

# ETHIOPIA Vol 1 Music of the Central Highlands

ጊታዊት



Jean Jenkins  
Horniman Museum

*Nili Fontes secundum Ptolemaean*

*Montes Lunæ Ptolemæi*



# ETHIOPIA Vol 1 Music of the Central Highlands

Ethiopia, with its high mountains, vast deserts, its Rift Valley lakes, and its Blue Nile River, contains equally diverse peoples within its borders. Some are farmers, some pastoralists, and others hunt and practise a little shifting cultivation; some speak Semitic languages and others Cushitic; some are monophysite Christians, some Moslems, while a small Judaic sect still exists and many peoples, especially in the south-west, are animists. They are all part of the Ethiopian Empire.

To most people, however, Ethiopia means the Central Highlands. Here there is an ancient Christianity, where Semitic-speaking farmers live in much the same way as their ancestors have for the past two thousand years, when Axum was a great and flourishing kingdom. Their ruler claims descent from the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Fiercely independent, they have resisted repeated Moslem invasions, and more recently, that of the Italians under Mussolini. The music of the Central Highlands reflects very clearly the traditional life of the Amhara and Tigré peoples.

## SIDE I

1. Part of the Mass (*Qeddase*) of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church (taken from the Anaphora of St. Dioscorus; recorded in the Chapel of the Imperial Palace, Asmara, 1969, by the Abuna Mikael Gebre Egziabiher, assisted by Aba Debre Zion Mulatu and Aberra Wossenu).

This type of liturgical music is the central part of every church service. It is sung in Ge'ez (old Ethiopic), uses three modal scales, and has its own musical notation. The Ethiopians have fourteen anaphora or gospels (the Egyptians Copts have only preserved three). That of St. Dioscoros is heard here; he was the 25th Patriarch of Alexandria, who, because of his insistence on the single divine nature of Christ during the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century, is one of the great saints of the monophysite churches.

2. The music of the Ethiopian church is reputed to have been created by St. Yared in the sixth century. The likelihood is, however, that their music is closely allied to that of the Syrian Antioch church of the fourth and fifth centuries. Since the Council of Chalcedon, the Ethiopian Christians have been isolated from the rest of the Christian world, and their music may therefore be the most ancient church music in existence. Their priests still beat the large drums and dance before the *tabot* (which symbolizes the Ark of the Covenant); priests and congregation use the sistrum, whose gentle tinkling sound can be heard in this service.

3. Ethiopian funerals differ from those of most other Christians in that a professional wailer or *alqash* is employed. It is his task to compose a lamentation in honour of the dead person; this is interspersed with cries of "Wai, wai" in which all the mourners join. This lamentation is composed by Adisie Fedjer, aged 80, of Wuchale, Ambassel district of Wollo province. A famous *alqash* may live two or three days' journey by mule from the place of the funeral, but if his *luxo* (lamentation) is renowned, he will be summoned notwithstanding.

4. The Judaic Falasha are an Agao group, speaking Qwara in their daily life, but using Ge'ez for their religious music. They are supposed to owe their religious beliefs partly to pre-Christian Judaism, but more to emigration of Jews from South-Arabia about a thousand years ago. Religion plays a large part in their life, and daily prayers, one of which is heard here, are observed every morning. A drum—water jar covered with skin—is used, as is a suspended iron bar beaten with a thin piece of iron. The Falasha are craftsmen: blacksmiths, potters and weavers. They farm in the region of Lake Tana, Beghemdir province, usually in isolated hamlets such as Amhober, where this music was recorded.

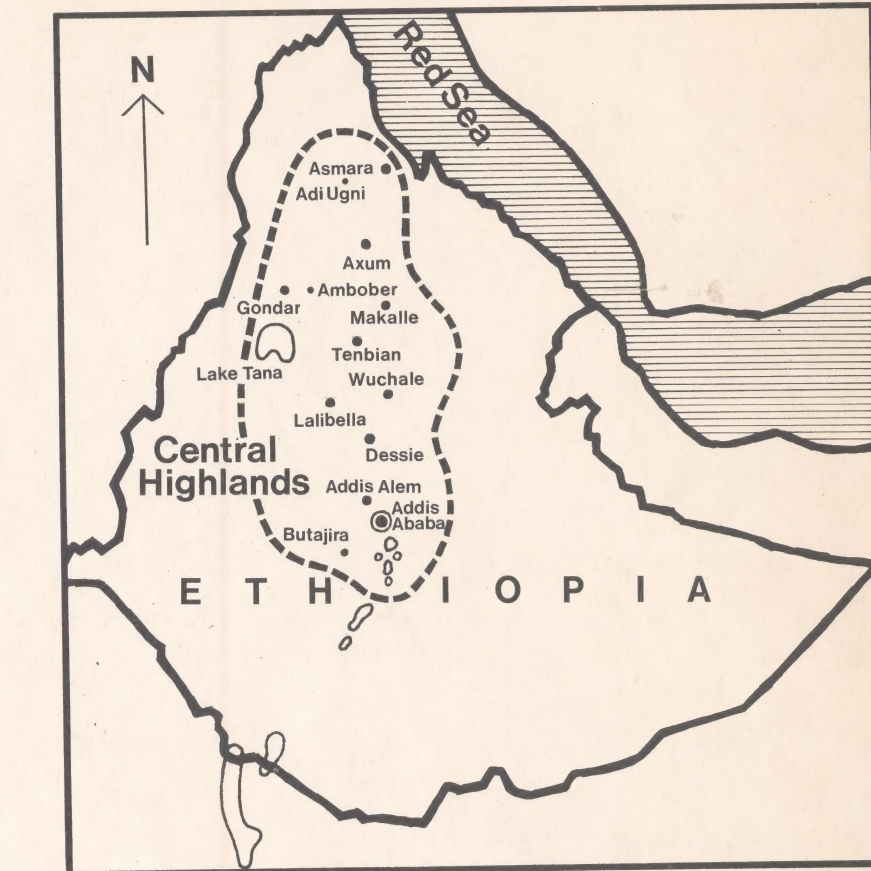
5. The Biblical "harp of David" was in fact a box-lyre similar to that of the Ethiopian *Bagana*. It is a tall instrument, and its deep-toned strings produce a slightly buzzing sound. This is a noble instrument in both senses of the word, for it is played by the Ethiopian nobility and some educated priests, who use it to accompany religious allegories. Here the Aleka Tessema Wolde Amanuel of Shoa province is singing about Herod's decree to slay all male children under the age of two at the time of Christ's birth, and contrasting the situation with to-day, when all children have a chance to live.

## SIDE II

1. One type of traditional music is held in high esteem all over the Central Highlands. It is called "wax and gold" music (from the concept of gold casting, in which a wax model is made, a clay mould is fitted around it, the mould is heated and the wax flows out of a small hole through which the molten gold is poured). The "wax" is the love of a region, and the "gold" the love of a woman. Wollo province is noted for its *azmaris*, as the creators and singers of this wax and gold music are called, and Bahru Qenyé (see photograph) who is singing "Batie" on this band is among the most famous of these, for he is a master of the play on words, or puns, which this music requires. He accompanies himself on the one-stringed fiddle *masenqo* whose horse-hair string is fingered from the side.

2. Simple notched flutes with three or four fingerholes are found throughout the Central Highlands. This one was recorded near Abbi-Addi, in the Tenhien region of Tigré province, where a boy herding cattle sat on a rock playing his *washint*. The instrument, held vertically, is somewhat difficult to play and his hard breathing is clearly audible, as is the wind which blows constantly in these high plateau regions.

3. The "*skista*" is a dance often performed at weddings. Here in Axum, the ancient capital of a powerful kingdom, a large group of girls and young men are singing and dancing to the accompaniment of all the instruments of the area. The *embilta* are long notched flutes, each of which gives one note only. The *embilta* undoubtedly come from the flute ensembles of the Cushitic people in southern Ethiopia, but by now they are so much a part of the musical scene in the Central Highlands, that it would be impossible to imagine a wedding, a feast, a procession or a welcome to guests without these instruments. The *malakat* or long trumpet adds a lower note; the one-stringed fiddle *masenqo*



is played by an *azmari*, and the large *kebero* or church drums further enliven the scene. The girls clap and ululate making a joyful sound.

4. Another traditional stringed instrument is widespread in the Central Highlands. This is the *kerar* or bowl-lyre, often used to accompany historical ballads, hard-time songs and love songs. It is often heard in the *tejbets* or liquor houses (*tej* is fermented honey, or mead, and is the national drink of Ethiopia). The *kerar* is sometimes played by women and here Taitu Kassa of Gondar is singing a love song.

5. The Gurage live in the southern part of the Central Highlands, although they may have come from the north. They speak a Semitic language of their own, but their way of life has been considerably influenced by the Sidamo people around them. Their staple food, for example, is not the *injira* and *wat*, found throughout the Central Highlands, but *Ensete*, the root of the false banana tree. Their music is also different and clearly shows its Sidamo ancestry. It has great vigour, as this short dance, recorded in the large Gurage town of Butajira, indicates.

6. "Incitement-into-battle" songs are variously called *fukera*, *shillele* or *karatu*. Since the Amhara are fierce warriors, such songs or recitatives are common. They tell of brave deeds, taunt cowards, and lead up to the moment of advance. This one, recalling the deeds of the Emperor Menelik and Ras Mengesha a century ago, was recorded in Gondar, Beghemdir province.

7. A great gathering in Adi Ugri, Serae district, Eritrea province, was heralded by the *embiltas* or notched single-note flutes; other instruments, singers, and dancers joined in later.



Masenqo player

Recordings and Notes  
by Jean Jenkins  
Horniman Museum.  
Design: Peter Spurrier

Tangent Records  
Suite 11, 52 Shaftesbury Ave.,  
London W1.



Volume 2 Music of the Desert Nomads  
Volume 3 Music of Eritrea



33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub>  
side 1  
mono



BOS. PL

All rights of the manufacturers and  
the owner of the recorded work  
reserved. Unauthorised public per-  
formance, broadcasting, and copying  
of this record prohibited. © 1970

Made in England

TGM 101

ETHIOPIA  
VOL 1  
**Music of the  
Central  
Highlands**  
Jean Jenkins



33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub>  
side 2  
mono



All rights of the manufacturers and the owner of the recorded work reserved. Unauthorised public performance, broadcasting, and copying of this record prohibited. © 1970

Made in England

TGM 101

ETHIOPIA  
VOL 1  
**Music of the  
Central  
Highlands**  
Jean Jenkins