Mendicancy and Oral Poetry in Ethiopia: The Case of the Hamina
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Abstract
The term Hamina refers to a group of people within the Amhara ethnic community, representing a kind of a “caste” due to their way of life with mendicancy. The Haminas who primarily reside in rural central and northern Ethiopia are named differently in the various regions. Among others Abba Wuddie, Abba Gonda, Abba Ayireba and Lalibela are some of these names by which the Hamina are identified. Ever since, this relatively small group of people faces neglect and exclusion by and from Amhara community members of better status and position, principally due to their ancestral background and traditional way of life. According to stories, the forefathers of the Hamina used to have suffered from leprosy so that their descendants inherited their right to practice mendicancy by moving from village to village and from house to house. This orally transmitted mendicancy bases poetic lyrics with praising and blessing parts. The Hamina have always believed that this singing tradition would protect them and their families from being imposed by leprosy.

The Hamina are afraid to show their faces and to be recognized during the daytime so that the singing is customarily carried out prior to sunrise. This livelihood has been the major means of income to date, since the Hamina receive all kinds of presents (clothes, food, and money) from charitable people. My paper will briefly discuss the tradition of mendicancy among this minority group. Parallel to detailed music analysis, it will also consider historical, social, cultural and economic aspects of the Hamina in past and present.

Keywords: Ethiopia, East Africa, Hamina, Amina, Debrahom Dekkama Abba Nezniz, Abba Woude, Abba Ayireba, Abba Gonda, Lalibela, leprosy, song-mendicancy, poetry, begging, minority, Amhara, Tigray, Oromo
**General Overview**: Human societies exist in a world of material objects, institutional rules and symbols with meanings they have created according to their social, cultural, political, economic and environmental circumstances.

In Ethiopia, certain groups or subgroups of people are symbolized as castes, simply because they are engaged in certain types of jobs/professions to make their living, i.e. working as blacksmiths, tanners, hunters, fishers, masons, potters, iron smelters, woodworkers, weavers, exorcists and sorcerers. Other people’s groups whose occupation is fully or partially related with music and making music and who may be categorized as occupational minorities specifically in central and northern highland Ethiopia are the **Debtera**, **Azmari**, **Asleqash** and the **Hamina** whose music culture this paper aims to consider along with their socio-cultural, socio-religious and historical backgrounds (see also Gelaye 2007: 18).

Very little has been written about the **Hamina** and their livelihood as song-mendicants in general and about the rich poetic style applied in their songs in particular. Based on materials I collected during my fieldwork in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2005, my paper will dwell on the singing (begging) practice of this group. The audiovisual recordings which I compiled in relation to this particular topic contain songs performed by two female **Hamina**, who provided me with first hand information about their livelihood and singing tradition through interviews and questionnaires.

The **Hamina**: The term **Hamina** refers to a social group believed to be afflicted with leprosy, primarily residing in the Christian Orthodox dominated central and northern highland regions of Ethiopia, representing one of the very distinct minority groups of the country. This vast geographic region covers today’s Amhara and Tigray as well as parts of the Oromiya Administrative Regions of central and southern Ethiopia. The latter specifically refers to the former province of Shewa including the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Besides, it is believed that some **Hamina** groups also reside in neighboring Eritrea. After the introduction of modern medicine to Ethiopia around the beginning of the twentieth century, some **Hamina** groups started to migrate to

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1 Tibetu (1995: 70) classifies these people’s groups as “occupational minorities”. Although these craftspeople contribute immensely to the economic wealth of their communities as service-rendering entities, the special skills they possess, unfortunately, led to their discrimination by the rest of society. In fact, other ethnic minorities in Ethiopia, have also been discriminated against and disregarded in the past, for reasons related to gender, ethnicity, and even religion. For instance, the **Bete Israel** (Falasha) who primarily inhabit the region of Gonder, faced segregation and isolation due to their Judaic religion. At times they were even forced to convert to Christianity (1995: 69 and 198). Furthermore, the Falasha community was also deprived of land and/or livestock ownership. So because of discrimination and loss of land and animals, the Falasha were forced to take up a craft specialty as potters and thus became essentially a caste, like other craft specialist groups.

2 Apart from the versatile role of the **Debtera** within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as “musicians and liturgical practitioners”, quite a large number of them are magicians and healers (Shelemay 1992: 243)

3 The traditional **Azmari** (the word is applied to both male and female musicians) are wandering musicians and entertainers. Ever since **Azmaris** predominantly led a “nomadic” life moving from place to place and entertaining their listeners of every social stratum, very often armed with the one-stringed spike fiddle, **Masinqo**.

4 The unique profession of the **Asleqash** (usually women’s occupation) refers to vocalists who are specialized in mourning ceremonies, specifically funeral services. Among the **Amhara** for instance these professionals offer a wide range of traditional mourning songs.
other regions in search of a cure for the disease. Consequently, today the Hamina are additionally found scattered in Southern as well as in eastern Ethiopia, in the city of Harar (figure 1). The first modern leprosy treatment center was established in 1901 in Harar, in the South-Eastern part Ethiopia followed by the Akaki-Leprosarium, southeast of Addis Ababa, in 1934 (see also Pankhurst 1984: 71-72). In the course of time, other health, rehabilitation and training centers for leprosy patients were established, among them the All African Leprosy Rehabilitation and Training Center (acronym ALERT) later on renamed as All Africa Leprosy, Tuberculosis and Rehabilitation Training Centre. Leprosy is still endemic in all the above mentioned regions.

The Hamina are addressed with different names in the country’s regions. In towns, cities and villages of Tigray, Gonder, Goğam, Wollo, the capital Addis Ababa and adjacent areas, they are called ወምና Hamin, ከምና Hamina, እምና Amina, የወንሞም Debrahom, ወንጆ Dekkama, ከናናና Abba Nezniz, ከወወ Abba Woude, ከወወ Abba Ayireba, ከጋ Abba Gonda and ከለ ም ም Lalibela. The linguistic origins of these designations are to a large extent unknown, except the name Lalibela which is linked with the Christian Orthodox Saint ጎብረ መስቀል Gebre Meskel meaning ‘servant of the cross’ (later on given the name Lalibela 1181-1221 A.D.) who ruled Ethiopia during the thirteenth century. This name consists of the words “lal-be-la” in the local language meaning “the bees recognized his might”, because the latter king, while he was a baby, was constantly visited by a circle of bees that never harmed him. Written sources indicate that King Lalibela sympathized with these singer-mendicants and ordered that they be organized into guilds, work and get charity from him (Pankhurst 1984: 61). The kindness of this king demon-

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strated in such a manner is believed to be a major reason why the Hamina are linked with his name. Consequently starting from around the middle of the twentieth century, this very name began to be used as an identification of the Hamina and analogous social groups, especially in quite a number of regions of the former Shewa province including Addis Ababa. However, the application of the name has become increasingly controversial in contemporary Ethiopia. Today the city called Lalibela, historically Roha, has been named after the devout king. This place is considered one of the country’s holiest locations with its altogether 11 monolithic churches attributed to king Lalibela. These rock-hewn churches, each chiseled out of a single rock, have caught the attraction of many tourists and are registered as “the eighth wonder of the world”. Hence, the town of Lalibela is a center of pilgrimage for most of the country’s Christians including the inhabitants of this monastic town. For that matter many Ethiopians, particularly the residents of Lalibela, whose city is carved from legend and from the Christian faith, are strictly against the use of the term Lalibela to designate the Hamina. In fact, this name is used to degrade or defame a person. In order to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations caused by the term Lalibela in relation with the Hamina, various government institutions (mainly cultural/media institutions) and concerned professionals are trying to find solutions, the major step being officially prohibiting the name from misuse. (see also Mesele 1993: 2017).

On the other hand, derogatory names such as Abba Ayireba meaning ‘good-for-nothing or value-less’ as well as Abba Gonda, Abba Nezniz reveal the disregard for this people’s group, generally indicating failure and laziness. On the contrary, the designation Abba Woude = ‘my dear or my beloved,’ is used in some localities of Wollo (Mesele 2010: 64). According to Worku (2008/Interview) there is a poem referring to the latter term: እላባ ዋወድሃል ከስ, Abba Woude, Yiwedihal Hode meaning ‘Abba Woude, my heart likes (loves) you’. All these appellations and their historical backgrounds require thorough investigations.

Mesele (2008) notes that the term Hamina is mainly applied by a wide range of ethnic communities residing in all three administrative regions mentioned above. I, therefore, will make use of this designation in my discussion.

**History:** The history of the Hamina in Ethiopia is linked with the record of leprosy [mycobacterium lepare and mycobacterium lepromatosis]. Myth-based information indicates that the ancestors of the Hamina were inflicted by this skin disease, believed to be transmitted through physical contact, the main reason that led to the isolation of leprosy-sufferers from society. The disease is called ቁምጥና “Quntina” in Amharic.

Leprosy has ever since tormented human populations all over the world leaving the patients to suffer both physically and mentally. Unlike other epidemic diseases such as cholera and smallpox which usually break out in densely-populated areas, the bacteria of leprosy are found anywhere. Even though human beings are prime victims of microbes, leprosy-causing bacteria that leave the skin infected, make body parts and joints numb and leave fingers, toe nails and nose disfigured and/or deformed, are believed to exist in animals and even in soil.

Leprosy had and still has a disastrous impact on socio-cultural life of its victims in general and their relationship with non-affected members of their community/communities in particular. Historical accounts reveal to what extent this disease was comprehended and simultaneously misinterpreted in societies, among others, the belief by many that it is a hereditary disease. In addition, leprosy was considered as sign of punishment, rather than a disease, leading to the fact that those affected by leprosy have been labeled as sinners and impure.
In his article entitled “The History of Leprosy in Ethiopia up to 1935”, Pankhurst (1968) briefly explains this disease along with its social, cultural and religious impacts on both the victims of leprosy and their respective societies in the course of the country’s history. His comprehensive references are primarily based on Ethiopian literatures as well as written source materials provided by foreign visitors to Ethiopia, travelers, missionaries, diplomats and individual researchers among them physicians who made observations at different periods and in various parts of Ethiopia primarily from the sixteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth century. In this relationship, Pankhurst gives details about the different approaches or attitudes as well as actions and reaction of successive Ethiopian emperors, rulers, governors etc. and their societies towards lepers and leper-mendicants. He further notes about their diverse official duties and roles, among others at war, in court, in the army and generally in day to day public life which reveals the extent of their generous treatment by society enjoying an unrestricted privileges at certain times. Pankhurst’s details furthermore refers to the Ethiopian traditional code “the የፍትሐ: ከገስት: Fetha Nagast (Law of the Kings), which took an essentially empirical and humanitarian view of the disabling disease” (ebd. 61). On the other hand though, leprosy sufferers have - to a great extent - faced physical isolation from the rest of society. In some regions they were at times even prohibited to beg by day, a situation which consequently forced them to create companies of beggars and move at night from house to house to request for alms. The reason that Hamina are generally described as pre-dawn singers may directly be related to this and numerous other factors.

In the Christian world leprosy is described through the biblical history as a skin disease. Consequently, references in the Old and New Testaments expose quite a lot about the notion of this disease. The Old Testament describes leprosy as a form of bodily and spiritual pollution and/or permanent uncleanness, thus, calling for isolation of a leper from society. In only very few cases, exceptions were made to relieve the patient from harsh punishments. “And he shall burn the garment, whether the warp or the woof, in woollen or in linen, or anything of skin, wherein the plague is: for it is a fretting leprosy; it shall be burnt in the fire (Leviticus 13:52).” Contrary to the Old Testament, the New Testament regularly refers to this disease in conjunction with the healing miracles of Jesus Christ: “When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Matthew 8:14).

We may now take a closer look at the history of the Hamina from the socio-religious perspective of the Christian population in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church relates this disease with God’s will to test one’s faith. Mesele (2010: 66-67) for instance notes this: “According to the

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8 Supplementary information may be found in Matthew 26:6; Mark. 1:40-45, 14:3; Luke 5:12-14; Psalm 133:2. Additional information may be accessed in Pankhurst’s (1984: 59-61) accounts concerning the conception of leprosy in the biblical chronicle in general and in the history Ethiopian Christian religion in particular as a result of his comprehensive studies of Ethiopian manuscripts, paintings, oral history and legends.
ordinance of the Church, the mortification of the body is generally perceived as a sign of the impurity of the soul and corporeal sufferings as a means to cleanse that impurity. Given that everyone living in this world is impure or 'leprous in soul' (or pseudo lepers), corporeal sufferings befall chosen people whose devotion and patience God wants to test as a 'leper in body'. Thus, it is believed that the latter will be rewarded in the hereafter. Those who missed the chance being 'lepers in body' will also be rewarded in the hereafter based on their amount of compassion and charity to the body lepers. Therefore, religious compassion and alms bridge the corporeal lepers to the soul lepers in the Orthodox Christian tradition”.

Pankhurst (1984: 63) furthermore states that even though lepers in Ethiopia suffered under stigmatization and isolation, they were generally tolerated and “never regarded as objects of horror, but rather of pity, even of sympathy, among Christians who remembered Christ’s treatment of them” (see also Demozu 2003: 68). In addition to the negative attitude Christian Ethiopians and the rest of the society have towards lepers, these groups of people were at times stigmatized by those members of their own family who were not affected by the disease. The extent of stigmas, along with ‘mistreatments and neglects,’ may, of course, vary from place to place depending on the overall social and cultural circumstances of society. Nonetheless, the fact that the Hamina have experienced centuries of neglect magnifies their low and inferior social status; it has negatively impacted their attitude towards people outside of their own cluster. This may be one of the main reasons for these groups of people to strictly practice endogamy and for considering this very practice as an inherent part of their traditional culture. Although there exist numerous endogamous societies in Ethiopia, the endogamy practiced by the Hamina, namely marriage bonds exclusively arranged within their own social group, has become defined as a distinct feature and identity, particularly a way of demonstrating their opposition to ‘those who neglect or degrade them.’ In this regard, mention must be made that Hamina matrimony customarily used to take place during a so-called Tezkar, an Orthodox Christian mourning ceremony held in remembrance of a deceased person on the fortieth or eightieth day called እርብ Arba or አምንያ Semaninya after day of the burial (see also Mesele 1993: 2012-3).

In an interview I conducted with Mebrat Mitiku and Yekitinesh Shimelis in 2005, the two women confirmed to me the strict rule of endogamy which is still today practiced among contemporary Hamina groups. What surprised me most about what my interviewees said was not this austere practice of endogamy, but their conception with regard to the disparate status of people in society which they classify as 'people with good manners' unlike their own status. They label this category of people as ወላита “Chewa,” an Amharic word used to describe people of better class, status, decency and good manners. They further pointed out that the Hamina carefully search for their perfect matches and tie the knot with only those with similar status and backgrounds. This clearly implies to all the inconveniences the Hamina have been facing, just because of their ancestral backgrounds and lifestyle (Mesele 2010: 64; Pankhurst 1984: 59-60). Do these people’s groups still believe and accept being impure or unclean, valueless and insignificant? Do they indeed agree with an inferior social status? I must admit that I was not able to get a direct and convincing response from my informants.

Mesele (2010: 63) notes that the centuries-old pervasiveness of leprosy, its mystifying pathology and its damaging impacts on human mind and body, have led to the fact that the disease kept on maintaining a special place throughout the course of Ethiopian history and its traditions. One can imagine how this resulted in the emergence and development of the singing/begging tradition of the Hamina. There is a clear indication that Hamina ancestors, particularly those who
were actually affected by leprosy and consequently segregated, must have been in a desperate situation and took song mendicancy as their major occupation to merely assure their survival by earning their bread through singing-begging.

Members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community always take special attention not to offend and ignore any beggars including leper-mendicants, since otherwise their Christian faith would be mistrusted, if they refuse or deny the plea for alms (Pankhurst 1984: 64). Taking the religious history of almsgiving very seriously, people accomplish this duty to adorn and beautify their mind and to clean their soul during their earthly life. Almsgiving among Ethiopians is for that reason believed to be imperative, since otherwise the curse of a Hamina would indeed take place on that person or on his family (Mesele 1993: 2033-36). Conversely, the blessing of a Hamina after receiving alms is likewise considered as very important.

The Practice of Song-Mendicancy: From a genealogical point of view, Hamina descendants firmly believe they possess an inherited right of song-mendicancy, which they consider as their ‘social and traditional duty.’

Customarily, the Hamina have been and - to a large extent - still today are pre-dawn singers at least in rural areas of Ethiopia. In order to avoid recognition, they wrap their face with cloth. “In any village on the plateau you may hear the songs of the Lalibeloch in the hour before sunrise. If you were abroad you would see shadowy figures grouped at the gateways through the fences that surround every Ethiopian home, especially round the gateways of the rich. Their faces are almost completely wrapped in the long traditional cotton Shemma or shawl leaving only their eyes exposed. As dawn is about to leap up with tropical abruptness, these Lalibeloch slip away into the shadows, unrecognized. At the same hour the next night they reappear….and always before they leave they receive the alms: food or money that are sent out to them by the master of the house” (Powne 1968: 69)

I asked my Hamina informants whether they believe to possess an inherited right of song-mendicancy and whether they are afraid to be struck by leprosy, if they would not sing. They stated: “If we do not move from place to place and from door to door singing our songs; if we don’t suffer under the chilly/frosty nights and under attacking and barking dogs, we will definitely be struck by leprosy. For that matter, every Hamina is obliged to carry out this ritual at least once a year in order to avoid the infliction with the disease. This is what our ancestors have done for ages and we are responsible to maintain this tradition and also hand it over to our children and grandchildren” (see also Shelemay 1982: 128; Mesele 1993: 2012; Demozu 2003: 32; Gelaye 2007: 19; Patterns of Progress 1968: 39).

Leprosy is in the present day to a large extent under control in Ethiopia and leprosy-patients are getting better access to medical treatments at rehabilitation centers and hospitals. In this regard, in my opinion, it is doubtful that The Hamina are still afraid to be affected by leprosy if they would stop singing/begging simultaneously ignoring the myth. So could this argument of my informants merely be a justification for this nowadays increasingly ‘abandoned’ livelihood? This refers specifically to those who are not inflicted and disabled by the disease. I believe that this attitude indicates unproductiveness and laziness. Mention must be made that not all Hamina are automatically mendicants and not all mendicants are Hamina (Powne 1968:69 and Shelemay 1982: 128). In other words, it has become difficult today to distinguish members of this group of people from others who are likewise song-mendicants.

How often Hamina practice song-mendicancy, differs from place to place and also from one social group to the other. In general two types of song-mendicants may be distinguished. The first group refers to seasonal vagrants whose main occupation is based on agriculture and cattle
breeding. These groups carry out their mendicant tradition once or twice a year, mainly after the harvest season (Mesele 1993: 2012). It belongs to a common practice that many of them move far away from their native villages, to avoid identification by members of society within their village. The second category of Hamina mendicants refers to permanent vagrants with no other occupation as well as no other ambition to make their living. Thus, they are continuously on the move throughout the year singing and soliciting for alms.

Hamina song-mendicancy is nowadays not only observed in rural areas, but also in urban towns and cities such as Addis Ababa where these groups of peoples frequently take temporary shelters by renting space in the area known as Merkato, western part of the city.

It so happened that, while I was in the midst of conducting my ethnomusicological fieldwork in Addis Ababa in 2005, where I had the opportunity to come across the two female Hamina, Mebrat and Yekitinesh (figure 2), who, along with other members of their community, were on a brief stay in the city deliberately to practice song-mendicancy.

![Figure 2: Mebrat Mitiku (left) and Yekitinesh Shimelis (right) Photo: T. Teffera, 16.03.2005, Addis Ababa](image)

The number of the Hamina migrating into Addis Ababa and other major Ethiopian towns for the mere purpose of practicing mendicancy has registered a constant increase in the past decades. This can be related to the ever rising migration from rural area to urban centres, a common phenomenon in a third-world country like Ethiopia. Such uninterrupted migrations, in search of better life have caused socio-economic problems on the existing rapid population growth, in addition to the already high number of homeless urban dwellers who are less fortunate and
forced to become vagrants due to their poor living conditions. It is my assumption that this situation might have spurred the Hamina to join these people and look for income-generating opportunities through begging by staying living in cities either temporarily or permanently. In earlier periods, when the Hamina exclusively performed pre-dawn songs covering their faces to disguise their identity, there was principally no access to carry out fieldwork on the spot. Hence, Powne’s (1968: 69) justifiable concern in accordance with this matter is understandable, since by the time he was conducting his research in Ethiopia in the 1960s it was indeed hardly possible to discover the Hamina (he uses the term Lalibela) who would perform their songs during the daytime. Powne (1968: 71-72) points out the following: “Nobody knows who the Lalibeloch are. You may see a severely afflicted leper in the street, but you do not know if he was one of the singers at your door that morning. In the daytime all the Lalibeloch except the obvious sufferers take their place as ordinary members of the village, tilling or working at some trade. They do not reveal themselves as the dawn singers and probably no one wants to identify these singers. But nobody sings their songs except the Lalibeloch themselves, and you will not find a Lalibela song included in any program of folk music. Their songs go unrecorded, tainted by the disease which taints so many of them; but passed on from generation to generation in this unique brotherhood. …Doubtlessly the songs of the Lalibeloch would reward the student with a wealth of material if it were possible to find the Lalibeloch and talk to them; but they go unknown and unseen except for their enveloping clothes. One could hide a microphone by the gate and catch some of their songs; to do more than that, to persuade them to reveal their secrets, would require patient work to obtain their confidence”.

Indeed, Hamina songs are not performed by others outside their own cluster. However, we should not fail to notice that these songs are primarily related to their historical and hereditary backgrounds as well as their abandoned custom of “begging for alms.” So due to the unique function of these songs and their message, no one would dare to perform same on other folk/traditional music events, since they would not fit any other occasions. Furthermore, the concern in reference to the inaccessibility of Hamina songs for scholarly studies and preservation is quite understandable. Shelemay (1982: 128) similarly mentions the difficulty of finding Hamina (she also uses the term Lalibela) when she states that “….despite several attempts, I was unable to contact Lalibeloc when I lived in Ethiopia from 1973-1975. In 1975, I obtained a single tape of their music from the archives of Radio Voice of the Gospel. This performance, slightly over six minutes in length, was not documented nor credited to a collector. In 1977, during a six week visit to Ethiopia, I was able to meet Lalibeloc…interviewed a couple and taped approximately twenty minutes of their music.”

Compared to the situation in previous decades, the access to the Hamina and their music is much easier nowadays. Unlike their pre-dawn singing custom that, most probably still exists in rural Ethiopia, in big cities like Addis Ababa, the Hamina nowadays are no more singing in the dark, nor cover their faces to disguise their identity, while moving from door to door. It was on a normal day of the week around noon that I heard two Haminas, Mebrat and Yekitinessh, singing at the gate of my parents’ house in Addis Ababa, while I was conducting my fieldwork in Ethiopia in 2005. After having listened to the music for a while leaning behind the

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9 There is no doubt that the begging tradition on the one hand and that of alms-giving on the other foster unproductiveness. The extreme increase of vagrants, particularly in Addis Ababa, has largely been tolerated by the society. Until very recent time this problem has been disregarded by successive Ethiopian governments, who did not undertake respective measures to tackle this phenomenon on time.
gate, I decided to open it and invite them to come in. They did come in without hesitation and accepted my request for them to continue singing, while I simultaneously made audiovisual recordings. To me, this was one of the most opportune moments to gather relevant material for my studies. During our brief conversation about their livelihood, Mebrat and Yekitinesh informed me that they are scared and feel insecure to wonder in the dark for the purpose of singing in Addis Ababa, a city which is big and strange to them, thus decided to conduct their singing in day light. Besides such a great coincidence of being able to meeting Hamina song-mendicants right in front of my own residence, the possibility of finding the Hamina around the Merkato area (at least in the case of Addis Ababa), supposedly the main base of the Hamina in Addis Ababa where they primarily live in groups, is quite high. The existence of this longstanding singing-begging tradition of the Hamina, today has led to the emergence of a range of songs, singing styles and an extensive poetry. The legacy of this poetic and musical culture undoubtedly deserves comprehensive investigation, extensive documentation by means of audiovisual recording, interviews, and proper preservation.

Performance Styles and Song Characteristics: Hamina often perform their songs either in solo or in duet. However, scholars such as Mondon-Vidailhet seem to have observed not only duets, but even a trio of a particular type as Powne notes this in his book (1968: 70). “It is hardly more than a homophonous music. It is a very simple form of harmony, usually based on the third, dominated by a melody full of vocal turns perfectly executed.” It is difficult to imagine a Hamina song performed by a trio. Of course, the Hamina may move from place to place and from house to house in groups e.g. as a family of three, four or more individuals, begging as an organized team. Nevertheless, to my knowledge their songs are not performed by a trio. This abstract explanation of the trio song is also hard to envision, as far as there is no audio example or a music score provided to confirm this statement. It would as well be misleading to apply the term “harmony” in relationship with Hamina songs. In contrast to the European musical conception, the term harmony, which refers to the vertical aspect of music in which the pitches being used are expected to fit with one another, in Hamina songs overlapping pitches do not at all agree or concord with each other. Since, I have not yet observed or heard of a trio song set-up, the reference of Powne – if it has a factual source - could be considered as exceptional. Hamina songs are never accompanied by any music instrument or dance. Unlike solo song-mendicants, duets are commonly performed in a male-female set-up with a clear division of role, whereby the duo may variously be a married couple, siblings, cousins, or relatives (Mesele 1993: 2012). With regard to the division of role, the male vocalist may often serve as the leader of the duo. The song may among others be structured as follows: At first the man may start reciting poems. At a certain point the woman takes over the singing part in her naturally higher voice range, whereby she ornaments her melody that may consist of a few syllables. Her parts, moreover serve as a bridge between the male vocal parts that consist of new, in general, rhyming poems or verses. In doing so, the parts of the woman will provide the man with breathing spells until he begins again with his recitals.

Due to the long-lasting experience of singing in duet, the intersecting parts of a couple continue streaming easily until the end of the given song. There are also duets consisting of recitals only,

\[10\] According to Mesele (1993: 2012) in areas such as Wollo primarily men move from place to place as solo singers whereas women stay at home accomplishing their traditional duties as housewives.
whereby each singer takes his/her turns at certain moments. The shifting between the two singers may occasionally create overlapping spots.

Prior to moving to the analytical part of my paper, I will here attempt to make some hypotheses about Hamina songs and their singing styles:

I believe that, regardless whether in solo or duet, wherever they go, a Hamina individual or a group usually sing one and the same song they have mastered through practice in their everyday life. Of course, minor changes in melody, singing style and ornamentation might be observed at some instances, but the overall frame of a song will not be altered as such. If we take this position into closer consideration, we may assume that Hamina song-mendicants are neither engaged in taking their time to create nor do have the aspiration to produce new songs to attract their listeners. Unlike other traditional music repertoires of the society, the Hamina neither change nor arrange melodies, apply new styles and rhythms to the already existing songs. I do not believe that the Hamina are aware of the aesthetic beauty of their songs and their melodic or rhythmic structures. It is also hard to imagine that they would sense whether their songs, including their voices, are entertaining enough or not. We should not forget that the major purpose and aim of the songs are simply based on begging for alms and receiving alms. On the other hand, we should as well note that one would neither be attracted nor entertained by these songs. Even if one may be praised or blessed through song poems, as in the case of the songs of the Azmari, the traditional singer and entertainer, he/she would not give this performance a special attention and value from a melodic, rhythmic, poetic, and in general from an aesthetic point of view. It is simply a song that is not performed for the purpose of entertainment, as in the case of other songs that may be sung in different contexts such as wedding, war, mourning or ritual songs. That is what makes Hamina songs unique; their clear contextual message as well as their role and function.

The orally transmitted singing culture of the Hamina has, in the course of time, developed its own characteristic features so that one may recognize their song from a distance. The distinct attributes of their songs thus are a) their melancholic (sad) melodies; b) their elaborated and free melodic ornamentation which, of course, differs from one vocalist to another. Apart from solo songs that may not include recitation parts, duets may be composed of both recited (speech) and sung (melody) parts that are accordingly executed by the respective singers. The songs are usually arranged in a cyclic form and in free rhythm. They, furthermore, contain 3 to 5 pitches which in terms of their intervallic relationship show close similarity to the traditional modes/scales, the so-called Qinit, used among music cultures of central and northern Ethiopia.

**Song Analysis:** The duet song under discussion is performed by my informants, Mebrat Mitiku and Yekitinesh Shimelis, I mentioned above. It consists of a multi-layered texture. Five pitches with approximate intervals of M2-m3-M2 and M2\(^1\) (see the first five pitches in figure 3) play a vital role in the melody structures, with the first three also appearing an octave higher so that the tonal range is stretched to an octave and a fourth. It is not easy to transcribe this free rhythmic song in an elaborated manner. Therefore, in figures 4 - 6 excerpts of the repeatedly occurring cyclic melodic-rhythmic structures representing the song parts of each singer have been reproduced as outline and as musical notation (transcription).

\(^{11}\) One should expect microtonal deviations, sometimes up to 100 Cents (1/2 tone). It is then very common that adjacent pitches with half-tone steps may also appear. These pitches are not so audible, but they serve as connecting pitches between the five pitches indicated above.
The song is arranged consisting of both recited (speech) and sung (melody) sections accordingly divided among the two singers. Regardless of which singer begins performing the song, one can perceive a clear division of role after a short while, due to the cyclic movement of the song with each course appearing again and again with slight melody variations.

The arrangement and/or structure of one cyclic course and the task of each singer may be explained as follows (see verse lines = vl. / figure 4):

**Figure 4**: Duet song outline performed by two Hamina (see also figure 5 and 6); arrow marks indicate the overlaps where both the singers recite different poems

Singer A starts with a recitation part, which is instantly picked up by singer B, virtually creating a canonic style of singing. Hence, singer B repeats the recited poem of singer A, lending it a melody\(^{12}\). Singer B proceeds to the second, rhyming verse line, which she – this time – recites instead of singing it. In doing so, she exploits a single pitch b-flat which is the lowest pitch of the pitch sequence (figure 3), which seems to play a central role during the entire song, specifically in the parts of singer B often appearing as an ending pitch. In figure 5 the so far explained song part of singer B, namely verse lines I and II, is additionally demonstrated by means of musical notation.

Shortly before singer B finishes her second verse line, singer A enters on top, either to recite a new poem or to sing an ornamented melody featuring two phrases each consisting of just two syllables as shown in figure 6. The melody phrases are sung in a relatively higher tonal register compared with those of singer B (figure 5). Throughout the song, this particular song part of singer A occurs over and over in this form with just the two ‘redundant’ syllables. In Amhara traditional songs of central-northern Ethiopia it is very common to insert such ‘redundant’ syllables.

\(^{12}\) As the song proceeds, one may notice that there are also certain instances where singer B does not automatically sing the recited verses of singer A. She may use totally different verses.
lables, often aimed to fill the gaps between stanzas but also to decorate the song (see Teffera 2001: 161-162). Therefore, it is possible that the Hamina use syllables for similar purposes.

Figure 5: Extract of a Hamina duet song; one cyclic movement of singer B, recorded by T. Teffera, 16.03.2005

As illustrated so far, a song part of one singer begins before that of the other singer ends and vice versa. So, they are inseparably linked with one another creating a flowing sequence. Overlaps occur throughout the song, but the most striking spots are those accordingly indicated with arrow marks (figure 4). These overlaps often appear in the second verse lines, in which both singers simultaneously recite their parts. These synchronized recitations are, at times very intense in a manner that creates a situation for the message of the poems become unclear due to the variety of their contents that are transmitted with accordingly non-similar accentuations and/or intonations. Thus, a total collision of sound takes place including the confusion that is generated through the incomprehensible poems.

The extremely intertwined vocal parts of the two Hamina follow certain rules that have been learned and practiced over a long period of time. Both singers’ voices stream freely and smoothly during the performance of their respective song parts. The cyclic nature of the song continues...
in the previously explained arrangement up to the end of the performance, whereas the lyrics steadily change.

**Song Poems and their Contents:** Hamina songs largely deal with poems of praise and blessing. Mention must however be made that there are also poems which depend on time and space, namely on actual situations reflecting various matters (see also Mesele 1993: 2023-24). Through their songs the Hamina indirectly express their socio-economic and socio-cultural status, their lyrics often reflecting their unfair treatment, neglect and stigmatization by non-Hamina in their community. Hence, although not all Hamina descendants are today inflicted by leprosy, this historical incident has left its mark. The century-old legacy of suffering the Hamina have gone through, it is believed that they have used song-mendicancy as a means of expressing their pain, agony, emotion, weariness and dilemma the disease has caused on the one hand, and their isolation from society, on the other. The result, though, is a great repertoire of mystic songs mainly bound to a metaphoric and poetic language that was orally transmitted from one generation to the next. Their sung or recited poems primarily magnify the glory of God and His Kingdom, the mortality of human beings in relation to the temporariness of earthly life, fear of punishment for sinful acts, and anticipation for blessings after death, just to mention a few.

The poems represented in the table below (table I) may for instance be given a closer look, since their content principally refers to the mortality of humans. The poems are drawn from a solo song sung by a Hamina from Shewa region broadcasted by the Deutsche Welle (DW) Amharic Radio Program (see Mesele/Worku 2008). Although mention was not made in the radio program whether this song was performed on a usual tour of a song-mendicant, or a special social event, one can tell that it is closely related with laments that are habitually sung on traditional mourning ceremonies of the Amhara, because the singer, apart from his distinct, partly recited and partly sung poem, also utters words of grief (not written down in the table) like ወጭ ከጭ ከማጭ: ዋዳርጋኝ: Wa Kembel Yadirgegn meaning “let your death be mine.” These words are habitually used whenever one laments the demise of a loved one. The words occur either in-between the stanzas or the rhyming verse lines to fill the gap and/or to serve as a bridge.

The poems of the song I have recorded are poems of praise as well as blessing which the two Hamina recited immediately alternately after having received alms from the benefactor\(^\text{13}\). The verses which mostly contain an average of 12 syllables per line (see figure 7) usually rhyme with one another. When sung or recited the number of syllables may differ accordingly to fit the melody structure.

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\(^{13}\) In this case my mother was the benefactor who not only served a meal to the two women and their children, but also donated clothes and a certain amount of money which they thankfully accepted. In this relationship, it is important to note that the duration of a Hamina song is usually determined by the response of the respective benefactor who may take either immediately or after a long while a measure and give alms to the mendicants. Mesele (1993: 2012) writes that the reaction of the Hamina may differ accordingly depending on what they received from their benefactor. Hence, if they are pleased by the received donation and/or alms they instantly start to recite their poems of blessing. On the other hand however, if they are unhappy with the received alms they begin cursing and even insulting the person.
Table I: Hamina poems, Solo song and recitation of a Hamina from the region of Shewa, source: DW Radio-Interview, Date 2008(?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amharic</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>እልጋው: ፈለጅና: ፊቀመጭ: ከወንበር</td>
<td>It is worth giving alms to the needy/poor, because the earthly home never lasts … it’s temporary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>አንቺ: ገር ከልሽ: እኛም: አንቸገር</td>
<td>Would you ever find a person who lives on earth forever….without tasting the bitterness of death?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊውና: ዓምሱን ዉስት</td>
<td>We were aspiring to see dawn, but the dusk came instead. He (God) kept on picking one after the other. ..taking them back to Him (referring to death)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊው በር በር ወለል ሳወ</td>
<td>Move faster folks; what’s the matter with you? Our journey is set to follow one another (in death)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊው በር በር ወለል ሳወ</td>
<td>That’s how we leave this world behind.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I shows part of the poems applied in the song in the original script, Amharic which is translated into English. Mention must be made that the translation was not easy and not always very pleasing, since the poetic significance of the lyric and its deep contextual implication fade away in the course of translation. In this relation Gelaye (2007: 22) for instance points out that “translating Amharic poetry is not an easy task. In the process of translation, the Amina songs and poems might lose their poetic quality, rhythm, concision and depth of meaning. Sometimes, the rich local customs and metaphorical expressions are not easily translatable from Amharic into English. Amharic poems and songs, such as feelings of the performance, emotion, irony, onomatopoetic expressions might be missing in the process of translation.

Table I: Hamina Song Poems; recording: 25th March 2005, Addis Ababa; T. Teffera

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amharic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊው በር በር ወለል ሳወ</td>
<td>Get out of the bed and sit on the chair-Your presence will ease our problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊው በር በር ወለል ሳወ</td>
<td>Gorgeous Lady! Keep us warm with your glowing beauty,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ከሆነ ሳወ ወለል: እርጊው በር በር ወለል ሳወ</td>
<td>Isn’t it better to be showered with earthly blessing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for life after death?

Honey won’t turn into wine unless it’s mixed with water; I feel great about people with good manner.

Assure me of your presence and make me feel at ease; I’m missing that wonderful character of yours.

July and August is harvest time for Kesse14, Aren’t you “the envoy” in the whole country?

Please show up, show up in public- You have a graceful appearance at first glance.

Who would dare to disagree with you rather than maintaining your friendship? You are as sweet as honey for those you like and as bitter as Kosso15 for those whom you hate.

My home town is far away across the mountain- It was your fame that brought me here flying like a bird.

‘She’ gave me 10 Birr (ETH currency). The guard of the flag; the envoy of the country.

The content of these poems refers to a female individual (my mother), who is given due credit in recognition to her generosity and splendor. She is referred to as the “guard of the flag” and “the envoy of the country”, expressions that indicate the respect and her high social status. The use of laudatory nicknames of individuals is quite common in Hamina songs, thus showing similarity with other traditional song repertoires of central Ethiopia. Praise songs generally belong to the widely used poetic forms in the music culture of the Amhara. These are, for instance, observed in the traditional songs of the minstrel, Azmari, whose role is very vital in the society. We also find praise poetry applied in war songs known as Shilela and heroic recitals called Qererto and Fukkera. These are “the most widely appreciated poetic genres that are deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the Amhara people of Ethiopia in general, in Goţgam in particular”16 (Gelaye 2006: 588).

14 Kesse is also known Dama Kesse. It is a medical plant belonging to the species Ocimum lamiifolium of the Lamiaceae family. This plant is very well known and widely used in Ethiopian traditional medicine against colds and other ailments.

15 Kosso is a medical plant Hagenia abyssinica, Rosaceae Aloe = Curacao-Aloe.

16 It was customary in former centuries that war lords were accompanied by singers (both solo and group singing) chanting praise songs during long and tiresome journeys to battle. In this relation Gelaye (2006: 587) notes the following: “Praise poetry is one of the most developed and elaborated poetic genres in Africa. It focuses on the achievements of prominent figures, heroes, military and political leaders, etc., describing the character, personality, power and skill that make them superior to others. In Goţgam, as elsewhere in Ethiopia, a marked military tradition, taking revenge on an enemy, hunting and other special achievements of the people are highly regarded, and praised in war songs and heroic recitals. Indeed, it has been an important culture and tradition to praise the skills, adventures and exploits of emperors, kings, nobles, warriors and great war-leaders in poetry and songs.”
In table II an extract of sample praise poems recited by two Amina from Goğğam and recorded by Getie Gelaye in 1997/98 is represented just to demonstrate the large variety of such poems. The Hamina have a tradition to acquaint themselves with given circumstances, such as inquiring the name, status and other details about the owner/s of the house they plan to go for singing-begging, where they expect a good charity or alms. This will give them the opportunity to prepare selected poems ahead, inserting laudatory nicknames in order to please their benefactor/s. For instance, a Hamina song mendicant, who frequently received charity from a person known for his generosity and resides in his vicinity, suddenly heard of the demise of his benefactor. Consequently he went to the house of the dead to console the mourning family members, but also to express his grief over the loss of this humble individual. Hence, he sang a song of lament shown in table III.

Through the song text the song-mendicant expresses his sympathy for the deceased, remembering his generosity. The rhyming verses are successively performed in a fast tempo with very short breathing gaps. The song consists of long and short melody phrases that are variously arranged by the singer. As the musical notation shows in figure 8, at the beginning of each verse line the syllable (ክ), put in brackets, consisting of the pitch set B–c♯–e' appears. This syllable seems to serve as an introduction to each verse line.

Only three pitches, namely B–c♯–e' play a vital role in the melodic arrangement of the song. Pitch A occurs only at two spots. Also the initial pitch, namely the possible keynote, of the sequence is unclear. However, as a whole it is most probably the Təzətə Qənət with pitch A serving as the keynote of the five tone sequence of the traditional scale/mode. Pitch f♯ that would have completed the sequence of this Qənət is not used in the song.

Table II: Poems recited by an Amina song mendicant from Goğğam; recorded by Getie Gelaye 1997/98 in Goğğam, Ethiopia (see also Gelaye 2007: 23).

<p>| Khadi! ያስቱታ የጭም! ያስቱታ | Oh! This world Woe! This world! |
| የኽ ርእኡት መድሃት እሆን | Your father has blessed you in childhood, |
| ከአሁ ነር ከእኳት የካካት ሇገቡ | Your wealth lasts long to the end. |
| እር! ያደ ከወክል እም ይታችል? | Oh! Why are they jealous of your fortune? |
| ይስ ከትር. የባ ይምህራው እለው | All that which you live on, is what you have earned. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>vl.</th>
<th>mp</th>
<th>Amharic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>እሰዬ: እሰዬ: እሰዬ: እሰዬ: ው: እስዯ:</td>
<td>Well, well my flower!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>a1</td>
<td>ከማወር-ማወር:</td>
<td>Hey, Charming!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>a2</td>
<td>ከምራጢ: ከማወር:</td>
<td>Gugšā (name of the deceased),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a3</td>
<td>ከነ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>ayāsū's father,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>ከርንም: (3x)</td>
<td>Oh! This World! Oh! This World!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>ከምራጢ: ከምራጢ:</td>
<td>Where are you going?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>c1</td>
<td>ከምራጢ: ከምራጢ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ?:</td>
<td>Where are you going to… rushing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>c2</td>
<td>ከምራጢ: ከምራጢ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ?:</td>
<td>Where are you going to… rushing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>ከማወር-ማወር-ማወር-ማወር-ማወር-ማወር: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>Do you think it’s your home, even though the place is spacious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>b1</td>
<td>ከርንም: (2x)</td>
<td>Oh! This World! Oh! This World!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>c4</td>
<td>ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>He used to feed me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>c5</td>
<td>ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>he used to feed me abundantly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>c6</td>
<td>ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>Oh! ayāsū’s father, Oh!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ: ከሃːስ:</td>
<td>ayāsū’s father; his generous hand perished.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mp = melody phrase

17 Son of the deceased; also other names of family members; i.e. brothers and sisters may be mentioned.

18 The deceased referred to in this sentence which – in other words - means: Why do you leave us? Do you think the grave is your home?
Figure 8: Song poem of a song mendicant, Recorded by Ayele Gugsa in Assela, Ethiopia 1993
**Conclusion:** There is no doubt that leprosy has had immense negative impacts in Ethiopia. We need to put into question whether the tradition of song-mendicancy (including all types of begging) might have encouraged attributes such as idleness, failure, laziness. Could this account refer to the Hamina and their song-mendicant (begging) tradition, in general? Do they really believe in their genealogical ancestry of leprosy and in the infliction with the disease, since this seems to be a justification to carry on the begging tradition that has prevailed until present time? Could the indiscriminate charity of Ethiopians have contributed to the increasing number of vagrants to an extent that has become difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the bogus beggar?

Before and even after the discovery of its biological cause, leprosy patients such as the Hamina were stigmatized and shunned. Even today, after a medical treatment for leprosy has been found and the disease has become under control in Ethiopia, the Hamina, in one way or another, are constantly associated with their ancestral background.

We must admit, though, that due to its prevalence, leprosy and the socio-cultural circumstances that were created because of the disease, have paved the way for the creation of art that influenced other cultural practices. This history of isolation the Hamina had to go through, coupled with despair caused by physical inability to work and earn their living on the one hand and the struggle for survival on the other, must have forced them take begging for alms as the only solution to the problems they have been facing for generations. The deeply rooted religious belief and tradition of almsgiving in Ethiopia, however, did not help much to solve problems, but rather encouraged the increase of the number of hands longing for alms, namely the culture of begging (Demozu 2003: 81-85).

In order to abolish stigmatization and abandoning of the disabled in general, health centers in Ethiopia have been established since 1901 with the assistance of foreign countries. For the first time ever, leprosy sufferers began to be treated along with other patients, and it is believed that they will increasingly be accepted by the community and be able to enjoy participating in social activities in the long run. Disability prevention is ever more being considered as a priority by the present Ethiopian government. This will, hopefully divert the stigma that has existed for centuries of leprosy as a major social problem.

As mentioned earlier, it is clear that not all Hamina are lepers and not all lepers are Hamina. For that matter, it requires a concerted effort to use the media as a major tool to change the wrong perception and stigma associated with leprosy in Ethiopia, while at the same time, embrace all who have been infected by the disease in any possible development activities, so that they will be productive, thus avoiding dependency and begging. At the same time, providing proper medical care and treatment at an early stage to those who are diagnosed with the disease will minimize the number of those that are disabled and stigmatized because of the disease. Regarding the Hamina song repertoire which has developed over the past centuries, it is important to conduct in-depth studies to understand the rules of musical organizations, song structures, forms and styles and, last but not least, the poetic content of these songs which would partly reflect the historical, social, cultural and political background and state of the Hamina in past and present-day Ethiopia. Comparative studies of similarly segregated societies residing in other parts of the world that either suffered of leprosy in the past or are at present still confronted with it, will definitely be a great source of information on this very crucial subject matter and its consequences both from biological and social point of view.
References


Online Publications


