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About Ethiopian Music(s) and their Heritage

Francis Falceto*

The reasons why I titled this keynote lecture “About the Heritage of Ethiopian music(s)” come from afar. But let me clarify first how I came to wonder about this plurality of heritages, and primarily how I came to be interested in Ethiopian music. Sometimes the fate of the researchers is strangely the result of mere chance.

A record of Mahmoud Ahmed, *Ere mela mela*, was more than enough for the music lover I was. I wanted to find out more about such an amazing music, unknown to me and totally unknown outside the borders of its country of origin. This was in April 1984. A friend had brought this disc from Ethiopia a few years before, when he was touring Africa with a French theatre troupe. The disc itself dated back to 1975. A year later, in April 1985, I landed in Addis Ababa to meet and invite Mahmoud Ahmed, Mulatu Astatqé and the Wallias Band to perform concerts in Europe. Of course, given the then appalling political situation, this was in vain. Nevertheless, eventually and against all odds, I returned several dozens of times to Ethiopia in order to try to know and understand this music, its origins, its history, and its role in the Ethiopian society. I started from scratch.

Initially interested in modern urban music of the late imperial era, I quickly realized how much modern music owed to the tradition of *azmari* as well as to other musical cultures that had long been marginalized (Gurage, Oromo, Tigrigna, etc.), which prompted me to greatly expand my field of research (and which also significantly increased my delight).

I’ll discuss later how the idea of heritage touched me decisively, even though it had hardly crossed my mind at the beginning of my research – and it took a few years to realize that my work could actually deal with a national heritage.

What about the meaning and origin of the words *heritage*? From the French 12th century, the words *héritage* or *patrimoine* of Latin origin mean *a good or a right transferred to heirs*. From the early 19th century, it also means by extension “*what is transmitted to a person or a community by ancestors, by previous generations, or a material and intellectual property inherited by a community*” (REY 1992).

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Are the music(s) of Ethiopia concerned by this definition? Incidentally, by raising this question, I would like to underline the lexical oddity of the English language that requests, unlike Romance languages, that the word *music* is invariable and does not take a final *s* to notify the plural. A real impediment when one wants to emphasize in English on the abundance and the richness of music in Ethiopia, a country of impressive musical diversity. Still it is necessary to leave Addis Ababa to get a real sense of this abundance, for much of these music(s) cannot be found in urban areas – they are either unknown in the capital and the major cities, or restricted to internal diaspora communities, and in any case they are not available in music shops. They are never or very rarely broadcast on national radio or television, and are pretty absent from the official stages. The folklore shows sometimes performed at the National Theatre or Agher Feqer Theatre cannot seriously do them justice. It must be admitted that many of these cultural expressions are ignored when they are not simply despised, or even opposed.

Heritage and administration

When it comes to heritage, in Ethiopia as anywhere else, the question of preservation and control of preservation arises inevitably. This is obviously a legitimate question. As for practical answers to this question, there is surely much to say. It should be noted that the idea of heritage is relatively new to Ethiopia, and it is difficult to say exactly when the concept gained acceptance.

We know that in 1952 an Imperial proclamation about the preservation of national antiquities was enacted *to protect monuments and other relics which are witnesses of the Empire and its heritage*.¹ A *Section d'Archéologie* (Department of Archaeology) was then established at the *Institut éthiopien d'Études et de Recherches* (Ethiopian Institute for Studies and Research), and attached to the National Library. These first steps of heritage policy, essentially limited to palaeontology and archaeology, were formalized at a governmental level in the 1960s, especially through the *Ethiopian Antiquities Administration* (1966).

Until the Revolution, the ministries of Education and of Information shared responsibility for cultural matters. In the early years of the *Derg*, specifically 1977, the Ministry of Culture and Sports was created; its proclaimed goal was *building a socialist culture in Ethiopia*. A *Department for the Study and Preservation of the Cultural Heritage* was put in charge of continuing the work started twenty years before by the Department of Archaeology. The “Cultural Heritage” in question was still strictly limited to paleontological and archaeological collections. The discovery of Lucy / Dinqnèsh in November 1974, although baptized in honour of a famous song of a British pop band, did not lead this Department to broaden the scope of its preservation policy. The newly created ministry also included a *Department of Arts and Theatre* supposed to supervise music, painting, theatre, cinema and creative writing.² There was no real patrimonial

¹ See KEBBEDE MIKAEL and LECLANT 1955: 1.

² See ALEME ESHETE 1982: 37-38, and ELLENE MOCRIA, MESFIN MESSELE and ALEMAYEHU GEBRE-HIWOT 2003: 23.

concern regarding these arts, but the emphasis was put on the necessary control and supervision of artistic creation in a socialist-realist style borrowed from the USSR and North Korea. Nonetheless, Ethiopia has a long history of inequality between populations, an issue which is still sensitive today, and it should be noted there was a considerable step forward then in the active recognition of the many southern cultures previously neglected – undoubtedly one of the very few progress to the credit of the *Derg*.

In 2001, music, and the arts in general, were transferred from the Ministry of Culture and Communication, and placed under the authority of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture. Among its *Powers and Duties*, a lot of youth, a lot of sports, very little culture. In the field of culture the then new *Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage* continued its missions of preservation for the classical disciplines. If its official *Powers and Duties* repeatedly emphasized concern for “cultural heritages” in the plural, music was not even mentioned.³ For a couple of years, music fell under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. If one refers to the Ministry's website, presented as the “Official Portal of Tourism in Ethiopia”, culture is recognized only with respect to tourism development of the country:

Mission: To study, preserve, develop and promote the cultural wealth and the national tourism attractions of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and to build the positive images of Ethiopia with a view to adding a sustainable socio-economic and political values with popular and stakeholder's participation.

Vision: To make Ethiopia one of the top five tourist destinations of Africa in 2020 through the development of its cultural wealth and natural attraction.

Values: Respect diversity, Hospitality, Transparency, Accountability, Commitment to change, Excellent Service, Participations.⁴

Yet, concern for the safeguarding of cultural heritage exists as expressed in the Proclamation 209 issued in 2000 by the Federal Government that gives a clear definition of intangible cultural heritage:

Intangible Cultural Heritage means *any cultural heritage* that cannot be felt by hands but can be seen or heard and includes different kinds of performances and show, folklore, religious, belief, wedding and mourning ceremonies, music, drama, literature and similar other cultural values, traditions and customs of nations, nationalities and peoples (Report January 2007).

Such a clear statement should unanimously reassure all stakeholders – people, performers and artists, regulatory authorities and researchers. Not sure...

Last but not least, Ethiopia has ratified the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” of 2003 initiated by UNESCO, a new and important step forward in the stated position of Ethiopia, including notably a four years program (2005-

³ <http://www.mysc.gov.et/ARCCH.html>

⁴ <http://www.tourismethiopia.gov.et/English/Pages/Home.aspx>

2008) in conjunction with UNESCO and with particular attention to traditional music (*Ethiopia - Traditional Music, Dance and Instruments*) (OHINATA 2009).

Are music(s) a heritage?

There are reasons to doubt this, particularly if we look at the *Mission, Vision and Values* issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Hence, shouldn't we consider the first place given to Culture in the Ministry's name as a *trompe l'œil*?

In many ways, we must acknowledge that music, particularly secular music, can not be compared to other recognized Ethiopian heritages, more or less protected, more or less long-valued, such as those already mentioned, or of other kinds such as archives, manuscripts, or biodiversity. There are at least two reasons for this exclusion: first, music is often seen as a commercial activity and not of lasting artistic value, which definitely invalidates patrimonial claims – and claims of national significance; secondly, in the Amhara dominant national culture, music is a matter of *azmari*, often seen as people of low virtue.

The ostracism traditionally suffered by *azmari* or *wata* (and by extension all kinds of musicians, including confirmed modern stars) has started to change in recent decades. Distrust of the society towards them can sometimes be tempered by fame and financial success. Their poetic genius, vindictory and singularly libertarian, does the rest. These artists that one disparages or defames easily are, at the end of the day, a great source of pleasure and comfort – one would say “the Salt of the Earth” (*Matthew 5:13*) to mean that they are essential to the society.

For many Ethiopians, it may seem strange, even inappropriate, to talk about heritage when it comes to music. This ambivalence towards all musical art is deeply rooted as well as discriminating. This perception also depends on from where one observes and from where one speaks. The musician, the music lover, the Ethiopian musicologist or historian, the *ferenj* researcher, a mother or the Minister of Culture may not have the same approaches, the same perceptions nor the same “interests” – not to mention the religious variants, depending on whether one is Muslim, Christian, Animist or Atheist. Moreover, the cleavage between religious and secular music (both plural forms) is so crucial that one often observes a true exclusion of the latter by the former. A Protestant missionary and a Coptic priest cast the same virulent curses on music and dance which they consider as impious and backward, when instead they can carry and transmit the memory of peoples. From the late 1990s, I could witness in Gurageland the slow but irresistible rise of prohibitions by the Coptic Church. The senior Gurage men and women who agreed to sing and record *bedra*, *wèyèg* and other *yèwèjè étchèhu* (respectively praise-songs to *Waq* the Gurage God of War, heroic chants, and songs in honour of *B^wəja* the Thunder God to ward off lightning) have become increasingly reluctant to interpret and record this traditional music, due to the frightening threats of damnation casted by the Church or the missions.⁵ Other researchers can testify about blackmailing

⁵ See STEINHOVDEN 2012. Through extensive interviews, the author gives a clear account of the devastating hostility of the churches towards traditional cultures.

and other “evangelical” methods used by the Pentecostal missionaries: access to school and medical care are weighed against renunciation to music and dance traditions. And what happened to the annual Festival of a thousand Stars in Arba Minch that used to gather fifty Nations, Nationalities and Peoples from the Omo Valley? It was inexplicably cancelled in 2009 after few successful years, while local people used to enjoy it unanimously.

Sic transit the remnants of historical cultures. That’s the way traditions die, they are just as mortal as civilizations – as we are supposed to know.

By the way, are these “traditions” fixed forms for all eternity? Or should we consider them as living organisms subject to dynamic changes? Do they die of entropy because they no longer reflect the societies which have generated them? Do they die natural or violent death?

Most agree that musical traditions used to remain unchanged for centuries. Some, like European musical traditions, have been studied and documented very closely, sometimes over several centuries. Concerning Ethiopian secular music, much less documented than church music, old written sources are not very numerous nor so ancient – and not so documenting... For long I thought Abba Bahrey had been the first writer mentioning the *azmaris*, in the late 16th century (GUIDI 1907: 230, line 13). Actually, earlier mentions of *azmaris* are found by the mid-15th in a juridical and administrative text dealing with food regulations at the royal court of Zärä Yaqob (reign 1434-1468) (KROPP 2005).⁶ Portuguese catholic missionaries of the 16th-17th gave us also some informations about secular music. While there is no doubt that the traditions are dynamic and not static (and not eternal, as too often local prides would have us believe), it is also clear that the changes they have experienced were extremely slow, and that they have developed over generations. Since the late nineteenth century and especially since the invention of the “talking machine”, it is clear that mutations are phenomenal. It also became possible to compare recordings of a musical tradition over more than one century. If we consider recordings of *azmari* and *wata* music, which were probably the most documented in Ethiopia over the twentieth century, and if we listen successively to Tesemma Eshèté (of 1908-1910), to Ferede Golla or Negatwa Kelkay (of 1939), to Assefa Abate or Shishig Tchèkol of the 1950s, to Ketema Mekonnen or Fréw Haylou of the 1960s, we clearly see that they all belong to the same kin, beyond the intonations of each of them.

After more than a quarter of a century of intensive survey of the Ethiopian *azmari* scene, there is a lot to be said about evolution and changes in their culture, starting from the pretty recent invention of the neologism *azmaribét* (literally *house of azmari*, a contradiction in the term itself since *azmari* are supposed to be wandering minstrels, and not attached to any cabaret or theatre). This new word appeared in the late *Derg* time, and most probably in the early 1990s. The massive settlement of these wandering minstrels in the cities, especially in Addis Ababa, the impressive evolution of the public

⁶ Mentions of *azmari ras* and *zan azmari* (as well as of *bāalā bāgāna*) are found pp. 120, 125 and 135. I am very grateful to Bertrand Hirsch for having conveyed this important information.

in the recent past, and of course the great talent of entertainers of these new look *azmari* has significantly affected the “*azmari* tradition”.

The evolution of the audience (or rather the various audiences) is of paramount importance in this transformation. While in the early 1990s you would rarely meet *ferenji* in *azmaribét*, they now constitute a large part of their customers. It is clear that the art of *azmari* being mostly an art of words, it *de facto* excludes non-Amharic speakers. To keep these customers, often seen as a potential goldmine, it is necessary to meet their expectations, which can be summarized as beautiful shows, lively melodies, great voices, skilled musicians, spectacular choreography, joyful atmosphere – and possibly beautiful women. In fact most *ferenji* customers are more sensitive to the rhythms of southern regions than to the heart-breaking Amhara ballads supposed to break the mood. In terms of dance, which has continuously grown in importance, if it is a universal language that anybody can appreciate, *eskesta* is now systematically associated with all kinds of choreographies more or less pan-Ethiopian, the most important being that they have to be spectacular. On another hand, one of the great universal laws of bars, cabarets, nightclubs, dance halls and other recreational places prescribes that the louder the sound or the livelier the atmosphere, the more the sale of beverages increases, for the benefit of the cash register. The poignant and bluesy melancholy of *Ambassel* and *Bati* has evaporated to give way to loosely Gurage or Welayta bedlam. One considers now that the Ethiopian blues beats down the atmosphere and gets rid of customers. And *Tezeta* becomes often a silly and automatic refrain, a sort of patriotic and binding obligatory hymn, devoid of any lyricism. So *exit* the killjoy archetypes in favour of a permanent incitement to dance and dizziness. The same could be said about the customers belonging to the Ethiopian diaspora in Europe and the United States.

Some observers would speak about *acculturation* to comment on the evolution of *azmari* tradition. Again, these rapid transformations point out to the necessity of preserving vanishing musical forms and related documents.

Heritage and memory

If I have developed this example at length, it is to show that nowadays the single human lifetime of a musician or a listener is enough to face the evidence that huge processes of evolution, transformation or revolution have overturned the sonic landscape of musical cultures – as opposed to the very slow evolution of the previous centuries. For better or worse, it is also a worldwide phenomenon. Modern recording and broadcasting technologies, internet, as well as easy transcontinental travels have heavily affected “the nature of cultures”. Today’s touristification of otherness⁷ seems to have replaced the nineteenth century taste for exoticism.

⁷ *Touristification* is a French word used in a pejorative way to denounce the growing abuse of everything and anything, but especially culture, in the tourism industry, whether by public officers or private companies. Touristification of otherness designates the present trend to consume the discovery of other cultures, peoples, music, etc., as a vulgar market, in the same way that one would go to the supermarket to buy a fashion item advertised on TV ads. Symptomatically, it is mostly consumers from the North who go shopping to the South, not the reverse. Is there a sustainable tourism, seriously?

Whatever one thinks of these developments, be they considered as happy or unhappy, it is always culture, for better or for worse. But this should strengthen our desire to preserve what has disappeared yesterday and what is still possible to save. That's what heritage is. It is dead or vanishing, but it is part of our memory and has to be passed on to the coming generations to let them know from which sense of beauty they are proceeding, to which grandeur they belong.

As I indicated in my introduction, at the beginning of my research, I had not envisioned that I would have to tackle the question of national heritage. I just wanted to share this exciting music with a wider audience. It should be remembered that only fifteen years ago, while virtually all African music, both modern and traditional, was available in music shops all around the world, none of the classic recordings of Tilahun Gessesse, Mahmoud Ahmed, Mulatu Astatke or Bizunesh Bekele were available in the northern hemisphere. The only available Ethiopian discs were the traditional recordings made by pioneers such as Harold Courlander, Wolf Leslau, Joseph Tubiana, Jean Jenkins, Ashenafi Kebede, Cynthia Tse Kimberlin, Kay Kaufman Shelemay, among others, and even those were only known by a happy few and dedicated music lovers. I was the first to be surprised by the unanimous welcome for the sonic remains of "Swinging Addis".

It soon became obvious to me that there was no relationship anymore between the big bands of the imperial era and the music of the *Derg* time (I made four trips to Ethiopia during the last six years of the *Derg*). On the one hand the *Derg* had disbanded institutional orchestras that were at the heart of musical creativity (Imperial Bodyguard, Police, Army, etc.), and on the other hand two other major technological innovations, exactly contemporary to the early *Derg*, marked the end of a musical as well as a political era: the emergence of electronic keyboards and of cassettes. The former were supposed to replace the big bands, and in any case nobody, institution or private, was able to continue sponsoring large music ensembles. As for tapes, they soon became a cause of widespread piracy, further weakening the economic situation of musicians, and discouraging their creativity since they scarcely got financial reward – not to mention other constraints they were facing such as censorship and propaganda. These are major factors necessary to understand the brutal break between the two musical eras.

The *Derg* put a brutal end to the golden age of "Ethiopian Groove" and urban high life.

The fall of the *Derg* and the twenty following years allow us to take the full measure of the breaks between the three eras: Empire, *Derg*, and post-*Derg*. The generation of Ethiopians who had known the first two regimes knew what was missing and had vivid memories of it. However, imagine a youngster starting "nightclubbing", let's say at the age of 17, at the time when the revolution was brewing. In 1974, this was prohibited, or in any case his desires were severely restricted because of the curfew. And the curfew lasted 18 endless years, killing the nightlife, which is a key moment for festive time as well as a space for musical expression and creativity. At the end of the *Derg* and the abolition of this barbaric curfew, this young man or young woman is 35 years old. Now in 2012 they are 56 years old. In other words, this sadly means that Ethiopians below

this age, meaning the vast majority of the population, have no direct or personal idea of what had happened musically before the *Derg*, during the so-called “Swinging Addis”.

Musically speaking, these 18 years are like a blank in the memory of Ethiopians, especially for the then young ones. We should also consider the impact of the *Derg* on the memory of Ethiopians living in the many diasporic communities around the world, particularly with regard to generations born under this regime or in exile.

From some informal surveys conducted in various Ethiopian diaspora communities (France, England, Italy, Sweden, Washington DC, Denver Colorado, Houston Texas, Minneapolis Minnesota, Australia...), I could see how music is an important vector of memory, and how it contributes to the strength of social ties, especially between generations. If I stay with the example of “Swinging Addis”, the sense of modernity and fun expressed by the music of these “Roaring Sixties” was adopted with gusto by the young “*diasporas*” – as the Ethiopians of Ethiopia call them. It turns out that they love the music of their parents’ generation. Sharing common musical tastes has surprisingly contributed to reset the memories, and mitigate significantly the negative views about the country associated with the *Derg*. This is not anything.

All of this is not about amnesia, but about prohibition, amputation, dictatorship on memories, and the censorship of History. Shouldn’t it alert us on the structuring capacity of musical cultures in the lives of individuals and societies? And on the necessity to fully recognize these expressions of folk and popular art as heritage that should be safeguarded? Still one would have to stop looking at all these *azmari* as belonging to a subculture unworthy of being preserved.

The reduction of this memorial discontinuity itself should be enough to justify the work of researchers on the music(s) of Ethiopia, be they Ethiopian or *ferenj*. Ethiopian researchers have of course their own agenda; foreign researchers can share it and also bring useful comparative perspectives. An external eye is always useful and the insights it brings are worthy of discussion – whether it is a *ferenj* eye watching Ethiopia or an Ethiopian eye observing any foreign culture. As an example, the case of 1970s Cambodia is very comparable to Ethiopia’s case – with the same time frame, similar music influences, similar political turmoil, and a similar memorial disaster...

Provisional conclusion

Over the past twenty years, the need for a sound archive for Ethiopia has often been mentioned. It makes sense. This could certainly be one of the solutions to the conservation, protection, research, development and promotion efforts for the musical heritages of Ethiopia.

Should we not consider pooling the various musical deposits scattered between institutions such as IES, ARCCCH, National Radio and Television, the Yared School, as well as the collections of Ethiopian recordings languishing for almost a century in many international museums and private collections? This is without mentioning the intense work of collecting done by researchers (mainly non-Ethiopian) for half a century.

Financial issues aside, why have no attempts to create a Sound Archive been successful until now? On a purely technical level, digitization could easily help create a nearly encyclopaedic sonic database of the musical heritages of Ethiopia. However, an issue that deserves to be addressed first is building a coherent understanding of the purpose of such a project and the criteria to be used in selecting materials. Of course this could lead to what is known in France and ironically as *une usine à gaz* ('gas-works'), a further challenge by creating another level of bureaucracy in the attempt to simplify matters.

I noted earlier the contradictions inherent to Ethiopian society when it comes to defining and recognizing what is cultural heritage and disqualifying what does not count. No music of Ethiopia deserves to be (mis)treated as a Cinderella of this national ambition. A particular tact is needed to solve these societal equations that should not affect or hinder research in any way.

To his or her dismay, more than one researcher, whether Ethiopian or foreign, has one day faced with the hostility of either ordinary Ethiopians or officials on the pretext that his or her research might project a negative image of the country. A recurrent suspicion towards researchers consists in accusing them of wanting to give a negative image of incurable poverty and overall backwardness. Shall we recall that propaganda or malevolence are not part of the premises of research? Critical thinking, especially with regard to sensitive or controversial issues, is often suspected of feeding a deliberate hostility. Linking critical thinking to denigration is an insult to the spirit of research.⁸

It goes without saying that research must go beyond these taboos, curses and other contradictions, to systematically observe, without limitation and equally, all musical cultures of the country – secular or religious (Christian, Muslim or related to other traditional beliefs). Certainly the role of the political and administrative authorities on culture is of primary importance in the definition of heritage and its active preservation, but isn't it also the role of everyone, wherever one is, to preserve their own memories as well as collective memory? Much remains to be done for a genuine harmonization of perspectives.

Museology often certifies the death of cultures that it preserves and exhibits. But flat encephalograms of vanished or endangered worlds as presented by museums have

⁸ For example, see in particular the edifying experience of Itsushi Kawase, a visual anthropologist documenting music-related expressions in northern Ethiopia. "I showed the film [When Spirits Ride Their Horses, 2011, 28'] at where I taught the visual anthropology block course, to a group including graduate students of social anthropology and heritage management at Mekelle University in northern Ethiopia in August 2011. During the viewing, some students were uncomfortable and irritated to see the film. I found that these students consider the subject of the film, Zar, too provocative because for them, the Zar ceremony resonated with the image of Ethiopia as 'backward civilization', and thus, was inappropriate to be the subject of the research. My other audio-visual documentation of Ethiopian mendicant singers, Hamina (or Lalibela) [Lalibalocc – Living in the Endless Blessing, 2005, 24'] met with harsh criticism. The film was labeled as a 'strong projection of poverty' during the meeting on inventorying of the intangible cultural heritage of Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and UNESCO Addis Ababa Office in October 2006. Later, I tried explaining to the officers of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH), who attended the screening and got particularly irritated by my film, the academic intention of my film and research projects. I found that the people from ARCCH consider the subject of the film too challenging because for them, Hamina resonated with beggars and not singers, and thus, were inappropriate to be the subjects of a film related with cultural heritage." (KAWASE 2012: 77-78.)

the virtue of mirrors. They remind us of our origins and question our memory. It is all about the memory of cultures, our cultures, and the people's memory. Ethiopia is not only Ethiopian, it is also universal – and possibly more than it thinks.

This is often the memory of beauty too.

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