CHAPTER TWENTY

MELODIC PATTERNS IN KARAITE MUSIC:
Past and Present*

Rachel Kollender

General Background

Modern research in folk music is based on the concept that music, as a product of human behavior and as a cultural phenomenon reflects society, its customs and modes of life.¹ The interpretation of various customs is linked to the historical events and the social developments undergone by a certain culture. The musical heritage of the Karaites reflects their unique historical and social circumstances throughout the ages.²

During the High Middle Ages, after the decline of their centers in Palestine and Egypt, the Karaites established themselves in Byzantium-Turkey. It was there that their law codices were fully consolidated and published, and all their prayers were gathered into a four-volume prayer book (Siddur).³

From around the thirteenth century the Karaites established communities in Eastern Europe (mainly in the Crimea and Lithuania), while keeping in touch with their brethren in Constantinople. There is much current debate on the nature of the Karaite settlement in Eastern Europe and its origins, but the general opinion is that the Karaites reached Crimea from Byzantium or Persia, and that from

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¹ For detailed discussions of the ethnomusicological and anthropological views and models, see Merrian, “Purposes of ethnomusicology”, p. 212; Baily, “Using tests”, pp. 147–149; Nettl, The study of Ethnomusicology, pp. 131–146; Rice, “Toward the remodeling”, p. 473.

² On complimentary aspects of the Karaite musical tradition with regard to Lithuania → Firkavičiūtė, Musical Heritage.

³ The Karaite Siddur was consolidated in the fifteenth century, mostly by Rabbi Eliyahu Bashyachi, see Ankori, “The Karaite Eliyahu Bashyazi”, p. 188. On the Karaite centre in Byzantium-Turkey and the literature and liturgy that developed therein → BYZANTIUM; → Astren, Historical Consciousness.
there they had emigrated to the region of Lithuania-Poland. These migration patterns influenced their musical culture and repertoire, so that even today it still preserves traces of ancient Moslem-Turkish tunes.

During the sixteenth–nineteenth centuries the Crimean Karaites kept close contacts with the Karaites in Turkey, as well as with those in Poland and Russia. At the end of the nineteenth century, Egypt was re-established as their main religious center. The leaders of the Karaite Egyptian community, nevertheless, were not only of Egyptian origin. Some of them were learned men who came from Turkey, Crimea, and Russia, such as Rabbi Ŭviah Babovich, a most prominent leading figure of the twentieth century. Since 1942, Karaites who fled from Europe joined the Cairo community. They, too, brought with them a musical repertoire, which probably had an impact on the performance and practice of music. New melodies, inspired by the immigration waves, were composed or adopted by the Egyptian Karaites.

Most of the Karaites who settled in Israel after 1948 were immigrants from Egypt who, as mentioned before, carried a long and complex musical tradition. Karaite musical tradition was not only influenced by patterns of inner-migration between the various communities, but also by ongoing contacts with the Jewish Rabbanite communities.

The Karaites always settled the vicinity of other Jews, with whom relationships wavered between sympathy and alienation. Naturally, they had contacts with their Gentile neighbors as well, and absorbed the musical styles and repertoires of non-Jewish society. Musical tastes were also influenced by surrounding fashions. In the Crimea, for instance, it was decided in the 1880s to shorten the traditional prayers

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4 Further on this matter → Shapira, Begginings.
5 Zajaczkowski, *Karaism in Poland*, p. 60, mentions a Turkish cradle song that is still sung today in Eastern Europe. I myself have heard traces of this song, sung several years ago by Egyptian Karaites.
6 Further on this matter → Beinin, *Karaites in Modern Egypt*.
7 For example, the national Karaite hymn in Egypt was composed by the above mentioned Ŭviah Babovich, resembling the Crimean Karaite hymn.
8 These Karaites, now living in Israel, supplied the main sources for my research (see in following). Further on this community → Trevisan Semi, *From Egypt to Israel*; Colligan: *Living Liminality*.