

The Role of Music in the Eritrean Struggle for Independence

Luwam Thomas

Ryerson University, Toronto

luwam.thomas@ryerson.ca

Music playing a vital role in the Eritrean Struggle for Independence is not only recognized by Eritreans ourselves but also well documented by foreign authors and institutions: “*used as part of the armory of resistance by the liberation forces*” (Boon and Plastow, 1998, p. 37).

Traditionally, Eritrean music consisted of group singing, and clapping, in a harmonious choir of mass participation, accompanied by Keberos (drums) and at times by the Kirar (5-stringed Eritrean instrument), Embilta and Chirawata. It is used in festivities, weddings and other social events. This group singing of Eritrean culture is also known for its use to raise the spirit of diligent work during collaborative duties in farming or building houses for members of a community.

Eritrea is a country located in the horn of East Africa bordered by Ethiopia and Djibouti in the south, the Red Sea and Saudi Arabia in the East, and Sudan in the West. As the struggle for independence was forming and as it was not permitted to discuss politics of their country, Eritreans used music to communicate between themselves in a way the Ethiopians could not readily understand. Artists used their lyrics and tunes to spread nationalistic messages that touched the hearts and minds of the people.

The story of the Eritrean struggle can be compared to the story of David and Goliath.

“The Eritrean struggle for freedom from Ethiopian colonial rule lasted for 30 years from 1961 to 1991...Eritrea received almost no external help, whilst

Ethiopia was supported initially by the US and later from the mid 1970s by the USSR,” (Boon and Plastow, 1998, p.36).

Along with their military offenses, Eritreans used education, political awareness, culture, and most importantly music as their weapons.

In the mid-1950s, “Eritreans started to realize that their country was slowly being swallowed up by its bigger neighbour,” (Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk, 2006). The Ethiopian government, which was controlling Eritrea, also controlled the books they read, the music they listened to and even discouraged them in speaking their own native Eritrean language, such as Tigrigna. They had no choice but to listen to what was given to them, which was Ethiopian music, read Ethiopian books, and speak the official Ethiopian language, Amharic. So as a response, Eritrean musicians would start singing songs describing life under foreign occupation, which resulted in forming small musical groups with “the aim of challenging the foreign culture that was engulfing their country” (Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk, 2006).

MaTA, which stands for Mahber Theatre Asmara, also known as the Asmara Theatre Association was one of these musical and drama groups formed by Eritreans. It was formed just a few weeks before September 1, 1961: the first date of the Eritrean struggle towards Independence (Banham, 2004).

Although there were a lot of singers that created songs with straightforward lyrics, many Eritrean singers included coded communication in their music so that only Eritreans would be able to understand. According to Banham (2004), Eritrean artists wrote their music using coded messages and symbolism to support the liberation struggle (p. 204). An example is a song by the renowned singer Bereket Menghisteb who is considered a legend, composed a song in 1972 called “Meley”. The lyrics state, “ata halaf megedi inte rekikbkaya meley, selam beleley” which translates into “Oh passerby convey my salutes if you see “meley” (which symbolizes Eritrea) on

the way” (Rena, 2008, p. 3). He also continues to say that she is hidden behind the mountains and he is not able to see her. He describes how he misses her dearly and hope’s she is alright. “Meley” is a popular name among Eritrean women and so for a non-Eritrean hearing this song but who understands the language Tigriña, will assume the singer is talking about his girlfriend “Meley”.

Other coded music by Eritrean artists include Ateweberhan Segid’s “agdo neyratni agdo nay beyney”, Tewelde Reda’s “shigey habuni”, Teberih Tesefahuney’s “ti’ghezana Abi hidmo, tuquan qunchi meliomo”, Osman Abdelrahim’s “Tsebhi tsom yibluki” and the list goes on. That is what is so amazing about Eritrean music from the 1960’s and 1970’s: their coded messages that secretly induce patriotism amongst the nationals.

The start of the struggle was also the spark of the patriotic feeling amongst the Eritrean youth. A song called “Gebel’ye Halengay” by a singer of the People’s Liberation Front’s Cultural Troupe contains piercing lyrics that are very straightforward and to the point. The singer describes himself as a strong freedom fighter by letting everyone know he is able to drive his enemies out of his land just like lightening and thunderstorms, frightening people away. He is ready more than ever to fight and is more than willing to let his enemies know that he and his people will not be challenged. He ends the song on a patriotic note saying “Aawet abesari nihizbey” which means he will be the deliverer of freedom to his people.

According to Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk (2006), music was used to inspire Eritrean youth to join the Eritrean struggle for independence. In addition it was also used to raise political consciousness and to revive patriotism amongst the youth. In the liberated areas political consciousness was also being taught in schools and social gatherings as well but as Rena (2008) states, “ Eritrea music is considered as the language of a common (Eritrea) man” and so,

listening to the music was just as much influential in reviving patriotism and making the youth more aware of the politics surrounding them.

An example of songs directed towards the youth is “Menisey” which means “Youth” by an Eritrean freedom-fighter singer, Tesfai Mehari. He begins by calling out to the youth, asking them to listen. He then describes the stories of the martyrs, who died fighting for their country, and of what they did to contribute to the struggle. He translates it to the youth asking them to continue the duties of the martyrs in order to bring back our land and our rights. In addressing youth, this song also brings a message of equal rights between men and women by distinguishing between a male martyr “Merhay” and a female martyr “Merhayit.”

Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk (2006) state that “Eritreans saw cultural activities (including music) with multiple functions as an integral part of the struggle” (p. 38). One of the multiple functions was that music was also an outlet for women and played a great role in the emancipation of women. As I interviewed an Eritrean, well versed with the Eritrean Struggle, he stated, “I had witnessed that by the end of 1980, 30% of the front-line fighters were women, which was a big achievement.” This was a result of mass organization and the political teachings and awareness on nationalism and encouragement of equal rights amongst men and women. The same Eritrean adds,

“The struggle for equal rights of Eritrean women was nothing like the struggle of women in the western society. Here in the Western society it is men verses women and women are labeled as feminists if they speak for their rights. During the Eritrean struggle in the early 1980’s, both women and men spoke up for equal rights of women by opposing the system that created inequality and by laying the principle of empowering women and other oppressed classes through political and social consciousness and the opportunity of engagement in participation. Because we believed that equal rights can only be achieved through equal participation be it in fighting or going to school” (Anonymous, personal communication, October 14, 2009).

“Dehan Kuni Wushate” is a song by a female freedom fighter, Birikti Ghebreselassie, describing the emancipation of women. The title translates “Goodbye, my kitchen” and she sings of how she will not any more be confined to the duties of the kitchen but also welcomes her duties as an activist, an educator, and a freedom fighter. She continues on to elaborate on the topic and reaches a point where she says:

*I lift my head up
And I bury the state inferiority
I will give my life as a dowry to my people and my country
Wearing my working clothes, I roll up my sleeves
Standing along my brothers and sisters (the Eritrean freedom fighters)
With my nails I dig, with my sweat I irrigate
To develop the land of my country.*

Such powerful lyrics gave women the confidence and inspiration to go and fight not only for their rights, but also for their country and through participation they have put their mark in world history. As Stated by Cook (2008), “by the end of the conflict in 1993, women comprised 30 percent of Eritrea’s approximately 100, 000 soldiers” and it is no wonder that, “30 percent of the Eritrean parliament seats are reserved for women” (p. 169).

When it comes to sacrificing their lives for their country, Eritreans were ready on the front lines with their heads held high. As my Eritrean interviewee reminisced back to the days of the Eritrean struggle, he states,

“I remember sitting in one of the branch offices of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, we were all just conversing lightly and sharing jokes. In the office, the new volunteers were lining up to get ready to be sent to a base camp located in Sahel. As I watched, they all gave up everything they had with them such as, watches, and jewelry and in return were given their uniform and a cloth wrap. One of the men smiled when receiving the cloth wrap, and he said jokingly, ‘Aha, this will have to be my burial cloth’ and everyone started laughing. I just stood in awe, and in amazement at their strong conviction to liberate their country and sacrifice themselves for the sake of their people. They were well aware and conscious of their sacrifice that was coming and yet had no sense of fear or retreat” (Anonymous, personal communication, October 14, 2009).

Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk (2006) acknowledge that the “predominant theme that guided Eritrean musicians from the 1950’s was love of the mother land. ‘Hagerey’, which means my land in Tigrigna, could very well be the most frequently used word in Eritrean’s musical vocabulary. Even after Eritrea gaining its Independence on May 24, 1991, Eritrean artists did not cease to use the word. However, the content of the music changed from “we will be liberated” to “we must develop”. Rena (2008) states that the content of the songs changed their priority to reconstruction of the land and encouraging youth to participate in developmental programs (p. 6). An example of a song by another Eritrean legend, an ex-freedom fighter, Tekle Kiflemariam (Wedi Tukul), is “Gobez Teshamo” which asks the people, especially the youth to roll up their sleeves and start working for the prosperity of their country.

In the beginning when it was impossible to talk about politics publicly, music was used to communicate and agitate the people as an underground movement. Music was used to raise political and social consciousness including equal rights between men and women. In times of war, contrary to the expectation of the enemies, it helped both the fighters and the mass to uplift their morale. Music was almost compared to anesthesia when listened during the worst times of the struggle. It was also an outlet for the Eritrean people, to have their voices heard by both friends and foes that their victory was undisputed: “awetna nay gidin eyu”. In conclusion, the huge contribution of music to the Eritrean struggle for independence was no less than the use of military armaments.

References

- R. Boon and J. Plastow (1998). *Theatre matters: Performance and culture on the world stage*. Cambridge University Press: New York, NY.
- B. Nettl and R.M. Stone (2002). *The garland encyclopedia of world music*. Garland Publications: New York, NY.
- R. Rena (2008). Role of musical songs in the independence struggle and its importance in contemporary Eritrea. *International Journal of Women, Social Justice and Human Rights*, 3(2): 39-51.
- S. Broughton, M. Ellingham, and J. Lusk (2006). *Rough guide to world music: Africa and middle east*, volume 1[3]. Rough Guides Ltd: London.
- M. Banham (2004). *A history of theatre in Africa*. Cambridge University Press: New York, NY.
- Cook, B. A. (2006). *Women and War: A historical encyclopedia from antiquity to the present*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Discography

Menghisteab, B. (1972). Meley. [cassette]. Eritrea.

Mehari, T. (1984). Menisey. *EPLF Cultural Troupe* [cassette]. Eritrea: EPLF Cultural Troupe.

Ghebreselassie, B. (1984). Dehan Kuni Wushate. *EPLF Cultural Troupe* [cassette]. Eritrea:
EPLF Cultural Troupe.

Kiflemariam, T. (1998). Gobez Teshamo. *Chiru Bereka* [cassette]. Eritrea: (not known).