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Annales d'Ethiopie, Année 1985, Volume 13, Numéro 1

p. 137 - 143

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A SHORT NOTE ON THE ETHIOPIAN CHURCH MUSIC

by
TADDESSE TAMRAT

The origins of the Ethiopian church music are still very obscure. Very little scholarly attention has been given to this aspect of Ethiopian Christian culture, and the huge compendium of the hymns known as *Degwa* still remains unedited and almost completely inaccessible except to some of the more studious functionaries of the church itself.

According to Ethiopian traditions it was Yared, an Aksumite priest who lived in the 6th c. A.D., who invented the three basic modes of the Ethiopian church music, namely *Ge'ez*, *Ezl*, and *Araray*. It is claimed that all musical notes, "even the sounds of animals and the songs of the birds, fall under one of these modes of Yared the Priest". Yared is said to have been supernaturally inspired in inventing his three modes which are believed to have been a special divine gift to Christian Ethiopia: "For God did not reveal [them] to others except to the people of Ethiopia." These traditions are accepted in Ethiopia as almost religious truths, which has apparently discouraged any attempts to look for a more historical origin of the Ethiopian church music.

The church in Aksum was established in the fourth century AD. as a small bishopric of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and the Ethiopian church remained in this dependant status until about three decades ago. It is therefore Egypt that one must consider as the most important source of inspiration for the major aspects of Ethiopian Christian culture. As regards church music, it is interesting to note that there are distant echoes of Yared's musical modes in the medieval records of the Coptic Church. Yared's modes — *Ge'ez*, *Ezl*, and *Araray* ... are sung at particular types of religious ceremonies depending on whether these are sad or happy occasions in the calendar of the church. In the same way, the Copts also had different tunes which change according to the

nature of their feasts and according to the time of the year. Their happy tunes were used for the major festivals such as Christmas Day and Easter. The sad and melancholic tunes were sung in times of sorrow such as Passion week. They also had other sad tunes used for funeral services and commemorations. Although the technical terms for the modes or tunes, and the number of these tunes are different in the Ethiopian and Coptic churches, the liturgical purpose for which they are used seem to be the same. This may at least point to the same origin for both the Ethiopian and the Coptic church music.

Just like the Ethiopians, the Copts attribute the origin of their music to the divine inspiration of one of their holy men. This saintly man, they say, was originally a layman and a mere potter; and he invented their sacred music when he later joined the monastery of St. Macarius. Essentially, the same theme runs through the Ge'ez story of the life of Yared.

It is related that Yared was born of an ordinary family in Aksum and that he was not a particularly brilliant pupil in the local church school where he had difficulties in mastering the simple reading lessons. At one stage he gave up all ambitions of developing his ecclesiastical learning; got married and started a more or less secular life even planning, on one occasion, to kill a man who had coveted his beautiful wife! But he was gradually and irresistibly drawn towards the spiritual calling. He abandoned the world, withdrew into an isolated area as a hermit leaving his family, and started a life of religious devotion and contemplation always trying to improve his literary accomplishments. One day, while wandering in a forest, he was greatly impressed by the persistence of a small insect trying to climb a tall tree. The little insect repeatedly fell to the ground; but it started climbing all over again, gradually attaining greater heights. If an insect could do this, Yared thought, a human being should achieve much more. This, he set out to do and began to be inspired by the beauty of nature and the songs of the birds which became the bases for his poetic and musical compositions. Hence, we are told, the origins of the Ethiopian church music.

Thus, there are close similarities not only in the general significance of the different musical notes of the two churches, but also in the details about the lives of the Ethiopian and Coptic clerics to whom the invention of the tunes is attributed. If this was a result

of one church influencing the other, it seems almost certain that it was the traditions of the mother Alexandrian church which had a lasting impact on the formation of the Ethiopian tradition about Yared and his musical talents. Like the monastic traditions of the Ethiopian church which derive their origin from Egypt, the story of the life of Yared and his musical talents may have also been, essentially, another result of the close cultural interaction between Christian Egypt and Ethiopia.

All this seems to point to the same origin of the sacred music of the two churches. It is nevertheless apparent that the Ethiopian liturgical chant [*Zema*] became much more elaborate during the medieval period. At this stage of its cultural history the Ethiopian church gradually developed a deep sense of self-identity, and there are a number of indications which show that the Alexandrian and the Ethiopian Churches were at variance on many points of religious practice. This became increasingly obvious after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 AD when the Copts were gradually required to cut down many of the public manifestations of their christian worship, while the Ethiopians added further elaborations on theirs.

As a result of growing pressures of Islam along the Red Sea coast after the seventh century, Aksum declined and its church became more and more isolated from the rest of the Christian world. Only a very slender line of communication was maintained with Egypt and the Holy Land along very precarious routes and through hostile territories. It is apparent that in this period the Holy Bible and particularly the Old Testament began to serve the Ethiopians as an inexhaustible source of cultural inspiration. Being the only Christian people in the Horn of Africa and surrounded by pagan or Muslim territories, the Christians of Ethiopia began to identify themselves with the chosen people of Isra'el.

This vital development was accompanied by a deliberate process of imitating and adopting the cultural and social institutions of the Old Testament. The highest form of expression for this religious and national tendency is the *Kebre-Negest*, the Ethiopic version of the legend of the Queen of Sheba. Written in the thirteenth century, the *Kebre-Negest* finally achieved an identification of the Royal Family of Ethiopia with the House of kings Dawit and Solomon of Isra'el. The *Kebre-Negest* also created close ancestral relationships between Solomon's high priest Zadok and the priestly families of Ethiopia. From that time on, the kings of

Ethiopia modelled their court on that of King Solomon of Israel, and the local saints posed as the veritable prophets of the Old Testament.

It is apparent that the characteristic forms of the Ethiopian church music as we know it today also took shape during the same period. There seems to be no doubt that some of the hymns of the Ethiopian church were already in use during the Aksumite period — even as early as the sixth century when Yared is said to have lived. Although *Gedle Yared*, the story of the life of Yared, is almost certainly a work of the 15th century, the traditions which it presents no doubt reflect developments since Aksumite times.

There are indications that, by the middle of the 14th century, one of the highest accomplishments among Christian Ethiopians was being well versed at “the songs of Yared.” The chronicler of King Beide-Maryam (1468-78) also gives the impression that the Ethiopian Church music had already assumed some of its later characteristics by the middle of the 15th century. On one occasion he describes both secular and sacred musical performances in Angot, in the presence of the king:

መሰብአ አንገት ከሎሙ ምስለ አንስቲ
ያሆሙ ተቀበልዎ በዘፈን ወበከበሮ ። ወደ
ብተራ ብዙኃን በገቢረ ማህሌት እስከ
ይደምፅ ጥቀ ቃላቲሆሙ ።

All the people of Angot with their women welcomed him singing, dancing and beating the drum; and many *dabbara* performing *mahlet* until their voices could be heard far and wide

Mahlet is the usual terminology used for the songs of Yared and the whole atmosphere described by the chronicler evokes images of the relatively modern forms of the musical performance in the Ethiopian Church.

It is, however, very difficult to follow up the specific developments of the Ethiopian Church music because of the paucity of relevant source material. None of the *Degwa* MSS known so far can be dated earlier than the 14th or 15th centuries. The *Degwa* is a collection of Ge'ez hymns for all the days, feasts and seasons of the Ethiopian year. No extensive or critical study has been made of the text of the *Degwa* as yet. Only Dillmann has published a

short extract in his well-known *Chrestomathia Aethiopica*, 1866. Cerulli has also translated four short hymns in his *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, 1956. A few years later Velat has devoted a more intensive study of *Me'eraf* which is an important part of the *Degwa*.

Except these isolated attempts the *Degwa* still remains an untapped source which, if systematically studied, would no doubt shed a lot of light not only on the music and liturgy of the Ethiopian Church but also on the history of the Christian nation at large. But enough is known of the *Degwa* to indicate that it is *not* the work of one single individual or the product of a single period. An early MS. of the fourteenth century without the simple Ethiopic notations (*Meleket*) is reported at the island monastery of Tana Qirqos. King Gelawdewos (1540-59) is said to have ordered two clerics of his court to systematize the collection and the notations of the *Degwa*. Two other revisions are also reported in the 17th century at the orders of *Echege* (Abbot) Qale-Awadi of Debre-Libanos. Thus, in its present form, the Ethiopic *Degwa* is a cumulative product of many centuries.

A major aspect of the Ethiopian Church music is the ritual dance that always accompanies the liturgical chant. Monneret de Villard, a well-known student of Ethiopian Christian art and of the history of the Nile Valley, has suggested that the liturgical dance of the Ethiopians may have originated in ancient Egypt. There are indeed distant echoes of this ancient Egyptian interaction in the flowing gowns of the *dabtara*, their use of the *sistrum* and even the long graceful prayer sticks which are all represented in the great monuments of the Nile Valley.

However, in its contemporary manifestations, a religious musical performance of the Ethiopian *dabtara* reflects yet another and a more recent layer of cultural interactions with the world of the Old Testament. The songs, the chants and the ritual dance in front of the *tabot* are strongly reminiscent of the dancing and the meriment of the Levites in front of the Ark of the Covenant (cf. 2 SAM. 6: 2-5). A casual look at the musical instruments used by the *dabtara* — who are sometimes explicitly called 'Levites' — clearly shows that the Ethiopians have also drawn much inspiration from the Old Testament. The whole atmosphere created during a religious service in Ethiopia evokes the old biblical scene transmitted in the last chapter of the book of Psalms:-

“Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet;
praise Him with psaltery and harp.
Praise Him with the timbrel and dance:
praise him with stringed instruments and organs.
Praise him upon the loud cymbals:
praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.”

Nevertheless, like all other aspects of Ethiopian history and culture, it is impossible to get a complete picture of the evolution of these musical traditions in isolation of developments in neighbouring regions. In the final analysis, it is only if we look at the Ethiopian Church music in comparison with ancient Egyptian, Near Eastern, Central Asian and even Indian traditions that we can get a more wholesome picture.

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