

Review: Review

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## Book Reviews

### **Paroles mélodisées: Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie.**

Estelle Amy de la Bretèque. 2013. Paris: Classiques Garnier. 230 pp., tables, figures, illustrations, map, photos, music examples, notes, index, bibliography, companion website. Paper, €17.00.

Amidst all the recent news about ISIS and its attempts to strengthen its grip on regions throughout Iraq and Syria, the resultant strife that has befallen the Yezidis has captured the rapt attention of the international media, the United Nations, and human rights organizations alike. Who exactly are the Yezidis? This question has dominated numerous articles that have been written about them, indicating that at a time when the dictates of sectarian and ethnic boundaries continue to determine the sociopolitical maneuverings, alliances, and understandings of the Middle East, a people such as the Yezidis, who fit into no neat categories, gain visibility only when the threat of invisibility looms.

Estelle Amy de la Bretèque's rich and timely work on the music and melo-dized speech of the Yezidis in Armenia is a compelling exploration of the question above. Certainly, a fine book such as this would be a welcome addition to the ethnomusicological literature at any point. However, because the Yezidis have lately been defined only by the tragedies, persecutions, displacements, and exile that have befallen them, and understood only in terms of the groups surrounding them, Amy de la Bretèque's scholarship stands out for its sophisticated exploration of their expressive culture and the ways in which they articulate, within this expressive frame, deeply felt sentiments of joy, sadness, and anguish. *Paroles mélodisées* provides not just a critical opportunity to examine the deeply complex affective realm of the Yezidis, but the very boundaries of music and the spaces in between speech and song.

A historically besieged ethnoreligious minority community found throughout Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, and western Europe, the Yezidis are a people on the margins of the marginalized. Neither Muslim nor Christian and often classified with a Kurdish population from whom some would rather remain distinct, the Yezidis occupy a delicate "border-position"

that has made them the object of persecution at various points over time. Although ethnically Kurdish, they are differentiated by their highly syncretic religion, Yezidism, which includes elements from Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. The Yezidis of the Caucasus fled the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the midst of numerous massacres; for those who ended up in Armenia, this shared history of Ottoman persecution has allowed for a more or less harmonious relationship with the greater Armenian population. As Amy de la Bretèque discusses, the Yezidi position in Armenia is a unique (if not delicate) one. The ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh—which has led to the fleeing of the majority of Armenia’s Muslim populations to neighboring Azerbaijan—has prompted Yezidis in Armenia to self-identify as Yezidi-Kurd (or simply Yezidi), as a way of distancing themselves from Muslim Kurds.

The melodic narrativizing of the traumas suffered by Yezidis past and present form the core of this study. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2010 in the Kurdish-speaking Yezidi villages of western Armenia, *Paroles mélodisées* investigates a system of melodized utterances known as *kilamen ser* (words about; sing. *kilamê ser*). *Kilamen ser* are one of two distinct, highly contrasting aesthetic forms that, together, give expression to the affective realm of Armenia’s Yezidis. The melodized *kilamen ser* are reserved solely to express words of pain while *strannen* (songs; sing. *stran*) convey joy and happiness. *Strannen* contrast with *kilamen ser* in almost every way: melodically, rhythmically, stylistically, physically, and in their seasonal associations. For example, *strannen* are performed in winter while standing and are accompanied by swift vertical dancing, while *kilamen ser* are performed during summer while in a seated position, the upper body moving side to side.

While *strannen* are considered music by the Armenian Yezidis, *kilamen ser* are not. Amy de la Bretèque classifies the latter as “melodized speech”—neither completely music nor speech, but existing in a space in between. *Kilamen ser* exclusively express pain, sadness, mourning, nostalgia, and remembrances of the deceased. Taken together, they represent the anguished and sorrowful reflections of a history of persecution and exile and recollections of the fallen heroes of the past and present. While *kilamen ser* are most often rendered in ritualized contexts such as funerals, they also have a significant presence in everyday life. The circulation of *kilamen ser* via MP3 technology, video clips on the internet, distribution at street markets, and occasional inclusion in “Best Of” song compilations have contributed to the growth of a shared cultural identity among a people dispersed throughout the Middle East, Transcaucasia, and Europe. Thus, what was traditionally a highly localized, contextualized, and personalized aesthetic form has, through these modes of circulation, broken these boundaries.

As Amy de la Bretèque writes, “delocalized from the funeral space and time . . . they become more and more autonomous and constituent of a shared Yezidi culture” (197).

At the heart of *Paroles mélodisées* is an exploration of the purpose of this melodization. Through sophisticated and penetrating linguistic and musical analyses of collected kilamen ser (most of which readers can hear on the helpful website accompanying the text), Amy de la Bretèque demonstrates that kilamen ser are about far more than simple catharsis (22). On the one hand, they activate cognitive processes that engender mourning in a socially acceptable framework, thus creating an “affective topography” (“une topographie affective”) that enables distinct social connections within and through this sonically constructed affective realm (97). Building on Steven Feld’s work among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea (1982, 1990), Amy de la Bretèque classifies this realm as a phenomenal, “suspended space” (“un espace suspendu”) in which the emotions embodied by the kilamen ser circulate, connecting not just those listening, but the living to the dead, and those separated by the condition of exile (ibid.). On the other hand, through its performative characteristics and formalized poetic formulations, kilamen ser simultaneously allow for a strategic distancing from the affective realm they engender. For those “performing,” this allows for the construction of a safe distance from which to narrate the often deeply emotional and traumatic topics within the kilamê ser and also for a “depersonalization” that enables others to share and participate in the affective space being created (187).

Amy de la Bretèque’s provocative study is an important contribution not only to the relatively scant ethnomusicological and anthropological literature on Yezidis, but also to the little-studied traditions of minority populations in Armenia. Just as importantly, it is an incisive examination of the space between music and speech and the ways in which this space conjures a complex and deeply embedded affective realm. As a focused, site-specific study of a people whose conditions of exile and displacement are ongoing, *Parole mélodisées* paves the way for much needed further study of the expressive culture of Yezidis both in and outside Armenia.

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