

**From Ambivalence to Acceptance – International Conference on *Azmari* in Ethiopia, University of Hildesheim, 6 – 8 January 2012**

The first international conference dedicated exclusively to the *azmari*, the traditional itinerant singer of northern Ethiopia, was held during three days, from 6 – 8 January 2012, at the Center for World Music, University of Hildesheim in Germany. The conference, with the title “From Ambivalence to Acceptance – International Conference on *Azmari* in Ethiopia”, brought together 24 participants, internationally acclaimed experts in the field as well as young scholars, from Ethiopia, the United States, Europe and Japan. The conference was jointly organized by Prof. Wolfgang Bender, former director of the Center of World Music, Getie Gelaye from Hamburg University and Andreas Wetter from Humboldt University in Berlin.

The presented papers approached the subject “*azmari*” from different angles and were organized in different sessions. The first and second days of the conference each began with a keynote address. The meeting was opened by the pioneer in Ethiopian musicology Cynthia Tse Kimberlin (Point Richmond) who gave an impressive keynote entitled “The *Azmari* as the Face of Janus: What was, what is, and what could be” in which she talked about the change of the concept “*azmari*” over the last half century and her ethno-musicological observations on “*masinqo* construction determinants of sound, music transcriptions as analytical constructs, extra-musical considerations, comparative studies showing possible Africa-Asia connections, and the impact of the *azmari* on popular and art music”. Timkehet Teffera (Berlin) gave the keynote on the second day which was an enthusiastic account of the life of the great Asnaketch Worku, with the title “Female *Azmari* (Musicians) in Past and Present: Honoring the Music Legend, Asnaketch Worku”.

The contributions of the first session investigated various historical aspects of the *azmari*, discussing the change in attitudes towards the *azmari* and their changing role in the society. The session contained the following presentations: “The Role of the *Azmari* in the Life of the Ethiopian Church: A Paradox?”, a committed and critical talk on the relationship between *azmari* and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, by Merigeta Dawit Kefyalew (Nürnberg); “The Transformation of the *Azmari*, *Liqā Makūwas*, from the Despicable to the Admirable”, a review of the historical changes in the role of the *azmari* in the society during and after the revolution, by Solomon Addis Getahun (Mount Pleasant); “*Azmari* in Perspective”, a historical account of the different roles of *azmari* in the past and an argument against the negative depiction of the *azmari*, by Taddele Yidnekatchew Tessema (Addis Ababa); and “*Azmari* Tradition in Addis Ababa: Transformation and Continuity”, an ethno-historical investigation of the *azmari* that took the social and historical context into account, by Simeneh Betreyohannes (Addis Ababa).

## Conference Reports

The first session on the second day contained three papers on the role of female *azmari*. After the keynote by Timkehet Teffera, which was the first contribution to this subject, two papers by Aster Mulu (Bahir Dar) and Cressida Marcus (Oxford) completed the session. Aster Mulu's paper "The Role of Folk Musicians in Preserving Culture and Taking Family Responsibility in Ethiopia: A Case Study of *Azmari* in Bahir Dar Town" discussed the particularly difficult position of female *azmari*. Cressida Marcus talked about aspects of orality in her presentation "Between Sacred and Profane: An analysis of female orality in which crosscutting genres is the overall performative style of Gondarine women".

The following session was devoted to the main instrument of the *azmari*, the *masenqo*. It consisted of only one paper, by Stephanie Weisser (Bruxelles) since the second invited presenter to that session couldn't attend the conference. In her paper "*Masingo* Scales in *Azmari* Performances" Stephanie Weisser investigated musicological aspects of *azmari* performance, particularly focusing on the traditional scales, *qəññətoŋ*.

The papers of the next session can best be summarized under the header "case studies" as they touched upon different aspects of the cultural complex *azmari* and the social complex *azmari*. The paper "The Interaction of *Azmaris* and Non-Azmaris: Some Evidence from Birbuax *Azmaris*, North Western Ethiopia" by Mesganaw Andualem (Hawassa) described the *azmari* from a socio-cultural perspective as an occupational group of people who live in a specific location in north-western Ethiopia. Itsushi Kawase (Manchester) talked about his visual-anthropological research on the role of *azmari* in possession ceremonies in Gondar in his paper "Singer-Spirit-Medium Relation: A Case Study from *Azmari* Performance in Zar Ceremony in Northern Gondar". A related study was presented by Aderaw Genetu Tassew (Bahir Dar) in his paper "Voices of the *Azmari*: Documenting the Social, Cultural, Religious and 'Professional' Life of *Azmari* in Bahir Dar and Gondar". In the presentation "Connecting the Ethiopian Diaspora with their Root Back Home: Dejen Manchilot in Israel", Getie Gelaye (Hamburg) talked about Dejen's extraordinary life as an *azmari* who, originally coming from the *azmari* village Birbuax near Gondar, participated in the famous *Həzəb lü-Həzəb* Tour in 1987, and emigrated to Israel where he now teaches young Israelis of Ethiopian descent the art of playing *krar* and *masenqo*. The renowned specialist of modern Ethiopian music Francis Falceto (Ocreville) talked in his presentation "*Azmaribét*: From neologism to deculturation" about the transformations in the musical culture of Ethiopia that were caused by the dramatic political and economic changes of the past decades. David Evans (Memphis) discussed the term *azmari* and the changes of its meaning over the years in his paper "Will the Real *Azmari* Please Stand Up?: Changing Roles and Definitions of '*Azmari*' in Contemporary Ethiopia". Wolbert Smidt (Mekelle) pushed the regional

## Conference Reports

focus further to the north and presented a paper titled “*Azmari, Ch'era wat'a* or ‘Artists’ – Itinerant Singers in Tigray”.

The last session treated subjects related to the art of *azmari* in the music industry. Woube Kassaye (Addis Ababa) gave an “Analysis of *Amarigna*, *Tigrigna* and *Oromigna* – *Azmari*-Songs Released in Albums” in which he compared commercially published *azmari* albums in three different languages. The paper “*Azmari* Recorded: The Vinyl Memory” by Wolfgang Bender (Hildesheim) focused on the publication of *azmari* music on an older medium. And the presentation of Andreas Wetter (Berlin) entitled “The Significance of the research on Cassette Production” attempted to offer a methodological framework for the description and analysis of Ethiopia music and in particular *azmari* music which was published on cassettes.

The program of the conference was not limited to the presentation of scientific results. An important point was the inclusion of *azmari* as active participants. The two *azmari* Dejen Manchilot (Tel Aviv) and Indris Hassen (Addis Ababa) took part in the discussions that followed the individual presentations. And they ensured, with a lively concert on the first evening, that the conference didn't remain merely an academic event. The second evening was reserved for a film panel of two ethnographic films on *azmari*: “*Kids Got a Song to Sing*” by Itsushi Kawase (Manchester) and “*Tizita - Two Azmari Portraits*” by Adrian Hofer (Zürich). Both films provided intimate views into the daily life of young *azmari* in Gondar and Birbuax. A second film by Itsushi Kawase dedicated to the role of *azmari* performances in *Zar* ceremonies in Gondar, “*When Spirits Ride Their Horses*”, was shown at the end of the conference.

In conclusion, all participants experienced the conference as a very positive and productive meeting. It was felt that this conference was only the beginning of an intensified research effort on *azmari* and that similar meetings should continue these cooperative efforts in the future. The papers of the conference are currently being prepared for publication.

Andreas WETTER<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

## Workshop “On the History and Culture of the Horn of Africa” at Mekelle University, 17-18 March 2011

A two-day workshop entitled “On the History and Culture of the Horn of Africa” took place at Mekelle University on 17 and 18 March 2011, in which scholars from the Free University Berlin and Mekelle University participated<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Senior Researcher, Humboldt-Universität Berlin, member of the organisation committee.

<sup>12</sup> Following an invitation by the Research and Community Service Council of the College of Social Sciences and Languages (CSSL), which organized the workshop in collaboration with the Department of History and Cultural Studies (DHCS).