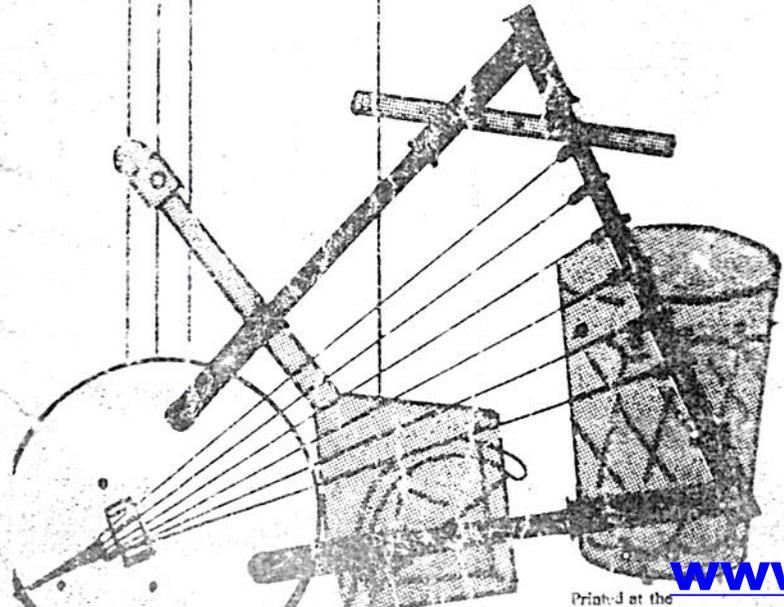


Patterns of Progress

MUSIC DANCE DRAMA

In Ethiopia

*Published by the
Ministry of Information
Publications & Foreign Languages Press Department
Addis Ababa-Ethiopia
1968*



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THE BACKGROUND

Music is in the air of Ethiopia — in its hills and dales, its rivers, lakes and waterfalls and in the lush green crops growing on its fertile fields. Music and poetry are in the blood of its ancient people—men, women and even children, reared in as mild, agreeable and healthy a climate as could be had anywhere in the world.

INSPIRING LANDSCAPE

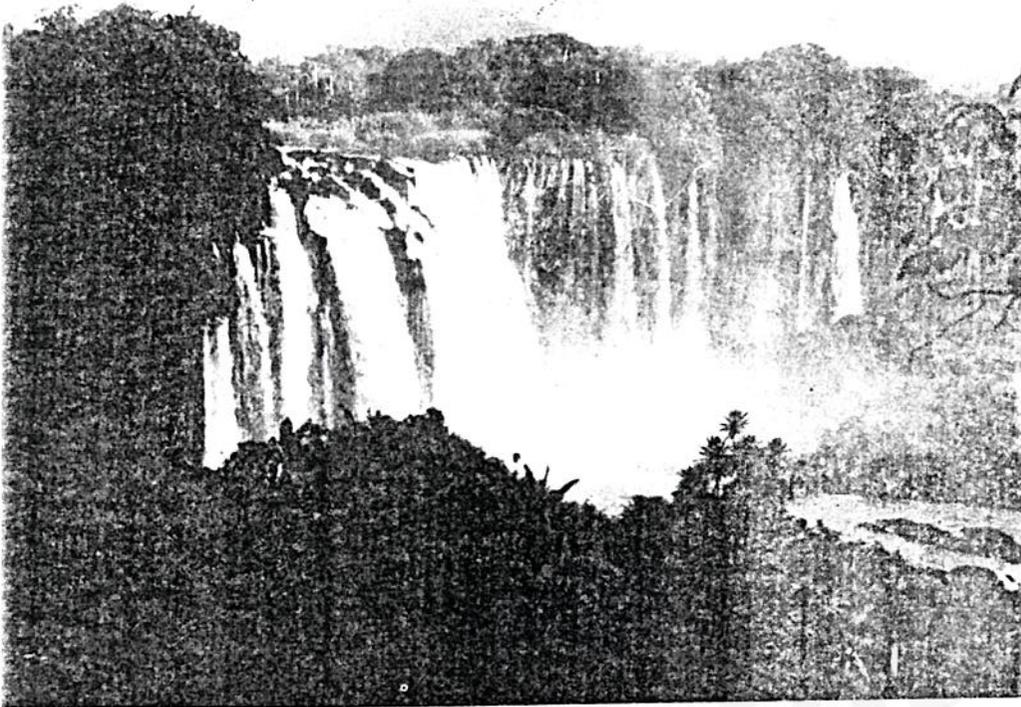
The physical configuration of the country has had a profound influence on the history and culture of the people. It is the beauty of the contrasting landscape and the wealth of flora and fauna which have been a source of inspiration to poets and musicians from time immemorial. As Mondon-Vidailhet says:

“I believe there is in a people’s music something that is fitted to their particular genius, I would say almost fitted to the physical circumstances of their country; and to confine myself to Ethiopians, I find it in the violent sidesteps (e’cart) which break the ordinary monotony of their chants. Therein I find their character, made in the image of their immense plateaux which seen from some summit, resemble infinite plains and which when you try to cross them, surprise you at every moment with giddy descents and breath-taking climbs.”

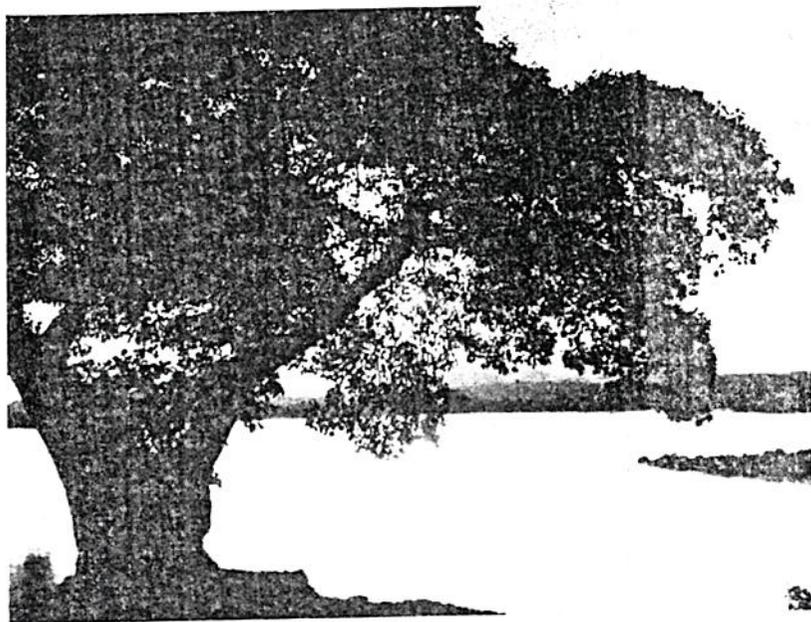
The high elevation of the Ethiopian plateau and its mountain ranges, have given to the country the apt appellation of ‘Switzerland of Africa’.

And yet its southern tip is hardly two hundred miles away from the Equator. One would have expected the country to be a hot, torrid and desolate desert. Such, of course, is the narrow sandy strip lying along the Red Sea coast. But as one proceeds into the interior, one notices an abrupt, almost perpendicular ascent to a seven to eight thousand-foot high plateau with abundant rainfall and a mild and salubrious climate.

The fertile plateau extending for over seven hundred miles in the north to Addis Ababa and Jimma in the south, is headed



Blue Nile Falls at Tis-esat, aptly termed “Smoke of Fire”. A spectacle of rare beauty, it has been a source of inspiration to poets and musicians in Ethiopia from time immemorial.

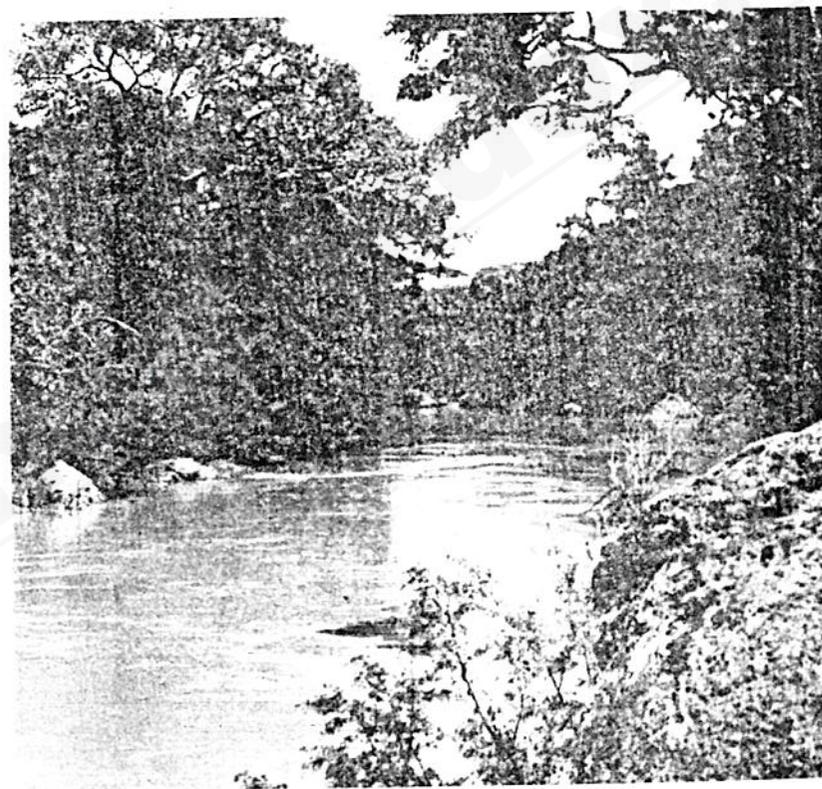


Lake Awasa in the southern province of Sidamo. A number of lakes, big and small, dot the beautiful landscape of the country.

by the mountain ranges with peaks reaching as high as 15,000 feet (Mt. Dashan). No less impressive are the beautiful crater lakes, such as Tana, the largest, or Lake Hayq, one of the smallest, with their islands and monasteries where "time has stood still and the world of the Old Testament is yet alive."

This great massif is cleft from northeast to southwest by the Rift Valley cut by the swift current of the Awash river. Equally romantic is the course of the Blue Nile which, from its source at Gish in the Sakala region, flows to Lake Tana as the Small Abbay. The spot has been a place of worship from time immemorial; a church dedicated to St. Michael and Zara Bruk still attracts thousands of pilgrims in search of cure by the holy waters. The Small Abbay emerges out of Lake Tana at Chara-Chara cataract as the Big Abbay and continues its slow and broad-bosomed course of one thousand miles to meet the White Nile at Khartoum. But before it leaves the confines of Ethiopia, it forms the great fall at Tis-esat (smoke of fire), 'a spectacle of rare beauty.'

It is not only the Blue Nile that favours the land — there are several more, like the Takkaze, Atbara and Marab. They flow west towards the Nile, while the Juba and Webi Shebeli, which descend from the eastern plateau, flow through Somalia.



There is music in the swift current of the river Awash. Lined with dense bushes and trees whose overhanging branches almost kiss its waters, the river presents a picture of bewitching beauty.

The flora of Ethiopia is as variegated as its climate and altitude. In the lowlands vegetation is generally dense and tropical, while in the highlands bushes and trees are found in small clusters in and around innumerable hamlets dotting the landscape. The hills are clothed in dense forests of evergreen coniferous *zigba* and *ted* trees of the juniper type, whereas the eucalyptus gives a green and wooded appearance to Addis Ababa and other cities and towns. The word "coffee" is said to be

derived from Kaffa, a province of Ethiopia where it grows in abundance. The staple crop of the country is *teff*, of which the tasty *injerra* is made.

In a country of temperate climate and abundant rainfall, vegetables and fruit would naturally be in plenty. So can one expect a rich variety of fauna flourishing on land and water.

No wonder the author of an original Ethiopian work, "The Christian Romance of Alexander", had his own homeland in mind when he describes the "City of Saints", where

"the water is sweeter than the grapes of which wine is made. . . where there is neither freezing cold nor parching heat, neither summer nor winter, neither oppression nor tears . . . All their wells and rock cisterns are filled with honey and every beast among them is filled with milk."

This beautiful country of lakes, mountains and lush green plateaux is the home of an ancient people of light complexion and Semitic features. In the historical sense they represent an amalgam of a relatively "thin layer of Semitic settlers from southwest Arabia with the great mass of the existing Cushitic population." The new settlers who arrived some time between the 7th and 4th centuries B.C., introduced a superior civilization: the use of metals, cultivation of cereals and fruit, house-building, and most important of all, the art of writing. The fact that Ethiopia alone among the people of the African continent (except the Arab countries) has a written script for thousands of years, speaks volumes for its culture.

Acting as a bridge between Asia and Africa, Ethiopia had old commercial links with Greece, Rome, India and Iran. Her traders and sailors crossed the seas to and fro. These contacts must have had a very profound effect on her music and other fine arts. But out of all these influences there emerged an integrated system whose pattern was distinctively Ethiopian.

MUSIC THROUGH THE CENTURIES

It is difficult to trace the beginnings of musical traditions in Ethiopia, for, the history of the land goes back to thousands of years. Apart from her chronicles, *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of Kings), there are independent sources which allude to her hoary past. We are told in the Old Testament that the river Gihon

'compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia', or that Moses had 'married an Ethiopian woman'.

Classical writers also refer here and there to the country and its people. Homer, for example, speaks (*Odyssey*, i, 22ff) of the 'distant Ethiopians, the farthest outpost of mankind'. In an anonymous first-century account of travel and trade in the Indian Ocean, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, we find a mention of the harbour of Adulis, 'a fair-sized village', as also of the 'city of the people called Aksumite', that is Aksum the ancient capital of Ethiopia.

An open-air class at the lakeside. No wonder the pupils, when they grow up, indulge in extemporising verses and songs.



It was with the rise of the kingdom of Aksum, that the Solomonic dynasty was established by the sagacious Queen of Sheba. Her son Menelik I of the union with King Solomon, was the first of a line of rulers that continues on the Ethiopian throne to the present day.

Some believe that music was introduced to Ethiopia by the Queen of Sheba. On her return from her visit to King Solomon, she is said to have brought with her a number of levites who had served as musicians and choristers of the Temple in Jerusalem. This belief is strengthened by the close resemblance of the Ethiopian church to the Jewish temple. We find the same institution of priests and deacons, and of the professional musicians and teachers, the *debteras*; the *begana* is akin to the harp of David. The dance of the priests in front of the Ark or *tabot*, the rattling of the sistra and beating of the drums, bring to life an ancient Biblical scene with its bright colours and almost hypnotic musical accompaniment.

It is, however, generally accepted that the ecclesiastical music and poetry of Ethiopia are entirely the product of the Christian church.

Christianity came to Ethiopia in the 4th century A.D. when the country was at the zenith of her power and achievements. Ezana (325-50 A.D.), a great Aksumite king, has left us a number of inscriptions which reveal his nobility and power.

But the greatest event of Ezana's life and rule was his conversion to Christianity which now became the State religion in Ethiopia. This had far reaching results not only for the history of the land, but for the life and culture of its people. The new religion became the focus and expression of all literary creation.

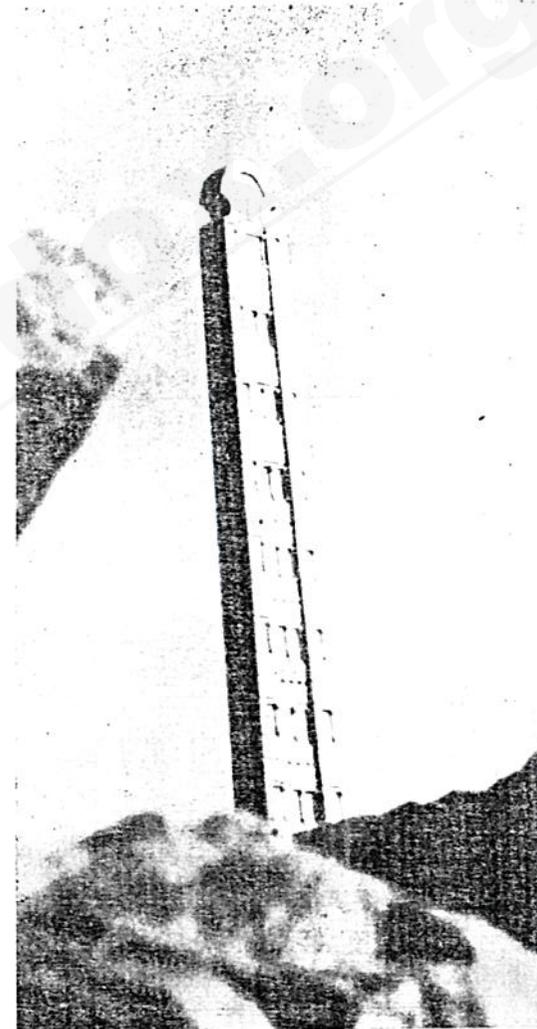
Christianity entered into Ethiopia hand in hand with music. Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, had consecrated Frumentius as Bishop of Ethiopia. Athanasius was the warm friend and biographer of St. Anthony, the Hermit, known as the father of Christian monasticism, who had lived apart from mankind in a mountain by the Nile for twenty years. The monastic system was a powerful agency in its time for the creation and preserva-

tion of culture. The influence of Athanasius doubtless assisted in implanting asceticism in Ethiopia which has been an ever recurring feature in her history.

And music played a prominent role in ascetic practices. It was considered the fittest means of procuring those states of ecstasy during which the soul was supposed to contemplate the Supreme Being face to face.

The mystic practices gave birth to chanting of slow sacred songs, accompanied by sistra, drums and dances. This church music was cultivated assiduously by the *debteras*, who had to undergo a long and arduous training to qualify them for the job. And it was in the sixth century, in the reign of Gabre Maskal (550-64 A.D.) that Ethiopia produced her greatest musician and poet—Saint Yared. He not only composed numerous songs and hymns of his own, but invented a special type of musical notation for the guidance of singers and dancers.

Secular music also seems to have been in prominence. We have an interesting reference to flutes and musicians in an account written by an ambassador of the Byzantine emperor Justinian. While describing the court of King Kaleb (514-42 A.D.)



The tall monolith at Aksum, a standing monument reminiscent of the glories of the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia.

he writes that "around the king stood his royal council and attendants playing flutes."

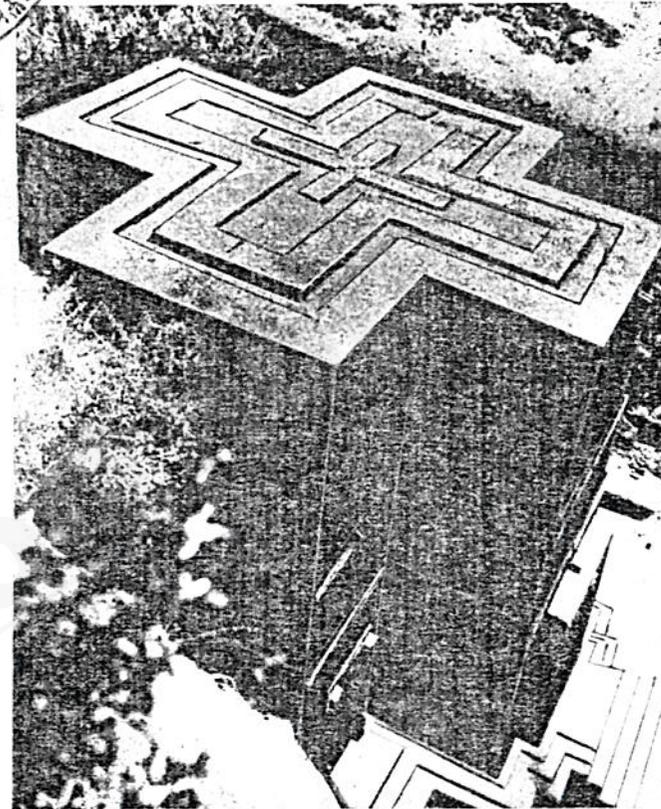
The Aksumite kingdom began to decline in the seventh century. With the birth of Islam and the rapid growth of Muslim power over Arabia and neighbouring countries, the traditional sea routes were lost to Ethiopia. Foreign cultural influences were thus stopped. "Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten." (Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*).

Ethiopia now turned to inward contemplation. Her cultural activities were centered on the Church and her religious music and dance assumed an austere and pious mode. But secular music took a different direction. Muslim incursions and internal problems weakened the nation for several centuries politically, but strange as it may seem this had a beneficial effect on her cultural growth.

We witness in this period of isolation, the birth of virile music, full of patriotic sentiments and exuberating heroism and fire. The secular music, always of folk origin, flourished side by side with the devotional music of the Church. The shepherd on the hillside still played on his *washint*, the mother continued to send her baby to bed with a melodious chant. The strolling singers, the *azmaris*, carried the message of freedom and joy to every nook and corner of the country and roused the youth to action and war against the unscrupulous invaders.

The twelfth century witnessed a short interlude when the Solomonic dynasty was eclipsed by the rise to power of Zagwe kings. The most notable of these was Lalibela to whom we owe the famous rock-hewn churches of singular impressiveness. His reign is also characterised by a fruitful development of Ethiopic literature and fine arts. Music received his special attention. He is said to have organised a fascinating class of musicians named Lalibeloch, who go about from village to village during certain seasons, singing melodious songs with the coming of the dawn.

The Zagwe dynasty was replaced by the Solomonic in 1270 through the intervention of Saint Tekla Haymanot. Its



The church at Lalibela hewn out of solid rock.

succession is marked by a great literary renaissance which gave adequate expression to the Ethiopian national genius. The flowering was most noticed in the reign of Amda Sion (1314-1344). He not only widened the frontiers of the Ethiopian empire by the might of his arms, but set in motion a wave of literary resurgence. His victories over his Muslim adversaries are mirrored in the stories and songs composed in his honour.

Under another great king, Zara Yaqub (1434-68 A.D.), Ethiopian art and literature received a further impetus. His fame rests more on the religious and administrative reforms which he put through than on his military exploits. He was a patron of music and literature and himself wrote a number of books on religion and philosophy. He is credited with the

authorship of *Argano Mariam* (Lyre of Mary) based on the model of the *Wudase Mariam*. Besides, he composed hymns for the days of the year, and numerous other poems.

Unfortunately Zara Yaqub's successors did not prove worthy of him. Though one of them, Lebna Dengel (1508-40) did at first resist and even repulse the incursions of the Muslim invaders, his reign witnessed the darkest period of Ethiopian history. Ahmed Gran, a commander of Sultan Abu Bakr, overran the country and inflicted severe blows on the people and their cultural heritage. He destroyed numerous churches and monasteries and burnt valuable collections of books and manuscripts. Much of the intellectual heritage of Ethiopia was irretrievably lost. But there was a brighter side too to this dark picture. The atrocities committed by this ruthless invader forced the growth of patriotic literature and music. There was an outburst of *shilela* or war songs and poems which kindled the fire of resistance among the people.

Lebna Dengel's son, Claudius, who succeeded to the throne in 1540, however, saw the complete deliverance of the country from the clutches of the invaders. Help came from the Portuguese, a small contingent of whose forces landed in Massawa in 1541. Fired to activity, the people rose as one and by the middle of the sixteenth century, the intruders were thrown out and the traditional religious and cultural institutions rehabilitated.

With the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries and Portuguese soldiers, Ethiopia shed for some time her isolationism. But by their religious intolerance and narrow-mindedness, the Portuguese made people suspicious of Europeans. Finally they were thrown out of the country which reverted to isolation and aloofness for some centuries more.

But new forces were rising outside Ethiopia. These were later on to have a direct bearing on the history, life and culture of her people. European powers were casting covetous eyes on Africa and several of them brought large chunks of the continent under their colonial rule. It was with the advent of King Theodore in the mid-nineteenth century that Ethiopia, to protect her independence, emerged from her isolation. With



His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I accepting a bouquet from an artiste of the National Theatre. His Imperial Majesty is a great patron of music, dance, drama and other fine arts.

her rediscovered unity under the Emperors "John, Menelik and Haile Selassie the First, did the country find its soul and its genius again, its spirit and its sense of mission."

The Ethiopian cultural renaissance involves all branches of expression—literature, art, music, dance and drama. New talents have and are still enriching the already rich cultural heritage. The resultant is a harmonious blend of modern trends and influences with the traditional and distinctively Ethiopian art and literature.

The credit for this happy achievement goes to the endeavours of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, whose greatest glory is his patronage of arts of peace and solicitude for the welfare of his people. He is the architect of modern Ethiopia and father of modern Ethiopianism — adaption of the worthwhile attributes of the present day world to all that is useful and enduring in the rich and ancient heritage of Ethiopia.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

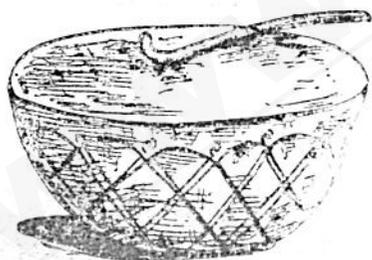
The scenic beauty of the country and its rich historical background inspire song and melody among the people. On the hills and meadows the shepherd boy plays on his *washint* the plaintive tunes of a lyric about the lover long separated from his sweetheart. Down in the fields, the farmer and his wife, sickle in hand, sing the *irshazaffan* praising the Lord and the Saviour for a bountiful harvest. In the market place, a playful urchin involuntarily bursts into song and the passers-by take up the refrain. Dancing and singing are necessary concomitants of festivals and religious processions. At weddings and even at funerals, one hears song and music appropriate to the occasion. And when night comes, the melodious tunes of the *krar* or *masinko* are in the air. Music is there at every occasion, birth, marriage or death.

And the instruments they use are simple, innocent and ancient in origin. These may be classified into percussion, wind and string.

PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS

The percussion instruments commonly in use are the *negarit*, the *kabero*, the *atamo*, the *tsinatsil* and (now rarely) the *gatchel* and the *dawal* or stone bell.

The *negarit* is a small kettledrum about 45 centimetres in diameter. The body which may be wooden or metallic is semi-hemispheric in shape. It is covered at the base with a skin, generally sewn together and tensioned latitudinally round the middle of the body. It is played with a stick and never by hand.

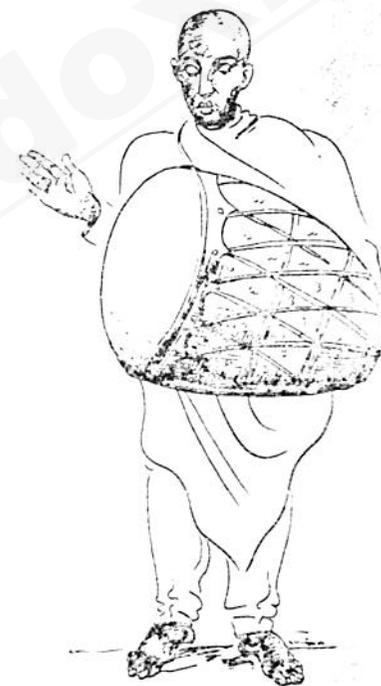


Negarit with striker

The *negarit* is a ceremonial instrument, one of the distinctive emblems of authority. On various state functions or when a royal proclamation is publicly made, the *negarit* is played along with the imperial trumpets or *malakats*.

The *kabero* is a small drum which invariably accompanies an Ethiopian orchestra of wind and string instruments. The bigger one is played in or outside churches to beat the time during singing of hymns and devotional songs.

The instrument is made out of a piece of hollow *wanzo* wood with ends of unequal diameter. Both the ends are covered with skin tied with leather thongs and tensioned at the middle of the body. Usually it is suspended by a strap to the shoulder of the player who standing up, marks the time by beating it with both hands from the two ends.

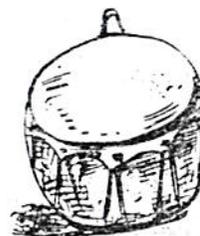


Kabero player

The *atamo* is a small drum held in hand or under the arm.

It is used entirely as a secular instrument. The body is usually made of wood. The face is covered with skin or parchment and carries a few small stones, glass beads or seeds inside. It is struck with the fingers or palms of one or both the hands in rhythmic patterns.

Atamo



An instrument almost entirely used in church music is the *tsinatsil*, the famous Ethiopian sistrum. It consists of a lyre-

shaped metallic frame with a wooden handle. There are two or three thin bars running from one to the other side of the lyre. On each of these, three discs are threaded. When shaken back and forth, the *tsinatsil* produces a jingling sound which usually follows the pattern of sound beats from the *kabero*.

A legend ascribes its origin to Saint Yared who, upon hearing three birds sing in a tree, was reminded of the Trinity and thus constructed the instrument.

Another instrument used wholly in church music is the *qatchel*, a small handrattle. It is made of a thin strip of metal folded over so as to form an elongated hollow cone, six centimetres long, with a base opening of two centimetres diameter.

The *dawal* or bell is not now used either in secular or church music. A bell of resonant stone slabs, or at times a resonant spar of wood, called *merewa* is still found in a few old churches. Generally there are two or three hanging side by side. A round pebble forms the striker. When sounded, the bells give out two notes as each stone is struck in turn.

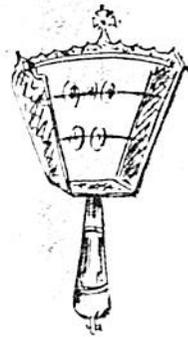
WIND INSTRUMENTS

The *washint* is a simple flute made from a length of bamboo cane. It has usually four finger-holes. The top of the instrument is "cut open as a mouthpiece, forming a right angle with a thin lower edge." This sets the air column in the flute vibrating.



Washint

The *washint* is entirely secular in use. Generally it accompanies other musical instruments, percussion or stringed, in a choral or solo song, or a dance. It plays an important role in an orchestra of Ethiopian instruments in as much as other stringed instruments are tuned to it.



Tsinatsil

A larger though more primitive type of *washint* is the *embilta*. It has no finger-holes. The mouth-piece is U-shaped and formed by the removal of a slice of bamboo for about one-third the width of the bore of the pipe. Like the *washint*, the *embilta* is held at a downward angle away

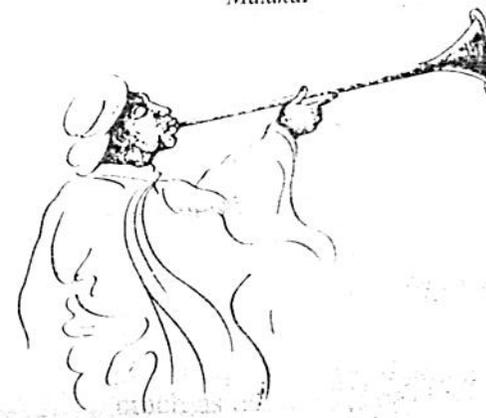


Embilta

from the body towards the player's right. The *embiltas* are played in groups of three. Each produces two tones, the fundamental and another a fourth or fifth higher. The leader of the three *embiltas* produces three tones. So in order to play one simple pentatonic tune, the three performers must have understanding, coordination and sense of timing.

Another wind instrument, the *malakat*, is a kind of trumpet usually a metre or more in length. Generally it is made of bamboo, but sometimes one may find a metallic one too. It ends with a bugle-type cap. There are no finger-holes and the entire body may be covered with leather or skin.

The *malakat* and *embilta* along with the *negarit* form ceremonial instruments or 'insignia of royalty'. They were used to herald the approach of the king or other officers of authority during a ceremonial state function.



Malakat

STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

Of the stringed instruments, the *begana* or the Ethiopian lyre



Begana

is the most important and dignified. A delightful old world instrument, it resembles the lyre of the Greeks and Romans and is believed to be exactly like the legendary harp of David. It has eight to twelve strings that are plucked with fingers. The body is usually shaped like a section cut out of a pyramid or occasionally it may be bowl-shaped, covered with skin or parchment stretched over its open front.

The two arms are fixed to the lower edge of the front of the sound box, under the parchment, about one third of the way from each bottom corner. These project at an angle and are joined by a yoke at the top.

The gut strings are fastened to the yoke and pass from its middle down to a generously-proportioned bridge. From the bridge the strings pass to a wooden rod at the underside to which they are tied.

The *begana* produces serious-sounding notes and has "come to be thought of as the perquisite only of the Emperor and noblemen." This is perhaps because of its strong resemblance to the harp of David. The instrument is used particularly outside the church on the occasion of Lent and other festivals. It is rarely to be seen accompanying a secular orchestra. That role invariably falls on the two popular stringed instruments — the *krar* and the *masinko*.

The *krar* is a six-stringed instrument plucked either with a plectrum or fingers. The body is like a shallow bowl hollowed out of wood or merely a tin box. On the front it is covered with skin stretched by a wire threaded through holes in its edge and tightened under the lip of the bowl. A second piece



Krar

of skin covers the underside and like the front is fastened to the wire with thongs.

Out of the box or body, two arms of the instrument protrude at an angle from each other. The yoke which joins the bars at their top-ends forms a triangle with them. The strings are wound round this yoke and stretched over the bridge on the skin at its centre and tied to a wire loop to the base of the arms inside the box. They are tensioned with the help of the yoke.

The only Ethiopian bowed instrument is the *masinko*, a fiddle. The diamond-shaped wooden body has both the face and back left open. These are covered with skin or parchment, which extends right round and over the body. The edges are stitched together down the side of the box. The rounded or rectangular length of wood that forms the neck is inserted through middle of one of the corners. The string of several strands of horsehair passes from the tuning peg over the inverted V-shaped bridge and is knotted immediately behind it to a fastener. This fastener of string or leather thong leads on either side of the bottom corner of the diamond-shaped box and is hooked round the projecting bottom end of the neckpole.

The bow is arc-shaped, about 36 centimetres long and strung with thickly stranded horsehair. "One would never imagine", says Mondon-Vidailhet, "that the *masinko* players could draw such resonances from such a primitive instrument, but



Masinko

nevertheless some of them possess real virtuosity. They make use of position-work and even produce harmonics.”

The instrument is entirely secular although a consort of *masinkos* may sometimes be found at the head of a religious procession as on Maskal. The *masinko* player is universally found in Ethiopia. There is hardly a village where he is not to be seen. His usual role is to accompany a song, in chorus or solo, and he usually comes from an *azmari* team of musicians.

An orchestra of Ethiopian musical instruments. All the instruments are capable of producing notes suited to Ethiopian songs and tunes.



CHURCH OR CLASSICAL MUSIC

Ethiopian church music may be appropriately called classical, for to attain proficiency in the art entails a long and arduous training under learned and competent masters. The training follows a set pattern and the songs and tunes conform to definite musical notations invented as far back as the sixth century A. D.

This music developed round the church. Ethiopians are highly religious people. The church and its music are a vital element in their culture and society. The entire liturgy is chanted, and the sistra and the drums are invariably found in the *kedest*, the middle of the three concentric sections of an Ethiopian church.

Christianity came to Ethiopia at a time when the Aksumite kingdom was at its zenith. Ezana's conversion opened new vistas for the religious and cultural upsurge of the times. It was, however, in the sixth century that Syrean monks, following their persecution in the Byzantium, entered Ethiopia where they established monasteries and churches. The various monastic orders enjoined a life of austerity and self-abnegation not only on the inmates but the people as a whole. Most of their time was spent in fasting, prayer and chanting of psalms and hymns. Many kings are recorded to have renounced their throne and turned into religious mendicants. One was so moved at the singing of a hymn that he broke into tears which were collected in a cup and used as mixer for a painting depicting Virgin Mary.

Virgin Mary is more venerated in the Ethiopian than in the Roman Church. Hence a great deal of devotional literature and music is inspired by her. The chants sung to the accompaniment of the sistra and drums lifted the congregation to such a pitch of ecstasy that they believed themselves to have come face to face with God. And it was but natural that this intense religious movement should have brought forth the greatest of Ethiopia's composers and musicians — Saint Yared.

SAINT YARED

Yared is believed to have been born in Simen. The full story of how he created the chant and the notation system is given in the *Senkessar* (Lives of the Saints). While learning lessons at the church school he is said to have been reprimanded by his teacher and beaten for his inability to grasp his lessons. In utter frustration he fled to a jungle. While brooding over his fate, he saw a caterpillar repeatedly falling from a tree it was trying to climb. And when finally it succeeded in its attempt, Yared got courage and determination to succeed. He went back to his teacher and begged his pardon. Thenceforth he is said to have made such rapid progress in his lessons that he learnt the Old and the New Testaments in a short time and was named a deacon.

At this time there were no set rules for the liturgical chant. "But when the Saviour wanted to establish sacred chant," says the legend, "He thought of Yared and sent three birds to him from the garden of Eden, which spoke to him with the language of men, and carried him away to the heaven of Jerusalem, and there he learnt their chant from twenty-four priests."

An Ethiopic hymn referring to the Yared legend, says:

"O Yared, Priest of the Altar on high in the heavenly places:
Whither the glorious hand of the Father of all hath led thee:
Lead thou me also with thee that with thee I may chant together."

Yared himself writes:

"O Music! I heard in Heaven the song of Angels!"

Now Yared set to work and composed a large number of chants for the hymns and liturgy of the church. He also invented a system of music signs and symbols. He is the author of religious songs and hymns devoted to particular occasions — the seasons, the months, and the days—and festivals of saints and the Holy Trinity. All this was done in three modes — the *Ezel*, *Ge'ez*, and *Araray*.

Ezel is very serious and heavy sounding, slow and dignified. It is particularly associated with the chanting for fasts and vigils, and at funerals. The *Ge'ez* mood is slow and dignified.



Saint Yared singing in front of King Gabre-Maskal (550-64 A.D.). On the left,



Deberas singing at a church service

and unadorned. The *Araray*, on the other hand, is lighter, gayer, altogether more free.

It is said that while reciting hymns and devotional songs, Yared would go into ecstatic trance, moving his listeners to such a pitch of devotion that they would forget themselves completely. A favourite church painting depicts Yared singing in front of king Gabre Maskal (550-564) who is so absorbed in listening to him that while keeping time with his spear, he inadvertently pierces Yared's foot. The latter too in his ecstatic mood does not feel the pain. The story says that when the king came to his own self and saw the damage done, he jumped down from the throne and requested of Yared how he could compensate the injury. Yared, in all humility, replied:

"Allow me to retire to the forest that I may devote the rest of my life to undisturbed meditation and prayer."

The chronicles are all praise for the superb quality of Yared's chants. "He composed chants," says one, "the like of which was not to be found in the East or in the West, neither among the Romans nor the Greeks nor the Syreans nor the Egyptians." "Nobody can invent a new mode which could be added to the three modes of Saint Yared," says another.

The medieval times when Ethiopia retired into isolation, witnessed a fresh upsurge of intense devotion. Since the country was cut off from outside influences, a highly individual Ethiopian church music was evolved. Numerous songs and hymns were composed and fresh notations on the model of those invented by Yared were put in use by two priests Azaj Ghera and Azaj Ragouel in the time of Emperor Claudius. "They began to introduce notation into ecclesiastical chant and instructed in it all the priests of a certain monastery."

ETHIOPIAN NOTATION SYSTEM

Ethiopian notation takes its place alongside the other notation systems of the world's diverse cultures, past and present. The link is difficult to trace. But of all the Eastern systems, it is the most developed, extending as it does to all the music of the church, not just to the cantillation of lessons.

The system, as invented by Yared in the sixth century, consists of syllabic letters, curved signs, dots and dashes. These are written above each line of the text of the liturgy, the hymns, and the psalms. The letters used as musical symbols are called *milikit* and the signs *seraye*.

To distinguish the musical symbols from the text, they are written in red and the text in black, or vice versa.

The letters are the most important part of the notation. Each letter means not one note but a whole group of notes and may denote a whole phrase or even a line of the text to which a particular melodic phrase was sung. In short each original phrase of music has its own *milikit*. Usually the *milikit* is placed at the beginning of the textual phrase, or even on its first syllable. The *milikit* signs serve to guide the singer in how to interpret the melody and may thus be correctly called interpretation marks.



A page from the Degwa or book of chants. Note the musical symbols over each line for the guidance of the singers.

The *seraye* is placed at the beginning of each hymn or portion of liturgy to indicate which of the three 'modes' is to be used. In addition there are instructions about speed, for instance, *meregd* (slow and even), *nius-meregd* (quicker), *abiye-tsefat* (still quicker), *tsefat* (presto).

The system is simple once it is explained. But it cannot be strictly termed a notation system in the Western sense. The fact that there are so many *milikit* makes it incumbent on the *debtera* to learn them by heart. With the possible permutations and combinations, the number of melodic phrases to be learnt

comes to as many as six or seven hundred. It is not, therefore, possible for a musician to sing independently by following the *milikit* and *seraye*. These do not indicate any definite pitch but only direction of singing. The system thus gave rise to heteraphonic style of singing with pseudo-unison.

TRAINING OF A CHURCH MUSICIAN

To the *debteras* goes the credit for preserving the musical culture of the Ethiopian church. They are a part of the hierarchy. Though on a level with the priesthood they do not enter the Holy Orders. They undergo a rigid system of education not only in music and dance, but also in poetry, literature and theology. The various stages of training after passing the elementary school course, are the school of music or song (*Ziema*); of dancing (*Aquaquam*); and of poetry (*Kene*).

A class in a school of church music (*Ziema*).





Debteras being taught the intricacies of singing in rhythm and how to keep time.

In the Zieme, the *debtera* has to study and even commit to memory the whole collection of hymns. There are at least five of these collections and others too. He has to acquire mastery over the notations used in each and every hymn or psalm. By the time he passes out of this school — and this takes as long as seven years — he has committed the entire melody of the ecclesiastical chant to heart.

But even then what he has learnt is no better than 'raw or unpolished' music. He now begins to learn its rhythm and how to dance. The mastery over playing the *tsinatsil*, beating the *kabero* and keeping time with the prayer stick, is attained after rigorous training. This may extend to another seven years.

Then comes the last stage in the course — the school of Kene or poetry. Traditionally all Ethiopian poetry was intended to be sung. In Ethiopia, as in ancient Greece, poetry was regarded as a branch of music. The science of music and poetry for singing hence became an intense and profound study.

In the school of Kene, the student has to master the art of Ethiopian poetic composition which is rather complicated.

He has to acquire the quality of economy of expression, double meaning, figurative language and other finesse. Sensibility to the scenic grandeur of the country and vivid descriptive power are a must for an adept.

So by the time the *debtera* is competent to present his thesis called Degwa, he has spent about twenty years in the three schools of Music, Dance and Poetry. If his work shows originality and creativity, the candidate graduates with the degree of *Lik* or Master.

However, not all *debteras* pass through all the schools. They try to specialize in any one of the three branches — Song, Dance, and Poetry. Hence every *debtera* may not be a skilled church musician, but every church musician is definitely a *debtera*.

The *debteras* use their drums, sistra and prayer sticks at every service of the church. They invariably stick to the three rhythm patterns which may be used in any of the three 'modes'. Abrupt changes from one to the other rhythm in the middle of an anthem are frequent. In the words of Mondon-Vidailhet,

"the clerks accompany the *zemame* singing with light tapping of their canes or crutches called *mukwaniya*; the *maraghed ziema* is sung to the accompaniment of the *kabero*; the *tsifat ziema* is sung like the preceding one, with the addition of hand-clapping."

They begin their concert by stamping their feet on the ground and playing gently on their sistra. By degrees the tempo rises. Singing becomes louder and louder till the highest point of ecstasy is reached. Often there is clapping and dancing till they are completely exhausted and an abrupt pause ensues.



SECULAR OR FOLK MUSIC

Folk music in Ethiopia is as old as the land. Its chief characteristic is its spontaneity. The concept of an audience is absent, for both the performers and the listeners intermingle when music is on. The songs are invariably in the folk idiom and hence depict the true folk-art of the country.

The composition of original verses is not restricted to any class of professional poets. Every educated Ethiopian is an adept at it. Extemporising verses is a favourite pastime at feasts, weddings and other social gatherings. Often these are fed to the music provided by the minstrel.

This spontaneity rules out any formal composition or notation. It is the absence of this rigidity which makes the Ethiopian folk music so rich and melodious. Every fresh song is a new creation and hence every folk-musician is both a composer and singer combined.

These songs are composed in all parts of Ethiopia and therefore reflect the characteristics of the different tribes and communities. For instance the melodies from the north and the east have a wandering character, in some cases they are monotonous and melancholic. Melodies from the west and the south are full of syncopated rhythm.

Rhyme and rhythm are important for these folk songs. Influenced by the exigencies of the melody, the composer forms the verse with a rhythm appreciated by the ear. Hence each ballad, each song, gay or sad, has its harmony of long and short, accented or unaccented and atonic verse endings.

Ethiopian musical scales vary from the predominant and different kinds of pentatonic scales to seven tone or diatonic scale. The most popular is the *tizita*. The second is called *anchi-hoye*. Though a little different from the *tizita*, it is also pentatonic. The scale popular among the people of the northern provinces is *ambasal*. Another scale popular there, particularly



A spontaneous outburst of music and dance during a festival.

in Wollo, is known as *bati*, from a district of the same name. *Anchi-hoye* may be called strictly Ethiopian, for it is not in use in any country even on the pentatonic scale. Western musicians do not use it, but in Ethiopia it is a living art.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Ethiopian people. Hence their folk-culture is interwoven with and influenced by the land. The rains, the thunder, the sun and the stars have all put their stamp on these simple folk songs. In the *zaffan* or folk-music and dance, is reflected every aspect of the people's life. Many of these songs are work-songs associated with sowing, tending and harvesting of different crops. Others are songs about daily household chores. Many are humorous; many sing about love and joys and sorrows of life. Some describe deeds of valour by warriors of yore, and some sing about the foibles and weaknesses of a local nobleman, the busybody or the incompetent.



Here is a satire on some master of the house:

Though he's wealthy in servants he cannot command,
 For he is but an old dotard unable to rule.
 Though his flagons are many we've nothing to drink
 For an iron chain closes his bottles of beer.
 Oh! how angry the master has grown against me
 Since I came to this household his servant to be.

This folk music of tribal and agricultural origin has been digested through the centuries and absorbed into the totality of Ethiopian culture.

The *zaffan* are nearly always performed by men and women together. The whole company claps hands vigorously. Occasionally an *atamo* might be used also. Repeatedly the women break in a joyous and ecstatic fashion. The verses are improvised by both the singers and the listeners. The songs are short, unpretentious, and close to the lives of the people. The pleasure that the *zaffan* gives to the people is two-fold — in the appreciation of the skill of the versifiers and in the actual chorus singing and dancing.

The *zaffan* is an ever-renewing process. The melodies that are currently popular undergo constant change. New words are added and new situations portrayed, until the old songs are forgotten and new ones take their place.

FUKARA

Another type of secular song is the *fukara*, especially sung by a warrior. He has an urge to celebrate his exploits by singing in full voice of his valorous deeds. In several fiery verses he expresses all that he believes himself capable of. His songs are generally accompanied by a *masinko* or a *krar* and occasionally an *atamo* as well. He struts up and down, gesticulating at his real or imaginary opponent. It may be a company of soldiers from the enemy camp, or a lion or a hippopotamus. No wonder that his boasting rouses another warrior among the audience to repeat the performance, and soon a third and a fourth spring up. The whole concert is thus built up to a tremendous climax of noise and excitement. One can well imagine the electric effect such performances must have produced among the people in times of war or struggle for freedom.



A warrior's song of Fukara or Shilela.

The origin of the *fukara* songs goes back to the numerous battles fought by warriors and patriots against aggressors during the long and chequered history of Ethiopia. At the end of a victorious battle, the warriors would celebrate the occasion in a congregation to which elders and high-ranking dignitaries would also be invited. As the celebrations progressed, warrior after warrior would stand up and in improvised verse narrate the heroic deeds they performed during the battle.

They would be listened to with rapt attention. Only when a warrior's claims received approval from the audience, would he be honoured by the Emperor with an elevation in his rank. If, on the other hand, they felt that the warrior had allowed his imagination to get the better of the truth, his claims would be questioned and he withdrew from the scene in shame.

Of course there is no dearth of patriotic songs in Ethiopia. Its long history is the story of constant struggle against invaders. This and the occasional local feuds gave a stimulus to the composition of *shilela* songs full of patriotic fervour and praise and adoration for the beautiful homeland and her people.

“Rally, rally, come together;
Ethiopians unite; isn't it unity which wins the day?
Shouldn't a proud people help
When others cry for aid?”

Folk songs and folk music embrace all activities of the people—social, religious and political. The birth of a child is often celebrated with a feast and the guests invariably sing and dance on such a joyous occasion. Similarly one notices a spontaneous outburst of singing and dancing on marriages and festivals.

Even funerals have their share of songs. The *mousho* or funeral songs are mostly composed and sung by women. These lamentations, some of which are of considerable poetic interest, concentrate on the virtues of the dead person. The singing is accompanied by gentle hand clapping. At the end of each verse, the refrain is repeated again and again by the mourners. Each time one of them drops out until there is only one voice left, intoning the last refrain in a soft diminuendo.

Falling into the same category is the *leqso*. This is a sort of complaint associated with a year of sorrow, or with some



Folk singers from Tigre province.

tragic event. A form of elegy, the *leqso* is spoken or sung in such a way that the couplet seems to celebrate the virtues of the person. This effect is produced by lengthening the sound of a letter, or modifying a soft or hard consonant. It is repeated and sung by women and perhaps a choir.

AZMARIS

What the *debtera* is to the church music, the *azmari* is to secular folk music and dance. The *azmari* is a strolling bard who has from centuries entertained the prince and the peasant with his song, wit and satire. There are references to these he-

editary “strolling singers who play on the *mazenko* and *krar*” in histories and chronicles written as far back as the 12th century A.D. Forming a remarkable brotherhood, these ‘singing gazelle of Ethiopia’ may, to some degree, be compared to minstrels of Britain, minnesingers of Germany and the rhapsodes of ancient Greece. Through good times or bad they, in their own humble way, contributed to the rich heritage of Ethiopian music.

In medieval Europe, such minstrels were retained by kings and princes. In Ethiopia too the Emperor and the nobles maintained their *azmaris*. They produced a wealth of song, eulogy and wit. At the same time they were allowed great licence. Their wit and pungent satire acted as correctives to administrative inefficiency of weak, indolent and pleasure-seeking princes and landlords.

Often an *azmari* suffered for the bold exposition of his patron’s foibles, but he gladly bore the punishment to keep up the traditions of his brotherhood. Witness, for example, his portrayal of the intensely bitter feelings of the poor at the mismanagement of the finances by a Ras or Prince.

Zara-Brouk, grannary one—empty
 Zara-Brouk, grannary two—empty
 Zara-Brouk, grannary three—empty

And all this when the landlord was gathering the last bushel from his tenants in tax.

In contrast we have the moving songs in appreciation of the deeds of the patriots. For example an *azmari* sings of the patriots’ efforts to rehabilitate their country (to ‘build the *tukul*’, the Ethiopian’s house with the central pole which is its main support). But the Emperor was in exile, hence the house could not be built:

Ras Abeba Aragai ordered his patriots to make the house;
 Dejazmatch Tashome did likewise;
 Falleke Lidj Ayhu did likewise;
 And also the proud Garasu did likewise;
 And the hero Kafallou did likewise;
 And all other heroes did likewise.

Name after name would be added, and after each line the



Professional musicians singing to the accompaniment of Washint, Masinko and Begana.

listeners might well join in with a repeated ‘ha’ or ‘o-he’. And after the names had accumulated there would come the point of the song:

But the pillar was not there,
 Therefore the house could not be built.

The *azmaris* with their *masinko* move from village to village singing songs and making others sing. They are basically improvisors and hurl verses at the audience. These may be deeply poetic, or panegeric or even abusive. But whatever they be, they have the power to hold the tempo of the consort at a high pitch.

The *azmaris*, however, live by their song and *masinko*. They are adepts at playing on this particular instrument and sometimes even improvise new tunes to the traditional ones.

Their style is dramatic, demanding the attention and arousing the enthusiasm of the listeners. Being professional singers, they are usually invited to entertain at feasts, festivals, marriages and other social functions. A woman singer generally accompanies the party, when the men play on the instruments and the woman gives a vocal recital.

Wearing the national dress — a long white robe drawn together at the waist by a girdle, her head and shoulders draped with the fine white *sham'ma* — she sings with a smile. Full of enthusiasm and verve, her black eyes glance archly around the company. At times she flings mirthful quips and sallies at some particular guest, making him the centre of attention and source of laughter.

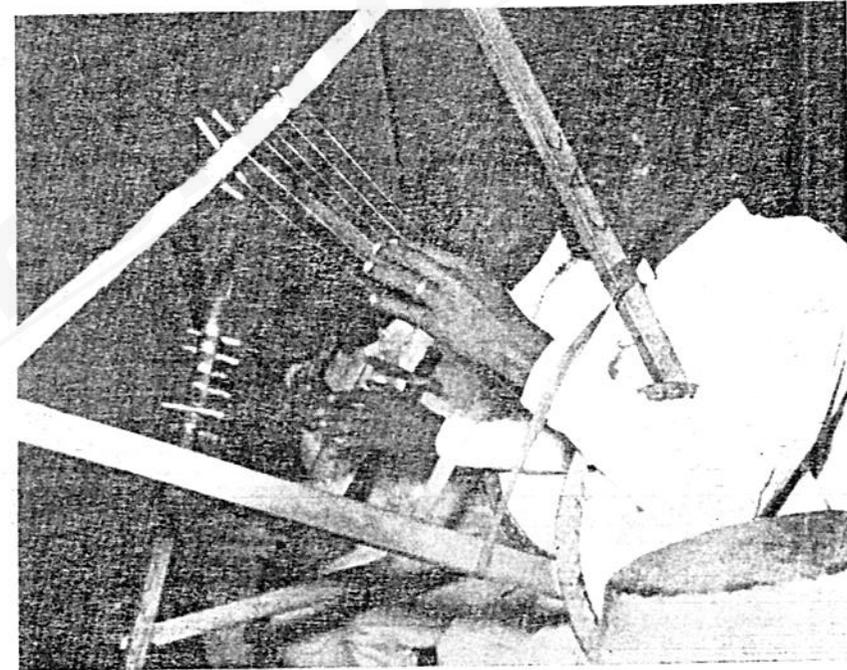
Prior to the development of fast motorized transport in Ethiopia, a caravan of mules and horses would be accompanied by a party of *azmaris* to enliven the tedious journey with their songs and tunes. In the countryside they go from farm to farm when the peasants are out in the field sowing, tending or reaping their corn. And invariably they receive a good cheer and sumptuous hospitality from their steadfast patrons — the peasants.

The traditions of the country, the brave episodes of the warriors, and the life and works of famous men of religion and letters are some of their favourite themes. For rousing the patriotic sentiments of the common man and thus acting as rallying posts for freedom fighters, many *azmaris* had to make the supreme sacrifice at the hands of the occupying army between 1936 and 1941.

Their field of activity has now widened and their talents find a new scope on the stage, radio and television. With the growing interest that the younger generation is taking in the traditional art and culture of Ethiopia, the *azmaris* can look forward to a better and assured future.

LALIBELOCH

Another class of singers about whom not much has so far been written is *lalibeloch*. They derive their name from King Lalibela (1181-1221 A.D.) who is said to have organised them into a guild. An hour before sunrise, a group of these minstrels with their faces covered by the *sham'ma* may appear in front of a house in a village and sing a song in a tune which may at once be melodious and often melancholy. The villagers give them food and money and they slip away before anyone is able to trace their identity.



Playing on Krar

Their music is more than homophonous. It is a very simple form of harmony. Maybe the effect is enhanced by the hour of their concert—the time when dawn lifts the veil of gloom from the face of the earth. Or it may be the effect of the simple harmony which is suited to feminine voices. But the combined effect is soft and sad, and it will be surely a strong heart that would not be moved to a greater or lesser degree by their song.



RELIGIOUS AND FOLK DANCES

Ethiopian music and dance are closely interlinked. It is difficult to say when a musical performance becomes a dance or vice versa. This stems from the spontaneity that is the hallmark of musical expression in Ethiopia.

The scenic splendour of the country is, in a large measure, responsible for the gay and abandoned movements and gestures of the dancers. A notable illustration of how nature has affected the dance forms of the country is provided by the style of religious dances introduced by Alaqa Gebra Hanna in the middle of the nineteenth century.

He was born in the district of Foggara on the east coast of Lake Tana. His pursuit of religious studies as a youth took him to Gondar where he did well and became a teacher in the church of Ba'ata Maryam, one of the most famous schools for the teaching of *aquaquam* (religious dance).

While there, he invented a new style of dance for the clergy. In the traditional style the bodies and sticks (*mequamia*) of the dancers move up and down, punctuating the flow of chant with alternately gradual and abrupt vertical movements. Inspired by the lateral movements of the waves of Lake Tana and of the bamboo reeds in the breeze at its shore, he taught that bodies and sticks should sway from side to side. This style was forthwith rejected by the conservative clergy at Gondar, but it was carried by his son, Takle, to Dabra Tabor and from there spread elsewhere.

The earliest tradition of religious dances by the *debteras* go back to the times of the old Old Testament. The veneration accorded to the *tabot*, its carriage in solemn procession, accompanied by singing and dancing, rattling of the sistra and beating time with prayer sticks, remind one most forcefully of David and the people dancing round the Ark. With the passage of time, dancing in church or at religious festivals acquired an orthodox as well as an unmistakably Ethiopian character.



Debteras singing and dancing to the beat of the Tsinatsil and Mequamia (prayer stick).

Unchanged and untainted, these dances have been performed year in and year out through the centuries. Descriptions as recorded by European travellers and missionaries from the fourteenth century onwards, or the singing and dancing postures as depicted in the illumined religious manuscripts of earlier days, tally in the minutest detail with the performances as given today. We have thus to look at these sacred dances with respect and awe, for they are descendents of ancient Biblical legends. They in fact go back to the early days of the church in Ethiopia.

TIMKET

An impressive spectacle of the traditional religious dance is provided on the occasion of Timket (Epiphany) and other festivals and holidays. Timket, the celebration of the baptism of Christ, falls on January 19 followed by the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel, on January 20.

On the eve of Timket, processions from all churches in the neighbourhood of a village or town, converge at a pool or a river. In Addis Ababa all the *tabots* of the Coptic churches are taken in colourful procession to Jan Hoy Meda, an open meadow, where at the centre is a special Timket pool. All the Arks are here surrounded by priests and cantors who sing and pray throughout the following night.

The ceremony begins at daybreak. The service is sung and the congregation sprinkled with the blessed water. The dance follows. The *debteras* face each other in two long lines. They wear a white turban and a toga or *sham'ma* over a tunic of striped silk with embroidered borders. In one hand they hold a staff crowned with a cross and in the other a sistrum whose jingling lends rhythm to the intoning chant. Nearby are two or three drummers.

The dance begins slowly. The *debteras* sing softly and advance with rhythmic swaying from side to side, shifting the balance to one foot as the other is lifted a little off the ground. The prayer sticks are moved back and forth, up and down, then raised high and swayed from one side to another. The beating of the drums quickens, the sistra jingle louder and louder and the pitch of the melody rises higher and higher. As the lines of the *debteras* approach nearer to one another, the atmosphere becomes electrical. Then comes the climax: suddenly the sound and movement stop, with the sticks, faces and bodies



Priests in embroidered robes and carrying colourful umbrellas at the Timket ceremony.



With Tsinatsil, prayer sticks and Kaberos, debteras performing a religious dance. (Reproduced from an old painting in the Museum of the School of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa)

of the *debteras* straining towards the sky. The whole scene is surcharged with devotion. It appears that the assembly of priests and people has been blessed by the Supreme.

At Aksum a similar dance is performed at the sacred rites of the Feast of Our Lady of Zion, or still more on the Saturday and Sunday of the Festival of Palms. Pageantry soars to its noblest height. The choir of *debteras* clad in their long, sacred decorated capes and togas, intone an expressive chant as they slowly advance towards the cathedral. Alternately they prostrate themselves and rise again as if participating in a ballet. With the left hand in which they also hold palm leaves, they cover their faces as a sign of grief or respect in accordance with the gestures depicted in the illustrated ancient manuscripts.

Then in two long rows facing each other, the clergy in their embroidered capes and snow-white turbans, advance to the slow and solemn beat of the drums and jingling of their sistra. They meet, cross and retreat in a very slow dance which dates from time immemorial.

FOLK DANCES

These festivals and holidays offer a feast of secular folk-dancing as well. Everywhere in villages and cities, groups of people gather and singing and spirited dancing begins. These are especially associated with *zaffan* or folk-song. They are a part of the song, and like it are often improvised.

The dance reflects not only the characteristics of the people but also of the place it comes from. For instance the people inhabiting the *kuolla* or the valleys and hot plains far below the plateau, have boisterous and lively songs and dances, for they have to toil hard to make nature yield them their livelihood. On the other hand the people living on the *dega* or the great plateau, who have an easier time, are more restrained in their gestures and serious and contemplative in their songs.

Intricate footwork or body movements are not typical of Ethiopian folk dancing. But a common characteristic is the vigorous jumping, thumping of the feet and swaying from side to side. Among women, movements of the body from the waist to the knees is frowned upon. It is, however, the head and neck

as well as facial expressions that are brought into play.

The most important and graceful dance performed particularly by women, is the *Eskeesta* or shoulder dance. The shoulders are moved in a series of motions forwards and backwards involving a certain movement of the breasts. Suddenly the head moves apparently from one shoulder to another, although it remains in its vertical position. Occasionally the dancer slowly flexes the knees almost to the ground, but always

Sidamo Folk Dance



she stands at the same spot. All the while the music beats its rhythm and clapping of the hands by the surrounding people who form the audience becomes vigorous. The motions are accompanied by a sharp drawing of air through the teeth, making a sound resembling the word *Eskeesta*.

Each ethnic group has its own dances and songs. *Gurage*, a tribe of industrious and business-minded people, have earned a name for their skilful folk-dancing.

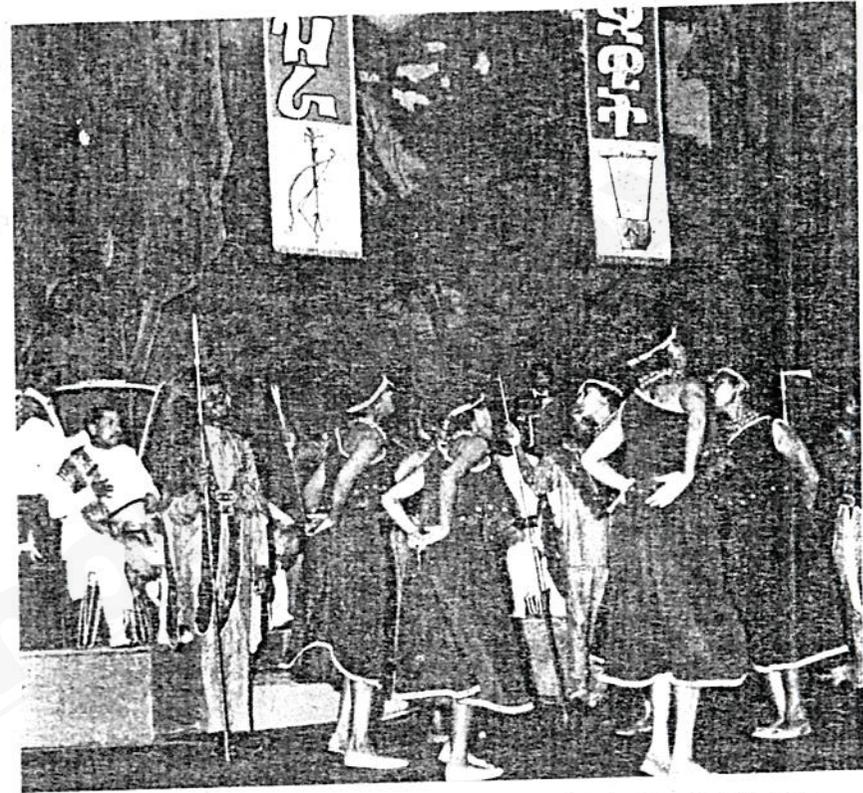


Ready for Wollamo Folk Dance

They swing their bodies from side to side during their famous harvesting dance. The women, with grass trays in their hands make gestures and movements as if extracting banana juice. The men, sickle in hand, pose as if reaping the corn. A headman moves from one end to another, supervising these operations. The footwork is very brisk. They turn half circles, men and women facing each other. The overall effect is a picture of graceful body movements and facial expressions, captivating and enthralling to the extreme.

The folk-dances of the *Gojjames* with sophisticated and graceful movements, are very popular. With great effect they alternate their singing with soft and loud voices. Most of their songs speak of love — “my heart melts for you, why don’t you come.”

The *Wollamos*, from the south of Ethiopia, are famous



Galla Dance presented by the Folklore Section of the Haile Selassie I Theatre.

for their rhythmic and exciting dances. The women dress in skirts and tunics of various colours. Round their neck and shoulder hangs a chord of small purses. Wearing striped shirts, the men cover their legs with colourful towels. Around their heads they tie fillets of tiger skin and in their hands carry long spears.

The women dance in a graceful and reserved manner. They sing sharp and loud songs, jumping and clapping while moving from side to side. The men, wielding their spears, make fearsome facial expressions. The music becomes brisker and the tempo of the dance rises. Abruptly the movement and music stop. A quicker number follows and after some time a still quicker one.

Then comes in the chief warrior, carrying his spear and

shield and wearing thick necklaces of coral beads. He also wears a belt and has a dagger. The drummer quickens the beats and dancing becomes brisker. The warrior moves from end to end, making gestures of a man striking his enemy. Occasionally he gives out a yell, signifying a challenge to his opponent.



Yeju Dance (Wollo province) being performed by the artistes of the Patriotic Association.

In contrast, the people of *Aksum* with their ancient history, dance in a subdued style. The women wear their *sham'ma* not only over their shoulders, but also their heads. This is a sign of great modesty.

While performing their dance, they make swan-like movements—stretching their necks and bending their bodies gracefully. The men follow, each going round a woman dancer and supporting her body with his arm outstretched. This dance in pairs is accompanied by the slow tunes of the *krar*, *masinko* and *kabero*. Occasionally the dancers utter a hissing sound and the women sharp ululations.

The people of *Ogaden* are hardy and warlike. They perform a very vigorous and manly dance. The men wear colourful



Kaffa Folk Dance

towels round their legs and a shirt of a matching colour and design. On their heads is a multi-coloured cap and round their shoulders a scarf knotted in front.

The women wear a skirt of striped cloth over which is a long tunic. Their heads are draped in a scarf of white.

The men carry staves of wood, whereas the chief has a dagger in his hand. The women with their multi-coloured umbrellas follow suit and the dance takes the shape of a brisk up and down movement of the staves and umbrellas.

The *Hota* or loyalty dance is performed by a group. War-

riors brandish weapons, shout, express loyalty to their leaders, and attempt to frighten a common enemy. The dance may be accompanied by hand clapping and shouting of the women onlookers in rhythm, or by the *kabero*.

Secular dances of Ethiopia, apart from their tribal origin, are part and parcel of the life of the people. Whether busy ploughing or cultivating their farm or whether hunting or marching off to battle, they love to dance and sing. All social functions provide an occasion for dancing. The *Chagulash Abeba Zare* or nuptial dance, is performed both by men and women at the time of the arrival of the bride at the home of the groom. The

Ogaden Dance



Abeba Lekamma or the flower dance is of great charm. On Ethiopian New Year, young girls, in their traditional white dress, go from house to house, performing a quick dance to the accompaniment of hand clapping. They also dance in circles

holding one another's arms. They carry bouquets of freshly picked flowers presenting these to the housewives. In return they receive cake, bread or money.

This is also an occasion for the boys to choose their girls. The boy carries a lemon in his hand and, dancing up to his favourite girl, eventually offers it to her. If accepted, the boy and girl kiss each other and dance off, joined by all around them.

A form of dance-drama exists in the countryside. The performer narrates a story through conventional gestures. Not much study has, however, been devoted to this interesting feature of Ethiopian culture. Such dance-dramas are frequently performed in Tembein (Tigre province) and deserve to be encouraged and patronized.

THE DRAMA

The histrionic sense is inborn with every Ethiopian. While conversing, he uses appropriate gestures, facial expressions and dramatic dialogue to drive his point home. No wonder in almost all villages the people are accustomed to putting on humorous skits and mimics.

But drama in the modern sense is a recent development. The nearest approach to it may be found in the Ethiopian church rituals. Since ancient times, certain events associated with the life of Christ and the Christian hierarchy have been enacted as Passion plays.

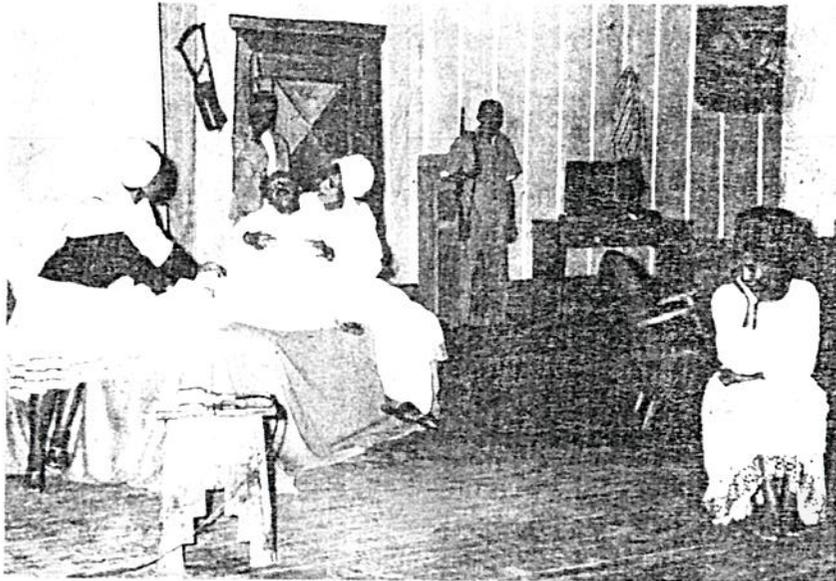
For instance, at Aksum, during Lent, a deacon comes to the church riding an ass and is received at the gate by other deacons singing "Housana". Next morning the same deacon, bent under the heavy load of the Cross, goes out of the church gate up a steep hill where he plants it on the summit. His way is lined all along by devout pilgrims and other Christians singing songs in praise of Virgin Mary.

Though it is a sort of Passion play, it has its own limitations as drama. These acts are looked on as the divine representation of a church ceremony. Here again the audience is totally involved in the ritual as, for instance, in kneeling, or bowing and lifting the heart in prayer. Not once do they think in terms of the play; not once do they applaud or condemn an actor's performance.

True, the credit for the origin of Greek drama goes to similar Passion plays; for example to the temples of the "living god"—Emperor Dionysus—where the pagan gods prayed to him and danced before him. As time passed, these or similar plays were adapted to depict the life of the people and the people themselves participated in these unreservedly. The audience was there to applaud or boo an actor; a sure fillip to improve the art.

Maybe it was due to her isolation for the greater part of the last two thousand years, that Passion plays in Ethiopia did

not develop into dramatic art and no effort was made to introduce choreography or stagecraft. It was only sixty-five years ago when Ethiopia had shed her policy of isolation, that the first professional drama of the Western concept was staged in the presence of His Imperial Majesty Menelik II. A comedy based on the Fables of La Fontaine adapted to Amharic was produced and directed by the then Bejerond Tekle Hawariat.



A scene from an Amharic play "The countryman in town", being staged by the Drama Section of the National Theatre.

From then on the drama, as another form of expression of Ethiopian culture, took root. Unlike music, dance or painting, the instruments of dramatic art are varied. It is the effort of the playwright, the director, the performer and even the audience that is responsible for bringing out the best that the theatre can offer. Lighting techniques, scenery, setting, costumes, make-up, stage management and design are essential requirements to make the play a success.

Fortunately there appeared enthusiastic workers in the field. People like Melaku Begosew, Fitwarari Cherinet and more particularly Yeftahae Negussie laid firm foundations of drama and theatre in Ethiopia. They were infact pioneers in this field.

Since the second world war, H.E. Dejazmatch Ghirmatchew Tekle Hawariat and H.E. Kebede Mikael have served this cause as playwrights and patrons of theatrical art. The former wrote a stirring play of historical importance, "Theodore", and the latter the "Hannibal". He also translated classics like "Romeo and Juliet" all of which were a success on the stage. Balambaras Asheber Gabre-Hiwot has successfully written and produced the plays "The Queen of Sheba" and "Love Never Dies."

The works of scores of competent Ethiopian authors accounted for the growth of the theatre. The playwrights whose works contributed to the rapid development of the dramatic art included H.E. Blatten Geta Heruy W. Selassie, H.E. the late Ras Bitwoded Makonnen Endalkatchew and H.E. Balambaras Mahtema Selassie Wolde Meskel.

The younger generation also has its outstanding playwrights. Well-known among these are Ato Tsegaye Gabre Medhin, author of "Yeshoh Aklel", who has adapted to Amharic the classics such as Molier's "Tartuffe" and "La Medicin Malgre Lui" and Shakespeare's "Othello." Ato Menghistu Lemma is an excellent comedy writer, and Ato Tesfaye Gassesse has several plays to his credit.

Amharic version of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."





A scene from "Romeo and Juliet" staged at the National Theatre.

Today the professional actors have come to the forefront. Many of them received training in various fields of theatrical art in America, England and other European cities under competent teachers. This they were able to do with financial grants from the Ethiopian Government and various cultural societies.

Most of the plays deal with the present-day transitional strains and stresses on the Ethiopian society. They are concerned with the conflict of values between the new and the traditional. A few classics have been put on the stage and several comedies as well.

Ethiopian drama is in verse form like the classical plays in English. The new technique of blank verse or plain prose is not suited to the language which has an ancient tradition of Kene poems.

THE OUTLOOK

Firmly entrenched in the lives of the people, the traditional music and dance of Ethiopia is a living art. The instruments remain unaltered. Song and satire continue to be produced extemporaneously by the people and the professionals. The *debteras* still sing and dance in churches and at festivals as of old. Music and dance in the traditional folk-lore style remain a natural expression of almost every emotion of the peasant and city dweller.

But during the last decade or so, the youth of the country are being subjected to the impact of jazz and rock'n roll type of music and dance through the cinema, television, radio, phonograph and pictorial magazines. One cannot overlook the flagging interest of the youth in indigenous sacred music and dance. This trend is noticeable in secular and folk music too.

To meet this challenge to the survival of traditional musical forms in Ethiopia, the Government under the patronage of His Imperial Majesty, has set up a National Theatre. Here the traditional music, dance and drama are being presented to the people through modern technique of stage-management and choreography.

HAILE SELASSIE I THEATRE

The Haile Selassie I Theatre was inaugurated by the Emperor in 1955, the year of the Silver Jubilee of His Majesty's Coronation. The inaugural play, "David and Goliath" by the late Ras Bitwoded Makonnen Endalkatchew was presented with great success.

Completed at a cost of Eth. \$ 3.5 million, the hall is built in the eighteenth century French theatre style. It is capable of seating 1200 people and has a spacious foyer with stained-glass windows and artistically decorated floor.

The Theatre has three sections: drama, folklore and music.



National Orchestra of Haile Selassie I Theatre. Its presentation of orchestral songs are being received well.

The drama section had originally planned to present one play a month. But this proved a difficult target to achieve. The number of original plays in Amharic or even adaptations of classical plays was limited. However, on national holidays, the Theatre, besides staging suitable plays, presents folk dances and music.

The traditional secular songs and dances as adapted to a modern stage are presented by the folklore section. The Theatre has a permanent orchestra of Ethiopian musical instruments. Some of the musicians are graduates of the five-year

music course started by the Theatre in 1962. Efforts are being made to collect and record folk-songs from different provinces. These are polished and improved upon and presented by the artistes of the Theatre with great effect.

The folk-song and dance ensemble of the Theatre has received applause from a number of foreign dignitaries who have graced the Theatre during visits to Ethiopia. The ensemble has also travelled abroad and performed to packed houses in Senegal, the Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, China and the Soviet Union. Last year it gave a very colourful and charming performance at Expo. '67 in Montreal. Their art was appreciated by competent musicologists from various countries who attended the show.

The Theatre's music and dance troupe goes around the different provinces in Ethiopia, presenting its choice repertoire to the people. But for its efforts to revive interest among the people in their traditional music and dance, this cultural heritage of Ethiopia would have suffered a setback through apathy and neglect.

Besides serving as a focus of national culture, the Theatre introduces the people to musical cultures of the world too.

Among such presentations may be mentioned the French ballet troupe, a Czech chamber music quartet, the famous Bolshoi Ballet, American Jazz bands and a ballet from San Francisco Opera Company. The Sudanese cultural troupe and a number of other artistes and musicians who came to Ethiopia under cultural exchange programmes gave their performances at the Theatre.

Today the Haile Selassie I Theatre, under the auspices of the Ethiopian Government, is cherishing the national heritage of folk-art and stimulating its continued production. The Emperor's personal interest has been a great factor contributing to the growth of dramatic and musical expression in the country.

THE PATRIOTIC ASSOCIATION

Closely associated with the Haile Selassie I Theatre is another cultural body, the Patriotic Association. Devoted to preservation and continued expression of Ethiopian music and

dance, the association has a long and interesting history. Nearly forty years ago, when the Emperor promulgated the anti-slavery law, a group of artistes under the leadership of an ardent patriot, the late Ato Makonnen Hapte Wold, went round the country arousing the conscience of the people against slavery. During the Italian aggression from 1936 to 1941, the group worked hard and with their patriotic songs and skits, kindled the fire of resistance among the people.

After liberation, the group (now named the Patriotic Association) directed its attention to the work of rehabilitation and reconstruction. It became a potent instrument in educating the people and creating among them an awareness of the need to modernise the country rapidly. The association received hearty response and was entirely financed from voluntary public contributions.



Gojjam Dance presented by the Folklore Section of the Haile Selassie I Theatre.

At present the association is working in collaboration with the Haile Selassie I Theatre and under the direction of the Minister of State of Information. It has its own hall where the artistes give weekly performances of Ethiopian dance and music. These have become popular and the income from the shows goes to the maintenance of the hall and payment of sal-



The early efforts of the Creative Arts Centre at organising and training an orchestra of Ethiopian musical instruments.

aries to the artistes. It has thus become a centre for cultural renaissance in Ethiopia.

THE CREATIVE ARTS CENTRE

Speaking at the Convocation of the Haile Selassie I University on December 19, 1961, His Imperial Majesty observed:

“Music, dance and other forms of art are rooted in the ancient history of our Empire, and their development to an even higher peak of perfection will be possible in the atmosphere of an University.”

To give a practical shape to the sentiments expressed by His Imperial Majesty, the Creative Arts Centre was set up in the University under the charge and direction of Professor Phillip

Kaplan. He invited Ato Tesfaye Gassese, the well-known playwright and actor, to help him in organising the centre. Ato Tesfaye later became its Director.

Apart from setting up a department of art, the centre devoted its main attention to Ethiopian music, dance and drama. The first requisite was systematising an orchestra of local musicians playing on Ethiopian instruments. Used to giving solo recitals, the instrumentalists had to work long and hard to play in symphony and adhere to set tunes and melodies. The efforts, however, bore fruit and under the direction of Ato Tesfaye Lemma, the Orchestra Ethiopia came into being.

At present there are sixteen musicians who are paid minimal salaries by the centre. The orchestra earns extra fees from concerts and performances on radio and television and also at public and private functions. The musicians receive a certain percentage of the fees thus earned.

The centre can be proud of having been successful in

Musician accompanied by Orchestra Ethiopia giving a performance from the stage of the Creative Arts Centre.



modern presentation of orchestral songs through the traditional musical modes and instruments of Ethiopia.

The response from the student community to the performances given by the orchestra is very encouraging. The numbers played are invariably Ethiopian and through proper stage management and direction, the orchestra is slowly but surely creating a taste for Ethiopian music and dance among the younger generation.



The Orchestra Ethiopia playing to an audience of University students.

In drama the centre has notable achievements to its credit. It has, by hard work, kindled among the university students an enthusiasm for acting and producing plays. More and more students, including girls, come forward to play roles in the various dramas presented by the centre. The plays are either originals in Amharic or Amharic versions of English or French classical dramas. These young actors also take part in plays broadcast on Radio Ethiopia. Drama has thus taken a deep root among the student community.

RADIO AND TELEVISION

Credit for revitalizing traditional music and dance must also go to the music and drama sections of Radio Ethiopia. They have collected and recorded innumerable folk-songs and adapted them for studio broadcasts. The Ethiopian songs and

the traditional tunes have caught the imagination of the masses. Similarly folk dance programmes on the television are becoming increasingly popular.

It has, however, been realized that these efforts, though laudable, are not enough to sustain an unflagging interest in music, dance and drama among both the artistes and the people. These require to be cultivated from one's childhood. Hence it has been felt that music and dance should form a part of the school and college curricula.

This is possible only when a sufficient number of Ethiopian music instructors are available. They have to be well-trained and capable of collecting, organising, systematising and teaching Ethiopian music through the use of indigenous material but with modern technique of teaching.

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL OF MUSIC

It is with this objective in view that the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts has set up the National School of Music in Addis Ababa. The school aims at training professional musicians and music teachers. At the same time this training attempts to impart social prestige to the profession and create among the people a taste for Ethiopian musical and artistic expressions.

A programme of specialized music education fit for talented Ethiopian students has been systematized. The syllabus provides four years of specialized musical training to students who have successfully completed their Junior High School Education (8th grade). Only those with some musical background or who pass a music aptitude test are given a place in the school.

At present there are 73 students. The school is housed in a modern building. The Government of Bulgaria has given assistance in its construction and has also provided some pianos and other Western musical instruments.

A solid background of academic and general information is provided by including in the syllabus subjects like English, mathematics, Amharic, general science and social studies. The



A class of religious dancing at the National School of Music.

teaching is by the direct method and the master-pupil relationship is emphasised.

To cultivate rhythmic body and muscular movement and also to enable a student to develop a healthy, robust body, great emphasis is laid on creative physical exercises. These are framed and formulated in such a manner that the students imperceptibly acquire a knowledge and practice of both dancing and voice modulation. Held under a competent teacher, these classes lead to discipline both in body and mind and also to teamwork. Ultimately they create a sense of harmony in the would-be musician and dancer.

The syllabus is based on the well-known principle of education—"from the known to the unknown." The students are initiated into music through their own traditional and purely Ethiopian art. They learn to play on the indigenous musical instruments. They are required to make one themselves and are expected by the end of the first year to play on it at least five improvised instrumental numbers.

Gradually they are introduced to other systems and forms of music, chiefly Western. They acquire an awareness of their form, expression and individuality. The ultimate aim is to make the student an expert in both the Ethiopian and Western systems. Once he masters both, he has an advantage of imparting in a subtle and imperceptible manner the nuances of the one to the other.

The school has opened a department of Ethiopian church music to study, re-search and notate the old hymns. The main obstacle to a quicker progress in this department is lack of trained Ethiopian musicologists.

The renaissance in music, dance and drama is thus taking a definite shape in Ethiopia. While the traditional forms are being cherished, modern techniques—dress, stage-management, choreography, orchestration, etc.—are being applied to greater advantage. The time is not far off when the distinctive music and dance of Ethiopia will receive recognition on a wider scale and will count among the first rank cultural expressions of the world.

The recently constructed building of the National School of Music in Addis Ababa.



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