

**Asmara Theater Association (*MaTeA*) 1961-1974:
Popular Music as Instrument of Modernity and Nationalism in Eritrea**

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ABSTRACT

Popular music in Eritrea is one of the most important instruments of political and social transformations. It has served as instrument of modernization, nationalism and political resistance. Based on critical and qualitative analysis of data, the paper argues that *MaTeA*, one of the first highly organized indigenous musical and theatrical bands of Eritrea which initiated the development of modern popular music, was an outcome of a negotiation between the modern music introduced by European colonialism and indigenous music that had been developing for centuries. *MaTeA* synchronized the modern art and indigenous art without jeopardizing popular music's basic function in the society. It also used modernization and nationalism as stimulants to develop new musical genres and popularity among the Eritrean society. At the same time, it-influenced the identity of the people and their relation to economic and political powers. As a tool of analysis of the social and political history of urban society, *MaTeA* reveals the relationship of music, identity and power in modern Eritrean society throughout its life span.

Keywords: *Art, Colonialism, Indigenous, Asmara*

DOI: 10.23814/ethn.16.20.tem

Introduction

In the post-independent Eritrea, the preoccupation of popular music has been modernity and nationalism. This is not to say that popular music has neglected other aspects of the society. However, numerically, popular music production tends to focus on themes of nationalism and modernity. This is because for the last twenty years, popular music has been an integral part of the state's political tools for mobilizing the society towards development and war. In the aftermath of thirty years of armed struggle, popular music in Eritrea made tremendous progress in its genres and technological advancements. This in fact can be traced to the period of the armed struggle where popular music had powerful political as well as military roles in shaping the attitudes of the freedom fighters and in increasing the consciousness of the masses. In the early period of independence (1991-1997), popular music, highly influenced by the musical genre of the armed struggle focused on expressing the euphoria of victory after the thirty years armed struggle. When another conflict with Ethiopia broke out from 1998 to 2018, popular music found a stimulating issue to farther engage itself into the nationalist agenda. With the end of the conflict in 2018, popular music returned to its old agenda of state-led development. Even though there is a growing tendency of using popular

music as an instrument of opposition in Eritrean diaspora, nationalism and modernity have resurfaced as important stimulants to further advance its genre and technology.

This historical account shows that in Eritrea both popular music on one hand and modernity and nationalism on the other hand have had a symbiotic relationship. One played a crucial role to transform the other. While popular music takes nationalism and modernity as an important agenda to pursue, people's nationalist feeling and desire of modernization, in turn, provide raw material for artistic adventures. The purpose of this article is to historicize this relationship by analyzing and unpacking the history of performance of one of the first indigenous people's music bands called *Mahber Tyatr Asmera, MaTeA*, (Asmara Theater Association) as a case study. Without historicizing the relationship between music and nationalism, it is difficult to understand the current relationship between nationalism and popular music in Eritrea. In investigating this relationship, the paper asks: what were the themes of *MaTeA* musical performances? To what extent were these performances related to modernization and nationalism? In answering these questions, the paper relies on an analysis of the lyrics, most of which gathered from private and public archives. In addition to this, secondary sources remain important throughout the paper.

Popular Culture and Society

Popular culture is one of the most powerful tools that shapes the thinking and practices of any society. Its role can be ideological, entertaining, construction of identity and manifestation of changes that take place in a particular society (Waterman 1990: 17-29). This could be through exposing injustices, settling anxieties, increasing awareness and encouraging people for actions and reactions (Perullo 2011). Moreover, music creates common desires and common objectives not to mention that it can be a form of resistance to injustices and a form of perpetuation of injustices. Be it as it may, the relationship between art and society is always “a two-way street: not only do social practices and beliefs illuminate and affect art, but art also illuminates and affects social practices” (Ben-Amos 1989: 1).

Music is part of such popular culture. It is always at the service of the society in different forms. The usage of music despite its effectiveness varies across societies and periods. It can be an instrument of social and political changes and a tool to define the power relations between the state and society. During decolonization, “black music” brought colonized people in a dialogue that created political aspiration for independence (Njoroge 2008: 102). This continued in the early period of independence when African leaders applied particular musical styles for nation-building projects (Dorsch 2010). In 2011, in the Middle East particularly in Tunisia and Egypt music contributed enormously in fulfilling the popular demands (Levine 2012). Under the neoliberal order, music industry universalized western culture by breaking cultural borders to inspire myths on global modernity (Horkheimer et al. 2001, Stokes 2004). In this manner, music serves as an instrument for the reproduction of power relationship between the centres and peripheries (Taylor 1997). This was not a simple production of music, the industry of culture had to conduct continuous rearrangements in order to perfectly merge words, images and music so that the mass has no other options but to follow what is given (Horkheimer, Adorno 2001: 97).

During colonialism, music was central in creating a new image of Africa. As a legacy of this process, one of the major problems of studying African popular culture after the

construction of new knowledge of African arts was how to separate the constructed image of African art and the authentic nature of indigenous arts. Although this fact has remained a barrier in studying African popular arts, some scholars like Karin Barber (1987) tried to create a *modus operandi* that treated African arts as the constitution of sociological and aesthetical aspects (Barber 1987: 11). Using this methodology, it can be said that in Africa popular arts are social facts, important in the lives of large number of African people. They are less class affiliated; not structured but spur-of-the-moment creations which penetrate and are penetrated by political, economic and religious institutions. No matter the way of emergence, popular arts as cumulative expression of the social, political and economic relationships are powerful communication mechanism by combining music, dance, costume, mime, song, and speech (Barber 1987: 2-3). This represents cumulative expression of diverse features of local and foreign, traditional and modern, political and economic, rich and poor, etc. (Waterman 1990: 17-29).

Development of Modern Music in Eritrea

In Eritrea popular music with modern equipment is mainly product of the influence of European culture. Historically, it goes back to the arrival of colonial powers, particularly the Italians 1890-1941. Even though the racial order denied indigenous people access to modern music and theater performances which were exclusively played by and reserved for Italian settlers only, some indigenous Eritreans somehow intermittently found way to listen and observe modern musical performances (Matzke 2010: 12). It was during British period that Eritreans began to be acquainted to modern musical works freely. These musical works were dominated by the *Imperials* mainly formed by the Italians and the *US Army Orchestras* stationed in Asmara during the Cold War. Only few Eritreans such as Abubaker Ashakih individually excelled in musical works (Ashakih 2005). Young talented Eritreans as a group took some more years to form competitive modern musical and theatrical bands. One among these bands was the Asmara Theater Association (*Mahber Tyatr Asmera, MaTeA*), which was formed in 1961. Seeking to simplify the discussion, the article uses the abbreviated name *MaTeA* throughout the paper.

MaTeA used local languages, mainly Tigre and Tigrigna as its members were dominantly from these two ethno-linguistic communities of Eritrea. Consequently, it gained popularity instantly. However, this does not mean that there existed no other theatrical associations formed by Eritreans before *MaTeA*. There were two theatrical association *Mahber Tewaso Deqebat* (The Association of Indigenous for Theater) and *Mahber Memheyash Hagerawi Bahil* (National Culture Development Association). The former was established in around 1947 by a group of young Eritreans who were members of the Unionist political party that struggled to ensure the unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia. In its nine stage plays, *Mahber Tewaso Deqebat* as a politically motivated association, praised Ethiopian history (Tessema 2006: 172-8). In 1953, it changed its name to *Mahber Muziqan Teweson Deqebat* (Association of Indigenous for Music and Theater) and worked under this name until its closure in 1959. Throughout its existence, cultural rehabilitation replaced its previous politically oriented works. In other words, *Mahber Muziqan Teweson Deqebat* became more concerned about the cultural deviation that young Eritreans used to follow. *Mahber Memheyash Hagerawi Bahil* (National Culture Development Association) was another proto *MaTeA* musical and theatrical association established by young talented Eritreans in 1957. The objective of this

association, as its name implies, was to revive the local musical culture. Even though there were unionist feelings in some of its members, it was overwhelmed by the focus on the struggle against the domination of Sudanese music in Eritrea (Tessema 2006: 192-204).

Organized musical performance by indigenous people using locally made instruments has a long history. However, these are different because of religion and ethnicity. Churches regularly teach students hymns and choirs. Musical performances vary in genres and purposes among various ethnicities of Eritrean society. In terms of objectives, however, they can be broadly classified as religious and secular. Whereas the secular music is performed in social gathering such as wedding, festivals etc. the religious music is exclusively performed in religious occasions. However, the secular music varies according to the nine ethno-linguistic communities that exist in Eritrea. Every ethnic group has a distinctive oral tradition such as poetry, story-telling, drama, music and dance. Although all share various musical performances, each community has its own distinctive musical genres, known to be used to raise collaborative duties and diligent spirit during farming, construction of houses, defense and various ceremonies. However, since the coming of European colonialism, these had been influenced to various degrees though they had never lost their authenticity as independent musical performances.

The arrival of Europeans, particularly Italians, in Eritrea brought tremendous changes in the local culture. One important change was modern urbanization and urban culture. The introduction of modern capitalist culture went side by side with the expansion of urban construction and capitalist economic activities not to mention that Eritrea was meant to accommodate Italian settlers. To this end, cities, particularly Asmara, became modernist urban centers (Denison et al. 2007: 71; Visscher, Boneses 2007). Even though music performance was subject to these changes, cities were segregated along racial laws. Laws required indigenous people to live in segregated quarters of the city and forbade them to participate in any modern music performances. “[T]he Italians were in charge of most purpose-built cinema-cum-theatre houses which hosted films and elaborate variety shows.” Eritreans used tea-shops and houses of local brewed drinks to perform music (Matzke 2010: 10). Cinemas were built for particular viewers, ‘first class’, officers and indigenous people (Plastow 2016: 6). This denial not only let the indigenous people continue to use local spaces but also local instruments like *Kerar*, *Mesenko*, *Wat’a/Chira-wat’a*, *Embelta*, *Shambeqo*, *Meleket*, *Kebero*, *Negarity* in their cultural performances until 1947, when the first association *Mahber Tewaso Deqebat* (Association of Indigenous for Theatre) was established.

After the construction of the first playhouse *Teatro di Asmara* in 1918 and the largest one in Africa at that time (Plastow 2016: 3), plays and music performances by Italians had become regular events in Asmara because all performances were only for the Italian settlers. During the British administration from 1941 to 1951, when indigenous people enjoyed a relative freedom from racial segregation, establishing a musical band was not easy. Consequently, only *Mahber Tewaso Deqebat* (Association of Indigenous for Theater) that belonged to the Unionist party did exist. As Eritrea federated with Ethiopia (1952-1962), Eritreans seized the relative freedom to form musical and theatrical associations. The Asmara Theater Association (*MaTeA*) was a product of this period. Over the next decade, it produced a number of plays in Tigrigna and Tigre and received unprecedented popularity until it was dissolved by Ethiopian authorities in 1974 because

of its strong nationalist sentiment (Connell et al. 2010: 90-1). And many of its members were labelled as political dissidents facing imprisonment and exile.

MaTeA's popularity grew rapidly between 1961 and 1974 because of three socio-economic and political developments. First, with the emergence of a working class which could be regarded as middle class, new demands evolved. Fifty years of Italian colonization (1890-1941) pursued aggressive capitalist penetration in the agrarian and pastoralist economies of Eritrean society. On one hand, capital introduced modern urbanization and new infrastructure in communication and transportation and on the other hand, it dispossessed peasants through conscription and employment. While the colonial army alone conscripted more than 130,000 indigenous Eritreans between 1890 and 1941 to fight on behalf of the colonialist power, which was ten per cent of the active labor of Eritrean society (Connell et al. 2010: 90-1), the manufacturing sector employed 13,351 indigenous workers (Hailemariam Stifanos 1997: 108).

Such capital penetration resulted in two forms of economy. While the urban and plantation areas run capitalist economy, the rural area still exercised peasantry economy. The emergence of a new proletariat class in the urban areas became the natural consequence of capitalist adventure (Riley, Emigh: 175). This new economic phenomenon increased rural-urban migration and by the end of the British Military Administration in 1952 twenty per cent of Eritrean society had already been urbanized and a significant size of it was elevated to middle class which comprised the working class and clerks. This development induced a new urban culture characterized by leisure time and entertainment demands. Having lived in town and cities with magnificent cinemas and townhalls and new social character the formation of indigenous musical and theatrical associations was largely a response to such development. Having been created under this context, where public enthusiasm for popular culture increasingly grew, *MaTeA*'s performances turned out to be congested public gatherings.

Second, the emergence of armed nationalist struggle in Eritrea against Ethiopia's occupation was a political development that increased the popularity of *MaTeA*. The struggle conquered popular music and served as stimulant to *MaTeA*'s works which dispensed its popularity in urban and to some extent in rural areas. As British Military Administration (BMA) withdrew from Eritrea in 1952, the United Nations decided Eritrea and Ethiopia be federated despite strong opposition from the majority of Eritreans. This decision brewed bitter anti-Ethiopian sentiment almost throughout the country first in the form of political movement then armed one which went on from 1961 to 1991. *MaTeA* was created and dissolved during this era and its products found to be attracted by this phenomenon. Hence, the majority of the contents of *MaTeA*'s songs invoked nationalist sentiment until Ethiopian authority eventually closed it. After its dissolution, while some of its members were either arrested or exiled, others joined the armed struggle.

Third, musical taste in the urban society of Eritrea increasingly changed. The socio-economic crisis and its subsequent political turbulence that took place between 1940 and 1960 charged new musical tastes among the youth that was highly acquainted to the western musical genres. It was a reformation in music. *MaTeA* took an objective to introduce a new musical genre that accommodates the modern rhythm with local melodies and languages. So, when it made a music that blended the western musical genre with local melody and languages, it received huge popularity not only from the

youngsters but also from the old generation who had been worried by the cultural invasion that appeared to be deteriorating the local culture (Tessema 2006: 233-36).

MaTeA and Its Contributions

Mahber Tyatr Asmera, MaTeA, (Asmara Theater Association) was established in August 1961 by nineteen artists. Before its official inauguration, the four founding members Asres Tessema, Alemayu Kahsai, Tewolde Redda and Tukabo Weldemariam held four meetings regarding its formation. However, as it started, it had nineteen members. Membership size reached fifty artists by the beginning of 1970s. The core objective of *MaTeA* was promoting socio-cultural transformation in society. One important point worth noting is that *MaTeA*, unlike the previous two musical and theatrical associations, had a clear organizational structure with a proper documentation system. It keeps personal records of the members, prepares activities’ reports and financial accounts on a regular basis (Tessema 2006: 204-13).

Assessing the contribution of *MaTeA*’s work in Eritrean society cannot be an easy task in anyway. This is because *MaTeA* had layers of audiences starting from the emerging elite class to ordinary peasants. *MaTeA*’s works were claimed by people of all walks of life particularly in the urban areas. Despite a manifestation of urban culture, *MaTeA*’s music, popular music for that matter, blended traditional instruments and genres with modern music and made traditional music and its instruments as important as ever. This gave the national culture continuity and a renaissance from the colonial suffocation. Consequently, artistically, it created a new genre of music and dancing performances not too far from the local traditions, particularly those of Tigre and Tigrigna speaking communities (Tessema 2006).

Thematically, *MaTeA*’s songs communicate multiple messages such as cultural modernization, nationalism, gender equality etc. Seeking to elaborate this argument, the paper takes six most popular songs that communicate several layers of messages of love and care, nationalism and gender equality, morality and humanism, as well as culture and norms. In a nutshell, *MaTeA* as a music band and organization attempted to lead to socio-political and cultural transformations in its audiences.

ነሰልጥኖ ደርፊ ዓድና (ብኣሰማን ዓብደራሕም) Let’s revive our Culture (By Osman Abderhim)

ነሰልጥኖ ደርፊ ሃገርና	Let’s develop our Music
ንከይ ጠፍእ እቲ ባህልና	for not to lose our culture
ሓደ ክልተ ክሓምዩና	do not undermine us
ፈቕድኡ ዘኸፍኡና	and our works
ሓሜን ዋጣ ውን ዩብሉና	they disrespect our talent
ስኣን ምኽኣል ንኸእለትና	while they lack it
እቲ ቀንዲ ዝኸርዓና	our culture is our pride
ዕምባባ ሃገር ንሕና ኢና	we are causing music to blossom
ነበራብር ንባህልና	and stimulating national culture
ድሓን ዓርከይ ዋጦት ኢና	oh my friend let’s embrace our talent
ስኣን ምሕታት ወለዶና	please my fellow Countrymen
ደቂ ሃገር ሓደራኹም	let’s inquire from our parents

አሰልጥኑ ንባህልኹም ንሱ እዩ ዘኹርዓኩም ንሃገርኩም ዘፍልጠልኩም	what our culture resembles for what we are grateful and enables you to know your country
ናይ ወጻኢ ተፈተውቲ ትንእድዎ በብሓንቲ ንሕና ግና ተጸረፍቲ ንባህልኹም አሰልጠንቲ ካብ ናይ ወጻኢ ነይሖምቶና ሓቦ ኃዲሉ ካብ ህዝብና	you adore foreign music and regard everything of it high above ours you forgot what we are doing but ours are not worse the foreign ones they only lack your support

This song conveys a message that glorifies national culture and appeals to individuals and communities to respect their culture and be proud of it. It stresses that with the erosion of national culture the society will eventually be deprived of the vital elements that constitute its identity. From the singer's point of view, this mission requires collective endeavors and calls up on everyone to encourage the nascent national artistic products instead of admiring and consuming foreign musical products with which the national culture will eventually be replaced in the long term if the neglect to the national art continues. The song was a response to the growing threat developed among the young urbanites due to their tendency to be foreign music admirers. In the 1950s and 1960s, youngsters between 20 and 40 years of age were enthusiastic about playing and listening foreign rhythms and melodies (Tessema 2006: 233).

MaTeA produced many artists some of whom are legendary in the history of art and music in Eritrea. Some of the legends that *MaTeA* produced throughout its fifteen years of performance were Atewberhan Segid, Yemane Gebremichael (Barya), Alamin Abdeletif, Teberh Tesfahuney, Tewolde Redda, Osman Abderehim and many others. All have left indelible marks on the Eritrean musical history that have influenced several generations. Some talented *MaTeA* bred musicians also played at international venues as they quickly caught up with the 60s and 70s American psychedelic rock and Motown soul music styles. Some of the great *MaTeA* musicians who rose to fame include the renown guitarist Tekle Adhanom (Huwket) and keyboard master Abdella Abubeker.

The six songs that this paper analyzes attempted to reform Eritrean society in various aspects. These include breaking social taboos against women by not only recruiting young women artists but also by staging musical performances that appeal for the emancipation of women from social oppressions. One of the legendary female singers of that time was Teberh Tesfahuney. Teberh was born in Asmara in 1947. She joined *MaTeA* at the age of 16 in 1963 and became a popular member. One of her biggest hits that enabled her to gain fame was titled “*Tegezana Abi Hedmo Tukuan Qunchi MeliOmo*” (Our Lovely House is infested with bedbugs and fleas). The song went viral across all section of the society as the content of the song was a satirical voice against Ethiopia's occupation of Eritrea. This led to the banning of it which fueled its popularity and forced its singer, Teberh, to flee to Sweden in 1970. Her exile lasted only for a few years: she returned to Eritrea and joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1975 (Tessema 2006: 255). In the struggle, Teberh was assigned to the fighting brigades until she was seriously wounded in 1978. Nevertheless, Teberh's songs inspired many young girls to follow her footsteps in the growing number of new musical bands in urban Eritrea. Chief among these bands was Police Orchestra.

Beside the popular nationalist song of *Our Lovely House is infested with bedbugs and fleas*, *Covered bride* is one of the most famous songs of Teberh. This song is about a Bride and Bridegroom, who had made a nuptial vow to live in warm love and respect, but after marriage she was betrayed as her Bridegroom broke the promise and began to treat her disrespectfully. In this song, Teberh made efforts to show the kind of domestic experience that an Eritrean woman has been through in the society. This is one of the songs that yet possesses popularity. One indication is that it has been remixed by various young talented female artists and still attracts the attention of the new generation for its themes and its melody.

መጋረጃ መርዓት (ብትብርህ ተፋሁነይ)

Covered Bride (by Teberh Tesfahuney)

መርዓት ተሸፊነ ብረቂቆ ዓለባ (እዋይ ኣነ)
ኣብ ዓራት ኮፍ ኢለ ከሕልፍ ጸበባ
ረጉድ መጋረጃ ኣካላይ ሸፊኑ (እዋይ ኣነ)
ብርሃን ከሊኡኒ ውሻጠይ ደቢኑ
ከምዚ ድዩ ነይሩ ናይ ቀደም ውዕልና
ኪዳን ኣፍሪስካዮ መስሓቕ ጎረቤትና

I am a bride veiled with robe
sitting on the bed with trouble
thick curtain covered my room
and blocked the light
was this our vow before marriage
you broke the promise we had made

ኣካልካ ምኻነይ ምዓስ ተሪፉኒ (እዋይ ኣነ)
መጋረጃ ገይርካ ዓቕለይ ተጽብበኒ
ንስኻ ከትዛወር ስግር መጋረጃ (እዋይ ኣነ)
ኣነ ተኣሲረ ብዘይካ ጠበንጃ
ከምዚ ድዩ ነይሩ ናይ ቀደም ውዕልና
ኪዳን ኣፍሪስካዮ መስሓቕ ጎረቤትና

I am part of your soul and body
why do you need to suffocate me
while you are going out of the door
I am jailed behind without guard
was this our vow before the marriage
you broke the promise we had made

ሰደድ ከትጻወት ብኖኻል ጠሚተ
ይነብዕ ኣለኹ ዓይነይ ተዓሚተ
ገበጣ ሕዝባይ ናይ ዕለት ከንቲባ
ኣነ ግን ሸፍንቲ ብተሪር ዓለባ
ከምዚ ድዩ ነይሩ ናይ ቀደም ውዕልና
ኪዳን ኣፍሪስካዮ መስሓቕ ጎረቤትና

you were playing as I looked through the window
while I am crying the whole day
you are respected by the visitors
but I am alone covered by robe
was this our vow before the marriage (2)
you broke the promise we had made

መቃልዒ ሂሮም ንዓይ ክርእዩኒ (እዋይ ኣነ)
ኣብትሸትሸ ኣኪበ ካቲም ክኾነኒ
ዘጣራቐምክዎ ቦዶ ተትርፈኒ
ከም መጠን መርዓትካ ኣይትዓምጸኒ
ከምዚ ድዩ ነይሩ ናይ ቀደም ውዕልና
ኪዳን ኣፍሪስካዮ መስሓቕ ጎረቤትና

all friends' gifts I amassed
you took them and spent
what did I do to you
please respect me, I am your wife
was this our vow before the marriage (2)
you broke the promise we had made

Many *MaTeA*'s products carry political messages that aim to induce a nationalist spirit. Almost all of the nationalist songs are satirical in order to skip verbal harassments and arrests by the Authority. The process of censorship was controlled by the Cinema Administration office (Plastow 2016: 11). Prior to presentation, *MaTeA* first had to present all its products in front of the censorship committee. Once passed this process, there were two security agents of Central Investigation Department (CID) who checked the contents and any political misconduct during live public performances (Tessema 2006: 214). To simplify the process, the leadership and members of *MaTeA*

confidentially agreed to avoid any mention of Eritrea or Ethiopia in any of the dramas and songs in any way possible (Tessema 2006: 219). Singers produced satirical songs composed of nationalist sentiment in spite of strict censorship. Some of the songs purposefully make pleas the public to support and strengthen the nationalist movement and remind the youngsters of their importance in political struggle.

ጉዳም ሸቃጢ (ብትብርህ ተስፋሁነይ)

How a Deceitful Man (by Teberh Tesfahuney)

ጸልማት እዩ ዝፈቱ ጉዳም ሸቃጢ
 ስርቅን ዓመጽንሲ ገይርዎ ለውጢ
 ከምታ ጽብቕቲ መርዓት ተሸፋፊነ
 እቃለስ እየ ዘልኹ ረዳኢ ስኢነ
 ኣብ ዝይይ ከይኣቱ ተኸልኪሉ ተኣጊዱ ነይሩ
 ሕጂ ግን ኣብ ዓራተይ ተጋዲሙ ዝሰበረ ሰይሩ

He loves darkness to nurture his dread and fraud
 nothing is good for him other than evil
 like a beautiful decorated bride
 I am struggling without aid
 he was prohibited to come my home
 but now he is laid in my bed by ruining everything

ርኢኹሞ'ዶ ግብሩ ክትከፍእ
 ኣብ ጣውላ ተሰቓሉ ላምባ ዘጥፍእ
 ብሞስኮት ሰባቢሩ ዝይ ኣትዩኒ
 ሙብራህቲ ኣጥፊኡዎን ንኸዘምተኒ

look at him, how mischievous he is
 he climbed on the table and extinguished the light
 he entered my home by breaking the window
 and switched off the light to raid me

ውጻላይ ርኣቐላይ እንተብልክዎ
 ሰብኣይ ዘይብሉ ገዛ ባይኑ ሒዝዎ
 እንታይ'ም ክገብር ካብሓየለኒ
 ፈንጠርጠር ኣንተብልኩስ ደመይ ከይፈስስ
 ትም ኢሉ እንተብኸኩስ ሕብረይ ክሃስስ
 ካቲመይ ተዓዘቢ ዝፍጸም ዘሎ
 ኪዳነይ ጸውዕላይ ሕጂ ብተሎ

when I shout him to leave my home
 he continued to rob the house
 I am feeble, he is powerful
 if I fight, I will bleed
 if I cry, my color will pale
 I am left only with my wedding ring
 please bring my wife back to me

The song *How a Deceitful Man* represents the political situation of the 1960s in Eritrea. The singer – Tesfahuney – represents the Ethiopian occupation of Eritrea as a woman raided by a powerful thief. Ethiopia deceitfully – in the name of federation – entered Eritrea. After Ethiopia incorporated every institution in Eritrea and put it under strict control of its monarchic system, its soldiers started to raid and kill people across Eritrea. On the other hand, the Eritrean people were incapable of resisting it because in the 1960s, the national movement was too young for resisting Africa's largest Army. It was too small to engage in conventional war. But the nationalist interpretation was understood as the main message of the song, and when this reached the authorities, Teberh – the female singer – was banned from singing this particular song on any stage.

During the mid 1960s, Ethiopian soldiers raided more than ten villages inhabited by Islamic communities and massacred the majority of its residents in a few days. Ethiopian Soldiers deliberately destroyed Muslim communities as a policy of divide and rule to break the social bond between the adherents of the two monotheistic religions, Christians and Muslims, who had lived in social harmony for centuries. These criminal actions continued in 1960s and 1970s and resulted in more than seventy thousand Eritrean refugees in Sudan and the Middle East (Ammar 1992: 66). At this time, *MaTeA* released a song that called for unity between Christians and Muslims by one of its legendary singers, Atewbran Segid. In the song, presented below, Atewbran makes a very powerful appeal to the followers of both religions, Christianity and Islam, to unite and cooperate

with each other in order to rid themselves of oppression and to get rid of the enemy that was damaging the land.

አስላማይ ክስታናይ (ብኣቶውብርሃን ሰጊድ) Muslims and Christian (by Atewbran Segid)

አስላማይ ክስታናይ ወዲ ቆላ ደጋ
ንምኽሪ ጸላኢ ኣይትሃቦ ቀጋ
ኣይትሃቦ ቀጋ ከይትከውን ዕዳጋ
ኣይ

Muslims and Christian of my country
ignore the teachings of your enemy
otherwise you will be easy prey

ግብርና ከፊኡ ልብና ነዲዱ
መሬትና ነቕጹ እቶቱ ውሒዱ
ቆልዑና ጠምዮም ጎበዝ ተሰዲዱ
ኣይ

these bad actions hurt our hearts
dried our land and diminished our harvest
starved our children and disprage our youth

ሓስወትን ሰረቕትን በዚሓም ስሱዓት
ኣንስትን ቆልዑን ተመጊቦም ንብዓት
እግዛዮ 'ስከ ንበል ከይወርደና ማዓት
ኣይ

when injustice and vice conquered our life
our children & mothers nourished tear and grief
let's pray before we perish

ሓሳብ ህያሉኻ ናይ ሕልና ዓይኒ
ንህዝቢ ንሃገር እንታይ ገደሲኒ
ባሃላይ ኣትኹን ንዓይ ይጥዓመኒ
ኣይ

please think how to be gentle
for the nation and its people
stop being greedy, but be noble

Furthermore, humanism and morality were parts of *MaTeA*'s musical themes. Using monotheistic religions as the sources of morality in Eritrean society, *MaTeA* worked to strengthen morality and humanism. In addition to musical products, it organized various public shows and performances dedicated to fund charitable organizations such as local orphanages, schools for the blind, adult literacy programs etc (Tessema 2006: 222). One of *MaTeA*'s songs that conveyed a message of that sort is titled *To be a human*. This song begs all citizen to show humility to each other and to value society above temporary individual interest.

ሰብ ምዃን (ብተወልደ ረዳ)

To be a human (by Towelde Redda)

ሰብ ምዃን ሰም ምዃንይ
 ኣብ ዓለም ክነብር
 ምኻኣሉ ምስኣን
 ሓጥያት ካብና ንልግሶ ናብ ዕነ
 ኔጋ ውን ካብና ናይ መሬት ፈተነ

To be a human (2)
 who lives on Earth
 is to suffer
 so, let's liberate ourselves from sin
 and all these worldly tests

ኣብ ምውቕ ገዛና
 ምስ ናእሽቱ ኣሕዋትና
 ሕያዎት ስድራና
 ምስ ኩሎም ንሳነ

in our warm home
 with all our siblings
 and kind family
 love should prevail

ካብ ሓመድ ናብ ሓመድ እዩ ኩሉ ሰብ
 ካብ ሓመድ ይደሊ
 ወይ ይክበር ወይ ይሕስር ይኣርግ ይምሽምሽ
 ክኸይድ ናብ መዕረፊ
 ጽቡቕ ታሪኹ እዩ ምስ ስሙ ተራፊ

man is from earth to earth
 man wants life from earth
 either rich or poor, every man dies
 goes to the final destination
 but it is his legacy that lives behind

ውሑድ ዝዕድማና
 ነበርቲ ይመስለና
 ዓስክሬን ምስ ኮና
 ኣብ ጋህሲ ስፍራና

our life is short
 we think it is eternal
 we soon become corpses
 to be buried beneath the soil

ኣብ መሬት ከለና ብሰጋ ምስ ስጋ
 ንዕሰብ ብዋጋ
 ናይ ሓጥያትና ጸጋ
 ጨረሻና ክንመውት
 ካብ ዓለም ክንፍለ
 ቀባሮ ይበዝሑ
 ሬሳ ምስ ነቕለ

while on earth with flesh
 we become servants of money
 the source of our sin
 when we die
 departing from earth
 we take nothing
 has the corps departs for funeral

ህልዋት ክይምትና
 ካብ ኣዳም ጀሚሩ
 ብሞት ዕረፍትና

we forget we will die as we were born
 starting from Adam and Eve
 death is the end of our stay on earth

Along with all these aspects, almost all singers produced songs on nationalism and modernization. With the growing urban culture, modernity – the thirst for western civilization, not only the acquaintance with European fashion among the youth, served as a source of inspiration for *MaTeA*'s artistic productions. Although there are various such songs, one among of them that kept its popularity up to now is titled *Tears of Love*.

ንብዓት ፍቕሬ (ብትኳቦ ወልደማርያም)

Tears of Love (by Tukuabo Weldemariam)

አቲ ፍቕሬ መብራህቲ ልቢይ
ብፍቕርኪ ይቕንዝለኹ አነ
እነብዕ አለኹ ደኒነ
ፍቕሬ እንዳበልኩ ወይ አነ

Oh my love, the light of my heart
I am suffering from your love
crying from solitude
calling you in pain

ብፍቕርኹ ልቢይ ቆሲሉ
ብፍቕርኹ አምዑተይ ሓረረ
ለይትን ቀትርን እንዳ በልኩ ለለ
አነኹ በጸሐ ካብጽላለ

this love wounded my heart
this love wounded my body
crying day and night
pushing me to insanity

አአ. ልቢይ ሓረሩ ናይተይ ቆሲሉ
ቃንዛ ፍቕሬ ከቐትለኒ አሉ (2)

oh my love, my heart burns
this pain is consuming my life

ከም ኮኹብ ላዕሊ ተሰቐላ
መብራህቲ ተብርሀ ብጩራ
ልቢይ ተሰሊቡ ብፍቕራ
እነኹ ግዜ ይጽበልዮላ

she is up in the sky like the stars
her long hair shines brightly
my heart is enticed in her love
I am just waiting for my time to come

ፍቕርኹ ንዓይ ቀቲሉኒ
እዚ ሰፊሕ ዓለም ጸቡቡኒ
ናይቢይ ከምዝኸይድ ጠፊኡኒ
በልስኪ ከምዛኸማይ ኩኒ

please, your love is killing me
the entire world is getting smaller
I do not know where to go
I can only wait for you accept me

አአ. እቕጽል አለኹ ወይ አነ
ብፍቕሬ ናይዛ ጓል ማሲነ
ከይደ ንኸረኸባ ስእይነ

my life lost its sense of purpose
because your love
cause me to despair

ዓለም ከንቱ እያ ብዓንተቦ
ገለ እስኣን ንገሊኡ ትህቦ
እጭነቕ አለኹ ትኳቦ
ድላዩይ ካብይ ከይረኽቦ

I failed to know the world
that it is unfair from the beginning
I am in deep sadness
for I could not find my love

ፍቕሬ ካብ ሓዘኒ ዘይሓልፍ
ከመውት እየ መቸስ ሞት ዘይተርፍ
ዓሕ እንዳበልኩ እነኹ እደርፍ
ከሳዕ ዝመውት ነብሰይ ትሓልፍ

if you do not accept me
I will eventually die
but, until that time comes
I will continue to sing in sorrow

Tears of Love as a song marks a break with the old custom regarding romantic relationship. Traditionally, exposed romantic songs were not part of the custom in Eritrean society as both the monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, discourage such relationship before any solemn marriage has taken place. The emerging modern urban culture, however, had charged youth against this norm and gradually romantic relationship became a custom. Young urbanites longed to pass through that experience. Hence songs of this kind received good public reception automatically.

The contents of the six songs discussed above reflect the preoccupation of the singers to raise consciousness on modernization and national feelings among several sections of

Eritrean society. In other words, they were calls for social transformation by inducing new feelings and aspirations in the Eritrean society, with a special focus on people living in towns and cities. Politically, although *MaTeA* did not belong to any nationalist movement group, its founders and members were sympathetic to the nationalist cause, and their musical products and stage performances regarded national political consciousness as their core objective since its inception as a modern musical band.

In a nutshell, *MaTeA* represents a social movement that tried to resist territorial and cultural invasions of Eritrea. However, it has never been consistent in its social struggle. Socially, it negotiated two opposing voices: the conservative voice and the pro modernization voice. While the former represented the majority, the latter represented part of the urbanites. When an extensive urbanization process and intensive capitalist penetration made people thirsty of modernization, it destabilized fundamental norms and values of Eritrean society. *MaTeA* through its products put a great deal of effort to reconcile these voices. Nevertheless, it never failed to confirm modernity. The fact that *MaTeA* promoted westernized costume, melodies, instruments and dancing it exemplified modernity. Later on, *MaTeA* went farther from its cultural particularity and adopted European culture in its performances. This reality turned *MaTeA* to be obedient to European cultural hegemony with some resistances when it dealt with the particular skills, messages and performances of the local people.

Such contradictory characteristics were part of the new urban identity. The emergence of an economically oriented hierarchy due to the influence of Europeans in urban areas pushed musicians to continuously try the development of new musical genres. *MaTeA* was in a persistent attempt to accommodate the needs of the emerging elites and the general public who was far from the socio-economic changes because of its cultural conservatism and insufficient capitalist penetration. In this aspect, *MaTeA* as a social space was a product of a compromise between the aspiration for modernity and preservation of locality and cultural particularity. This enabled *MaTeA* to acquire elements of universality by which it transcended its geographical limits and temporal barriers. Hence, *MaTeA*, as a social movement, can be regarded as a mode of transaction of cultural resources, negotiating between different social classes, and as a metaphor for the social order of that specific period.

These characteristics enabled *MaTeA* to promote resistance to social and political injustices. In a period where there was no political space for open and free political discussions, and social conservatism opposed changes, popular arts remained the alternative venue. *MaTeA* illuminated the society about its existing socio-economic and political conditions by mixing entertainments with social and political messages in its works. As it created a social context, in return, the social contexts illuminated *MaTeA*'s musical products. Although, *MaTeA* was hardly a source of radical change in Eritrea socially and politically, it encouraged people to act and react for or against changes. Through these actions, *MaTeA* became a social fact itself that provided an option to the society in order to develop new social and political contexts that would help the society to initiate the forging of a new self-image. Theoretically, this made of *MaTeA* a social and cultural institution that conjugated sociological and aesthetical aspects. Sociologically, it attempted to forge a social reality, which could allow the adoption of what was perceived as modern social behaviors. Aesthetically, *MaTeA*'s works struggle to create this social reality through artistic beauty by stimulating the society emotionally.

Conclusion

Popular music as an instrument of nationalism and modernization was not unique to the Eritrean society. Colonized societies in Africa deployed popular culture to similar purposes. In both circumstances, popular music was at the same time a tool for resistance and adaptation. As a tool of resistance, popular music conveyed a nationalist agenda, and as tool of adaptation, it selectively embraced colonial culture.

MaTeA, as a popular music band, provides valuable tool by which one can analyze social attitudes, for it was nothing but an artistic expression of the daily life of society. In addition to that, *MaTeA* was one of the pioneers in creating a new genre of music that mixes the modern with the indigenous, even though it found it difficult to bridge the natural contradiction between modernity and tradition. Hence, it represents two realities, whereas in the route to modernization, *MaTeA* was an expression of a divided community, in the route to nationalism, it was a manifestation of an undivided community. Be that as it may, as a popular musical band, it made a mixed contribution to the social history of the urban society of Eritrea of 1960s and 1970s. In one way or another, artistically, *MaTeA*'s musical products earned a remarkable acceptability up to now. Today, *MaTeA*'s legacy dominates many musical works and, in this way, it has become part of the national memory that continues to underpin the contemporary identity of the Eritrean urbane society.

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