

“Composing Identity: Transformative Collisions in Music and Culture”

Marilyn Herman, *Gondar’s Child: Songs, Honor, and Identity among Ethiopian Jews in Israel*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press), 2012. pp. 316.

By Janice Levi

In this ethnographical study, Marilyn Herman seeks to understand how the Beta Israel community in Israel constructs and communicates their identity through the use of musical narratives and performance.¹ Equipped with the anthropologist’s staple methodology of ‘participant observation,’ Herman joins a diverse and multi-generational band, Porachat HaTikva, and suggests through this musical filter Beta Israel can more freely “speak for themselves.” Through 15 chapters, 3 glossaries (Amharic, Hebrew, and musical terminology) and 28 musical recordings of the songs analyzed (available on the publisher’s website), Herman provides an in-depth study of how music can embody and represent a larger cultural phenomenon. Collision, courage, and honor are the main themes threaded throughout this study and inform how Beta Israel identity has evolved.

Part One of Herman’s ethnography provides a historical overview of Beta Israel in Ethiopia, the anti-Semitism experienced and their self-segregation to avoid corruption of indigenous practices. Part Two, the bulk of the work, examines Beta Israel after their migration. She explains the paradoxical treatment of the Israeli Jews toward the Beta Israel, which was predicated on their contested Jewish identity. Due to their conviction and continuation of observing Mosaic Law,² Beta Israel were seen as authentically Jewish. Yet, their hazy lineage raised doubt of a credible Jewish heritage leading to the requirement of a ritual *giur* (conversion) to legitimate their faith. In their new homeland, Beta Israel were placed in “absorption centers,” forced to take up Hebrew names, combatted prejudice in finding housing and work, and coped with patronizing and condescending attitudes from their Jewish brethren. Thus, Beta Israel began to draw parallels to their past life: the pejorative “Falasha”³ that was deployed to

label them in Ethiopia was substituted with “convert” in Israel, symbolizing the rejection of the authenticity of their faith identity, a troublesome encounter that had never occurred in Ethiopia.

Herman tackles the transformative process the Beta Israel experienced through their interaction with Israeli culture, in which the Beta Israel are seemingly colliding with “modernity.” Herman’s peppered usage of “traditional,” along with the analysis of musical “traditions” demonstrates an evolution through the incorporation of Western frameworks to compose and perform cultural music. Therefore, she juxtaposes a process of “modernity” that influenced musical forms via western musical technology to that of the cultural incorporations of “modern” and “normative” Judaism via the journey to Israel. Herman also evaluates lyrics, content, dance and performance as representations of paramount philosophies in Beta Israel culture: *cavod* (honor) and *busha* (shame). These values transformed due to cultural renegotiations, as did their understanding of ‘Jewishness.’ Herman’s comparative study of Amhara Christian and Beta Israel music mirrors the distinctions of “Jewishness” held by normative Judaism and Beta Israel. In spite of sharing Ethiopian origins and a common language, Porachat HaTikva realized their Amhara Christian bandleader preferred a more western composition and “commercial” style of music due to his urban and international exposure. Similarly, Beta Israel discovered that although they share the same religion, their Judaism was different from the “mainstream” and more secular faith practiced in Israel. The musical evolution, yet again, reflected the cultural experience and identity transformation of Beta Israel. The book concludes with a succinct summary and the reader is reminded of the various collisions encountered in the Beta Israel narrative: collision with Ethiopian Christians, urban culture, musical technology, Jewish secularization, and alternate ideas of Jewishness.

Herman’s work would have benefited from a comparative study of Beta Israel and normative Judaism to further contextualize Beta Israel’s claim to Judaism, which would raise further awareness of their struggle for equal treatment in Israel.⁴ The study highlights songs remembering hardships experienced in Ethiopia, and a comparative of these songs to any produced about the prejudicial treatment in Israel would be instructive and provide a more complete and “full circle” musical analysis

that addresses the historical sections included. Additionally, her focused study of Porachat HaTikva's music provides a limited sample of Beta Israel who "speak for themselves," and thus not necessarily representative of the larger community. Despite these few elisions, Herman's ethnography adds to the growing literature of African Judaism by shedding light on Ethiopian and more specifically Black Jewish identity vis-à-vis normative Judaism. Her skillful discussion asserts the power and usefulness of musical orature in the renegotiation of Beta Israel identity and provides a unique study that contributes to the field.

Notes

¹ The Beta Israel emigrated from Ethiopia to Israel in the 1970s-90s and admitted under the "lost tribe" status under the "Law of Return," Israeli legislation that allows Jews and persons with (acknowledged) Jewish heritage to settle in Israel. Herman cites seminal texts regarding this history including Steven Kaplan, David Kessler, and Tudor Parfitt.

² Mosaic Law typically refers to a seemingly more antiquated Jewish Law (sometimes "Old Testament Law") that derives from the Talmud in comparison to the more widely practiced Halachic Law, which has been modified by rabbinical understanding and literature in present-day.

³ "Falasha," is a term that connotes foreignness. Translated as "emigrants," "exiles," and/or "foreigners," the derogatory label was a constant reminder of their otherness and non-acceptance in the land in which they lived. Now, they self-identify as the Beta Israel (House of Israel).

⁴ This is in reference to the *giur* requirement and the present and various restrictions on marriage, including banning marriage outside of their ethnicity (54-56).

