RELIGIOUS MUSIC of the FALASHAS
(Jews of Ethiopia)
MUSIC OF THE FALASHAS
(JEWS OF ETHIOPIA)

INTRODUCTION BY DR. WOLF LESLAU

In some regions north of the Lake Tana in Ethiopia lives a population of Jewish faith called Falashas. Their historical origin and racial affinities present many difficult problems. Were they originally Jewish immigrants? If so, when and from where did they come to Ethiopia? Or are they a segment of the indigenous population of Ethiopia converted to Judaism? And if so, by whom were they converted and when? As yet no definite answers have been given to these questions.

The Falashas resemble, in great majority, the Amharas — that is, the main body of the Ethiopian population. Others resemble the people of Agau descent, the indigenous population of Ethiopia.

The Falashas live either in separate villages or together with other elements of the Ethiopian population. In the latter case the Falasha huts form a compact unit of their own and are usually apart from the main body of the village. In appearance the Falasha village does not differ from an Ethiopian one. One sees the same circular huts of branches, plastered with mud, and thatched with coarse grass, and the same granaries of dried mud.

However, the Falasha village has noticeable characteristics which reveal the occupation of its inhabitants. Thus, in various sections of the village one sees a hole in the ground and above it a loom. A Falasha is weaving linen. Elsewhere a fire burns, iron pieces are lying around, and a smith is making utensils such as axes, sickles, and knives. Still in another section clay is baked; pitchers big and small, pots and cups, granaries of clay and other clayware are standing nearby on the ground; a Falasha woman is making pottery. In the
COUNTRY AROUND THE VILLAGE WE SEE MEN TILLING THE GROUND, PLOWING WITH ONE OR TWO OXEN, AND SOWING WHEAT, BARLEY OR MILLET. THIS LAND, HOWEVER, IS NOT THEIRS. THEY TILL THE GROUND AND PAY AN ANNUAL RENT IN WHEAT TO THE OWNER.

IN ADDITION, THERE ARE SOME HUTS PECULIAR TO A FALASHA VILLAGE -- THE SYNAGOGUE, THE "HUT OF BLOOD OR MALEDICTION", AND THE "HUT OF THE WOMAN-IN-CHILDBED".

THESE LAST TWO HUTS ARE USUALLY AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE VILLAGE, BUT IN SOME INSTANCES ONLY A SMALL DISTANCE FROM IT. THEY ARE READILY DISCERNIBLE BY THE LOW STONE-WALL SURROUNDING THEM. AS SOON AS A WOMAN REACHES HER MENSTRUAL PERIOD SHE LEAVES HER WORK AND ENTERS INTO THE "HUT OF BLOOD" OR "MALEDICTION". THERE SHE REMAINS SEGREGATED, FOR SEVEN DAYS, BEING CONSIDERED AS IMPURE. SHE DOES NO WORK AT ALL. HER FAMILY POURS WATER OR COFFEE FOR HER OVER THE LOW STONE WALL. THEY BRING HER BREAD OR ROASTED GRAIN WITHOUT TOUCHING HER. THE MORNING OF THE SEVENTH DAY THE WOMAN WASHES HERSELF AND HER CLOTHES, REMAINS AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE VILLAGE THE WHOLE DAY, AND AT SUNSET SHE ENTERS HER HOUSE.


The priests perform the service in the synagogue, the priesthood is not a hereditary office. Its members are recruited from the entire community. After a candidate is proposed, the high priest confers with the other priests called ka'hen, and together they examine his character and degree of learning. If any member of his family as far back as the seventh generation has ever committed adultery, or has had a bodily defect of any kind, the candidate cannot be elected to the priesthood.

The priest does not dress differently from other Falashas. The only badge of his office is a turban similar to those worn by priests in the Ethiopian Christian Church.

Every large community supports a high priest, who is chosen from among the other priests. Both the high priest and the priest perform the daily prayers at the synagogue, pray for the sick, bless the uncircumcised children and the newly married. They also officiate at the slaughter of sacrificial animals and bless the Sabbath and the festival offerings. In all matters of community welfare and policy, the priests, as the chief spiritual authority, are looked to for guidance and leadership.

Yet despite this high prestige in the community, the priests do not constitute a privileged caste and must work like all other Falashas at the common occupations.

Another religious institution found among the Falashas -- the presence of monks and nuns -- unmistakably reflects their long exposure to Christian influences.

An important religious practice of the Falashas is sacrifice. All sacrifices are offered on an altar (called the "area of sacrifice") located on the north side of the synagogue. The sacrificial animal may be a bull, a ram, or a goat, and they must meet the old testament requirements of not being blind, lame, or having any bodily defect. Beside the sacrifices, the Falashas bring "offerings" to the priest. On Saturday morning or at any lunar or yearly festival the women bring bread and beer to the synagogue as "offering".

The Falashas, though eating much the same food as other Ethiopians, observe the prescriptions of the Bible with great strictness and eat only cud-chewing, cloven footed animals. They are scrupulous about
WASHING THEIR HANDS BEFORE AND AFTER EVERY MEAL (AS IS THE CASE WITH THE OTHER ETHIOPIANS), AND PRONOUNCING THE BENEDICTION OVER THEIR FOOD. THE FALASHAS DO NOT EAT RAW MEAT OR ANIMALS THAT HAVE DIED NATURAL DEATHS. FOOD PREPARED BY A NON-FALASHA WILL NOT BE EATEN BY A FALASHA PRIEST OR BY OLDER PEOPLE.


THOUGH THEIR LITERATURE IS WRITTEN IN OLD ETHIOPIAN, THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE OF THE FALASHAS CONFORMS TO THAT OF THEIR ETHIOPIAN NEIGHBORS; IN THE AMHARIC-SPEAKING REGIONS THEY SPEAK AMHARIC, THE MAIN LANGUAGE OF ETHIOPIA, WHILE IN THE NORTHERN OR TIGRIGNA-SPEAKING REGION THEY SPEAK TIGRIGNA.

FORMERLY THEY SPOKE A LANGUAGE BELONGING TO THE AGAAR GROUP OF CUSHITIC ORIGIN. ALL HISTORICAL EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT THE FALASHAS HAVE NEVER AT ANY PERIOD SPOKEN HEBREW.
Prayer is the most important manifestation of Falasha religious life. They recite their prayers in the synagogue or, occasionally, outdoors. On weekdays, the high priest or the priest in charge of the religious service alone recites the prayers.

On Saturdays or on festivals the people come to the synagogue and either join in prayer with the priests or listen to the prayers. There are six different prayers, during the day and four at night, and particular prayers for the Sabbaths and festivals. The language of the prayers is Geez; in some of them, however, are still found passages in Quarenya, which is the Cushite language previously used by the Falashas. On all special holidays excepting only the Day of Atonement, the priests play the drum and the iron gong during prayers. All this is accompanied by rhythmic movements of the body. The prayers, accompanied by musical instruments, are performed outdoors either on special festivals and fasts, or during burial ceremonials, or on special occasions such as the receiving of an important guest.

Songs accompanied by instruments such as the Masonqua are sung during weddings and other occasions of rejoicing.

A typical prayer is the following:


Record O1465A (1): Prayer of Absolution
-- Chorus, Gong, Drum

Record O1465A (2): Prayer "Adonai" for Weekdays -- Chorus

Record O1465B: Responsive Reading -- In this recording the first voice speaks in Geez (African Ethiope) and the second voice translates for the congregation into Amharic (Modern Ethiope). Following is the Geez text, given in standard phonetic type, with a line-by-line translation into English instead of Amharic:

Yebbarakh 'a'gzi 'abeher 'amlak 'asa 'el "Blessed be God, the Lord of Israel"

'amlak lakullu manaas wakullu zasega "The Lord of all spirit and of all flesh"

wazantu wa'etu samaay makhari samu zalal 'alam "This is my name, His name is gracious for ever"

wazakrayanni lateweladda tawled "to be remembered for generations".

wayebe 'a'gzi 'abeher l'amuse "And God said to Moses"

'ana wahabakka sanbatat wabu'alatal wamasla 'erift "I gave thee the Sabbaths and the festivals for a rest"

wasiw'u samaay zaburubu sanbat "And they called my name on the fourth Sabbath"

'ana waa'etu zaahallo wayehellu "I am the one who was and will be"

wazeyanni zalal 'alam "And my name is for ever"

(whbo'at sanbat) basaba'at 'alat bata'amneta 'a'gzi 'abeher ("And the Sabbath came) on the seventh day in confidence to God".

zayasa'al wayaganni wazayassebah wazayassin "He who will implore, be submissive, praise, prostrate himself"

batiabu' labbu "with his resolute heart"
habehu, 'iyāssonāssu 'allāssā yā'aqūbwwa
"to him; those who keep (the Sabbath)
will not be reduced to misery"

wāzi 'arīnu hagawomu lä'allā
ya'aqbu sānbātā 'agzi'abēher
"These are the prescriptions for those
who keep the Sabbath of God"

zāyakābrwwa lä'allā
yakābrwwa lä'sānbāt
"He will give life and will honor
those who honor the Sabbath"

lä'allā ya'aqbu
"for those who keep it (the Sabbath)
'āmā yatawqšomu 'agzi'abēher lä'allā
yenābru wastā mūdēr
"When God will reprimand those who live
on earth"

'āmā 'alātî mag'at taqāwwăm sānbāt
'āmhabā 'agzi'abēher
"on the day of the arrival (of the
last judgement), the Sabbath will
stand before God"

lä'allā yafrāhwa wātakāwwan sēma'a
lādāqiqẖ addam būdāhrītom
"(to intercede for those) who fear
her, and she will be a testimony for
the children of Adam on the last day"

wātabelo sānbāt lä'agzi'abēher
"And the Sabbath said to God"

'ābī sēmākā māharī sēmḵā
"Great is Thy name, gracious is Thy
name"

wāyābela 'agzi'abēher lāsānbāt
"And God said to the Sabbath"

māharīkū lāḵī zāyakāwwanakẖi
"I am gracious in your behalf to
those who belong to thee".

READING LIST

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