs contain wellerisms. For example, “‘Cook me with the hump!’ said the intestines.” Such constructions have been well documented in European languages, and also in West Africa (Dundes 1964), but this book gives ample evidence of it in Alaaba. Noting examples of wellerisms also in

Amharic, Oromo, and Kambaata, Harari it is clear that they are common in Ethiopia, as well.

The translations are generally good, but one word needs correction: *samaag* ‘wildcat’ (found in several proverbs) should be ‘leopard’.

It is not surprising to find here proverbs that are known in other Ethiopian languages, such as “Of mothers and water, there is none evil”, also found in both Amharic and Oromo. However, it is fascinating to find one that is also found far away: “The she-dog [bitch], because she is in an extreme hurry gives birth to blind (ones).” (The same basic proverb is found in adjoining Guji Oromo, but recast as a wellerism.) What is jolting is that this proverb is attested in ancient Greek and Akkadian texts, where Moran gives it as “The bitch by her acting too hastily brought forth the blind” (1978:18). Alster (1979:5) classified this proverb as having “a longer history than any other recorded proverb in the world”, going back to “around 1800 BC”. It must have been valued in its form and commonly used to be preserved so unchanged.

This collection of proverbs is valuable as documentation of Alaaba culture and language, but also as a stimulus to other scholars to collect and publish proverbs in the proverb-rich languages of Ethiopia.

#### *References*

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