



# Performing the Humanities at the Ethiopian Millennium

## Citation

Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. 2009. Performing the humanities at the Ethiopian Millennium. *Daedalus* 138(1): 105-109.

## Published Version

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/daed.2009.138.1.105>

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3292405>

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Kay Kaufman Shelemay

*Performing the humanities at  
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The performing arts, sometimes regarded as separate from the humanities, in fact bring the humanities to life.<sup>1</sup> Through performance, the written word travels from the mind's eye to the lips and to the ear; painting and sculpture suddenly spring into motion; and music takes wing from the imagination or from a score to fill all available sonic space. A moment of performance, at its best, gathers together various domains of human expression, a sensory experience able at once to narrate history, enact social relationships, symbolize systems of belief, and generate feelings of fear, comfort, or joy. While the humanities are generally conceived as the disciplines spanning fields of knowledge such as literature or philosophy, they si-

multaneously provide the basis for much of human behavior and patterns of interaction expressed through the arts. Music and its performance, in particular, convey these multiple domains of knowledge as well as provide "audible entanglements," shaping both individual imaginations and broader communities.<sup>2</sup>

Performance tells us less about procedures than it does about processes. Ideally, performance incorporates spectators

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1 The American Academy of Arts and Sciences's Humanities Indicators Prototype expressly excludes the arts from the scope of the humanities. See Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanities-indicators.org/statement.aspx>: "Scope of the 'Humanities' for Purposes of the Humanities Indicators" (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). My essay engages and takes occasional issue with that exclusion. I acknowledge the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for fellowships that supported a leave year during which this essay was written. I thank Ellen T. Harris, Steven Kaplan, and Daniel Mekonnen for helpful comments.

2 Jocelyne Guilbault, "Audible Entanglements: Nation and Diasporas in Trinidad's Calypso Music Scene," *Small Axe* (17) (2005): 40.

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and performers alike, reaching out from the present to extend both into the past and the future, reaffirming existing collectivities and creating new ones. Take, for instance, the September 8, 2007, performance in Washington, D.C., to mark the advent of the Ethiopian Millennium.<sup>3</sup> More than five thousand D.C.-area Ethiopian immigrants<sup>4</sup> turned out for the concert, which provided a bracketed moment for members of the Ethiopian diaspora community in D.C. to reaffirm their identities as Ethiopians, in solidarity with (but also in opposition to) others dispersed around the world. That Ethiopians in the homeland marked the passage of the millennium with a celebratory concert, too, provides fascinating data for comparative studies, discussed briefly in my conclusion.

The D.C. concert was divided into three parts: sacred music (*zema*) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; cultural music (*bahālawi*), a category subsuming traditional secular instrumental, vocal, and dance styles; and modern or popular

music (*zāmānawi*), incorporating aspects of international musical genres and instrumental resources that have entered into Ethiopian musical experience as part of twentieth-century transnational discourse and cultural circulation. Each section reinforced the significance of musical styles named and conceived as separate musical categories derived from the Ethiopian homeland. But the concert didn't simply map an idealized landscape of musical styles from the past or evoke nostalgia for the Ethiopian homeland. Through performance it brought to life the humanistic domains of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, which continue to engage diaspora Ethiopians. The concert allowed the Ethiopian American community to acknowledge the complexities of its diaspora identity through performances by some of its most talented musicians, more than 150 of whom are permanent residents of Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup>

To start the event, a group of ten D.C. church musicians led a forty-minute performance of a section of the Ethiopian Orthodox holiday ritual music. In traditional white turbans and flowing vestments, they sang their chants in the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language, Ge'ez, accompanied by tinkling of small, metal sistra, the swaying of prayer staffs, the beating of two large kettledrums, and graceful dancing. At times, the high, piercing ululation by hundreds of women seemed to weld

<sup>5</sup> I am currently building a collection of oral histories recorded with Washington, D.C., musicians of Ethiopian descent to be deposited, along with recordings and video footage of their performances, in the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I am grateful to the John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress for their generous support of this project.

<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian calendar, based on a Roman Julian model, runs approximately seven-and-a-half years behind the Gregorian calendar adopted in the West. Thus the Ethiopian millennial year began in early September 2007, both in Ethiopia and in its diaspora.

<sup>4</sup> Members of the second largest community of late-twentieth-century African arrivals to the United States, Ethiopian refugees and emigrants began to leave their homeland in large numbers in 1974, following the overthrow of the Ethiopian monarchy and subsequent revolution. Nearly a million Ethiopians are estimated today to live in diaspora, with the majority settled in the United States. The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is the unofficial center of Ethiopian life in North America. See Solomon Addis Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants and Refugees in America, 1900–2000: Patterns of Migration, Survival, and Adjustment* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2007).

this concert audience into a congregation. The majority of Ethiopians living in diaspora are Orthodox Christians, propelled into exile when their historic church lost its preeminent position, as the emperor at its head was deposed and Orthodox Christianity forfeited its status as the official religion of the state. The reestablishment of their churches in the United States and the continued performance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian liturgy at once lend life and renewed vigor to a venerable belief system and the institutions that sustain it.

An ensemble of four traditional Ethiopian minstrels, two playing six-stringed lyres (*krar*) and two playing one-stringed bowed lutes (*mas̄nqo*), began the second section of the concert with two hours of cultural music. The lyres and lutes sounded traditional, pentatonic Ethiopian melodies in unison, with individual instruments ornamenting the tunes in slightly different ways, giving rise at moments to an intense heterophony. A fifth musician tapped traditional rhythmic patterns on an electronic drum machine. This mainly traditional instrumental ensemble accompanied several well-known Ethiopian cultural singers, who sang in Ethiopian vernacular languages, in alternation with lively performances of Ethiopian dances by a troupe of three men and three women who changed costumes after each number to represent various important Ethiopian ethnic communities.

Competing ethnic identities, which always simmered beneath the surface of pre-revolutionary Ethiopian national life, have become a looming political issue in Ethiopia since the 1974 revolution and an even more sensitive subject under the post-1991 federalist policies. The Ethiopian diaspora, which incorporates Ethiopian immigrants from a range of ethnic backgrounds, continues to en-

gage with its various ethnic and regional heritages on multiple levels: ethnicity is at once a marker of identity as well as a source of dissent within intense diasporic political processes. The concert announcer in D.C. underscored the strong political valence of cultural musics performed on the millennial occasion by remarking at one point during the show, somewhat ironically, "This will go on until we get through all the ethnic groups."

After a long intermission, during which a large, raised bandstand was erected center stage for the third part of the show, a brass-dominated jazz band of the sort that has accompanied popular music in Ethiopia since the late 1960s took its place.<sup>6</sup> As the band sounded the well-known instrumental introduction to "Tizita," the most popular Ethiopian musical symbol of nostalgia and longing for the homeland, the beloved Ethiopian singer Mahmoud Ahmed suddenly appeared and began singing. Mahmoud,<sup>7</sup> one of the only Ethiopian musicians not resident in the D.C. area to perform at the concert, sang several sets of popular music. He bounded around the bandstand, dressed in Ethiopian traditional white jodhpurs and tunic, topped by a Western-style vest prominently bordered in the colors of the Ethiopian flag. If Mahmoud's dress signaled a strong connection with the Ethiopian nation, his songs about the homeland, as well as rousing dance pieces accompanied by syncopated, Ethiopian rhythms,

6 For an overview of the impact of modernization and international musical trends in twentieth-century Ethiopia, see Francis Falceto, *A Pictorial History of Modern Ethiopian Music* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2001).

7 Ethiopians are traditionally known and referred to by their first names.

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completed his transformation into a national symbol. While the cultural musicians in the second section of the concert had performed Ethiopian ethnic identities, it was made clear that Mahmoud Ahmed was performing the Ethiopian nation in this third and final section.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the three sections of the millennial concert was carefully delineated from the others across all expressive domains; each incorporated different performers, distinctive musical repertoires, contrasting costumes, and distinctive styles of staging and choreography. Yet taken together, the overall progression from sacred Christian music to the panoply of secular ethnic styles to music and dance from the popular domain brought to life the Ethiopian humanities. In the course of the evening, the performance highlighted realms of distinctive Ethiopian religious practice; the music, poetics, folklore, and art that have arisen over the course of Ethiopian history; and the acknowledgment of present realities in exile, of life today lived a great distance from the historical motherland.

This millennial concert, of course, spoke loudest to an immigrant generation, which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, remains closely wedded to the musical and cultural past, drawing their shared, formative musical experiences from Ethiopia. But make no mistake: this concert was engaged equally with the present.

8 Among the recent ethnomusicological studies that have explored music's deep engagement with political life, see Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Jocelyne Guilbault, *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Many diaspora Ethiopian Orthodox Christians continue to pray in churches that sustain their traditional liturgy. Those who can afford to do so hire minstrels to sing, play, and accompany dancing at family weddings and celebrations, giving rise to an active circuit of musicians who travel to perform for members of Ethiopian communities from Atlanta to Los Angeles to Seattle. Even the diaspora's younger generation, many American born, attends public concerts mounted to showcase Ethiopian popular singers in the larger Ethiopian diaspora urban centers. These events, like Mahmoud Ahmed's section of the Millennium concert, feature a large dance floor, insuring that the concert turns into a dance party.

Performance helps bridge challenging transitions at times of dispersal, conveying memories of the past while also providing a communication medium to enact and celebrate multiple aspects of everyday life. In such moments, performance has the capability to embody ideas and sentiments of importance to individual and collective well-being. The Washington, D.C., Ethiopian Millennium concert just described could *only* have taken place in the Ethiopian diaspora in America; its size, scope, and range of contents emerged from distinctively Ethiopian American sensibilities at the 2007 millennial moment. Indeed the major Millennium concert held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was a very different affair, featuring the Black Eyed Peas, a multiethnic group from Los Angeles with musical roots in hip-hop.<sup>9</sup> A second Addis Ababa mil-

9 See "Peas at Ethiopia's 3rd Millennium Bash," AP Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 7, 2007; available at <http://cbs5.com/entertainment/Ethiopia.s.Coptic.2.459395.html>.

lennial concert a few weeks later presented Beyoncé Knowles, the American pop star of Louisiana Creole and African American descent.

At the dawn of their new millennium, Ethiopian Americans sustain dual identities and sensibilities. The Millennium concert provided a moment in which they could come together and perform their heterogeneous musical world, defining their diaspora experience through Ethiopian modes of performance at the same time. That the millennial moment literally performed the struggle to be Ethiopian in America, in domains ranging from religion to ethnicity to politics, sheds light on the power of performance and its role in bringing the humanities to life.

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