

Lalibala

Lalibala (“Lalibaloch” in plural) are the group of traditional singers in northern Ethiopia who sing, beg and bless for alms. They are a hereditary group who maintain close kinship relations. Desta Tekla-Wold (1970) notes that the term Lalibala originates from the Amharic words; *lelit* (late at night) and *bala* (to eat). This is because they used to sing and beg at night. On the other hand, The Lalibala community found in Addis Ababa declares that the group was named after King Lalibala of the 12th Century. Though their origin is not clear, one of the oral traditions commonly shared by Lalibaloch traces their origin back to the story of Adam and Eve. It claims that when God found out that Adam and Eve have not presented half of their children in front of him, God became angry and cursed the hidden to keep singing and begging for alms.

The majority of Lalibala come from Shoa, Wollo and Gojjam. Specially, Dejen in Gojjam and Fiche in Shoa are densely populated by Lalibaloch. They travel from town to town as a single man or woman or, more commonly, in a small party mostly composed of a husband and his wife accompanied by their children. The activities of Lalibaloch are more limited than those of Azmari, another type of kinship-organized musicians from Gondar, who perform flexibly in various social settings. However, in some areas of North Shoa, Lalibaloch occasionally attend *tazkar* (“*rota*” in their own terminology): the religious service and banquet held for the commemoration of the deceased, where they sing a requiem and receive the leg of a *caw* in return.

Lalibala sing songs without using any musical instruments. Their manner of singing can be roughly classified into the two forms. One is by duets between a man and a woman. The couple moves from house to house with the woman singing vocables in a strained vocal quality followed by the man singing verses of praise. The other way of singing is done by a single man or woman who sing both the chorus and verse. Before they start singing, they usually look for promising clients and collect information (religion, occupation, etc.) about these people and edit several verses that suit them. Once Lalibala receive alms in the form of money, clothes and food, they sing particular forms of blessing verse-wishing prosperity to the listener. Thus, their song text is consequently the mixture of fixed and improvised verses. They learn the skill while following their parents in their childhood.

Lalibala maintain an *argot*. Communication by the *argot* can occur most advantageously when they are begging in front of outsiders. Thus, the information related to their “business transaction” can be frequently exchanged through the *argot*.

The surrounding dominant population believe that Lalibala are condemned to suffer from leprosy if they do not sing, beg and bless for alms in the morning. However, the belief has a wide degree of variability for Lalibala today. Most Lalibala admit that they have never known any Lalibala who contracted leprosy for discontinuing his activities. Moreover, many say publicly that they are just singing to earn their daily food. Nonetheless, the rest of the society still stigmatizes them by associating them with leprosy, which has a strong abhorrence in Ethiopia.

Lit.: Dasta Takla Wald, New Amharic Dictionary, 1970 p725 (in Amharic)

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