Introduction

The following article is a verbatim translation of a Tigrinya text published in Rome in 1895. It is a first-hand account by Dàbtâra Fesseha Giyorgis Abiyâzgi of his voyage from Ethiopia to Italy. As far as we know, it is the first secular text to be published in the Tigrinya language. And as a travelogue, it is also a first in Ethiopian literature. Some three and a half decades later, Blaten géta Hiruy Wâldâ Sellasse wrote an impressive and lengthy account of his travel to Japan in Amharic. His example has hardly been followed. In Ethiopian literature, travelogues are rare and hard to come by. Thus, it is worthwhile to introduce them to the general public when they do exist.

The Maison des Études Éthiopiennes (now Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes), under the directorship of the late Dr. Jacques Bureau, provided a subvention grant for the republication of Fesseha Giyorgis' travelogue. As a result, the Cultural Association of Tigrai (C.A.T.) reprinted the Tigrinya text in 1998 under the title /n'TM/h/H- *fl»lfln (DÙ a×I*L *n»fl.P ^VlA-f (Impressions: An Account of a Voyage from Ethiopia to Italy). It has, therefore, been available since to the
Tigrinya-reading public. As far as I know, no translation of the travelogue has ever been made in any language. Thus, this translation makes it available to the English-reading public for the first time.

362

We do not know much about the life of Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis Abiyàzgi. We know that he was born in the historical town of Yeha (birthdate unknown), some 45 km east of Adwa in Tigrai, and that he died in 1931 in a village called Adi Zenu in Seraye, Eritrea. We also know that after he left Ethiopia, he studied and taught in Italy; we know little else.

Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis can be regarded as the father of Tigrinya literature. He authored at least five Tigrinya texts, of which two were published in Rome in 1895 and 1898. His manuscript “A History of Ethiopia” was published in Naples in 1897 with an Italian translation by Professor Yaqob Beyene of the Istituto Universitario Orientale. It is hoped that his other works will be published in the future.

Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis wrote not only in Tigrinya but in Amharic as well. The Amharic work “The Former and Later Ethiopia”, published in Rome in 1899 has Alàqa Zâwâld for author. After textual comparison of the Tigrinya and Amharic texts, Professors Lanfranco Ricci and Yaqob Beyene maintain that Alàqa Zâwâld was only a pen name for Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis. If so, that makes him one of the early pioneers of Amharic literature as well.

I have attempted to make the present translation as faithful as possible to the Tigrinya text, not only in content but in style as well. Thus, the translation may appear awkward in places, and the reader is, therefore, forewarned to keep that in mind.

**An Ethiopian's Voyage to Italy at the End of the 19th Century**

*by Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis Abiyàzgi*

**Preface**

As there are prominent and conscious persons who like to know and make known the Tigrinya language, on their prompting, this concern engaged our mind. The aim they set was for us to write about our voyage from
Ethiopia to Italy and on the impressions that seeing this country [Italy] made on us. Our chief instigator is Professor Francesco Gallina, and we present it to him [in his honor]. Other than this [account], we have written, in their respective sections, on the ancient genealogies Ethiopians reckon their own; on their ancient cities with indications on their toponyms; on the lives of some of their famous Emperors and princes, and on the customs of the country. If it is God's will, this [latter] will see the light of day [be published] in its own time. Apart from this and further, as it is possible that Ethiopian matters may have been written in the name of Arabs, we have taken some ladlefuls, and translated them into Tigrinya with the help of our Arabic teacher. In writing all this, our chief aim is, as we already indicated above, to provide study material for those who may be eager to learn Tigrinya. Prior to this time, no Ethiopian had tried to do this. Thus, it may be pleasing to the wise. If, perchance, it becomes an obstacle for some, we hope they will bear

with us, considering the basis of the motive of our undertaking. This [entreaty] is in regard to our future book. The present account, being only a narration of our voyage, is not worrisome. Our worry is from our compatriots. We entreat them, therefore, to fill in the missing gaps, and to spare us from criticism.

An Account of a Voyage from Ethiopia to Italy

On 30th June, 1890, Count Antonelli, accompanied by an officer, met me in the palace precincts in Massawa, and left for Assab. He had three Shoan servants accompanying him who also boarded the ship with him. The gentleman ato Gàbrà Sellasse, whom Emperor Menelik had sent to bring from Assab to Shoa canons, rifles and tens of thousands of bullets, also boarded the ship. The two Shoan servants of Count Antonelli were to go to their country [Ethiopia] by way of Zeila. As for Dagne, he was to go with him [Count Antonelli] to Italy. The reason why I stayed, separated from them, in Massawa was so that I would keep watch over the horse and mule
Menelik had given him [Count Antonelli] as well as over the horse Ras Alula had given him. They were to be taken to Italy, straight from Massawa to Naples. On this account, I spent seven days waiting for the arrival of the warship called Folta. When the ship arrived and departure became imminent, the officer I had met earlier [accompanying Antonelli as already mentioned above] had me called [to his presence]. He spoke to me about the voyage, and said that I was going to give the horses grass fodder and water from time to time. I said that I had never, up to this day, done stable work, and that I would not have gotten into all this situation, had I known this when Count Antonelli was here, and that he himself would not have entertained the idea of me doing stable work. He smiled [at this], and said that I was only to keep an eye on them, and that there were others who would give them grass fodder and water. I replied to him that I would not be unequal to the task of keeping watch, and that it was for that very reason that I stayed behind. We made an appointment for our hour of departure. Then, I took leave and went my way. Aha! Wait a minute! Before I left, he said, «Here! Take this piece of paper and give it to any naval officer you come across on entering the ship!» and gave it [the piece of paper] to me. After that, I bade farewell to my friends and acquaintances. Some of them mocked me and others said that I had triumphed. As for myself, since I had decided on my voyage, I did not respond to people's comments or mind it [at all]. When it got to be towards evening, I rose to enter the ship as per order of the major who was my protector-guardian. Some of my friends came up to the shore to see me off and we bade each other farewell. When it [the departure] became final, my body sort of trembled. Two of my friends immediately began to shed tears. In the late afternoon, we kissed each other anew, and I boarded a boat. Until I boarded the ship, they were on the shore seeing me from afar. Now and then, until I got into the ship, I also did not stop from turning my face towards them and taking glances. On entering the ship, I waved to them with a white handkerchief, and they went their way with a heavy heart. After that, I did not get out of the ship. At that time, many soldiers returning to Italy from Africa were boarding the ship. Their superiors brought in their luggage, took their sleeping rooms, and returned to Massawa. The rest of us, however, spent the night there [in the ship].
The following morning, on the 7th of July, 1890, after mid-day, those superiors who had not spent the previous night in the ship came in; and as its departure was getting close, it started to sound as a signal. At around 1:30 p.m., all passengers boarded the ship. **On the 7th of July, 1890, at 2:00 p.m., we started [our voyage] from Massawa to Italy. Before that time, my longest voyage was from Massawa to Dikhona, and if not that, from Massawa to Grar or Seraya; apart from this, I had not voyaged on the sea further. Other than this, it is a grave matter to leave your land and your people and to go alone to an alien country. Although it becomes a simple matter later, at the beginning, when you think deeply, your heart lacks ease and repose. Other than myself, there was no other Ethiopian. But then, there was one shanqilla, around 19 years old, employed by a rich person, who had come on the ship. He knew how to speak Italian a little, and so he chatted with the soldiers. And with me, he spoke in Arabic now and then. As for me, I did not listen to a word of Italian. From then on, I started to study a few words from the soldiers; they were competing with each other saying «I will teach him! I will teach him!» For this reason, I did not experience loneliness. Other than this, as ras Makonen and his entourage traveled back and forth to Italy on this ship, there were sailors on this ship who knew them. They would come and chat with me; they would also take me up [and down] to the deck. There was especially one sergeant who would take time to chat with me in French. He oriented me to the customs of the country saying, "Do this or that when you enter Italy!"

At noon, on the third day of our departure from Massawa, we saw two ships from afar to the east. In the night, whether they were the same ones or others, we saw ships anew. Before everybody else, I think the captain of the ship saw them first. They then dropped down the anchor and stopped the ship. All the soldiers got ready with arms. Those who had to climb on the pole of the mast did so. Those who handled artillery stood by their artillery. Then I started to ponder. I was not afraid of death, but if they were to shoot at each other, and I was to be a sacrificial sheep to the fish without putting up a fight and die!... the thought of that bothered me. From
a distance, they started to signal each other by light signals that were known to them. After staying put thus for about half an hour, we resumed our voyage. Then they asked me whether I was afraid. I replied to them, "Just like you!" Some of those who had been to Africa said, "When were Abyssinians ever afraid?"

From the moment of our departure from Massawa until we entered Suez, the sea was as flat as a sàtàta (an injera basket that is flat) and it was calm. On my part, I am not familiar with the character of the sea; it was those with experience who were admiring the calmness of the sea. Before I left Massawa, they were giving me advice and counsel that the sea is bad and that it makes you vomit, and yet until I reached Suez, I did not feel any discomfort. I then started wondering where it [the discomfort] all was and what the point of all that advice was, and so I dismissed it lightly. On our arriving at Suez, I began to see a different world. Prior to that, apart from seeing mountain peaks now and then from afar, we did not see anything other than the sea and the sky. As it was, in Suez, we did not descend from the ship to the shore and rested only for half an hour, and there was no time. Then, via the Suez Canal, we headed for Port Said. As the Suez Canal is crossed slowly, Egyptians, saying "Bakshish!" "Bakshish!" ran

1 These are small islands just off the coast of Massawa.

along the shore. Some of the soldiers would throw broken pieces of biscuits to them. However, some of it, without reaching them, would drop into the middle of the sea. From Suez, we left at mid-morning, and we entered Port Said in the night. They let down the anchor for the ship, and it stood there up till mid-morning. They bought much coal. At that time, Arabs, Egyptians and Greeks on boats brought goods and fruits to sell. And all around the ship, like a monkey who is denied water, they would look up and say "Buy! Buy!" "Here [is] a good fruit!" "Here [is] a fine product!" They would show their products thus, and ride their boats. Although some soldiers poured water on them from bowls, they did not mind it at all, presumably
from being used to it. **Italy, being a country of fruits, and the countries they had been in, being without fruits, all the Italians in the ship who came from Africa began to buy, having found those [fruits] that grow in their country. At that time, it appeared to the soldiers as if they had just about entered their country. From the greatness of their joy, their faces appeared flushed like those of ripe melo (an edible reddish yellow berry).**

When it reached noon, we left Port Said. It was our fifth day from the time of our departure from Massawa. After a little distance, we were to voyage on the Roman Sea in place of the Red Sea. And lo! the horses of the waves began to rise and to pile up like a hill, and the ship was beaten up and down and sometimes swung sideways like the handle of a spear. It swayed to the right and left, and we began to look up and down. Alas! The deck of the ship was sprayed with sea water. After that, our stomachs turned and everyone, including the sailors, began to throw up. From every body else, it was worst with me. After the sun set, the ship sometimes was beaten from both sides, and at other times it rose and sank and whirled and bowed, and so the sky along with the stars appeared to me to be swaying. The sailors said to me that such storm was not seen often and that it was amazing how it fell. On our third day, it calmed a little. As for me, nothing could get into my mouth. Even more, if the smell of the food entered my nostrils,- it caused me to try to throw up, although nothing would come out. Of the sailors, some asked me when I was going to die. They said this to me out of concern that I might not die of starvation. On the fourth day of our departure from Port Said, the storm calmed completely. As for myself, until we reached Naples, save for an occasional cup of Marsala, I did not let anything into my mouth. As for the shanqilla, however, since when he was in Massawa he was voyaging back and forth to Aden and Jeddha in big ships, except for that [one] day when we left Port Said and he, like everybody else, threw up, nothing happened to him and he was completely healthy [comfortable]. Nonetheless, he wanted to force me to eat. It was not only him; others also said as much to me. **On the tenth day of our departure from Massawa, as we approached Naples, the sun was very low. On their pointing out Naples to me from a distance, the sea sickness immediately left me. Then, in order to see settlements, we looked to our right and left in expectation. As some officers and ordinary sailors were**
competing to show me settlements, we reached the dock for ships. It was sunset, and the anchor was dropped. There and then, people started to descend from the ship and head for the city. In the same sweep, those favored by time, without returning, passed the night in the city; some of the others, however, returned to the ship after some time. As for me, I did not move out of the ship. Nevertheless, of those who had been in Africa, Captain Mikael de Bernadis and the Basha bezuq officer who had been in Keren, whose name I have forgotten, told the catering officers to give me whatever food I fancied emphasizing [to them] that I had had sea sickness and that I had not even as much as tasted food. Although I did not feel estranged, they encouraged me and went down to the city. After that, the lights were switched on in the city. On top of that, the moonlight was luminous. Although prior to this, I had much heard news of the beauty and the completeness of the development of European countries, when on that night I was on the ship and looked at Naples, decked and decorated with lights, it became to me just like when Queen Makeda [Sheba], seeing Jerusalem, said that what she was seeing was more than what she had heard [of it].

On the morrow, all passengers, carrying their luggage or having them carried [by others], began to go down to the city. In the middle of it, a captain and a lieutenant boarded the ship. At first, they looked at the two horses and the mule. Then, they came up to me, asked me questions, and took me down with them. They put collars on the horses and the mule and pulled them down. The two kind captains who had been in Africa and who we mentioned earlier came to me after I descended from the ship, asked about my condition and bade me farewell, speaking to me about good things and saying they were going to their respective homes. As for me, after descending from the ship, I stayed for a long while at the gate. Then, the Napolitan lieutenant came and took the pack animals away, entrusting them to soldiers. He took me along with him and sat me on a chariot and took me to a place in Naples where sailors who travel back and forth to Africa are accommodated. After that, after we got in, he lodged me in a house together with two officers. As the two captains of whom we spoke earlier had talked to the lieutenant about me, he took
me to a restaurant there and then I ate up to my fill. In any case, they received me well. When I was in the ship, however, as in this world completeness is not found, and in spite of all the other Italians caring for me so much, a captain who was a subordinate of the colonel, presumably perhaps because I lacked grace in his eyes, would look at me with the white of his eyes turned up. When it got to be day, my protector-guardian lieutenant gave me a soldier for companion and I spent the day touring Naples. By chance, we met an Egyptian. Except for the turban on his head, all his clothes were as fine as those of European gentlemen. He was also tall and well built. He asked me my country and I told him. Then we became like relatives and he went around with us till evening. In the end, he went to his business and we went back to our house. When we parted, we appeared like old friends. While I was going around and touring Naples, the impressions made on me are difficult to tell. It is open to question whether he, who starting from Ethiopia dropped suddenly in a big European city, would not wonder whether he was in heaven or on earth. Nonetheless, especially a son of central Tigrai is so sharp that there is nothing that will be uphill to him. In Naples, I stayed three days as though it were one day. On my third day, in the afternoon, they gave me a soldier to see me off and I boarded a train and they sent me in the direction of Rome.

As for the two horses, they were left behind in Naples, while the mule came with me. Between Naples and Rome, there is a small town called Cecano; its chief is the brother of Count Pe Antonelli. His name is Pa Antonelli. For this reason, as Count Pe Antonelli had sent a message to Naples to take me to the residence of his brother Count Pa Antonelli, they took my companion and myself down from the train when we arrived at Cecano. As it was night time, we rested there [at the station] until dawn. At dawn, as they led us to the residence of Count Pa Antonelli, we met him en route

367

as he was leaving his house mounted on a horse. Since he had already received news of my coming, he recognized me quickly. The people of this country, especially the gentlemen, have sweet tongue [speech] and after speaking good things, he sent me to his house with an additional companion. He himself did not stay long; he attended to his business and returned quickly. He played a good host to us; we
stayed there for three days. In those three days, I visited the city and the farms. Their trees bear fruit and they are planted in a wonderful and orderly manner. You should not see this land during their winter; it is green in the spring and summer. The trees are tall and slender and planted in orderly fashion. On one side, there were women threshing grain, and on the other side, there were men piling up hay. Apart from this, as I was wearing Ethiopian-cut trousers, both children and adults flocked to see me. As I found their manner of dress and behaviour different, I saw them with curiosity on my part as well. However, I was not as amazed at them as they were at me.

On our third day, towards late afternoon, Count Pa Antonelli assigned a person to see us off to the station: my soldier companion to return to Naples and I to go to Rome. Aha! wait a minute! He asked whether I would be afraid to go to Rome alone, and he said that if it were so he could give me a companion. I said to him, "Thanks! I am not afraid." When we reached the station, I got into the train going to Rome, bade farewell to the one who saw me off, and started [the journey] for Rome where I arrived towards evening. Then a person who was waiting for me at the station put me on a chariot which took us to the compound of the residence of Count Antonelli. Dagne waited for me there. On seeing me, he was very happy. On my part too, I was as happy, if not more so than him. Although I had marveled at seeing Naples, it became even more of a marvel to me when I saw Rome. The compound in which Count Antonelli resided was called "Albergo"; it means a hotel. The owners were sociable. Dagne and I would seat in the dining room side by side. As people like us were like curiosities then, they, wishing to know about all conditions in Ethiopia, asked us any question they fancied. These people looked upon Ethiopia much like Ethiopian highlanders looked upon other Africans surrounding them. When I heard of this cultural attitude, it became new to me and I marveled. If you ponder over it, however, it is true. In Ethiopia, he who can write his name is an accomplished person. In the albergo, I stayed for forty-one days with Count Antonelli. After that, however, I came under the wings of a representative of the Foreign Ministry. A native of Inda Aba Gârima2, brought up in Amhara country, by the name of Mâsfen was already there. In his language, he appeared to be Amhara and not Tigrean. After that, as the point of my coming was to live in the Ministry we mentioned above, I took my accommodation there.
When an Ethiopian comes to Europe and sees its goodness, beauty and glamour, that which impresses his whole being can not be told. He marvels when he sees the lights at night shining like the sun at day while people tarry back and forth. He admires saying, "What a country!" He even goes as far as saying that God created this people himself, and not others. Wherever he goes, he sees and hears only new things, things he did not see or hear before in his country. Upon this, he decides he will not leave a country such as this. He compares his country with this country and finds his own country inferior in all aspects. He sinks in the urge and concern to speak in the lan-

2 *Inda Aba Gârima* is a village near Adwa in Tigrai.

368

guage of the [host] country. However stutteringly, he speaks in the language. He also acts only in the manner he has heard and seen. He is always happy. Nevertheless, this is only so at the beginning, before he distinguishes the red from the black.

Dagne, who we mentioned earlier, had been to Rome six times. At one time, he had stayed [in Rome] for a consecutive period often months. Then he said this to me, "This country is likable at first. However, later, when you know the language and its nuances and get to know people very well, its glamour wears off'. Dagne's speaking thus was not true; it is just that he was homesick. Apart from this, there is no country which does not have vulgar and impertinent persons, and Dagne' social milieu was that of vulgar servants. On top of his nostalgia, it is possible that they slandered him with insults like "You cannibal!" or some such insult. Even then, you take into account the behaviour of the rich gentlemen, and should not consider that of the riffraff.

**Those of us who recognizably came from Central Tigrai were three. The first was called Zàkareyas and he was from Aksum. He spent twelve years in the Propaganda Fide school and studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian and French there. On ordination to the priesthood, he was ordered to return to Ethiopia with Abunà (bishop) Ya'eqob (Jacobis?). Let alone**
speaking of the possibility of the charm of the place [Italy] wearing off, he
died eulogizing it like a bard.

I myself used to hear this [sort of eulogy] from his own mouth in Aksum.
The day I entered Naples, that which I used to hear from him became
reality. Recollection of that made it my heart's chief happiness. As for
Abreha and myself, it has been four years and five months since we started
living in this country. And even though, now and then, the longing for our
country and our relations springs in us from some natural whim, we grow
fond of this country and its people as the days pass. Other than this, that
which most pleased me was its smooth comfort. At that time, in Ethiopia, it
was a situation of dog-eat-dog. Wherever you passed, you heard crying
and wailing. On the road, you came across corpses dead from starvation
and disease, or across people imminently near death. It was a marvel if
you went out of your house and came back safe and well. Thus, for a
person who went out of such a country and came to this land of peace and
paradise, this change makes quite an impression upon his being.

3 Dàbtàra Fesseha Giyorgis left Ethiopia at the time of the Great Famine of 1
889-92, a famine caused by the spread of an hitherto unknown cattle disease,
rinderpest. Farmers could not plough because of lack of oxen.