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Embilta Playing in Ethiopia

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The reason for the choice of my topic lies in the so far observed negligence of the study of aerophones in the African music cultures in general and in the Horn of Africa in particular, no matter whether they serve for performing purely instrumental pieces, or to accompany songs, or are just preserved in households being considered as a status symbol. There is a great lack of scientific works with regard of aerophones at our disposal for the entire African continent¹.

The focal point of my paper is centred on the *embilta*, a side-blown long flute without finger-holes. The *embilta* is always played in groups usually consisting of three instrumentalists.

So far made investigations resulted that in earlier times the instrument was used on large state ceremonies besides the long tube *meleket* and the large kettle drum *negarit* and thus it served as a symbol of honor for the royal family. Due to its high social value, one may therefore, assume that the *embilta* – compared to its function nowadays – was hardly used in the music of the everyday life at that time. Today, however, its use can be observed in the music cultures of the *Tigray* and the *Amara*, ethnic societies predominantly residing in the Central Highland of Ethiopia. It is especially played on wedding ceremonies to accompanying the bridal party and in doing so to decorate the wedding feast as a whole.

While playing, the *embilta* is held diagonally or at a downwards angle away from the player's body. It is frequently stressed that the instrument is held towards the player's right, however, this does not always correspond to the practice.²

While playing, the instrumentalists bend the upper part of their bodies for- and

¹ These are among other things the works of Dauer 1985; Kebede 1971; Lemma 1975; Powne 1968; Dje Dje 1978; Koetting 1980 and Cooke 1970.

² Tesfaye Lemma presents in his booklet "Ethiopian Musical Instruments" 1975: pp. 18 three *embilta*-players and one *meleket*-player, whereby two of the *embilta*-players hold their instruments towards their left sides and the third player holds it towards the right side of his body.

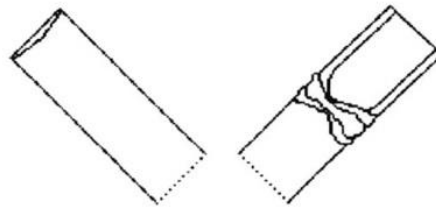
backwards and simultaneously stamp with their feet alternately on the ground moving for- and backwards as well. In doing so, they produce metro-rhythmic accents which enable them to get an overall orientation during the playing.

The *embilta* is either made of bamboo, or of metal tubes and has two types of mouth-pieces (Fig. 1). The first type is made of a minimally sharp edged hollow as a blowing cut (resulting from the removal of a slice of bamboo), whereas the second type indicates a u-shaped opening which is tightly bandaged with a piece of cloth at its lower end.

Fig. 1

type 1:

type 2:



Compared to the first mouthpiece, the diagonal playing position is not necessarily required for the second type, however, it is frequently used to facilitate the communication between the group of instrumentalists, because this position enables each player to hear the pitch produced by oneself much better and simultaneously the overall sound will be under control.

Michael Powne (1968:32), who made investigations on the Ethiopian music in the early 60s lists the measurements and characteristics of three *embiltawoc* preserved in the Ethnographic Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the Addis Ababa University in the following table³:

Fig. 2

catalogue no.	length	bore	origin	length of cut-out mouthpiece
838	95 cm	2,5 cm	Gore	7,5 cm
1607	75 cm	2,25 cm	Shoa	6,5 cm
837	77,5 cm	2,4 cm	Gore	no cut-out

However, the listing and Powne's attempt to compare the instruments with one another is to be criticized, because all three items obviously originate from different areas:

³ According to Powne, we may observe that the instruments listed are of different lengths, bore, origin as well as deviations in the lengths of their mouth-piece cuts.

– should we believe the secondary informations provided – and thus they inevitably belong to different sets of *embiltawoc* originally.⁴ The majority of the instruments preserved at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies today, was once collected by voluntary and interested individuals mostly without systematic and handed over to the Ethnographic Museum of the Institute. So we most probably have a collection of *embiltawoc* here which were at the time of their collection already out of use, and therefore given away. Due to all these factors, it would lead us to misunderstandings to compare and contrast them with each another considering them as a set.

Only the participation of several *embilta* players enables a performance to be meaningful. In traditional repertoires of those societies, who practise the *embilta* playing, it is very essential to be able to produce a perceptible melodic pattern from which different melodic variations will be developed.

In the playing process the instrumentalists form a melody, which - shortly after the beginning of the respective instrumental piece – develops to a cyclic movement with short melodic phrases. Each player contributes to the completion of the musical piece by inserting the melodic part assigned to him on the right time or at the right position. Maintaining the rhythmic movement constantly, all players are expected to arrange their quite tight melodic courses individually, in order to make a perfect whole out of the musical piece. For that matter, they should know each other very well in order to complement one another very easily. On the other hand though, they are also dependent from each other, so that in case of a rhythmic or melodic error the entire ensemble would surely be affected.

It is strongly assumed that *embilta* playing is based on many years of experience. Thus, the know-how of a specific basic repertoire consisting of a number of melodic patterns as well as various metric and rhythmic formations is required. Otherwise in both the rhythmic course and in the blowing technique - which obviously requires a good experience - it would be impossible to overtake the musical part designated for each player as expected, even if only one or two pitches come into question.

For playing the *embilta* the over-blowing technique is used. In contrast to the long tube *meleket* for example, the *embilta* consists of a tonal range of about two octaves. From the technical keynote which depends on the length of the respective instrument, the octave pitch sounds at first, then the perfect fifth over this octave pitch, then the perfect fourth, possibly afterwards the major third. However, the last pitch is very difficult to produce, because it requires too much strength. For similar reasons the technical keynote - if at all - is very rarely blown as well. Therefore, only the octave and the

⁴ In this connection one should bear in mind that there are regional variations in the construction of the *embiltawoc* based according to musical tastes and local materials available for the instrument maker. This phenomenon refers to all other traditional music instruments of Ethiopia. Thus, similar music instruments often have different names in the different ethnic societies.

perfect fifth above the keynote usually play an important role. In the following a music example (Fig. 3) played by three *embilta* players (indicated as I, II and III) is shown. The pitches for each instrument are given at the beginning of the staff line:

Fig. 3

The figure shows three diagrams of *embilta* instruments, labeled I, II, and III, which are long, thin, conical wind instruments. To the right is a musical score for three staves labeled I, II, and III. Each staff begins with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The notation includes various note values and rests, with vertical dashed lines indicating synchronization between the parts. A fourth staff at the bottom shows a melodic line with notes and rests.

Powne (1968:33) quotes a music example of a group of *embiltawoc* notated by Mondon Vidailhet (Fig. 4) which, however, is written down on one melodic line:

Fig. 4

...etc.

A single melodic line of music on a five-line staff, starting with a treble clef and a common time signature. The melody consists of a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The text "ig the me-" is partially visible to the right of the staff.

loodic pattern in Fig. 4 as a base, the course of the practical playing of all three instrumentalists will be shown in Fig. 5:

Fig. 5

A musical score for three staves labeled I, II, and III. Each staff begins with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The notation includes various note values and rests, with vertical dashed lines indicating synchronization between the parts. The score shows the practical playing of the three instrumentalists based on the melodic pattern in Fig. 4.

It is evident that all three keynotes only use the octave and the fifth pitches over the octave in each case. Thus it will be clear that the single and the double over-blowing techniques have been used here. All three keynotes do not occur in the music-piece, but the intervallic relationships major second (g-a; i.e. 3rd-2nd *embiltawoc*) and minor third (a-c; i.e. 2nd-1st *embiltawoc*) correspond to the above mentioned example.

The tonal range of a set of three *embiltawoc* usually corresponds to the typical pentatonic pitch sequences of the so-called *Tizita* mode⁵, a most widely used mode out of four different modes⁶ within the traditional music repertoires of the Central Highland of Ethiopia in general (ex. the ethnic societies of the *Amara* and the *Tigray*).

The division of role of the *embilta* players also requires a special metric arrangement of the each instrumental part (see I = 1st player; II = 2nd player and III = 3rd player).

The rhythmic construction and its course could variously be perceived by listeners; i.e., that even a complete change of accents could also take place in such a setting. According to the bar lines indicated, the stressed beats of each instrumentalist may be observed. They will constantly be maintained by the players, in order to make the musical piece meaningful. The dotted bar lines on the other hand refer to the metre given by Powne. These bar lines could be considered as common denominators for all three instrumentalists. Here, the second and the third players alternately play the stressed beat. But also the stressed beat played by the first player could be conceivable as well, a view of canonic playing, which - besides the rhythmic association - comes more closer to the ostinate drum playing in each part (Fig. 6):

Fig. 6

The figure shows a musical score for three embilta players, labeled I, II, and III. Each player's part is written on a five-line staff with a treble clef. Player I starts with a whole note chord (G4 and A4) and then plays a series of eighth notes. Player II starts with a whole note chord (A4 and B4) and plays a series of eighth notes. Player III starts with a whole note chord (B4 and C5) and plays a series of eighth notes. Vertical dotted lines indicate the stressed beats for each player, showing an alternating pattern between players II and III. Solid vertical lines indicate the bar lines for the entire piece.

While playing the *embiltawoc*, the instrumentalists move with view contact to each other in circles or in a row one player moving behind the other. Their dancing steps usually correspond to the metric movement of each player. In this way also the phrasing of the individual parts can easily be recognized.

A quite complicated piece is the following which I tried to notate according to my perception:

⁵This is most probably the reason why for example the wedding songs of the *Amara* people are predominantly sung in this mode, rather than in other three modes.

⁶They are known as *Bati*, *Ambassel* and *Anchi Hoye Lene*.

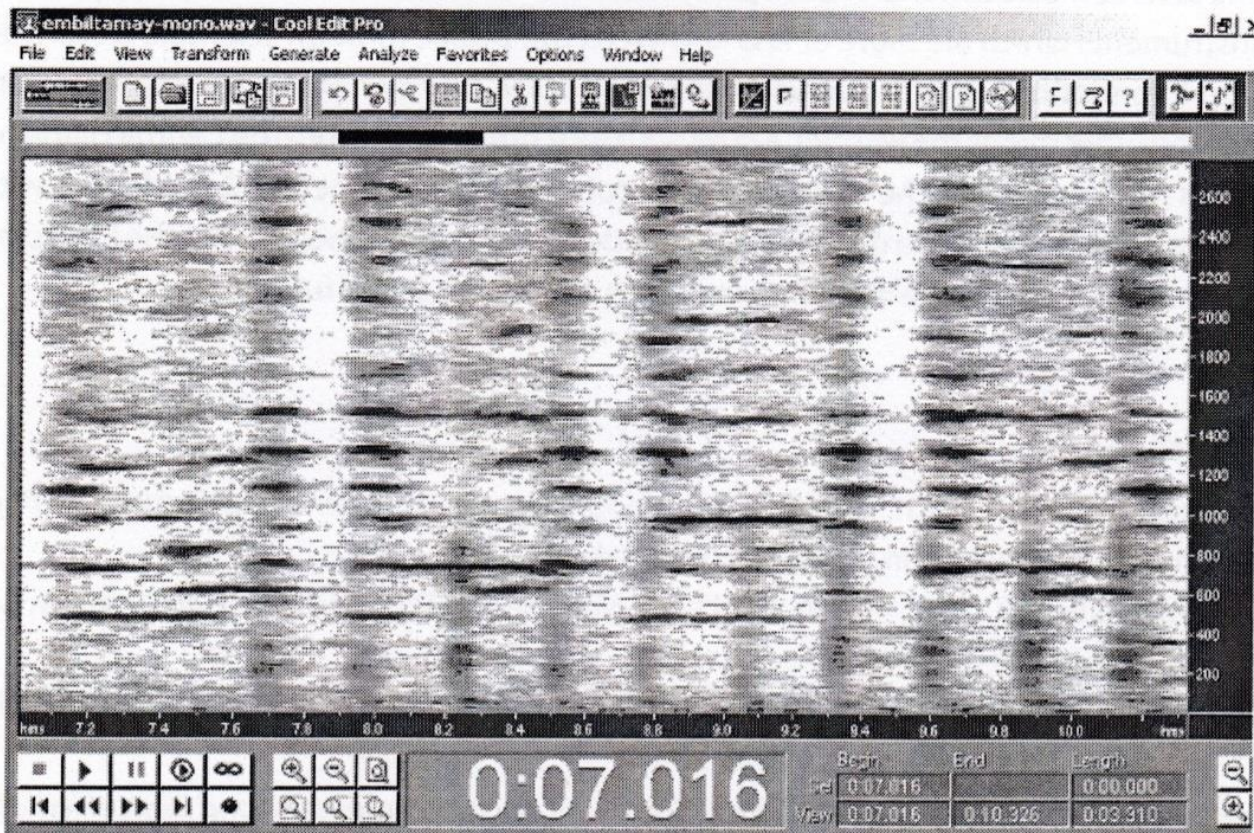
Fig. 7. Notation of an instrumental piece performed by 3 embilta-players

The image displays a musical score for three embilta players. It is organized into four systems, each containing three staves. The top staff of each system is labeled '1st. emb.', the middle '2nd. emb.', and the bottom '3rd. emb.'. A tempo marking at the beginning indicates a quarter note equals 75. The score is divided into measures, with bar numbers 1 through 15 clearly marked. The notation features a variety of rhythmic values and melodic intervals, showing a high degree of interweaving between the three parts. The first staff (1st. emb.) primarily uses notes on the octave and fifth above the keynote 'c'. The second and third staves (2nd. and 3rd. emb.) utilize the keynote 'c' and the second degree 'G' and 'A'.

In this music example we may observe that the keynotes of the second and third *embiltawoc* (i.e. G and A) are used, while the first *embilta* only uses the octave and the fifth pitches above the keynote c. From the melodic construction we may observe how the three instruments are interwoven with one another. One bar represents one melodic phrase that – despite of internal melodic and rhythmic variations within the given frame – will be maintained until the end of the piece. We may also take a look at the melodic movements of each *embilta* part with the help of the musical notation presented in Fig. 7.

On the other hand, we can observe the dance steps of the instrumentalists while playing their *embiltawoc* with the help of the following Fig. 8:

Fig. 8



Conclusions

Due to lack of satisfying and convincing scientific works, the *embilta* – likewise many traditional music instruments used in Ethiopia - has not yet been investigated thoroughly. This refers to its heritage, its playing technique, the rules for melodic and rhythmic movements, musical styles, the repertoire ... etc.. The true understanding of the apparently complicated musical pieces of the *embilta*, especially the formation of the interwoven melodic and metro-rhythmic patterns, requires intensive and frequent observations on the scene of action and intensive investigations.

In the course of the Ethiopian history (for example during the reign of Emperor Haile Silasse 1930-1974) the royal families and principalities possessed each a group of *embilta*-players in their courts. One of the eldest "professional" *embilta*-players still alive is Areru Shegen who not only served the royal court under the reign of Haile Silasse as an *embilta*-player, but afterwards also belonged to one of the staff members of one of the first traditional music group called "Orchestra Ethiopia"⁷⁷ for about 20 years. Almost all his colleagues have passed away without having transmitted their musical skills to the young generation. Likewise Areru Shegen is an old man of about 78 years of age leading an impoverished life without any kind of financial support (pension, social

help...etc.), a typical phenomenon for the majority of Ethiopian traditional musicians and instrumentalists.

Last but not least there are definitely quite a great number of aerophones used in the diverse music cultures of Ethiopia which have remained hidden compared to those instruments which are more or less known to the public through scientific researches and informations (ex. media) and used by a large number of the society. These are among other things the *washint*, a flute with four finger holes from the Central Highland areas of Ethiopia and the *meleket*, a long tube which has functional similarities with the *embilta*.⁸ Therefore, a detailed investigation of all aerophones used in the Ethiopian cultures are going to be one of my research intensions in the future.

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⁷ The Orchestra Ethiopia was founded in the early 60s and became fruitful under the direction of Tesfaye Lemma.

⁸ *Meleket*-players usually imitate the traditional diagonal playing position of the *embilta*, in keeping their head diagonally which will surely enables them to get a much better control over the sounds produced.