

## **‘Kedassie’. A Kemant (Ethiopian Agaw) Ritual**

Olivier Tourny<sup>1</sup>

The remaining non-Christian Kemant, living in the Chilga area (west of Gondar), still maintain their old religious traditions. The religion of the Kemant people is comprised of animistic, (many) Hebraic and (some) Christian elements. The traditional religious leaders through prayers, chant and dance perform the central ritual, called Kedassie, all over the year. Our paper will focus on the presentation of this ritual.

### **Introduction**

The Kemant Agaw people are considered as the original inhabitants of central-northern Ethiopia. Living in the Gondar area – the historical ‘Kemantland’ (Gamst 1969:1) – they have been progressively, then massively Christianised and Amharized the last century. Nowadays, less than one percent of the 170,000 Kemant people (1998 census) have preserved their ancestral language and beliefs. Our personal observation during three different field works conducted in the Gondar area<sup>2</sup> (1999, 2002, 2007) confirm Zelealem’s expertise (2002:15) considering that without the intervention of extraordinary circumstances, ‘the extinction of Kemant is conceivable the next 40-50 years’.

The traditional Kemant are found in small villages in the Chilga area, about 60-80 kms west of Gondar. In this area, one can find high priests (*kamazana*) and priests (*abayegarya*), led by the *Wambar* (*litt.* ‘seat’), their religious and political figure. Monthly and annual festivals as well as other more private circumstances require their competence. On these very occasions, they perform through prayers, chant and dance a ritual called *Kedassie*. This paper will focus on the presentation of this ritual.

### **Myths and beliefs of the Kemant people**

Frederick Gamst (1969: 3-4) considered that the syncretized and archaic forms of belief which characterize the Kemant religion are the result of two different religious strata that exist in the Ethiopian Highlands: the Agaw and the Hebraic. That is why he called them ‘Pagan-Hebraic’. This denomination has been contested by Joseph Tubiana

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<sup>1</sup> Musicologist, ethnomusicologist, Laboratory *Languages Music Societies*, CNRS – Paris Sorbonne University. Creator of the French-Ethiopian Cooperation Program in Ethnomusicology (2000-2004) and of the Unesco/Norway-Funds-in-Trust program in Ethiopian Traditional Dance, Music and Instruments (2005-2008).

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(1999:70), who denied any Judaic influence in their faith and religious practice. As for Graham Hancock (1993:248), the Kemant tradition is 'Judeo-Canaanite'. What is this about?

According to the paleoanthropologists, the Kemant are descendants of Cushitic-speaking Caucasoid hunters (Gamst 1969:11). The Kemant are supposed to believe in a Canaanite origin, which is geographic (today Israel) or biblical: Yaner, the Father of Kemant people, has been identified as the great grandson of Canaan, grandson of Ham, son of Noah. Other stories recall the arrival in Ethiopia of the Kemant ancestor from 'Jerusalem' with the Father of their Beta Israel Jewish neighbours. But, one thing is for sure: they do not consider themselves 'Jews'. They heard about the legend of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, but they consider it as purely Amhara<sup>3</sup>. Nowadays, most of Kemant claim for a native origin.

The Kemant believe in one God, assisted by angels, heroes and holy figures. Spirits and genii loci also play important roles in spiritual life. The Kemant pantheon also adopted (and adapted) biblical figures like Adam and Eva, Cain and Abel, Noah and his wife<sup>4</sup>, and Abraham and Moses. However, they do not possess any written literature. They believe in souls, in good and evil, in judgment day and in everlasting life in heaven. God is good but can be violent too. Prayers sanctify and keep *Saytan* away. Hermits (*maheyen*) were highly venerated in the past. The Kemant observe fundamental laws:

*You shall worship and thank your God*  
*You shall not kill*  
*You shall not steal*  
*You shall work hard to make a living*  
*You shall have just one wife and shall not take someone's wife*  
*If you are the victim of somebody, you shall not take vengeance; God will*  
*If a Kemant becomes a killer, you shall not give him up to the police but to the Wamber*

Ritual places (*shuwen sebra*) are always located on hilltops, in sacred groves (*deгна*). Each one is dedicated to cultural heroes. According to the tradition, the sacred groves are innumerable, from Canaan to Ethiopia. Traditional Kemant pray when getting up (*shuwen faynu*), before drinking and eating (*gawten*), before and after work (*qidus*) and at bedtime. They fast from the eve until the end of each ceremony. They observe a strict law of purity, limiting contacts with their non-Kemant neighbourhood. The same can be said for their diet: they do not eat pork, fish or wounded animals and do not mix flesh with milk. With their Jewish neighbours who also observed strict dietary laws, they could share the *injara* (traditional crepe), fruits and vegetables. As for whether religion is given by birth, proselytism was not practiced, but conversion was permitted.

The religion of the Kemant people is comprised of animistic, (many) Hebraic and (some) Christian elements that cannot be summarized by one definition. Religious practice and beliefs form a whole which is proper to them.

<sup>3</sup> The union of the Queen of Sheba with King Solomon, which produced Menelik, the father of the Ethiopian Solomonide Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> According to the tradition, Noah's wife was buried in *Aykel*, the biggest Kemant locality in the Chilga area.

## Kedassie

Kedassie – from geez<sup>5</sup> ‘kds’, i.e. ‘Holy’ - is the central ritual of Kemant religious traditions. It is performed weekly (Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays), for monthly and annual festivals, as well as for funerals. Its general structure is simply modified to fit each occasion. For *tazkar*, the ritual is the most complete. The performance of *Kedassie* is strictly devoted to the priests: the congregation has no other function than to attend to the ceremony.

### *Ritual at Djegriho, 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1999*

*On the way to Djegriho’s hill, squashed up in a rented four-wheel drive pick-up, the priests try to identify the numerous Kemant holy places coming into view in the rolling landscape. Some are now surmounted by churches, indicating the Christian domination in that area. The day is quite special: it has been almost fifty years that Kemant priests have not climbed up to Djegriho – one of their most historic sacred places - to perform a religious ceremony. They fear getting in trouble with Christian authorities of the region but hope that my presence will make their dream possible.*

*When we arrive on the spot at dawn, nobody’s there. Taking with us the sheep bought in town the day before and a can of water, we start to climb to the top. The Wamber is first. His name is Mulunah Marsha; he was elected in 1941 when he was 6. He is followed by the High Priest, Allemye Awōka, and by Priest Abeve Abegaz, Priest Allehin Negussu and his brother, Priest Maamo Negussu. Halfway up the hill, the forest starts. It continues to the top. Once they have arrived, the priests immediately start to clean the space dedicated to the ritual. Then they take some water brought from town to clean their hands, teeth, lips and faces. They bless the rest of water and mix it with honey to purify the place. One of them lights a fire, roasts cereals (oat and t’eff) and cooks the ritual crepe. At this very moment, coming from nowhere, some shepherds appear from the forest, then followed by others, all puzzled by our presence. They are Christian Kemant. During the entire ceremony they stand without moving, visibly fascinated by the scene taking place in front of them. The Wamber is sitting on a rock in the ritual space. His fundamental role is to supervise the accuracy of the ceremony but not to participate in the prayer chants and dances. Most of the time, the ritual is held by the High Priest and assisted by a priest. Today, the other priests present will be part of the performance by acting as soloists and choir in turn. Kedassie is ready to start.*

*The High Priest is virtually the chant leader (keber) but he is not the one who starts the ceremony. K’es Abeve Abegaz is the starter (yetente) and will actually conduct the collective singing. After the introduction prayer, Abeve starts to sing, stretching out his arms to the open space in front of him, his hand’s palms turned to the sky. Then the other priests repeat his musical phrase with the same gesture. The soloist and the choir alternate like this until the end of the song. Then other prayers follow.*

*Kedassie is structured by three general kinds of performance, of which the order of appearances can vary. One is based on collective singing, in different manners. Another is defined by simultaneous singing and dancing, in a joyful atmosphere. Another, much more intimate, consists of long recitatives performed solo, punctuated from time to time*

<sup>5</sup> Geez - the old Semitic language spoken during the Aksumite Kingdom – is the liturgical language of Jews and Christians in Ethiopia. Few other terms in geez can be found in the Kemant religious tradition, like (E)gzio (God), q’es (priest), kiddus (Holy), wōrōb (Christian liturgical dance), tazkar (remembrance days for deceased persons), and ‘amen’. It is also worth to notice that, for decades, Kemant people’s names are no longer in their traditional language, but in Amharic (Zealelem 2002 :9-10)

*with short responses from the other priests. At the end of the prayers, the Wamber stands up to participate in the final benediction.*

*Then the sheep is slaughtered by the High Priest, assisted by a priest. The animal is immediately carved up. Its fleece will be kept or sold later. Some flesh is burned as a sign of sacrifice. The rest is grilled and shared with the ritual crepe by the priests and people present for the meal, which marks the end of the ceremony.*

### *Prayers*

Nowadays, one of the main difficulties to face when doing fieldwork among the Kemant, is the problem of language. Less and less people speak *Kemantinya* (Afro-Asiatic, Cushitic, Central, Western): 1) there are probably no more monolingual speakers of Kemant; 2) very few are Kemant-Amharic bilinguals; 3) all, including the priests, are native Amharic-speakers (Zealelem 2002: 13-14). In such conditions, the given translation of the prayers is often rough, because the priests do not know the strict equivalence in Amharic, or because they do not know the signification of archaic terms used in the ritual. Besides the ageing of the concerned population, another problem is the lack of tangible structures strong enough to ensure the survival of the tradition. The priests' lapses of memory and contradictions can be explained by the weakness of the passing on and the absence of written sources.

The *Kedassie* ritual is basically the same during the entire year, the slight differences being specific quotations or allusions for each respective celebration. The priests consider all the prayers and benedictions of *Kedassie* as a whole, but they easily identify each of them. Both the order of prayers and their number can vary. The following description concerns the ritual in its largest mode of expression, i.e. for *Tazkar*, as given by the priests.

*Kidus nimien mizgantena* ('God, two times blessed'), spoken by the High Priest, introduces the religious ceremony:

*'God, two times blessed  
Provider of fruits  
This who touches the Earth and bring clouds  
Providing harmony  
Giving the Ruler and people's harmony'*

That prayer is followed by another *Kidus*<sup>6</sup>, *Kidus sakhwye* ('God, forgive us'), sung twelve times by the solo priest and repeated by the choir:

*'Holy  
Listen to us'*

Then another blessing, *gayo gayoni* ('We thank You'), begins. The first line is usually sung by a priest, the second by the choir, but the soloist can use them both:

*'We thank You (for your presents)  
Let it be (Amen)'*

<sup>6</sup> *Kidus* (i.e. Western 'Sanctus') is also the first prayer at the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Mass.

The following prayer *Genjar kunen gayekar* ('Pray without sleep') is used for *Tazkar*, as suggested by its content. It is chanted by a priest in a psalm-singing style<sup>7</sup>. The choir repeats some of his enunciations:

*'Pray (God) without sleep, before you die, for your soul, before its separation with your body, your body going to the grave, be honest and rightful, enjoy your possessions, that you can drink, pray before being covered with soil, make your confession<sup>8</sup> before your burial, before you die during the night, before staying alone in your grave, before being buried, before your tongue is tight...'*

*Lissowsh geverio* ('Rather than the Bad') is not sung, but recited by the High Priest in a halting and high-speed drone. Comprised of hundreds of invocations, we will just give the beginning:

*'Rather than the Bad, Give us the Good, Save us from the Bad, from the Snake, Receive our prayers, Protect us from thunderbolts, from storms, Save us from all dangers, from famine, Please Give us more in the future...'*

The ritual continues with a collective song that consists in the repetition of '*anemeni*' (Give us our daily food), then the High Priest recites another prayer in the same style as the *Lissowsh geverio*, enouncing the names of Kemant Heroes and Holy places (*degna*). The dance of the priests is performed during *Awnqwo mezmananie* ('Thanks to God'). The priests stand in a semicircle, stressing the beat by hopping from one foot to the other, swinging their arms and rejoicing:

*'Thanks to God, His beloved (should) praise Him, [??], work to eat'*

*Kedassie* ends with a final collective blessing (*Shuwen*) and the Wember's invitation for the assembly to share the ritual meal:

*'All be blessed, sit down and share the meal'*

#### *Musical aspects*

In Kemant language, *sowasu* is the term which refers to 'ritual music'. When listening to (and looking at) different audio (and video) recordings of *Kedassie*, some general elements emerge. The first one concerns the distribution of roles during the ritual: as *keber* (leader), the High Priest is mainly dedicated to the recitation prayers, whereas the *yetente* (starter) performs the chanted ones. On special occasions, the function of other priests present is to act as a choir. All of these vocal roles contrast with the silence of the *Wamber*. The second aspect of *Kedassie* concerns the collective performance itself: in spite of visible efforts from the solo priest to conduct the singing, the collective performance is marked by much hesitation – sometimes to the point of stopping –

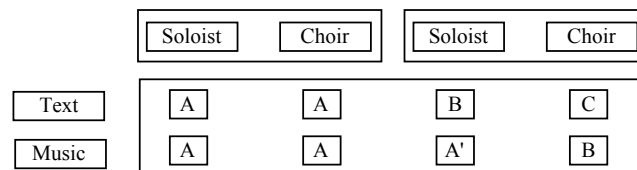
<sup>7</sup> Like other long prayers in *Kedassie*, one can find different versions of this prayer. The order of the verses can change, version can be richer than another, but the style remains the same.

<sup>8</sup> The (final) confession to a priest, generally considered as a pure Christian religious tradition, was also practiced among the Ethiopian Jews.

giving the impression of a tradition that is no longer mastered. According to the priests, they always performed it like that. The third comment is about the identity of this musical tradition: it shares common elements with their Jewish, Christian and Muslims neighbours, with specific features (Tourny 2007a, 2007b).

Musical scales constitute the backbone of melodies. In Ethiopia, like in many other parts of the world, the pentatonic anhemitonic scale (based on five different degrees, without semi-tone) prevails. This is also the case between the Kemant and the Jews. As for the Christians, *araray*, one of their three different musical scales, works the same way. However, the two main characteristics of the Kemant singing are the predominant use of few degrees and – especially – the instability of their realisation. These produce a singular atmosphere that is proper to the Kemant community.

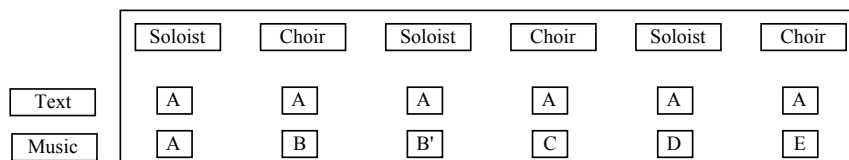
As for the ways texts and music are distributed between the different protagonists, they are diverse. Apart from the collective singing in *Anemeni*, all performances are based on the alternation of a soloist (sometimes two) and a choir. In all cases, the soloist is the chant leader, starting the prayers and using his voice or his gestures to guide his colleagues' performance. The predominance of the *responsorial* mode (A/B) as well as the spectacular duration of soloist's performance – compared with the concision of that of the choir – confirm his leading position. *Kidus* and *Awnqwo* pieces present other interesting structures, such as the distribution of the verses within the double alternation of the soloist and the choir (S-Ch-S-Ch), as shown in *Kidus*:



Ex.1

This kind of textual and musical organisation based on a double alternation is also frequently used in church. But what is not often seen is the other type of distribution, which shows a configuration structured by the triple alternation between the soloist and the choir.

The following example, which is one of many, is taken from *Awnqwo*:



Ex.2

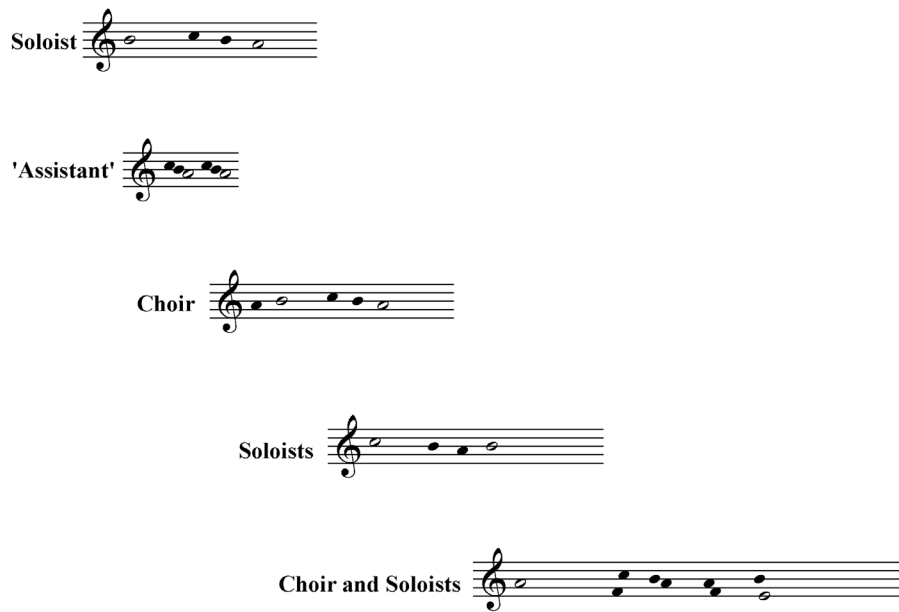
This triple alternation is typical of the Jewish and (Gonderi) Muslim religious chants, with one fundamental difference: in these last cases, the distribution mode is much more elaborate, confronting the *binary* alternation (S-Ch-S-Ch-S-Ch) with a *ternary* distribution of the music and text (A-B-C/A-B-C) (Tourny & Arom 1999).

In spite of the presence of a leader, the Kemant collective ritual singing is characterised by strong flexibility. That flexibility can be seen through the relative independence of each protagonist. The alternation between a soloist and a choir is a reality, which is always challenged by the occasional intervention of a priest with the soloist and the overlapping between melodic lines. This produces dense heterophony, one of the most obvious features of that singing ritual. For *Kidus*, for example, the musical verse is distributed like this:



Ex.3

However, the following would be a better horizontal/vertical transcription of its actual musical rendition, taking into account the systematic overlapping as well as the incidental final consonances:



Ex.4

That flexibility is also patent in regards to time organisation. In the case of non-measured chant, such a feature is not surprising: the particular length of some musical notes tends to increase such kinds of manifestations. But, even for chants theoretically submitted to a time standard – those accompanying ritual dances – the frequent singing anticipations lead to irregular hand-clapping. The absence of any rhythmical instrument increases that irregularity. With respect to dance, there is no doubt that the Kemant gestural tradition shares common elements with that of the Beta Israel, as well as – to a lesser extent – with the *wðrðb* and *tch'etch'ebo* categories from the Church patrimony<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> For better knowledge about the Ethiopian Christian Liturgical Dances, see Damon (2005, 2007).

Last, but not least, the melodic system used in *Kedassie* is particularly limited to very few elements. As previously presented, *Kidus* is based on a single phrase repeated twelve times, whereas *Gayo gayoni* works on two different melodic patterns, each repeated five times. In general, pieces are characterized by their opposition of style, style-like psalmody or a bit more melodic. *Awnqwo* is radically different, not only because of it is measured, but also due to the melodic distribution of the musical verse, alternating short patterns that end on the main tone *finalis*:



Ex.5

By chanting in this way, the Kemant priests share evident musical elements with the singing and dancing performance of their neighbouring Jewish colleagues.

## Conclusion

The Kemant people have been strangely neglected by scholars in Ethiopian Studies. No doubt their case has been overshadowed for decades by the tremendous academic interest for their Jewish (Beta Israel) neighbours. Of course, as Jan Abbink puts it (1991: 71 [Our translation]), ‘from James Bruce [1790] to James Quirin [1998], many have emphasized the strange similitude between these two populations’. But, very few researchers went further than that simple statement, to research it on the field in the Chelga area.

The use of the term *K’edassie* by the Kemant for naming their central ritual is quite surprising as it is in geez language and as it is the same denomination for the Ethiopian Christian mass. The use of the term *Kedus*, in Ge’ez language, to denominate one prayer used in both rituals, as well as the bread sharing should also be interrogated. In that very Christian historical area, as previously attempt with the Jewish community (*cf. Shelemay* 1986), a Christian interpretation of the Kemant ritual could be very much attractive. Unfortunately, due to the lack of tangible evidence, there is no answer to that question. Ritual meal/bread sacrifice is not specific to Christian – and even – Hebraic traditions. On the same hand, it is probable that the Guez quotations founded in the Kemant ritual are coming from their Jewish or Christian neighbourhood, though an older origin could also be conceivable.

From a musical point of view, *K’edassie* is one of the central and last remaining expressions of traditional Kemant religious identity. Its main personality is reflected in its remarkable musical scales, which give the chant prayers their unique atmosphere. It does, however, show similarities with other ritual music coming from the same area. This is true for some performance structures also noticed at church. The fact that the Kemant and Beta Israel ritual music share many common elements was predictable, although they each maintain their own specific identity and can therefore not be confused.



To a certain extent, a deeper knowledge of Kemant traditions is still possible. It may provide important missing elements for a better understanding of the area from anthropological and historical point of views. It is (the last) time to do this research in a multidisciplinary perspective. Our modest contribution is part of this urgent mission.

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