

## Book Reviews

**Singer Poets in the Ethiopian Highlands. (*Ethiopia Kougen no Ginnyu Shijin: Uta ni Ikiru Mono Tachi*).** Itsushi Kawase, Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo Sha, 2020, pp. 252. (in Japanese)

This book focuses on two kinds of traditional Ethiopian singers, *Azmari* and *Lalibala*. What they have in common is that they are mainly from the northern part of Ethiopia and that they sing with improvised lyrics. However, their reality is very different. *Azmari* perform alone using a traditional single-stringed violin called a “*Masenqo*.” they are based out of “Azumalibet,” a traditional night club, and also perform at weddings, baptisms, and other entertainment occasions. In contrast, *Lalibala* don’t use musical instruments. Their performances include one man and one woman, or two women. They are wandering entertainers who go from house to house from early morning to noon. They also sing at funerals and other occasions of mourning for the dead.

This book consists of 23 chapters without section, but in this review, I want to introduce the contents into five sections. The first section includes chapters 1–3. In this section, the author introduces *Azmari*’s musical instruments, origin myths, social status, and the town of their base. The author focuses on the jargon “*chumble*” (ጭንብር) as a symbolic representation of *Azmari*. This term can mean “unkind,” “unfriendly,” or “cunning,” but it is also used to describe a good performance or singing. Through this word, they are depicted as not being straightforward.

The second section comprises chapters 4–12. The author mainly illustrates *Azmari*’s artistic style and relationships with society, which have changed over time. In some eras, these entertainers were in a position to criticize and advise politicians through their art at the royal court. Today, *Azmari* entertainers hold performances in the local community with comical and ironic songs, and they also perform during farm work and at ceremonies. In the second half of this section, many examples of *Azmari*’s jargon and lyrics are introduced. The most symbolic of these is “wax and gold.” *Azmari* entertainers use songs to flatter the audience’s appearance and personality, to

put them in a good mood, to liven up the crowd, and to receive tips. However, their songs are not simple flattery songs. “Wax” is a superficial lyric that seems to be just a song of praise. However, “gold” is a metaphor showing that underneath the surface, the song is referring to elements that remind us of death.

The third section is included in chapters 13–17. In this section, the author describes the spread of *Azmari* as an art form throughout the world. *Azmari* expanded their activities to Mekele, one of the major cities, and Addis Ababa, the capital. Some of these entertainers are currently active in Washington, DC, USA. These circumstances indicate that *Azmari*’s performances are widely recognized. However, the catalyst for this spread was unfortunate. *Azmari*’s activities expanded with the movement of people who were at the mercy of political power. For example, during the period of military rule that began in the mid-1970s, 200,000–300,000 Ethiopians were exiled to the United States. The need for *Azmari* at annual events in their new communities has led to the singers’ widespread success. Today, some of *Azmari*, who are not related to any blood relationship with any *Azmari* groups, gained international recognition as artists.

The fourth section is chapters 18–22. The author describes *Lalibala*’s performance, origin myth, and door-to-door style of entertainment. In addition, the author introduces episodes from the filming of his visual anthropological work on *Lalibala* and the reactions that he received after its release. The characteristics of the *Lalibala*’s performance are then depicted as part of an impromptu performance but one that is constantly generated and emerges in a rich exchange with the listener. The same is true of the communication between the author and his viewers over the video works about them.

The fifth section is described in Chapter 23. The author describes today’s difficult situation of *Azmari* and *Lalibala* due to COVID-19 and shows how *Azmari* entertainers continue to sing songs those include jokes and sarcasm, creating a hopeful future.

I have been researching African dance and Japanese street performers for many years, and I would like to

comment on this book from two perspectives based on my experience. The first regards the expression of the book. The author has avoided the style of an academic technical book by using a colloquial, poetic style as well as including the singers' jargon. Some of the contents were originally published as articles, but the author rewrote them in a non-academic format and style. This action has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that it allows for the atmosphere of the performance and the interaction with the audience, which could not be fully expressed in academic articles, to be conveyed. The disadvantage is that sometimes the author's subjective expressions and objective descriptions become mixed together. Other researchers will certainly refer to this book in the future, but I suspect that they will have trouble handling such descriptions in academic writing.

The second aspect is the evaluation of the singers' performance. I understand the author's fascination with performances that take their shape in the interactions between singers and the audience. However, performing arts in which performances are changed depending on the situation and communication with the audience are sometimes regarded as inferior to those that continue to refine their performance on stage. An evaluation by a leading Ethiopian film director that is mentioned by the author is a notable

example. It is also worth noting that *Lalibala* is considered by some Ethiopians to be a shameful culture and that there was criticism of the author's visualization of the culture and its global dissemination. What non-Ethiopian audiences and researchers, including the author, think of *Azmari* and *Lalibala*, is not necessarily the same as what Ethiopians think of them. Even if a singer based on *Azmari*'s performance gains recognition outside of Ethiopia, it is important to carefully determine whether the target is the performance produced by the interaction that takes place in traditional local nightclubs or a sophisticated stage performance that fuses folk and Western music.

This book succeeds in depicting the reality of *Azmari* and *Lalibala* beyond the image of "wandering minstrels." These performers have rarely been treated as research subjects. This book is the result of the author's efforts to collect primary sources and publish them as research results, despite the scarcity of materials. Research will continue to develop as we accumulate additional results, even if only gradually. The fact that the results have been put into print and published as a book should be commended.

SUSUMU AIHARA  
Kyoto University