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Preface

Writing a book on Ethiopian humour is as fun as readers may assume it is. For years now, I have collected jokes, humorous anecdotes, funny back-and-forths from as many sources as I could read, watch and observe. But *Jesting the Lion: Humour in Modern Ethiopia* is not just the result of an academic interest in the subject. The ideas in here are products of the environment and community I grew up in.

My parents Semə'on Marəyye and Ənani Əšātu raised seven children and two cousins in the Haya Hulät Mazorya neighbourhood of Addis Abäba. Every morning, after *qəddase*, my mother would prepare a coffee ceremony for the neighbourhood women and other guests. Under her command, our house was a meeting place for individuals with various backgrounds, travelling through the capital city or just coming to visit. People who hailed from Yəfat, Raya, Hayq, Wälqite, Dägän, Tepi, Däbrä Marqos, Adwa, and so on flocked to our home each day. Most of them were older men and women who discussed their lives and politics over food and coffee. And it is in this environment that I was introduced to the joking culture of the Ethiopians around me. It is also how I came to call many of them uncles and aunts, though no blood relation could be traced.

Among these uncles and aunts was *Gaše* Mulatu Täfärra (called simply *Gaše* Mulat by us), the witty philosopher of our neighbourhood. I was told that he passed away one March morning in 2019 via a sad phone call while I then lived in Hamburg finalizing my doctoral studies and preparing to return home. Him and Tafäs, his outspoken wife, were an unshakeable part of my formative years.

Gaše Mulat had taught me and the other children of the neighbourhood the A B Cs of humorous Amharic wordplay and riddles which he had learned while growing up in Sämen Šäwa. He also recounted absurd and creative fables, and posed ridiculous questions to us in hopes of pushing the limits of our imaginations. I was very close to him as we also shared the common ailment of asthma and would often laugh about how easy others in mountainous and cold Addis Abäba had it. The rainy seasons were particularly hard for him. The joke was that whether one was asthmatic or not, Addis Abäba's polluted air was terrible for all. Besides his short and poignant commentary which frequently drew laughter from people, he had an eccentric outlook on life which amused young people like myself. Among his peculiarities included his insistence to greet in equal reverence both churches and mosques he might encounter on his way, his avoidance of the sun and the hospital, his distaste for all television advertisements, his choice of being with children over people his age in communal settings, and his inability to

raise his feet properly as he walked making his toes openly accessible to pebbles and rocks that often injured them. He particularly avoided cobblestone streets. Loved by children, he was a significant part of our lives as he made sure we knew the value of laughing at the irregularities of life.

There are still other prominent members of the neighbourhood such as *ፎጥሃይ ሃሻ* (*ፎጥሃይ* is what we call her), who rival him in wordplay. *ፎጥሃይ* is impressive for her reserve of never-ending proverbs and sayings which colour her every speech and dialogue. She often has something to say; and she speaks boldly, always armed with a hilarious saying. I still wonder from where she learned (and where she stores) all of her sayings and expressions.

We were raised around such Ethiopians of various backgrounds, various religions and various customs. And I assume my predisposition for laughter is influenced by them. As we grew older and started understanding the politics and realities of our time, I noticed that many of the youth of our neighbourhood started voicing their political and socio-economic opinions through the humorous tools that we had been raised to appreciate. It is why this book is dear to me. Through most of the work undertaken here, I felt I was recording the opinions and voices of Ethiopia's capital city to help the city's residents claim their rightful place in their country's vast and continuing history.

The first part of the book deals with the history of 'modern' Ethiopia, ideas of modernity as presented by Ethiopian intellectuals, the Amharic language and its proclivity towards ambiguity, and humour in Ethiopian historical settings and historiography. The second part of the book deals with humour's manifestation in four different public spaces of Addis Abāba: the parliament, theatre, minibuses, and public demonstrations during the period from 2005 when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, r. 1991–2019) held Ethiopia's first free elections, to the dissolution of the EPRDF in 2019, after the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmād in 2018.

All in all, there are over a hundred and sixty jokes in the book. With archival, historical and ethnographic research tools employed, I have attempted to provide a nuanced representation of how young and old Ethiopians engaged with the challenges of survival in EPRDF's Addis Abāba through humour, which traditionally also holds a notable place of honour in the Ethiopian socio-cultural, and literary tradition. The jokes illuminate an informal and often elusive sphere of communication between Ethiopia's rulers and the public. Though there is a serious written and documented political history in Ethiopia, the book also demonstrates that state and society relations can be studied through a methodology designed to make use of both written and oral traditions.

As for the title, *Jesting the Lion* is chosen primarily as the lion is long recognized as the symbol of (political) power in Ethiopia. Most of the jokes in the book address political and socio-economic topics related to the EPRDF administration, the symbolic lion here. And the book is an account of people engaging, criticizing, commenting on, and speaking truth to this power through humour; hence, *jesting*

the lion. On the other hand, it is a point of praise to call someone an አንበሳ *anbässa* ‘lion’ in Ethiopia. An individual who accomplishes a feat, succeeds in something, overcomes a challenge, nobly defends him/herself or honourably stands up for something is complimented by the word *anbässa*. I say that this term can be extended to people who, lacking other means of standing up to their rulers, tell jokes. The title is meant to play with both of these ideas.

In the end, I hope readers will have found some value for the book as a record of public opinion and critical voices in Ethiopia’s modern period. If not, I hope at least some of the content presented makes readers laugh and admire the human ability to cope with the ups and downs of life.