

# SHOULDER DANCES

## DANCE TRADITIONS OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS

By Ruth Eshel

Since the beginning of the century, much scientific research about all aspects of the life of Ethiopian Jews has been carried out. Historians, anthropologists and musicologists described the community from different viewpoints. Dance, it seems, is the only sphere as yet unexplored.

The present article endeavors to describe the dance of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel and to trace its development and the changes that occurred since the two waves of mass immigration to Israel, namely "Operation Moses" in 1984 and "Operation Solomon" in 1991. My survey is based on a project I carried out in 1990-1993, when I documented the Ethiopian community in Israel, with the help of the National Council for the Arts and the Israel Dance Library.

"Beta Israel" is the name preferred by the Jews who resided mainly in several areas around Lake Tana, in the north-west region of Ethiopia. The term "Falasha" - meaning "stranger" used by their non-Jewish neighbors has a derogatory connotation.

They used to live in small villages, of 10-15 circular huts ("tukul"), raising cattle, poultry and goats. The men worked as hired labour or serfs in the fields of farms owners or were blacksmiths - an occupation deemed low on the Ethiopian social scale. The women were busy producing clay pottery, their infants tied to their backs.

Each village had a synagogue ("Beit Makdash"). Religious life was organized by the "Kess", the Ethiopian term for rabbi. These elders made decisions according to Scripture, oral traditions and commentaries in the Gez language. Synagogues, for example, were always built close to a running brook, which would serve the purification rituals prescribed by ancient laws. In their appearance, Ethiopian Jews were not to be distinguished from their gentile (Christian) neighbours, mainly of the Amhara and Tigre tribes. They also danced the same dances as their neighbors, barefoot, in the open air or inside a wooden structure erected for special occasions such as celebrating a wedding, which could last as long as 8-10 days. The traditional dances were learned by imitation and everyone was free to join in.

The chief characteristic of the Amhara dance is the "eskesta", consisting of a variety of shoulder movements which change according to the geographic origins of the dancers (Gondar, Minjar, Gojjam or Semien mountains). As most of the Jews hail from Gondar regions, this variant of the "eskesta" is most common in Israel, the dancers adding other motifs as they see fit (Documentation of the variants is to be found in the Israel Dance Library in Tel-Aviv).

In Israel, the "eskesta" is danced as follows: it starts by a mass of dancers moving in a circle counterclockwise, their palms held at shoulder level, while clapping their hands in a 2/4 rhythm. The density of this human cluster is amazing. The dancers actually rub their

bodies together, apparently drawing energy from this shielding proximity. From afar they remind one of a flock of penguins trying to warm themselves.

At a certain moment they turn towards the center of the circle and a human wall is formed, while the dancers clap their hands in a ceremonial manner, shifting their weight from one foot to the other. Their knees are loose, and move softly up and down. The excitement increases and everything is ready for two soloists to enter the circle, where they are about to compete against each other in a virtuoso "eskesta", based on improvisation and creativity. The solos being very strenuous, they tend to be short, no more than 45 seconds each. The soloists then leave the circle to catch their breath and are replaced by others. The audience encourages the solo dancers to more and more virtuoso feats and they in their turn encourage the observers to dance the "eskesta" while remaining in their places.

At the climax of excitement the whole human mass jumps up and down, clapping hands, moving their shoulders and then resuming the counterclockwise movements, engulfing the soloists, as if swallowing them.

Only those standing in the inner circles are able to see the soloists, but those on the periphery join the general excitement none the less. When tired, everyone resumes the clapping and knee moves, until new energy has accumulated leading to another outburst of ecstasy. The dance has a constant structure, while its details are improvised. It may last for about an hour. The women usually form a separate circle. Only once did I have the opportunity to observe a woman breaching the circle to dance alone in the center.

The "eskesta" is accompanied by home-made musical instruments, such as the kabaro, a drum the Jews beat with their hands; the masenko, a sort of fiddle with a square shaped vibration chamber and a single string; the krar, a small lyre. In Israel, the musical instruments have electrical outlets to attach an amplifier. The drummer usually remains apart from the dancing mass of people, sounding the steady 2/4 rhythm, sometimes changing to a 3/4 rhythm, around which other amateur musicians and dancers improvise. The musicians are unable to read notes, hence their music is learned by ear, by imitation and memory alone. The singing is antiphonal-consisting of "question and answer" strophes, exchanged between the singer and the dancer, called "zafan". In Israel a tape-recorder often replaces the musicians.

Why are the shoulders so prominent in the "eskesta"? One reason may lie in the tender body-build of Ethiopian Jews. They lack a prominent pelvis or a heavy trunk, which would demand a dance close to the earth, accompanied by low bass tones. On the contrary, they are lithe, and their typical movement is introverted and delicate. It seems, these characteristics simply require shoulder movement, which is a sort of tender

embroidery placed on the body. The high tone of the singing also creates an elongated line, one which begins in the knees, continuing upwards to the shoulders.

It is also possible, that the "eskesta" is a continuation of the hand clapping which always precedes it. When I myself joined a group of dancers who were moving in a circle for several minutes, I felt that the clapping was also circular. As the ecstasy mounted, the movements became wider and my shoulders began to rise and fall of their own accord, as a preparation for the "eskesta" soon to commence.

At first glance it may seem that the "eskesta" movements are few and repetitive. But a deeper look reveals a wealth of shoulder motifs differentiated by varying rhythms, directions and qualities.

In the "eskesta" the shoulders move vertically (up and down), horizontally (forwards and backwards), diagonally (One shoulder down, the other up) and in a twist (One shoulder forward, the other backward). It may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. The basic moves are enhanced according to an abstract "scale", following an imaginary map of movement levels (In the classical ballet jumps are embellished by batterie in a similar manner).

There are six vertical levels (including the normal level) in the "eskesta" shoulder movements, three moving upwards from the normal shoulder position and

two levels leading downwards to the lowest position. There are three points in the horizontal plane moving forwards from the normal position and three more backwards.

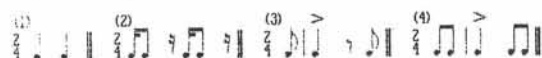
In the "eskesta" one may distinguish between two basic motifs around which the dancers improvise. One motif is a constant moving of the shoulders between two adjacent positions, which creates a steady tremolo. This shaking is done in a 2/4 rhythm, repeated several times. The arms are usually relaxed, hanging down along the torso.

Examples of typical shoulder rhythms:



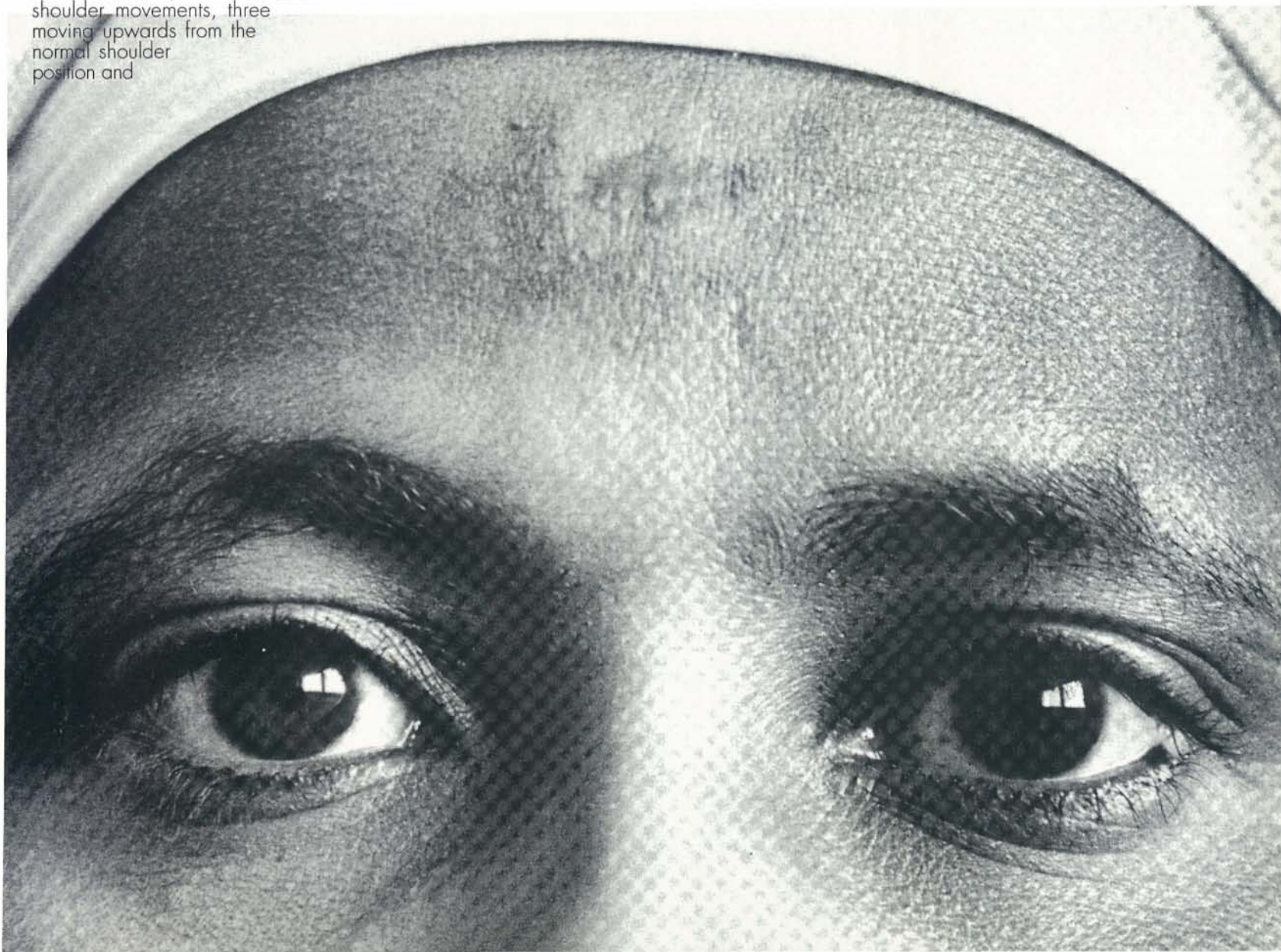
In the second basic motif the shoulder movement may travel rapidly between two or more disparate positions. The movement is quick and stops abruptly. In order to emphasize the stop-station in the lateral or the twisted "eskesta", sometimes the dancer adds as a flourish a curving movement of the shoulders. To enhance the size of the movement, the torso is sometimes tilted backwards or forwards or to either side. The rhythmic unit (2/4) is repeated several times and then another is introduced. The arms are passive throughout, but the elbows are bent sidewise and the thumbs rest slightly below the waist. This type of "eskesta" is impressive, but less tiring than the tremolo-type. Therefore it is danced more often, affording the dancers an opportunity to catch their breath before commencing with another tremolo.

Typical rhythms of the above shoulder motif:



As already stated, the "eskesta" is accompanied by knee movements, namely vertical, slight up-and-down bounces in demi-plie. Here too is an opportunity for improvisation. The feet are parallel, either touching each other or slightly apart. The center of gravity is shifted from one leg to the other, or from front to back. As the pace quickens, the dancers progress from bounces on both legs to jumps landing on one leg or the other.


Example of a jump on the downbeat:




 accented plie

 a jump with both legs held together, knees in slight plie, shoulders rise to the highest vertical level, the torso bent backward as above

 shoulders lowered by one or two levels


 landing in plie, the shoulders at normal height

The same two jumps in one 2/4 measure: 

The same jump on the upbeat: 

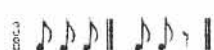
Typical rhythms of jumps from both legs or leaps from one leg to the other with shoulder tremolo (The "eskesta" is carried out on the triplet during the jumps):




Downbeat: 


Upbeat: 


### TIGRE DANCES

The other dance style I observed, the Tigre dance, is characterized by its circular walking form. The virtuoso component belongs not to the dancers, but to the drummers. They gather at the center, start drumming, inviting the dancers to join in. Even if Western dress is normally worn, during this dance the Ethiopian Jews feel compelled to wear the traditional white scarf. The men put the scarf around their waist, the women are covered all over by a white cloth, so that only their faces and feet are seen.

Typical drum-rhythms for walks: 

Men and women standing in a single file may use one of the basic foot motifs. For example: Right foot steps forward () , left ball of foot touches right ankle () , left foot slides forward with no weight () . A delicate "eskesta" can be added to ornament the walking as the body swings slightly to the sides (one eighth of a circle) with hands hanging down. Inside the circle the drummers continue to set the atmosphere, making it more joyful by adding bounces and hops to their walking or moving forward or backward, or turning on the spot. From time to time they add an accent with a plie or stamping or big jumps that sometimes resemble a parallel "temps leve" or "sissonne ferme". The excited drummers may join the circle as if leading it or continue to excite the dancers from outside of the circle.

Drum rhythms for jumps and leaps: 

The circle then stops moving: all stand close together, facing the center, The feet are slightly apart, as in a parallel second position. Knees are relaxed, the shoulders executing a delicate "eskesta". This is the Amhara "eskesta", modified to fit in with the Tigre 3/8 rhythm. One may observe certain patterns, for example: one shoulder descends, the other rises while the head moves from left to right (head isolation). Simultaneously, the older people who are unable to do this, just move their heads to and fro. Then the dancers move sidewise: the right foot steps to the side and is joined by the left, while an "eskesta" in 

rhythm is executed. Sometimes an additional circle is formed around the drummers by men clapping while facing the dancers.

There is no agreed signal to bring the "eskesta" to an end. Just as is the case with Amhara dance, the Tigre has a general pattern which enables the dancers to go on for a long period. Those individuals who are tired leave the dance, while others join in.

### PRAYER DANCES

While Beta Israel admit that their secular dances are Ethiopian Folk dances, the "Kesses" proclaim that the movements accompanying the prayers are from ancient Hebrew traditions. In response to the question in which parts of the liturgy they dance, the "Kess" answer was that usually dance accompanies prayers depicting the victory of good over evil. For example, when the text depicts Moses victory over the Pharaoh's magicians, the "Kesses" dance with their sticks. When, during the prayers, Jerusalem is mentioned, they often clap their hands. The movement vocabulary includes bounces with an accented downbeat, small jumps with both feet moving forward and backward with a dignified and rather heavy quality. Elbows are close to hips and hands open and close accompanying the text; other arms gestures for either one or both hands include small figure eight motifs.

Some of the prayers are accompanied by gestures of supplication such as the

arms held diagonally upward. In other prayers, like in the final prayer of Shabbat, they spread both arms up in supplication and bow down on their knees, the torso extended toward the floor. Many members of the congregation are used to holding a small horsehair fly whisk in their right hand, which they shake to the rhythms of the prayer. They are so used to holding this fly whisk, that even when their hands are empty, they tend to move the right hand as if it held the implement.

Most of the dancing occurs during Yom Kippur, the Day of Attonement. The "Kesses" state that dancing is a certain way of castigating the body and soul through strenuous effort, such expiation of sins "bringing redemption closer". And if deliverance is approaching, that is of course a good reason to rejoice in dance. In addition to knee movements and their accompanying embellishments there are other specific motifs: right palms are flexed and held close to the shoulders; hands folded in front of the chest and moving up and down in zigzag or wave-like motions while the torso moves with delicate impulses. The "Kesses" say these movements describe Israel's historical crossing of the Red Sea fleeing Pharaoh's army.

These undulating hand movements remind one of Yemenite dancing. There exists several theories as to the geographic origin of the "Beta Israel" Jews. One of these (though not generally accepted), holds that they arrived in Ethiopia from Yemen. Perhaps these movements are an indication of such a connection.

### GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS

In my survey I came across a remarkable woman's ceremony. The belief in good and evil spirits is widely held among the Ethiopian Jews. One kind of spirit is the "Zaar". According to an ancient legend, Eve gave birth to many children. She wished to conceal the most beautiful of the offspring from God. In order to retaliate, God made them immortal in the form of Zaar spirits. The Zaar is often supposed to attack women; a woman who is out of her mind is deemed to be 'ridden by a Zaar'. In such cases, the spirit is exorcised by means of dancing.

In the dead of night, the possessed woman is brought to the hut of the healer, in which women of her kind used to gather together in the past. The leader of the group is one who has had contact with spirits by means of aromatic herbs.

Yael Kahana in her book "Achim Shchorim" (Black Brothers) describes the proceedings thus: "Meanwhile soft drumming starts, accompanied by singing and hand clapping. Each member of the group commences dancing 'as the spirits move her [...]'. She [the senior member of the group] begins to shake her shoulders. Slowly she rises and is seized by an orgasmic ecstasy. She then turns around on her axis at an accelerating speed until she kneels over and falls to the ground [...]. The possessed woman observes the dance until she too begins spinning, at first as if

her body was very heavy, petrified. Several hours may pass until she commences her dancing. when she starts moving, it is taken as a good sign, an omen that her "Zaar" is willing to stop 'riding on her'. It is the beginning of the recuperation. The patient is in a trance [...]. As the patient's dance increases and becomes wilder, the healer make his diagnosis after analyzing the content of her movement [...]. The Zaar's demands are according to the spirit's character; for example, if she is of a dark complexion, he may ask for a black goat, if she is fair, he may ask for a white one".

My own inquiries about such exorcism ceremonies taking place in Israel met with a stormy silence, embarrassment and denial.

## MOURNING CEREMONIAL

An event, rich in movement, is the gathering for a funeral. This ritual of expressing sorrow, continues to be followed meticulously by the community. What changed in Israel is the site of the mourning rituals. Instead of taking place in African villages they are in modern condominiums. In Nazareth, on April '92 I recorded such a gathering. In the early morning, the family came to the courtyard. Men and women crying, eyes closed, rocking from one foot to the other, knees slightly bent, legs apart. Neighbors encircled the family and in the middle, the elder son was seen lifting his dead father's picture and crying in a rhythmical voice, counting out loud his father's good deeds. "He was brave," and the crowd would repeat his words. "He gave charity," and the crowd answered in wailing consent. One could notice a variety of movements expressing mourning: hands interlaced over neck with elbows pulled to the side; palms pressed to the top of the heads with elbows pulled down; women beating their head with their right hands; men banging their chests.

Consoling processions of other "Beta Israelis" arrived from all over the country. "Kesses" were in black embroidered caps holding colored parasols and flywhisks. At the head of another procession women, each holding a handkerchief at the two opposite ends, make the material flutter and then lower it tight to the head pulling their elbow's down, then lifting their arms up with stretched handkerchiefs and striking their chests. Others, lift their arms and hold stretched handkerchiefs high above their heads and then pushing the whole body into a deep bow, reaching the ground. Men bang their heads with their fists and then spread their arms diagonally as if asking how they are going to withstand this disaster?

Each procession that reached the courtyard halted. The mass of mourners split and the family rushed towards the leaders of the procession, stretching their arms, embracing and hugging them as if melting in sorrow into each others' arms. Meanwhile, the rest formed a huge semicircle, standing, huddled together, shoulder to shoulder. The family approached each of them, placed their

right arms on the shoulders of each consoler and strongly embraced. After that, the newcomers melted into the mass of people.

After all processions reached the courtyard, and the above procedure repeated itself 5-6 times, a kind of hysteria started. A huge circle was formed. In the middle women walked with seemingly no focus, weakend knees, banging their heads or folding their arms to the back and bending the torso fiercely forwards and backwards. Others stood bouncing quickly as if the ground beneath was burning. Several males arranged in couples encircled the hysterical women. Segments of shouts filled the air.

At noon buses arrived to take the group to the cemetery for the typical Jewish-Israeli burial ceremony.

## MODERN INFLUENCES

Life in Israel exposed the Ethiopian immigrants to other, secular kinds of dance. Apart from their traditional dances the younger men adore break-dance to pop music which they imitate from TV. Greek music is also very popular amongst them. Their steps become Greek folksteps, while their shoulders remain Ethiopian. Also popular is Arabic music and they improvise moving with delicate circular hip movements. Small girls can be seen doing belly dance copied from the Arab programs they see on Israeli TV. In one marriage celebration a blond belly dancer was invited and a mass of males encircled her, clapping their hands and jumping, leaving her hardly any space in the center, just as they do for their own soloists in the Amhara dances. Surprisingly, those "born dancers" find it difficult to dance the Israeli Hora, because they have to imitate an exact step and fit it into the regular rhythm of the Hora.

The shoulder moves are intriguing for the Israelis. At some weddings I observed guests trying to join in the "eskesta", to obvious approval of the Ethiopian hosts. Some of those joining in were middle aged Israeli women of oriental extraction (Jews from Arab countries), well versed in hip movements and chest shimys, as well as in the ululating tremelo sounds used in the Middle East and Ethiopia for merry making. One of the ladies made bold and even joined the inner circle of solo dancers. A waiter who recently arrived from Russia began to shake his shoulders in "eskesta" - fashion, while balancing a tray of drinks with one hand.

There have been several experiments among the Ethiopians to establish dance groups in Nazareth, Petah Tikva, Afula and other places. Although the movement excell in "eskesta", much of the authenticity and beauty of the dances is lost as they try to adapt the dances for the stage, replacing the original forms and rearranging them with banal choreographic patterns copied from commercial video cassettes of Ethiopian folk dances. The result is neither authentic folklore nor artistic dance.

Yet the first sense of an Ethiopian "flavor"

with its cultural contribution to the Israeli melting pot can be observed. Liat Hayms from the Kibbutz Dance Company created "Journey" for the company workshop based on the ordeal of crossing the Sudanese desert in '84. Maski, a fashion model was discovered as a singer and appears frequently on TV. Ethiopian Jews have opened night clubs where they can be seen break dancing in Tel Aviv; an Ethiopian restaurant has been opened in Jerusalem, but probably the most successful combination of cross - fertilization between Israeli and Ethiopian culture is "The Queen of Sheba Choir" of Moshe Gronich, a well known Israeli composer working with Ethiopian children in Tel Aviv.

Dance is a dynamic and ever changing art form, a mirror of society. In the last decade since "Operation Moses", the dance of the Ethiopian Jews has undergone many changes. New ways are being found to adapt to the new environment. This article describes what has happened up to the present. It will be useful to further observe and document these developments in order to analyse this process of continuing change from a long term perspective.

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