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## **Aspects of Traditional Culture in Modern Ethiopian Novel in English: With Reference to *Shinega's Village* and *The Afersata***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines some prominent aspects of traditional Ethiopian culture depicted through modern Ethiopian long fiction in English. Ethiopia has a long history of literary tradition in its indigenous languages, mainly in Geez and Amharic. However, the history of Ethiopian creative literature in English is slightly over half a century old. In this sense, it can be considered as a more recent development when compared to the tradition of Ethiopian literature written in Geez and Amharic. Moreover, the output of literature in English in Ethiopia is quite scanty, compared to the output in other African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, for instance. Although limited in quantity, Ethiopian literature in English comprises important works in fiction, poetry, and drama. One striking feature of Ethiopian creative literature in English, particularly that of long fiction is its fusion with aspects of indigenous traditional culture. This article attempts to explore some salient aspects of Ethiopian traditional culture reflected in Ethiopian literature in English through the analysis of two novels by Sahle Sellassie Berhane Mariam, namely *Shinega's Village* and *The Afersata*. Textual analysis has been used as a basic method to explore the aspects of traditional culture in the novels. A close reading and analysis of the novels revealed four major aspects of traditional culture. These are mystical world view, traditional dispensation of justice, infusion of folklore, and a sense of continuity.

### **1. Introduction**

Traditional culture has been playing a significant role in African literature in general and modern African novel in particular. Traditional folkloric forms drawn from the rich African traditional culture often infuse modern African long fiction with characterization, theme, and technique. The novels of Chinua Achebe

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and Nigugi Wa Thiongo, to mention but two authors, are good examples of this. As will be shown in this paper, modern Ethiopian novels in English are no exception in this regard.

The history of Ethiopian literary tradition dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, if not earlier. This relates to the literature in Geez, which is regarded as the language of Ethiopia's ancient civilization. Gradually, however, Amharic started to contend with Geez as a literary language. Amharic literature traces its history to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Debebe 1980, 3). Amharic literature has not suffered from the competition of literature in English as compared to other local languages in Anglophone African countries because of the history of colonialism in Africa.

Ethiopian creative literature in English is over half a century old. According to some studies, (Tewodros 2002, for instance), the first creative work in English was a poem entitled '*Unconquerable Sovereign*' published in *The Ethiopian Herald* on may 6, 1944 E.C. In this view, Ethiopian creative literature in English can be considered as a more recent development when compared to the tradition of Ethiopian creative literature written in the indigenous geez or Amharic languages.

Several factors contributed to the rise and development of Ethiopian literature in English. These include increase in Ethiopia's external relations with the English speaking world, increase in the influence of Great Britain after the five year occupation of Ethiopia by the Italians, increase in training opportunities for young Ethiopians abroad, and the making of English a medium of instruction in Ethiopian schools in 1944 (Bahru 1991).

However, the output of literature in English in Ethiopia is still scanty. This unique position of Ethiopian literature in English relates mainly to the fact that English has been and still is a foreign language in Ethiopia. In other words, English is not a lingua franca in Ethiopia as in Nigeria, South Africa, or many east African countries.

It can be argued, however, that it is literature in English, not literature in Amharic that can play a more important role in presenting Ethiopian experience to a wider international audience mainly

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because of its medium. Moreover, in spite of the fact that it is limited in quantity, Ethiopian creative literature in English comprises important works in fiction, poetry, and drama. As noted in the abstract earlier on, a striking feature of Ethiopian creative literature in English, particularly that of long fiction, is its fusion with aspects of indigenous traditional culture.

However, creative literature in English in Ethiopia has been and still is facing two major problems. First, it has been and still is overshadowed by the stronger and more popular literature in Amharic and as a result the attention given to it by researchers and students of literature in Ethiopia is very little. Secondly, because the output of literature in the English language in Ethiopia is quite limited, it has received little attention of students of literature and researchers outside Ethiopia. These are the main reasons for focusing on this subject in this paper.

## **2. Objectives**

The general aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore some salient aspects of Ethiopian culture reflected in two Ethiopian novels in English by Sahle Sellassie so as to bring this creative writing to the attention of a wider audience. There are two reasons for selecting Sahle Sellassie's works for this paper. First, he is perhaps the most prolific long fiction writer in English in Ethiopia. Secondly, he is probably the most immersed writer in the cultural traditions of his *Chaha* (one of the clans among the Gurage people of southern Ethiopia) community in particular and those of the Ethiopian society in general. As Molvaer (1997, 37) puts it: "Good literature reflects the life and spirit of a people. Writers hold a mirror up to their society. A society finds expression through its authors and in this way it is the co-author of literary works. Their society, their physical surroundings and the times they live in provide their themes and to a large extent their view points." Among Sahle Sellassie's works, *Shinaga's Village* (1964) and *The Afersata* (1968) are set in *Chaha* village life and hence seem to be greatly infused with traditional cultural elements.

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions through the study of these works:

1. To what extent is the novel in English infused with traditional cultural elements in the Ethiopian setting?
2. What aspects of Ethiopian traditional culture are depicted through the novels under study?

### **3. Methodology**

This paper uses textual analysis as a basic method. Primary textual data that substantiate the central arguments of the paper are drawn from the novels selected for the study through close reading, selection, and analysis. Secondary data pertaining to the subject has been obtained by reviewing literature related to the subject. Theory has been drawn from literature on folklore.

### **4. Review of Related Literature**

The aim of this section is to review previous studies related to this paper and to consider some concepts and theories of folklore so as to give the paper a conceptual and theoretical framework.

#### **4.1. Review of Previous Studies**

As stated in the introduction, there is very limited research on Ethiopian long fiction in English in our context. One work related to the subject of this paper is Mekonnen Minda's (1979) B.A thesis entitled "*The use of Folklore in Dagnachew and Sahle Sellassie's Fiction in English.*" Mekonnen made a comparative study of the ways in which folklore has been used in Dagnachew's *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973) and Sahle Sellassie's *Firebrands* (1979) and *The Afersata* (1968). Mekonnen's paper is different from the present paper in that its concern is not with aspects of traditional culture but with the similarities and differences between Dagnachew and Sahle Sellassie's use of folklore in the development of their fictional works. Moreover, Mekonnen's paper has not considered Shinega's *Village* (1964).

Another work worth reviewing is Debebe Seifu's M.A. thesis entitled "*Ethiopian Literature in English*" (1980). In this paper, Debebe makes an insightful investigation of the most prominent works in

fiction, poetry, and drama written in the English language by Ethiopians. However, Debebe's treatment of these works is primarily thematic. Debebe states: "My overall approach is thematic" (ibid, 4). The present paper differs from Debebe's paper in that it is concerned not with thematic matters, but with the examination of some prominent aspects of traditional culture in the novels under study.

Molvaer's (1980) work entitled "*Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature*" is another work that has connection with this paper. The connection is that Molvaer also considered the notion of tradition in Ethiopian long fiction in Amharic. However, Molvaer's study focused on the study of how traditions and customs have changed over time. This is clearly stated in the introduction of Molvaer's work: "It is the aim of this book to study how traditional culture survives today and how customs and ways of thinking have changed during the last few decades" (ibid, ix).

The novel as we know it today emerged in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it can be regarded as a modern form of literature. The assumption, however, is that in countries like Ethiopia which have a long standing cultural tradition, the written literature would be strongly influenced by traditional culture. Molvaer (1980, 1) has noted this fact in his study of Amharic long fiction. He observes: "A perusal of Amharic literature written between 1930-1974 reveals a society that strongly holds onto traditions and values inherited from previous centuries."

Another study on Ethiopian creative literature in English is Tewodros Bogale's (2002) M.A. thesis entitled "*Major Themes in Ethiopian Poetry in English*." As the title indicates, Tewodros's paper, like that of Debebe, is concerned with thematic analysis of the poems in English by Ethiopian writers. Thus, its concern is different from the purpose of the present paper.

On the whole, a review of several other Ethiopian novels in English, Dagnatchew's *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973), Sahle Sellassie's *Warrior King* (1974) and *Firebrands* (1979), and Fikremarkos Desta's *Land of the Yellow Bull* (2003) also shows that modern Ethiopian long fiction in English is strongly linked with native tradition.

## **4.2. Review of Related Concepts and Theories**

### **4.2.1. Conceptual Framework**

One central concept in this paper is the notion of traditional culture. In order to understand the essence of the term traditional culture, it would be necessary to consider the two concepts in it, tradition and culture. The Cambridge International Dictionary defines tradition as “beliefs, principles or ways of acting which people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time.” Charlotte (1986, 28) conceives tradition as: “a pattern of beliefs, customs, values, behavior and knowledge expertise which are passed on from generation to generation by the specialization process.” In short, tradition is belief or custom passed down from one generation to the next. It is in this sense that the term tradition has been used in this paper.

The term culture has also been conceived in similar ways. Davies and Schalefer (1994, 23) describe culture as: “a whole way of life.” Encyclopedia Britannica (1978) offers a more elaborate definition of culture: “Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior consisting of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies and other components”. It can be seen from the above discussion that the terms tradition and culture are closely related and overlapping. This overlapping can also be observed in the following definition of traditional culture by Mclean (2000, 27): “Traditional culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits required by a person as a member of a society.” In short, traditional cultural elements are the basic oral and material assets that represent the historical as well as the existing social identity of people.

### **4.2.2. The Notion of Folklore**

The insights gained in the discussion of traditional culture show that there is a strong link between traditional culture and folklore which is a key concept in the study of aspects of traditional culture. Folklore is a very broad and multifaceted term and has been conceived in different ways by different scholars in the fields of literature and folklore. Abrahams (1981, 66), for instance, has provided the

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following insightful observation on the subject. He defines folklore as:

A collective name applied to verbal materials and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by words of mouth and by example, rather than in written form. It includes, among other things, legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles spells, nursery rhymes, pseudo-scientific role about the weather, plants, and animals; customary activities at births; marriages, and deaths; traditional dances and forms of drama which are performed on holidays or communal gatherings.

Scholars like Sokolov (1959) and Dundes (1965) agree that folklore includes material culture as well as human spiritual or intellectual cultures such as oral literature, social folk custom, and performing folk arts. For Leach (1989, 20): Folklore is part of people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs, practices, customs and observations of general currency; in myths, legends, and tales of common and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual.

Although all these are interesting ways of perceiving the notion of folklore, certain elements in the following conception by Dundes (1965, 8) have also been used in the study of aspects of traditional culture in this paper: "Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, and insults. It also includes folk customs, folk dance, folk drama, folk art, folk belief and folk poetry." Perhaps a more comprehensive classification and definition of folklore has also been provided by Dorson (1972). According to Dorson, folklore can be divided into four categories. These are oral literature, material culture, folk custom, and performing folk arts. Since these classifications are central to the discussion of certain aspects of traditional culture in this paper, these categories of folklore are discussed in some detail in this conceptual review.

Oral literature refers to traditional expressive forms such as folk narrative, folk song, and folk poetry. Oral literature also includes traditional tales, anecdotes, romances, epics, proverbs and riddles. As

will be shown in the analysis section of this paper, Sahle Sellassie has used this aspect of his native *Chaha* culture in the novels under study. Another aspect of folklore is material culture. According to Dorson (1972, 3), material culture denotes "... how men and women in tradition-oriented societies build their homes, make their clothes, prepare their food, fashion their tools and implements, and design their furniture and utensils." The analysis will show how this aspect of folklore is linked to the development of the novels under this study. Folk custom is also another aspect of folklore that has been widely used in the novels. Folk custom relates to such rites of passage as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. It also includes aspects of social folk custom such as folk belief, folk medicine, folk blessings, curses and oaths. The two novels under study abound with these aspects of folklore. Yet another aspect of folk custom is performing folk arts. In tradition-oriented societies, these relate to more casual forms of folk song, traditional music, or dance. As will be demonstrated in the analysis, the funeral dirges that Kerwage performed in the episode of Theresa's (her daughter's) sudden death are good examples of this aspect of folklore.

On the whole, since the following observation by Dorson (ibid, 11) highlights the essential links between traditional culture and folklore, it has been used as an operational definition in studying aspects of traditional culture in this paper: "Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, and insults. It also includes folk customs, folkdance, folk drama, folk art, folk belief and folk poetry."

#### **4.2.3. Theoretical Framework**

A number of theories can be applied to the study of aspects of traditional culture in long fiction. Dorson (1972) recommends several theories such as historical-geographical, functional, and contextual. These theories will be briefly reviewed in this section so as to find a more appropriate framework that can serve the purpose of this paper. The historical-geographical theory proposes a comparative approach whereby a researcher in folklore attempts to reconstruct the origin and meaning of one folkloric form with that of another form. Since the purpose of this paper is not to reconstruct the historical background of aspects of traditional culture in the novels under study, this theory



does not provide an appropriate framework for analysis. In the study of aspects of traditional culture in this paper, functional and contextual theories have been considered appropriate because all the aspects of folklore in the novels under study are closely connected to the functions they serve in the socio-cultural context of the Chaha community.

The functional theory concentrates on the function and significance of aspects of traditional culture in a given cultural situation. In this view, folk arts and beliefs are aspects of a functioning society and are integral parts of the culture. In this paper, the functional theory has been used to explore the social functions of folk beliefs and verbal arts. Moreover, the functional point of view has been used to show the close link between aspects of traditional culture and the world view of the community.

In like manner, the contextual theory has been used to study the aspects of traditional culture reflected in the novels in the social setting of the Chaha community. This theory enabled the writer to capture the cultural dynamics of the novels under study in the context of communication, expression and performance of the various aspects of traditional culture. On the whole, it helped to consider issues pertaining to the context of Chaha expressions and performances in the setting of the study. The subsequent section is devoted to the discussion of aspects of traditional culture depicted in the novels in view of these conceptual and theoretical considerations.

### **5. Discussion of Aspects of Traditional Culture in *Shinega's Village* and *The Afersata***

This section is devoted to the discussion of some prominent aspects of traditional culture depicted through the novels selected for this study. Before presenting the analysis of aspects of traditional culture in the texts, it is appropriate to offer a brief synopsis of the novels.

#### **Synopsis of *Shinega's Village***

The story begins with a chapter devoted entirely to the circumstances in which Shinega was born. Kerwage, Bala's wife and the major character in the novel, was expecting the birth of her child that night or the following morning. The anxiety of the entire household

increased by the hour as Kerwage's labor began with overwhelming pain. Bala also was very anxious and was pondering whether his wife would give birth to a second daughter, or to a son. Naturally, he hoped for a son. As Kerwage cried with pain, the women of the village who came to be on her side cried to saying "O holy Mary save us." The household were also disturbed by the howl of a hyena now and then, for the superstition held that if a hyena howls when someone is sick, and then death is near.

Kerwage gave birth to Shinega at cockcrow and was congratulated by family and friends. In the course of the story, Theresa died and the heartbroken Kerwage performed funeral dirges to family and friends. Nevertheless, Shinega grows up and starts his own family. The story ends by depicting the circumstances in which Shinega's wife gives birth.

#### **Synopsis of *The Afersata***

The story opens with the episode in which Namaga's, the major character's hut burns down in the dead hour of the night. The incident woke up the entire community and everyone rushed to the scene to put out the roaring fire. The hut was consumed by the fire, except that some items were saved by the villagers. The rest of the novel revolves around the traditional Ethiopian institution of crime investigation locally called *afersata*.

The close reading and analysis of the novels has revealed four major aspects of traditional culture. These are mystical world view, traditional dispensation of justice, infusion of folklore, and a sense of continuity. The subsequent sections dwell on the discussion of these aspects of traditional culture depicted through the two novels.

#### **5.1. Mystical World View**

Mystical world view maintains that knowledge of God is attained by a human faculty that transcends intellect and logic. African village life is filled with belief in the supernatural. As a result, mystical experience plays a central role in African literature in general and modern African fiction in particular. Belief in spirits and gods often influences the lives of the characters in the stories. As will be shown in the subsequent analysis, one aspect of traditional culture that marks

the novels under study is belief in supernatural power. The aim of this section is to explore aspects of mystical experience in the two novels.

Both the novels under investigation in this paper, *Shinega's village* and *The Afersata*, are set in the *Chaha Gurage* villages called *Wardena* and *Wudma* respectively. The life in the two villages which serve as the settings of these novels abounds with belief in mystical world view. Commenting on the significance of this view in African village life in general, Mbiti (1969, 179) observes: "The whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in mystical power." The mystical world view that informs modern Ethiopian long fiction in English is highly evident in the way gods and priests affect the course of things in society.

One striking example of belief in mystical power is reflected in the episode in *The Afersata* where the villagers appease the spirit of the sky by smearing the oak tree with butter and pouring a jar of local beer over it. The following lines from the novel can illustrate this point: "Adults avoided the oak tree only when it was raining. Children were warned not to approach the oak tree even when the sky was cloudy, for it attracted the 'Boje' the spirit of the sky that appeared in the form of a golden axe and caused a blow of death." (p.17). The practice of smearing the oak tree with butter and avoiding it 'when the sky was cloudy' or 'when it was raining' reflects the belief in mystical power in the village life of *Wudma*.

The role of the supernatural in the life of the people portrayed in the two novels can also be observed by considering the central place given to God in blessings, curses, and oaths. There are ample examples of this in the two novels examined in this paper. In *The Afersata*, for example, the elders give the following striking blessing before they presented the final report on the investigation of the affair of Namaga's hut: "May the tongue tell the truth. May God give issue to those who have none. May the young ones grow to be adults. May the adults live long to be elders and to be wise. May the bright day give place to a peaceful night" (p.88).

In this blessing, God is accorded a very important place. This shows how mystical world view plays a pivotal role in various social activities. Similarly, when Bala learns from Kartchea about the death

of Yibgyeta's calf in *Shinega's Village*, he utters his blessing in the name of God: "May God replace Yibgyeta's calf," (p.5). Examples of this nature are abundant in the novels under investigation.

## **5.2. Traditional Dispensation of Justice**

Another feature of traditional culture depicted through these novels in English is traditional dispensation of justice. In order to understand this aspect of cultural tradition, one needs to understand two concepts, namely the concept of community and the concept of order in traditionally oriented societies.

### **5.2.1. The Concept of Community**

In traditional cultures, the sense of community is usually very strong. In such communities the group or the community is more important than the individual. As a result of this, the literary products of such communities are highly socialized. This communal view influences characterization and other aspects of literary productions. In other words, focus or emphasis is not on any individual character but on the community at large. Sahle Sellassie's novel, *The Afersata*, presents a striking example of this. The major character in this novel appears to be Namaga, but his role in the novel depends on the actions and reactions of the community. For instance, in the traditional investigation to find out the culprit who burnt down Namaga's hut, it is the elders of the community, not Namaga, that play a central role in the episode. In other words, the elders become the protagonists in the whole process of the traditional investigation and outshine Namaga, the major character.

### **5.2.2. The Concept of Order**

Maintaining law and order is also a very important aspect of African village life. According to Ojaide (1996, 6), maintaining law and order seems to be true of African societies in general. He writes: "Order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group."

In traditional village communities in Ethiopia, great importance is attached to law and order. In these communities, elders play a vital role in the administration of law and order. Elders are actually regarded as legislators and judges. The meeting of the Gurage tribal

assembly in *Shinega's Village* is a good example of the fact that elders are the lawmakers of the society. The following conversation between Bala and Yibgyeta after Bala had returned home from the assembly illustrates this point beautifully:

“Yibgyeta said:” Elder, what was discussed today and what were the decisions?” Bala responded, “After taking all afternoon we decided that the Gurage shall celebrate Meskel at the same time as the Amhara, as there will be uniformity throughout Ethiopia, which after all is, one country. Second, we ruled that from now on no bride price shall be paid, more than the clothes bought for her” (p.8).

In this quotation, the expressions ‘we decided that the Gurage shall celebrate Meskel at the same time as the Amhara’ and ‘we ruled that from now on no bride price shall be paid’ clearly reflect the important role the elders play in the dispensation of law and order. Similarly, the judgment rendered by the elders of Wardena Village against a thief that had stolen Bala’s cow is yet another example of the fact that elders are the judges of the society. After consultation and the customary blessing, the elders gave the following judgment: “We have decided that you must give Bala two cows and his expenses, that is, the fifty dollars he had to pay his informant” (p.102).

Sahle Sellassie’s novel *The Afersata* is also a very good example to demonstrate the essence of this view of law and order in Chaha village life. The very title of the novel, *The Afersata*, refers to the traditional Ethiopian institution of crime investigation. The following passage from *The Afersata* projects the central role that this traditional institution of crime investigation plays in the Chaha society: “The night Namaga’s hut was burnt down, all the inhabitants of the thirty villages of Wudama were asleep. Who is the culprit? The men set about finding out by means of the ancient institution of the *Afersata*, the traditional Ethiopian way of investigating crimes (p.3).”

What is more, traditional communities also demonstrate a sense of collective responsibility. The decision that the elders arrived at after they had failed to find out the criminal in the affair of Namaga’s hut is a case in point. Here is the textual evidence: “Fellow villagers, we are all responsible for the burning of Namaga’s hut, and we are all

condemned collectively to compensate him for his loss, because we have failed to find out the criminal” (p.89).

The next section will consider another aspect of traditional culture in the novels under study.

### **5.3. Infusion of Folklore**

The close link between folklore and traditional culture has been shown earlier in this paper. It has been noted that folklore is a key concept in the study of aspects of traditional culture. In other words, modern African fiction draws from the rich tradition of African folklore. Modern Ethiopian fiction in English is no exception in this regard. Hence, infusion of folklore is yet another aspect of traditional culture in the novels under study. The novels of Sahle Sellassie seem to abound in folkloric elements, perhaps more than those of any other long fiction writer in English in Ethiopia. In this section, the most prominent elements of this aspect of traditional culture will be discussed.

#### **5.3.1. Folk Literature**

This section attempts to show the extent to which Sahle Sellassie has used traditional Chaha literary forms in his novels in English. Folk literature or ‘oral folklore’, to use Dorson’s words, includes proverbs, riddles, tales, myths, etc. The novels of Sahle Sellassie abound in genres of folk literature. *Shinega’s Village* and *The Afersata* depict plenty of examples of this. In this regard, *Shinega’s Village* could, in fact, be called a folkloric novel. In this novel, Sahle Selassie mixes modern narrative fiction with Chaha folk literature. The whole of chapter six, for instance, is devoted to the riddle contest between Theresa and Shinega. This is how the riddle session has been introduced in the novel: “There was no one in the house except Shinega and Theresa. They sat by the fire keeping warm and playing riddles” (p.8). The following are some examples from the riddle contest:

“Shinega, here is a riddle!”

“Say it!”

“It eats when I eat, it walks when I walk, it sits when I sit,”

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“Your shadow.”

“Right. Here is another one for you.’

“Say it!”

“We were two when we saw it, we were five when we picked it up,  
we were thirty when we ate it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Give cloth.”

“Take the Kuta cloth.”

“May I gain riches, may I become important, through the kuta cloth.  
Two eyes saw it, five fingers picked it up, thirty teeth ate it” (p.29).

*Shinega’s Village* also abounds in songs. The following is a song that the women who came to help Kerwage with false banana harvest sang:

Wives of hard-workers, rejoice!  
Your men planted hundreds of *ensets*!  
Luckless wife of a lazy man, what will you  
Give your crying children?  
Wives of hard-workers, rejoice!  
You have nothing to worry about.  
Wife of a lazy man, dress and be up!  
You must go to market and buy cheap!  
Wives of hard-workers, rejoice!  
You are mothers to village orphans (p.24).

Similarly, the following is a wedding song called *lalashebo*, that was sung on the occasion of Shinega’s marriage:

In the woods to the east

Lal Ashebo!

Who makes a noise?

Lal Ashebo!

In the woods to the west

Lal Ashebo!

Who rustles dry leaves?

Lal Ashebo!

It is Shingega's footsteps

Lal Ashebo!

As he looks for his beauty!

Lal Ashebo!

Kerwage's funeral dirges on the occasion of the death of Theresa in *Shinega's Village* are also fascinating examples of the infusion of verbal folklore in this novel:

Theresa my daughter, you who had not reached woman's years, you so young; who looked upon you with the evil eye and caused your death? Theresa, my daughter, O bride, will you be able to warm your new dwelling place alone? Theresa, my daughter, is it true that you have said goodbye forever? Theresa, my daughter, I believe you are still alive, I say still alive, you are only sleeping (p.88).

It can be seen from the foregoing discussion that *Chaha* folk literature has been given a central place in developing Sahle Sellassie's novels in English. In other words, the infusion of folklore is another aspect of traditional culture in the novels under study. The next section will look at the infusion of folk belief.



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### 5.3.2. Folk Belief

As noted earlier on, village life is characterized by beliefs or, as sometimes called, superstitions. The novels of Sahle Sesellassie exhibit some of the fundamental beliefs among the *Chaha* people. For instance, if a hyena howls when someone is sick, it is believed that death is near. In *Shinega's Village*, for example, when the howling of a hyena was heard while Kerwage was in pains of giving birth to Shinega, Atshewa says, "O hyena, weep for yourself alone" (p.4). It is also believed that direct exposure to the sun can cause illness to a newborn baby and its mother. This folk belief is reflected in the episode that depicts the circumstances in which Shinega was born as follows: "The door is slightly opened so that the sun could not enter. It is believed that if the sun touched the woman in childbed and her baby, they would fall sick" (p.5).

The belief related to the sickness or death caused by the evil eye and its treatment among the *Chaha* people is another fascinating example of folk belief. It can be seen that this belief is reflected in the funeral dirges chanted by Kerwage in the episode of Theresa's death: "Theresa my daughter, who looked upon you with the evil eye and caused your death?" (p.88).

It is also believed that the cure for the sickness caused by the evil eye lies with the person who has the evil eye. For instance, when Shinega falls sick soon after Abu's visit, Kerwage, Shinega's mother, automatically concluded that the sickness was caused by Abu's evil eye (p.31).

Likewise, a popular folk belief among the people of Wudma Village in *The Afersata* is depicted in the episode that describes the burning down of Namaga's hut. It is believed that if the central pillar of the house still stood upright after the house had burnt down, that foretold that the criminal would be caught. The following passage from *The Afersata* shows this belief: "And Namaga, as well as the other villagers were happy that the central pillar was still upright, for that foretold that the criminal who set the hut alight would be caught" (Ibid, 3).

### 5.3.3. Folk Medicine

Another aspect of traditional culture in the two novels in English is the portrayal of folk medicine. This aspect of traditional culture reflects the views of the society depicted through these works on sickness and its remedies. It should be noted that the views and practices of folk medicine are based on folk beliefs. The novels under study portray the views and practices of the *Chaha* people on folk medicine. The case of the evil eye and its treatment in *Shinega's Village* could be an interesting example of this. When Shinega falls sick shortly after Abu paid a visit to Bala's house, Kerwage automatically associated Shinega's illness with Abu's evil eye. It was believed that if a person with an evil eye looks on a naked child, that child is sure to get sick or to die. It was also believed that the cure for the sickness caused by the evil eye lies with the person who has the evil eye. The treatment that Kerwage gives Shinega is an astonishing example of this belief and the practices of folk medicine related to the sickness caused by the evil eye: "Early the next morning, Kerwage went and found Abu and took a pinch of earth from beneath his large foot. This she put in the milk that she gave Shinega to drink" (p.26). The views and practices of the *Chaha* society on folk medicine are further demonstrated in the novel through the treatment that Bala solicited for Shinega: "Bala, not knowing what his wife had done, saddled his black mule and set out to consult a Muslim Sheik who was experienced in medicines. The Sheik prescribed: 'A horn spoon full of abasud spice (a folk medicinal powder) mixed with butter every morning until the child is cured, and the milk of a cow fresh for the first time'" (Ibid, 27).

### 5.3.4. Folk Blessings, Curses and Oaths

Blessings, curses, and oaths are also aspects of traditional culture that play a significant role in the novels under this study. In traditional rural societies, people have no pension and therefore their children are the only social security they have for old age and in time of sickness. Children have to take care of their parents' clothing, food, and lodging when the mother and father are too old to work. Hence, there is a strong belief that the security and continuity of an individual or a community depends on bearing and bringing up children. In other words, children are highly cherished in such traditional societies as a means of, to use Ojaide's (ibid, 11) words, "immortalizing the race".

As a result of this view, “being fertile was among the top qualities of Gurage women. Love and beauty were values that were considered secondary to fecundity” (*The Afersata*, 61).

Blessings, curses, and oaths are aspects of traditional culture through which the society’s sense of immortality is reflected. The sense of immortality in a traditional society is often related to the great importance attached to children. In other words, blessings, curses and oaths are usually expressed by using children. The following passage from *The Afersata* is a good example of blessings and curses and how these have to do with children: “When elders, bless a person they say most often, ‘May God give you a child’, or, ‘May your child grow to be somebody’. If on the other hand, they want to curse him, they say, ‘May God never give you a child’ or ‘May you lose your children and thereby suffer!’” (p. 61).

Similarly, oaths are also expressed by mentioning children. For instance, the seven elders who conducted the ceremony to find out the criminal who had set Namaga’s hut on fire in *The Afersa* took the following oath before the crowd: “May God deprive me of all my offspring and make me rootless” (ibid, 22). In general, folklore is part of people’s culture which is preserved in beliefs and practices of a group of people.

#### **5.4. A Sense of Continuity**

The sense of continuity in this context refers to the notion of socio-cultural continuity depicted through the novels under study. Socio-cultural continuity in African village life is closely connected to traditional conception of space and time. In other words, traditional cultures usually have a strong sense of continuity which emerges from the perception of time and the cyclic nature of things. Hence, another feature of traditional culture that underpins the two novels examined in the present paper is a sense of continuity. The strong belief in the sense of continuity is usually reflected in the great importance attached to children. As Ojaide (ibid, 3) puts it: “The birth of a child is symbolic of communal renewal and revitalization.”

The central position given to children in the process of individual and communal continuity is vividly presented in *The Afersata* as follows: “There is a belief among the Gurage that a man who has children

never dies. A dead man is one who has no offspring. A child is thus a sort of possession of eternal life, and a fertile woman, the source of that eternity” (p.61).

One can see the impact of the conception of space and time in African literary forms in general and in modern long fiction in particular. Belief in the sense of continuity and the cyclical nature of things in *Chaha* community is reflected in the novels under study. Probably the most fascinating example of the sense of continuity can be found in the opening and closing episodes of *Shinega's Village*. The circumstances in which we find Bala at the birth of his son, Shinega, are astonishingly similar or, in fact, identical to the circumstances in which we find Shinega at the birth of his son in *Shinega's Village*. Here is the opening passage of the novel:

In the village of warden it was evening. A fire of dry olive wood burned without smoke in the open fireplace in Bala house, flickering and casting shadows upon the round walls. Small calves, hungry for their mother's udders, bawled in the stable, for it was time for the cowherd to drive the village cattle home. In Bala's house the lowing of the returning cattle could be heard.

While Matebet, the maidservant, rinsed the kettle to prepare evening coffee, Bala's wife lay on a mat near the fire place warming herself. She did not feel well; she was far gone in pregnancy, and the birth of the child was expected tonight or tomorrow. Naturally, Bala hoped for a son (p.1).

Here is the closing passage of the novel:

In the village of Wardena it was evening. A fire of dry olive wood burned without smoke in the open fire place in Shinega's house, flickering and casting Shadows upon the round walls. Small calves, hungry for their mothers' udders, bawled in the stable, for it was time for the cowherd to drive the village cattle home.

While the maid servant rinsed the kettle to prepare evening coffee, Shinega's wife lay on a mat near the fire warming

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herself. She did not feel well; she was far gone in pregnancy and the birth of the child was expected tonight or tomorrow. Naturally, Shinega hoped for a son ... (p.111).

The striking similarity or sameness of these passages reflects the belief in the sense of continuity and cyclical nature of things in Chaha society.

The fact that children play a central role in immortalizing the community is recurrently depicted through blessings, curses, and oaths in the fictional works. For instance, the statement: "A man who has children never dies (*The Afersata*, p.61) is a good example of this. The oaths that people were taking at the *Afersata* (the traditional Ethiopian institution of crime investigation) are also interesting examples of the importance given to children in the community. Each villager is expected to say: "May God deprive me of all my offspring and make me ruthless" (ibid, 16).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, attempts have been made to explore some prominent aspects of traditional culture in modern Ethiopian novel in English with particular reference to two works of Sahle Sellassie Berhane Mariam, namely *Shinega's Village* and *The Afersata*. The paper has been essentially analytic in approach. The theoretical arguments have been substantiated through the analysis of textual samples drawn from the two novels under study.

The findings of the study have shown that one prominent aspect of traditional culture in the two novels examined in this paper is the role of mystical world view. This relates to experiences and beliefs in supernatural power. The role of mystical world view and its impact on the fictional characters in the novels is manifested in the way God affects the course of things in society. Another feature of traditional culture reflected in the works is traditional dispensation of justice. This aspect of traditional culture is reflected in the great importance given to the community rather than the individual. This view of community affects characterization in the sense that community is given more importance than individual characters in the novels. Traditional dispensation of justice is also demonstrated through the vital role elders play in the administration of law and order. In such

societies, elders are actually regarded as legislators and judges. The implication is that in such traditionally oriented societies, the strong sense of community greatly contributes to social cohesion.

Yet another feature of traditional culture projected through the novels under study is infusion of folklore. The two novels examined in this paper abound in folkloric elements such as folk belief, folk literature, folk medicine, folk blessings, curses and oaths. This shows the importance attached to traditional literary forms and techniques by modern Ethiopian long fiction writers in English. A sense of continuity is also another aspect of traditional culture reflected in the novels. This aspect is related to the perception of time and the cyclic nature of things. As shown in the discussion in this paper, this belief in the sense of continuity in *Chaha* society is depicted through the great importance attached to the bearing of children.

This study is limited to the exploration of some salient aspects of Ethiopian traditional culture in two novels of Sahle Sellassie Berhane Mariam. The writer hopes that the findings of this paper can be useful for potential writers and researchers. The implications of the paper can be further studied in other Ethiopian novels in English.

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