

## BOOK REVIEWS

**ESTELLE AMY DE LA BRETÈQUE**, *Paroles Mélodisées: Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013, 230 pp.

The product of fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2010 in the Yezidi villages of the Aparan, Hoktemberian and Talin regions of Armenia, *Paroles mélodisées: récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie* by Estelle Amy de la Bretèque examines the usage of a particular musical form that the author calls a 'melodized speech'. Amy de la Bretèque describes these melodized speeches and presents their musical characteristics, the settings in which they are performed, their dominant themes and some of the social functions of their usage. What makes this book fascinating is the fact that it has been conceived in parallel to a multimedia interface located on the website of the Société Française d'Ethnomusicologie, which allows the reader to watch and listen to the ritual ceremonies, performed songs and melodized speeches that the author is analysing. All the analysed documents are referenced and can be consulted by the reader at [www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees](http://www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees).

We should first devote some lines to the Yezidis in general, a people perhaps not so familiar to the common reader. Amy de la Bretèque furnishes some information to situate them in the ethnic mosaic of the Caucasus before moving on to analyse different aspects of their cultural life. The Yezidis are a Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) speaking group sharing a common religion: Yezidism. Yezidism is a syncretic religion deriving from an ancient Iranian cult related to Zoroastrianism and incorporating many common features with Islam, Christianity and Gnosticism. Having migrated from Anatolia as a result of persecutions by their Muslim neighbours, today the Yezidis live mostly in Armenia, Georgia and Iraq, but also in Syria and western Europe. Amy de la Bretèque makes interesting comments on the emergence of an identity crisis among the Yezidis of Armenia. She notes that,

in the Anti-Muslim climate [of Armenia] (during and after the Nagorno-Karabagh war), a schism developed between those who considered themselves to be Kurdish and those who saw Kurdishness as implying an Islamic identity. These people wished to claim for Yezidis a separate ethnicity, calling their language not Kurmanji but Ezdîkî. Nowadays this crucial identity debate divides the community into two groups – Yezidi-kurds and Yezidis – about to become two nations...

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Thus the author introduces an interesting topic of research to anthropologists interested in debates over identity and ethnicity. However, that is not the main theme of her book, and it is time for us to present the author's findings on the melodized speeches of the Yezidis.

As the author describes, the melodized speech is situated on the boundary between speech and music. Called *kilamê ser* (literally 'words about'), this genre of enunciation is a way of making use of the voice in such a way that the ordinary intonation of speech is replaced by melodic contours. These 'words about', which are used during rituals but can also suddenly be proclaimed at any moment during an ordinary conversation, can easily be qualified as 'songs' by non-Yezidi listeners. But interestingly, they constitute a totally unique category for the Yezidis, being considered radically different from what is called *stran*, literally 'song'. Amy de la Bretèque offers a structural analysis in order to explain this intriguing fact. First she thoroughly explains and proves that one of the most important characteristics of the 'words about' is their connection with sadness and pain. Then she reveals a general structure in Yezidi culture in which two opposing sides can be identified. On the one hand we find winter, happiness, dance, music, etc. Opposed to these are summer, sadness, speech, etc. Thus, given the fact that 'words about' are strongly associated with feelings of sadness, they can only belong to the second group, and so, no matter how melodic and musical they appear to non-Yezidis, they are never considered to be music or song by the Yezidis themselves, but rather as *speech*, as 'words about'. Although the author confines her structural analysis of Yezidi culture to what is relevant to the melodized speech, she nevertheless suggests a possible topic for further anthropological research: the inherent structures of Yezidi culture.

After defining melodized speech, Amy de la Bretèque discusses their thematic and musical characteristics. The main themes of the 'words about' are the following. First of all, as mentioned earlier, there are the themes of sadness, pain and suffering. According to the author, these pieces 'suggest an aesthetic experience of suffering'. 'The fire burns my heart' and 'my wounded hearth' are very common expressions in melodized speech. Another important and dominant theme in *kilamê ser* is that of the hero: *kilamê ser mêranîê* are 'words about the hero' that glorify different types of hero in the community, whether fighters against enemy peoples, Kurdish popular heroes like the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, or even mafiosi who have perished in gangster fights. Exile is the third important and recurrent theme in melodized speech, since it has a dominant place in Yezidi culture. In fact the Yezidis keep the memory of their exile from Anatolia and are experiencing a contemporary exile in the Russian and European metropolises. Other important themes are those of destiny, self-sacrifice and nostalgia. As for the musical characteristics of the melodized speech, these are thoroughly analysed in the second part of the

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book with musicological professionalism. Amy de la Bretèque notes that the *kilamê ser* is characterized by non-isochronous rhythms, quite free melodic lines that generally follow a descending path, a generally lower pitch compared to that of the *stran* (song) and often a lack of tension. She even meticulously identifies specific techniques and analyses them, such as the glissandos that, according to her, recreate the effect of moaning, the vibratos that materialize a trembling of the voice, and the noisy breathing of the enunciators that reminds one of a real sobbing.

Finally, the book also reflects on the social functions of the *kilamê ser*. As the author argues, ‘melodized speech constructs and moulds social relationships as much as it expresses individual feelings’. In fact, the ‘words about’ are qualified as mechanisms connecting distant people to each other, such as the emigrant to his family at home. Amy de la Bretèque provides examples of ‘words about’ sung during funerals, in which the enunciator mentions the names of the dead, his loved ones, his kinsmen and even those who are not present at the ritual, thus reinforcing the bonds between all the latter. Often emigrant relatives listen to these ‘words about’ directly during funerals through mobile phone calls. Another habit is filming the funerals and the melodized speeches in order to send the tapes to relatives living abroad. In this way friends and relatives are connected and share their emotions through the melodized speech. Moreover, some ‘words about’ are recorded in studios and sold in MP3 format or uploaded on to the web. These contribute not only to maintaining ties of kinship and friendship, but also to the creation of a shared culture between the Yezidis of Armenia, and even the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and western Europe. Thus the *kilamê ser* even has the capacity to act on the identity dynamics of this people. Finally, the melodized speech has an educative function, since it helps construct and promote exemplary and memorable figures, especially in the case of lamentations commemorating perished heroes.

In conclusion, *Paroles mélodisées* thoroughly analyses a very interesting aspect of Yezidi culture: the melodized speech. It makes good usage of both anthropological and musicological approaches. And importantly, in parallel with its main topic, it also mentions and discusses many of the cultural expressions of the Yezidi community – their beliefs, traditions, myths, dances, musical instruments, marriage rules, etc., thus paving the way for further anthropological research among them.

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