



Melaku Belay
Artist Information Sheet
All Ages

Artist Biography:

Melaku Belay

Ethiopia's Melaku Belay is a world-renowned dancer and ambassador for Ethiopia's many distinctive cultural traditions. He is a master of many styles of Ethiopian dance but is most well-known for his version of the thrilling shoulder-rocking dance called eskista. His spectacular mastery of eskista has earned him the nickname of the "walking earthquake."

Born in Ethiopia in 1980, Melaku grew up an orphan on the streets of Addis Ababa, shining shoes to earn enough money to survive. He was always fascinated by the moves and stories relayed through Ethiopian traditional dance that he witnessed at local religious street festivals and taught himself to dance. He later trained at the National Theater of Ethiopia, Ras Theatre, and Hager Fikir Theater, the oldest indigenous theater in Africa.

When he was 17, he started dancing for tips as a local Azmari Bet (a club that hosts traditional musicians and dancers) working for tips and sleeping in the club when it closed late at night. He eventually earned enough money to purchase Fendika Azmari Bet in 2008, and runs it as the Fendikla Cultural Center to this day with the goal of demonstrating the creativity and unique identity of Ethiopian traditional art forms.

Melaku is passionately committed to the preservation and development of Ethiopian performance culture and heritage, especially the heritage of Azmari music. His Fendika Azmari Bet has survived and thrived, due to Melaku's belief in the tremendous creative potential of Azmari music, his ability to mobilize support from Ethiopian and international audiences, and his hard work and innovative spirit. Melaku's Fendika was the first Azmari bet to pay salaries, reforming the age-old custom where these musicians only earned tips, and often hosts international musicians for collaboration.

Tradition:

Traditional Ethiopian Dance

- **Azmari**

Maybe you have heard of Griot? A Griot is a West African storyteller and musician that keeps the history of the community. Like the Griot in West Africa, in East African culture, there is the Azmari. The Azmari of Ethiopia is a social class of musicians and poets. Traditionally, Azmari in Ethiopia were not only known as skilled singers and musicians but as versatile entertainers who could improvise on any suggested topic. Their repertoires included love songs, historic tales, and impromptu commentaries



about well-known figures or audience members. In order to be considered an Azmari, you must be born into an Azmari family.

Azmaris needed to be humorists and excel in wordplay as well as singing. Azmari could be itinerant musicians, attached to a noble court or local entertainers. Religious and secular celebrations, such as harvest festivities, New Year's parties, or possession ceremonies, all required the presence of Azmari performers to complete the event. Despite their contributions to society, the Azmari were historically considered a lower social class. This is changing however, as respect for contemporary performers is growing both within Ethiopia and abroad.

- **Azmari Bet**

Melaku Belay runs Fendika Azmari Bet. In Ethiopian culture, an azmari bet is a traditional house of music where people come to be entertained, informed, and sometimes playfully insulted by the azmari who serve as current events commentators while they dance, sing, and play for tips.

- **Eskista**

Loosely translated to 'dancing shoulders', this distinctive Ethiopian dance that puts an emphasis on the upper body, which sets it apart from most other African dances, which usually place emphasis on the feet and legs.

The dance is performed by all genders and is characterized by rolling of the shoulder blades, bouncing of the shoulders, and tilting the chest. It is believed that the dance mimics the shaking of a snake's tail.

The eskista and its accompanying music uses traditional Ethiopian instruments such as the krar, which is a five or six-stringed bowl-shaped hand-held harp. The music also uses the flute, percussion and the mesenko, which is a single-stringed bowed lute.

Place:

Ethiopia

Located on the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is its second most populous country. Its capital city is the large metropolis of Addis Ababa. During the 19th Century, European countries attempted to control African peoples and land through force in a brutal process called colonization. Although much of Africa was colonized during the late 19th century, Ethiopia was one of the few countries in Africa to never be colonized.

Ethiopia contains over 80 different ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has distinct cultural practices and speaks a language specific to their ethnicity (e.g. Oromos speak Oromiffa and Tigrayans speak Tigrinya).



In total, there are 87 native languages spoken in Ethiopia. Amharic is the only language that has official status throughout the entire country.

Ethiopia occupies the land where powerful ancient kingdoms flourished and is the region where it is believed modern humans first departed Africa for the Middle East and beyond.