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Anthology of the Liturgy of the Ethiopian Jews: a Franco-Israeli program as Impetus for Research¹

Prelude

It all started in Jerusalem. A day very much like any other for the ethnomusicologist... except that particular day he was to meet, for the first time, with Jewish Ethiopian priests. They had only recently immigrated to Israel and their liturgical chants were still, in 1986, virtually unknown. This had prompted the ethnomusicologist's interest in this meeting. The ethnomusicologist was Simha Arom. At the time he was Research Director at the CNRS, and Head of the Ethnomusicology Department of the LACITO.² He knew Jerusalem well because he had lived there for many years, but had acquired his reputation in Africa where he had studied many traditions, in particular the Pygmies. In other words, it was highly probable or practically inevitable that one day he would encounter African Judaism.

But what Simha Arom did not know when he went to meet the *Beta Israel*³ priests was that this encounter would be the start of a long-term synergy between researchers and institutions –and primarily the CRFJ and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem - that would pave the way for new and exciting investigations, as the present article shows.

Introduction

At the Meir Center, a religious institution in Jerusalem, Simha Arom met the Ethiopian Jewish priests. There was Avraham, Sama, Mahari, Malkitzedek, Yossef, Yeheskiel, Adana, Imharen and Kassata, all *qessotch*⁴, originally from the Abyssinian highlands, the historical birthplace of Ethiopian Judaism. The majority came from the Tigre, at the northern tip of the country, whereas others came from Semien, Wolqait or the Gondar region. The ethnomusicologist explained why he was interested in their chanted liturgical traditions and the importance of preserving this oral patrimony for future generations. The *qessotch* listened, discussed among themselves and then began to sing. First one priest chanted alone, and then all the others responded to his chant. The tape recorders were set in motion. The project

¹ Many thanks to Simha Arom and Frank Alvarez-Péreyre for their help and comments in the writing of this article.

² “Laboratoire de Langues et civilisations à Tradition Orale”, formerly located in the 14th district of Paris and currently housed on the Villejuif campus.

³ Literally, ‘House of Israel’, one of the terms used for this Jewish community. The term “Falasha,” probably the most well known, is not used here because of its pejorative connotations in Ethiopia.

⁴ Priests, *Qes* in the singular

began. The priests were invited to choose the most representative chants of their liturgical cycle. They were the masters and for the moment the ethnomusicologist was simply there to guide and encourage them. At his side, Professor Israel Adler, his long time friend, the director of the Center for Jewish Music at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who immortalized the moment with a video camera. Behind him, the sound engineer Avi Nahamias inaugurated his new digital equipment. But what, initially, was to have been a single recording session for the Israel National Sound Archives quickly gained momentum of its own.

At the CRFJ, Frank Alvarez-Péreyre was appointed research director. This ethno-linguist, in charge of various programs on written and oral Jewish literature was also a member of LACITO and was the initiator of a research project begun several years earlier on Ethiopian Judaism⁵, in conjunction with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the CNRS, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ben Zvi Institute. Drawing on their respective experience, Simha Arom and Frank Alvarez-Péreyre immediately set to work -- because this liturgy was rapidly headed for extinction. Because of religious traditions at times far removed from modern Judaism, the Ethiopian Jewish community was requested to conform to the norm. For this reason the *qessotch* lost their status as priests and religious ceremonies are no longer conducted in Israel, except the annual *Sigd*⁶ pilgrimage. The sole response they could provide to the announced disappearance of this centuries-old tradition was to quickly establish a research program for its preservation, and publish pieces in the form of an anthology. Shoshana Ben-Dor, an Israeli student associated with the Ben-Zvi Institute joined the team at this time. She already had a background in Ethiopian Judaism, having conducted a study in Ethiopia on this community and was continuing her investigations on the *qessotch* to study the anthropological features of their liturgy. In addition, the fact that she knew *Ge'ez*⁷ well and her vast knowledge of Judaism made her a valuable addition. The CRFJ, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the LACITO were invited to take part in this endeavor and all responded affirmatively through their respective directors. The year was 1989. A new series of complementary recordings was made with the *qessotch*. What remained to be done was to analyze all these hours of chants, translate the texts and attempt to understand this liturgy which is still present in the minds of its recitalists but which is already part of the past.

The first record was produced⁸ and received critical acclaim. A series of concerts was organized in Paris where the *qessotch* were highly successful. These were sure

⁵ Project entitled The Jews of Ethiopia: Traditions and Integration.

⁶ Pilgrimage celebrating the renewal of the Covenant. See K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Seged*, a *Falasha* Pilgrimage Festival, *Musica Judaica* III/1, 1980-1, p. 43-62; J. Abbink, *Seged* Celebration in Ethiopia and Israel: Continuity and Change of a Falasha Religious Holiday, *Anthropos* 78, 1983, p. 789-810; S. Ben-Dor, The *Sigd* of *Beta Israel*: Testimony to a Community in Transition, in Ashkenazi, M.&A. Weingrod (eds), *Ethiopian Jews in Israel*, New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1985 p. 140-159.

⁷ Semitic language, Axumite in origin, used exclusively in the liturgy.

⁸ 1990. *Liturgies juives d'ethiopie*. Paris, Maison des Cultures du Monde. Inedit, Auvidis W 460013.

signs of the public's interest in this community and its religious traditions; and brought an equal amount of satisfaction to the researchers involved in the project.

At this same period of time, I continued my studies at the Department of Musicology of Tel Aviv University. After graduating with a Master's in Musicology in France, I had gone to Israel with the purpose of discovering new musical territories. I regularly attended courses on Jewish music and was interested as well in all the musical traditions concentrated in such a small country. In fact, I was looking for a subject for my future doctoral dissertation, and an advisor willing to accept me. On Lincoln Street, in the old CRFJ offices, I first met Frank Alvarez-Péreyre and Simha Arom. At the end of a seminar course the latter gave at Bar Ilan University I was invited to take part in their Ethiopian project. The team was then complete. A few weeks later, the massive and spectacular arrival of the remainder of the Ethiopian Jewish community could only be a plus for the continuation of the project.

The Anthology

Simha Arom taught me my trade: its difficulties and its delights that include transcribing and retranscribing,⁹ breaking down the problems, selecting the appropriate methods to resolve them, imagining other solutions when needed. In addition, of course, I was able to meet the depositaries of the tradition, get to know them better, and form ties. The sessions sometimes took place at the Israel National Sound Archives with all the priests present, at times in the more private setting of their homes. Other *Qessotch*, newly arrived in Israel and from a variety of regions of northern Ethiopia, were invited in turn to talk about their experience of the liturgy.¹⁰ This enabled us to compare information and assess local variants when present. Outside of the community itself, numerous specialists were also queried as regards history, religion, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology as well as musicology¹¹. The team met at regular intervals to assess the way the work was advancing, exchange information and gradually validate it. And the work progressed.

On the musical level, the analysis revealed extremely rich and original structures¹² corroborated by text analysis¹³ and confirmed by anthropological study.

⁹ O. Tourny. *Le vertige de la page blanche*, *Noter la musique*, Cahiers de Musiques traditionnelles, 12, Geneva, 1999, p.3-8.

¹⁰ Among others, the monk Abba Bayenne, and the *qessotch* Biyatqelin, Menashe, Nagga and Barqu.

¹¹ So many individuals that it is difficult to mention all of them; including Abuna Paulos (Patriarch of Ethiopia), Sister Abraham (Dr. Kirsten Pedersen), many singers from the Ethiopian Church and especially Abba Fisseha Zion and Abba Mengestu Gebre Av, the Kemant priests, Lisa Anteby, Margaret Hayon, Professors Israel Adler, David Appleyard, Francois Blanchetierre, Celestin Deliege, Alexander Goehr, Gideon Goldenberg Bertrand Hirsch, Stephen Kaplan, Jean Molino, Nicolas Meeus, Vittorio Morabito, Richard Panckhurst, James Quirin, Edwin Seroussi, Emanuela Trevisan-Semi and the students in the EHESS Ph.D. ethnomusicology seminar.

¹² O. Tourny, Structures litaniques singulières dans la musique des juifs d'éthiopie, Ndroje Blendro, *Musiques, terrains et disciplines*, *Textes offerts à Simha Arom*, Paris, Peeters-Selaf, 1995, p.147-160; S. Arom & O. Tourny, The Formal Organization of the *Beta Israel* Liturgy – Substance and Performance, Musical

Because of its complexity, re-recording¹⁴ was required to study polyphony. This technique, developed by Simha Arom in Central Africa consists, with the help of the musicians, of reconstructing or gradually reducing the melodic layers to obtain the respective contours and the relationships between them. In Ethiopia, some prayers were accompanied by percussions,¹⁵ but the priests had not been able to bring these ritual instruments with them. In these conditions it was difficult if not impossible to grasp their true influence on the chants. In the end, through reconstruction, the principles of temporal organization were identified. The study of the scales and modes these pieces were played in was even more difficult and only cognitive experimental techniques were able to yield information on these features.¹⁶ However the greatest challenge was to understand the melodic structure which in the end yielded an eloquent demonstration of the *modus vivendi* of a musical heritage based exclusively on the oral tradition.¹⁷

Work on the texts of the chants required first overcoming the hurdles of their transliteration and then their translation. Analysis of the extremely composite sources demanded painstaking intellectual effort and perseverance. What emerged is that the liturgical chants were inspired not only by the Old Testament (and the Psalms in particular) but also from apocryphal and pseudo-apocryphal texts and from the literature itself of the *Beta Israel*. Whereas in the minds of the *qessotch* there was clearly a dividing line between what comes strictly from the Bible and what was foreign to it, they nevertheless considered the entire set of these sources as part of their heritage. The nature of these texts themselves ranged from direct quotations to paraphrase to composition, and hence reflected a variety of forms which further complicated the analysis. The examination was extended to literary devices and their modes of execution in the rituals, and to an in-depth study of content and themes. The final stage was a comparison of text and literary analysis with data gleaned from the musical systematization.

Structure, in Tudor Parfitt and Emmanuella Trevisan-Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel Studies on Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, p. 252-256.

¹³ F. Alvarez-Péreyre, S. Ben-Dor. The Formal Organization of the Beta Israel Liturgy: Substance, Performance, Literary Structure, in, in Tudor Parfitt and Emmanuella Trevisan-Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel Studies on Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, p.235-251.

¹⁴ S. Arom, *Polyphonies et Polyrythmies instrumentales d'Afrique centrale, Structure et Méthodologie*. Peeters-Selaf (ethnomusicologie 1) 2 vol, 1985.

¹⁵ Metal gong (*metke*) and a drum with a single skin (*nagarit*).

¹⁶ O.Tourny, Le système scalaire des chants liturgiques juifs éthiopiens, l'Afrique et l'Europe Médiévale: la théorie du pentatonisme revue à travers les systèmes Africains de traditions orale, *Musicae Scientiae*, Hors Série, Bruxelles, 2000, p. 25-33.

¹⁷ O. Tourny, *Systématique de la musique liturgique des juifs d'Ethiopie*. Ph.D. Thesis, EHESS, Paris, 1997, 2 vol.

The upcoming publication of this work as an anthology¹⁸ thus ends many years of interdisciplinary work on this liturgical tradition. Through the content it explores and reveals, this anthology testifies to the extreme originality of this patrimony and to its great wealth. In addition, through its conclusions, this study sheds new light on this liturgy, challenging the commonly held opinion of its presumed roots in the Ethiopian Christian tradition.¹⁹

On a personal level, the work I conducted was to be the starting offplace for many other studies.

New Directions

The Book of Psalms is without doubt the most frequently used source in the Beta Israel prayers. My discovery of Jewish traditions had in fact also taught me the importance of these Biblical texts in Judaism. The book by Reinhard Flender, *Hebrew Psalmody*,²⁰ confirmed this and invited a much more in-depth study of the question. The topic becomes vaster and more fascinating if we also consider the use of these same psalms in Christian rituals, and inquire what characterizes the psalmody,²¹ what differentiates it from cantillation or litany on the musicological, ethno-musicological and philological levels. With the help of Simha Arom, a new research project was gradually set up and became a full-fledged long-term program whose goal was the study of psalmodies in terms of the relationship between written and oral forms, creation of a typology of textual and musical sources, the establishment of distinctive features, and as a corollary, the identification of universals. On the basis of this research program, the CNRS decided to recruit me. During my most recent mission in Israel (August-September 2001), supported by the CRFJ, numerous specialists I met in various religious institutions and universities expressed their interest in this project and their willingness to take an active part.

A question remained unanswered at the end of the work on the *Beta Israel* liturgy; namely, its place in this tradition in its original setting. Although Gondar and the surrounding area were the historical center of Ethiopian Judaism, this was also true for other communities, starting with the Kemant, - an Agaou people whom historians believe to be the oldest group in the region. In addition, the Christian tradition, which is widespread on the high plateaus, has over the centuries made it a fundamental political and religious center of the country. Lastly, the Muslim community, which derives from the great invasions from the East, is also present in this region. Several missions conducted in this region with the backing of the Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes enabled me to conduct fieldwork with specialists from each of these communities and to carry out the first recordings of their liturgical

¹⁸ F. Alvarez-Péreyre, S. Arom, S. Ben-Dor, O. Tourny, *Anthology of the Ethiopian Jewish Liturgical Music*, Yuval Music Series, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2 vol 3CD, in press.

¹⁹ K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual and Falasha History*. East Lansing, Michigan State University, African Studies Center, 1986.

²⁰ R. Flender, *Hebrew Psalmody: A Structural Investigation*. Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1992.

²¹ Strictly speaking, psalmody refers to the chanting of psalms. In the broader sense, it includes Koranic psalmody and many other chanted traditions.

traditions. Other missions in the future will enrich the data I collected in the previous studies. An analysis of the entire corpus will enable a better understanding of those features associated with each of the communities and their common elements. This should in particular shed more light on the dynamics and identification strategies perceptible in this region located at the crossroads between the East, Africa, and the Mediterranean world. However, this personal project gave rise to a much larger research program.

During my missions in Ethiopia, I was able to observe that both abroad and in the country itself, many musical traditions remained unknown or poorly known because of a lack of a genuine ethno-musical research policy. In these conditions, at a time when many traditions were threatened by extinction from ethno-urbanized cultures, it was urgent to make an inventory and collect these traditions for purposes of preservation, study and dissemination. To do so, thanks to the experience acquired in Israel, a research program was set up associating my laboratory²² with a number of Ethiopian institutions and various French and European universities. Sponsored by the Cultural Service of the French Embassy in Ethiopia, this project fit perfectly into the framework of scientific exchange, allotting ample attention to the training and supervision of French, European and Ethiopian students. This is doubtless one of the reasons for its immediate success, attracting a team that currently has more than twenty people working together on this exciting project. The first missions conducted by some of the team members have helped explore such topics as the Ethiopian lyres, the *Ari* and *Male* polyphonies of the south of the country, the liturgical dances of the Orthodox Christian Church, the *Harari* marriage chants, the *Gurague* dances, the *Afar*, *Konso*, *Berta* and *Arsi* musical traditions—a whole set of patrimonies which will be described in a collective anthology and will be the basis for the future Ethiopian National Sound Archives.

Coda

The day that Simha Arom went to meet the Beta Israel priests was thus a special one, since it was the beginning of great scientific and human adventures. The theory of the beating of the butterfly's wing was reinvented: through the wealth and the variety of programs that it prompted, the anthology of Ethiopian Jewish liturgy so strongly backed by the CRFJ, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the LACITO illustrated the value of interdisciplinary work, and confirmed the importance of integrating new generations of researchers. It provides proof if indeed there was the need, of the high level of scientific cooperation between France and Israel, and its future potential.

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²² LMS (Langues, Musiques, Sociétés) UMR 8099, CNRS- University of Paris V