

The Initiation, Development and Implementation of the Written Afar Language

By

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Before I talk about the Afar language's written form, I think I should introduce myself and the people who speak this language. My name is Jamal Abdulkadir Redo. I am the director of the *Afar Language Studies and Enrichment Center* in the Afar National Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

The Afars are people who live in the Horn of Africa – at the funnel of the Great Rift Valley in north-eastern Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea. In the three countries they live in, they are estimated to be around 1.5 to 2 million whose majority of about 65% live in Ethiopia. They are known by different names given to them by their neighbours but they call themselves Afar. The most widely known ones, among those names, are Danakil and Adal.

With the exception of those who dwell at the coast of the Red Sea from the port of Massawa to the port of Djibouti and whose economic mainstay is fishing, the Afar are pastoralists who graze cattle, camels, goats and sheep. Having said this much of the Afar people, I would like to turn to their language *Afaraf* as a written language. I will try to deal with this topic under three sub-titles:

1. Initiation
2. Development
3. Implementation as mentioned in the agenda.

1. Initiation

Under this sub-title, we shall see when, where and how *Afaraf* started as a written language. It is said that some Afars (religious people) with a knowledge of Arabic started writing *Afaraf* in Arabic script at the villages of Mi`dir, Iddi, Baylul Tajourah and Zeila, and in Awsa in the hinterland. Some of the existing manuscripts written in *Afaraf* but in Arabic scripts date back to the beginning of the 19th century. However this written *Afaraf* is hardly read because of the absence of E & O vowels (both in their short and long forms), which don't exist in Arabic.

The recent quest for search for an alphabet suitable for *Afaraf* started in the early sixties of the 20th century. Some Afars tried it in the old way i.e. Arabic. Some tried it in Geez script. Some tried it in different forms of Latin. There were even some who tried with creative letters of their own. Finally, it was Dimis – Reedo type of Latin script of 1974 that prevailed over the rest. This alphabet of 17 consonants with 5 short and long vowels came into effect with the publication of two books one of which was a grammar one, in Paris 1975. These letters are:

1. Consonants

BTS CKX DQR FG LMN WHY

2.Vowels

2.1 Short A E I O U

2.2 Long AA EE II OO UU

These letters with Arab alphabet sequence and with three letters of the non related sound to Latin is in usage since the time mentioned above. If we raise the question why Latin was finally chosen for *Afaraf* written language, it is plainly and evidently clear that the quantity and quality of vowels required for the proper writing of *Afaraf* were found in Latin.

Neither Arabic nor Geez could provide us with five short and long vowels required for *Afaraf* writing. As we know, Arabic has only three short and three long vowels, while *Afaraf* needs five of each. Geez has intermingling three short and four long vowels, which don't properly fit *Afaraf*.

Therefore, the shortage of vowels in Arabic script and the intermingling of short and long vowels in Geez script made our choice of Latin (where we found five short and five long vowels required for the proper writing of *Afaraf*) inevitable. I think this is also of true of languages of eastern Cushitic family.

2. Development

Under this sub-title, I will try to show what were added to the original 17 consonants and 5 vowels. Although *Afaraf* in the last quarter of 20th century was written by the combination of 17 consonants and 5 vowels, it was not without defect. These defects with the march of time were observed both in consonants and vowels. In consonants, there appeared a need to pronounce words imported from different languages in their original sound of letters that don't exist in Afar alphabet. In this connection some seven letters in the frequently used foreign words were added to the original 17 *Afaraf* consonants. These letters are J, P, V, Z, SH, CH, and Ts.

The defects of vowels were also properly addressed. They were dressed by 4 accents called in *Afaraf xagissoosa*. They are jumping and stressing accents, diarisis and liaison.

E.g. Ina[^], baaxo
Mari`n baaxo
Yi ina
ku abba etc ...

3. Implementation

Here I will talk only of Ethiopia where I am the director of the center for the studies and enrichment of Afar language, although the implementation of *Afaraf* as a written language is being carried in both Eritrea and Djibouti. In Djibouti, they have now established and institute for studies of Somali and Afar languages, while in Eritrea primary education is run by it in the Afar area of the country.

In the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia where I come from, a center for studies and enrichment of the Afar written language was established in Aysaita – the capital of the Afar National Regional State in September 2001. The objective of this center is to enable the Afar society to read and write and finally work in their mother tongue. The implementation of this task is being carried out in both formal and non-formal education processes.

In the Afar National Regional State, like the rest of the FDRE component regions, primary school education will run in *Afaraf*, middle school education in Amharic and higher education in English. As the media of instructions in the upper two layers of middle and higher educations are already in tact, our newly-founded center is now struggling to fulfil the medium of instructions for the ground floor (primary school). For the successful realization of this noble task, the CENTER, requires material, financial and formative facilities from all who are interested to help.

Thank you!

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