



Lowell Milken Center for
Music of American Jewish Experience

Jewish Music in Uganda: Context, Tradition, and the Sound of Psalm 150

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סיפורי מוסיקה
Stories of Music
College Edition

UCLA

Herb Alpert
School of Music



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Introduction

The purpose of these **flexible modules** is to introduce topics related to Jewish music into university music courses in a way that is accessible, adaptable, and pedagogically rich. Although Jewish music traditions intersect deeply with both Western music history and global music studies, they remain underrepresented in many standard music history surveys, theory curricula, and performance-oriented classes. These modules are designed to help instructors integrate this material seamlessly—whether by expanding existing units, diversifying repertoires, or offering focused explorations of Jewish music life in different historical periods.

Each module combines scholarly background, analytical tools, performance resources, and curated listening examples. They are intentionally structured to serve a wide range of courses including music history surveys and topics-based seminars, both for majors and non-majors. Instructors may choose to incorporate the entire module or select particular elements: recommended recordings, score excerpts, guided listening activities, or discussion prompts.

Whenever possible, **scores** are linked to openly accessible platforms such as IMSLP. Each guide includes multiple **recordings**, linked to various platforms including Spotify, AppleMusic, and/or YouTube. For each module, you will find at least one **guided listening** example, including timestamps to draw students' attention to important elements.

Bibliographic material, with a focus on sources published since 2000, appears at the end of the reading; articles available without a paywall are linked. Modules also include relevant **primary sources** to support historically informed analysis and discussion.

Together, these materials aim to illuminate the musical creativity, cultural contexts, and diverse experiences of Jewish communities across history. By situating Jewish music within broader musical narratives, the modules encourage students to develop a richer and more inclusive understanding of music's role in shaping identity, ritual, and artistic exchange.

About this Module

For Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, psalm-singing has long served as an expression of faith and community. This module introduces the history of the Abayudaya and explores their distinctive musical practice through a setting of Psalm 150, highlighting the role of song as a vehicle for resilience, renewal, and cross-cultural Jewish expression.

Key Work

Abayudaya Jewish Community, Psalm 150



Torah Dedication in Nabugoye Stern Synagogue, January 2019. Photo by Amanda Ruppenthal Stein

Teaching Contexts

Courses focused on Jewish music topics: This module enriches survey courses on Jewish music, engaging students with music of minority Jewish communities.

Courses on music and religion: The materials support comparative explorations of religious sub-communities and explores how language can be used to represent both religious cohesion and diversity.

African music contexts: The inclusion of the Abayudaya into broader discussions of music on both the African continent and the African diaspora expands students' understanding on how Jewish liturgical traditions intersect with African musical, linguistic, and historical contexts.



Capt. Jon Cutler, a chaplain and the religious affairs director for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, walks with Gershom Sizomu in front of Moses Synagogue. Photo by U.S. Air Force Lt. Col Leslie Pratt [Wikimedia Commons]

Brief Background Narrative

For the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, singing and music are a core element of communal expression and identity. In particular, Psalm-singing in Luganda, the Bantu language spoken in the African Great Lakes region, is a core repertoire of the Abayudaya liturgy and has been a foundational vehicle for communication and cross-cultural sharing to the broader Jewish world. Founded in 1919 by the Buganda warrior leader Semei Kakungulu, the Abayudaya originally practiced Judaism through a literal reading of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. In 1962, Israeli diplomat Arye Oded began visiting the community and arranging for prayer books and donations to be sent from the United States and Israel; his writings on the Abayudaya were among the first to reach Hebrew- and English-speaking audiences.

In 1971, Ugandan military leader Idi Amin launched a coup against the country's government, bringing forth a brutal dictatorship dominated by exclusionist policies. Among other despotic practices including torture, ethnic expulsion, military tribunals, and assassinations of suspected enemies, Amin and his government stoked tensions across religion in Uganda. Although religion was guaranteed under the constitution of Uganda, Amin sought to establish a reputation of Uganda as a Muslim country, seeking alliance and support from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and throughout Amin's regime, the government tacitly prohibited any religions besides Amin's religion Islam (which at that time was only 5% of the country's population), Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Orthodox Christianity. Aware of their precarious status, during Amin's reign, the Abayudaya dwindled from as many 3,000 to roughly 300 who worshiped in secret.

After Amin's fall in 1979, a gradual emergence was marked by the composition of new melodies by the brothers Gershom Sizomu, J.J. Keki, and Aaron Kintu Moses. It is difficult to fully capture what Abayudaya music sounded like in the 1980s, as the earliest produced album of Abayudaya music, *Shalom Everybody Everywhere!*, was released in 1997 by Kulanu, an organization that supports isolated, returning, and emerging global Jewish communities. Ethnomusicologist Jeffrey A. Summit researched the community's music in the early 2000s. His recordings for the table book *Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda*, edited by Richard Sobol (Abbeville Press, 2002) and *Abayudaya: Music from the Jewish People of Uganda* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2003), were vigorously researched and received popular and critical acclaim leading to a Grammy nomination for the latter.

Psalm 150, a joyful psalm of praise through musical instruments, dance and voice, is part of the daily morning [Shaharit] service and is also included during the prayers of praise [Hallel] that mark each new month [Rosh Hodesh] and major holidays.

Work: Psalm 150

Date: 1980s

Ensemble: Congregational song

Melody: J.J. Keki

Text: Psalm 150, Hebrew

English	Luganda	Transliterated Hebrew
Halleluyah! Praise God in the sanctuary,	Mumutendereze Adonai [Mukama]. Mumutendereze Lubale [Katonda] mu watukuvu we.	Halelu Eil b'kodsho,
Praise God in the heavens, the seat of God's power	Mumutendereze mu bbanga ery'amaanyi ge	Halelu'hu, birkiya uzo
Praise God at the triumph of the Divine.	Mumutendereze olw'ebikolwa bye eby'amaanyi:	Halelu'hu big'vurotav,
Praise God in accord with the greatness of God.	Mumutendereze ng'obukulu bwe Obulungi bwe buli.	Halelu'hu k'rov gudlo.
Praise God with the call of the shofar.	Mumutendereze n'eddoboozi ery'ekkondeere:	Halelu'hu b'teika shofar,
Praise God with the harp and the lyre.	Mumutendereze n'amadinda n'ennanga.	Halelu'hu b'neivel v'chinor
Praise God with timbrel and dance,	Mumutendereze n'ekitaasa n'okuzina:	Halelu'hu b'tof u'machol,
Praise God with flute and strings.	Mumutendereze n'ebyo ebirina Engoye n'endere.	Halelu'hu b'minim v'ugav
Praise God with crashing cymbals,	Mumutendereze n'ebitaasa ebivuga ennyo:	Halelu'hu b'tzil'tz'lei shama,
Praise God with resounding cymbals.	Mumutendereze n'ebitaasa Eby'eddoboozi ettono.	Halelu'hu b'tziltz'lei t'ru'ah
Let every breath be praise of God; Halleluyah! [Siddur Lev Shalem, 2016]	Buli ekirina omukka kimutendereze Adonai [Mukama]. Mumutendereze Adonai [Mukama]. <i>Kol hanishama tihalelu Ya, Halleluyah!</i>	Kol han'shama t'hallel Ya, hal'luyah.

Available Scores

No published scores available

Liner Notes and Lyrics available <https://folkways.si.edu/abayudaya-music-from-the-jewish-people-of-uganda/judaica-sacred-world/album/smithsonian>

Sample Recordings

Psalm 150, *Abayudaya: Music of the Jewish People of Uganda*

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5kDcZk6QXeoQ6FINMXeMkk?si=21aa235f3b88477d>

Published: Smithsonian Folkways, 2003

Performers: Gershom Sizomu (vocals and guitar), J.J. Keki, Tziporah Naisi, and Rachel Namudosi (vocals); drum track

What to listen for:

0:00	Introduction	Acoustic guitar solo with synthesized bass and drum tracking
0:20	Choral Entrance in Luganda	Recording features both male and female singers in close homophony. Notice the use of “Adonai” in lieu of the “Mukama” for the first instance of God’s name; this is intentional on the community’s part to separate their tradition from Christian tradition, as Mukama is associated with Jesus.
0:30		Draw students’ attention to how phrasing in Luganda aligns (or does not align) with melodic contours of the tune. For example, melodic phrase structure does not follow poetic phrases.
2:10	Guitar Solo	
2:37	Choral Vamp in Hebrew	<p>Repetition of the final verse of the Psalm “Let every breath be praise of God; Halleluyah!” Voices of Gershom Sizomu and J.J. Keki are featured more in the Hebrew, evidence of their increased comfort with the language</p> <p>If students are familiar with modern Hebrew pronunciation, they will notice the Abayudaya dialect. Summit observed that the Abayudaya’s Hebrew pronunciation is influenced by Luganda, where words end in vowel sounds. Whereas the verse might be pronounced in mainstream modern [Sephardic] Hebrew as “Kol han’shama t’hallel Ya, hal’luyah,” added or altered vowel sounds are apparent on “hanishama” and “tihalelu.” This dialect has been fading as the community has made more connections with American and Israeli Jewish communities.</p>



Rabbi Gershom Sizomu in recording studio, Kampala, Uganda, January 2019. Photo by Amanda Ruppenthal Stein

Psalm 150 [17 150 FIX], Cantors Assembly 2022 Abayudaya Hagaddah,

<https://on.soundcloud.com/nRtltPWevKZHzgXh5N>

Uploaded: Cantors Assembly, 2019

Performers: Gershom Sizomu (guitar); Abayudaya community members (drums, bass, marimba); American cantors Michael Stein (guitar, violin), Jeremy Stein (flute), Michael Weis (voice).

About this recording: In 2019, the Cantors Assembly, the professional organization for hazzanim associated with the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, visited the Abayudaya in a mission of solidarity following the denial of visas by the state of Israel to several students attempting to study at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The goal of this trip, as defined by its participants was “to build a sacred bridge of peoplehood and to explore the unique aspects and commonalities of our musical heritages.” Although the cantors originally planned to make studio recordings of new or unreleased melodies, Rabbi Gershom Sizomu asked to rerecord several existing Abayudaya melodies. This recording of Psalm 150 was seen as an update, emphasizing Hebrew, and an attempt to display the community’s interconnectivity and collaboration with American Jews.

What to listen for:

0:00	Introduction	Opening full ensemble introduction with drum set, guitar, bass, violin, and flute.
0:20	Solo/Ensemble Entrance in Hebrew	Gershom Sizomu with Abayudaya community members begin this recording with “Halleluyah,” frames the performance for listening rather than for use in a liturgical setting. Students may note Sizomu’s intermittent pronunciation of a slight /m/ at the end of “Halleluyah.”
0:36	Solo in Hebrew	Sizomu sings the full Psalm, much in the same way he might at morning prayer services (with guitar or drum on weekdays). Sizomu’s Hebrew is almost entirely in Sephardic (modern) pronunciation, with very mindful accuracy to emphasize the community’s connection to American/Israeli modern Jewish practice. Slight falsetto and dynamic shading on “Halelu’hu b’t aika shofar” and “Halelu’hu b’tzil’tz’lei shama” provide contrast and shape the melody.
1:28		Students may note the slight maintenance of Abayudaya dialect vowel present in “Kol han’shama,” which heard as “Kol haneshama.”
1:38	Instrumental Break	
1:54	“Innovations” in Luganda	Sizomu uses the final line of the Psalm in Luganda “Buli ekirina omukka kimutendereze Adonai” [“Let every breath be praise of God”] to create a series of call and response, varying “Let everything that has X be praise of God.” Examples—obulamu (life), omubiri (body), amaso (eyes/sight), esanyu (happiness), suubi (hope), and amanyi (knowledge) are substituted for omukka (breath/soul).
2:25/ 2:55		Rachel, who lived with the community and was in the process of conversion.
2:38		Elana, high school student and prayer leader.
3:03		SanCee, a non-Jewish friend of several Abayudaya youth and the sound engineer for the recording session sings an added text: “Kyigambo kya mukama” [It is the word of the Lord].
3:13		Hazzan Michael Weis sings the Psalm’s final line in Hebrew in the Western cantorial style.
3:29	Flute Solo	Jazz flute solo with vamp on Halleluyah.

Guiding Questions for Discussion

The following prompts are designed to support flexible use in the classroom. They may serve as starting points for class discussions, guided reflections, written responses, or extended essay assignments.

Historical and Cultural Contexts

- ❓ How does the music of the Abayudaya reflect both indigenous Ugandan musical traditions and external Jewish influences?
- ❓ What are some social or political factors that influence the music of the Abayudaya in the two versions of Psalm 150?
- ❓ What are some reasons that the Abayudaya are increasing their use of Hebrew? How does language choice reflect and affect communal identity and spiritual engagement?
- ❓ How do Rabbi Sizomu’s “innovations” in the 2019 recording reflect the current spiritual and education needs of the Abayudaya community?

Style, Textual, and Musical Analysis

- ❓ How does the melodic structure and repetition of the melody change when the Psalm is sung in Hebrew, as opposed to the original Luganda?
- ❓ How do Rabbi Sizomu’s “innovations” in the 2019 recording change the melody and overall structure of the Psalm?

Performance and Interpretation

- ❓ What are the implications of adding a drum track to the 2013 recording?
- ❓ What are the implications of adding young adults, American instrumentalists/styles and an Ashkenazi-style cantorial solo into the 2019 recording?
- ❓ How does the Abayudaya’s introduction of Hebrew into their liturgical practice differ from other communities around the world and through Jewish history (e.g., American Reform style of Debbie Friedman, etc.) introduction of English?

Recommended Bibliography

[link provided when available without paywall]

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