

Cultural identity, Islamic revivalism and women's new-found role in preserving and transmitting musical traditions. Suggestions from Harar, Ethiopia¹.

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Introduction

Gey fäqär, literally “the songs of the city”, is an ample repertoire of traditional secular sung poetry, currently performed by harari women according to different musical styles, most frequently in a voice-percussion configuration.

If projected diachronically, however, social distribution and performance of harari *gey fäqär* reveal a more complex outline, also involving a noteworthy production of earlier male singers. Although most harari men do not play songs anymore, a vast assortment of recordings testifies in fact their past musical and poetical fertility. In the last decades most men have eventually chosen to abandon music, thus conveying almost entirely to women the custodianship of traditional secular songs.



The city of Harar

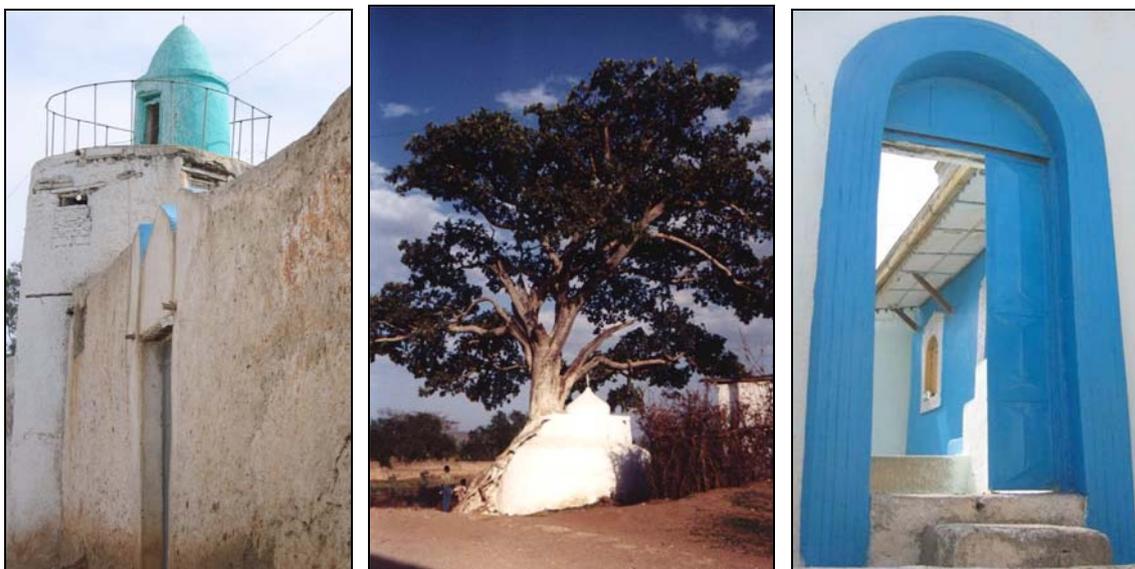
¹ This paper is based on four fieldwork missions carried out in Harar between 2002 and 2006 (respectively February-May 2002, July-September 2003, February-May 2005 and October-February 2006) thanks to the financial support of La Sapienza University of Rome, UNESCO, CNRS Paris, CFEE and thanks to the cooperation of Harari institutions (Culture and Sport Bureau, Rimbaud Museum, National Regional State Government) as well as local scholars, singers, *afōča*, assistants, informants and friends. Kabir Abdi Abdulmuhyamin Abdunassir, Abdullahi Ali Sharif, Ahmed Zekaria, Sallahadin Ahmed, the whole Redwan family, Mohammed Jami-Guleid “Daque”, Woreda Saleh, Hussein Abubeker, Amina Adam “Gini”, the late Zebida Abdosh and Boki Tala, Umma Amina Abdullahi and family, Dus and Ramadan Ahmed Yusuf, Hablul band, Ehsan Abdusalam and the children of Suqutät bāri are some of the local contributors to my research. In the impossibility to mention all the people whose help was precious through the years, I truly apologize with those I have not mentioned and express my most sincere gratefulness to the whole Gey for being such a welcoming fieldwork. *Allamägän*. I would also like to thank Prof. Francesco Giannattasio, Dr. Simone Tarsitani and Dr. Olivier Tourny as well as the Assilah Forum Foundation and the Maison des Cultures du Monde.

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In order to contextualize and describe the process and its local specificity, it will be useful to introduce Harar's historical and cultural background and to briefly illustrate harari traditional repertoires in both synchronic and diachronic perspective, highlighting women's present role in preserving traditional modalities of musical practice. Harari musical reality will finally represent a mirror of some socio-cultural adjustments that have recently occurred.

Harar, the City of Saints

The walled city-state of Harar, a micro-cultural island in Eastern Ethiopia, has been for centuries a crucial commercial crossroad with the Orient and the major East African centre of Islamic culture. Its inhabitants call it simply *Gey*, "the City", or *Jugol*, the wall that encloses and symbolizes it, but Harar is also named *Madinat al-Awliya* "City of Saints", being starred with hundreds of mosques, shrines and tombs of saintly men. Harar is a holy city of Islam, a fertile land for scholarship, Sunni orthodoxy and spiritual practices.



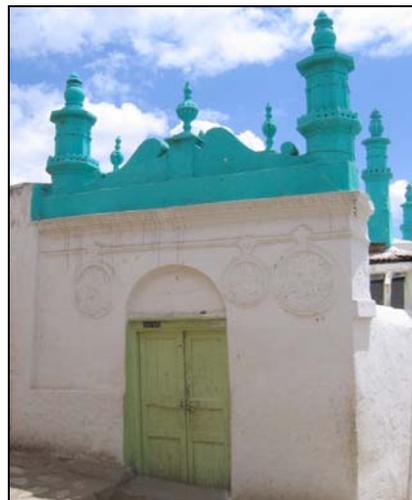
Harari mosques and shrines

Oral traditions most frequently ascribe the city's birth to the arrival of the "patron saint" *shaykh* Abadir, a holy man who came from Arabia and united a number local tribes by converting them to Islam. Historians, according to different interpretations of the sources, place its foundation between 9th and 13th century.

In the following period Harar became the capital of a wide emirate that reached its golden age in the 16th century, under the rule of Ahmed ibn-Ibrahim al-Gazi, known as Grañ "the left-handed" and his successor Nūr ibn-Mujahid, builder of the *Jugol*.



Tomb of Amir Nur



Egyptian mosque

Harar remained politically independent until Egyptian occupation (1875). In 1887 Mənilək's troops won the battle of Čällänqo and incorporated Harar in the Abyssinian Empire. Since then and for more than a century of Ethiopian history, harari people experienced cultural and religious restrictions, which became particularly severe during Mengistu's DERG regime (1974-1991).

When DERG eventually fell, Harar's historical importance and its well-developed urban culture were recognized by the new government of Ethiopian Federal Republic. The small territory of Harar became a National Regional State and harari people started a process of cultural reconstruction and restoration, also implying revival of religious practice and identity.

For Harari, an urban, literate and highly educated population, *āda* (culture) and *dīn* (religion) are strictly interlocked. Harari call themselves *gey usu'*, "people of the city" and define the essential aspects of their culture as *gey*, "of the city". Harari culture essentially developed within the city walls, though many external cultural influences were integrated through the centuries.

The concept of "city" (*gey*) and the Islamic faith are essential to every aspect of harari life, cultural traditions and identity and they also pervade harari poetical and musical repertoires, which are among the most significant expressions of Harar's intangible cultural heritage.

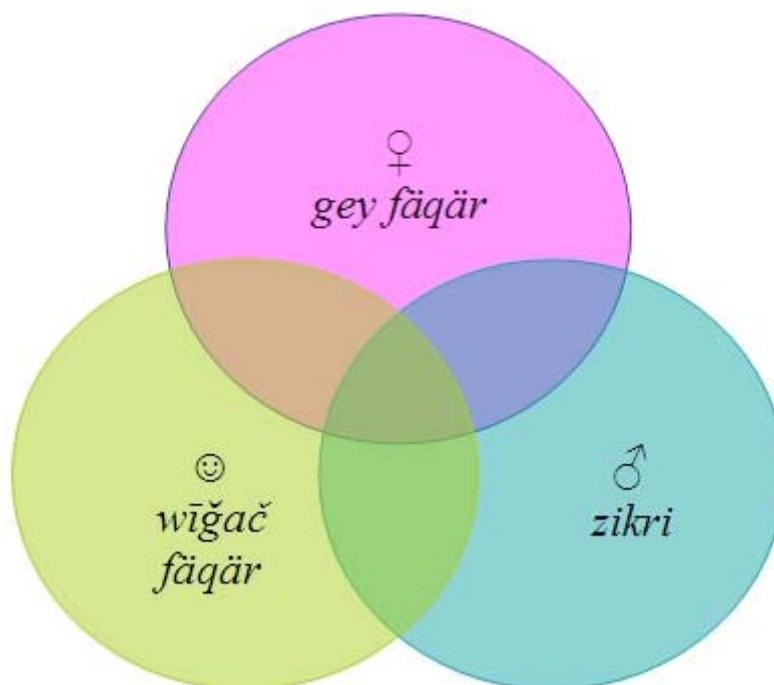
Harari sung repertoires

Indeed, not all the expressions presenting a musical profile are to be considered as "music": some rather belong to the sphere of religious devotion and ritual custom; some others may be preferably regarded as expressions of poetry or activities of entertainment. Texts and contexts define the nature of sung practices in spite of musical form and performance modalities.

In Harar no explicit legal obligation is applied to music, but shared religious beliefs tend to discourage performance and audition of string and wind instruments. Therefore, in the repertoires universally accepted as traditional, Harari do not use melodic instruments, preferring to combine only voices and percussive instruments.

The peculiarity of harari musical system emerges when compared to neighbour musical customs: in fact, in spite of predominant pentatonism, harari melodies mainly refer to a diatonic scale.

Distribution of sung practices touches the majority of the social strata. To summarize harari synchronic reality, division of repertoires among social groups is quite defined, although permeable to some extent.



Harari present sonic reality

Traditional secular sung poetry (*gey fäqär*) is mainly performed by women, especially during weddings. Devotional chants (*zikri*) accompany ritual practices derived from the influence of Sufi order Qādiriyya and principally represent a men's activity. A part of women's repertoires (lullabies, sung fairytales and mother-to-child songs and nursery rhymes) integrates with children's songs. Children usually imitate adults' repertoires, but they also play their specific songs (*wīgāč fäqär*), which are very well-preserved.

Besides traditional musical practices, a new generation of pop musicians performs harari songs with imported electrified instruments. Modern musicians are mostly young men, with few female exceptions; in their songs they use eptatonic scales and keep continuous connections with their culture, but their musical practices, if compared to traditional singing and playing, present differences in compositional procedures, forms, instruments, personalities, uses, contexts and taste. To my viewpoint, harari pop production can be portrayed as a new musical container for cultural *gey fäqär*.

A view of today's traditional *gey fäqär*

Gey fäqär, in its traditional modalities of performance, is sung poetry. Its textual and musical aspects shall not be considered as separate entities, but rather as a whole²: *gey fäqär*'s practice in fact combines the expression of a shared poetic and musical heritage with the ability of verse improvisation and melodic variation.

Harari songs may be performed in solo, in duo or in group, with or without instrumental accompaniment. Modalities of execution present monodic, heterophonic and polyphonic procedures; vocal styles express a variety of timbers and techniques. Harari women traditionally accompany *gey fäqär* with drums (*käräbu*), tambourines (*däf*) and wooden blocks (*käbäl*).



Women's *käräbu*

Performers of *gey fäqär* may belong to different social backgrounds; in wedding context they may be *wāli*, expert or professional singers, *ayāč*, “mothers” (elderly relatives of the bride) or *afōča* members (women belonging to the same neighbourhood association as the bride's mother).

Sources and themes of inspiration for *gey fäqär* generally refer to Harar and the surrounding nature, family genealogies, historical and religious figures, love, marriage, conditions of the playing environment, praising formulas as well as sayings, aphorisms, riddles, proverbs, sacred hymns, prayers and blessings. The most popular verses and couplets are recurrently played in songs: their arrangement within the poetical and musical structure is regulated by formulaic mechanisms.

² The term *fäqär* itself is translated as “song, poetry” in Leslau (1963:63).

1	አለላ	<i>Allāh</i>	God	Dieux
2	ነብ	<i>nābi</i>	Prophet	Prophète
3	ፈቀር	<i>fāqār</i>	Sung verses	Vers chantés
4	ባድ	<i>bād</i>	Land, country	Terre, Pays
5	ደድ	<i>dād</i>	Love	Amour
6	ሙት	<i>mūt</i>	Death	Mort
7	ሙራዶ	<i>murād</i>	Wedding	Mariage
8	ሽርተ ሐል	<i>širti hal</i>	Situation	Situation
9	መፋለስ	<i>māfalās</i>	Praising	Éloges:
			a) አለስ ሞረዶ	<i>halās morod</i> invitation
			b) ጌለዋ መሪኝ	<i>gēl-wa māriñ</i> Friendship ፶፩ Amitié
			c) መሪኝ	<i>Māriñ</i> Friendship ፶ Amitié
			d) ዩድዮው ዩድዮው	<i>youdayoudé</i> (?)
10	መስዳብ (ቆስ ፈቀር)	<i>māsdaḅ (qōsa fāqār)</i>	Joke, provocation	Blague, provocation
11	መለሳይ ፈቀር	<i>mālasay fāqār</i>	Epic/heroic song	Chant épique
12	ታሪቅ ኤድ ፈቀር	<i>tarīq fāqār</i>	History	Histoire

Themes of *gey fāqār* according to Abdulmuhaymin Abdunassir 2005

The following excerpts may briefly exemplify the variety of *gey fāqār* styles³.



1. *Salley*, solo song. Theme: patriotic. Performer: Gini (*wāli*). Recorded in 2005.



2. *Ĝāliyei* duet (most ancient style). Form: strophic, use of *tuilage*. Themes: praising, patriotic, religious. Performers: Gini and the late Zebida Abdosh (*wāli*). Recorded in 2003.



3. *Kōtankōt* duet accompanied by *dāf*. Form: cyclic, wide use of *tuilage* and non-significant syllables (*lele*). Themes: love, marriage. Performers: Gini and the late Zebida Abdosh (*wāli*). Recorded in 2006.



4. *Dārsi* group song accompanied by *kārābu*, *dāf* and *kābāl*. Form: strophic, responsorial solo-choir. Themes: patriotic, praising the bride, religious. Performers: Gini (*wāli*); *ayāč* and *afōča* of the bride. Recorded in 2002.



5. *Ĝāliyei* group song. Form: strophic, responsorial solo-choir, use of *tuilage*. Theme: love, praising the bride's family. Performers: *ayāč* and *afōča* of the bride. Recorded in 2002.

In these recently recorded examples, only female voices are heard: today the perpetrators of traditional sung poetry are women; but their exclusive custodianship of *gey fāqār* is a recent fact.

³ For additional information on *gey fāqār* styles, texts and contexts, see Sartori (2007).

Earlier *gey fäqär*

Formerly, men played an important role in *gey fäqär* composition. In wedding context, harari songs could also be played by young boys and girls together⁴. *Mugād*, harari youth associations organized by age, sex and neighbourhood, were a regular context of musical-poetical composition, performance and dance. Their production was vast and varied, singing took place in many social occasions, songs were a shared heritage and repertoires were in constant evolution, both on the male and female sides. It was in the frame of a boy's *mugād* that *kōtankōt* style was born. Also, since restrictions on musical practices always applied indulgently to harari young generations, in the '60s and '70s, while girls kept performing *gey fäqär* in the traditional voice-percussion configuration, young men took inspiration from radio tunes and imported gramophone discs and started experimenting new musical instruments such as guitars, accordions, keyboards and synthesizers, anticipating the new wave of harari pop. *Mugād* eventually disappeared under the cultural repression of DERG regime, but a vast collection of recordings, together with oral history, testify their poetical and musical richness⁵.

Besides and above *mugād*, for more than three decades, the most famous and respected *wāli* of Harar was a blind lady of Turkish and Syrian origins known as Shamitu. Her blindness and her incomparable ability with sung verses contributed to nickname her as "the Homer of *Gey*"⁶. Along her life, Shamitu travelled the world to celebrate expatriated Harari's weddings and to perform in world music festivals, always keeping her roots strongly entrenched within the *Jugol*.

Past and present, memory and practice

When six years ago Shamitu passed away, her stainless figure and her unforgettable songs became a symbol of harari culture. The memory of Shamitu and her poetical and musical heritage are still persistently evoked by harari communities in Ethiopia and in the diaspora within concerts, press articles and radio programs.

After an adequate period of mourning, Shamitu's long-standing musical partner, known as Gini, inherited her central role in *gey fäqär* and became the most requested and appreciated woman *wāli* in Harar.

In the while, men had gradually abandoned music under past political pressure or because of religious choices: after marriage, many Harari chose to leave music to better follow the way of Islam. In the holy Harar, undeniably, the spiritual path always conveyed the strongest call. Besides, religious observance, study of Islamic texts and spiritual practices are also part of the present cultural restoration process. Today many harari men practice *zikri* both as a religious and cultural activity and pay no interest to secular songs.

⁴ See Leslau (1947:130-131). Within the *Jugol*, older Harari orally witness *mugād* activities and earlier practices of *gey fäqär*.

⁵ In Abdallah Sharif's Private Museum, besides numerous manuscripts and objects that represent and illustrate Harari history and material culture, it is possible to find and listen to over two-hundred cassette-tapes as well as reel tapes and digitalized documents testifying *mugād*'s musical activity, earlier *gey fäqär* and other forms of Harari and Ethiopian oral traditions.

⁶ Kabir Abdi Abdulmuhaymin Abdunassir, harari scholar, historian and ex-singer, reported to me this nickname as well as many precious pieces of information about *gey fäqär* and Harari culture in general.

The memory of male *mugād* is anyway vivid: texts are being collected and published, while full songs, refrains, couplets and verses, re-folklorized and re-functionalized, keep being performed with minor variations by women singers.

Modern harari bands occasionally rearrange old songs as well, but harari women hold the practice, preservation and transmission of the greatest variety of vocal and instrumental traditional procedures, revitalizing at every performance harari music and oral poetry.

The songs of women *wāli* of all times, Shamitu's above all, represent today an essential facet of harari identity. Children's repertoires, on their side, give a full mirror of the musical life of Harar, bearing countless intact memories of the past and reabsorbing men's and women's contemporary repertoires as well as fresh radio tunes.

Conclusion

Harari community embodies a peculiar example of social rearrangement of musical roles under the stress of historical transformations, suggesting a potential recipe to balance codified social values between conservation and innovation: when men chose to leave music, women's custodianship turned into the key of preservation, transmission and development of local traditional modalities of musical performance.

Contemporary harari musical practices, between old and new cultural habits, represent an example of how a Muslim micro-society may face historical and political dialectics, cultural reconstruction, revival of Islamic belief and identity issues by finding peaceful solutions within its own resources, redistributing repertoires among sexes and age-groups and keeping sung traditions licit and lively.

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