

## **What Does the Study of Music Bring to the Study of Religion? or Combating 'Scholarly Melophobia'**

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Although many different belief systems underpin religions worldwide, a common aspect of most religious rituals is the presence of music. The ubiquity of music and its centrality to the performance of religious liturgy is, to borrow a memorable phrase coined by anthropologist Roy Rappaport, "an obvious aspect of ritual." Rappaport argues that, beyond ritual's formality and invariance, "performance is the sine qua non of ritual, for if there is no performance there is no ritual." Rappaport goes on to state "that performance is not merely a way to express something, but is itself an aspect of what it is expressing."<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to frame my remarks today with quotes from research associates from two religious traditions I've studied in the course of my career. I am an ethnomusicologist whose research cuts across boundaries in Judaism, Christianity and autochthonous religions, grounded in ethnographic methods of participant observation. But even had I not been a music scholar, from the start of my first field studies in Ethiopia of rituals among the Beta Israel (known as Ethiopian Jews today in Israel), music would have demanded my attention. The Beta Israel liturgy proved to be entirely sung as an oral tradition, accompanied by a repetitive gong and drum rhythm (ostinato). One Beta Israel priest recounted an oral tradition about the use of musical instruments in the liturgy, crediting their ubiquitous presence to insuring "that the melody would not get lost."<sup>2</sup> He was describing the regular rhythm that supported the vocal melody, which in turn carried sacred texts in the ancient Semitic language, Ge'ez, and an even older indigenous Ethiopian language, Agawinya. By the time of my 1970s research in northern Ethiopia, neither language was understood by the Beta Israel priests who performed the liturgy. In the case of Beta Israel liturgy, music surely can be said to sustain sacred text. It is not an

exaggeration to say that the interaction of vocal melody, gong, and drum perpetuated the entire fabric of liturgical performance.

But music in religious ritual clearly serves not just to sustain liturgy. Here I would draw on a second example from another tradition, from the Syrian Jewish community with whom I carried out research in the 1980s and 1990s. Today a large community of Syrian Jews from Aleppo live in Brooklyn, New York; they migrated as part of a broader population outflow from the Middle East worldwide, beginning early in the twentieth century. Syrian Jews sustain a Judeo-Arabic musical tradition cultivated for centuries in Aleppo, and they take pride in their community's reputation for musicality. Music in Syrian religious contexts is largely sustained by non-professionals and is acknowledged as sustaining memory itself—as well as a full array of associations with religious practice and experience. Let me quote one Syrian Jewish man on this subject:

It's amazing how much we remember from so many years back . . . . And I think that since this is a musical group, they taught us much of our learning with tunes and with singing. And when you learn with singing, it remains in your mind.... I find myself walking along the streets once in a while singing to myself some of the words of the Song of Songs of King Solomon, or some of the words of Proverbs. It's amazing. Music helps you to remember. Of course, this is only the impression of a person who does not know music, except what little they taught me.<sup>3</sup>

I offered these two quotes to make three general points about what the study of music brings to the study of religion: First, music very often serves as a central technology for transmitting and performing liturgical orders; in many cases, such as that of the Beta Israel just discussed, one cannot study liturgical performance without attention to its continuous musical content. Second, music insures that liturgy transcends the formal liturgical context and keeps these sacred texts accessible in the mind of both the performing clergy and the listening congregation.

In other words, music both sustains and transmits liturgy, as well as a full range of related semantic, procedural, and affective memories. But a third point may be the most important for a cross-disciplinary conversation —the Syrian man who testified so eloquently to the power of music on his religious memories was by his own admission “a person who does not know music.” Often, those who are not music scholars are reluctant to approach musical materials, assuming that they cannot handle them with the depth and finesse they exercise in their primary fields. If my remarks today have one big take-away, it is the argument that those engaged in the study of religion across the disciplines should not fear to address the musical content of religious rituals. Here I would like to combat a condition that I will ironically term “scholarly melophobia”—the scholarly fear of music. I use this phrase both to get your attention and to underscore my efforts to combat a situation of musical exclusion that extends well beyond the community of religion scholars to colleagues in most fields outside of music. I hope that the following remarks will suggest pathways through which those without technical musical skills might fruitfully engage with music in the study of religion.

### Music and Its Role in the World of Changing Liturgies

In recent decades, my research has moved, with the Ethiopian traditions I studied first in their historical homeland, to new locales.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Syrian Jews, the movement from the Syrian homeland began a century before I entered this field, but music had migrated worldwide to a number of Syrian diaspora communities. As I have become deeply involved in studying migrating liturgies and other sacred repertoires, I have found music to be of great utility in understanding the transmission and performance of ritual in domains I might not have emphasized before. These include the role of music as a site of liturgical and social change; the central role of music in transmitting deeply held values and emotions; and the agency of musicians in founding and maintaining religious institutions. These three domains, and many others, are accessible to those from disciplines outside music and my discussion hopes to highlight their accessibility for scholars of religion.

I'll discuss these three aspects of music's contribution to the study of religion with commentary drawn from traditions that have migrated from their historical homelands to the United States. Teresa Berger has noted in a recent essay that there seems to be little in the contemporary world that is not on the move . . . . This . . . [is] true also of liturgical practices—both in the contemporary context of globalizing flows and in the manifold migrations of liturgical history-- which might be said to stretch from the entryway of the Upper Room to the edges of cyberspace.<sup>5</sup>

Below, I will return to one of the musical traditions mentioned in my introduction, that of the Syrian Jews—and, rather than return to the Ethiopian Jews, add remarks on the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition. The Syrian Jewish liturgy, with its historical roots in Aleppo, completed its migration to North America decades before my study began in the mid-1980s. However, circulation and migration continue to be important elements shaping liturgical transmission and performance among Syrian diaspora communities around the world.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition presents a similar case of worldwide migration, although its initial geographical displacement was more traumatic and much more recent. The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church is one of the oldest in the world, founded in Ethiopia around the year 330; it is therefore an indigenous Christian church with its own liturgical language, a distinctive (and esoteric) musical system, and a system of musical notation created to preserve the tradition following an Islamic invasion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Today the Ethiopian Church is part of a global diaspora that emerged in the wake of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, when political violence and a vicious famine forced large numbers of Ethiopian Christians to migrate out of the country. Today in Boston, I can visit any one of four Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the metropolitan area. If I wish to attend Ethiopian Christian rituals that equal those of their homeland in musical content and liturgical complexity, I can attend one of the 13 churches in Washington, DC. Most of you present at this session could find an Ethiopian church service to attend in or near your own home base—if there is an Ethiopian restaurant in your area, there is likely an Ethiopian church somewhere nearby as well.

Let me move to the three aspects of musical practice that are quite amenable to ethnographic study by scholars from religious studies and other fields.

### Music as a Site of Change

The ethnography of musical performance provides an opportunity for understanding the redrawing of boundaries within and between religious communities. In the Ethiopian Orthodox church, leadership and hierarchy abroad is evident in liturgical and musical domains, where women now outnumber men in attendance at most rituals and have assumed new and prominent roles in liturgical performance. One can observe the role of women in the emergence of new musical repertoires, in particular a genre of vernacular language hymns. Known as “Sunday School songs”, these hymns entered Ethiopian Orthodox practice during the late 1960s as part of a formal Church initiative to compete with the circulation of hymns from rapidly growing evangelical churches that were attracting Orthodox young people to their congregations. When the Ethiopian revolution began a few years later in the mid-1970s, singing the Sunday School songs served as a cover that enabled young people to meet when groups were otherwise forbidden to convene by the revolutionary government. As the Christian community migrated abroad, choirs soon became well established in new locales, not just for youth, but as a locus of female musical activity. Today, female choirs constitute a major component of present day Ethiopian Christian musical life in diaspora.

These changes in musical and liturgical performance reflect deeper transformations in church structure and leadership from that found in the homeland. The all-male religious hierarchy in Ethiopia, with its centralized administration through a patriarch’s office, has given way in diaspora to decentralized, local churches linked politically through competing networks. Diasporic churches were established and are maintained through the entrepreneurial resources of members of a given local community. In the American diaspora, women have emerged for the first time as church founders and leaders; one Boston-area Ethiopian church, for instance, was founded by an early Ethiopian arrival to the area, a woman who obtained the mortgage enabling the congregation

to purchase its small frame building. She is widely acknowledged as the church founder. Gender issues in religious institutions are therefore “performed” through liturgy and its musical content.

### Music’s Role in Transmitting Values

If music helps to sustain memory, it also serves as a primary generator of emotional meaning and congregational bonding. In the Syrian Jewish tradition, a repertory of paraliturgical hymns called *pizmonim* (singular *pizmon*) are commissioned, composed, and performed as part of the liturgy in honor of newborn babies, *bar mitzvah* celebrants, and couples to be wed. The melodies of these hymns are not newly composed, but rather are borrowed from pre-existing songs; in the Syrian Jewish community, where Arab music is beloved and perpetuated as a living tradition more than a century after migration from Aleppo, many of the melodies are borrowed from popular Arab songs. For instance, a groom will select a favorite tune; it will next be set with a new, sacred Hebrew text by an experienced *pizmon* composer; and then the song will be dedicated and performed on the Sabbath before the wedding. A catchy melody will attract congregational attention and the hymn may be sung on other occasions as well, including being re-used on the occasion of other weddings. In this way, music arouses memories and affect among a series of individuals and couples who are linked through the song they choose for a moment of religious blessing. The choice of repertory and use/re-use of songs can lay bare the power of melody in establishing liturgical meaning and achieve very deep meaning for individuals and families for whom they are performed.

The use of an inappropriate *pizmon* on a given liturgical occasion—one can only sing hymns set in a certain category of Arab melody on specific Sabbaths—can arouse controversy and strong negative responses. There are tales in the Syrian Jewish community about members leaving a synagogue in protest over the use of inappropriate tunes or a cantor’s less-than-acceptable singing style. These musical controversies are particularly volatile as melodic use may signal a changing relationship to the past. Singing a beloved melody can trigger nostalgia and a sense

of belonging or, conversely, the use of an unfamiliar tune can alienate or serve to threaten longtime ties.

### The Agency of Musicians

Just as music is much more than accompaniment to a liturgical order or a hymn tune, my research shows that musicians are pivotal to generating new religious communities in diaspora. In the Ethiopian diaspora, for example, one can document the important role of musicians in founding local churches. In short, one cannot perform the liturgy without musicians and their presence is vital to founding a religious community. Musicians' biographies narrated in interviews indicate that many are responsible for multiple initiatives to found institutions. We can take the distinguished Moges Seyoum, trained as both a priest and a musician, who was one of the founders of an Ethiopian church in Dallas, Texas in the 1980s—and, in the 1990s, of St. Mary's Church in Washington, DC, one of the largest Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup> The agency of church musicians is central to the founding and maintenance of Ethiopian churches in diaspora.

Similar data emerge from my study of Syrian Jewish migration to New York City in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the presence of one well-trained cantor from Aleppo sparked the founding of Syrian synagogues and a new compositional tradition for the *pizmon* repertory in the United States. Several of the *pizmonim* are dedicated to individuals who were instrumental in catalyzing innovations such as youth congregations.

In closing, there are many pathways to investigating music in religious life, and one can explore many of them without a technical grasp of craft terms or deep musical knowledge. I hope that collaboration across boundaries of musical scholarship and religious study will encourage more scholars of religion to “hear the music”—and inhibit the growth of scholarly melophobia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979), p. 176-77.

<sup>2</sup> Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1989), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down. Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Both many Ethiopian Christians and virtually all Ethiopian Jews departed from Ethiopia during the seventeen years of the Ethiopian revolution. Ethiopian Jews resettled almost exclusively in Israel, while the largest concentration of Ethiopian Christian is in the United States, particularly in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. For background on these migrations, see Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan, "Introduction," in "Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora," Special Issue, *Diaspora. A Journal of Transnational Studies*. Vol 15 No. 2/3 (Fall/Winter 2006, published in 2011): 191-213.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Berger, *Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace*. (Collegeville, MN: A Pueblo Book Liturgical Press, 2012), p. xii.

<sup>6</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>7</sup> For details of Moges Seyoum's life and career, see Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Ethiopian Invention in Diaspora: A Tale of Three Musicians." *Diaspora*, Vol. 15, No. 2/3 (Fall/Winter 2006, published in 2011): 303- 320.

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