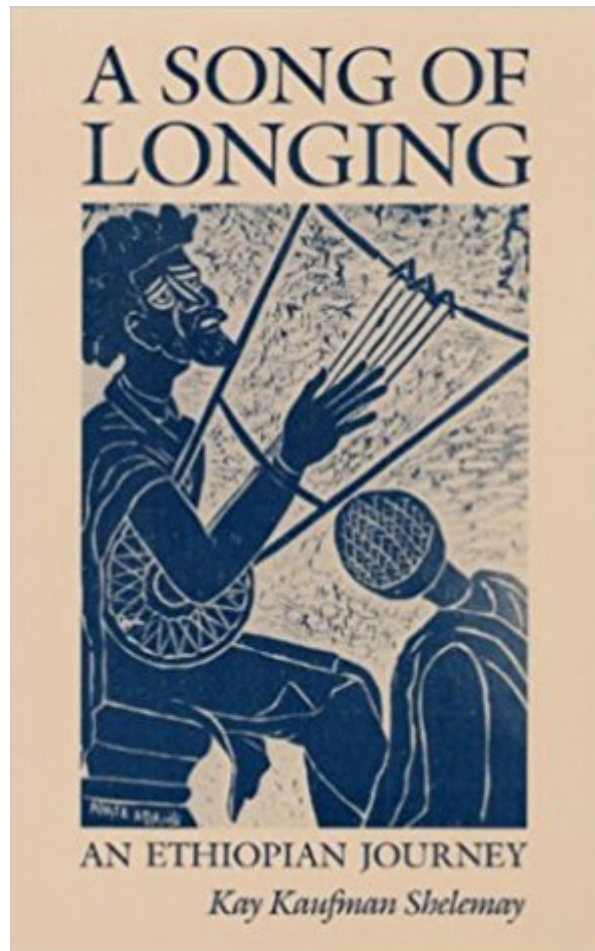


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# A Song Of Longing: AN ETHIOPIAN JOURNEY



## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This narrative offers a rich, descriptive account of the author's study of Ethiopian music and culture from 1973 to 1975. Shelemay's study of the sacred music of Beta Israel and Ethiopian Christian musical traditions emanates from numerous ethnographic sources, including field notes, journals, correspondence, and memory. Those who enjoy reading tales of perseverance will appreciate learning of the author's struggles as she, her husband, and other members of the Adenite Jewish community in Addis Ababa adjusted to the Ethiopian revolution's immediate impact. The author presents extraordinary personal experiences that shaped her research process and makes reading this text pleasurable.- LaDonne Roberts, Mississippi State Univ. Lib., Mississippi StateCopyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"An engrossing first-person narrative." -- Notes

This book, of great scholarly significance, also happens to be a thrilling read. It tells how a distinguished scholar goes about her work when that work is both demanding and dangerous. Kay Kaufman Shelemay's sojourn among the Beta Israel in rural Ethiopia in the 1970s was accomplished against great odds, and stands as a monument to anthropological field work. Think of it: before she ever went, in preparation for work in northern Ethiopia and while still an American

graduate student, she studied Hebrew and Amharic in Israel, then more Amharic and Ge'ez (the liturgical language of Ethiopian Christians and Jews) in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. And, now in retrospect, the study of these difficult languages appears as the easy part. She often had to work without any of the comforts of Western life, sometimes while bullets were literally flying around her. How many people bring so much courage, so much mental, emotional, and sheer physical determination to a study of anything? Once her work was accomplished, Shelemay was able to join the small handful of distinguished scholars who, in the course of about twenty years, revolutionized our understanding of Ethiopian Jews. Among the others are, most notably, Steven Kaplan ("The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia," 1992) and James Quirin ("The Evolution of Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920," 1992). Shelemay's own major work is "Music, History, and Falasha History," 1989. To put it briefly, these scholars have shown the Ethiopian Jews to share with Ethiopian Christians a long history of Judeo-Christian culture in Ethiopia. It is not for nothing that the Ethiopian emperors were considered descendants of King Solomon. These scholars have shown Ethiopian Christians and Jews to share a now-sacred language (Ge'ez), as well as much of their liturgy and their religio-cultural outlook. If one were to look for something to fault Shelemay, it may be her emphasis on Christian-Jewish similarity to the exclusion of some very real differences. This latter task, clarifying the differences, has now been undertaken by a younger Israeli scholar, Hagar Salamon ("The Hygena People," 1999). "A Song of Longing" only touches lightly upon the results of her field work. Most of the book is taken up with a very detailed account of the nuts and bolts of doing the work: all the unbelievable difficulties, all the dangers, and, perhaps most striking of all, the details of the Marxist takeover that occurred while she was there and that ultimately ended her stay in the country. There is even a love story with a happy ending, but I must leave that to the reader to discover for himself. In a book of such exceptional quality, the editorial blemishes can almost be overlooked. Almost, but not quite. The publisher and his copy editors were clearly asleep while this book was in production. It is riddled with typos, grammatical errors, malapropisms. The index is almost a joke. The Ge'ez language, so crucial to the author's story and frequently mentioned by her, cannot be found in this index! The publisher owes it to his own conscience -- not to speak of the world of scholarship -- to prepare a corrected edition forthwith.

A tremendous book in terms of history, music, social commentary and above all the personal story of the author. HIGHLY recommended.

Kay Kaufman Shelemay's *A Song of Longing: An Ethiopian Journey* is part

travelogue, part memoir, and part coming of age tale of a young scholar in search of intellectual and emotional fulfillment. It is also the story of the degeneration of a country; its plunge into chaos, war, and famine. Shelemay went to Ethiopia in the early to mid-seventies to study the Beta Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia (which she calls Falasha throughout the work). In the process, she met her future husband, a scion of a wealthy Adenite Jewish family living in Addis Ababa. This book evolves into an exploration of some of the more distant areas of the Jewish diaspora, but is also about the gathering together of Jews. Shelemay, an Ashkenazim, marries a Sephardi man as she makes contact with the Beta Israel. During her studies of Beta Israel and Christian liturgy (mainly through song), she is one of the originators of the origins of the Beta Israel, a theory which still holds currency among scholars today. She is one of the last witnesses of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia before their immigration to Israel, and their complete evolution to Ethiopian Jews. As such, her well written book is invaluable.

Kay Kaufman, a graduate student in Ethnomusicology, went off to Ethiopia in 1973 to study the music of the Beta Israel, Ethiopia's Jewish community, otherwise known as Falashas. Though she managed to collect a considerable amount of religious music in a village east of Gondar, a town in the provinces, the immense changes that accompanied the overthrow of Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian monarchy, overwhelmed her research and she finished by studying Ethiopian Christian liturgy in Addis Ababa. Meanwhile, she met and married a Jewish businessman, Jack Shelemay, from a Middle Eastern (Aden) family permanently settled in Ethiopia. *A SONG OF LONGING* is not then an academic book about Ethiopian religious music, rather it is a tale of Kaufman's fieldwork experience. It is also a story of cross-cultural marriage, the foreign population of Addis Ababa in the early '70s, and a descriptive narrative of the early years of the Ethiopian revolution. Woven together very deftly, it reads easily. The reader goes back and forth from descriptions of ritual and village life, rural travel, problems for female researchers in a society where most women stay at home, life among the Shelemay family in their luxurious apartment block, and sketches of various expatriates that the author met during her stay. Unfortunately there are no photographs. Books like Paul Rabinow's "Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco" may give more attention to actual problems of fieldwork---this is a rich description of anthropological research in a most difficult time. It would be a useful book for everyone planning to do research in a politically unstable area. (See also Stephanie Kane's "The Phantom Gringo Boat") As a result of her research and further work on Ethiopian history back in the USA, Shelemay realized that the Beta Israel had not maintained an ancient tradition unbroken from the time of Solomon and Sheba. They were not in fact descendants of Jews who had

arrived from the Middle East at some point in antiquity. They more likely were Ethiopian Christian mountain people who had preserved a form of local Christianity which was already highly Judaized and which had arrived in their remote villages with monks back in the 1400s. The repercussions for the treatment of Ethiopian Jews in Israel and their status in the Jewish world could have been great. It seems to me that Shelemay's conclusions are valid, but after over 100 years of growing exposure to mainstream Jewish tradition, the Falasha are certainly as Jewish as anyone else who claims to be. While her findings may set history straight, they should not reflect on anyone's Judaism today.

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