

Amharic Praise Poems of *Däggazmač* Bälay Zälläqä and the Patriots of Goğgam during the Italian Occupation of Ethiopia, 1936–1941*

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This paper explores the relevance of Amharic oral poetry as a significant source material for recording the social and political situation of the resistance movement in Goğgam. Most of the Amharic poems presented in this paper praise and glorify *Däggazmač* Bälay Zälläqä (*Abba Kostär*; 1912–1947) and his patriotic spirit, bravery, determination and skill in military leadership that he showed fighting the Italians in 1935–41. Other poems describe the battles, and praise the heroes and patriots of Goğgam. They further depict the intrigue of Bälay's rivals that caused him to be arrested and taken to the court, to Addis Ababa, where he was hanged. Finally, the paper presents poems lamenting the execution of Bälay. All these poems are still recited and performed by the rural people of Goğgam in a special genre of Amharic oral poetry known as *qärärto-anna fukkära* ('war songs and heroic recitals').

1. Introduction

Praise poetry is one of the most developed and elaborate poetic genres in Africa¹. It focuses on the achievements of prominent figures – heroes, military and political leaders, etc. – describing the character, personality, power and skill that make them superior to others. Ruth Finnegan states: "The poetic style of praise poems emerges more colorfully when one considers the language and form of expression in some detail. Alliteration, parallelism, repetition and the use of metaphors and analogy are distinct features in praise poetry."² In Goğgam, as elsewhere in Ethiopia, a marked military tradition, taking revenge on an enemy, hunting and other special achievements of the people are highly regarded, and praised in war songs and heroic recitals. Indeed, it has been an important culture and tradition to praise the skills, adventures and exploits of emperors, kings, nobles, warriors and great war-leaders in poetry and songs³. The social, political, historical

* The Amharic praise poems presented in this paper were collected from the patriots of Goğgam who are still alive and from other local poets and singers between 1992 and 1998. Most of the patriots were eye-witnesses and followers of Bälay Zälläqä and fought on his side during the 1936–41 resistance movement against the Italian occupation. I would like to express my gratitude to all my informants, particularly to *Fitawrari* Täsämma Laqäw, *Wäyzäro* Salələš Zälläqä, *Ato* Mässälu Gässäsä and *Aggafari* Mängəste Goššu for their kind assistance in reciting most of the praise poems and in providing me with their memories of the resistance struggle in Goğgam.

¹ See, e.g., FINNEGAN (1970); OKPEWHO (1992); OPLAND (1998); AWE BOLANLE (1974).

² See FINNEGAN (1970:117). Finnegan further pointed out that the language of praise poetry may be archaic and lofty, and there are often references to historical events or people that may need interpretation; veiled and figurative forms of expression are also common. Especially frequent are comparisons of the person praised to an animal or series of animals (cp., e.g., poems 5, 7, 16, 42 below).

³ Good examples of this are the old Amharic "Royal Songs" which were composed and recited in honour of 14th–16th cent. Ethiopian emperors (GETIE GELAYE 2001:7f.). See also SCHACK – HABTE MARIAM MARCOS (1974); PANKHURST – GIRMA-SILASSIE ASFAW (1985).

and literary contributions of praise poems and heroic recitals that were composed and recited during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1936–41 have not been systematically documented and studied. Besides, only a few historians and writers have attempted to study the biography and the deeds of *Däggazmač* Bälay Zälläqä⁴, and the resistance struggle of the patriots of Goğgam⁵. In an attempt to fill this gap, over 500 Amharic praise poems (most of them couplets) have been collected and classified by the author⁶. Out of this collection only 45 sample poems have been selected, translated and briefly analyzed in this paper.

2. *Qäräto* and *Fukkära* (War Songs and Heroic Recitals): Expressions of Praise Poetry in Goğgam

Qäräto and *fukkära* (*qäräto-anna fukkära*) are the most widely appreciated poetic genres and are deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the Amhara people of Ethiopia in general, in Goğgam in particular. Historically, reciting them, peasants aroused male courage during war campaigns and before battles: they were mainly recited by warriors during campaigns and times of war, at battlefields and by hunters upon returning from hunting. Later, the people also articulated in this poetry their grievances, feelings of sorrow, and encouraged uprisings and revolts against invaders and enemies. Whenever conflicts between peasants and local officials arise, the former composed and improvised their *qäräto* and *fukkära*.

Qäräto and *fukkära* are popular and intrinsic forms of oral poetry among most men, and the favorite form among the peasants of Goğgam. Almost every adolescent learns them or trains to compose, memorize and recite his *qäräto* and *fukkära* or improvise poems and recitals composed by others. The praise poems are recited and improvised at weddings, harvests, funerals, religious feasts and other social gatherings. Both *qäräto* and *fukkära* are usually performed inside a house and in front of a crowd after plenty of food and local alcoholic drinks (*tälla*, *aräqi*) are served.

Traditionally, the two poetic forms are performed together. First, *qäräto* poems are recited repeatedly⁷ to inspire and get the attention of those who would perform the

⁴ *Däggazmač* (lit. ‘commander of the gate’) was the official title of Bälay Zälläqä. Aside from the popular horse-name, *Abba Kostər* (for the Ethiopian tradition of naming persons after their horses see MAHETÄMÄ SELLASE WÄLDÄ MÄSQÄL 1969) and the various praise names that we find in the poems, there are other titles by which Bälay Zälläqä is known. These include: *Aše Bägulbätu* (lit. ‘Emperor by his own might’), *Nəgus* (‘King’), *Lə’ul* (‘Prince’) and *Ləğ* (‘child of high birth’), see, e.g., KÄBBÄDÄ TÄSÄMMA (1962:265); SHIRREFF (in *PICES* 11, vol. 1, 849). According to my informants, Bälay Zälläqä became a famous hunter and sharpshooter already during his adolescent years. The noun *Kostər* is derived from *kosättärä* (‘to wipe out, exterminate’; KANE 1990:1408) and, here, means ‘sharpshooter’ (*Abba Kostər*, thus, lit. means ‘father of sharpshooter’); it was given to Bälay by his companions after a hunt when he surprised them by killing an animal with one precise shoot. It became his “praise name”, and later his popular “horse-name”.

⁵ YOHANNES BERHANU (1972); ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983); SAMSON CAHNE (1983); SELTENE SEYOUM (1999); ZÄWGÄ ZÄGÄYYÄ (1985); ANON. (1979; 1977); SƏBHAT GÄBRÄ ƏGZI’ABHER (1972; 1995) contributed articles about Bälay Zälläqä and the patriots of Goğgam. Based on Bälay’s biography, ABÄRRÄ ĞÄMBÄRE (1983) and ALÄMAYYÄHU GÄBRÄ HƏYWOT (1989) wrote a historical novel and a historical play respectively. See also TADDÄSÄ ZÄWÄLDE (1956); GÄRIMA TAFFÄRÄ (1960); SALOME GEBRE EGZIABHER (1969); PANKHURST (1969; 1970). Popular singers, such as Nəway Däbbäbä, sang songs in honour of Bälay Zälläqä.

⁶ See GETIE GELAYE (1999).

⁷ Culturally, the one who recites the *qäräto* is expected to be skilled in repeating the most important words, (especially places and personal names) now and then so that they can be understood by the audience.

fukkära. The one who performs the *qärarto* is expected to have an appealing voice, to walk rhythmically and to recite his poems repeatedly in order to gain the attention of others and inspire them to join in the *fukkära*. Then the performer of *fukkära* appears who looks aggressive and war-like. He primarily praises himself: his personality, character, the kind of weapon he has, etc.; and either mentions the achievements he has already accomplished (e.g., chasing cattle, killing adversaries in disputes over land and property or blood feuds⁸) or what he intends to do in the future. The recital of each verse is confirmed and approved by his peers, friends and by the crowd at large. He then praises his family, his ancestors and his friends; he additionally praises his oxen, his harvest etc. He also mentions the names of renowned individuals and their adventures. In Goğgam, during *fukkära* recitals, a performer carries a hand gun or a staff (*šəməl*) and begins by uttering some established expressions, such as: *əmbi! zərraf! yä-kostər aškär!*⁹ The patriots of Goğgam proudly claim that Bälay Zälläqä was not only a distinguished warrior, but also a famous composer and reciter of *qärato* and *fukkära* poems¹⁰.

3. Bälay Zälläqä (*Abba Kostər*)

Bälay Zälläqä was a hero and patriot leader who distinguished himself during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1936–1941. He was born in 1912 in Čaqqäta, Wällo. His father, *Bašša* Zälläqä Laqäw, was a native of Lämčän in Goğgam and his mother, *Wäyzäro* Taytu Asäne, was a native of Ğorru Gonta in Wällo. Bälay's father was a loyal and close servant of *Ləğ* Iyyasu, who bestowed him the title of *Bašša*, and is said to have had a considerable number of troops under his command¹¹. After the fall of *Ləğ* Iyyasu, *Bašša* Zälläqä first moved to his wife's residence, in Čaqqäta, and later to his native Lämčän in Goğgam, and there submitted to *Ras* Haylu Təklä Haymanot. After a while, Zälläqä killed a man and refused to submit peacefully to *Fitawrari* Əmbi'alä, the governor of Bičäna¹². The *Fitawrari* marched to Lämčän to arrest Zälläqä. In the skirmish that followed, Zälläqä was killed in Qänčo Maryam, and at Bokkänna his body was hung on a tree¹³ for a day in order to intimidate the local people¹⁴. This events had a huge impact on the young Bälay and his entire family and relatives. Bälay with his brother, Əğğəgu, and his mother left Lämčän for Čaqqäta. It was there that Bälay mastered his father's rifle and began his career as a *šəfta* ('bandit'), cherishing the idea of avenging the blood of his father. Bälay, Əğğəgu (later known as *Abba Qästo*) and another companion were operating between Lämčän and Čaqqäta and, in the lowland areas of the gorge of Abbay. Bälay's company was joined not only by his relatives but also by other brigands, criminals and outlaws

⁸ This mostly refers to those who are involved in conflicts, blood feuds and disputes over land or property.

⁹ Literally, "he who says no, who refuses to accept orders"; "he who slays with a sword, he who is a killer, a defender, etc."; "he who is the servant of *Abba Kostər*." These expressions are repeatedly recited in between almost every verse or stanza during the performance of *fukkära* (GETIE GELAYE in *PICES* 14, vol. 3, 2049; ID. 2001:42f.).

¹⁰ O.i.: Täsämma Laqäw, Salələš Zälläqä Mässälu Gässäsä, Mängəste Goššu and Əğğəgu Dästa. See also ANON. (1979:3) and SƏBHAT GƏBRƏ ƏGZI'ABHER (1972:10).

¹¹ See ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983:2); SAMSON CHANE (1991:5); o.i. Täsämma Laqäw, Əğğəgu Dästa, Əguwalä Ğəmbäre.

¹² See SELTENE SEYOUM (1999:166); ANON. (1979:3); SAMSON CHANE (1991:2); ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983:3).

¹³ My informants point out that the corpse of Zälläqä Laqäw was hanged on the gate of his house.

¹⁴ ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983:4); SAMSON CHANE (1991:3); SELTENE SEYOUM (1999:166).

who sought refuge in the bush¹⁵. Bälāy's popularity grew after he avenged the death of his father some time in the middle of 1927, and, later, looted cattle, captured firearms and defeated local officials. Bälāy was noted for his courage and determination; he was elected the leader of the group in April 1935¹⁶.

The invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy changed the precarious situation in Goḡḡam. Bälāy and his followers, who numbered some 50 at that time, got an opportunity to fight for a good cause and legitimize their rebellion. They tried to mobilize and recruit the local people, both peacefully and forcefully. They ambushed the Italians and attacked them in their fortifications, capturing numerous firearms. Italian attempts to subdue Bälāy Zälläqā through persuasion failed¹⁷. Bälāy soon emerged as a prominent patriot leader¹⁸; between 1937 and 1939 most of the districts in Eastern Goḡḡam were gradually brought under his control; he was communicating with patriots in other regions, particularly with *Ras* Abäbä Aräḡay in Šäwa¹⁹. It has been documented that Bälāy and the other patriots fought in over 23 important battles between 1937 and 1941 at various locations including: Abära, Bäränta, Bičäna, Čaqqäta, Däbrä Wärq, Dägän, Danssa, Dibisa, Dima, Dälanta, Gongä, Gubaya, Ġarso Ġnnäbse, Lämčän, Mäkanä Sälam, Malka, Somma, Tīq, Wasida, Waššäge and Yage²⁰. Bälāy bestowed traditional titles and military ranks to the patriots and established his own administration²¹. As Italy was defeated and Haylä Səllase I returned from his exile through Däbrä Marqos on 6 April 1941, Bälāy reportedly had 40,000–45,000 combatants²², who presented themselves in a military parade in front of the emperor, singing war songs and heroic recitals. Haylä Səllase was impressed and rewarded Bälāy with 12,000 Thalers, and then invited him for a private talk.

After the liberation, the history of Bälāy Zälläqā was dramatic. He was appointed governor of Bičäna, his home province, with the title of *Däḡḡazmač*; he was supposed to keep Goḡḡam's nobility in check. However, Bälāy was disappointed: Mängäša Gämbäre, who collaborated with the Italians, was appointed governor of Goḡḡam; several districts that were previously under Bälāy's control were given to other noblemen. Bälāy's adversaries began to disseminate rumors and send reports to Addis Ababa telling that Bälāy refused to accept government orders and revolted against the imperial administration²³.

¹⁵ SELTENE SEYOUM (1999:166).

¹⁶ ZELLALEM ASSEFA (1983:8).

¹⁷ *Ras* Haylu Täklä Haymanot, the main collaborator of the Italians, attempted to persuade Bälāy to submit to them so that he would be appointed governor of Goḡḡam. The *Ras* had also tried to give Bälāy his daughter in marriage but Bälāy refused all the offers (SHIREFF in *PICES* 11, vol. 1, 852; ID. 1995:32; SELTENE SEYOUM 1999:337).

¹⁸ Bälāy's military skill was described by Stevens (see SAMSON CHANE 1991:3) as follows: "Lij Belay Zelleqe was the ablest soldier among the patriot leaders. He was the only one with a professional understanding of military tactics, the only one who could impose regular military discipline on his column: he was the only irregular commander capable of moving his host from place to place in secrecy and silence." Also SHIREFF (in *PICES* 11, vol. 1, 849f.) wrote: "Mängäsha Jembere, Hailu Belew and Negash Bezabeh ... were all connected with *Ras* Hailu [Täklä Haymanot] the ruling family; Bälai Zallaqa was of peasant origin but an effective leader, who never submitted to the Italians."

¹⁹ O.i.: Täsämma Laqāw and Mässälu Gässäsä. See also KÄBBÄDÄ TÄSÄMMA (1962:263); SELTENE SEYOUM (1999:168).

²⁰ SAMSON CHANE (1991:25–28).

²¹ See SAMSON CHANE (1991).

²² ZELLALEM ASSEFA (1983:53); SƏBHAT GÄBRÄ ƏGZI'ABHER (1972:12).

²³ ABÄRRA ĠÄMBÄRE (2003:456).

Troops from Goğgam, Wällo and Šäwa were sent to Bičäna to arrest him. Bälay decided to resist, and, together with his followers, he fortified himself in Somma. After three weeks of heavy fighting some of his combattants were killed, some wounded, others weakened, and some defected; finally, Bälay was arrested, taken to Addis Abäba and sentenced to life imprisonment. Later it was reported that on the way to Goğgam, after he attempted to escape from custody with other prisoners, he was brought to court again and was sentenced to death. The emperor confirmed the death penalty, and Bälay was publicly hanged, together with two of his brothers, on 13 January 1945 in Addis Abäba. He was 35 when he died; by four wives, he had three daughters (Yärome, Yäšašwärq and Yäšimmäbet) and four sons (Admasu, Goššu, Bahru and Mälaku)²⁴.

4. Major Themes of the Praise Poems

Poems 1–3 introduce Bälay Zälläqä greeting him “in the name of the Father” and using the keywords: *sälamta* (‘greetings’), *tammər* (‘miracles’) and *məsgana* (‘praise’). These words in the first lines of the verses are chosen to match with the rhyming words in the second lines of the poems, and to convey the most significant message. Through these words the poet praises the bravery, military tactics and piety of Bälay Zälläqä.

Poems 4–10 describe Bälay metaphorically: “he whose face burns like midday fire”, “he who is the lion of Lämčän”, “the lion of the *filaw* [‘low-land’]”. Additionally, the poems praise Bälay telling of his greatness and glorifying him as “he who puts on the trousers of brave men”. The poems further extol Bälay as a messenger of St. George who is sent to chase out Italy and to defend the independence of Ethiopia. My informants, who were close followers of Bälay, recall that poems 9 and 10 were composed and recited by Bälay himself at decisive battles.

Poems 11–19 praise Bälay’s military skills, his adept manipulation of artillery and the victories he achieved over the Italians: the news of his military superiority and strong resistance is broadcast on the radio of the “whites”; on the battlefield, Bälay defeated the enemy and “piled corpse over corpse”.

Poem 20 metaphorically depicts how Bälay defeated both the Italians and the *askari*. Here he is praised as a hard working peasant who harvests plenty of *tef*, and is respected and admired in the region. Poem 21 is said to have been composed by Bälay himself. He boasts of killing his enemy with “both hands” and speaks of his adventure, the report of which “has reached Rome”. Poems 21–28 seem to have been composed by the patriots. They praise their bravery and loyalty to Bälay, and describe their military escapades against the Italians.

Poems 29–45 refer to those who became Bälay’s enemies after the liberation. The poems 30–36 depict how Bälay’s enemies defeated him and describe the grief of the people of Goğgam lamenting the tribulations Bälay suffered, his execution at a young age, and recalling his victories and generosity. Bälay’s belongings – his war trumpet, sword, cartridge belt, drinking vessels, ceremonial mules and horses, compound and carpets – are also praised. Poems 40–45 tell how Bälay’s enemies conspired, arrested him and took him to Addis Ababa. In poem 40 Bälay’s bravery is compared to the 16th-cent. *Imam* Ahmad Graññ (‘the Left-Handed’). In poem 43 Bälay is metaphorically described as the elephant.

²⁴ ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983:87).

The final poem compares Bälāy with biblical king Solomon and Sirach; his generosity is compared to that of emperor Mənilək.

5. Amharic Poems in honour of Bälāy Zälläqä: Translation and Commentary

1. እስቲ በስማም²⁵ ብዬ ልጀምር ሰላምታ
አባ ኮስትር በላይ የሃይማኖት ጌታ ።
2. እስቲ በስማም ብዬ ልጀምር ታምር
አባ ኮስትር በላይ የጦር ምንስቴር ።
3. እስቲ በስማም ብዬ ልጀምር ምስጋና
ኮስትርን የሚያህል ምን ወንድ ተገኘና ።
4. እንደ ቀትር እሳት የሚፋጀው ፊቱ
አባ ኮስትር በላይ ለምጩን ላይ ነው ቤቱ ።
5. ጎጃም ዓይኑን ታሞ ሲደነባበር
የለምጩኑ አንበሳ ይመራው ጀመር ።
6. የወንዶችን ስራ ደርበህ ታጥቀህ
አባ ኮስትር በላይ ምን ይሆን ሥራህ?
7. የፊላው አንበሳ
መጣ አሉ እያገላ ።
8. የፊላው ንጉሥ
ገባ አሉ ማርቆስ ።
9. በላይ ዘለቀ ላቀው
ቅዱስ ጊዮርጊስ የላከው ።
10. ባንዲራው የዘለቀ ልጅ
ጣሊያንን ደምላሽ፣
የኢትዮጵያ ደም መላሽ ።
11. ታርበኞቹ ሁላ ይበልጣል ኮስትር
ሺ ብረት ማራኪ ባንድ ናስማስር ።
- Let me start greetings in the name of the Father,
Abba Kostər Bälāy, lord of the faithful²⁶.
Let me start relating the miraculous deeds,
in the name of the Father,
[Of] *Abba Kostər* Bälāy, minister of war²⁷.
Let me start praising in the name of the Father,
Since not a single man is found who compares *Kostər*.
He whose face burns like midday fire,
Abba Kostər Bälāy's home is Lämčän.
Goḡgam's eye has got sick and walks here and there,
The lion of Lämčän began to lead [rule] it.
Having put on, and put on the trousers of brave men²⁸,
How great is your work, *Abba Kostər* Bälāy?
The lion of the *filaw*²⁹,
Has come roaring, they say.
The king of the *filaw*,
Has reached [Däbrä] Marqos, they say.
Bälāy Zälläqä Laqāw,
He, whom Saint George has sent.
The son of Zälläqä, the flag,
He, who crushes Italy,
He, who avenges Ethiopia³⁰.
Kostər is superior to all the patriots,
He, who captures a thousand rifles with one *nasmäsär*³¹.

²⁵ The correct Gəʿəz (/Amharic) is *Bäsəma ab* ... 'In the name of the Father ...'.

²⁶ My informants in East Goḡgam relate that Bälāy Zälläqä was a pious Orthodox Christian. St. George was his patron and he always swore in his name. A certain monk called *Abba* Gäbrä Maryam of Dima is said to have been Bälāy's Father Confessor, advisor and scribe who prepared a seal inscribed: በላይ ዘለቀ መልክ ብርሃን ገብረ ጊዮርጊስ ('Bälāy Zälläqä Angel of the Light, Slave of [St.] George'). The monk accompanied Bälāy to the battlefield and he is said to have protected Bälāy from bullets through his magic prayers. See poem 9; also ZELALEM ASSEFA (1983:78–79); SĒBHAT GĀBRÄ ʾEGZIʾABHER (1972:13).

²⁷ The correct Amharic for "minister" is *ministər*. It actually means that Bälāy Zälläqä was a renowned warrior who became "master of war"; he was not "Minister of War" as such.

²⁸ *Därräba* is 'to put another garment over the one being worn' (Kane 1990:1046), the metaphorical expression here meaning 'to become extraordinary strong; great'. Besides, the expression "to force someone to take off his trousers" is used by the people of Goḡgam to describe deeds of valiant men and means: 'to defeat the enemy and humiliate him, to force him to flee'.

²⁹ The low-land (*filaw*) was a strategic area adjacent to the Blue Nile gorge, where Bälāy Zälläqä and the patriots of Goḡgam had their major stronghold and from where they began their military campaigns against the Italians (see SĒBHAT GĀBRÄ ʾEGZIʾABHER 1972:11).

³⁰ Informants Täsämma Laqāw, Mängəste Goṣšu and Mässälu Gässäsä told that Bälāy's seal was inscribed: በላይ ዘለቀ የኢትዮጵያ ደም መላሽ 'Bälāy Zälläqä Avenger of Ethiopia' (but cp. above, n. 26).

³¹ "Rifle which has its barrel fastened to the stock by brass rings" (KANE 1990:1022–23).

12. አባ ኮስትር በላይ እባክህ ተቆጣ
አንተም ራስ ተባል እኛም ጎጆ እንውጣ ።
13. እንማይ፡ በረንታ፡ ጥላትግን፡ ውድሚትም ፡
አዋበል፡ ማርቆስም፡ ወዮልሽ! ወዮልሽ!
“ሞተ”፡ “ሞተ” ስትይ በላይ ዘለቀልሽ ።
14. ፈረንጅ ምድር ለቆ ቢሄድ በሰማይ
ዳመናውን አልፎ ዘለቀ በላይ ።
15. “አለቅን” አለ ፈረንጅ በራዲዎኑን
ኮስትር እንዴት አርገህ ወግተኸው ይሆን?
16. ጣሊያን ፍየል ሁኖ ቅጠል ቅጠል ሲያይ
ነብር ተመስሎ አረደው በላይ ።
17. የጣሊያኖች ሱሪ ረጅም ነወይ?
በግድ አስወልቆ ታጠቀው በላይ ።
18. አባ ኮስትር በላይ ወጣቱ ጎልማሳ
አነባብሮት መጣ እሬሳ በሬሳ ።
19. አባ ኮስትር በላይ ያርበኛው ባለቤት
ሣር አላበቀለም ነጩን የወቃበት ።
20. አባ ኮስትር በላይ አላወቀበትም ጉዛምነቱን
አደባልቆ ወቃው ነጩን ተጥቁር ።
21. የሶማ ጎራዴ ሰገባው ነጭ ነው
የኮስትር ጎራዴ ሰገባው ነጭ ነው
የሚበላው ሥጋ የሚጠጣው ደም ነው ።
22. እንኳን ሠራሁበት በቀኝ በግራ እጄ
ሮም ላይ ተሰማ ጎጃም ተወልጄ ።
23. ይህ ሁሉ መላ ነው፡ ይህ ሁሉ መላ ነው
ያባ ኮስትር ታማኝ ውበቱ ጎርፌ ነው ።
- Abba Kostər* Bälāy, be more serious;
Title [yourself] *ras* so that we may well claim rank³².
Ənnāmay, Bärānta, Ṭəlatgən and Wədmī;
[As well as] Awabäl and Marqos, woe! woe!
Though everyone thought that he died, he [Bälāy Zälläqä] sprang on top.
Though the *färäng*³³ have left the ground and travels in the sky,
He passed through the clouds, and went up [Zälläqä Bälāy]³⁴.
The *färäng* said on the radio “we are finished,”
Kostər, how did you attack them?
While the Italians looked for leaves like goats,
Bälāy slaughtered them in the likeness of the leopard.
Are the trousers of the Italians long?
Having forced them to take them off, Bälāy put them on.
Abba Kostər Bälāy the youth, the strong one,
He came back having piled corpse over corpse.
Abba Kostər Bälāy master of the patriots,
No grass has grown where he had threshed the white³⁵.
Abba Kostər Bälāy is not aware of his being rich;
He threshes mixing the white with the black³⁶.
The scabbard of Somma’s³⁷ sword is white;
The scabbard of *Kostər*’s sword is white;
Its food is flesh and its drink is blood.
I am proud of what I did with my right and left hands,
My fame has reached Rome, me being born in Goḡḡam.
All is strategy, all is strategy,
Wubātu Tərfe³⁸ is loyal to *Abba Kostər*.

³² *Ras* (lit.: ‘head’) was the highest title, next to the king (*Nəgus*) only, that existed in the Ethiopian monarchy. Here, the poet wishes the highest title for Bälāy Zälläqä. However, as both the sources and informants indicate, Bälāy was not interested in having any of the titles; whenever asked which title he wished to be bestowed upon him, he used to respond: “I do not need any more titles, my mother has already called me Bälāy [e.i., ‘above’].” Bälāy was asked the same question by Haylä Səllase I when both met in Däbrä Marqos in April 1941 (KÄBBÄDÄ TÄSÄMMA 1962:295).

³³ The term *färäng* (pl. *färängočč*) refers to white people or Europeans.

³⁴ The name Bälāy Zälläqä itself is a poetic pun and has two meanings. The first meaning refers to Bälāy’s power which caused him to emerge as a famous warrior. The second meaning praises the heroic adventures of Bälāy Zälläqä (news of Bälāy defeating the Italians equipped with the modern weaponry, reaching as far as Rome).

³⁵ Here the harvesting of the best quality white (*näčč*) *tef* is analogized with the victory of Bälāy Zälläqä over the Italians.

³⁶ This is a typical “wax and gold” (*säm-ənna wärq*) poem, with two meanings. The “wax” (surface meaning) compares Bälāy Zälläqä with a hardworking peasant in Goḡḡam, who harvests plenty of white and black [red] *tef*. Its “gold” (secret meaning) is the praise to Bälāy, who defeated both the whites (the Italians) and the blacks (*banda* and *askari*, Italian troops composed of native Africans).

³⁷ Somma is a strategic mountainous area situated close to the Blue Nile gorge, where Bälāy Zälläqä established his head-quarters.

³⁸ He was one of the prominent patriots in East Goḡḡam.

24. የአባ ኮስትር አሽከር እስጢፋኖስ ገብሬ ሰው እያባረረ ይገላል እንደ አውሬ ።
Abba Kostər's servant,³⁹ Eṣṭifanos Gäbre, Hunts and kills men like wild animals.
25. አንተ ቁመህ ተኩስ እኒያ ይሩጡ የአባ ኮስትር አሽከር ገብሬ ባለቁርጡ ።
You shoot standing, let those run, Abba Kostər's servant, Gäbre the resolute.
26. አዙረህ ታጠቀው አልቢኑን እንደ ድጉ የአባ ኮስትር ታናሽ አባ ቀስቶ እጅጉ ።
Carry the albin⁴⁰ in reverse like the dæg⁴¹, Abba Qästo, Eḡḡəgu the younger [brother] of Abba Kostər.
27. የአባ ኮስትር አሽከር ድልኑሃ አባ ይባስ ቆርጦ ቆርጦ ጣለው የጣሊያንን ምላስ ።
Dəlnässa Abba Yəbas, the servant of Abba Kostər, He sliced and sliced up and threw down the Italian tongues.
28. እስቲ ላኑሃሃው በግጥም አርጌ የአባ ኮስትር አሽከር አጋፋሪ መንጌ ።
Let me mention [praise] him in a poem Aggafari⁴² Mänge⁴³, the soldier of Abba Kostər.
29. የኮስትርን ሱሪ ሰፊ አበላሽቶበት መንገሻ ጀምቦ ጉልበቱን አየበት ።
The tailor has spoiled Bälāy's trousers, [Hence] Mängäša Ğämbäre could see his knees⁴⁴.
30. መንዱ አባ ኮስትርን ጉልበቱ በደለው ቢቆም አይለቀንም የሚል ሰው ገደለው ።
Abba Kostər is disadvantaged by his manliness, Someone, fearing of his being alive, killed him.
31. ለምጩን አገራችን ሽምብራ ተዘርቶ ዓባይ አገራችን ሽምብራ ተዘርቶ ነቀሉት በጮርቃው መጠርጠሩ ቀርቶ።
Lämčän our country, being sown with chickpeas, Abbay our country, being sown with chickpeas, They supplanted it [him] while still young⁴⁵ instead of cracking out [the peas].
32. ሞፈሩን ቀንበሩን ጎጃም ቆርጦልኝ
 “ማነቂያው ሸዋ ነው” ብሎ ሰደደኝ።
The Goḡḡames have cut for me the plow-beam and the yoke, They send me to fetch the yoke-rods from Šäwa⁴⁶.
33. አበባው በላይ፣
 ወጣቱ በላይ
 ሂደህ ቀረህ ወይ?
Bälāy, the flower, Bälāy, the youth, Alas! you went [to Šäwa] but never returned back!
34. በቅሎ ላሻው በቅሎ እሚሰጠውን በልጅግ ላሻው በልጅግ እሚሰጠውን ችኩዝ ላሻው ችኩዝ እሚሰጠውን አሻግረው ሰቀሉት በላይ ዘለቀን።
He who gives a mule to one who needs a mule, He who gives a bälḡəg⁴⁷ to one who needs a bälḡəg, He who gives a čäkkeoz⁴⁸ to one who needs a čäkkeoz, They took Bälāy Zälläqä across [Abbay] and hanged him.
35. የነ ደቦጭ ጌታ፣ የነ ገምባው ጌታ
Lord of dāboč, lord of gämbaw⁴⁹

³⁹ *Aškär* is a soldier-servant who is loyal to his master and follows him.

⁴⁰ This is an *Alpini* rifle of Italian manufacture.

⁴¹ “A sort of cummerbund of 25–30 yards of cloth wrapped around the body over the clothing from the chest to the waist” (KANE 1990:1828).

⁴² A title given to the one who were responsible for welcoming, introducing and supervising guests at banquets during the imperial era (KANE 1990:1332).

⁴³ Mänge is a short form of address for Mängəste Goššu, one of Bälāy Zälläqä's followers (who is still alive).

⁴⁴ The poem's “secret meaning” is that Mängäša Ğämbäre, a native of Damot, challenged Bälāy and defeated him.

⁴⁵ *Čorqa* means ‘immature, unripe’.

⁴⁶ This poem refers to Bälāy's rivals who had him arrested and transported to Šäwa [Addis Ababa].

⁴⁷ A Belgian-made rifle.

⁴⁸ A type of rifle manufactured in the former Czechoslovakia.

⁴⁹ *Däboč* was the name of Bälāy Zälläqä's favourite horse; *Gämbaw* was Bälāy's war bugle [trumpet] and also the name of his drinking vessel.

- “ተሰቅሎ አደረ” አሉ የጥምቀት ለት ማታ። “Was hanged over night” they say, on the day of Epiphany.
36. ተሰቀለ ቢሉኝ ዝናሩ ነው ብዬ When they told me, “he was hanged” I thought it was his cartridge belt,
- ተሰቀለ ቢሉኝ ናስማስሩ ነው ብዬ When they told me, “he was hanged” I thought it was his *nasmasər*,
- ለካስ አንገቱ ነው መከራውን ያዬ። Alas! It was his neck that had the tribulation.
37. እጅጉ ባይቆስል ሽፈራው ባይሞት Had ፱ḡḡəgu not wounded, had Šəfärraw⁵⁰ not died, Who would’ve dared to invade Bäle’s⁵¹ governorate?
38. እንዳልተበላበት ሥጋ በቢላዋ As if no meat was eaten with knives in it, እንዳልተጫነበት ዋርዲና ሳሙና As if no Wardi and Samuna⁵² were saddled in it, እንዳልተጠጣበት ጠጅ በማብረጃ As if no *täḡḡ*⁵³ was drunk with serving jag in it, እንዳልተነጠፈ ወላንሳና ግምጃ As if no *wälansa* and *gəmḡa*⁵⁴ were spread [in it], Weeds have grown at *Abba Kostər*’s palace.
39. ተበላይ ዘለቀ ተተሰቀለው Than Bälāy Zälläqä who was hanged ይሻላል ሽፈራው ሶማ የቀረው። Is Šəfärraw better who died in Somma.
40. አባ ኮስትር በላይ ቢቃ ተከተተ *Abba Kostər* Bälāy is finished and gone; ያንተ ወደረኛ ግራኝ ነበር ሞተ። Your rival was Graññ who is dead.
41. “ተእንግዲህ ወንድ አለ” ብየም አላወራ Henceforth I shall not speak of manliness, ጀግንነቱ አለቀ ተአባ ኮስትር ጋራ። [For] heroism has ended with *Abba Kostər*.
42. የበላይ ኩራቱ The proud of Bälāy, ገመድ ነው ራቱ። Rope has become his dinner [in the end].
43. ወይ! በላይ ዘለቀ ታላቁ ዝሆን Oh! Bälāy Zälläqä, the great elephant! “ሮር መጣልህ” በሉት ይነሣ እንደሆን። Tell him: “war has come” in case he rises up.
44. እናርጅና እናውጋ ሲጠራኝ አገሬ When my compatriots in ፹nnarḡ and ፹nnawga, and my country called upon me, “አቤት!” እለው ነበር ወይ! አለመኖሬ። I would have responded to them [Alas!] had I been alive⁵⁵.
45. እንደነ ሰሎሞን፣ እንደነ ሲራክ፣ Like [king] Solomon, Sirach and others, እንደ ደጉ ንጉሥ፣ እንደ ምኒልክ Like Mənilək, the kind king, መች ተጥፎ ያልቃል የኮስትር ታሪክ? *Kostər*’s [life] history cannot be completed by writing.

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⁵⁰ *Däggazmač* Šəfärraw Gärbaw, Bälāy’s cousin, one of the top commanders of the resistance movement.

⁵¹ A short form of endearment for Bälāy.

⁵² Wardi and Samuna were the names of Bälāy Zälläqä’s mules.

⁵³ *Täḡḡ* is an Ethiopian honey wine. In the past, the drink was reserved for rulers and the upper class.

⁵⁴ *Wälansa*, *gəmḡa* are decorated carpets that were spread during banquets at the court of Bälāy Zälläqä.

⁵⁵ In this poem, the singer recites as if the song would have been composed by Bälāy Zälläqä after his death.

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III. Informants

- Fitawrari* Tässämma Laqäw (Bälay Zälläqä's uncle), age 84, interviewed in Bičäna, 29.6.1990.
- Emmahoy* Salələš Zälläqä, age 75, interviewed in Bičäna, 29.06.1990.
- Aggafari* Mängəste Goššu, age 90, interviewed in Gädäb Giyorgis, 25–26.6.1990.
- Aggafari* Əğğəgu Dästa, age 77, interviewed in Tängumma Mika'el, 27.6.1990.
- Abba* Taggälä Kasa, age 90, interviewed in Däğğ Mariyam, 23.6.1990.
- Wäyzäro* Yäwubdar Ayyälä, age 72, interviewed in Gädäb Giyorgis, 26.6.1990.
- Ato* Täsägga Bälaččäw, age 77, interviewed in Bičäna, 29.6.1990.
- Ato* Mässälu Gässäsä, age 48, interviewed in Däbrä Wärq on 22–23.9.1989, 1–2.7.1990.
- Märigeta* Əguwalä Ğämbäre, age 80, interviewed in Däbrä Wärq, 18.9.1989.
- Abba* Agäññähu Tämäsgän, age 77, interviewed in Dima Giyorgis, 28.6.1990.