The Traditional Secular Music of the Harari: Its State in History and Present Day

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Abstract

This article chiefly discusses the traditional secular music of the Harari community residing in the Harari People’s National Regional State, one of the nine Ethiopian administrative regions (Kalaloč). In doing so musical styles such as Saley, Ėaliyei and Dersi and their distinct features (melody, rhythm, and lyric) will be taken into closer consideration. Harari songs that may be performed as solo, duo or group songs are accordingly classified to these basic musical styles accordingly. It is among other things worth to note that songs sung in duo or group mainly reveal peculiar characteristics that are totally unknown in the music cultures of other Ethiopian communities. This phenomenon shows the close historical link of the Harari with neighbouring Arabian countries since early periods.

Harari songs may be performed with or without instrumental accompaniment. For historical reasons music instruments played are not only very limited but they are completely non-melodic instruments. This refers to double and single-headed and variously sized drums, Kărābu, wooden clappers called Kābāl and frame drums, Dīf.

This article also explores the present state of the Harari secular music in which primarily women are playing a significant role in maintaining it than their male folks. It is obvious that music is inseparably connected with the everyday life of a community. Non-musical factors such as social, cultural, historical and religious circumstances are always the reason for musical change, because music is a reflection of these phenomena. What is the cause for this perceptible musical transition in the today’s Harari society?
My fieldwork in the south-east Ethiopian region Harar took place in November 2000. The aim was based on gathering audiovisual data (through recording) and on examining the traditional music of the Harari community. Thanks to the kind co-operation of a number of people, I had the opportunity to make audiovisual recordings and thorough investigations within a short period of time.

**Historical Background:** Harar is the regional capital of the Harari People’s National Regional State that belongs to one of the nine ethnic geographical divisions of Ethiopia known as Kələloč. Harar is located about more than 500 km to the East of Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa with an altitude of more than 1800 meters. Harar belongs to one of the oldest Ethiopian cities. There are different interpretations of historians with regard to the history of Harar, due to lack of written sources. Nevertheless, one of the versions believed by some scholars is that Harar was founded by Semitic-speaking people approximately between the 6th and 9th centuries. From this time onwards Harar gained increasing attention as a metropolitan city. Until about 1887 it was successively ruled by more than 70 Sultanates who possessed their own territories, state machinery, political and social systems besides well functioning financial and economic systems. They also used their own currency. Among others Ahmed Gragn (ca. 1525-1544), also called “Ahmed the left-handed”, Muhammad Jasa (1577-1585), Sa’ad al-Din II (1585-1613) and Abu Bakr II (1834-1852) were some of the rulers of Harar to mention just a few. The 16th century is considered as the “golden age” the successive emirates of Harar (Sartori 2007: 2).

Harar is inhabited by Semitic and Cushitic speaking people whose languages belong to the Afro-Asiatic language family. Historical accounts portray that Semitic speaking peoples might have migrated in ancient times from Southern Arabia and settled in Abyssinia, present day Ethiopia, around 1,000 B. C. Further migrations were carried out in the periods following (Abdu-Nassir 2000). From linguistic point of view the Tagre, Tagrāy, Amārā and

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1 Variation: Harrar, Hārer, Harer, Adere, Adari. Abdu-Nassir (2000) explains that the Harari were used to be called Adere, a term deriving from the Gə’ez verb “adere” meaning „he made a stop; he got settled instead of moving from place to place“. This term has been misinterpreted – most probably as a result of inter-ethnic conflicts - so that its usage has gradually diminished. Today the population is legitimately called Harari.

2 Thanks to Anisa Ali, for accompanying and assisting me during my stay in Harar. She provided me with information by contacting local musicians whom I interviewed about the traditional music of this community in addition to the audiovisual recordings I made of their songs. During the interviews, Anisa among others served as a translator from Hararinya into Amariña and vice versa so that language barriers and misunderstandings could be avoided right from the start. My special thanks also goes to Dr. Hayat Ali and Dr. Salahadin for providing my stay in the city of Dire Dawa, for their hospitality and kind support in supplying me with information about the history of Harar. I would also like to thank Abdumuhemin Abdu-Nassir, an expert of Harar history and Abdullahi Ali Sherif, owner of a private Museum with ethnographic objects of all ethnic communities residing in Harar. Last but not least my thank goes to the traditional singers Nuria Ahmed (stage name: Shamitu) and Amina Adem Abdi (stage name: Gini) for their kind co-operation.

3 The Amārā migrated to the highland regions of Harar about 100 years ago especially during the reign of Emperor Menelik II from 1889 up to his death in 1913. Abate (1969: 28) states that compared to the remaining population of Harar, the Amārā – though a minority group - possessed for a quite a long time the political power and privilege, for example as land owners, civil servants, army members, police officers as well as members of the church.
Gafat belong to the northern Semites, whereas the Arggobā⁴, Gurāgē and the Harari and/or Adere communities are known as the southern Semites whose ancestors used to speak the old Ga’ṣz language. These are principally the Amārā, Tagrāy, Harari, Arggobā and the Gurāgē people. On the other hand the Oromo⁵, Sumülë⁶ and Afār⁷ belong to the Cushitic people’s group.

The Harari: In former times the Harari used to call their city Gey „city; place; settlement” and referred to themselves as Gey Ussu’i „the people of the city“. However, according to Abdu Nassir (2000) this term had often been misinterpreted by foreign scholars⁸ so that it is today legitimately changed into Harari or Adere (see also Sartori 2007: 2). The Harari are Muslim people. Islam was introduced in the 12th century. With its numerous mosques and shrines including its ancient history the city of Harar is today considered as one of the holy cities of the world besides Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The Harari predominantly inhabit the walled city called Jegol⁹ located within the city of Harar (figures 1-4) and surrounded by its five traditional and historical gates. In the local language these gates are called Berri, Berr or Barri “door, entrance, gate” and they represent the five pillars of Islam. The gates have ever since played a number of significant roles in terms of the economic growth of city of Harar and the preservation of a close socio-cultural and economic link with adjacent ethnic communities as well as neighbouring countries.

⁴ The Arggobā are known as the descendants of the so-called Jabarti colony (Moslem Amārā) who migrated from the former Moslem Ifāl Dynasty to the Emirates of Harar. During the Italian invasion the 8 major Arggobā towns located about 30 km South of Harar consisted of ca. 1000 people. Their original Semitic language has unfortunately diminished today (Abate 1969: 30).
⁵ The Oromo, Ethiopia’s largest ethnic community migrated to Ethiopia from about 1570 onwards. Due to the rapid population increase of the Oromo, Semitic people were gradually assimilated. Today the Oromo inhabit the larges part of Ethiopia including in the Hararghe plateau (Abate 1969: 28).
⁶ The Somali are nomadic and pastoral people whose culture is predominantly centered on camels with a few cattle and goats. They inhabit the area in southern Harar administrative region (southeast Ethiopia). Their nomadic life is not only meant to guarantee the economic base, but also to serve as a status symbol. They practice the Islam since the 14th century.
⁷ The Afār are nomads primarily inhabiting the Danakil Desert in north central Ethiopia, the today’s Administrative Region Afār as well as in Eritrea and Djibouti. A small group resides in the Administrative Region Harar. The contact with merchants from the Arabian Peninsula brought about to the Islamisation of the Afār starting in the 10th century. Today the Afār confess to Islam.
⁸ The term bears a negative content when the pronounced; i.e. Gey = homo sexual, gay.
⁹ After long lasting successive holy wars led by Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, Harar was exposed to continuous attacks from different angles. Gragñ was defeated around 1543 by King Gelawdewos who had the support of Portuguese military forces. Consequently his nephew Nur Ibn al-Wazir Mujahid came to power and married the widow of Gragñ, Bati Del Wambara. It is believed that it was this man who was responsible for the construction of the remarkable defensive wall today known as Jegol. This walled city comprises a surface of ca. 48 hectares with 362 relatively narrow lanes, whereas its circumference is about 3,348 meters with five traditional gates demarcating both the administrative and socio-economic zones of the city. Therefore, this wall symbolizes the important cultural affiliations, because without it the indigenous people would feel as if their cultural and social contact wouldn’t exist any longer.
The gate to the north called Berberē Berr or Assum Barri was for instance used as the centre for merchants who imported pepper, salt, spices and other items from the Gulf of Aden. The Argob Barri gate located to the east was used by businessmen handling similar profitable trades from Arggobā to Harar and vice versa. All the gates were strictly guarded and thus closed at around 6:00 p.m. so that from this time onwards it was forbidden to enter or leave Jegol. The five historical gates are listed below:

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The gates of Jegol are named differently by adjacent ethnic communities, e.g. Sumāle and Arggobā. In general we may assume that the Harari always gave value to unity and respect between their neighbours which is also observed today. Thus, Harar is ever since considered as a metropolitan city with a multinominal community reflecting colourful and mixed cultures along with a multifaceted regional development that is among others observed in its trade boom since early periods creating one of the ancient and largest market centres of Ethiopia. Today the number of the gates, that are still being intensively used by farmers, merchants and caravans coming from various directions, has increased to seven including the Shewa Barri represented in figure 6. A large part of the Harari today still inhabits Jegol.

In respect to the origin of the Harari there are different hypotheses. Abate (1969: 29) for instance argues that they belong to the oldest Cushitic people’s group of the Sidamā who had already been assimilated by Semitic Arabia prior to 1000 A. D. In the centuries following they were dominated by a small group of Abyssinians who possessed a military colony in the city of Harar. Just about the beginning of the 16th century the population shaped by Abyssinians and Arabs was pushed back to the city because of the Oromo migration. The Harari are a mixed community as a result of inter-marriage at first with Egyptians who resided here from the 16th century onwards for quite a long period of time. Since recent

12 Harar has recently received international recognition for its historical backgrounds and its historical gates. For that matter, it has been considered in The UNESCO list as one of the world’s cultural heritages.
13 Since its foundation Harar completely remained independent up to the Egyptian occupation in 1875 so that the situation of Harar changed accordingly. Besides regions like for instance Berbera, the Port of Zeila was also seized by the Egyptians. Rauf Pasha, who served as the Egyptian governor brought about a very rapid process of modernization in Harar especially focusing to monopolize commerce (e.g. coffee business) in the Egyptian-controlled territory for about a decade. Among other things he introduced the Egyptian piasters in order to replace the so far used currency in Harar, the so-called Mehallaq. Through the influence of British colonial rule however, he was forced to withdraw his troops from Harar on January 19th 1885 so that the power was transferred to AmirAbdulahi Ibh Mohammed who ruled Harar from 1885-1887 (Gebissa 2004: 47; Sartori 2007: 3).
periods they have also been mixed with neighbouring Oromo and Somali peoples through inter-marriage.

**Harari Music:** Little is known about the orally transmitted music tradition of the Harari which consists of different musical practices mirroring the socio-cultural aspect of the community. The music repertoire comprises wedding, work, entertainment, love; religious and ritual songs just to mention a few. In addition music events in which both male and females may take part, there are also certain musical styles that are explicitly divided in distinct gender and age-groups.

During the long lasting emirate of Harar, the different rulers had accordingly different opinions to worldly music and accompanying instruments. The playing of instruments was for instance strictly forbidden during the reign of Sultan Haboba Ibn Harar (ca. 960-1000 A.D.). Other rulers allowed the playing of instruments while following sultanates again prohibited this. Taking this situation into account, we may assume that the persistently changing attitudes towards secular traditional music and instruments might presumably also have influenced the freedom of the musician in singing, dancing and instrument playing without restraint.

It may be the outcome of this “negative” historical process along with the influence of neighbouring Arabian countries that the Harari today only use just a few music instruments for song accompaniment. Above all melodic instruments have ever since been totally abandoned so that the use of music instruments has always been limited to idiophones and membranophones (Sartori 2007: 3). These include double-headed cylindrical or conical drums as well as kettle drums mostly played in ensembles and/or sets. Drums - generally known as Käräbu - are among others played on religious and ritual ceremonies accordingly by men or by women. The Käräbu played in sets are distinguished by their different sizes and their musical functions in a given performance that depends on the occasion taking place.

Another very common music instrument of the Harari is the single-headed frame drum Däf or Daf (figure 7), an indirectly struck idiophone made of a round wooden ring. Usually pairs of thin metal jingles are fixed to produce percussive sound when beating the membrane or shaking the drum as such. The round frame is covered only on one side with parchment or skin that is nailed around the frame.

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14 For example, the Shewalid feast, a term referring to an elaborated religious ceremony taking place after the end of the fasting month Ramadan. The festival usually lasts for six successive days on which quite a large number of people (men and women) take part.
15 Amir Haboba is though supposed to have been the first Harari ruler, nevertheless historians believe that there had been quite a large number of kings and queens prior to him. The problem lies in the luck of written documents so that the exact date of their rule is unknown.
16 Collection: Völkerkundemuseum of Viena, Africa collection; Photo: T. Teffera 2006, Vienna.
17 The Däf is also widely known in the Islamic-Arabic world as Riqq or Buben.
The Däf is of an average diameter of 25-35cm and a height of 5-8cm. Frame drums were introduced to Harar around the 1950s along with the accordion, harmonica and the guitar that are used in the popular music today particularly represented by young and modern Harari musicians (primarily males). In the process of time all these instruments, including the Däf have been integrated in both traditional and modern music of the Harari. Another common music instrument is the Käbäl shown in figure 8. The Käbäl - a concussion idiophone - is made of a pair of wooden blocks or clappers usually of the same size, i.e. ca. 15-17cm long, 7cm wide, and 3cm thick. Likewise the Däf, the Käbäl is mostly played by female musicians, again a common feature observed in many parts of the Islamic-Arabic world. Nevertheless, on special occasions such as the religious Mawlid ceremony - in which only men take part - the songs are accordingly accompanied by more than two male Käbäl and drum players. When playing, the clappers are taken in each hand and beaten against each other. The player usually moves her upper body forth and back according to the given rhythmic structure. Along with the Däf, at least two or more Käbäl accompany songs and dances. On wedding feasts for instance it is customary that four to five Käbäls and at least two Däfs are played in an ensemble.

In Harar, I had the opportunity to contact the two well known female musicians, namely the blind singer Shamitu and her companion Gini who provided me with required information and performed music which I recorded. Some of the songs were accompanied by the Däf. The only instrument they used during my recording was the Däf played by Gini as shown in figures 9 and 10 a-b (music example 1). I was above all interested in and at the same time impressed by the variety of the melodic and rhythmic arrangements of the performed songs. Besides the solo songs that consist of relatively simply perceivable melodic phrases, the pair songs primarily dominated by parallel thirds and fourths are to be considered as the distinct feature of the Harari music. These polyphonic melodies are not just performed arbitrarily; instead they are on the contrary subordinated to predetermined musical rules.

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18 These are similar wooden clappers of the Bajuni people of Somalia that are similarly played for song accompaniment (mostly female songs). Collection: Völkerkundemuseum of Viena, Africa collection; Photo: T. Tefera 2006, Vienna.

19 Photo: T. Tefera; 15.11.2000, Harar, southeast Ethiopia
One part of the Harari music repertoire includes songs that are performed in duo; i.e. two women or two men. Another part involves antiphonal songs that are accompanied by the frame drum Däf. The third category consists of songs performed in solo mostly without instrumental accompaniment.

**Figures 10a-b:** Traditional musicians Shamitu and Gini

Taking the entire Harari music repertoire into consideration, we may ascertain three basic song styles called a) Saley, b) Jaliye c) Miras Fäqär and d) Dersi (Abdu Nassir: 2000) discussed below:

**Saley:** can be performed both as solo and group song. An example for a solo song in Saley style is the song Runey Runey that was performed by Shamitu and shown in the score of figure 11 (music example 2).

**Ğaliye:** A similar song belonging to Saley style and exclusively sung by women is the Ğaliye performed either in duo (music example 3) or in solo usually without any instruments accompanying. The lyrics of Ğaliye “The friend of my heart” may differ according to the music occasion. Among other things the Prophet Mohammed is praised on ritual and/or religious music events. On weddings ceremonies on the other hand Ğaliye is performed as a closing or a farewell song for the bridal party. Ğaliye’s lyric may as well refer to entertainment, patriotism and religion. According to the two singers Shamitu and Gini, Ğaliye can also be performed as a work song by women while cutting the well known chat plant (*chata edulis*) every morning.

**Miras Fäqär:** this song style comprises songs performed in duo (two female or two male) without instrumental accompaniment. As an example the song Ğaliye may once again be mentioned. The melody of Ğaliye may vary and therefore reveal differences between those who are performing it. Additionally it can be performed in different styles. Nevertheless, the basic melodic structure that identifies this song should be maintained by the singer/s.

When a song in Miras Fäqär style is performed, at the beginning one of the two singers starts singing a phrase or a stanza. At a certain point the second singer joins him/her and from this point onwards both sing up to the end of this phrase. The melody is at the beginning mainly arranged in parallel third and fourth. Prior to reaching the end of the phrase, the singers meet at a common pitch and from here they continue singing in unison up to the end.

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21 This song may be compared with the song style called Ingurguro of the Amārā of central Ethiopia.
After the end of the first phrase a short break occurs. Then, the first singer starts singing the following phrase or strophic part in the same way as described so far (figure 12; music example 3).

Another song classified to the Miras Fāqār style refers to canonical songs sung in duo. At the start the first vocalist sings a short phrase that is repeated by the second vocalist who may arrange his/her melodic and metro-rhythmic part individually. Both of them then meet at a certain point and continue singing either in unison or in parallel third and fourth. In music example 4 Shamitu und Gini perform such a song (see also figures 6a-b).

**Figure 11:** Solo song: “Runey Runey” performed by Nuria Ahmed (Shamitu)

**Figure 12:** Melodic and rhythmic arrangement/structure of the Miras-Fāqār song style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melodic phrase I</th>
<th>Melodic phrase II</th>
<th>etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st singer</td>
<td>rest</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd singer</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>rest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** = end of the given song line
As a result of the canonical style of singing, nearly no rests occur in the melodic course when listening to the song (figure 13).

**Figure 13:** version of the Miras-Fāqār song style

**Melodic phrase performed in a canonical style of singing**

1st singer → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → unison and/or 3rd-4th parallels

2nd singer → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → etc.

● = meeting point  ** = end of song line

*Dersi* is a group song in which the song leader initially sings a phrase that will be accompanied by a chores group. In doing so, the choir may completes or repeat the started phrase. As to my *Shamitu* and *Gini*, this song style possesses distinct similarities with other alternate songs. *Dersi* songs are mostly accompanied by the Kārubu, Dīf and Kābāl (Abdu Nassir: 2000).

*Dersi* songs are divided in different sex groups being performed either by men or women. They may also comprise both uniform and/or changing tempi depending on the various song parts. *Dersi* songs may be performed as entertainment, praise and religious songs on respective occasions.

**Conclusion:** Referring to the state of the Harari traditional secular music we may today observe that primarily female maintain the traditional music rather than the men folk. Harari men are less involved and interested in worldly music occasions. The reason is most probably the religious background, the Islam. Particularly after their marriage they focus on spiritual life and therefore, they only participate in purely religious music occasions that deal with the praising the Prophet Mohammad and related issues. They usually consider the partaking in secular music events, especially after their marriage, as “irreligious”. This fact reveals that music making has merely become the task of female musicians who are in a genuine sense playing a decisive role to keep up the traditional music of the community alive. Sartori (2007:1) who undertook thorough investigations and field researches on the Harari music states the following related to shifting women’s role in preserving this asset:

“Gay fāqār”, literally “the songs of the city”, is … currently performed by Harari women according to different musical styles, most frequently in a voice-percussion configuration. If projected diachronically, however, social distribution and performance of Harari Gey Fāqār reveal a more complex outline, also involving a noteworthy production of earlier male singers. Although most Harari men do not play songs anymore, a vast assortment of recordings testifies in fact their past musical and poetical fertility. In the last decades most men have eventually chosen to abandon music, thus conveying almost entirely to women the custodianship of traditional secular songs.”

The once famous musician *Shamitu* who mastered the entire traditional Harari music repertoire from early childhood onwards and whose songs I had recorded on the spot in 2000 passed away a short time after my visit. In one of our interviews *Shamitu* explained that she has unfortunately never able to pass on her artistic skills and experience to young Hararis. The youth is not interested in practising the traditional music and there is a general negligence as to *Shamitu*. From time to time – especially in the past 3-4 decades – quite a
large number of young Harari left birth place towards the capital Addis Ababa or to foreign countries (predominantly to Europe and USA) looking for a better life; e.g. further education, job opportunities and business.

Music, an unquestionably significant aspect of human culture, reveals the social structure of a community, patterns of diffusion and adaptation, changes along with new appearing and disappearing features, the reason and the effect of such changes for the society. In terms of changes that have taken place in the traditional secular music of the Harari, Sartori notes the situation in contemporary Harar as a result of her research as follows:

“Harari community embodies a peculiar example of social rearrangement of musical roles under the stress of historical transformations, suggesting a potential recipe to balance codified social values between conservation and innovation: when men chose to leave music, women’s custodianship turned into the key of preservation, transmission and development of local traditional modalities of musical performance.

Contemporary Harari musical practices, between old and new cultural habits, represent an example of how a Muslim micro-society may face historical and political dialectics, cultural reconstruction, revival of Islamic belief and identity issues by finding peaceful solutions within its own resources, redistributing repertoires among sexes and age-groups and keeping sung traditions licit and lively”

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Adem Abdi, Amina (Gini): Interview about the traditional music of the Harari made on the 15th November 2000.

Music Examples

All music recordings were made by Timkehet Teffera on 15th November 2000 in Jegol, Harar.

Music Example 1
song title: Ya Wadud
repertoire: Religious praise song
musician: Nuria Ahmed (Shamitu) and Amina Adem (Gini)

Music Example 2
song title: Runey Runey
repertoire: Nostalgic song
musician: Nuria Ahmed (Shamitu) solo song

Music Example 3
song title: Jaliye
repertoire: Religious praise and entertainment song
musician: Nuria Ahmed (Shamitu) and Amina Adem (Gini)

Music Example 4
song title: Le le
repertoire: Entertainment song
musician: Nuria Ahmed (Shamitu) and Amina Adem (Gini)