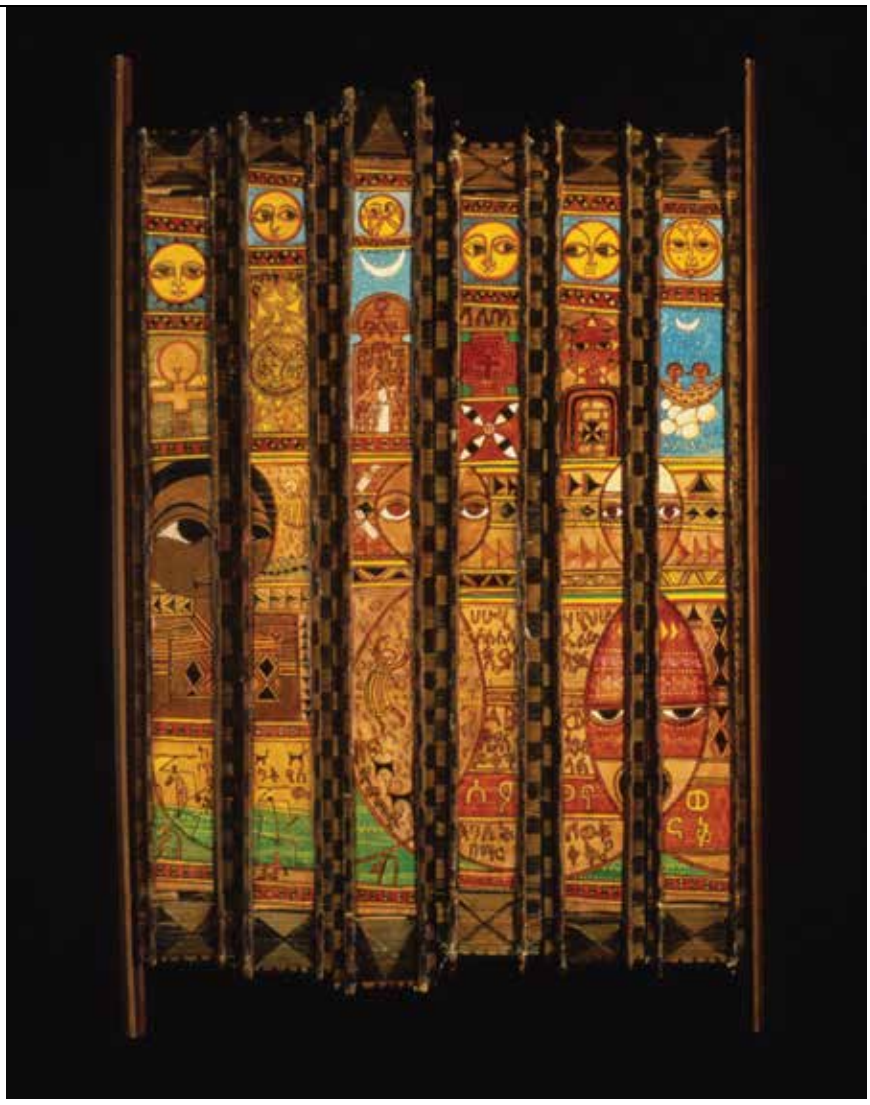
A Suite of Contemporary Ethiopian Poetry

Compiled by Eric Ellingsen

The lively center of the contemporary Ethiopian performance poetry scene can be found in the capital, Addis Ababa. Scores of young and old poets have approached the writers presented here in the past two years, asking and auditioning to perform with them. According to Eric Ellingsen (whose essay appears on page 30), "This is really considered a bit of a movement in Addis. There is nothing else like it."



ABOVE Zerihun Yetmgeta (Ethiopian, born 1941) *Wax and Gold,* 1991. Mixed media on animal skin and bamboo, 38 1/8 x 25 1/2 inches, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, Purchase, 94.24. © 2014 Zerihun Yetmgeta

Enkutatash

by Misrak Terefe

new year new year: enkutatash – my pearly blues.
of all the names why did the angel give you this?
oh how i wish your name would just be pearl – enku
would be enough – but why tatash? tatash
with all our troubles, tatash with all our blues.
we already have enough of that: don't borrow us more trouble.

enkutatash – for you – to bloom we bake the bread.
we spread the grass as carpets, flat, we burn the incense,
add the plates, the blessed, to celebrate – to celebrate the change.
enkutatash, if you come – then change. then change us, too.
but if you come to bring new trouble – year after year – don't come at all.

Translation from the Amharic
By Rike Scheffler

Up to the End

by Abebaw Melaku

Abel far able in grace
in innocence far beyond reach,
poor Cain in changing riches held too near
sinks into
this abyss.

Into a story in the start in the dark
changes in a bruise in blackness
introducing a violence in the start of humankind.
Let's go down, Abel says
to his brother to snatch
his breath from him.

A chapter in death's memoirs, over
ages will be spoken by men,
by angels will be written
written now as follows.

"Two brothers
stepped down
into the valley,
one killer returns
one killed not able
to return.

"One coming back
one staying back
the one saying, come down
let's go down together –"

Now one stays, in having come
down, now a murder.

After half a day missing something
a half-fulfilled day half-unsuccessful a day half-lived,
after this betrayal the trust in half breaks
between those on mountaintops
and those on mountaintops' bottoms.

The line of Adam
no matter how brave, no matter the talk,
no matter the profit, no matter the titles,
the one staying on top says,
"Oh, they will kill me if I come down so I will not
step down."

Therefore once reaching the top, to step
down equals death. Am I able to step
down when told to step
down when in coming
down Abel's life is
left?

Of course, why should he step down?
Has stepping down benefited
anyone who has reached the top,
unless the killing of those who step down is stopped,
forever?

Translation from the Amharic
By Eric Ellingsen & Jorga Mesfin

Misrak Terefe is a renowned poet in Ethiopia who published the first poetry VCD as a female poet. A founding member of the Tobiya poetic jazz group, she has various joint publications with other writers as well as the Tobiya poetry and jazz DVD (vol. 1) release.

Abebaw Melaku is a renowned poet and journalist who published the verse collection *Keradion* in 2007 and an audio poetry CD the following year. In 2008 he was one of the founding members of the Tobiya poetic jazz group, and he is also a journalist for Ethiopia's most influential radio show, *Addis Zema*.

Rike Scheffler (b. 1985, Berlin) is a poet, co-founder of the Berlin poetry collective G13, and songwriter whose work has been published in various newspapers and anthologies. Her first book, *der rest ist resonanz,* was published by kookbooks in November 2014 (www.rikescheffler.tumblr.com).

An Ethiopian musician, **Jorga Mesfin** is the founder of the Ethio-jazz group Wudasse and composed the score to Haile Gerima's epic movie *Teza*, for which he won the award for Best Music Selection at the twenty-second Carthage Film Festival and Best Composer Award at the fifth Dubai International Film Festival.

The Planner

by Mihret Kebede

Why do we even make plans?
Being human is like being the plan
of another planner / planet
so that in some way you are always
a plant in someone else's plan

and so until the planner decides to change the plan
or unless the planner decides to dismiss the plan

you are beautifully sitting there,
plain plan man.

Like the flow of the river, determined
by the shape of the land in any situation. But
how to flow
is a very different question.

You can either carefully step on the rocks
or you can simply decide to flow under
the rocks and be forgotten forever.

Two rocks, still out there –
to shape your flow and course.

Translation from the Amharic
By Uljana Wolf

Mihret Kebede is an artist and poet who is a founding director of Netsa Art Village, an artists' collective, as well as part of the Tobiya poetry and jazz DVD (vol. 1) release and a founding member of the Tobiya poetic jazz group. She is renowned for her poetry readings and her experimental artworks.

Uljana Wolf (b. 1979) is a poet and translator based in Brooklyn and Berlin. *False Friends*, an English selection translated by Susan Bernofsky, appeared from Ugly Duckling Presse in 2011. She translates numerous poets into German, among them John Ashbery, Erín Moure, Cole Swensen, and Christian Hawkey.

"The poems in this issue do not come from small voices. They do not come from a country that is just developing a literary culture. **These poets are part of a long tradition in Ethiopia, and the vibrancy, the subversive nature, the indignation and lamentation you will read will echo some of the most incisive and intelligent poetry anywhere.** It is we who are catching up, but thank goodness we are doing so now."– Maaza Mengiste

ABOVE Eric Ellingsen, Robbert Lippok, Abebaw Melaku, Mihret Kebede, Rike Scheffler, and Misrak Terefe reading in the group *Heart* performance in the Roter Salon at Berlin's Volks Theater in July 2014. Courtesy of the Institute for Spatial Experiments / www.raumexperimente.net.

Visit the *WLT* website to watch video clips of these poets' recent performances and to read Terefe's long poem "A Country in the Leader's Eyes, a Country in the People's Eyes."

In the Listenings
The Gold Waxes

by Eric Ellingsen

Ethiopian poets know that "wax and gold" is a practiced skill one learns merely by growing up in the languages of Ethiopia today. Learning how to speak from childhood to adulthood is learning how speech itself is a tool and a weapon.

WHEN I MOVED TO Addis Ababa with my family for ten weeks in 2012 to collaborate with the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design—with twenty-two young international artists, the curator/cultural studies collaborator Christina Werner, and three artist/architect grantees—Olafur Eliasson, the artist who started the Institute of Spatial Experiments in Berlin, told me: "Don't frame a place by a lack of resources; see the resourcefulness there." In Ethiopia, I saw it in the things I heard.

Ethiopian poetry is a poetics of "gold in wax." This is a saying every Ethiopian I have ever met, young or old, knows and identifies with. And everyone has a different opinion of what that phrase means. What "gold in wax" means is what it does, and the meaning is fresh, generative, not something stored, fixed, concretized. In other words, it is like the Hebrew story of the manna the Israelites collected each morning while drifting about looking for the promised land. Any gold has to be collected anew each day. Yesterday's gold is today's wax, or rot. In other words, to talk about a solidified meaning of anything is to cast it into a strict formwork of words. But it is in the speaking that the forms are exercised, and listening is the digging one does. And it is thought and feeling that heat and separate the things found. And all this annealing of meanings happens simultaneously. The wax and gold saying practices itself in saying sayings. Literally. It generates, like negentropy, a structure that constantly builds itself up against the flow of stable meanings. Two people using the gold-and-wax speaking device in a conversation can get solid ground to stand on, and yet that ground is a quicksand requiring all the lithe energy you can shuttle into its polycausal, multidimensional, infinite depthlessness afoot.

In Ethiopia, the Amharic language has an emotional architecture. Wax and gold, and what they mean, underlie all said things, whether talking renewal, poetry, policy, politics, religion. . . . Anything said is said in the gold wax ways. And the gold is the way talking happens, and it does not have deep roots in simple sarcasms or cynical obviousness.

In other words, the listener puts the gold in the wax that they already find there.

So perceiving wax translates the content into more wax.

So perceiving gold translates the content into more gold.

Does it sound like a Buddhist koan? It is not also that, too.

"Gold and wax" is analyzed by how it feels. Each sound has a different look. And listening sets the speaking tone.

Know how wax and gold will be *like* a lot of things you think you know.

The most important thing I know about Ethiopian poetry is that poets in Ethiopia today are not giving *readings*—they are giving *listenings*. And the instrument played, and practiced, is the listening instrument. There are not many people today practicing listening. Most people just listen to what they want to say and what they want someone else to hear. Today, it seems, in some sense, everyone is listening *in* on each other and not *to* each other, not *with* each other. Maybe this structure of Ethiopian poetry today is what translates into the structure of how things are heard. To listen could be what it means to sew the sweater while the wool grows on the sheep.

The wax and gold are not unlike Wallace Stevens's "Nothing that is not there / and the nothing that is." The view sounds good at least.

Whatever the gold is, it isn't. And the gold keeps growing between the people speaking to each other so it is a kind of in-listening; a mollusk space, a strange-attractor, a device. The only Rube Goldberg device I have ever heard that worked.

The wax and gold in Ethiopian poetry today requires a negotiation of listening. And listening changes the thing you are listening to. It's what perceptual and cognitive psychologist Diana Deutsch describes in *Phantom Words*. Listening writes the thing you hear. Listening is the transducer. Listening says a lot. The result always being, in some sense, that what is said is not said by the speaker, or is only partly said by the

speaker. Just as what is written is authored by the listener.

So in Ethiopia, the only "death of the author" possible would be the death of the listener.

Understanding how gold and wax work requires work. And understanding the poetics of Ethiopian poetry today requires a working understanding of wax and gold:

> Political messages may also be passed on in this way, often in cryptic form. The cryptic form in such contexts is usually a vulgarized application of what is called the "wax and gold" (*sem-inna-werg*) method of writing poetry developed in ecclesiastical institutions of learning, based on puns and double meanings. Ambiguity has served the need for secrecy often associated with political power in Ethiopia, where too-open expressions of opinions and sentiments could be risky. . . . A prominent feature of this poetry [*Qinė* poetry] is the use of "wax and gold." Its basis is the Monophysite conception of Christ professed by the Ethiopian national church. In the belief, Christ was God and man, but his manhood was only a shell that hid his real, divine essence. The poetry framed on this model is not only ambiguous but also contains a superficial meaning (the wax) that "hides" the genuine message (the gold). The rules of this poetry are complicated and take years to master. (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*)

For example, if three people are talking and two of them feel they have an understanding and speak to that understanding, then a Trust Space grows. In that Trust Space more gold is made, and more gold is mined, and more wax is required for casting. At the same time, the gold made and mined is wax to the third person. However, a really practiced gold and wax speaker says things so that the third person thinks they are making gold, too. So the third person is, in a way, finding gold in the wax. To the first- and second-person point of view, the third person is missing the important things, even though the important things are right there, and anyone can mine. And though it is wax to the second and first person, that wax allows the other person's gold to be shaped, refined. A currency. And this is a production of knowledge.

It helps to understand that Ethiopian poetry is, and is not, in some sense, sung. Is, and is not, song. Is, and is not, in some sense, spoken-word. Is, and is not, music. The poetry is jazz in some sense. This is what many Ethiopian poets today call their practice: poetic jazz.

Ethiopian poetic jazz performances make space with, on average, 1,500 people in Addis Ababa. These people will pay to show up at venues that range from the national theater to a hotel conference room. They will sit still, for hours, in tight, airplane-like economy rows of seats that cost business-class rates. The public will come, not as poets listening to poets but

Husbands of My Dear Country

by Mihret Kebede

Let me have a polite conversation with my country
Let me write a poem to benefit my country
  even if I'm not able to write a poem for my country like the wise poets write
  even if I'm not the legal husband of my country or a leader
  let me still water the dry land with planted sweat
  let me slip in by the fence as a lover

By the front by the top by the upper upper door
  they closed the gate open but the gate never fits
  it never fitted you, probably it never properly
  fit the bowl

either way either way . . .

I don't want to ask you to marry . . . Instead let me write you a poem
  Let me fit a poem . . . to benefit my country
  My writing of poetry will never stop . . . my writing of poetry will never cease
  collecting the hill of words

The poetry of the people . . . is the melody of the people
until I grow vines I will . . . fit you with my poetry
until I twist lines here I will . . . build a rhyming house here for you

Because the lid doesn't fit and the leaders don't fit
and they always leave the door open
and they always leave the lid of the pot open
so people can scoop things out and scoop things out and scoop things out . . .

Translation from the Amharic
By Eric Ellingsen, Jorga Mesfin, and Uljana Wolf

RIGHT The Tobiya Poetic Jazz Group hosts monthly poetry events at the Ras Hotel in Addis Ababa.

because the poetry speaks to their lives and what is important in their lives. Poetry, in Addis Ababa, plays a real role in the larger population and social stickiness of society. People feel themselves reflected in it. It is relevant to them. It is not merely entertainment, though it is entertaining, too. This means the poetry makes a relational space, rather than takes place, in the language of people's lives.

Spatially, the musicians often play behind the poet. The poet stands with their back to the musicians, facing the audience. This forces a situation of listening to what is going on behind you, while modifying the words based on the expressions and feelings of people listening in front of you. So the ears listen backward while the eyes listen forward, giving the ears a kind of 360-listening-degree sense. This sound volume is sight specific.

In Ethiopia, each poet rehearses their poems with the musicians days and days before their performances, almost like bands rehearse. The rehearsals are an exercise that creates a poly-everything style of precision particular to each poet. The rehearsals are a symbiotic relationship that makes listening an active activity rather than a passive action.

So listening sets the tone.

Know how poetry in Ethiopia today is not just spoken-word or singing, but it is those things, too. And poetry in Ethiopia today is not one genre accompanying another. It is not genre at all. It is not only keeping time; it is an embodiment of time itself. And timing is spatial. Timing gives time to others, which takes time to give. In Ethiopia, it is not the same time, in terms of the date or year, as anywhere else in the world, even if you are in the same zone.

Know how Addis Ababa is the home of the African Union, a "gift" of Chinese investors, and that means a lot of listened-to gold from everywhere, in some sense.

Know how by 2019 the "slums" and people living in said slums in Addis Ababa will have gone through a complete relocation. The last time I was able to hang out with some of the Ethiopian poets, we were also with planners. We speculated whether there was room for a twenty-first-century urban planning strategy, which could require that art and poetry institutions scale at similar rates of growth as the city. Can poetic measures be another way to measure the health of a city's growth? Can poetry measure freedom of the press?

Know how there is not a poetry/creative writing department, or any poetry/creative writing classes, at the University of Addis Ababa, a university with more than 42,000 students.

Know that despite the very rare contemporary poetry book, and the absence of online creative writing platforms and small presses in Ethiopia, contemporary poetry and poets maintain a central role in the culture and arts of society. (See David Shook's manifesto on DIY publishing.)

Also know that the earliest illustrated Christian Bible, the fifth-century Garima Gospels, were found in Ethiopia. That some of the ancient manuscripts, historical chronicles, and hagiographical texts in Ethiopia were written about, and preserved by, women. That books in Ethiopia are regarded as some of the most sacred things, yet people are allowed to touch and handle them.

"Wax and gold" is a practiced skill one learns merely by growing up in the languages of Ethiopia today. Learning how to speak from childhood to adulthood is learning how speech itself is a tool and a weapon. Everyone grows in a constant emergence of meaning, which is socially dynamic and layered in strata of simultaneous meanings as a conscious construction of power relations. So poetry starts young. To dig into Ethiopian poetry today is to know that words are the tip of the shovel, and the weight of the listener on the shovel gives heft to the words. And if there is gold, it is probably in the digging.

Cornell University

Eric Ellingsen uses bio-spaces to squat bio-poems.
This morning I couldn't get my bio lines to read rite, so I took a bit out of the hand drill and inserted all my two-year-old's red crayons drawing the red line. Then I went upstairs and read, instead of "state," *let us all be heads of lettuce*, drawing on Khlebnikov. Whatever you throw into the eternal circumstance, have a good time.

TOP PHOTO: TAMRAT SEYOUM