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(Article begins on next page)
Ethiopian Lives and Liturgies at Home in North America

By Kay Kaufman Shelemay

(Photograph, Tabot Ceremony at Kidest Maryam (St. Mary’s) Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Washington, D.C, January 27, 2007)

The curtains to the Holy of Holies open and three priests emerge, each one supporting on his head a cloth- wrapped tabot, a sacred altar slab made from wood or stone replicating the Tablets of the Law. Each priest’s vestments, as seen from the front, is covered by richly embroidered cloth draping down from the tabot. When viewed from the rear, each of the three figures appears as a solid block—similar to the altar chest on which the traditional tabot rests. Turbaned musicians in white robes stand several steps below the three priests, deployed in two lines facing each other, all singing the traditional chant and swaying to the resonant beats of the kebaro, the large kettledrum. Each musician shakes a small metal sistrum in his right hand, while his left anchors a prayer staff extending back over his left shoulder. The musicians are led by Liqa Mezemrat (“master of liturgical chant”) Moges Seyoum, who stands second from the rear in the right-hand line of musicians, a microphone instead of a sistrum in his right hand. Behind him and to the right of the tabot procession, one can just glimpse the bearded face of the Abba, the church elder, flanked by priests, one of whom carries a large ceremonial cross. The tabot procession, shadowed by large ritual umbrellas, proceeds down the center aisle of the sanctuary and then around the circumference of the entire hall. The musicians and choir follow, trailed by members of the congregation who sing, dance, and ululate. When the procession ends, the priests return the tabots to the altar and close the curtains to the Holy of Holies.
If the elaborate rituals of Ethiopia’s venerable Orthodox Church might seem to be relics from a distant land, the 1974 Ethiopian revolution and subsequent migration of millions of Ethiopians abroad has introduced Ethiopian Christianity to all corners of the globe. Among these locales are Washington, D.C, the location at which on January 27, 2007, the procession described and pictured above took place at Kidest Mariam (St. Mary’s) Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The late twentieth-century dispersal of Ethiopians worldwide may strike one as unexpected, given Ethiopia’s longtime status as a global symbol of isolation and stasis. Did not the eighteenth-century writer Edward Gibbon state that, by virtue of their location in the mountainous highland plateau of the African Horn, “...the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten. If Gibbon overstated the historical isolation of Ethiopia, which had in fact for more than a millennium supported an ecclesiastical community in Jerusalem as well as initiated other contacts with the outside world, he would have been even more startled at the pace at which late twentieth and early twenty-first century Ethiopians have become global citizens. Heirs to a Church founded in the fourth century when the Ethiopian court was converted by ship-wrecked Christian missionaries from Tyre, Ethiopian Christians have in recent decades transmitted their esoteric liturgical tradition far and wide.

The Ethiopian Synaxary credits the large repertory of Ethiopian chants to the creativity of a venerable church musician named Saint Yared, who is said to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit during the sixth century reign of Emperor Gebramisqal. (Photograph Saint Yared and Emperor) Performance of this liturgy has remained at the heart of Ethiopian Orthodox religious practice ever since, just as the Church itself expressed the core of Ethiopia’s official national and religious identity for centuries. (Photograph Christmas Ritual at Lalibela) But in 1974, the Ethiopian revolution began and the longstanding hierarchies of Ethiopian religious and social life were turned upside down. With the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the church lost its symbolic, but powerful, head and, with the subsequent nationalization of rural and urban lands shortly afterward, its economic base as well.

As Ethiopia became increasingly chaotic in the mid-1970s, Ethiopians began to flee their country and to seek asylum abroad. Thousands, especially Christians of Amhara ethnic descent, left the country through whatever means were possible; over time, they established new communities worldwide. Among these refugees were an unusually large number of church musicians vital to the establishment of Ethiopian Christian abroad. Here I will introduce two important church musicians, both of whom have helped found Ethiopian churches abroad and remain central to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity’s new global presence.

The first is L. M. Moges Seyoum, mentioned and pictured above, whose peripatetic life was surely one he could never have anticipated or even imagined during his formative years. Born in a rural area of the central Ethiopian highlands in
1949, Moges began studying chant in his local church as a young child. His father was a marigeta (leader of Church musicians) as well as a teacher and scholar of chant. Like many young boys, Moges followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming, along with his two older brothers, a marigeta. At fifteen, Moges left home for Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, where he both continued his secular education in a military high school and achieved at Church schools the status of “master for aqqwaqwam,” the advanced study of Ethiopian liturgical dance and instrumental practice. This was also an era during which the Emperor placed a high priority on sending talented young people abroad to study, and Moges left in 1970 to study theology and law in Greece. When the Ethiopian revolution began in 1974, and violence soon broke out at home, Moges decided to remain abroad. He left Greece only in 1982 when he received asylum in the United States.

Moges Seyoum arrived in Dallas, Texas in the heat of August, 1982. At first, he helped lead the liturgy at a local Russian Orthodox Church, knowledge he had acquired during his sojourn in Greece. But with the Dallas metropolitan area home to an increasingly large number of Ethiopian refugees, Moges quickly helped found the Ethiopian Tewahedo Debre Meheret St. Michael Cathedral in adjacent Garland, Texas. Over the years, he made visits to other Ethiopian churches throughout the U.S. and, in 1989, accepted an invitation from Debre Selam Kidest Mariam Ethiopian Orthodox (St. Mary’s) Church in Washington, D.C. to lead their liturgy.

Today the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area hosts the largest Ethiopian community outside of Ethiopia, estimated at more than a quarter of a million people.

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3 Ethiopians are traditionally called by their first names. I thank L.M. Moges Seyoum for sharing details of his life story and musical activities with me.
and is home to more than a dozen Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. St. Mary’s Church has grown to be one of the largest Ethiopian churches in the diaspora and has a critical mass of priests and liturgical musicians able to insure performance of the liturgy in a form very similar to that of the Ethiopian homeland in the past. There are enormous challenges facing Ethiopian Orthodox Churches seeking to maintain the traditional ritual cycle along with its musical content in diaspora. While the Mass can be chanted by a single priest and is relatively straightforward to perform in the diaspora setting, the musical liturgy celebrating annual holidays requires a critical mass of trained musicians proficient not just in the large and esoteric corpus of chants set in the three distinct musical modes, but in the ability to perform a given chant in multiple and subtly different renditions with varying instrumental accompaniment and dance. Full performances of these lengthy rituals celebrated on annual holidays, Saint’s Days, and other important occasions, ideally require two groups, each with a dozen musicians, standing opposite each other accompanied by drummers playing kettledrums (käbäro).

Even large churches such as St. Mary’s face mounting challenges, especially as their well-educated priests and musicians age: All congregants except the clergy and musicians lack familiarity with the liturgical language, Geez. In diaspora, the many demands of immigrant life render impossible the day-to-day engagement with the traditional liturgy that sustained the tradition among congregations at home in the past and encouraged young boys to pursue a liturgical career. Moges Seyoum is well aware of such challenges to the future of the tradition, which has led him to take action:
“I have to teach... When I was in Ethiopia, it was OK. I didn’t have any problem because a lot of students needed to follow the *zema* (chant), the *aqqwaqwam* (instruments and dance). Now, we don’t have time in this country. You know, everybody works and just the younger generation follows a class in English language.”

In light of the pressing need to transmit the liturgy, since 2000, L.M. Moges has offered a weekly class on Saturday mornings where he teaches a group of men from his church the chants and associated sistrum and dance motions for upcoming rituals. (Photograph Moges Seyoum’s class) In this way, a larger group of participants are incorporated and important liturgical portions are inculcated as common knowledge. L.M. Moges has also published a set of CDs containing the complete chants for the annual cycle of holidays (*Yä’ämuntu Wäräboch*) and plans to record a DVD that will transmit his singing along with accompanying movements: “...The DVD is very important for everybody. So at home you can follow it.”

*(Photograph Moges Seyoum’s CD)*

Moges Seyoum devotes extraordinary time and effort to maintain the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy in Washington, D.C. despite holding down two full-time jobs. A similar situation exists in other American communities with much smaller Ethiopian immigrant populations; at the same time, these smaller communities can contribute to our understanding of the struggle to maintain Ethiopian liturgical and

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4 Interview by author with Moges Seyoum, 2 August 2007.
5 Ibid.
musical practices in these new environments. We can turn to the Ethiopian diaspora community in Boston for additional insights.

There are four Ethiopian Orthodox churches in the Boston metropolitan area serving an Ethiopian community officially estimated at 12,000, but no doubt considerably larger. Among the priests serving these four congregations, only one, Qes (priest) Tsehai Birhanu, is also a highly trained liturgical musician. So extraordinary is Qes Tsehai’s story that I will recount it here in some detail.\(^6\)

Tsehai Birhanu was born in rural Ethiopia. Orphaned by the time he was one, he was raised by his grandmother. There were many clergymen in his family and his great uncle, a monk, trained him in liturgy from his early childhood years. After becoming a marigieta, leader of the musicians, at the famed Qoma Fasilidas monastery in north central Ethiopia, Qes Tsehai received a diploma in Amharic Literature from the Holy Trinity Theological College of the Haile Selassie I University and also became an expert in performing improvised liturgical Geez poetry, qene. Qes Tsehai speaks with great reverence of the exhilaration he experiences from improvising qene: “When one does qene well, it is energizing spiritually.” \(^7\)

In the early 1970s, after studying and teaching Bible and Church music in the Ethiopian capital for several years, Qes Tsehai travelled to Russia, where in 1975 he completed a Master’s degree at Leningrad in Theology. After his return to Ethiopia, he served the church in several important administrative positions, including heading the Church’s Youth Department. In 1982, Qes Tsehai left Ethiopia for the

\(^6\) I am grateful to Tsehai Birhanu for sharing his life story and musical knowledge with me over the last decade.

\(^7\) Interview with Tsehai Birhanu, 12 April 2008.
United States to carry out post-graduate studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, and subsequently received asylum. He held several positions with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the United States over the ensuing years, and in 2001, moved to Boston at the invitation to serve as head priest and administrator of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Debre Selam Saint Michael Church in Mattapan, Massachusetts. In addition to his comprehensive musical, liturgical, and administrative skills and experience, a very special aspect of Qes Tsehai’s background made him particularly well-suited to head congregations in smaller diaspora communities.

While a leading musician in the church in Addis Ababa in the late 1960s, before his departure to Russia, Father Tsehai worked to engage the interest of urban Christian youth in Addis Ababa, who were drifting away from the tradition. He composed strophic, unison hymns in Amharic, the Ethiopian national language. Father Tsehai recalls vividly the process through which he invented a new genre of Ethiopian Christian choral music and issued the first publications of the genre:

Yes, the new style... Let me explain to you. I composed this hymn book, while I was studying ... [at] Holy Trinity College in Addis Ababa. I was assigned by the Bishop to teach Bible and song at every church in Addis Ababa. At that time, [I was] ... creating every new hymn. So I decided to ... make a book of compositions. I sent it to the Bishop. He just put his sign on it to be sent to the Department of Evangelization. They said ... ‘If it is published, it will helpful for the younger generation of the church’ ... And it was published. Soon everybody, even the bishops, the archbishops, the scholars, they had that book... This was before I went
to Russia. After I came back from Russia, they asked me to publish again. And that is why, now here in America, and throughout the world they are using my songs.  

Father Tsehai’s hymns quickly became popular among young people in the Church, and during the revolution, when groups were forbidden to congregate, the songs provided an excuse for young people to gather in the church. The hymns, which came to be known as the “Sunday School Songs,” are today circulated and widely performed in Ethiopia as well as worldwide. Circulated through cassettes, CDs, and oral tradition, the Sunday School Songs have opened a channel through which young people could participate in Ethiopian Christian liturgical performance. (Photograph of Father Tsehai, assisted by members of his choir, officiating at a wedding in Watertown, MA) In smaller Ethiopian diaspora communities such as Boston, the choirs that sing these songs have both helped attract young people to church and provided ballast to traditional liturgical performance.

The hymns also provided the first channel through which women of all ages could enter into the formerly all male world of Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical performance. As Qes Tsehai noted, “Traditionally it is not allowed for women to sing... But now it is coming. Even here, the women are participating with the men. Even in Ethiopia, in the cities they do.” Over time, women began to play the drum and sistra, and to begin to acquire some basic knowledge of the traditional chant. (Photograph of female drummer)

Choirs are today heard at Ethiopian churches throughout the diaspora. At large churches, like St. Mary’s in Washington, D.C. the choirs are large and co-

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8 Interview by author with Tsehai Birhanu, 17 September 2010 and 12 April, 2008.  
9 Ibid.
educational. (Photograph of St. Mary’s choir) At smaller churches in communities such as Boston, choirs tend to be comprised mainly of women and are small.

(Photograph of St. Michael’s Choir) The Amharic hymn texts are more accessible to the congregation than are the traditional chant texts in Geez, and many of the songs invoke the Virgin Mary. One of Qes Tsehai’s Sunday School songs, “A Voice Cried Out in the Wilderness,” is sung for the Ethiopian New Year in September:

Verse One:
A voice cried out in the wilderness
Saying prepare the way of God.
If John told us his witness, let our heart be straight for our God.
Chorus: O Virgin Mary, bless for us our New Year.

Verse Two:
Every mountain and hill shall be made low; every valley shall be lifted up.
Unless the mountain is not straight, there is no way to pass.
Let us prepare the way for our God; it will be for our benefit in the world to come.
Chorus: O Virgin Mary....

Verse Three:
Let us avoid every jealousy from our hearts and inherit righteousness and compassion. We have received the Holy Communion to inherit your kingdom.
Chorus: O Virgin Mary...

Verse Four:
He who has two cloths, let him give one to anyone who has none. Please sanctify us; not to be perished with our sin.
Chorus: O Virgin Mary...

Thus the perpetuation of musical and liturgical traditions from the Ethiopian homeland presents a great challenge in diaspora, with only the largest churches within major metropolitan areas having the musical leadership let alone a sufficient number of musicians to mount these rituals in full. Ritual performance in most Ethiopian American churches necessitates clear evidence of compromise in the face of constraints on personnel and time.
Like Qes Tsehai, L.M. Moges also undertakes activities that are overtly innovative in the musical domain. He arranges liturgical portions to perform on special occasions, and in October, 2007, arranged the chant, instrumental accompaniment, and dance for a presentation during the 69th National Folk Festival, at Richmond, Virginia. While most of his activities are in service of sustaining longstanding traditions, L.M. Moges devotes a great deal of time and attention to re-shaping these materials for performance in new diaspora settings. He understands that the Ethiopian church needs to reach out to a broader public: “In the American society, we have a plan, you know, to show everywhere. Not in our church only. We have to explain for people and for, example, universities... There is the game of promotion.” 10

Tsehai Birhanu and Moges Seyoum have expended decades of effort to re-establish the Ethiopian musical liturgy within the United States. Both have served their communities in exceptional ways and have received public acknowledgment. Qes Tsehai has received certificates of recognition from the U.S. Congress, from the Massachusetts State Senate, and two Boston-area city councils. (Photograph Tsehai Birhanu) In September 2008, L.M. Moges received the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. The day following a ceremony on Capital Hill and a festive banquet in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, a celebratory concert for fellowship winners was mounted at the Strathmore Music Center in suburban Maryland. As part of an awards program that featured a Korean dancer, Brazilian capoeira master and his troupe, a New Orleans jazz clarinetist and

10 Interview by author with Moges Seyoum, 2 August 2007.
ensemble, and Oneida Indian hymn singers, L.M. Moges and ten musicians from St. Mary’s Church performed Ethiopian chants on the Strathmore stage. But perhaps the most extraordinary moment followed the curtain calls, during which each fellowship winner took a final bow while the jazz band played choruses of “When the Saints Come Marching In.” When all the awardees had congregated on stage, and the band continued to play, the capoeira troupe suddenly and spontaneously began to perform traditional capoeira moves to the music; a few of the young men approached the older Oneida women and invited them to dance. The Korean dancer began dancing her own elegant style in the middle of the stage, and several Oneida couples started to dance the two-step. On the right hand side of the stage, the Ethiopians, led by Moges Seyoum, stood in full liturgical dress. They looked at each other in amazement, and then slowly joined in, swaying to the music and reinforcing the jazz band’s beat with the boom of the kebaros and the tinkle of the sistra. Ethiopian lives and liturgies were on this evening clearly very much at home in North America.

Images of worship and musical performance at Re’ese Adbarat Debre Selam Kidest Mariam Church can be viewed on the church website at http://www.dskmariam.org/en/multimedia.html