

## MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AND SELF-DESIGNATION OF ETHIOPIAN MINSTRELS: AZMARI

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**ABSTRACT** The performance of Ethiopian minstrels (Az mari) in the Gondar area of Northern Ethiopia can be seen in various social settings including life cycle celebrations, annual events of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, Zar-spirit possession, etc. The abundance of musical activities counters the dominant image of Az mari as musicians just found in local bars. Moreover, Az mari in Gondar share a self-designation based on genealogical ties. The paper treats their folk category as well as genealogy and code of communication as self-imposed group markers that strictly distinguish the in-group. The paper tries to reconstruct the people who have been known as "Az mari" from the above perspectives.

**Key Words:** Musical activities; Az mari; Self-imposed group markers.

### BACKGROUND

There is a tendency of society to differentiate groups or people according to various kinds of social factors such as economic status, kinship, the type of occupation, generation, etc. This paper intends to make a preliminary analysis of self-imposed group markers of Ethiopian minstrels which separates them from the rest of the society.

Anybody who drops by local bars in the Ethiopian highland areas might encounter a musician playing a one-stringed fiddle with a diamond-shaped wooden body frame called *masinqo*. Az mari, surely, is the familiar face of the music culture in Ethiopia. During the feudal era in Ethiopian history, Az mari were singers serving princes and the nobility as part of court retinue and playing multiple roles, while many of them were believed to travel around entertaining the local people and receiving food, cattle and financial rewards in return. They also followed troops into battle and sang to encourage the soldiers (Kebede, 1971)

A few decades have passed since ethnomusicologists (Pawne, 1968; Kebede, 1971; Kimberlin, 1976) referred to the instrumentation and melodic characteristics of Az mari music, and gave a general description of Az mari. This paper, to a certain extent, benefited from these works. However, their description of Az mari tended to be quite vague. Their ambiguous relation with society (Bolay, 1999), their fluid character and the apparent lack of detailed research from the ethnological viewpoint based on fieldwork could be the reason for that.

The paper will first describe the characteristics of Az mari musical performance in Gondar according to the various social settings in their local context, before reconsidering the musicians who have been simply known as

“Az mari” from several perspectives including a preliminary analysis on self-designation in their folk category, genealogy and language.

## AZMARI IN GONDAR

Gondar city, which is located north of Lake Tana (the source of the Blue Nile), is known for its high population density of Az mari, who are engaged in musical activities. They originally come from the nearby villages and rent rooms in Kebele 11 just beside Fasil castle. *Bourbox*, *Enfranz*, *Sakkart*, *Wogara*, *Bahir Gumb* and *Amora Gadel* are the major villages where they come from. Among their villages of origin, *Bourbox*, which is about 24 km from the city, shares 64% of the Az mari population in the city.

Although Az mari tend to be described as wandering or strolling minstrels, they do not actually move around from city to city. They are, rather, sticking to a particular city where they can find relatives and engage in musical activities. It is said that they return to their villages and settle when they become too old to play music.

There is another type of Az mari performer who follow a seasonal schedule, this group usually live as farmers in the village. The seasons for their musical activities fall in September after the festival season around the Ethiopian New Year, and in December after the harvest time of *tef* when they are free from agricultural activities.

## SETTINGS FOR AZMARI PERFORMANCE

Az mari usually perform in local bars such as *bunna bet*, *tala bet* and *tedj bet*, where people enjoy alcoholic drinks and musical entertainment. These are the dominant settings for Az mari performances. In the past the Az mari were viewed as merely singers who performed in local bars and they were subject to stereotyped images. However, the variety of musical activities practiced by Az mari in Gondar offer us an opportunity to rethink this dominant view. With this in mind, I would like to describe the broader social contexts where Az mari performances are held or required.

Festivities and rituals are also important occasions for Az mari to play music. In Gondar, Az mari performances are in strong demand in life cycle celebrations or ceremonies, such as baptisms and weddings. At a wedding, they are expected to lead the bride and groom in procession praising the couple and wishing them a happy marriage.

The annual celebrations of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church such as *Timket*, *Qidus Yohannes*, and *Meskel* are the primary setting for religious occasions. On *Qidus Yohannes*, the Ethiopian New Year's Day, one may observe groups of Az mari all over the city visiting from house to house, blessing people for the coming year. But there are cases when they are brushed aside as if they were

importunate beggars. In *Timket*, several Azmari accompany the *Tabot* (the ark of covenant) from the church, playing *Zerasennya*, which is regarded as the spiritual song among their repertoires.

On the other hand, Azmari performance can be required for *Zar* cult, which has been considered a traditional cult in Christian Amhara society. It might seem a contradictory combination, yet *Zar* is regularly held on local saints' holidays of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, such as *Sane-Michael* in June, *Qidus Yohannes* in September, and *Hidar-Michael* in November. Moreover, *Zar* can be held at random times when requested by an ailing patient. Thus, it has a function as a curing ceremony. However, local priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church denounce *Zar* as an old tradition contrary to the teaching of Christianity. In *Zar*, *Bale Kole*, someone who is possessed by a spirit gives cues to the performing Azmari, indicating the songs and the tempo. The Azmari takes the role of evocation of the spirit by playing its favorite songs, even praising *Bale Kole* and the spirit in ad-lib fashion. Then, the Azmari repeats the words of *Bale Kole* and sings for the audience.

Azmari performances can also be seen during agricultural activities such as the harvest time of *tef*. In the one I witnessed, people worked rhythmically to an Azmari who was playing the type of war-song called *shillela*, a song traditionally performed to rouse a warrior before battle.

The venues where they play are not limited to the performers' own religious denomination. One musician has the option of playing on Christian, Muslim or other traditional religious occasions.

In Gondar, the younger Azmari generation (teenagers), who are "pushed away" from the above setting of musical activities by adult Azmari, tend to find their place to work in recreation centers where people fill their spare time, and also in front of historical ruins such as the *Fasillades* Pool-targeting mainly the group of tourists.

In recent years, the settings for Azmari performance have spread even to some European countries due to musical events organized by foreign producers. *Azmaribet* in Addis Ababa has received increased attention, too. *Azmaribet*, found in *Kasanchis and Yohannes seffar*, are the kind of cabaret where people can particularly enjoy Azmari performances. Each Azmari belongs exclusively to a particular *Azmaribet*. *Azmaribet* have flourished throughout Addis Ababa, since the fall of the Derg government in 1991. Indeed, many Azmari informants in Gondar expressed their intention to leave for Addis Ababa in search of a job. Those Azmari who are working for *Azmaribet* in towns and cities are viewed as rich and successful. This might be one of the reasons for the recent trend of rural-to-urban Azmari migration.

## AZMARI SONG TEXT

Frequent themes of Azmari songs are love in allusive or idealized forms and past glories and exploits of heroes. A fierce sort of repertoire, such as *Shillela*,

is played in *tedj bet* by elderly Azmaris, whereas songs such as *Medina* and *Zelasennya* are about religious beliefs and concepts which are associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The younger generations quite often imitate the songs they hear from recorded Azmari cassettes such as *Yirga Dubale* and *Yeshimabet Dubale* and Ethiopian pop tunes.

However, when it comes to Azmari performances, it is important to mention that the lyrics can be largely improvised or sung with the art of double meaning called *Qene* or *Semmnaworq* (literally, 'wax and gold'). It is a prominent characteristic aspect of the lyrics of Azmari. Wax refers to the literal sense of the lyrics, and as the wax melts, gold, which is the hidden message, slowly emerges. The audience cannot take the lyrics literally, they are challenged to listen carefully to get the "golden" sense. They praise particular individuals in the audience through the songs to uplift their feelings. Azmari accept spontaneous verses from some audience members and incorporate them into the music. The improvisation is expected from the audience equally as from the musician. These are prominently comprised of *Fukkara* (self-boasting sung by a man with a loud voice). In this way, the musician is able to involve the general audience in the singing performance. To be a good Azmari, one should not miss the lyrics thrown from the audience, but set to a familiar melody a spontaneously composed rhyming text called *Bet meta* and *Bet daffa*, concerning persons and events of immediate interest. The skill in improvisation of Azmari is as important as their skill in playing *masinqo* or the quality of their voice.

## AZMARI FOLK CATEGORIES AND SELF-DESIGNATION

According to Kimberlin (1976) and Bolay (1999), the word Azmari is derived from the Geez word *Zammara*, which means "he sang", or 'one who praises God'. Today, the concept mainly applies to professional *masinqo* players and the female singers accompanying them. However, it seems that the word "Azmari" carries a negative image among Amharic speakers due to the stigma of this profession. The word Azmari can also be used to mean 'the one who talks too much', and some people continue to consider this job as low class even as a beggar.

Azmari is a term mainly used by non-Azmaris. The Azmari people identify and prefer to call themselves *Enzata*. The term *Enzata*, which is a self-designation as opposed to "Azmari", distinguishes the in-group and allows them to retain a concept of authenticity in their self-named category.

To be *Enzata*, one has to be the descendant of *Enzata*. Thus, the word has the implication of shared genealogical ties. Those people who do not belong to this category are called *Buga*. It is noteworthy that Leslau (1964), who did a survey on the Azmari argot, mentioned that the term *Buga* had a meaning of "animal". It is unclear if, in this term, a sort of superiority of *Enzata* to the people who do not belong to their category can be found. But it seems possible to say that the term does not mean "animal" nowadays, rather simply non-*Enzata*.

If someone who is not from an *Enzata* family background becomes a skilful *masinqo* player, people may call him Azmari. Nevertheless, he would be distinguished from the in-group because they would call him *Buga*. At the same time, those who are born of *Enzata* descent but not engaged in playing music are regarded as *Gimashi Enzata* (or *Bugazata*), meaning half *Enzata*.

### ENZATA-BUGA RELATIONS

It is desirable for *Enzata* to marry a person with a *Enzata* family background from another *Enzata* village in Gondar region. Therefore, complex networks of *Enzata* in-group marriage exist in Gondar. Furthermore, when choosing a marital partner, there is awareness and performance for a partner of *Enzata* descent, thus, there is a desired sharing of genealogical ties among them. For the 120 couples of 3 villages –*Bourbox*, *Sakkarto* and *Bahir Gumb*, marriages between persons of *Enzata* descent amounted to 89%. Therefore, the strong genealogical preference for *Enzata* becomes clear. But it does not always mean the marriage between *Enzata* and *Buga* is something undesirable, although when this happens, some *Enzata* consider it as “*Sabro gebba*” which can be approximately translated as “break into a house (family)”. Most Azmari who are engaged in musical activities in Gondar city were actually *Enzata*. Furthermore, they tend to stick together in their daily life when they are away from the musical activities. *Enzata* try to maintain a cordial but “superficial” relationship with *Buga* (especially since they might be their audience in the future).

### A SECRET ARGOT

In addition to the system of in-group marriage, communication through a secret argot allows *Enzata* to share a sense of community and exclusivity. Moreover, it helps as a means of exchanging information they do not want outsiders (*Buga*) to know. Because of this and due to the high degree of unintelligibility with Amharic, it is often considered by the group as a “language” on its own, called *Énzatéñña* or *Énzatlanq<sup>w</sup>a*. Communication by the argot can occur most advantageously when used during performances in front of an audience of *Buga* (Kawase, 2005). It is strictly taboo to share the argot with outsiders. The argot is formed on the basis of Amharic, but it can vary slightly according to generation and place. Several viewpoints can be put forward in tracing the origin of the argot. Leslau (1964) indicates that the great majority of the vocabulary of the argot are a deformation of Amharic words and it also borrows vocabulary from other languages such as Agäw, Sidaama and Oromo. In relation to the argot of *Enzata*, it is worth noting *yäwäf q<sup>w</sup>anq<sup>w</sup>a* (Amh. ‘bird’s language’), different codes of words used by young kids and adolescents. Both follow similar rules of reduplication of the root with a consonant inserted between the reduplicates. Also the argot of *Lalibaločč*, the dawn singers coming

from Goggam, northern Šäwa and Wällo, share a lot of common words with the argot of *Enzata*.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article attempted to reconsider the people who have been known as “Azmari” based on self-imposed group markers, rather than just treating them from the musical perspective. The use of self-imposed group markers, such as folk categories, genealogy and an argot, separates the in-group (*Enzata*) from the surrounding dominant populations.

In recent years, Azmari’s performance settings have spread even to some European countries due to the musical events organized by foreign producers. Also *Azmari-bet*, the clubs where people can particularly enjoy Azmari performances, in Addis Ababa have been receiving increased attention. Taking these trends into consideration, future research requires further exploration into how their own “markers” will be maintained or challenged through time and space.

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