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Fieldwork Experiences in East Africa (Ethnomusicology)

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Introduction

The present ethno-musicological fieldwork that focuses on a wide ranging study of aerophones among the societies of East Africa was carried out between February and July 2005.

Present day East Africa, also known as the 'cradle of humanity', encompasses the countries Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia (also known as the 'Horn of Africa') and those countries located in the coastal, central and southern regions. These are Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Seychelles, as well as parts of Sudan, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi. As a multiracial and multiethnic region, East Africa consists of Afro-Arabs, Afro-Asians, and Europeans besides the predominantly pastoralist and agriculturist native communities, among them the Bantu, the Nilotes and the Cushites. These populations also migrated originally at different times from other areas to East Africa, starting from about 1500 years ago. Today they build the largest communities within what is known as the East African region.

The historical, socio-political, cultural and religious past of East Africa is thus marked by uninterrupted migration. The reasons for migration include the search for better and more fertile areas for living, but also war, natural catastrophes, displacement, overpopulation and epidemics. Owing to this background history, we may be able to differentiate closely linked populations who reside in specific regions and share homogeneous music cultures, such as the Swahili and the Mijikenda communities of the coastal regions of Kenya and Tanzania (including Zanzibar and Pemba islands). Through strong Islamic influence that began around the 12th century and highly developed trading systems which, as a result, enabled cultural persuasions, these populations nowadays represent a uniquely mixed culture composed of indigenous African, Middle Eastern and Indian backgrounds, both in their everyday life and in their musical traditions.

Definite Research Area

A full investigation of the entire East African region is logistically out of reach. Even a complete fieldwork of all the existing musical traditions of a country would be impossible to accomplish within the given period of research mentioned above. For that matter, only five historically linked countries - Ethiopia (for two months), Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya (each for one month) - were focal points of the field research. In this way an attempt was made to contact at least a minimum of one and a maximum of four ethnic communities:

- The *Bertha* (also *Berta*), *Mao* and *Komo* communities who reside in the *Benishangul-Gumuz* National Regional State located in West Ethiopia (BGNRS¹).
- The *Ari* and *Maale* ethnicities living in South Ethiopia. The region is called the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples State (SNNPS²).

The *Nymang* (also called *Nyima*, *Nima* and *Ama*) residing dispersed in seven small villages known as *Nitill*, *Kurmutti*, *Kellara*, *Tunir*, *Sellara Foyin* and *Kakara* in the *Nuba Mountains* of the southern region of Kordofan, central Sudan.

¹ Other indigenous population of the BGNRS are the *Gumuz* and the *Shinasha*. Another group of the *Bertha* also lives in south Sudan. The *Bertha* communities of both Ethiopia and Sudan share common historical, cultural and religious features.

² The SNNPS is extraordinarily rich with various languages and dialects used by many different ethnic communities like for instance the *Hamer*, *Dizi*, *Surma*, *Mursi* and the *Bumi* to mention just a few.

- The Bantu speaking *Baganda*, the largest single ethnic community living in central Uganda,³ as well as their eastern neighbours, the *Basoga*, who occupy the regions between Lake Victoria and Lake Kioga.⁴
- The *Wasambaa* community of northern Tanzania. They occupy a large area starting from the north Tanzanian region of *Tanga*. However, I specifically visited the village called *Vuga* that is located in the *Usambara* Mountains.
- The *Digo* and *Giriama* of the coastal regions of Kenya, who belong to the altogether nine closely related *Bantu* speaking *Mijikenda*⁵ people who have a common historical and cultural background.

Aerophones in East Africa

The aerophones used in the music cultures of East African societies have been studied inadequately. There are only a few academic researches and publications at our disposal. The African continent, which is generally considered a homogeneous region, is identified predominantly through the abundant types of drums. With reference to drums, the various methods and techniques of playing, and the socio-cultural status and roles of the drums, there is still quite a lot to explore, but they have at least been investigated in a relatively better way compared with other groups of musical instruments, such as the aerophones.

The East African communities possess a large number of aerophones that have never been examined exhaustively. In the East African musical history in particular, the use of end-blown flutes, horns and trumpets played in sets of from 6 to 22 instrumentalists, has been one of the common features of music making. Such instrumental ensembles were used predominantly in the royal courts of many countries at different times. This phenomenon is also observed today.

Fig. 1: Waza trumpet ensemble⁶



As an example the *Waza* calabash trumpets played by the *Berta* people of south Sudan and west Ethiopia may be mentioned. A group may consist of 10 to 12 trumpets each producing one pitch. Therefore, the participation of all the trumpeters is necessary in order to create a complete melodic and metro-rhythmic musical piece (see figure 1).

³ The present districts in which the *Baganda* live are *Kampala*, *Mpigi*, *Mukono*, *Masaka* etc.

⁴ The present districts of the *Basoga* are *Jinja*, *Kamuli* and *Iganga*.

⁵ The nine *Mijikenda* groups including the *Digo* and *Giriama* are called *Rabai*, *Kambe*, *Ribe*, *Jibana*, *Chonyi*, *Kauma* and *Duruma*

⁶ Photo: Timkehet Teffera 13.02.2005; *Assosa* district; *Nifro Gebeye* village/West Ethiopia.

Fig. 2a: *Woissa* flute ensemble⁷



Fig. 2b: *Pilea* flute ensemble⁸



Other ensemble instruments consist of end blown stopped flutes that are mostly constructed of bamboo, such as the flute ensembles called *Woissa* (**figure 2a**) and *Pilea* (**figure 2b**) used by the south Ethiopian *Ari* and *Male* people, or the flute ensemble known as *Bol-Negero* of the *Berta* (**figure 2c**), consisting of 21 flutes.

⁷ Photo: Timkehet Teffera 07.03.2005; *Jinka town/South Ethiopia*.

⁸ Photo: Timkehet Teffera 10.03.2005; *Maale district; Beneta village/South Ethiopia*.

The flutes used in such ensembles of course differ in their quantity, but their characteristic similarity lies in the fact that each instrument needs to produce one or a maximum of two pitches. In doing so, they use the hocket technique in order to construct a full melodic and metro-rhythmic course. Another typical feature is that these ensembles may also be accompanied by other musical instruments, such as drums, horns, gourd rattles, wooden concussion idiophones, percussion sticks etc.

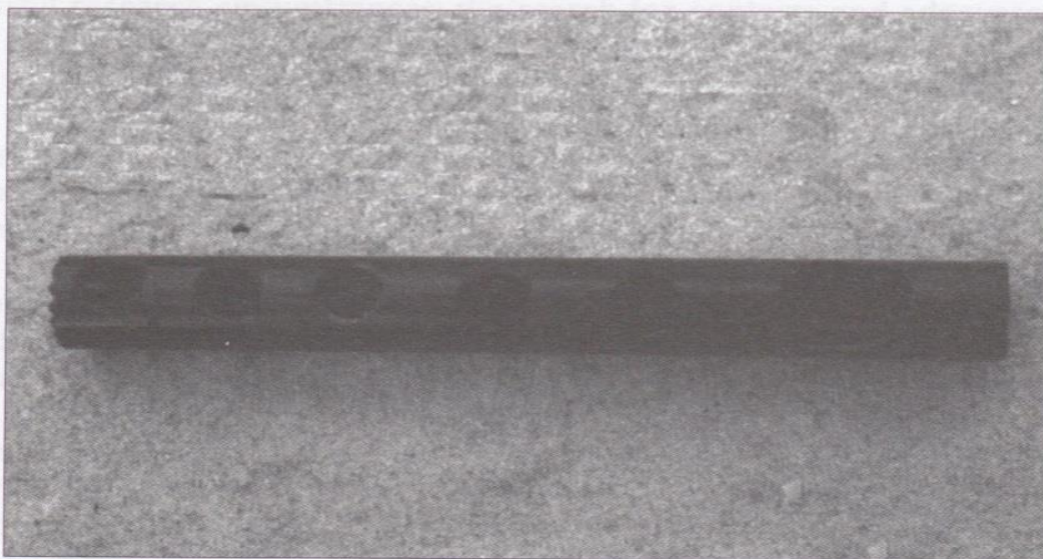
Fig. 2c: Part of Bol flutes of the Bol-Negero ensemble⁹



For instance, the *Bol* flutes of the *Berta* are accompanied by the single-headed kettle drum *Negero* (lit. = drum). For that matter, the ensemble is accordingly known as *Bol-Negero*.

Additional aerophones refer to numerous types (end-blown or side-blown flutes, trumpets and horns with or without finger holes, etc).

Fig. 3a: stopped flute *Chivoti* of the *Digo*¹⁰



⁹ Photo: Timkehet Teffera 13.02.2005; Assosa district; Inžiñhedia Šhedia village/West Ethiopia.

¹⁰ Photo: Timkehet Teffera 10.07.2005 Tiwi; Southern Mombassa; East Kenya.

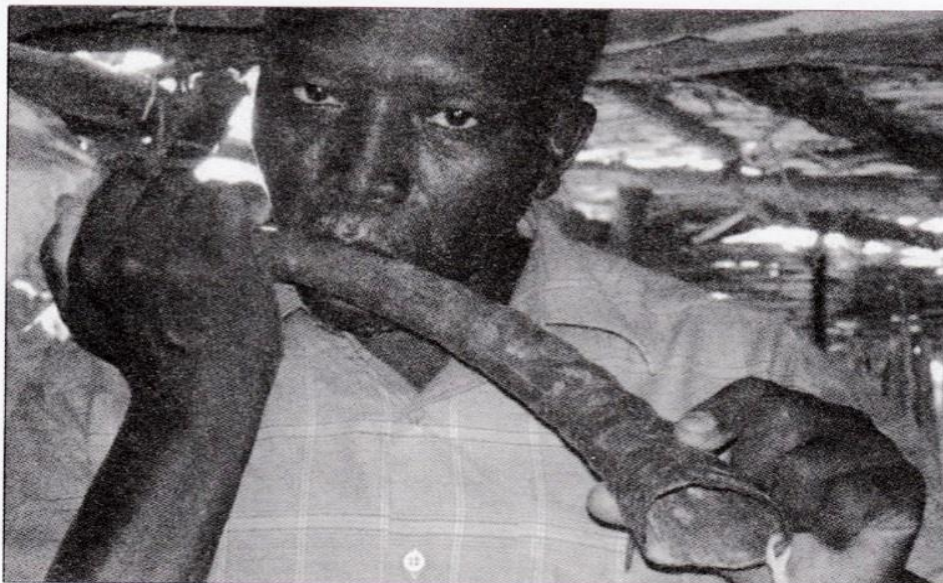
Fig. 3b: open-ended flute *Sorrer of the Nymang*¹¹



They may be used as both solo and ensemble instruments. Their shapes (cylindrical or conical), materials (animal horns, wood, clay, bamboo, metal, plastic etc) and their playing techniques vary from place to place (**figures 3 a-b**).

Animal horns (eg goat, ox, bushbuck, gazelle and antelope) belong to the most commonly used music and/or signal giving instruments in East African societies serving various purposes. These include the call to war, gatherings, mourning, group activities such as harvesting and hunting. On the other hand, they are played while herding livestock, and they accompany musical performances, circumcision ceremonies etc, together with other musical instruments.

Fig. 4: side-blown horn *Boršher*¹²



¹¹ Photo: Timkehet Teffera | 1.04.2005; *Nuba Mountains in South Khordofan region; Central Sudan.*

¹² Photo: Timkehet Teffera | 3.04.2005; *Nuba Mountains in South Khordofan region; Central Sudan.*

The antelope horn *Boršher* played by the *Nymang* of Sudan is, for instance, used primarily as a signal giving instrument (see figure 4). The blowing techniques of the horns differ according to their construction. Thus they may be either blown at the truncated ends or at a hole made on one side.

Research Objectives and Fieldwork Experience

As preliminary documentation, the assessment of photographic and sound materials, as well as the examination of traditional musical instrument collections, was carried out at the Phonogram Archives of Vienna and Berlin. Apart from the fieldwork, analogous evaluations were undertaken in the National Museums (formerly National Museums of Uganda and Kenya) and Sound Archives (IES-Institute of Ethiopian Studies/Addis Ababa University, TRAMA-Traditional Music Archive/Khartoum University) of the respective countries that possess quite large collections of music and musical instruments. Therefore, as a result of all the preparatory work, about 30 hours of audiovisual recordings and some 2 000 photos were collected.

The main objective of my research is based on the representation of East African aerophones, their classification in groups and subgroups, and the investigation of their musical and instrumental styles. The study concerning areas of style will be complemented by intra- and inter-cultural classification and systematic analysis. This overview should thus give detailed information about the ethnocultural link and/or historical origin; the organological classification (i.e. intra-cultural classification); the music repertoire, and its meaning and function, from a musical point of view (also in relationship with other comprehensively studied groups of music instruments); the technological diversity; methods and techniques of playing; the socio-cultural role of the instruments; their non-musical significance, and last but not least their role in terms of gender and class.

My ethnomusicological fieldwork in East Africa was a very tiresome task, full of adventures and risks, but simultaneously useful, instructive, encouraging and worth doing. Since a maximum stay of one month was scheduled for each country, it was clear from the start that a complete research study would in one way or another be absolutely impossible. The physical and mental preparation for the field research, the journey to each country; the handling of administrative procedures mainly in the capital cities in connection with providing suitable and successful research circumstances; the search for contacts and adequate information about the area of research, required quite a lot of time and energy, and a great deal of patience.

After accomplishing all these steps, the second phase of the plan - the practical research - referred to journeys in the respective countries to definite areas, and to approaching the ethnic community. Here, mention must be made that, if a researcher is aware of collecting convincing data and gaining adequate authentic information, he/she is first of all obliged to share the everyday life of a community, respect and understand its culture, mentality and its people, and above all spend an extensive period in order to gather an abundance of source material on its music culture as well as all the details related to it.

Since the undertaking of any kind of recording has become a means of generating additional income for both 'professionals' and 'semi-professionals' in many parts of Africa, in making such deals I always tried to make these musicians conscious of their music tradition/s that they should represent with a great deal of pride, since it is a part of their identity. Such discussions were essential, since they made the people feel responsible for the music they performed. So, a special task of my fieldwork was based on clarifying the aim of my research with the intention of avoiding misunderstandings.

After paving the way to go forward, the final and most significant part of my fieldwork was the audiovisual recording of music that is followed by questionnaires, discussions, dialogues and interviews with individuals/groups about origin, evolution, nature, style, role and function of music, and musical practices. These achievements have certainly helped me to experience and understand quite a lot about the musical traditions and cultures of numerous societies of East Africa.

Knowing areas of research from provided and/or available materials such as literature and other data on one hand, and facing multiple realities in the field on the other, are two extremities. Apart from getting used to new geographic and cultural areas that either I have been acquainted with from a distance, or that had been completely unknown to me, my research journey to the five East African countries as a whole has greatly enabled me to realize the importance of ethnomusicological field assessments, and to understand quite a lot about how to do the following:

- explore new perspectives and experiences
- approach 'new' and 'strange' cultures as an ethnomusicologist and carry out a study
- approach people (especially musicians) through understanding and accepting their mentality, ideologies and cultures
- deal with research related problems and crises in the field
- realize the aims of the research in the field (especially the recording of sound), and last but not least
- achieve the research goals

There is still a lot to explore in the music and material cultures of East African communities. This research work and its final analytical results will, therefore, hopefully encourage and enhance further future studies in this untouched region that is characterized by its multiethnic communities with a long history. It is recommended that the studies not be confined to the field of ethnomusicology, but that interdisciplinary investigations also be conducted in related disciplines, such as anthropology, history, ethnology, ethnography and linguistics.