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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOME TIGRINYA PROVERBS

Abstract: The present article largely draws upon the author's thesis dealing with the topics of birth and death in Tigrinya proverbs, submitted at the Free University of Berlin, Germany. The paper investigates -parallels of some of these proverbs to those from other African as well as Mid-Eastern, European, and Asian language cultures. The relevance of the analysis lies in the fact that, although being the third largest modern Semitic language, Tigrinya remains not sufficiently studied, with many gaps in the academic research of this language, not to mention its proverbial heritage. Although the notion that Tigrinya proverbs have equivalents in other languages might suggest itself, hardly any documented evidence of it has been presented up to the present day. The following analysis thus takes a step toward the comparative study of Tigrinya proverbs by offering an annotated overview of selected proverbs and sayings with their correspondences in other languages.

Keywords: Comparative paremiology; contrastive paremiology; Tigrinya; proverb distribution

1. Introduction

1.1. Some introductory notes

Throughout the article, the originals are given in common academic transliteration. Since the naming conventions used in Ethiopia and Eritrea differ from the Western ones, and Ethiopian patronymics are often mistaken for surnames, the names of the respective authors are treated differently, according to the way established in Ethiopian studies, that is with the emphasis on personal names. Publication dates given in Ethiopian calendar (EC) or Islamic calendar (AH, or Hijri year) are recorded along with the corresponding Common Era (CE) dates.

1.2. Tigrinya proverbial tradition

Tigrinya (also: Tigrigna, Tigrinia and the like; self-designation: təgrāñña along with təgrəyna) is one of the working languages

in Eritrea and the largest working language in the Tigray region in Northern Ethiopia. It is an Ethio-Semitic language, written in the *gə'əz* script and used as native language in the Eritrean highlands, in Tigray, as well as in the diaspora in many countries worldwide. Several scholars of Semitic and Ethiopian studies have contributed to compiling and annotating Tigrinya proverbs. Most of the respective works in European languages were published in the late 19th to the mid-20th century. The compilation of the traditionally oral genre of the proverb into published collections by Tigrinya speakers began towards the end of the Italian colonial era in today's Eritrea in the 1940s with a work containing 3,300 proverbs, and has been continuing ever since within and outside the region, with collections containing up to several thousands of units.¹ Usually, such collections constitute mere alphabetical lists, with barely any of them explaining the proverbs, and only seldom organized by topic. Occasionally, rare words or archaisms might be listed with their common-use equivalents in an appendix. All these collections are monolingual except for the bilingual collection by The Academy of Ethiopian Languages, which offers an Amharic translation, however no explanations or commentaries on the background or use of the proverbs.²

1.3. Comparative and contrastive proverb study

For centuries, scholars have been repeatedly drawing their attention to the fact that many proverbs across cultures can be strikingly similar in their form, structure and message, and yet different in the detail, using different pictures, protagonists, or settings. This peculiarity is usually explained with the crucial role of the respective historical, geographical, social and cultural environments in the shaping of proverbs.³ While the terms comparative and contrastive refer to different approaches in linguistics, the former focusing on similarities and the latter discussing the differences between units, paremiology uses these terms rather synonymously, meaning that the comparison of proverbs implies the detection of differences between them.⁴

Numerous comparative paremiological studies have been conducted by scholars around the globe, covering language pairs or groups of languages related to each other by geographical proximity, language family membership, or cultural bonds.⁵ In the case of Tigrinya, a thorough comparative analysis of its rich proverbial

tradition is yet to be conducted. It seems to have most in common with Amharic proverbs, which is certainly to be attributed to the geographical environment, the Ethiopian cultural area, linguistic relatedness, as well as to the history shared by these languages and regions. However, due to the high number of common features between the two traditions, this topic should rather be addressed in a separate article. In what follows here, a selection of Tigrinya proverbs with semantic equivalents in other languages is to be presented.

2. Tigrinya proverb selection with parallels and equivalents

2.1. Tigrinya – Hebrew

There is hardly anything new in the statement that wise sayings and similar expressions from religious scripts form an inherent part of proverb corpora in language cultures to which the respective religions are crucial. That is the case with German where proverbial expressions from the Old and the New Testaments are used, with Modern Hebrew where the sagacity from the Tanakh and Rabbinic literature live on in form of proverbs, with Arabic where “the proverbs of the Prophet” coexist with the “popular proverbs”; and Tigrinya is no exception in that respect, using proverbial expressions of Biblical origin alongside with proverbs proper.⁶ Thus, the evidence of such expressions, often taken from the Old Testament, allows to draw parallels between Tigrinya and Classical Hebrew. As the following couple of examples shows, not only do the Book of Proverbs or the Ecclesiastes serve as their sources.

One of these sources is the Song of Songs with the golden thread of the theme of love running through it. A part of its verse 8:6 is listed in a Tigrinya proverb collection as a word-for-word borrowing of “[...] love is as strong as death, jealousy as unrelenting as Sheol” (Hebrew: *‘azzā kam-māwæt ‘ahābā, qāšā ki-š’ōl qin’ā*), where *Sheol* stands for the underworld of the Hebrew Bible and remains incorporated in the expression in Tigrinya in form of a loanword (*si’ol*): (1) *fəqri kām mot həyyal, qən’at si’ol bərtu*.⁷ However, a version of this proverb found in another collection is noteworthy: (2) *fəqri kab mot yəhəyyəl, qən’at kab si’ol yəbərtə* – ‘Love is stronger than death, jealousy is more unrelenting than Sheol’.⁸ Variations of this expression are known to a number of languages, including Turkish, Uyghur, and Vietnamese.⁹ Among other Old Testament verses subjected to alterations on their way to becoming proverbs in Tigrinya is from Ezekiel 18:2: “The fathers have eaten

sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Hebrew: *'āḇōt yōkəlū ḥōsār, wə-šinnē hab-bānīm tiqhānā*). The closest rendering of this verse in form of a proverb is found in Carlo Conti Rossini's Italian-language collection from 1942: (3) *qāddamot z-ibāl'u yəsə'ənu, daḥarot məs k^wərərəmtom yəwəllädu* – 'The ancestors lacked food, the descendants are born with their molar teeth'.¹⁰ The variations of this proverb listed in Tigrinya-language collections feature different verb forms and might have different wordings. Thus, in most of them, the verb *sä'anä* 'to lack' appears in its gerund form *sə'inu*, unlike above where it is as an imperfect, while the suffixed form *z-ibäl'ə=wwo* 'something to eat' (literally: what they eat it) is preferred. Also, the lack of food might be expressed in alternative ways: *yä'bädbədu* 'they run here and there while looking for something' or *z-äy-räkäbu* 'the ones who did not find (get, enjoy)'.¹¹ Moreover, in yet another compilation, instead of 'their molar teeth', the closer to the Hebrew original 'their teeth' (*asnanom*) is attested.¹²

2.2. Before birth and before death

Besides Hebrew, paremiological parallels between Tigrinya and other Jewish languages are attested. A popular Tigrinya saying goes: (4) *qäw'i k-äy-kätätä, säb k-äy-motä 'ay-yə'əmmän-ən* – 'The harvest is not to be trusted before it is reaped, the man not before he is dead'; with the following alternative version: (5) *säb k-äy-motä, 'əkli k-äy-säwwätä ('ay-tə'män)* – '(Do not trust) the man before he is dead, the crop before it is ripe'.¹³ The Amharic counterpart revolves around the harvest and a monk.¹⁴

This saying resembles a Rabbinic maxim from the Mishnaic ethical tractate of *Pirqē 'Abōt*, which says: *'al ta'ämîn bə-əšmākā 'ad yôm mötkā* – 'Do not trust in yourself until the day of your death'. It also exists at least in Moroccan Arabic: *lä t'ammin³ d-dahr ḥattā ta'wī l-qabr* – 'Do not trust in the destiny until you head [to] the grave', and has a Moroccan Judeo-Arabic equivalent: *lo' 'əməḥna ba-gōy 'əfillō ba-əbər 'arbā'im sāna* – '[There is] no trust in a Muslim, even if he has been in the grave for forty years', as well as a parallel in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish): *no ay emuna en goy ni afilu en la fuesa* – 'There is no trust in a Gentile even in the grave'.¹⁵ Similar sayings are also attested outside the African and Middle Eastern context, for example in Romansh: *marcant e porc as i peisa mort* – 'A merchant and a pig are weighed dead'.¹⁶ Here, a similar

idea, but in regard to a merchant, is expressed: One should not believe a merchant until he is dead.

Another Ladino expression, considering birth, has semantic parallels to a Tigrinya proverb: *no nasio ke ya estornudo* – ‘He was not born yet, but has already sneezed’, with the Tigrinya equivalent being: (6) *k-äy-wälädku, ’ambäbädku* – ‘Before I was born, I was [already] shivering (from the cold)’. A similar expression also exists in Somali, however rather as a saying used for young people who act untypically beyond their years: *maba dhalane dhawrsan okaa!* – ‘She was not born yet but is already ashamed [of her nudity]’.¹⁷ Existing with different verb forms, these expressions convey the same idea of prematurity, using the same starting point against somewhat different situation backgrounds.

2.3. *Sleep and death*

The notion of a connection between sleep and death is evidenced in numerous language cultures around the globe. In Tigrinya, although not being a proverb proper, it is often listed in proverb collections: (7) *hərras nə’əštäy mot* – ‘Sleep is the little death’, as well as (8) *mot bə-təkäs /dəqqas/ yäləmmäd* – ‘One becomes used to the death while in sleep /doze/’.¹⁸ The saying is not unknown to other Ethio-Semitic languages; for instance, in Harari, it exists in form of a riddle: *mut-le ih-zo (mañit)* – ‘For death, its brother ([solution:] Sleep)’, as well as in form of a proverbial saying: *mut-wā mañit massā-nta* – ‘Death and sleep are equal’.¹⁹ The idea of death and sleep being related to each other also exists in other African language, for example in Yoruba: *enífé é rí òkú kó sùn* – ‘Whoever wants to see the dead should go to sleep’; and in Akan: *se nnyim owu a, hwe nda* – ‘If you have no idea of death, observe the phenomenon of sleep’.²⁰ There are similar sayings in the *Feyli* dialect of Southern Kurdish: *xew le merg birdiye* – ‘Sleep is the little death’ (literally: takes from death), in Armenian: *k’naçn ow meřaçë, tip’ mēk ē* – ‘Asleep or dead, is the same’, as well as in Moroccan Judeo-Arabic: *n’ās ben ’āmm l-mōt* – ‘Sleep is the paternal cousin of death’.²¹

Tracing this notion back to its origin does not seem an easy task. The similarity between sleep and death as realms where the human mind and consciousness are absent is alluded to as early as in the Mesopotamian epic poem of Gilgamesh, and in Ancient Egypt. Death as a kind of sleep from which some will resurrect in the End

of Days has a strong presence in the Jewish tradition and is attested in the Rabbinical literature and the Old Testament (Psalm 13:3, Jeremiah 51:57, Job 14:10–12 and others). Greeks and Romans had similar views, regarding the divine personifications of both these phenomena as close relatives, according to their mythological traditions, but also reflected in the works of classical authors like Virgil and Homer.²² It is fascinating to see how the same idea is expressed in different languages, for instance, what degree of kinship is attributed to the concepts of sleep and death.

2.4. On resemblance

The apple never falls far from the tree, Like father, like son...

There is hardly any language that lacks similar sayings expressing the idea that children inevitably share characteristics of their parents. Tigrinya is no exception in this regard; in fact, it features several similar proverbs: (9) *rämäs wäddi g^wahri, quttu' wäddi näbri* – ‘Red-hot ash is the child of the burning coal, fiery is the child of a tiger’; (10) *wäddi bäla'i 'anna-k^wämsä'ä yəwälläd* – ‘The child of a voracious eater is born chewing’; (11) *wäddi qənfiz ləmuş 'ay-yəwälläd-ən* – ‘The child of a hedgehog is not born smooth[-skinned]’; (12) *(wäddi) raza nay 'abbu'u haza* – ‘(The child of a) stork took after his father’; (13) *wäddi hawwi hamäkušti* – ‘The child of fire is ash’.²³ Among equivalents in other Semitic and Jewish languages are the following: (Amharic of the Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel; compare with the previous) *yä-'əsət ləğ 'amäd* – ‘The child of fire is ash’; (Tunesian Judeo-Arabic) *wəld əl-fā'r haffā'r* – ‘The son of a mouse knows how to dig’; (Palestinian Arabic) *ibn il-baṭṭ 'awwām* – ‘The son of a duck is a floater’, (Judeo-Tat, or Juhuri) *çingire gove çingire gusele mibu* – ‘A mad cow gives birth to a mad calf’; (Amharic) *gäbs s-ibäsəl, 'abbatu-n yəməsəl* – ‘When the barley corn ripens, it resembles its father’.²⁴ Further languages where similar sayings exist include Somali: *shabeelka ilmihisu waa giiran yihiin* – ‘The children of a leopard have spots’, Herero: *aya za mondaura kai isa ozondeku momutjira* – ‘That which was born by one with spotted tail will not be without spots on its tail’, Japanese: *kaeru-no ko-wa kaeru* – ‘The son of a frog is a frog’, Polish: *kto się cielęciem urodził, wołem umrzeć musi* – ‘Who was born as a calf must die as an ox’, Romanian: *vițel s-a născut, bou a murit* – ‘Born [as] a calf, died [as] a ox’, and Czech Romani: *dilineske ul'il'a, dilineske merla* – ‘Born as a fool, died as a fool’.²⁵

However, in some languages, there are proverbs trying to question the existing laws of nature. Thus, in a proverb in Akkadian, the earliest attested Semitic language, the following question is raised: *agarinnu enšēt, šikari ina mīnū iṭiāb* – ‘The mother brew is bitter; how is the beer sweet?’. A rhyming proverb in another long since extinct language, the Andalusian Arabic, presents a subject worth pondering: *ummu rrana wa-wildu ṭayr al-muruḡ: al-walad li-man yaḥruḡ?* – ‘His mother is a frog and his father a wading bird: to whom will the son take?’²⁶

2.5. More on resemblance

There is however a disagreement between different proverbial traditions on the question whom the new-born child should resemble. According to one Tigrinya proverb, the issue should be solved as follows: (14) *’anno mäsäli, na’aḳi yämsäl* – ‘Resemble [your] mother (oh woman); [your son] should resemble you’.²⁷ In Palestinian Arabic, several sayings ascribe importance in this matter to the maternal uncle: *il-xāl wālid* – ‘The maternal uncle is a father’ and *tiltēn il-walad la-xālo* – ‘Two thirds of a child [resembles] his maternal uncle’. Such view of things might sound familiar to the speakers of Icelandic, whose language, however, offers a proverb with an additional detail: *móðurbræðrum verða menn líkastir, en föðursystur fljóð* – ‘Men are born resembling [their] maternal uncles, maidens – resembling [their] paternal aunts’. Yet another suggestion comes from the Cypriot Greek: *i níffi ándan yenníthin dis beθθerás imiázi* – ‘As soon as she’s born the bride looks like the mother-in-law’.²⁸

The maternal uncle also occurs in another context, namely when referring to someone who avoids giving direct answers or tries to escape a shameful situation. The following dialogue proverb featuring an identical wording is attested in both Tigrinya and Arabic: (Tigrinya) (15) *bäqli, män ’abboka ’antä-bälu-wwa-s, färäs ’ak-koy bälä* – (Palestinian Arabic) *sa’alū l-baḡil: mīn abūk? āl: l-əḥṣān xāli* – ‘They said to (Arabic: asked) the mule, “Who is your father?” He said, “The horse is my maternal uncle”’.²⁹

Another proverb popular throughout the Arab-speaking world and featuring a paternal uncle instead has a semantic equivalent in Tigrinya: ‘My brother and I are against my cousin (“son of my paternal uncle”), and my cousin and I are against the stranger’, cf. the Tigrinya *ḥaw z-älläwwo g’ana yäfarḥo, wälud z-älläwwo ḥaw*

yəfārho – ‘He who has a brother, the stranger is afraid of him; he who has a child, the brother is afraid of him’.³⁰

2.6. *Ungrateful children*

Another pattern common to numerous language cultures concerns parenthood and upbringing, topics universal enough to be reflected in proverbial traditions around the globe and throughout history. As the respective Tigrinya saying has it: (16) *'addä 'assärtä zəb'i bäl'a* – ‘As for the mother of ten, a hyena ate her’, meaning that none of the children she has given birth to and raised was there to defend her in need, in this case, from the beast.³¹ Corresponding proverbs include the Hebrew *'āb 'əḥād məp-arnēs 'āsārā bānīm bə-ahābā, wa-'āsārā bānīm 'enām yəkōlīm ləp-arnēs 'āb 'əḥād* – ‘One father provides for ten sons with love, and ten sons are not able to provide for one father’, the rhymed Sudanese Arabic *umm el-'ašara tamūt tiht eš-šağara* – ‘The mother of ten dies under a tree’, the Belarusian *matka parve pazuchu, chavaŭšy dla dziacej, a dzeci parvuc' pazuchu, chavaŭšy ad matki* – ‘The mother strains herself stashing for the children, and children strain themselves stashing away from mother’, and the Czech Romani *jekh daj bararla avri deše čhavoren, al'o deš čhave na l'ikerna jekha da* – ‘One mother raises ten children, but ten children cannot take care of one mother’.³² Strikingly, the amount of children being ten seems to be preferred in several different cultures. The fact that a similar saying is documented in one of the first attested languages in human history, Sumerian, suggests the universality of the value discussed in it, namely the responsibility of children towards their parents. However, in Sumerian, the offspring of a different size is mentioned: *ama-g'uruš 8-e tu-ud-da nig² sig-ga ba-nu²* – ‘The mother who has given birth to eight young men lies down exhausted (in poverty)’.³³ It is known from Old Babylonian inheritance records that up to eight adult children were allowed to inherit – a regulation which might explain the use of number ‘eight’ here.³⁴

2.7. *Giving birth in public*

The following Tigrinya metaphoric proverb might be used for referring to a thing which could not be held in secret till the end, not least due to the carelessness of the secret-keepers themselves: (17) *tāḥabi'än-ya yəṭänsa-mmo, säb 'akkibän yəwälda* – ‘It is in secret (literally: having hidden themselves) that they become pregnant; then, having assembled people, they give birth’.³⁵ Noteworthy, a

semantic equivalent exists in Southern Kurdish: *manga we dizîyew ket girê we aşkîra zayid* – ‘The cow mates in secret, but gives birth openly’.³⁶

2.8. Attending funerals

When it comes to power relations, some untold regulations which have proven useful have manifested themselves in Tigrinya proverbs. The underlying idea of such sayings suggests that one should show respect and loyalty to the respective power holder, particularly in hard times, however, rather stay away from the scheming when it comes to power transition. Tigrinya expresses this notion as follows: (18) *wäddi ’anbäsa kə-mäwwät qəbärro, ’anbäsa kə-mäwwät ’addi wä’al* – ‘When the son of the lion dies, attend its funeral; when the lion dies, stay in [your] village (stay home; refrain from participating)’, or (19) *zämäd šum ’əntə-mot ’addi ’ay-təw’al, šum ’əntə-mot, ’addi wə’al* – ‘When a relative of the chief dies, do not stay in [your] village; when the chief dies, stay in [your] village’.³⁷ Similar expressions are not unknown to other proverbial traditions, however, they tend to be made up of one part only, namely advising to pay equal tribute to the animals of important people as to their owners (for instance, in Judeo-Neo-Aramaic of Zakho: *kalbid qāzi mtle, kullu zillu l-azāya* – ‘[When] the dog of the judge died, all went to pay [their] condole’). A two-part proverb similar to the one in Tigrinya exists in Korean among other languages: *taegam chug-ün te-nūn an ka-do, taegam mal chug-ün te-nūn kanda* – ‘Although one does not attend a government minister’s funeral, one attends the funeral of the minister’s horse’.³⁸

2.9. Medicine against death

As a universal topic, death has been providing a plentiful abundance of material for proverbs and sayings throughout cultures and history. One of the issues people have been concerned with in them is that of an eternal life, or the existence of a medicine against death. At this point, it would be appropriate to once again mention the Epic of Gilgamesh, probably the earliest surviving literary work in which the pursuit of eternal life plays a central role. Suffice it to mention a few proverbs treating the topic, for instance the Bulgarian *ot smärt lek njama* – ‘There is no medicine against death’, the Japanese *furō fushi no kusuri wa nai* – ‘There is no medicine against aging and death’, or the Amharic *kä-motä bä-h^wala mädhanit, k-aräğğä bä-h^wala ’abet ’abet* – ‘When one becomes old, [it’s no use] wailing;

when one is dead, [no] medicine [will help]'.³⁹ The equivalent in Tigrinya states as follows: (20) *yällän-əs yällän, fäwsi həmam 'əmbär, fäwsi mot-əs yällän* – 'What does not exist, does in fact not exist; a medicine for illness does exist, however, as to the medicine for death, it does not exist'.⁴⁰

2.10. On cats and mice

Although in the Routledge Book of World Proverbs, the proverb *What is play to the cat is death to the mouse* is listed as being Danish⁴¹, there is hardly anything specifically Danish about it. In fact, this and similar proverbs are quite popular with African languages, with Tigrinya being no exception: (21) *nə-'anč əwa-n ša'ra-mota, nə-dummu mäššawətta* – 'To the mouse, [it is her] death agony; to the cat, it (the mouse) is its playmate'.⁴² The Amharic equivalent sounds: *y-ay(ə)t motwa yä-dämmät č awta* – '[What is] to the mouse its death, [is] to the cat its play'; similarly in Saho, which is spoken in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan: *andawa rabaa-k lam dummu tigiri la yan-aa* – 'The cat plays with the mouse, while it (the latter) lies dying'. On the other hand, Somali features children and a lizard in the same context: *mulac waa u qurgoyn, carruurna wa u qosol* – 'What is death to the lizard, is fun for the children', and *wiilkana waa ku geeraar, mulacana waa ku geeri* – 'What is pastime (literally: a nursery rhyme) to the boy, is death to the lizard'. However, the motive with a cat and a mouse seems more common also outside the African region. For instance, in Karaim, a Turkic language spoken by adherents of Karaite Judaism mainly in Eastern Europe: *mačyg'a ojun, šyčanga öliin* – 'The cat's play is the mouse's death'.⁴³

The danger is over for the mouse though as soon as the cat is out of the house, as numerous languages express in their proverbs, for example in Lithuanian: *katinas iš namų, pelės iš kampų / ant stalų* – 'The cat out of the house, the mice out of the corners / on the tables', in Finnish: *kun kissa on poissa, hiiret hyppivät pöydällä* – 'When the cat is away, the mice jump on the table', or in Palestinian Arabic: *in gāb əl-eṭṭ, il'ab yā fār* – 'If the cat is absent, go play, oh mouse!'.⁴⁴ Tigrinya, however, prefers in this case an owl to the cat: (22) *gung^wa 'əntä-ṭäfə'a, dəmmu yəssarasär* – 'When the owl is away, leaps the mouse for joy'.⁴⁵ In its turn, Yoruba also features the same scenario using a leopard and a dog as well as a hawk

and crow as protagonists alongside with the popular cat and mouse.⁴⁶

2.11. *Death as a friend*

Having the death as a friend does hardly bode well, as does walking right into the hands of a predator. Thus, a Tigrinya proverb warns: (23) *mot zə-šäwwə'a dārho, məs šəkdam tə'arrək* – 'The chicken which is called by the death (literally: which the death calls her) makes friends with a bird of prey'.⁴⁷ Interestingly, a semantic equivalent exists in Judeo-Georgian: *cxovrebit ukmaq'opilo siqvdi-lis megobaria* – 'Who does not have joy in life, makes friends with death'.⁴⁸

2.12. *Tigrinya – Yoruba*

Finally, a few remarks additional to the ones made in the course of this paper should be noted on parallels between proverbs in Tigrinya and Yoruba (Yorùbá), one of the largest African languages. Although belonging to different language families and spoken on two opposite sides of the continent, both languages share numerous similarities when it comes to their proverbial traditions. Consider the following: (Tigrinya) (24) *mantilla zälila zälila nab märeta, säb näyru näyru nab motu* – 'The rabbit jumps and jumps [but at the end comes back] into the soil (literally: its soil), the man lives and lives up to his death', which becomes in the Yoruba context *ẹ́sín ta ta ta ó kú; èyán rìn rìn rìn ó sọ̀nù* – 'A horse kicks and kicks and kicks and dies; a person walks and walks and walks and gets lost'. As is often the case, a similar proverb can be found from the immediate linguistic vicinity of Tigrinya, namely in Amharic, where an antelope is used instead of a rabbit.⁴⁹

The following popular Tigrinya proverb discusses the nature of human fear: (25) *bə-tämän zə-sänbädä, bə-ləḥsi tädahlä* – 'Who was [once] scared by a snake flees in fright from a rope [which looks like a snake]'.⁵⁰ The Yoruba counterpart says: *ìbè rù ẹ̀jò ò jé, ká tẹ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ ẹ̀jò mó lẹ̀* – 'Fear of the snake keeps one from stepping on the young of the snake'. A similar saying also exists in Yoruba's neighboring language culture of Duala: *nyam'a bwaba e labi te oa, w'en te ekonkəŋ, o nya mula* – 'When a snake has bitten you and you see a rain worm, you run away [in fear]'.⁵¹ For comparison, the proverb is also attested in Mid-Eastern language cultures like Arabic and Neo-Aramaic.⁵²

In some Tigrinya proverbs, ironical situations are depicted, for instance running into a greater danger than the one from which one is fleeing: (26) *nə-’anbäsa färīhom, nab ’om yadəyyəbu-mmo, näbri yəşänḥom* – ‘Fearing the lion, they climb on a tree, and then, a leopard awaits them [there]’.⁵³ Similar expressions can be found in Yoruba as well: ‘He who runs from the white ant [which does not usually bite] may stumble upon the stinging ant’.⁵⁴

Finally, a Tigrinya proverb on self-compliance bearing a striking similarity to its Yoruba counterpart in its wording and the image use should be noted: (27) *ḥarmaz mä’akkoru ’aminu, gundi yəwəḥəṭ* – ‘The elephant trusts in his buttocks/anus [to such an extent that] it devours a tree trunk’.⁵⁵ The corresponding Yoruba saying has it: *bí àjànàkú ò bá gbé kè lé fùrò , kì í mi òdù àgbòn* – ‘If an elephant is not sure of its anus, it does not swallow whole coconuts’, and a variation thereof: *bí idí ikokò kò bá dá a lójú, kì í gbé egungun mì* – ‘If the wolf does not have faith in its anus, it does not swallow bones’.⁵⁶

Summarizing, one might emphasize some specific elements shared by equivalent proverbs in Tigrinya and Yoruba. In spite of the fact that only a small selection of semantically and metaphorically equivalent expressions from the two proverbial traditions are presented here, the preliminary findings emerging from their analysis allow to speak of their common characteristics. First, both languages widely use animals in order to express the same or similar ideas and probably to thus make these ideas more intelligible. Second, the use of similar concepts, beliefs and knowledge reflects local realities, the parallels between which often results in analogically shaped or even verbatim equivalents. Numerous of these sayings have parallels also in other African cultures. In their turn, some of them cannot be exclusively ascribed to some particular local belief and are rather to be regarded in a broader context (like the one on resemblance between sleep and death).

2.13. Conclusion

The over two dozen Tigrinya proverbs presented here with their equivalents in a considerable number of languages around the globe and throughout history serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, this paper reintroduces Tigrinya proverbs into the Western academic research, where they have been virtually unrepresented for several decades.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the article appears to be

among the first attempts to approach Tigrinya proverbs, which generally remain little explored, from the perspective of comparative paremiology. Moreover, it seeks to possibly consider the proverbial traditions of extinct, minor, and endangered languages, along with those of the widely spoken ones. The results of this short analysis indicate that Tigrinya proverbs have equivalents not only in language cultures of their closest linguistic surrounding, but also in other African, Mid-Eastern, European, and Asian languages. This might be explained by the fact that most proverbs presented here address universal values and issues, be it the human physical existence, fear, parenting, relations between children and parents, or power relations. Interestingly enough, however, such parallel sayings often exhibit strikingly similar or nearly identical wordings and metaphors.

2.14. List of the Tigrinya proverbs discussed

- (1) *fəqri kām mot hayyal, qən 'at si 'ol bərtu'*
- (2) *fəqri kab mot yəhəyyəl, qən 'at kab si 'ol yəbərtə'*
- (3) *qāddamot z-ibäl 'u yəsə 'ənu, daharot məs k'ərarəmtom yəwəllädu*
- (4) *qäw 'i k-äy-kätätä, säb k-äy-motä 'ay-yə 'əmmän-ən*
- (5) *säb k-äy-motä, 'əkli k-äy-säwwätä ('ay-tə 'män)*
- (6) *k-äy-wälädku, 'ambädbädku*
- (7) *hərras nə 'əštäy mot*
- (8) *mot bə-təkəs /dəqqas/ yələmmäd*
- (9) *rämäs wäddi g'ahri, quttu 'wäddi näbri*
- (10) *wäddi bälä 'i 'ənnä-k'ämsə 'ä yəwəlläd*
- (11) *wäddi qənfiz ləmuş 'ay-yəwəlläd-ən*
- (12) *(wäddi) raza nay 'abbu 'u həza*
- (13) *wäddi hawwi hamäkušti*
- (14) *'ənnə məsälī, nə 'aqi yəmsäl*
- (15) *bäqli, män 'abboka 'əntä-bälu-wwa-s, färäs 'akkoy bälä*
- (16) *'addä 'assärtä zəb 'i bäl 'a*
- (17) *tähabi 'än-ya yəfänsa-mmo, säb 'akkibän yəwälda*
- (18) *wäddi 'ənbäsa kə-mäwwət qəbärro, 'ənbäsa kə-mäwwət 'addi wä 'al*
- (19) *zämäd šum 'əntə-mot 'addi 'ay-təw 'al, šum 'əntə-mot, 'addi wə 'al*
- (20) *yällän-əs yällän, fäwsi həmam 'əmbär, fäwsi mot-əs yällän*
- (21) *nə- 'ančəwa-n ša 'rä mota, nə-dummu mäššawəta*
- (22) *gung'ä 'əntä-täfə 'a, dəmmu yəssarasär*
- (23) *mot zə-šäwwə 'a dərho, məs šəkdam tə 'arrək*

- (24) *mantilla zälila zälila nab märeta, säb näyru näyru nab motu*
 (25) *bə tämān zə-sānbädä, bə-ləḥši tādahlä*
 (26) *nə-`anbäsa färīḥom, nab `om yədäyyäbu-mmo, nābri*
 yəṣānhom
 (27) *ḥarmaz mä`akkoru `aminu, gundi yəwəḥəṭ*

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Notes

¹ Ghirmai Negash 1999: 130f.

² Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993.

³ Petrova 2014: 243.

⁴ Ibid.: 244.

⁵ In addition to the collections and studies mentioned by Roumyana Petrova in her article, a few more important works might be brought up here. Among more or less extensive studies, Kazys Grigas's work (1987) on parallels between Lithuanian proverbs and those from nine more Indo-European languages should be noted, as well as the paremiological comparison study by the great linguist and lexicographer of the Maltese language Joseph Aquilina (1972) on Maltese and other languages and dialects mainly from the Mediterranean basin. Other thorough studies treat parallels between Somali and Russian (Kapčič 1983), Hebrew and Arabic (Sagiv/Landau 1998), Valencian-Catalan and Castilian (Gisbert 2011), German and Bulgarian (Simeonova 2009), Armenian, Persian and English (Panosian 2007), and between Finnish and Russian (Chramcova 2011). Smaller contributions include books and articles covering Maltese and several varieties of Arabic (Aquilina 1968; Talaat 1975), Turkish and Georgian (Gözpınar 2014), Japanese and Finnish (Korpiola 1992), Kazakh and English (Syzdykov 2014), and others.

⁶ On German cf. Duden 1992; on Hebrew cf. Sagiv/Landau 1998: iv–v.; on Arabic cf. Bergman 1996: 223; Kassis 1999: 19.

⁷ Sälomon Gäbrä-Krastos 1995: 308.

⁸ `Andä-Mika`el Sälomon 2009: 98.

⁹ Permjakov 1979: 496.

¹⁰ Conti Rossini 1942: 49, № 151. 'Descendants' should most probably be *daḥrot*, in other collections also: *daḥrätwot*.

¹¹ 'Andä-Mika'el Sälonon 2009: 24; Kəbrä'ab Wäldä-Giyorgis/'Erməyas Kəbrä'ab 2006: 57.

¹² Yətbārək Gədəy 1998: 46, № 119.

¹³ Sämärä Gäbrä-Tənsa'e 2014: 12.; Kəbrä'ab Wäldä-Giyorgis/'Erməyas Kəbrä'ab 2006: 47.

¹⁴ Guidi 1891: 31.

¹⁵ For Hebrew and Arabic see Sagiw/Landau 1998: 60. For Judeo-Arabic see Brunot/Malka 1937: 178.; although *goy* means 'Gentile' in general, the meaning 'Muslim' is usually applicable in Judeo-Arabic context. For Ladino see Alexander 2015: 514.

¹⁶ Decurtins 1917: 167.

¹⁷ For Ladino see Shanker 2010, Summer: 40.; for Tigrinya, Şögeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993: 238.; for Somali, Kapčic 1983: 170.

¹⁸ Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 3, 22.

¹⁹ Leslau 1982: 62, № 133; 'Abdurahman Māhamād Qoram 1992: 12, № 62. Cf. also 'Death and marriage are the same', *ibid.*: 12, № 64.

²⁰ Owomoyela 2005: 389. The Yoruba proverb has a second part: '[...] such encounters happen only in the realm of dreams'. For Akan see Brookman-Amisshah 1986: 77.

²¹ See for Kurdish Kamber 2015: 72; for Armenian Sakayan 1997: 172; for Judeo-Arabic see Folklore Research Center, The Hebrew University: № 1052. Notably, according to a similar expression in Judeo-Persian, 'fear is the brother of death' (*tars barādar marg hast*), *ibid.* № 68.

²² For Gilgamesh see Mitchell 2004: 61; for Ancient Egypt Assmann 2005: 104. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (lines 211–212), Sleep was the brother of Death and the son of Night. In Homer's *Iliad* as well as in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the both are (twin) brothers, too (Il. 14.231, 16.672; Aen. 6.278).

²³ Gäbrä-Kidan Dästa 2001/2002: 97, 151, 152. For the version of the proverb about the stork without the 'child of...' part, see Kəbrä'ab Wäldä-Giyorgis/'Erməyas Kəbrä'ab 2006: 42.

²⁴ For Amharic of Beta Israel see Girma Berhanu 2006: 272; for Judeo-Arabic, Cohen 1964: 143; for Palestinian Arabic, Isleem 2009: 34; for Judeo-Tat, Dadašev 2006: 263; for Amharic, Richter/Eshetu Kebbede 1994: 24.

²⁵ For Somali see Kapčic 1983: 68; for Herero, Kavari 2013: 169; for Japanese, Trimmell 2004: 69; for Polish, Stypuła 1974: 376; for Romanian, Botezatu/Hincu 2001: 43; for Romani, Hübschmannová 1991: 26.

²⁶ See for Akkadian Lambert 1996 [1960]: 270–271; for Andalusian Arabic, Institute of Islamic Studies of the University of Zaragoza 2013: 164, 167.

²⁷ Sälonon Gäbrä-Ḳrəstos 1995: 193.

²⁸ For Arabic see Isleem 2009: 39, 112; for Icelandic, Guðmundur Jónsson 1830: 235; for Greek, Cypriot Academy: Proverbs. <http://www.cypriotacademy.com/proverbs.html>, adapted transcription.

²⁹ Tigrinya in Arbeiterwohlfahrt Bundesverb. e.V. 1989: 69; for Arabic see Isleem 2009: 180.

³⁰ For Tigrinya see Gäbrä-Kidan Dästa 2001/2002: 85. The Arabic variations include the Palestinian 'āna wa-aḥūy 'alā ibən 'ammī əw-'āna əw-ibən 'ammī 'alā

l-ġarīb, Isleem 2009: 14; the Sudanese 'ana wa-aḥī..., Ahmed 2005: 39; the Baghdadī 'āni wa-ḥuya..., al-Ḥanafī 1382 AH = 1962 CE, № 283. Compare with the identical expression in Surayt Neo-Aramaic, or Turoyo: ono w aḥuni cal u *abro d cammi*, *ono w u abro d cammi cal u nuxroyo*, Talay 2017: 64.

³¹ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993: 206.

³² For Hebrew see Sagiw/Landau 1998: 29; for Sudanese Arabic, Ahmed 2005: 146; for Belarusian, Lepešau/Jakalcévič 2011: 319; for Romani, Hübschmannová 1991: 43–44.

³³ Proverb 2.141 from the Sumerian proverb collection 2 + 6.

³⁴ Stol 2016: 154. Only few sources mention nine as the upper limit for the number of possible heirs.

³⁵ Gäbrä-Kidan Dästa 2001/2002: 113.

³⁶ Kamber 2015: 50.

³⁷ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993: 275; Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 88.

³⁸ For Neo-Aramaic see Sabar 1978: 225; cf. The Arabic *kalb əš-šəx šəx* – 'The dog of the sheikh is a sheikh', Isleem 2009: 246. For Korean see Sohn 2006: 83.

³⁹ For Bulgarian see Simeonova 2009: 175; for Japanese, Korpiola 1992: 80; for Amharic, Richter/Eshetu Kebede 1994: 91.

⁴⁰ Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 95.

⁴¹ Stone 2006: 58.

⁴² Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 51. Here, *mäşşawätta* could be a typographical error, if *mäşşawäta* 'her fun' is meant instead.

⁴³ For Amharic see Guidi 1891: 51; for Saho, Reinisch 1889: 306; for Somali, Kapčič 1983: 53, 73; for Karaim, Zajęczkowski 1947: 59.

⁴⁴ For Lithuanian see Grigas 1987: 280; the entry also lists equivalents in numerous languages including Latin, German, French, Spanish, Latvian, Belarusian etc. For Finnish see Chramcova 2011: 66; for Arabic, Isleem 2009: 25.

⁴⁵ Sälomon Gäbrä-Krastos 1995: 279; 'Andä-Mika'el Sälomon 2009: 88 and others.

⁴⁶ Owomoyela 2005: 52 № 143, № 144, 467 № 4808.

⁴⁷ Gäbrä-Kidan Dästa 2001/2002: 97.

⁴⁸ The Israeli Proverb Index, Folklore Research Center, The Hebrew University: № 679.

⁴⁹ For Tigrinya see Kəbrä'ab Wäldä-Giyorgis/'Erməyas Kəbrä'ab 2006: 33; for Yoruba, Owomoyela 2005: 389; for Amharic, Richter/Eshetu Kebede 1994: 50.

⁵⁰ Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 36. This proverb is familiar to the Western audience concerned due to its repeated appearance in the correspondent contributions, including Praetorius 1885: 323 and Gabriel 1956: 213.

⁵¹ For Yoruba see Owomoyela 2005: 213; for Duala, Melzian 1929: 71.

⁵² For Arabic see for instance Iraqi Arabic of Baghdad: illi t'adḍah l-ḥayya yḥāf immn-il-ḥabil – 'He whom a snake bites is afraid of a rope', McCarthy and Raffouli 1964, 145, 357. For Aramaic, see for instance Assyrian Neo-Aramaic: ha nissa l-khowe min khola ke zadeh – 'He who has been bitten by a snake is afraid of the rope', Lethin 1972: 99.

⁵³ Yosef 'Aläm-ayyāhu 2000: 51.

⁵⁴ Alabi 2005: 160.

⁵⁵ Sälomon Gäbrä-Ʒrəstos 1995: 3; Sälomon Gäbrä-Ʒrəstos 1995: 81.

⁵⁶ Owomoyela 2005: 157–158.

⁵⁷ For the sake of completeness and fairness, such important, recently published contributions as Solomon Berhane Hagos 2015 should be mentioned.

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