

ETHIOPIA Vol 2 Music of the Desert Nomads

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Jean Jenkins
Horniman Museum



Ethiopia consists of a great central highland region surrounded, except on the south-west, by deserts. The highlands tend to be inhabited by farmers, the deserts by nomadic pastoralists. Since farming in settled communities permits more leisure, the music of the highlands tends to differ considerably from that of the desert nomads. The former have many musical instruments, while amongst the nomads vocal music is the rule. The highlanders are part of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church, or of the Judaic Falashas, or in the south-west, are animists, while the pastoralists of the deserts are usually Moslems. Economics, rather than religious, linguistic or historical factors, seems to determine the life of the desert peoples. In the perpetual search for water and pastorage for their flocks, they roam across huge arid regions, often fighting other groups in search of the same scarce water and grasslands. Their music tends to concentrate on prayers or thanksgiving for rain, work songs, love songs, tales of heroic deeds and of battles, and dances which celebrate the end of a fast, a wedding, or religious observances. The music on this record has been selected partly for its beauty, and partly because it is representative of what may be heard in the great empty spaces of Ethiopia's deserts.

SIDE ONE

The Somali tribes range with their flocks throughout Somalia, but also in eastern Ethiopia and Kenya. In Ethiopia, they are found in the Ogaden desert of Harar province, a region of plains sparsely covered with coarse grass, broken by occasional streams and rivers. There are several tribes of Somalis; the northernmost, the Isa, being influenced by the Afar in many of their customs. These tall, thin herdsmen, with dark skin and fine features, were converted to Islam from the sixteenth century onwards; today all the Somalis are Moslems, although the townsmen are generally more fervent in religious practice than the nomads.

Band 1. The Gadabursi are a Somali tribe living in the northern Ogaden. At the great feast which concludes the month-long fast of Ramadan, many clans gather near Jijiga in Harar province for a three day celebration. One Gadabursi elder led his kinsmen in a very long song which not only gives their genealogy, but tells of their wanderings, and of the heroic deeds each of their leaders has performed.

Band 2. "Minkiasakha" is a love song, sung by a young Isa girl and her two brothers, near Jijiga. These singers are well known in the district, for not only do they sing well (although in a somewhat modern manner which results in disapproval by the older Somali men) but they often make new songs of this type, many of which have become popular throughout the Ogaden. The poetry is often very beautiful, and the tunes quickly become widely known.

Band 3. The Afar (called Danakil by the Arabs, Ethiopians and foreigners) are an independent and somewhat fierce people, who eke out the barest existence in a most inhospitable area. Unlike the Somalis, who live on a plateau with grass and a few rivers which can support several permanent settlements, the Afar inhabit a lowland area where vegetation is so sparse as to be invisible. Their territory, however, includes a very valuable asset, for in the great salt depression of the north-east, most of the rock salt of Ethiopia is obtained. These long bars of salt were the standard currency of Ethiopia until very recently, and indeed they are still in use in some areas. The Afar have a monopoly on this rock salt, and, since they have absolute control of entry into this land, the monopoly is likewise complete. Most of the salt is taken to be sold in the salt market of Makalle in Tigré province, and despite a fourteen day journey by camel caravan, there is evidently a profit made by the Tigrinya-speaking caravan men and salt traders. The Afar likewise make their profit. In this work song, one salt miner, near Dalol, is singing; the strict rhythm is marked by the chipping of the other Dahimela-Afar miners.

Band 4. The Rashaida are an Arabic-speaking tribe who live in the typical black tents of the Bedouin.

They are strict and conservative Moslems; they pray often and keep the Ramadan fast so devoutly, that they eat only enough to sustain life during that time. All the men wish to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. They hold aloof from such other tribes as exist in the northern part of the Red Sea Division of Eritrea, and, in the section of the Rashaida I visited, only two marriages outside were known; in both cases, the man was cast out as a result. The women are heavily veiled, and because of this, can participate in all activities. Rashaida music includes love poetry, usually a solo sung by a man, religious music, and a great many dance songs, which accompany sword dances, stick dances and the great festivals where the women dance in the centre of a semi-circle of men (see photograph). Such a dance is on this band. The Rashaida use only one scale; they often sing in octaves or parallel fourths or fifths; a high or low sostenato is also a feature of their music.

Band 5. Although the Afar territory is among the least habitable of all the desert areas of Ethiopia, Afar adaptation to their environment is extraordinarily complete, and they do manage to exist there. They are famous for killing any stranger at sight, but clan also fights clan, as part of the struggle for existence. Indeed, they seem to respect only a man who has killed. Their tents are of matting; they live on sour milk, occasionally they have millet porridge, and they drink a liquor made from the *doum* palm. They are Moslems, but remnants of earlier religions are easily discernible. The music on this band honours those who have killed.

Band 6. In the south of Ethiopia, in Sidamo and Harar provinces, live the Borana. They are a Galla group, considered by many to speak the purest form of the Galla language. Nomadic pastoralists who are famous for their beautiful white cattle, their territory includes many wells and is less arid than the eastern desert lands of Ethiopia. The Borana have their own religion with several deities, and socially they are organized into a Gada (age-grade) system whereby, every eight years, the males pass into a new grade with different responsibilities. The mainstay of their life is their cattle; they live on its milk; make butter and sour cheese from it also, eat its meat and use its skin for leather water bags, pillows and clothing. Most of their songs concern their cows, and in this band a Borana *balabat* (local chief) near Yavello is praising his cattle.

Band 7. The Borana wells are remarkable. Excavated long ago by their ancestors, they go deep into ground, twisting and turning for as much as sixty feet. Twice a day, water is drawn and a large group of men descend into the wells. Each has a small giraffe-skin bucket; when the man at the bottom starts passing up his filled bucket, he catches the empty one coming



Front cover: Afar pastoralists on the move.

down, so that there is a continuous stream into the pools and troughs which have been constructed at the top. In turn, the camels, the cattle, the goats and the few mules come for their water; all are watered regularly. The drawing of water is accompanied by singing—indeed, the men are unable to keep the rhythm required by the work without this well-music.



Rashaida dancer

Recordings and Notes
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SIDE TWO

The Gerre are a nomadic tribe owning camels, cattle and goats, and speaking an admixture of Somali and Borana. They are of Somali origin, but have intermarried with the Borana and have largely accepted the Borana religion. They call themselves Moslems, but only a few of the chiefs use the Koran as the basis of their prayers. One of these chiefs, near Wachille, leads the religious singing of his tribe, and this music is sung when a new encampment is made, so that water and grass will be plentiful. The same type of music is sung on Fridays, after a wedding and after fasting. The chief leads and all the other men, arms interlocked, form the chorus, swaying rhythmically from side to side in a long line. After some time, they approach a state of trance.

Volume 1 Music of the Central Highlands
Volume 3 Music of Eritrea



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33 $\frac{1}{3}$
side 1
mono



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VOL 2

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Desert Nomads**
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