Book Review:

Ritual and Music of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn


Reviewed by Shayna Silverstein

Mark Kligman's book, *Maqam and Liturgy*, is an evocative study of contemporary liturgical practices that investigates how music and text articulate Judeo-Arab cultural synthesis among Syrian Jewish congregations in Brooklyn, NY. Through eloquent descriptions of liturgical Hebrew text and the aesthetics of modern Arab music, Kligman's work deepens our understanding of cultural memory among the largest group of Syrian Jews today. By linking individual narratives to the broader experience of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arab and Jewish immigration to the United States, this study is of interest to those in Middle East studies who wish to explore discursive processes of minoritarian identity construction in the context of ritual worship.

Drawing from a period of fieldwork conducted in 1990-91 among fifteen congregations in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY, this ethnography is based on participant observation at Sabbath services, interviews with cantors and community members, and performance studies in cantorial recitation and *oud* through which the author explored how Syrian liturgical traditions are acquired, transmitted and preserved. Kligman's work is thus a recognized successor to earlier scholarship on paraliturgical musical traditions (*bakkashot* and *pizmonim*) practiced within these communities and the ways that these traditions mediate the transmission of memory among immigrant communities (Shelemay 1998).

This research focuses specifically on communities that immigrated from Aleppo and who seek to maintain their Syrian Jewish identity through religious institutions, such as synagogues and schools, as well as social affiliations with other members of the Syrian community. Through processes that are both integrated with and distinct from Levantine Arab migration patterns, Jewish communities left Aleppo in the 1920s to seek better economic and social opportunities. Once established in Brooklyn, the Syrian Jewish community maintained relative socio-cultural insularity from other Sephardic Jewish and Ashkenazi organizations. This insularity was fostered by resistance to processes of assimilation (to both American and Ashkenazi Jewish cultural spheres) and strict paternalistic loyalty to institutions of kin and religion that were
maintained through economic ties, marriage within the community, and adherence to religious
texts, among other social practices. Kligman suggests that the historical conditions of living as
second-class denizens (dhimmi) in Ottoman Aleppo, within which religious minorities
participated in a larger cultural milieu while maintaining specific ritual practices, places of
worship, and educational institutions, may have shaped the heightened exclusivity that continues
to mark Syrian Jewish communities in Brooklyn today. Moreover, Aleppo Jews articulate a
particular aesthetics of music through the preservation and performance of classical Arab
musical systems in ways that resonate with past participation in the musical life in historic
Aleppo and that also distinguish their worship practices from other Sephardic congregations in
the United States.

The first part of this study contextualizes the experience of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn within
micro-histories of the Levantine Middle East in ways that complicate an Arab Middle East rather
than situate Syrian Jewish identity within the field of Jewish studies per se. This genealogy
supports Kligman's claim that a sense of modern identity is shaped by Arab musical aesthetics,
and, moreover, reinforces how the historic marginalization of Syrian Jews in the United States
led to the negotiation of alternative forms of Jewish cultural identity-- forms in which it "pays to
be Syrian" and "other than Jewish for public purposes" (36). Kligman pursues this line of
inquiry further by demonstrating how Syrian Jews have strategized a hybrid identity through
processes of cultural synthesis. For instance, he traces the preservation of communal identity
through the recent publication of community prayer books, for which cantors synthesized newly
composed Hebrew words with preexisting melodies that were adapted from secular modern Arab
music in order to create vocal and instrumental compositions for worship.

In the second part, Kligman identifies other markers of Arab music in the melodies, extramusical
associations, performance practices and aesthetics of contemporary liturgical practices. As
structural devices and stylistic gestures, these markers are located in the ritual acts of worship
that constitute the Sabbath morning service, a service comprised of six liturgical sections
recognizable by performance style and by mandated ritual components. With an adept rendering
of detail that is typical of his scholarship and a demonstrable expertise in Arab music, Kligman
here delineates the systemic parameters of maqam theory and the ways that such relates to Arab
musicology and the lived experience of Syrian Jewish cantors in Brooklyn. Through discourse
analysis, Kligman intimates how cantors frame maqamat as the formal apparatus that structures
repertoire in Syrian Jewish liturgical practice. Cantors transmit knowledge of maqamat and
related musical repertoire to their students through debates over the appropriate rendering of
pitch intervals and maqam variants in ways that authenticate individuals as both members of a
religious community and connoisseurs of classical Arab music (specifically Aleppo-based
muwashshahat, qasida, dawr, and taqtuqah). Kligman likens maqamat to a "prism through
which to view all music, providing a framework for understanding melody as well as a method
for its acquisition. This demonstrates the assimilation of Arab and American culture" (68).

The core of this study lies in Kligman's analysis of the Sabbath morning service in which he
offers a composite model of Syrian liturgy and the "series of shared rules" that comprise these
codified devotional practices. He separates the service into six distinct sections on the basis of
text and associated liturgical function, the role of the leader in each section and the interaction
between the hazzan and congregation, and the use of a distinct maqam and vocal style whose relations may or may not be fixed according to patterns of "liturgical necessity and the aesthetics of worship" (75). Musical styles include the recitation of melodic formulas, singing melodies, and improvisation of maqamat according to each liturgical section. Thus the shifting dynamics of text (as structure) and music (as texture) emerge in the course of performance through various styles of recitation, song (fixed and improvisatory), and spoken discourse that depend on the codification of religious ritual and the adaptability of modern Arab musical aesthetics.

Of Kligman's comprehensive segmentation of the morning service, in which he precisely aligns liturgical text, maqamat, vocal styles, and the roles of practitioners into a narrative sequence of performative events, he draws our attention to the main section of the morning service-- the Shaharit morning prayers. This service is structured by liturgical "singing stations" which might best be understood as three to five lines of text by which the cantor mediates transitions between fixed pitch relations and improvisation, lighter and heavier singing styles, and the hierarchical importance of certain singing stations over others, for instance, the three "crowns" of Nishmat, Kaddish, and Kedushah. Kligman attends to the ways in which musical settings of these liturgical singing stations illustrate processes of adaptation and synthesis through the juxtaposition of descriptive analysis of musical examples with personal interviews conducted with prominent cantors of this community.

Part three of this book is devoted to explicating a process of cultural synthesis that conjoins Arab poetry, melodies, and interpretive frameworks with Jewish liturgical texts, including biblical, rabbinic, and extraliturgical, that are embedded within sacred worship practices. Paramount to this synthesis is a system of extramusical associations that correlate specific maqamat to weekly biblical readings in ways that are comparable to prior lines of inquiry that bestow Arab maqamat with the capacity to communicate emotion and mood (see Marcus 1989). The narrative content of certain biblical passages is linked to prevailing moods that are in part conveyed through the selection of a corresponding maqam, such as the the use of hijaz in relation to death, saba to convey the sobriety of ritual circumcision, or ajam to elicit the happiness of liberation from bondage. Kligman expands these structural conditions to include not only affect but also theory (application of Arab musical systems), melody (use of pizmonim) and variety (individual interpretation) as factors that determine the adaptation of Arab music in Syrian Jewish cantorial performance practices.

Throughout this work, Kligman positions cultural synthesis as a performative process of representation that negotiates communal identity on the basis of ethnic and religious difference. Though he distinguishes between the performance conditions of, on the one hand, secular Arab music that generates a feeling of ecstasy between performers and audiences, and, on the other hand, the ritual worship of sacred Syrian Jewish liturgical practices, the shift in ethnomusicovarge context questions whether these discursive terms also shift and complicate the very meanings that are generated by performance practices (see Shannon 2006 for differentiated meanings of music, modernity and aesthetics in contemporary Aleppo). When Arab aesthetics are invoked by cantors in order to explain musical competence in situ (see Brinner 1995), an Arab imaginary is valorized in ways that dialogically complicate what it might mean to be "Arab" rather than depending upon a homogeneous and tranhistorical construction of alterity that is suggested
throughout this study of Judeo-Arab synthesis.

This research might also be extended to question the ways that the appropriation of melodic repertoire and song form from twentieth century Arab classical music by this religious community offers a hermeneutical response to our current understandings of such repertoire. In that Kligman notes that cantors select only from secular sources of Arab vocal music and not from instrumental or religious repertoire such as adhan or dhikr (though arguably these practices are historically constitutive of each other), Syrian Jewish liturgical practices presumably contest boundaries between secular and sacred fields of cultural production in ways that demand further interrogation. How might the presentation of an Arab self be instantiated through the reproduction of a musical canon vis-a-vis fragments that recall specific historical figures such as Umm Kulthum, Muhammed Abd al-Wahhab, and Sabah Fakhri? Conversely, how does the emergent process of performance suggest how maqam theory is dialogically constituted through its relation to liturgical text in ways that tackle the ontological debate of music and its relation to religion and ethics in the Middle East, and increasingly, in America?

The richness of this ethnography encourages us to reconsider the processes by which ritual worship negotiates lived experience and "affirms a particular Judeo-Arab heritage" (218) that has been historically peripheral to our understandings of what it means to be at once Jewish, Arab, and American.

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