

Nile Ethiopian Ensemble: Profile of an African Immigrant Music & Dance Group

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More than 40,000 Washington-area residents claim the Ethiopian region as their birthplace. They are members of several culturally, religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities. The largest is Amharic, but the area also includes Tigrean, Oromo, Eritrean, and Gurage. Tesfaye Lemma, a longtime advisor and community scholar of the African Immigrant Folklife Project, is the founder of the Center for Ethiopian Arts and Culture and of the Nile Ethiopian Ensemble. The center, like many other African immigrant organizations, promotes traditional culture for the benefit of their youth and the understanding of the general American community. And, like many African immigrant music and dance groups, the ensemble presents traditions from many peoples — in



Donned in traditional clothing and carrying traditional instruments, the Nile Ethiopian Ensemble poses for a photo. Photo courtesy Nile Ethiopian Ensemble

this case, those from the Horn of Africa — in their performances.

The ensemble often performs with Seleshe Damessae, a master of the *kerar* (six-stringed lyre), who learned to play from his father. Damessae spent four years studying the traditions of the Azmaris, itinerant performers in northern Ethiopia, from whom he is descended. He now teaches young apprentices to make and play their own *kerars* here in Washington, D.C.

Most members of the ensemble started performing as youngsters in Ethiopia. "I enjoyed dancing with my

friends during holidays like Easter, New Year, Christmas, and also weddings. Many people from the neighborhood admired my talent, and I continued my singing and dancing career in school," said dancer Abebe Belew, who was born in Gondar Province.

Like singer Selamawit Nega, most future members of the ensemble in the late 1970s were recruited or forced to join music and dance groups sponsored by the former Ethiopian government "to educate for propaganda purposes." Dancer Almaze Getahun recalls that when his family objected to this, "My father was labeled a revolutionary, and they sent him to jail." During this time, members of the ensemble learned songs and dances from many Ethiopian ethnic groups.

Most of the ensemble members eventually moved to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and joined musical groups that toured the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Tesfaye Lemma defected to the United States while on a tour in 1987. As musicians and dancers arrived in the Washington area, Lemma formed the ensemble. And, in accordance with the Amharic proverb, "*Kes be kes inkulal be igru yehedal*" (Slowly, slowly, even an egg will walk), the group has developed a loyal audience for their performances in the Washington, D.C., area and beyond.

Suggested Reading

- Barlow, Sean, and Eyre Banning. 1995. *Afropop: An Illustrated Guide to Contemporary African Music*. Edison, New Jersey: Chartwell Books.
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On the weekends, musicians from neighboring regions of Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Algeria sometimes stay late at local North African restaurants like Casablanca performing music together in informal sessions attended by family and friends from home. New groups form from such gatherings. The Kasbah Band, musicians of Moroccan origin, perform both Moroccan shaabi and Algerian rai popular music at a holiday banquet of the Algerian-American Association of Greater Washington, D.C. Photo by Harold Dorwin