

## **The Porous Boundaries of Religious Life and Practice**

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In many ways, offering comments about the impact of religion on the study of music amounts to preaching to the choir! The history of broader musicology may be said to rest on a foundation of liturgical studies in the realm of early music, extending from the earliest dates through the Baroque era. Similarly, studies of rituals at the core of religious practice played a prominent role in the history of musical ethnography and continue to pervade ethnomusicological studies today. Studies of music and religion are surely alive and well. A quick scan of the session topics and paper contents for this joint meeting provides ample evidence of the continued vitality of the study of music and religion: some 20 sessions apart from our own are fully or substantially devoted to topics in this domain.

It seems to me that a responsibility of this panel is to demonstrate how the study of religion remains not just relevant to, but opens new perspectives for, musical scholarship. Scholars across the disciplines have focused on boundary formation and the processes of redrawing boundaries over time. The longtime perception of religious boundaries as relatively fixed has given way to more sensitivity to their mutability. I would like to discuss the markedly porous boundaries of religious thought and musical practice, making three central points.

To illustrate each point, I will draw succinctly on materials from my research in the music, history, and practice of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church, a venerable church founded in the year 332, and the only indigenous Christian church in sub-Saharan Africa with its own liturgical language, distinctive musical system and an original system of musical notation.<sup>1</sup>

POINT ONE: The porous boundaries of religious practice emerge in part from the ubiquity of religious life. Wherever one lives, religious institutions dot the local

landscape, offering rich sites for research (and ethnographic excursions) into religious musics as living traditions. Religious diversity in North America, as well as in other locales around the world, from Berlin to Tel Aviv, provides opportunities to study the widest array of ritual music transmission and performance. I no longer have to go to Ethiopia or to the venerable Ethiopian church in Jerusalem to observe Ethiopian ritual and their musical content. Today in Boston, I can visit any one of four Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the metropolitan area, and even attend major holiday rituals mounted through collaboration by several of these churches, in a park a short walk from my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Today the Ethiopian Church exists both at home in Ethiopia and abroad in the new global Ethiopian Christian diaspora that has emerged since the 1974 Ethiopian revolution forced mass migration out of Ethiopia. The opportunities to learn from these local churches, as well as Hindu temples, Islamic mosques, and Jewish synagogues, have opened new vistas on global religious life.

POINT TWO: The presence of diverse religious institutions in virtually every urban center or town, and on most college campuses, lends itself to close observation of change on a local level. One can observe and track shifting boundaries within religious—and musical—life. For instance, in the Ethiopian Christian domain, there are striking changes in church leadership in diaspora. The once all-male religious hierarchy, with a centralized administration coordinated through the patriarch's office, has given way to decentralized networks. Most important, the establishment of local churches depends on the entrepreneurial resources of members of the particular community. In this context, women have emerged across the diaspora as church founders and leaders; one of the Boston metropolitan-area Ethiopian churches, for instance, was founded by an early Ethiopian arrival to the area. She personally obtained the mortgage for the small building her church occupies and very proudly takes credit as its founder!

But the shift in church leadership and hierarchy also has reverberations in liturgical and musical domains, where women now outnumber men in attendance at rituals and have assumed new and prominent roles in liturgical performance. The

emergence of new repertoires, such as a genre of vernacular-language hymns first sung by youth in Ethiopian churches just before the Ethiopian revolution began, were inspired in part by the youth hymnody in rapidly-growing evangelical churches in urban Ethiopia in the late 1960s. The new choirs, a center of female musical activity today in the Ethiopian diaspora, now constitute a major ingredient of musical life.

POINT THREE: The globalization of religious rites, and the transmission of their ritual and musical content through all varieties of recordings and on-line access, have led to the emergence of new musical interactions. Religious institutions broadcast their rituals and market the music of their choirs for fundraising and public relations purposes to outsiders. At the same time, Ethiopian Orthodox chant has become part of the musical toolbox of Ethiopian secular musicians at home and abroad. For those who live in the Ethiopian diaspora, boundaries between the sacred and the secular have become quite porous, and many aspects of the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical heritage become resources for musical creativity. As an example, I would mention one of Ethiopia's most famous musicians, Mulatu Astatke, an Ethiopian Christian who is the innovator of Ethio-jazz. An international performer, composer, and arranger best known to many from his soundtrack for Jim Jarmusch's 2005 film *Broken Flowers*,<sup>2</sup> Mulatu Astatke has incorporated Ethiopian Orthodox chant and liturgical references into a number of his jazz compositions. A prominent example includes his composition *Dèwèl*,<sup>3</sup> which uses the vibraphone to evoke the sound of traditional stone chimes struck to call the rural Ethiopian faithful to prayer.

In closing, the proliferation of diverse religious institutions in so many locales provides rich opportunities for musical scholarship, both ethnographic and historical. Whether one's interest is the study of ritual orders, a musical anthropology of sacred soundscapes, or innovation in religious musical life, religion should continue to have an impact on musical scholarship in the years to come.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a history of the Ethiopian church music tradition, see Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Peter Jeffery, *Ethiopian Christian Liturgical Chant: An Anthology*, 3 vols., with CD. (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, Inc. 1993, 1994, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Music from Broken flowers, a film by Jim Jarmusch*. (New York: Decca, A Universal Music Company, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *Éthiopiennes 4*, ed. Francis Falceto. (Paris: Buda Musique, c. 1996).

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