

## THE KARAITE JEWS OF ISRAEL RECONSTRUCT THEIR HERITAGE

Jehoash Hirshberg

In her discussion of the methodological concepts of 'emics' and 'etics' in ethnomusicology Marcia Herndon (1993: 67) has observed that "it is no longer clear that either a conceptualized dichotomy of emics vs. etics or a continuum is entirely useful. Instead, it might be well to consider congeries of possibilities..." The growing interest in the theoretical implications of case studies of the role music plays in displaced societies (Reyes-Schramm 1986; 1989; 1990) has brought out radical situations in which insiders pose as outsiders with the deliberate purpose of observing and recording their groups' practices in order to preserve their endangered heritage. This issue will be addressed from the perspective of a specific case study of the musical heritage of the Karaite Jews.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the eighth century Judaism was split by a fierce religious schism into Karaites, who upheld the teaching of the Bible alone as emanating from divine provenance, and the Rabbanites, who regarded the later interpretations recorded in the Mishnah and the Talmud as sacred sequels of the Bible. The number of Karaite Jews has dwindled during the past few centuries to no more than about 40,000 world over; nonetheless, they have persevered in their religious and historical commitment. In the mid-nineteenth century, Cairo emerged as the largest center of Karaite activity. The political deterioration in the Middle East which followed the foundation of Israel in 1948 triggered a process, lasting some twenty years, of disintegration and forced displacement of the entire Cairo community (El-Kodsi 1987). Most of the displaced Karaites resettled in Israel. There the cohesive Cairo community split among ten towns and villages, with the process further enhanced by professional mobility (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Karaite communities in Israel today listed by size and seniority. Nos. 8–10 have emerged after 1990 as a result of professional mobility, and have barely been active so far as religious communities.*

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Ramle	Traditional Karaite Jewish center, seat of the National Religious Council; two Karaite synagogues.
Ashdod	Large community, very active in religious and educational matters; an old synagogue.
Ofakim	Small southern town with a significant Karaite community, home of the Chief Rabbi Eli Marzuk; an old synagogue.
Jerusalem (old city)	Location of the ancient Shrine of Rabbi Anan Karaite, a Karaite museum, and an educational center.
Mazliḥ	Village adjacent to Ramle, large community with its own synagogue.
Beer Sheba	Middle-sized community with a synagogue.
Ranen	Small, exclusively Karaite village with a synagogue.
Kiryat Gat	
Bat Yam	
Arad	

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A smaller wave turned to the United States where a relatively cohesive community emerged in San Francisco Bay Area, home of the well-organized KJA (Karaite Jews of America). A much smaller community formed in Chicago. With no parent community left in Cairo, the new communities in Israel and in the United States assumed

sole responsibility for the preservation of the ancient Karaite Judaism as a living religious practice. Totally identified with the social and national cause of the Jewish majority in Israel on the one hand and well-assimilated into the nonsectarian American society on the other, the preservation and regular practice of the Karaite Jewish religious heritage remained the only recourse to prevent the disintegration of Karaite Judaism as a living practice (see Hirshberg 1986; 1987; 1989; 1990). In the late 1970s the new Karaite communities in Israel had gradually pulled out of the initial economic and social trauma of resettlement. By then direct links with the Cairo tradition had been lost and the majority of those few rabbis and cantors commonly respected as authorities were either at an advanced age and ailing, or had already passed away. Although distances in Israel are relatively small, interaction between the Karaite communities has been limited to frequent family visits. Large groups of Karaites traveled from one community to another only on festivals such as the traditional pilgrimage to Jerusalem on Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) or Passover and on special events such as the inauguration of a new synagogues. Such isolated gatherings did not prevent the emergence of local variants. Rabbi Moshe Dabbaḥ<sup>1</sup> from Jerusalem has indicated that a Karaite visiting from the southern communities would find it difficult to adjust to the practice in the village of Mazliaḥ, for example. Local variants and personal idiolects have appeared, and even the more experienced cantors have occasionally lost confidence in their own memory. Disagreements on the correct cantillation resulted in power struggles, with personal reputations at stake.

#### INITIATION OF THE KARAITE *MIDRAŠAH*

The Karaite synagogue service is held in the morning and in the evening, with Sabbath and holiday services much more elaborate and longer than those on weekdays (Kolender 1991). Nearly the entire Karaite service is chanted and sung in responsorial formulas, solo cantorial phrases, and choral songs. Unlike the texts which have long appeared in codified print (*Siddur haqara'im* 1977), the musical heritage depended on oral tradition.

1 Rabbi Moshe Dabbaḥ (b. 1937) immigrated to Israel in 1957. He first lived in Ofakim and then moved to Jerusalem where he was very active in developing the ancient Karaite shrine in the Old City and the adjacent Karaite museum.

In November 1991 the Karaite Jews of Israel inaugurated their first rabbinical *midrašah* (seminary) which was located at a small apartment adjacent to the ancient shrine of Rabbi Anan in Jerusalem. The class consisted of about a dozen male students comprising two distinct age groups: (1) men in their forties and fifties who had been active as cantors and wished to deepen their religious education and receive official authorization as rabbis and (2) young men in their twenties.

The *midrašah* provided the students, all of whom came from out of town, with accommodations for three days a week. During their stay, in addition to intensive class schedule, they also held regular morning and evening prayer services which soon disclosed local variants. Rabbi Joseph Murad, head of the *midrašah*, said that “on the first days we found it difficult to pray together, because some of us were slower, some faster.... In that place [the *midrašah*] we can afford to enjoy the service, because we do not have to rush anywhere. Thank God, we have formed a compromise which suits everyone”.<sup>2</sup>

In early July 1992 Rabbi Moshe Dabbaḥ and the director of the *midrašah*, Rabbi Yoseph Murad, invited me to present a lecture to the students on my previous research. They also asked me to bring with me a notated transcription of one of the Karaite songs. My lecture triggered a discussion which encouraged the participants to launch two sessions (7 and 15 July 1992) lasting nearly two hours each, in which they brought up questions of authenticity and of musical variants for deliberation and consultation. Rabbi Murad refrained from exerting his authority and instead took the role of a moderator, raising issues and encouraging the expression of conflicting opinions, leading finally to decisions as to which of the variants should be implemented. Such decisions were of practical nature since the participants had the potential of effecting changes in their respective communities where they had acted as cantors. In the present article I will study the verbal interaction motivated by some of the chants and discuss its implications on the theory of the emic-etic dichotomy. The discussion in the *midrašah* concentrated on four excerpts from the prayers.

2 Recorded interview, 7 July 1992.

## SELECTED EXCERPTS

*Excerpt 1*

The first excerpt was a long sequence of psalms chanted on each of the seven Sabbaths between the holidays of Passover and the Shavuot.<sup>3</sup> Psalms are the most prominent source for the Karaite service and they are chanted in flexible formulas which easily adopt themselves to the lengths of verses. The first was Psalm 120 which was chanted according to two formulas. The first reader was Rabbi Murad who has preserved the consistent alternation between the two formulas for verses 1 through 4, whereas the second formula alone was applied for verses 5 through 7. Example 1 illustrates the setting of verses 1 through 2.

*Example 1*

Psalm 120

1. El A- do - nay baz-za- ra-ta li Ka- ra-ti way- ya-ca- ne- ni 3.6"

2. A- do-nay ha-zi-lah naf-ši mis-sfat še-ker mil-la- šon re- mi- yah 4.5"

Psalm 120, 1-2 : In my distress I called to the Lord  
and he answered me.

O Lord, save me from treacherous lips,  
from a deceitful tongue!

The second reader who chanted Psalm 121 repeated the two formulas at precisely the same tempo. Yet, he used the first formula for all verses with the exception of the fifth. This particular variant evoked no comment at all, suggesting that the change in the order of the psalmodic formulas which attracted my attention as an outsider did not matter to the participants.

3 *Siddur ha-gara'im* 1977: vol. 1, 426-427. The Jews count fifty days from Passover to the Shavuot (Feast of Weeks). Yet whereas the Rabbanite Jews begin the count from the day following the the first of Passover, the Karaite Jews begin the count on the Sunday which follows the first Sabbath after the holiday. Consequently there are always seven Sabbaths between Passover and Shavuot, the latter always falling on Sunday.

By contrast, the third reader, who belonged to the younger group, presented Psalm 122 in a version which sparked an immediate reaction. It consisted of three psalmodic formulas in consistent alternating formula (Ex. 2).

### Example 2

Psalm 122

1. Sa- mah-ti be-om-rim li beyt A- do-nay ne- lek

2. Om- dot ha-yu rag-ley-nu biš-šca- ra- yik Ye- ru- ša- la-yim

3. Ye- ru- ša- la-yim hab-bnu- yah ke-Cir še-ħub-brah lah yah-daw

Psalm 122, 1–3 : I rejoiced when they said to me,  
‘We are going to the House of the Lord.’

Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem,  
Jerusalem built up, a city knit together ...<sup>4</sup>

Abbreviated translation of the ensuing discussion:

Rabbi Murad: “Have you noticed that something has happened here?... If you read on days of lamentation or in synagogue... He has not followed them... You noticed yourself that you have not read like them [i.e., the first and second readers]?”

Reader: “I’ve read the way I read Psalms [daily]. I did not notice the way they had read.”

Rabbi Murad: “Theirs was the tune [according to which] one has to read.”

The rendition of the fourth Psalm was close enough to that of the first two and evoked no comment. The fifth chapter, Psalm 124, however, again triggered a reaction.

<sup>4</sup> *Siddur ha-qara'im* 1977: vol. 1, 7.

*Example 3*

Psalm 124

Lu- lei A- do-nay še- ha-yah la- nu' yo-mar na Yis- ra- el

Lu- lei A- do-nay še- ha-yah la- nu be- qum ca-ley-nu a- dam

## Psalm 124, 1–2 :

Were it not for the Lord, who was on our side,  
let Israel now declare,

were it not for the Lord, who was on our side  
when men assailed us...

Rabbi Murad's reaction which will be translated verbatim presented both a specific comment and a general observation.

Rabbi Murad: "Now have you noticed the end of the verse? This was different. If we write it down in music notation and show it to an expert, then he would say that something happened here... Or maybe no one has the right to say anything since one may do as one wishes?"

Rabbi Murad directed the question to me as the 'expert'. I replied that since the chants for the Seven Sabbaths were not sung regularly it could be expected that readers might inadvertently substitute daily psalmodic formulas. Rabbi Murad replied that "normally people would like to keep the original tune", thus establishing a policy which prevailed throughout the remainder of the two sessions.

*Excerpt 2*

The next excerpt touched off a discussion of two major issues. First, the ethos of the modes of Karaite chant. Second, the attitude to the emergence of local variants.

The excerpt was the benediction which opens the daily evening prayer. Yet, the first reader made use of the formula for mourning which is reserved for the festive prayer on the first day of the month<sup>5</sup> as well as

5 *Roš hodeš*, the first day of each month in the Jewish calendar, has a festive status and special prayers in both Karaite and Rabbanite ritual.

for memorial and funeral services. Lamenting the destruction of the Second Temple is a basic tenet in the Karaite theology and each Karaite service contains sections of laments chanted in *niggun galut*, that is, “in the tune [or mode] of the exile.”

The first reader, Haim Hefetz, left Cairo at the age of 17 and therefore insisted he could rely on his memory of the chant as practiced there. Following his immigration he moved several times in the country, living part of the time with the community in Ofakim. For five years he was in charge of the holy Karaite shrine in Jerusalem. Consequently he did not represent any definite local custom.

Example 4

Example 4 shows two lines of musical notation. The first line is labeled 'Hefetz' and 'Group'. The Hefetz part consists of two phrases: 'A-va-re-kah et A-do-nay be-kol Cet' and 'Ta-mid te-hil-la-to be-fi'. The Group part consists of a single phrase: 'Ba-do-nay - tit-hal-lel naf- xi'. The second line is labeled 'Hefetz' and 'Response'. The Hefetz part consists of two phrases: 'Ba-do-nay - tit-hal-lel naf- xi' and 'Yiṣ-me- Cu Ca-na-wim we-yis- ma-hu'. The Response part consists of a single phrase: 'Yiṣ-me- Cu Ca-na-wim we-yis- ma-hu'. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 7/8 time signature. It features various musical ornaments such as slurs, accents, and fermatas, along with numerical markings like '3'' and '2'' indicating specific rhythmic or melodic features.

Hefetz’s reading instigated the following exchange with David Elisha, whose father Yoseph had been the Rabbi of the Mazliḥ community:

Hefetz: “This is the tune [mode] for mourning. It is more broken, it touches the heart.”

Elisha: “Whose heart? We have a totally different tune for mourning and for fast days.”

Example 5

Example 5 shows two lines of musical notation. The first line is labeled 'Elisha' and 'Response'. The Elisha part consists of two phrases: 'A-va-re-kah et A-do-nay be-kol Cet' and 'Ta-mid te-hil-la-to- be- fi'. The Response part consists of a single phrase: 'Ba-do-nay tit- hal- lel naf- xi'. The second line is labeled 'Elisha' and 'Response'. The Elisha part consists of two phrases: 'Ba- do- nay tit- hal- lel naf- xi' and 'Yiṣ-me-Cu Ca-na- wim we-yis- ma-hu'. The Response part consists of a single phrase: 'Yiṣ-me-Cu Ca-na- wim we-yis- ma-hu'. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 7/8 time signature. It features various musical ornaments such as slurs, accents, and fermatas, along with numerical markings like '3'' and '2'' indicating specific rhythmic or melodic features.





had substituted it for the cadential formulas of weekdays. The excerpt belongs to the prayers of the Tenth of Av. Unlike the previous excerpts, there was a consensus among the participants that this tune suited the expression of mourning. The cantillation consisted of a repeated declamatory pattern for all verses with a cadential change at the final verse of each section.

### Example 7

David Elisha

Koh a-mar A-do-nay ma maze-u a-vo-tey-kem bi Ca-wel

ki ra-ha-qu me-Ca-lay wa-yel-ku a-ha-rey ha-he-vel way-yeh-ba-lu

Jeremiah 2:5 : Thus said the Lord:

What wrong did your fathers find in Me  
that they abandoned Me  
and went after delusion and were deluded?”<sup>9</sup>

From my etic vantage point, I realized that the participants focused on the differences between the three cadential formulas. Yet, David Elisha’s version (Ex. 5) ended with a descending major second and was not influenced by the minor second which prevails in the mournful chant which had affected him so deeply (Ex. 7). The participants’ attempts to isolate musical parameters such as tempo and mode, or melodic cells such as the cadential intervals, was an etic construct which resulted from the special context of interaction in the *midrašah*.

### Excerpt 3

The next excerpt represents a more extreme outcome of the context of the interaction. The Sabbath morning service contains a medieval *piyyuṭ* (liturgical poem).<sup>10</sup> which is a rich poetic paraphrase of the vision of the

<sup>9</sup> *Siddur ha-gara'im* 1977: vol. 1, 127.

<sup>10</sup> A religious poem set in to a strict meter and rhyme scheme. The heyday of the *piyyuṭ* was the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of medieval Jewish poets from Moslem Spain, such as Yehudah Halevi and Shlomo Ibn-Gavirol. The poetic forms of the *piyyuṭ* literature are related to medieval Arabic and Latin sacred poetry.

prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel chapter 1). In four of the verses the strict rhyme scheme forced the poet to split a sentence contrary to the meaning. The following presents the transliteration of one of the problematic verses of the *piyyuṭ* with the original articulation markings and a strictly literal translation. The crucial combination (bold) is *qeraḥ nora*, literally, terrible ice.

*Naṭuy raqi'a be-rašeyhem / ke'eyn qeraḥ:* Sky is spread over their heads / like ice:  
*Nora / ke'or yeqarot nizraḥ:* terrible / glowing in regal aura:

The traditional melodic formula preserves the rhyme scheme, thus distorting the meaning of the sentence. Moreover, the adjective *nora* (terrible) which completes the meaning of the previous verse is prolonged by a long melisma. Example 8a both keeps the traditional syntax markings of a slanted slash for half-verse and a colon for the end of the verse. Rabbi Murad has recorded the common version (Ex. 8a).

#### Example 8a

Na-tuy ra-qi-ca be-ra-šey- hem / ke-ceyn qe--raḥ / no- ra / ke-or ye-qa-rot

Some fifteen years ago the late Rabbi Shmuel Hacohen who had immigrated from Turkey had drawn attention to the problem of splitting the sentence meaningfully and had proposed his own revision which connected the noun to the adjective at the expense of the rhyme scheme. Yet no one except for his son in Ofakim has adopted the revision. The interaction at the *midrašah* thus set the scene for a renewal of the deliberation both of the particular excerpt and of the general issue. The participants reached a consensus which favored meaning over rhyme scheme, and Rabbi Moshe Dabbaḥ made an effort and recovered the revised version from his memory of his period of life in Ofakim fifteen years earlier.

#### Example 8b

Na-tuy ra-qi-ca be- ra-šey- hem ke-ceyn qa- raḥ no- ra ke- or ye-qa-rot

A few days after the session, Dabbaḥ met Shmuel Hacoheh's son, the cantor Moshe Ben-Shmuel Hacoheh from Ofakim, who read the chapter in his father's revised version.

#### Excerpt 4

The summer recess of 1992 and the High Holidays halted studies at the *midrašah* for more than two months. Financial difficulties forced some of the students to quit and then the remaining students were entrusted with a major project of preparing educational material for elementary schools. The class graduated without having the opportunity to return to the topic of musical variants, and financial and personal difficulties prevented the opening of a new class. Yet, discussions of Karaite religious topics soon resumed in the less formal venue of well-attended weekly study groups held at the Karaite center in Ramle at the initiative of Rabbi Joseph Elgamil.<sup>11</sup> Highly dedicated to the Karaite cause, Elgamil persisted in his quest to clear the Karaite musical practice of any foreign influences and local variants. A few of the sessions turned to the musical heritage, frequently leading to unforeseen results as illustrated in the following example from a field recording at a session held in January 1994. Most of the session was devoted to a lecture by Rabbi Joseph Elgamil on the Karaite cantillation of the *te'amim*, the masoretic accents of the Bible. Towards the end of the session Elgamil instructed the group how to sing the *piyyuṭ* “*šihartika, dar me'onī*” (“I have sought you who dwells in my abode”)<sup>12</sup> which had fallen into oblivion and which Elgamil salvaged by finding an old recording by Rabbi Lietto Nono.

#### Example 9

♩ = 96

šī-har-ti-ka dar me-co-ni de-raš-ti-ka zur ge-o-ni

11 Born in 1944, Elgamil immigrated to Israel in 1952. At a young age he followed the teachings of the much adored Chief Rabbi Shlomo Nono. A school teacher by profession, Elgamil also fulfilled religious duties as a Karaite rabbi and *mohel* (performing the sacred act of circumcision). He also published a three-volume history of the Karaite Jews (תולדות היהדות הקראית, רמלה, 1979–1981).

12 *Siddur ha-gara'im* 1977: vol. 4, 212.

Right after Elgamil went with the participants through the song “*šihartika*,” the Karaite Moshe Baruch Tanani<sup>13</sup> took over. Accompanying himself with tapping on the desk, he inadvertently modified the melody

*Example 10*



Joseph Elgamil stopped him with the comment: “We are losing the tune. Let’s get back on the right track.” Moshe Tanani then observed the similarity to another song, “*Yazar ha-el*” (“The Lord Created the World”) which he then illustrated.

*Example 11*



Elgamil seized the opportunity and claimed that the common melody of “*Yazar ha-el*” was “new” and that the correct tune was an older version which he had heard from Lietto Nono, of which he had on an old private recording.

*Example 12*



13 Moshe Baruch Tanani (b.1927) immigrated in 1953. Having turned from the family’s jewelry business to being an electrician, he enjoyed inventing religious songs at the family circle. In 1961 he was asked by the Chief Rabbi Shlomo Nono to invent a song for the inauguration of the first Karaite synagogue in Ramle. He soon composed new songs which became very popular in the community and rendered him the only Karaite folk composer. See Hirshberg (1994).

The encounter has illustrated that which Philip Bohlman has discussed under the general topic of 'The Dialectic of Oral Tradition': "For folk music, the product is the discrete entity... whereas the process is the continuation of transmission" (Bohlman 1988). Tanani's interpretation has represented a process by which units of discrete similarity easily modified one song into another. The policy which Elgamil advocated, however, gave priority to the uniqueness of each product. Since Elgamil was unable to deny the resemblance between the songs, he responded by advocating the substitution of an older product, thereby protecting the uniqueness of each song and rejecting the possibility of a dynamic process of change. This may also suggest that Tanani's brand new melodies were accepted precisely because their style totally deviated from the Karaite Egyptian tradition and thus constituted unique products. The session has also illustrated the potential of group dynamics to retrieve and activate dissemination of long-forgotten melodies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The unique conditions of the *midrašah* and of the study group have created an enclave of open discussions within a largely hierarchical community. The work done at the sessions has supported the current view which rejected the concept of emics-etics as an opposition. The participants freely shifted roles of insiders and outsiders, not only analyzing each other but also using the situation for self evaluations. The diverse attitudes and methods of inquiry used in the discussions may be described by an analogy to a series of positions placed on a line, moving from emics in the direction of etics:

1. Insiders from different communities presented and compared local variants. Each of the participants assumed the stance of a partial outsider vis-à-vis the other's local variant.
2. The insiders isolated certain elements of the melodic formulas which they deemed salient with the purpose of determining their affective power, such as mourning. They focused on cadential patterns, whereas variants in the opening patterns or in the order of formulas which I as an outsider had noticed were tacitly accepted by the participants.

3. Some of the insiders assumed the outsider's methodology of invoking theoretical musical concepts from western terminology such as 'musical scales' and 'tempo' with the purpose of defining the affective properties of certain formulas.

4. Some of the insiders expressed their wish to make more use of western musical notation in order to compare variants and to consult with 'musical experts' from the outside.

5. A methodology of analysis of text–music relations was used to make a critical judgment of existing formulas and to suggest modifications and improvements, favoring clarification of textual meaning over traditional rhyme schemes which divide meaningful sentences. At that stage some of the participants turned from a descriptive to a prescriptive attitude, expressing their intentions to act as cantors and gradually effect changes in the practice of their respective communities.

6. Processes of change in song tunes were observed, leading to decisions involving policy of selection between process and product.

In the course of the discussion I repeatedly asked the participants for the source of the variants they had applied. Those who had lived and acted for many years in the same community referred to the admired rabbis who had immigrated from Cairo and had been leading the services, such as the late Rabbi Emanuel Masuda in Mazliah, the late rabbis Shlomo Nono and his brother Eliyahu Nono in Ramle, or to the present Chief Rabbi Eli Marzuk in Ofakim and local rabbis such as Abraham Gavr from Ramle. Others referred to family kin, mostly a late father. In certain cases it seemed as if the interaction had refreshed memories of variants and formulas which otherwise might have been gradually forgotten and lost.

The interaction also blurred my own role as an outsider. The three sessions discussed above were triggered by the initial questions I had directed to the participants in my lecture. The participants occasionally asked for my own opinion as a professional outsider.

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*Siddur ha-qara'im*

1977

סדור התפילות כמנהג היהודים הקראים. רמלה.

(The book of prayers according to the custom of the Karaite  
Jews)

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