

## CASE STUDY: ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIAN CHANT

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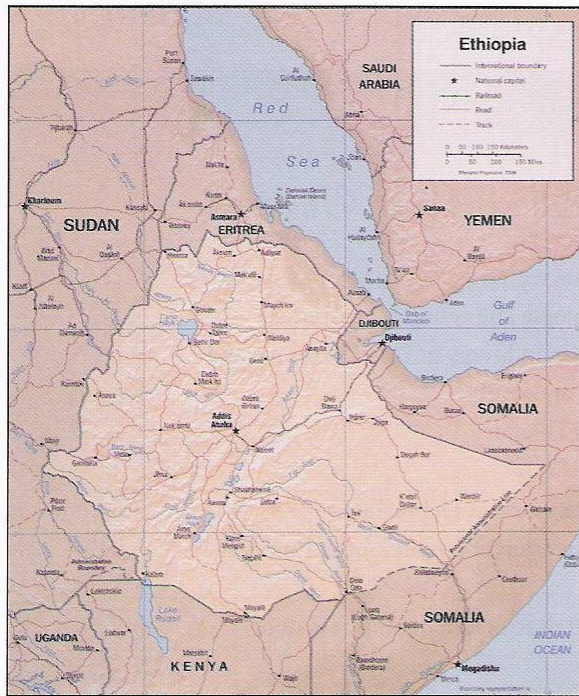
Another rich chant tradition established in North America only since the 1970s is the ritual music of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church. One of the oldest Christian denominations in the world, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was founded in the Horn of Africa in the early fourth century (see "Looking Back: The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church").

Although the group, from its earliest times, maintained close relations with the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Ethiopian Christian sacred language, liturgy, and musical tradition grew out of its own creativity in a framework indigenous to Ethiopia. From its founding, the church stood at the center not just of Ethiopian religious life but of the political and cultural life of the people as well, with the ruling emperor also heading the church. The overthrow of the last Ethiopian

## LOOKING BACK

## The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church

332 C.E.	Advent of Christianity in Ethiopia with the conversion of King Ezana
Late 400s–500s	Syrian missionaries arrive in Ethiopia and found monasteries
600s–700s	Consolidation of Ethiopian Christian liturgy in Ge'ez language and reputed period of St. Yared's life and work
Before 1200	Churches carved from stone at Lalibela
1270	Beginning of "Solomonic dynasty"
Early 1300s	Establishment of Bethlehem monastery at Debra Tabor
1434–1468	Consolidation of church and expansion of empire under Emperor Zara Ya'qob
1529–1541	Muslim invasion of Ethiopia and destruction of churches and monasteries
1540–1559	Abba Gera and Abba Ragu'el innovate the <i>melekket</i> (notational signs)
1635	Gondar becomes Ethiopian capital and site of literary and musical activity
1800s	Innovation in Ethiopian dance and instrumental traditions
1887	Addis Ababa becomes Ethiopian capital
1890	Italy establishes colony in Eritrea
1930	Haile Selassie crowned emperor of Ethiopia after more than a decade as Regent Ras Tafari
1935–1941	Italian occupation of Ethiopia
1950	First native-born Ethiopian patriarch (head of the church) appointed
1952	Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea
1974	Beginning of Ethiopian revolution
1987	Holy Cross Square renamed Revolution Square, Addis Ababa
1992	Abuna Paulos installed as patriarch of Ethiopian Orthodox Church Ethiopian Orthodox Church in America declares independence from mother church in Ethiopia Eritrean independence



*Ethiopia's location in the rugged plateau of the Horn of Africa protected it for most of its history from invaders and helped preserve its independence, except during a sixteenth-century invasion from the south and the Italian occupation of 1935–1941. The region along Ethiopia's Red Sea coast, Eritrea, became independent in 1992 following a long civil war.*

*A priest at a church in the Ethiopian countryside strikes the resonant stone slabs used for centuries to call the faithful to worship. Today, a metal bell usually serves the same function.*

emperor, Haile Selassie, during a revolution that began in 1974, and the subsequent years of civil unrest, drought, and famine, forced millions to leave modern Ethiopia and its surrounding regions.

The Ethiopian diaspora today includes thriving communities in far-flung locales, including Italy, Sweden, and Israel, but North America has emerged as the largest and fastest-growing home for Ethiopians abroad.

Ethiopian Christian chant, through its continued life in the diaspora, provides a rich case study of the surprisingly flexible relationship between music and belief. Of particular interest are the many changes that have taken place within the musical tradition since the chant's reestablishment in North America. Although Ethiopian chant continues to be closely associated with the rituals expressing Christian belief and is regarded by its practitioners as intrinsically meaningful, some centuries-old practices and associations have shifted under the pressures of a new environment. Changes were already under

way in the Ethiopian homeland before the period of migration, as the flow of people to urban areas diminished the central role of the church in daily life. But changes aside, music of the Ethiopian-American diaspora still marks the ritual experience and provides continuity with the church's earlier traditions of worship.

Many of the changes in music and belief are shaped by events outside the religious domain, especially the tension between ritual practice and everyday life.<sup>7</sup> Rituals can provide a context in which old symbols are given new meaning and where new symbols can be incorporated. Such is clearly the case with Ethiopian Christian chant, which has brought longtime practices and values into the present while providing a creative setting for innovation and resistance.



Ethiopian Christianity at Home in North America The Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church has established itself throughout North America, with many urban areas supporting several Ethiopian congregations. But virtually all lack their own meeting spaces and depend on the generosity of other American Christian denominations to provide room on Sundays and major holidays, following the regularly scheduled services. A striking exception is the Ethiopian church building in Seattle, Washington, which is wholly owned by the worshipping community.

Challenges confront Ethiopian Americans seeking to sustain their religious and musical practice in North America. The Ethiopian community, like that of the Vietnamese we encountered in Chapter 3, is a diaspora of recent origin, dating only from the mid-1970s. Many of its members were forced migrants who arrived in the United States only after periods of imprisonment or other hardships.

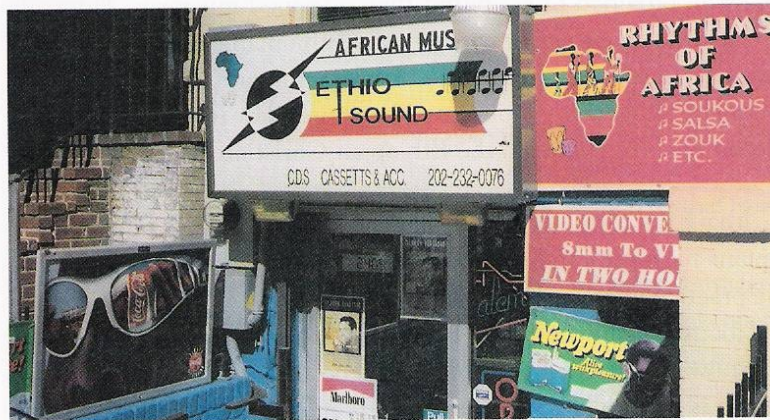
The exodus from Ethiopia during the revolution established a sizable Ethiopian-American community. More than forty-six thousand immigrants born in Ethiopia entered the United States between 1971 and 1994; the community grew from around three thousand individuals prior to 1974 to a total in 1990 (including Eritreans) estimated at fifty thousand to seventy-five thousand people.

Ethiopian Americans have established both community organizations and social networks. Restaurants present the most public face of the Ethiopian community in large cities, but the widely circulated *Ethiopian Yellow Pages* shows a community with its own accountants, attorneys, and dentists, and a group that maintains culinary and cultural traditions by patronizing special groceries, restaurants, and stores. A large number of compact disc and video recordings, many recorded and distributed from studios in North America, are sold in these shops.

Although many diaspora Ethiopians have made a successful transition to new careers in academia, the professions, and industry, the majority are struggling,



*Priests and dabtaras celebrate the final stages of construction of the new Ethiopian Orthodox church of Saint Gabriel in Seattle, Washington.*



*Record stores selling music imported from Africa and recordings produced and distributed domestically are found in many American cities. This shop is located in the Adams Morgan area of Washington, D.C., a neighborhood where many thousands of immigrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and other African nations now live.*

working-class people who hold low-paying service jobs in hotels, parking lots, taxi companies, and similar enterprises. These circumstances have made it difficult to gather the necessary funds to sustain even a modest Ethiopian Christian ritual cycle.

Beyond their economic needs, the Ethiopian churches in North America face a severe shortage of qualified clergy. There are no facilities for training Ethiopian priests or musicians in North America, and since the revolution in Ethiopia, few clergy have been trained there (see “Individual Portrait: Berhanu Makonnen, Ethiopian Church Musician”). The scarcity of clergy puts the church’s musical traditions at particular risk in the diaspora, where a congregation is fortunate if it obtains the services of even a single priest, who then must officiate at the Mass and perform all other aspects of the liturgy as well. If a priest is not available, some congregations worship with the aid of cassette recordings imported from Ethiopia. Whenever possible, churches address this problem by importing musicians, at least for important holidays such as Christmas or Easter.

Ethiopian Chant in Its Historical Homeland To understand musical changes in the Ethiopian diaspora, we must be familiar with the musical heritage from the Ethiopian Church’s proud past. The creation of Ethiopian Christian chant, called *zema* (literally, “a pleasing sound,” “a song,” or “a melody”), is attributed in traditional Ethiopian sources to the divine inspiration of Saint Yared, a holy man said to have lived before the ninth century. Yared is credited with inventing the Ethiopian Christian musical system under divine inspiration, composing the chants and organizing them into service books. Although the texts of the Ethiopian liturgy were written down in the Ge’ez language in parchment manuscripts, performance of chant by church musicians was largely transmitted through oral tradition. In an effort to help the music survive in the wake of a devastating Muslim invasion in the sixteenth century, two musicians of the time, Gera and Ragu’el, invented a system of musical notation (see “Studying Music: Systems of Music Writing”).

The Mass is the Christian ritual in Western church history with the most elaborate musical content, but in the Ethiopian tradition it was chanted simply, without accompaniment, by an ordained priest rather than a trained musician. The main setting for more elaborate chant performance in the Ethiopian church was the ritual called the Hymnary, performed before the Mass on Sundays and festivals. The musicians, traditionally all men, were obligated by church law to perform some of the nearly two dozen types of chants in the Ethiopian Christian Hymnary.

Ethiopian Chant in Its North American Diaspora North American Ethiopians have tried to bring the Mass and the sacrament of communion closer to the practice of other American worship services in which these rituals are the main focus. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian Hymnary with its elaborate musical content is now performed mainly on special occasions such as annual holidays; even then, it is generally shortened. The regular Sunday Mass in most

## INDIVIDUAL PORTRAIT

## Berhanu Makonnen, Ethiopian Church Musician

The Ethiopian church musician, the *dabtara*, is one of the most highly trained musicians in the world. Years of study begin in early childhood in the Ethiopian liturgical language, Ge'ez, and in Christian liturgy. The following years are spent at a chant school (literally, a "zema house"), learning chant melodies, the notational system (*melekket*), and liturgical dance. Further schooling is specialized, in a specific chant book, in instrumental practice, or in liturgical dance. During their student years, *dabtaras* may work as merchants, particularly in the butter trade, to support themselves and their families.

Because of their reading and writing skills in a country where only a minority of the population is literate, some *dabtaras* write special scrolls that are commonly used by Ethiopians to heal illnesses. Only *dabtaras* can prepare and decorate these scrolls, which can be hung on the wall or rolled in leather cases and worn around the neck as amulets. The work of the *dabtara* as a healer extends beyond the Christian community to produce magical texts that are thought by peoples of different belief systems to defend against the spirits and devils that cause illness and misfortune. The *dabtara*, then, is musician, magician, singer, and healer, occupying a powerful role in traditional Ethiopian society.

In the past, several distinct styles of liturgical singing were associated with and named after important monasteries in northern Ethiopia where the musicians studied. Although three of these styles survive, that of the Bethlehem monastery predominated by the late twentieth century in urban Ethiopia. It is the style that is most often heard in diaspora churches.

In this chapter, we encounter a great Ethiopian musician who is both a *dabtara* and a priest: Alaqa (literally, a "learned man") Berhanu Makonnen, whom we hear singing *Yome fesseha kone* (see Listening Guide 46). Since the 1970s, Alaqa Berhanu has supervised the



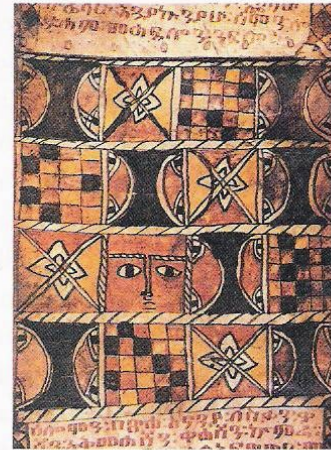
*Alaqa Berhanu Makonnen (wearing cape) stands at the center of a group of dabtaras, many of whom hold prayer staffs and liturgical umbrellas. In front of the group sits the kebaro, a church drum.*

training of Ethiopian church musicians at the patriarch's office in Addis Ababa and has taught Ethiopian chant at the Theological College.

Alaqa Berhanu is as well known for his vocal prowess as he is for his encyclopedic knowledge of Ethiopian Christian traditions. During his training, which spanned thirty-one years, he earned diplomas in virtually every aspect of church liturgy and liturgical music. For twelve of those years, he studied at the famous Bethlehem monastery, where he later became the head teacher and was in turn succeeded by one of his own students.

While the Ethiopian *dabtaras* and the musical materials they transmit are critical to the perpetuation and performance of Ethiopian Christian rituals, events of the late twentieth century have led many *dabtaras* to work outside the church as well. With the loss of church land and revenues in 1975 because of land nationalizations during the Ethiopian revolution, a trend among *dabtaras* to accept employment outside the Church gained momentum. A leading *dabtara* declared that "Now they are ready to work everywhere the government asks."

*An Ethiopian magic scroll (asmat) is usually cut to the height of the person for whom it is made. Each scroll is decorated with motifs, drawings, and sections of prayers and incantations written in Ge'ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language. This detail from an early twentieth-century scroll shows checkered patterns and faces; the full faces usually represent the king of demons, whereas the seven pairs of half-hidden faces depict either demons or angels.*

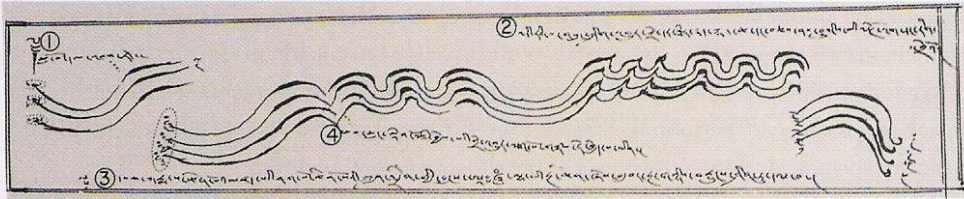


Ethiopian American churches attracts a lively congregation, with a majority of the women and a few men wearing traditional Ethiopian dress. In most churches, the prayers are still sung in Ge'ez, but sermons are delivered in whatever Ethiopian language the congregation understands. The clergy use books imported from the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Few service books are to be seen among congregants, although photocopied texts are occasionally distributed.

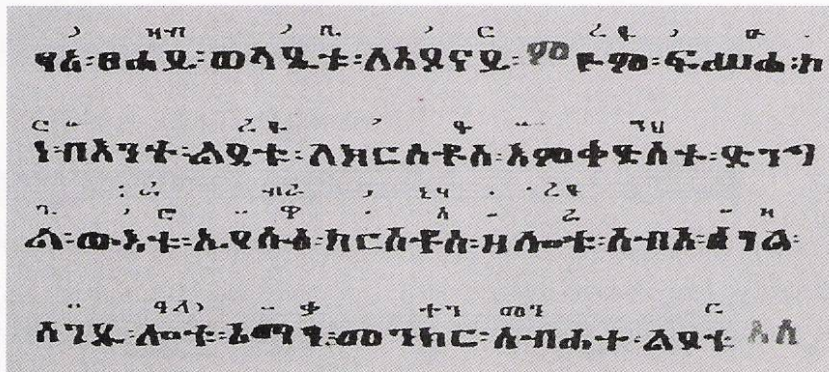
**Sound** The chants performed in the diaspora churches are sung in the traditional manner and adhere to the Ethiopian musical system. Ethiopian chants fall into three categories of melody (or *mode*) named Ge'ez, 'Ezl, and Araray. From the legend of Saint Yared come strong associations for each mode: Ge'ez is linked with God the Father, 'Ezl symbolizes the Son, and Araray represents the Holy Spirit.

## Systems of Music Writing

We often use Western musical notation to write down, or “transcribe,” the oral traditions we hear so we can study and analyze them. But many systems of music writing developed outside the West, including two that belong to soundscapes encountered in this chapter. The system for notating the Tibetan *dbyangs* is found in song books termed *dbyangs-yig* (literally, “written account of the song”), or *yang-yig* (see illustration below). Tibetan chant, written from left to right in two or three horizontal lines, indicates the name of the song,



The Tibetan notation shown here has been annotated to help readers. The numbers in circles indicate where each song begins and ends; dotted rings (or ellipses) are placed around meaningful Tibetan textual syllables to differentiate them from vocables, which simply extend the sound of the main syllable.



Ethiopian notation for the Christmas chant *Yome fesseha kone*, discussed in *Listening Guides* 46 and 47. The manuscript reads from left to right, and the chant notation begins about two-thirds of the way toward the right margin on the top line. A small character that looks like eyeglasses marks where the chant text begins. The *melekket* (signs) are found between the lines of text. Above the third line in the manuscript, a double line of *melekket* begins, indicating that the words from there (at “He is Jesus” in the English translation) to the end should be repeated with a different melody. Even in Ethiopia, however, this repeat is not always taken and the singers in our recordings do not perform it.

its author, the meaning of the song, and the use of introductory drum beats. Directions for performance style are sometimes indicated, instructing the singer, in one case, that a song should "be chanted like the sound of the wind." The text syllables are placed below the notational curves. Black and red ink are used to differentiate between textual syllables and instructions for their performance.

The notational system used in the Ethiopian church, developed in the late sixteenth century, contains several types of signs. The most important and largest number of signs are the *melekket*, some six hundred and fifty in all, each consisting of one or more characters from the Ge'ez alphabet, which is actually a syllabary, in which each symbol combines a consonant and a vowel. Placed between the lines of the prayer texts, each *melekket* is an abbreviation of the word or phrase that represents a specific short melody. The *melekket* are themselves divided into three categories, the most common of which we will meet in this chapter.

An additional dozen signs consist of dots, dashes, and curved lines that regulate aspects of pace and vocal style. Performing a chant from Ethiopian notation is possible only for a musician who already knows the music of the ritual as an oral tradition.

This transcription of the Ethiopian Christmas chant melody, performed in Listening Guides 46 and 47, "translates" the traditional Ethiopian notation into Western staff notation. Notational signs (*melekket*) placed above words in the Ethiopian manuscript are represented by alphanumeric formulas. For example, the number representing the first *melekket*, G259, indicates that it is the two hundred fifty-ninth sign in a comprehensive list of the known Ge'ez *melekket*.

$\text{♩} = 116$   
 G259 yo- mā fə- G195 kə- h'e kə- nē G76 be'an-tē lə-de- tu lē- kras-  
 $\text{♩} = 60$   
 G182 G13 G66 G249  
 yu -lo- sə əm- qə-dās- tə don- gə- lə wə- 'ə- tu i- yye- su- sə  
 $\text{♩} = 96$   
 G261 G230  
 kras- ə- to- sə ze- lo- ttu se- b'e- se-  
 G163 G122  
 -gē- lə sē- gē- du lo- ttu  
 $\text{♩} = 62$   
 G280 G95 G30  
 e- mā- nē men- kə- rə səb- h'e- tē lə- de- tu