

THE MUSICIAN AND TRANSMISSION OF  
RELIGIOUS TRADITION: THE MULTIPLE ROLES  
OF THE ETHIOPIAN *DĀBTĀRA*

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Ethiopia presents an unusually complex profile both in terms of the diversity of religious practice within the country and the interaction between belief systems which on the surface appear to be separate. Officially a Christian state from the date of the conversion of the Ethiopian emperor by a Syrian missionary about the year 332 A.D. until the overthrow of the modern monarchy during a revolution that began in 1974, Ethiopia has also provided fertile soil for a number of autochthonous religions, for Judaic traditions, and for Islam. This essay traces the pivotal role of a single category of musicians, the *dābtāras*,<sup>1</sup> whose well-known activity at the centre of Ethiopian Christian musical practice is in fact only one aspect of their multifaceted role in Ethiopian religious life.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their formal responsibilities as musicians and liturgical practitioners within the church, many *dābtāras* past and present have been magicians and healers; these activities have served to bring the main carriers of Ethiopian Christian liturgy into on-going contact with peoples formally associated with many other Ethiopian religious systems. Of additional, but strictly historical, significance today, is the once important role of *dābtāras* within the traditional religion of the Beta Israel (Falasha), an Ethiopian community now recognized as Jews in Israel. The presence of *dābtāras* within so many facets of Ethiopian religious life is only one small, if very human, piece of the evidence speaking to the extensive interaction, between what are today too often perceived as separate streams of religious tradition within Ethiopia.

Although it is possible to chart relationships between Ethiopian religions by drawing on indigenous historical sources as well as by comparing their literatures and liturgies, I will here move 'beyond

the texts'<sup>3</sup> to address the importance of the human agents who transmit much more than liturgy and its musical setting both within and between religious traditions. Utilizing both the existing secondary literature and primary ethnographic data, I will analyze the *däbtära*'s complex role in Ethiopian religious life through an examination of the educational process he undergoes,<sup>4</sup> accepting Pierre Bourdieu's suggestion that an educational system both imparts its own properties and sustains them within a given social system (Bourdieu 1973: 71-2).<sup>5</sup> Through an investigation of this sort, we are able to ascertain better the range of information, or 'cultural capital' (*Ibid.*: 72) that a *däbtära* acquires and subsequently controls both within and outside of musical domains.

The authority of the *däbtära* within Ethiopian Christian society derives in large part from the musicians' roles as the heirs of Saint Yared,<sup>6</sup> a figure commemorated annually for arranging the corpus of Ethiopian Christian liturgical music under divine inspiration. This mythistory<sup>7</sup> extends the lineage of *däbtäras* back to the sixth century.<sup>8</sup> On a more general level, both within and outside of Christian tradition, it appears that much of the power of the *däbtära* resides in the musician's unique ability to transcend the technologies of orality and literacy in Ethiopian culture, merging both in the acts of musical transmission and performance, as well as in the practice of traditional medicine. While literacy was historically restricted to the aristocracy and clergy in traditional Ethiopian society, and largely perpetuated through Church education, it was always intertwined with oral tradition, both during the educational process and afterwards. In the case of the *däbtära*, who constantly mediates between orality and literacy in different contexts, this duality established from the earliest days of his schooling has contributed to his efficacious if ambiguous status within Ethiopia.

### *The Education of the Däbtära*

The initial education of the Ethiopian *däbtära* begins no later than age five in a local church elementary school.<sup>9</sup> Only a minority of young boys enter the church schools, generally chosen by their families to be the single candidate for the clergy in their generation. Because the profession of *däbtära* has always been largely hereditary, many who attend are offspring of local *däbtäras* (Young

1970: 141-5).<sup>10</sup> Other students would include candidates for the priesthood, those with disabilities that might restrict their participation in agricultural activities, and individuals looking for a professional alternative.<sup>11</sup>

The teacher at a Church school is a local priest or monk; if neither is available, a *däbtära* is employed. The church elementary school, called the *nəbab bet* (house of reading), offers five levels of training (Pankhurst 1955: 234-7). During initial studies that last all day in a highly regimented format, the student first learns to read the Ethiopic (Gə'əz) syllabary.<sup>12</sup> From its beginning, the study of the Ethiopic syllabary unfolds as both a visual and aural process, with the child touching the Gə'əz characters written in a table on parchment, naming each aloud. This process is known as *qut'ər* (learning by counting each letter).<sup>13</sup>

The second stage of elementary education, called *fidäl hawarya* (Apostle's alphabet), requires memorization of the First Epistle of St. John in four styles of vocal articulation. The first is *qutər*, referred to above, which entails monotone reading of the syllables in a regular rhythm. Next, the student begins a drill known as *gə'əz*, characterized as a 'chanting' (Haile 1971: 85) or 'singsong' style, similar to *qutər*, but with occasional ascents up the interval of a third (Abba Petros Gebre Selassie, 13 June 1978). After some months to master the *gə'əz* style, the student begins to learn *wərd nəbab* (reciting reading), a type of psalmody with an ascent to a reciting tone, which then adheres to the accent patterns and phrasing of the text; *wərd nəbab* is traditionally used within the liturgy on Good Friday and for the Epistles of St. Paul (Abba Petros Gebre Selassie, 6 June 1978). The final stage, *qum nəbab* (basic reading) or simply *nəbab*, is regular reading similar to *wərd nəbab* but faster, less sustained, and more formal in style.

During this second stage while the student is mastering oral performance of written liturgical texts, he begins the study of writing, preparing his own ink and reed pen, and until the relatively recent distribution of paper, practicing his penmanship on slates made of smooth ox bones or slabs of wood (Imbakom 1970: 7). From this point on reading, writing, memorization, and vocalization are intertwined in the learning process. It is noteworthy that writing is the last of the elements of literacy to be introduced.

The third stage of education is called *gəbra hawarya* (Acts of the

Apostles) and requires the students to read the Acts aloud with commentary by their teacher.<sup>14</sup> In this third stage young boys begin also to serve as choristers, having already acquired much of the liturgy through observation (Imbakom 1970: 4).

Once the students are able to read the Acts of the Apostles and other service books and have committed long portions to memory, they advance to the study of *Dawit* (The Psalms of David); the student must master reading the entire book in the various reading styles, a process that may take one or two years. In the final stage of the *Dawit* course, the student also commences *yäqal tēmhart* (voice study), classes that are held during the evening and night and where long sections of various prayerbooks are memorized and recited. The students memorize the *Wəddase Maryam* (Praise of Mary) and learn orally the Canticles of the Old and New Testaments. Although it is traditional for students to remain seated for reading classes, the entire *yäqal tēmhart*, also known as *yāmata tēmhart* (night study), is taken with the student standing. It therefore appears that the tradition of singing the hymnary (*Dəggwa*) while standing may reinforce the *däbtära*'s memory during liturgical performance by replicating postures learned during his student days (Imbakom 1971: 4-5).<sup>15</sup>

Throughout their years in the church school the young students maintain busy schedules, with day and evening classes and the further responsibility to help their teacher with tasks such as wood gathering and cultivation. They are further expected to attend prayers at church, with those who read fluently being asked to do so during the last week of Lent (Imbakom 1970: 6-7).

Successful mastery of *Dawit* constitutes completion of the church school and is an educational achievement celebrated with a family feast (Haile 1971: 88; Imbakom 1970: 8-9). After having successfully completed the elementary school between ages seven and twelve, students are confronted with several options. Most choose to be tested by the local bishop for certification as a deacon, which in the past brought use of church lands in return for performance of the Mass; a few years later young deacons could become priests.<sup>16</sup> Prospective *däbtəras* often become deacons as well since certification is frequently a prerequisite for admission to one of the specialized schools of musical studies. However, while ordinary deacons who may or may not aspire to the priesthood will remain in their natal parish, the *däbtära* is bound to leave home and to begin

his studies with a recognized teacher of the chant tradition (Young 1970: 147). Indeed, it has been suggested that the *däbtära*'s life was particularly attractive to students in the past because it necessarily included travel and residence at famous churches and monasteries (Young 1970: 145-6). According to Imbakom, the leavetaking of a young *däbtära*-to-be as in the past secret and planned with great care. Some young men changed their names so that their parents could not trace them and exert pressure to force them to return (Imbakom 1970: 13).

The young *däbtära* will, on the basis of word of mouth and advice from the *däbtäras* he knows, select a church or monastery at which to continue his advanced studies; in some cases, he may even seek out a particular master of *zema* (chant) with whom to study. Students are informally differentiated according to their commitment and character: those who wander from place to place are termed 'foot students,' while those who boast of their skills while in fact possessing only a limited repertory are termed 'mouth students.' In contrast, the truly devoted student, who is modest and studious, is called a 'heart student.' (Imbakom 1970: 18-19).

#### *Attending the Zema Bet (House of Chant)*

The most knowledgeable and ambitious of the young men will try to study at one of the major *zema* schools. The most prominent is the Bethlehem school, named after the Ethiopian monastery where it is located, some forty kilometers south of the town of Debre Tabor. The Bethlehem vocal style is in the late twentieth century performed in most major urban Ethiopian churches as well as taught in official church schools. Its primacy evidently dates from the period following the invasion of Ethiopia by Muslim forces between 1529-1541,<sup>17</sup> when, according to oral traditions, it was only at the Bethlehem monastery that a single Ethiopian hymnal survived the widespread destruction (Velat 1954: 27; Berhanu Makonnen, 3 September 1975). From that time forward, Bethlehem *zema* came to acquire such prestige that it is said that Saint Yared himself composed in this style (Berhanu Makonnen, 17 June 1975).

Although the Bethlehem style clearly dominates in modern Ethiopian liturgical performance practice, other regional 'schools' of vocal performance practice once existed, of which at least two are

still active. *Däbtäras* still train at the Qoma Fasilidas monastery in Begemder province and its exponents are represented both locally and at churches in the Ethiopian capital. Oral traditions suggest that the Qoma style was begun by a singer trained at Bethlehem who later lived in Qoma (Berhan Abiye, 8 September 1975); the fact that the Qoma Fasilidas monastery itself was founded only in the early seventeenth century, well after the dominance of the Bethlehem monastery was secure, renders this scenario plausible.<sup>18</sup> It is also interesting to note that while the Bethlehem vocal style is performed by the vast majority of modern singers, the Qoma school is said to have set the style for liturgical dance (Berhanu Makonnen, 11 September 1975). A third school of *zema* similar to that of Qoma, called Achaber, is associated with the Brur Maryam Monastery of northern Gojjam Province, where it is said to have arisen locally (Berhanu Makonnen, 9 September 1975).

Other schools of liturgical performance practice are also rumored 'barely to survive' (Berhanu Wedneh, 4 November 1986). It seems clear that Ethiopia's formidable geography as well as the relative independence of many local monasteries throughout the history of the Ethiopian Church provided an environment in which disparate regional musical styles flourished. Additionally, the patronage of Ethiopian emperors was a clear factor in establishing certain monasteries as centres for musical study. Oral traditions record that a sixteenth-century emperor designated Bethlehem as the official place of study (Berhanu Makonnen, 3 September 1975) and subsequent references in the Ethiopian chronicles make clear continued royal interest in Bethlehem (Guidi 1908: 168).<sup>19</sup> Qoma Fasilidas Monastery was established with the support of the emperor whose name it carries, and its singer later played a role in the performance of the liturgy at other imperial churches founded subsequently.<sup>20</sup> Only Brur Maryam appears to have been a purely local training centre, and its lack of imperial connections and corresponding marginal social status is clearly reflected in oral tradition:

There is the story of three sons. One was the son of the king, the second the son of an aristocrat, and the third of a poor man. The son of the king qualified in Bethlehem, the son of the aristocrat in Qoma, and the son of the poor man in Achaber (Tekle Mesheshe, 8 September 1975).

The study of chant follows a similar pattern in all traditional *zema* schools. Students participate in formal classes that last all day and continue with evening memorization classes after dinner (Imbakom

1970: 15). Acquisition of oral skills is emphasized during this process:

The student puts his book far from the teacher—the teacher must sing without looking. If he looks, he is a weak teacher. Everything should be taught orally by the teacher—he should know it by heart and so should the student. He should have it all by memory (Berhanu Makonnen, 12 September 1975).

Only on the major festivals is class not held while students spend the entire time in church, observing the performance of the liturgy.

It generally takes the student at least four years to achieve a grasp of *zema*. During this time, he consolidates his knowledge of the musical system and begins to function as a teacher to beginning students. Through observations and study, he learns how to select the precise hymnary portions to be performed on a given day from those of the required type and mode. He is also required to copy his own *Daggwa* complete with the signs of the indigenous Ethiopian system of musical notation.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Advanced Musical Studies*

After completing the *zema* school, many *däbtāras* gain employment at local churches. Although *däbtāras* are only required to command a general knowledge of Gə'əz language, the basic service books, and *zema*, it is traditional for a singer later to specialize in at least one area. This results in a compartmentalization of knowledge, with a given musician eventually coming to be regarded as an expert in one of a range of specializations, including *aqqwaqwam* (dance and instrumental usage), *qəne* (liturgical poetry), *zəmmare* (poetic forms performed on Sundays and holidays after the Mass), and *māwasə't* (liturgical portions performed on certain annual holidays and at funeral services).<sup>22</sup> Like the major schools of *zema*, each of these advanced studies is associated with a certain locale or monastery (Velat 1954: 27; Pankhurst 1955: 247; Imbakom 1970: 25).

Most important for the actual performance of the liturgy is study at one of the schools for *aqqwaqwam*, since both instrumental accompaniment and dance are incorporated into the performance of the *Daggwa*.<sup>23</sup> Training at the school of *aqqwaqwam* appears to be less structured than at other church schools, apparently because instrumental practice and dance are most effectively taught through observation. The very structure of the ranks of the *däbtāra* in fact

reflects this learning process, since the musicians are always led by a single musician who is the most learned and acknowledged as the 'guide' (Berhanu Makonnen, 7 June 1975). The other *däbtäras* follow his lead, while yet more junior *däbtäras*-in-training serve the others by bringing them their *sistra* and, occasionally, by drumming.

While in a school of liturgical specialization, the *däbtära* begins to assume a professional position. He begins to dress like the teacher,<sup>24</sup> making it 'hardly possible to tell at a glance which is teacher and which student' (Imbakom 1970: 23).

Once he completes the *aqwaqwa* school, the modern *däbtära* is usually assigned a place at which to teach.<sup>25</sup> Once established at a Church, he sings the *Daggwa* on Sundays and holidays, free the rest of the time to teach, study, and to perform funerals. Most churches have special quarters in which *däbtäras* live, and some *däbtäras* disdain any non-ecclesiastical activities, living from remuneration for copying church books and for performing other liturgical activities (Young 1970: 155-6). However, tradition and economic necessity moves many *däbtäras* into other areas as well.

#### *The Däbtära as Medicant, Merchant, and Healer*

Financial pressures mount on the young *däbtära* during his years at the *zema* school, and it is at this time that he begins to choose a particular vocational path that will largely determine his future. Almost all student *däbtäras* meet their own personal needs as well as those of their teachers by obtaining food or other goods as mendicants. But since *däbtäras*, like Ethiopian priests, are entitled to marry, supporting a wife and family often imposes further economic pressure. Thus many student *däbtäras* find that begging is not sufficient and many become merchants. Often the transition from mendicancy to commerce is made by begging crops, selling that which is not needed for personal consumption, and investing the profits from these activities in goods to be resold. The young *däbtära* would then move on to gathering wild grass in the lowlands, which could be dried and sold to weavers at markets. A number of student *däbtäras* meet with such success in their mercantile activity that they leave the church altogether. Notable examples are the butter merchants, who are often *däbtäras* who have invested their profits from gathering and begging in butter, which they transport to highland markets (Young 1970: 151-5).



Many *dābtāras* choose to become masters at *abənnāt* (lit., 'model, pattern, doctrine,' Leslau 1976: 134),<sup>26</sup> a wide-ranging group of esoteric works including herbal remedies, therapeutic performances, prophylactic amulets, and divinatory texts which are efficacious through the invocation of holy figures of the Church and/ or a *ganel* ('Evil spirit, demon,' *ganel* in Young, *ganen* according to Leslau 1976: 214). Although *abənnāt* is a common and lucrative sideline of *dābtāras*, it is not formally acknowledged in much of the literature (with the exception of the detailed description in Young 1970: 155-256, on which this discussion draws) nor was it mentioned by the *dābtāras* with whom I worked. Yet *abənnāt* is of great interest here because it provides another arena in which the *dābtāra* is heavily involved, one that, like music, where orality and literacy interact closely and which arises from economic necessity during the educational process.

Although in his use of herbal therapies the *dābtāra* resembles other secular healers, only he can prepare a *dəgam* (*dəgamt*, according to Leslau 1976: 199, 'incantation or charm', from the verb *dəg-gämä*, 'repeat, do again, recite prayers') which can be recited orally or written down and sewn in a *kətab* ('charm, amulet, talisman', from *kättäbä*, 'to vaccinate', Leslau 1976: 162). The *dəgam* contains a syncretic text drawing upon a wide range of Christian literary and liturgical books, the secret name of Jesus and God, and petitions for help (Young 1970: 157). The *dəgam* always has a stylized form which includes appeal for supernatural help, identification of the agent responsible for the misfortune, and a description of the faithful who is seeking aid. Thus the *dəgam* is dependent upon both Church literary and liturgical sources as well as Church power for its efficacy, while seeking to defeat supernatural elements well outside the bounds of Christianity. A young *dābtāra* begins to collect actively *abənnāt* knowledge as a student, expanding his repertory through trading with other *dābtāras* and by consulting treatises (Young 1970: 174-5).

Although a *dəgam* can be spoken or written, Young points out that most *dābtāras* prefer to sell a written *dəgam* since their public is largely illiterate and an oral version might well be transmitted further without their knowledge (Young 1970: 162). A recited *dəgam* must be spoken daily to be effective, while a written one is effective as long as it is undamaged and is renewed annually. However, a *dābtāra* will almost always recite an oral *dəgam* over the *kətab* before

presenting it to his client (Young 1970: 165). While most of the efficacy of the *dāgam* is derived from the power of the words, unusual graphic elements such as text deployed in a circle or talismanic drawings may be utilized to enhance its power. Although the parchment on which the text is written should be made to match the recipients height (Young 1970: 163), many young *dābtāras* initially prepare a dozen or so *katabs* before travelling to areas where more skilled healers are not available and there fill in a space which has been left blank for the name of the client (Young 1970: 170-1).

As his knowledge expands, the *dābtāra* learns to manipulate divinatory texts on behalf of a client, which, while enhancing his reputation and income, leads him to be classified as a *ṭānqway* ('magician, seer', Leslau 1976: 233), and to be associated with the manipulation of supernatural power (Young 1970: 176). These written texts are personalized to a client's needs, and provide information through arithmetical calculations: names, dates, and directions are given a set of numerical values, which are then interpreted by the *dābtāra*. From these texts a *dābtāra* extracts both a diagnosis and therapy (Young 1970: 180-2). Although some aspects of the divinatory texts are acquired from other *dābtāras*, the final text is likely to be the 'unique product of many adventitious deletions and additions' (Young 1970: 185).<sup>27</sup> Like the preparation of his own notated chant book from a synthesis of both written models and knowledge of oral tradition, the *dābtāra* creates divinatory texts in 'writing as internal dialogue' (Goody 1977: 160-1).<sup>28</sup>

It is clear that an increase in a *dābtāra*'s prestige is in a very real sense related to his increasing powers at manipulating oral remedies as opposed to the purely written *katab* distributed earlier in his career. Particularly in the area of 'pulling *ganel*s', invisible devils or demons who cause disease or misfortune, the *dābtāra* recites oral magical texts repeatedly until the *ganel* has been located and then engages him in conversation. After the *ganel* has responded, audible only to the healer, the *dābtāra* engages him in conversation, while all present hold prophylactic items and burn church incense to protect themselves from this evil spirit (Young 1970: 203-4). The *ganel* is then sent back to his abode, and the *dābtāra* reads church liturgical texts, combatting the *ganel* with an appropriate saint. Thus 'ganel-pulling' is largely an oral and aural activity, depending upon the particular *dābtāra*'s manipulation of both standard church and magical texts.

In general, the *däbtära* is consulted for more serious ailments because he can both identify the disease and the spirit causing the illness. Unlike secular healers, whose attitude toward therapy has been described as 'passive', the *däbtära* is recognized as an active and manipulative healer with a strong impact (Young 1970: 190-3).

### *The Däbtära in a Changing Ethiopia*

Although liturgical and musical education continues to be carried out in rural churches and monasteries, the twentieth century has seen major changes. An important factor was the establishment of the Ethiopian capital in Addis Ababa at the end of the last century, which resulted in a consolidation of Ethiopian church administration in the growing urban centre. The capital further attracted many clerics who were needed to service a proliferating number of churches.

By the mid twentieth century, a move to systematize theological education emerged as an outgrowth of Emperor Haile Selassie's broader initiative to establish a system of universal education in the country (Velat 1954: 25; Aymro and Joachim 1970: 127-8). In 1942, the Theological School was founded in Addis Ababa under the administration of the Ministry of Education; this institution became the Theological College of the Holy Trinity in 1960 (Balsvik 1985: 22).<sup>29</sup> In addition to reflecting the Emperor's conviction that all education should be modernized, including that of the Church, the initial founding of the Theological School was in part a practical response to the closing of many traditional church schools during the Italian occupation (1936-1941) and the murder of many traditional scholars during that period. The School's reconstitution as a College was likely further influenced by the founding of the University College in Addis Ababa some ten years earlier (Balsvik 1985: 21).

Following models from Western higher educational systems, the Theological College offers a four-year bachelor degree in subjects ranging from Ethiopian church law to comparative religion. Students tend to come to the school after having completed secular high schools in the capital and other large Ethiopian towns. Although traditional church education at rural churches and monasteries continues, the Theological College has had a significant impact on both educational patterns within the church and on

liturgical and musical transmission. To cite one telling example, during the 1960's and 1970's, the first attempts were made by Ethiopian *däbtāras* to list separately in a systematic manner the signs for musical notation that had earlier been incorporated only into their liturgical manuscripts.<sup>30</sup> Yet while the urbanization of Ethiopia has certainly played a role in the decline of traditional church education, Young suggests that it has in fact contributed to the *däbtāras*' prominence in cities and towns, giving them increased visibility (Young 1970: 193-4).

With the loss of Church land and related tax revenues in 1975 during the land reforms of the Ethiopian revolution,<sup>31</sup> a trend already evident among *däbtāras* to accept outside employment gained momentum (Tekle Mesheshe, 8 September 1975). In the words of a leading *däbtāra*, 'now they [the *däbtāras*] are ready to work everywhere the government asks' (Berhanu Makonnen, 7 June 1975).

#### *A Historical Note on the Däbtära's Role Among the Beta Israel*

In the past, a role identical to that played by the *däbtāra* in Ethiopian Christian liturgy and a broader world of healing practices was also found among the Beta Israel, a people who lived in north-western Ethiopia until their final emigration to Israel in 1991. Although the history of Beta Israel religious tradition and its possible connection to external Jewish sources has long been a subject of considerable speculation and debate,<sup>32</sup> recent ethnographic and historical research indicates that the Beta Israel religious tradition largely stems from interaction beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of indigenous peoples with Judaicized Ethiopian Christian monks.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the maintenance of a Gə'əz liturgy with close terminological, textual, and musical parallels to past and present Ethiopian Christian practice (Shelemay 1989: 99-295), the Beta Israel clerical structure also parallels that of the Church. The small Beta Israel clergy still active before their departure from Ethiopia consisted mainly of priests who performed the musical liturgy as well as carrying out all religious tasks; the few men still carrying the title of *däbtāra* among the Beta Israel by the late twentieth century were primarily priests who remarried in defiance of religious law after being widowed.<sup>34</sup> The paucity of *däbtāras* among the modern Beta Israel can be attributed both to the

high attrition rate in general among Beta Israel clergy since the late nineteenth century as well as to the fact that Beta Israel monks historically directed both transmission and performance of Beta Israel liturgy.

However, earlier sources confirm that the Beta Israel clergy in the past included *däbtāras* whose responsibilities were the same as those of their Christian colleagues. Nineteenth-century Jewish and Christian visitors to Ethiopia mention Beta Israel *däbtāras* in their memoirs (Halévy 1877; Stern [1862] 1968),<sup>35</sup> where they are described in general terms as scribes and learned men (Stern 1968: 252), and are noted specifically as copying Gə‘əz prayerbooks (Halévy 1877: 41). These accounts substantiate also the activity of Beta Israel *däbtāras* in traditional medicine: Halévy writes that Beta Israel *däbtāras* tried to present him with an amulet to insure his safety during his travels (1877: 41, 45). He further mentions *däbtāras* offering prayers for a dying man (*Ibid.*, p. 56), activity resembling that of Christian *däbtāras* who also officiated at funerals.

The presence of *däbtāras* among the Beta Israel is an index of the close historical relationship between what are usually presented as separate, if not diametrically opposed, Christian and Beta Israel religions, as well as a testimony to their interaction over time. As late as the nineteenth century, Beta Israel *däbtāras* sometimes studied at Christian schools affiliated with principal churches (Flad 1869: 32).<sup>36</sup> It is unfortunate that the vast majority of the twentieth-century literature has been so concerned with emphasizing the boundaries between Beta Israel and Ethiopian Christian practice that all opportunity has been lost to gain insight into their intense interaction.

### *Conclusion*

From the earliest days of his training, a *däbtāra* acquires multiple categories of knowledge, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, which he uses for religious purposes and economic gain, in service of the Church and traditional medicine. By virtue of both the information he possesses and the activities he undertakes, he occupies an ambivalent role in Ethiopian society. On the one hand, he is respected for his knowledge and for his manipulation of powerful words in sung, spoken, and written forms; at the same time, his very ability to manipulate the sacred and magical links him simul-

taneously to the most revered and feared elements in the world of Ethiopian belief. As has been noted above, the *däbtära* is represented in the existing Ethiopian literature and oral tradition almost solely as a musical specialist within the church. Indeed, nowhere is the focus fixed so rigidly upon these sanctioned aspects of the *däbtära*'s professional life as in the writings and comments of Ethiopians themselves. So rare are references to the *däbtära*'s role in medicine and magic, that the following disclaimer is worthy of quotation:

We have not included the *Awde-Negast*,<sup>37</sup> which deals with astrology, in the above mentioned categories of holy books. This is because it has been banned by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as being outside its approved disciplines. Nevertheless it is well known that many scholars and men of learning have put the knowledge derived from the study of the *Awde-Negast* to profitable use, and have helped their friends and harmed their enemies with it. Yet the book can be put in the service not only of what is evil but also of that which is good. It embodies sections that are the highly efficient and necessary aids to personal well being. In balance, however, the harm that can be done through the agency of this book far outweighs the good. This is the main reason for its exclusion from the list of holy books and wholesome learning (Imbakom 1970: 2).

It has been suggested elsewhere that the lack of formal acknowledgement of the *däbtära*'s role can be seen as an expression of Ethiopian ambivalence toward too much learning, which is believed to result in madness (Levine 1965: 173).<sup>38</sup>

The reason for neglect of the *däbtära* in the large literature by foreign scholars about Ethiopian religious and cultural life may be attributed both to the constraints of Ethiopian studies and those of the disciplines in which these various endeavors are situated. As was noted above, foreign Ethiopianists have tended to move from analyses of liturgical and literary texts to broader conclusions about the historical processes that shaped them. Yet as we have seen, both the texts themselves and their transmission and performance within and between several religious traditions are mediated by the *däbtäras*, who thereby inject a highly dynamic element.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, it seems clear that the *däbtäras* have been perceived by most outsiders strictly as musical specialists, following compartmentalized models of Western scholarship.<sup>40</sup> The special status of the *däbtära* between clergy and laity furthermore has few parallels in the broader Judeo-Christian tradition with which most Western scholars are familiar. If the close association of the *däbtära* with the spirit world and their power over *ganels* is regarded with extreme

ambivalence within Ethiopia, where the *ganel* is associated by the Church with *satan* (Young 1970: 6), it seems clear that similar misgivings may have silently informed the approach of those outsiders who in fact were aware of such activities.

The world and praxis of musicians often extend beyond musical performance into other realms, transcending narrowly circumscribed boundaries.<sup>41</sup> The Ethiopian *däbtära* provides a striking example of the manner in which Western notions of specialization have served to limit our understanding of these African religious practitioners.

#### NOTES

1. Amharic and Gə'əz words are transliterated according to the system set forth in Wolf Leslau, *Amharic Textbook*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967. Because plural markers are inconsistently used with Amharic nouns, the plural of the word *däbtära* is anglicized.

2. The *däbtära* is an unordained clergyman educated in ritual and musical practice. Although studies exist of the texts associated with or written by *däbtäras* (See, for example, M. Griaule, *Le Livre de Recettes d'un Dabtara Abyssin*. Université de Paris, Travaux et Memoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, No. 12 [1930] and D. Lifchitz, *Textes Éthiopiens Magico-Religieux*. Université de Paris, Travaux et Memoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, No. 38. [1940] ), less attention has been devoted to evaluating their roles and impact within Ethiopian religious practice more broadly defined. A short discussion of the *däbtära* based on historical research and ethnographic observation is found in Bernard Velat, 'Chantres, poètes, professeurs: Les Dabtara éthiopiens,' *Cahiers coptes* 5 (1954): 21-9. Two invaluable sources on church education provide information concerning the *däbtära*'s training. These include a personal account by Ethiopian priest and scholar Alaka Imbakom Kalewold (*Traditional Ethiopian Church Education*, translated by Menghestu Lemma. Publication of the Center for Education in Africa, Institute of International Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University. New York: Teachers College Press, 1970) and a broad survey by Sylvia Pankhurst (*Ethiopia, A Cultural History*. Essex: Lalibela House, 1955, pp. 232-66). A study of traditional medical practices by Alan Young ('Medical Beliefs and Practices of Begemder Amhara.' Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1970) provides otherwise unavailable information on *däbtäras*' activity in the domain of healing. My own ethnographic research with Ethiopian *däbtäras* was carried out between 1973-1975 in Addis Ababa; I gratefully acknowledge information provided by Aläqa Berhanu Makonnen, my primary teacher, as well as the help of research associates Berhan Abiye and Tekle Mesheshe. Additional details were later supplied by Tesfaye Nega of Jerusalem and Berhanu Wedneh of New York. Bishop Makarios (formerly Abba Petros Gebre Selassie) provided invaluable information from his own monastic and priestly education. Research associates are here cited by name and date of interview; in shortened references, Ethiopian authors and informants are referred to by their first names as in Ethiopian custom. For further information about the musical traditions transmitted by Ethiopian *däbtäras*, see Kay K. Shelemay and Peter Jeffery, editors, *Ethiopian Christian Liturgical Chant. An Anthology*, 3 volumes. Madison, Wisconsin: A.-R Editions, Inc, in press, research supported by funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

3. This method has been proposed by Lawrence A. Hoffman, who suggests that 'it is not the text, then, but the people who pray it, that should concern us' (*Beyond the Text. A Holistic Approach to Liturgy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 2). Given the esoteric nature of the Ethiopian liturgical tradition and the minimal participation of congregants within Ethiopian ritual orders, this discussion will of necessity focus on the people who in fact perform the texts (and their musical settings).

4. This discussion primarily recounts traditional educational process which transmitted domains of knowledge as well as engendered the wide range of activities undertaken by the *dābtāra*. Changes that have taken place in the twentieth century as a result of urbanization and the centralization of church leadership in the Ethiopian capital, and the subsequent disruption of church activities since 1974 resulting from social and economic changes, will be addressed afterwards.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,' in *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, ed. Richard Brown. London: Tavistock Publications, 1973.

6. Colorful tales concerning Yared's life and creative activity are recorded in the Ethiopian synaxarion (See Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928, pp. 875-7) and in his life history (C. Conti Rossini, *Vitae Sanctorum Antiquiorum, Volume 1. Acta Yared et Pantalewon*. Scriptorum Aethiopicorum, 9-10. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 26-27. Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1955).

7. This term, here used to acknowledge the close kinship between myth and history and the manner in which the two interact to comprise 'shared truths' that underpin the Ethiopian world view, is borrowed from William McNeill's 'Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians', in *Mythistory and Other Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 1-22.

8. Getatchew Haile has questioned this traditional chronology, dating the reign of Emperor Gebre Mesqel, to whose period Saint Yared's musical activity is usually attributed, to the late ninth century ('A New Look at Some Dates of Early Ethiopian History'. *Le Muséon* 95 [3-4] [1982]: 311-22).

9. All the *dābtāras* with whom I worked reported beginning school at early ages. One specified that he began studying at the age of 'four years and four months' (Berhanu Wedneh, 4 November 1986), while a second recalled that he 'studied as a baby' (Tekle Mesheshe, 6 September 1975).

10. All but one of my research associates reported having fathers and grandfathers who were either *dābtāras* or priests; one claimed to be a fifth-generation *dābtāra* (Berhanu Wedneh, 4 November 1986).

11. The twentieth century has seen a systematization of theological education involving a change in requirements to emphasize ability rather than hereditary status: 'In the past priests were chosen from traditional priestly families and so formed almost a Levitical cast. The new regulations provide that the clergy must be of good character and ability. A true reform will be effected in time' (Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, editors. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*. Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970, p. 128).

12. The Gə'əz syllabary consists of twenty-six consonants, each of which occurs in seven different forms modified to accommodate the seven vowels.

13. Haile Gabriel Dagne, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Church School System,' in *The Church of Ethiopia. A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1971, p. 84.

14. The translation and interpretation (*targum*) of the Ethiopic sacred literature into the vernacular (Amharic) is one of the four branches of traditional church higher education, along with *qəne* (poetry), *zema* (chant) and *qəddase* (the Mass),



*Tərgum* translates the Gə'əz text, provides a traditional exegesis, and may further interpolate detailed personal histories of various Biblical figures and saints (Friedrich Heyer, *Die Kirche Äthiopiens*. Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1971, pp. 140-150). Although *tərgum* existed initially as an oral tradition, much of the corpus has been committed to writing.

15. Philosophers have argued for a class of memories encoded as physical habits, which in contrast to personal and cognitive memories, insure retention through a 'motor mechanism' (Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 22-23). Connerton argues that habit-memories, which he terms 'bodily practices', are particularly important in preserving commemorative ceremonies, of which liturgical performance is a prime example (*Ibid*: 72).

16. Some deacons who wish to be priests continue their studies at the *qaddase bet*, where they are trained in the liturgy used for the Mass; the rest is learned through observation. Since most churches have a teacher who has specialized in *qaddase*, prospective priests do not have to leave home for further training (Haile 1971: 88).

17. For a discussion of the general impact of this invasion, see J. Spencer Trimingham's *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1952. For its effect on Ethiopian literature, see Getatchew Haile, 'Religious Controversies and the Growth of Ethiopic Literature in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *Oriens Christianus* 4th ser 65 (1982), p. 133.

18. I thank Donald Crummey for a private communication confirming this dating through his recent research on the founding, property, and inventory of important Ethiopian churches.

19. I. Guidi, *Annales Iohannis I, Uyasu I, Bakaffa. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*. Scriptores Aethiopici, ser. Altera, Tomus 5 (1903-1905).

20. Four clergymen from Qoma are recorded as having served at the Narga Church built by Emperor Iyasu II (1730-1755) at Lake Tana. See S. Euringer, 'Die Geschichte von Nārgä', *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete*, Band 10 (1934-1935): 160.

21. The signs (*mələkkat*) of the Ethiopian Christian notational system are interlinear signs consisting of one or more characters from the Ethiopic syllabary. Each sign is an abbreviated form of a word or phrase from the text of a well-known liturgical portion and cues the particular melody associated with that source text. The notational system dates from a period of liturgical regeneration following the sixteenth-century Muslim invasion. For a full discussion of the content of Ethiopian Christian notational system, its history, and a dictionary of its signs, see Shelemay and Jeffery, *Ethiopian Christian Liturgical Chant, An Anthology*.

22. The order of attending different advanced schools varies according to regional traditions and the skill of the student (Berhanu Makonnen, 12 September 1975).

23. Most chants are first sung unaccompanied and then repeated several times, accompanied in each subsequent rendition by the motion of the prayer staff (*māqwamiya*), the rhythms of the sistrum (*ṣānaṣəl*) and drum (*käbäro*), and liturgical dance (*aqqwaqwam*).

24. The *däbtära* traditionally wears a white turban and robes. He is obligated both to cover his head during liturgical performance and to wash before praying. In the past, *däbtäras* at large churches and monasteries patronized by the aristocracy received elaborate vestments (Berhanu Makonnen, 8 June 1975).

25. It is clear that an individual may disregard such an assignment, as in the case of one of my research associates, who ignored a request that he teach in the provinces and instead came directly to Addis Ababa.

26. Wolf Leslau, *Concise Amharic Dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976.

27. By the mid-twentieth century, some texts had been published in collections and began to be consulted by *dābtāras*. Young points out that the availability of such books did not diminish the *dābtāras*' clientele, both because of the inability of a largely illiterate public to read such books and because of a strong fear of tampering with spiritual matters (Young 1970: 185, n. 30).

28. Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

29. Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*. East Lansing, Michigan: African Studies Center and the Norwegian Council of Science and Humanities, 1985. A publication of the Ethiopian Orthodox Mission states that the Theological College of the Holy Trinity was founded in 1962 (Aymro and Joachim 1970: 129).

30. The first published lists are those of the Theological College, *Yāqəddus Yared Tarikanna Yāzəməw Mələkkətoch* (The History of Saint Yared and the Signs of the Chant; [in Amharic]). Addis Ababa: Tənsa'a Zaguba'e, 1967, and Abba Tito Lepisa, 'The Three Modes and the Signs of the Songs in the Ethiopian Liturgy', in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa, 1966, vol. 2, pp. 162-87, Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1970. Berhanu Makonnen prepared his own list, *Sāləqəddus Yared Tarik* (Concerning the History of Saint Yared, mimeographed typescript [in Amharic] n.d.). Other *dābtāras* have also drafted their own handwritten lists of signs. See Shelemay and Jeffery, in press, vol. 1, for additional details.

31. Both rural and urban land were nationalized, with loss of the former having a particularly devastating impact upon the Church, one of the largest owners of rural property. See John W. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation. The Quest for the Post-Imperial State*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1988, pp. 130-44.

32. The literature concerning Beta Israel religious history and identity is too extensive to cite here. For the most recent overview of these publications, see Steven Kaplan and Shoshana Ben-Dor's *Ethiopian Jewry. An Annotated Bibliography*. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1988.

33. For a detailed survey of the basis of this perspective derived from ethnographic research, see Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989. For a discussion of further literary and historical evidence of Ethiopian Christian influence upon Beta Israel religion, see Steven Kaplan, "'Falasha' Religion: Ancient Judaism or Evolving Ethiopian Tradition? A Review Article', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 79 (1) (1988), pp. 49-65, and *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia. From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, forthcoming 1992.

34. Wolf Leslau briefly mentions this phenomenon in *Falasha Anthology. The Black Jews of Ethiopia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951, p. xxiii. See also Shelemay 1989: 78.

35. J. Halévy, *Travels in Abyssinia*. Translated by James Picciotto. London: Wertheimer, Lea, and Co. 1877; Henry A. Stern, *Wandering Among the Falashas in Abyssinia*. 2nd ed., with a new introduction by Robert L. Hess. London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd., 1968. Originally published 1862.

36. Johann M. Flad, *The Falashas (Jews) of Abyssinia*. Translated by S.P. Goodhart. London: William Macintosh, 1869.

37. The *awdunəgəst* is a category of texts with which a *dābtāra* divines through mathematical calculations. For further details, see Young 1970: 180-6. Although some of these texts are in part astrological, most provide prophylactic, diagnostic, and magical information as well.

38. Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold. Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

39. These suggestions may seem predictable to those who study African religions outside of Ethiopia, where research such as that by Jan Vansina on the role of oral tradition has broken new theoretical and methodological grounds (Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). In contrast, and largely because of the extensive manuscript tradition that first sparked outside scholarly interest, Ethiopian studies was from its inception philological and historical. Ethnography has come of age in Ethiopian studies only during the second half of the twentieth century.

40. Clear exceptions are Levine 1965 and Young 1970.

41. Within Ethiopia, other musicians are linked to healing; for example, the music of the *labibela* is said to ward off leprosy (See Kay K. Shelemay, 'The Music of the *Lālibēloč*: Musical Mendicants in Ethiopia,' *Journal of African Studies* 9[3][1982]: 130-1). Numerous other instances of music and healing have been documented by ethnomusicologists. See Paul F. Berliner, *The Soul of Mbir*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance. A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*. Translated and revised by Brunhilde Biebuyck in collaboration with the author. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. Originally published as *La Musique et la transe: Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*. Editions Gallimard, 1980; and Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds: Music and Medicine in the Malaysian Rain Forest*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.