

WHAT DOES SOUNDING HISTORY MEAN AND TO WHOM? A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF EARLY SOUND RECORDINGS FROM AXUM (ETHIOPIA)

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Introduction

The “Berliner Phonogram Archiv” which was established in 1900 possesses one of the earliest sound documents on wax cylinders collected with a phonograph from the end of the 19th until the mid of the 20th Centuries. These historical sound documents were recorded during expeditions carried out at different times and in various countries of the world. Among historical recordings, the collection of the German Diplomat Friedrich Rosen recorded in 1905 comprising 46 recordings, the collection of Dr. Erich Kaschke recorded in 1906 consisting of 37 recordings, the collection of Weiss recorded between 1921 and 1924 consisting of ca. 35 recorded materials, the collection of Grühl recorded in 1926 consisting of 6 sound documents as well as the collection of Dr. Erich Kaschke consisting of about 37 songs and instrumental pieces from Axum, the capital of the North Ethiopian region, Tigray in 1906. In this paper this collection will be discussed. Dr. Erich Kaschke was neither a musician nor an ethnomusicologist. However, on the Axum expedition, lead by Professor Enno Littman, Kaschke was one of the active participants, namely a staff physician and a collector of ethnographic, zoological and phonographic items simultaneously (Littmann 1913). With regard to Kaschke’s activities during the Axsum expedition, it is predictable that he might already have taken general guide lines about the collecting methods and field research in Germany before leaving for Axum.

The Song Texts

Before discussing the musical part it is important to describe the text material that is related to the discussed sound collection and thus to the major part of the performed songs. The texts consisting of about 11 pages and the entire sound collection were handed over to the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin in July 1906, shortly after the arrival of the delegates from their expedition in Germany¹. Since there is no specific evidence who wrote the texts, it is most probably possible that Littmann might have overtaken this assignment². Because Littmann was the head of the expedition, it may also be assumed that he would have been involved with the documentation work of the texts parallel to the recording work of Kaschke. The way the texts are written down leads furthermore to the assumption that they were probability noted down quickly. It can hardly be accepted that they could have been written down by a native Ethiopian³, but rather by a European. Therefore, in my opinion only Littman would come in this connection into question⁴ (see figure 1).

¹ See also Susanne Ziegler: „Historical Sound Recordings from Ethiopia on Wax Cylinder“, Paper presented on the 1st International Littmann Conference in Munich, May 2002.

² According to Ziegler (2002: 5) the Italian Resident in Adua/Tigray region, Capitano-medico Dr. Mozzetti whom Kaschke contacted to discuss his recordings with him, Littmann himself and Aleka Taje, a translator, a performer or a guide come into question in connection with the provided text material.

³ At the time when the recordings were made, the old Ethiopian script Ge’ez was of course predominantly used by priests who must have visited religious schools to learn religious songs including reading and writing in advance, but it is doubtful that a priest may have assisted Kaschke during his recording work.

⁴ I discussed this issue with Dr. Susanne Ziegler, a staff member of the “Berliner Phonogramm Archiv” who gave me detailed information about this expedition to Abyssinia.

FIGURE 1: Original Text – Wax Cylinders 15 and/or 32

The song texts are predominantly written down continuously without interruptions, although most of the songs consist of rhyming verse lines that should be written down in linear form.

From the so far described investigations of Kaschke's collection a typical characteristic could furthermore be discovered, namely that the songs predominantly consist of relatively limited texts pointing on the fact, that in that specific moment of recording the participants did not have enough knowledge of the texts to be used.

song 1.

group

clapping

drum

01 02 03 04 05 06

FIGURE 2: Extract from wax-cylinder 12 ID 05; antiphonal song

The Music Recordings

21

performed in Arabic language. The sound documents consist of religious, war, hunters, wedding, love and entertainment songs. Based on the analytical work made for the entire collection, various songs are still being performed today in the music traditions of the above mentioned ethnic communities.

Despite the almost 100 years of age, the recorded songs of this collection are in a relatively good condition. However, some recordings are of poor quality and therefore, inaudible in their melodic and textual courses as mentioned above. Also music instruments used to accompany a number of songs are also hardly audible. For that matter, such parts could not be written down in musical notations.

For the transcription of the songs and musical pieces the European notation system has been applied. In doing so, quite a number of songs are notated in linear forms along with their typical text and melodic arrangements. This type of notation was particularly used in order

- to create a better overview of each line and/or combination of lines
- to distinguish melodic, metro rhythmic and textual structures from each other and/or
- to make fruitful analysis regarding their interrelations.

With exception of the two above mentioned songs performed in Arabic language, the rest of the repertoire is based on the so-called *Qīñitoc*, a sequence of five pitches with fixed intervallic relationships usually arranged in ascending order. The *Qīñit* system is divided in four major groups known as *Tizita*, *Bati*, *Anchi*, *Hoye Lene* and *Ambassel*.

The songs are performed in both solo and antiphonal styles. Compared to the solo songs, the antiphonal songs are performed alternately between a song leader and a group accompanying him/her. In figures 3-5 a part of wax cylinder 2 which is performed by a group of boys in both *Tigrña* and *Amariña* languages is shown:

sl	s/g	mf	original script	phonetic script	translation	measures
1	s	a	ሆህ ያያ	<i>hohi ya ya</i>	(---)	1 – 2
2	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	2
3	s	a ¹	ሆህ ያያ	<i>hohi ya ya</i>	(---)	3 – 4
4	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	4
5	s	a	ህዬ በሉ	<i>hiye belu</i>	Say „Hiye“	5 – 6
6	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	6
7	s	a	ተቀበሉ	<i>teqebel u</i>	Accompany the song	7 – 8
8	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	8
9	s	a	ጳጳዳ ደአሮ	<i>sa'ida da'iro</i>	The white tree-	17 – 18
10	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	18
11	s	a	መንፈገሮ	<i>menfegero</i>	who broke it?	19 – 20
12	g	b	ሆያ	<i>hoya</i>	(---)	20

FIGURE 3: Wax Cylinder 2

[illegible]

FIGURE 4: Original Text – Wax Cylinder 2



FIGURE 5: Extract from Wax Cylinder 2

Even though it is unfortunately unknown on which occasion and under which circumstances the song in wax cylinder 2 was recorded, it is traditionally performed by young boys of about 14-17 years of age as well as by adult men up to ca. 20 years in separated age groups. Besides, the song is customarily performed on the Christian Orthodox holiday known as *Buhe* that is celebrated in the month of July, the 11th month of the Ethiopian calendar. According to the notice made at the beginning of the recording, however, the song was performed on the 19th of January, a very usual day. Therefore, we might have a spontaneous recording work done here.

Additionally, it may be assumed that this song was performed by a group of boys, most probably shepherds. Some text lines have profane or rather irreligious contents. Such text lines do not occur or are unknown in the originally known traditional *Buhe* song.

The *Buhe* feast is not only celebrated in the culture of the *Tigray*, but also among other Ethiopian communities who believe in Christianity. Leaving the profane texts aside, the present song belongs to the traditional music repertoire of the *Tigray* people and thus it is still practised in almost the same way on the *Buhe* holiday today.

In this song one of the boys serves as the song leader, whereas the rest of the group accompanies him. The text predominantly consists of meaningless syllables like *ho*, *hi*, *ya* and *ye*. In specific gaps the leader sings rhyming stanzas. The response lines of the group, on the other hand, consist of a short as well as of relatively unchanged phrases, each phrase comprising of the word “*hoya*”.

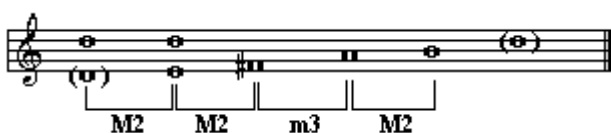


FIGURE 6: *Tizita Qiñit* - Wax Cylinder 2

The melodic course uses typical pitches with a specific intervallic relationships corresponding to the *Tizita Qiñit*. Four of the five *Qiñit* pitches, namely *a'*, *h'*, *d''* and *e''*, are used in this song, whereas the pitch, *f*-sharp (3rd pitch) does not occur. This would, however, not change the intervallic relationship of the *Tizita Qiñit* discussed here. The pitches *d'* and *e'* are sung an octave higher (see the intervallic relationships of the *Qiñit* in figure 6).

Songs with clearly different and independent melodic and textual parts are sub-divided in song sections. Each section is indicated as section 1, 2, 3...etc. Furthermore, some songs are divided in refrain and stanza parts. This division is mostly related with the structure of the song text. Based on the analysis, a typical feature of quite a number of antiphonal songs is that the refrains are identical in their melodic and textual structures and thus they are arranged in a cyclic form, whereas the stanza parts are mostly accompanied with new texts and occasionally occurring melodic variations. Moreover, the refrains have relatively short melodies and usually consist of three successive lines, whereas the stanzas may consist of 4, 6 or more lines. In figure 7 the refrain and stanza parts of a hunting song (solo) may be observed.

sl	mf	original script	phonetic script	translation	measures
refrain					
1	a	አደ ወሽባይ	ado wešebaye	(---)	1 – 5
2	b	አደ ወሽባይ	ado wešebaye	(---)	6 – 10
3	c	ፍናናው ሲያዞር ገደደ	finanawu siazor gedaye	... the hunter	11 – 16
4	a ¹	አደ ወሽባይ	ado wešebaye,	(---)	18 – 23
		አደ ወሽባ	ado wešeba	(---)	
5	b ¹	አደ ወሽባይ	ado wešebaye	(---)	24 – 27
6	c ¹	ኮረምቲ ሲያዞር ገደደ	koremstu siazor gedaye	... the hunter	28 – 32
stanza					
7	a	እስቲ አይምሰላቸው	isti ayimselacewu	Don't let them think-	33 – 37
8	b	የተለባ ፍትፍት	yetalba fitfiti	It is a porridge of...?	38 – 41
9	c ¹	አደኝ ወሽባ ገደደ	adañi wešeba guroye	The hunter, the killer	42 – 46
10	a ²	እስቲ አይምሰላቸው	isti ayimselacewu	Don't let them think-	47 – 51
11	b ²	የተለባ ፍትፍት	yetalba fitfiti	It is a porridge of...?	52 – 55
12	a ²	.....	.....	.....	56 – 60
13	b	.....	.....	.....	61 – 64
14	c ¹	አደኝ ወሽባ ገደደ	adañi wešeba gedaye	The hunter, the killer	65 – 69
15	a ²	የመንደር ጥንብ አንሳ	yemender timb ansa	The raven of the neighbourhood	70 – 74
16	b ²	የመንደር ጠብደላ	yemender tebdeli	The fat of the neighbourhood	75 – 78
17	a ²	የመንደር ጥንብ አንሳ	yemender timb ansa	The raven of the neighbourhood	79 – 83
18	b	የመንደሩ...?	yemenderu.....?	The? of the neighbourhood	84 – 87
19	c ¹	አደኝ ወሽባ ገደደ	adañi wešeba guroye	The hunter, the killer	88 – 92
20	A	የመንደር ጥንብ አንሳ	yemender timb ansa	The raven of the neighbourhood	93 – 97
21	b	.....	.....	.....	98 – 102
22	c ¹	አደኝ ወሽባ ገደደ	adañi wešeba gedaye	The hunter, the killer	103 – 107
23	a	ገደደ ሲመጣ	gedayu simeta	When the killer comes-	108 – 112
24	b	ከባሪ መምታቲ	kebero memtatu	the drum is beaten.	113 – 117
25	c ¹	አደኝ ወሽባ ገደደ	adañi wešeba gedaye	The hunter, the killer	118 – 122

FIGURE 7: Wax Cylinder 19⁵

Performed Text: The refrain is repeated two times with each part consisting of three lines (see song lines 1-6), but the stanza part consists of several lines and is therefore, relatively longer than the refrain part (see song lines 7 –25 in figure 7)⁶. On the other hand, the melodic arrangements of both the refrains and the stanzas parts are – despite of slight melodic variations – generally analogous.

Accompanying Music Instruments

A few songs are accompanied by the one-stringed fiddle *Masingo*⁷ and the drum *Hebero*⁸, traditional music instruments which are still today widely used in the music cultures of the Central Highland of Ethiopia.

⁵ The major part of this song text could not be translated word by word. Thus just the content dealing with *the praising of a hunter* has been translated. The text lines indicated with the sign ...? Could not be translated at all (see column translation)

⁶ This type of song structure can also be observed in several songs of the collection.

⁷ The *Masingo* is predominantly used in the music cultures of the *Tigray* and the *Amara* among the *Azmariwoc*. For detailed information see Timkehet Teffera: „Musik zu Hochzeiten bei den Amamra im Zentralen Hochland Äthiopiens“, Peter Lang,

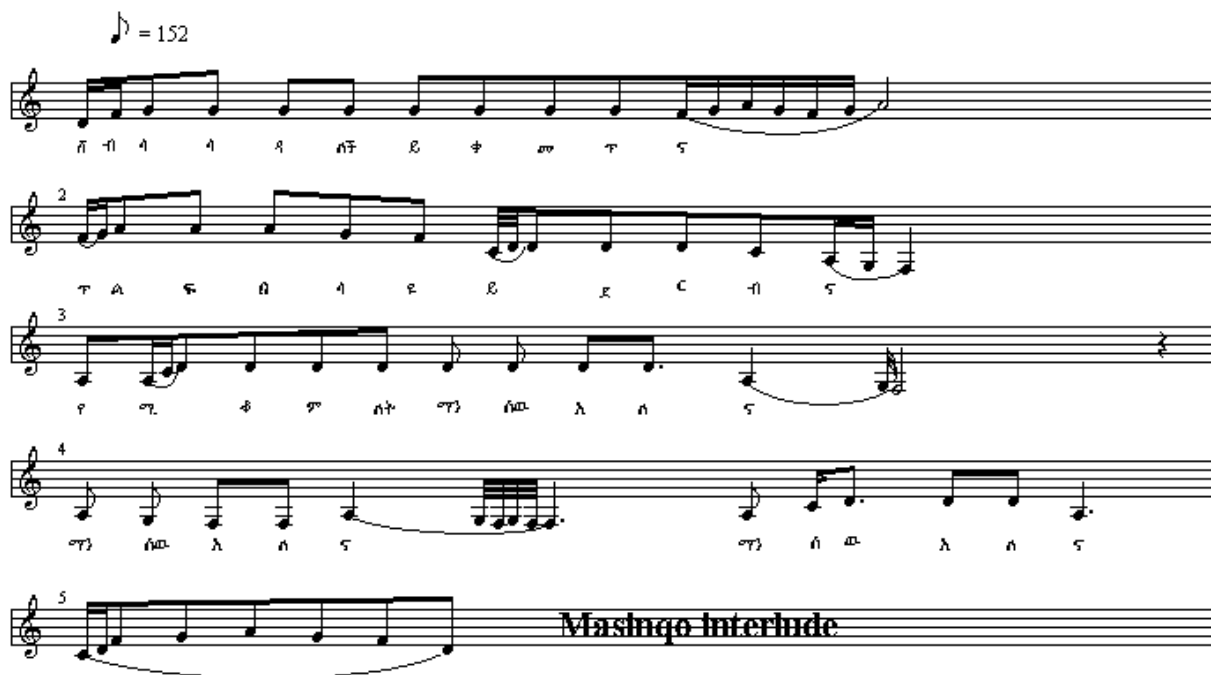


FIGURE 9: Extract from Wax Cylinder 6; solo song

This song is arranged in free metre and sung in *Amariña*. The *Masinqo* is most probably played by the *Azmari*⁹ himself. Due to the inaudibility of the *Masinqo* part, only clearly identifiable pitches of the *Masinqo* could be written down in musical notations¹⁰.

The text deals with war incidents and famous heroes as well as their courageous deeds. In addition certain individuals who are absent during the performance are being praised by the *Azmari*¹¹. The major part of the stanzas rhymes¹². The song uses the typical pitches of the *Tizita Qiñit*.

The melodic lines show a certain recurring structure that is variously shaped and remains within a specific frame. The typical characteristics of the song are

- the ends of the melodic lines with melismatic characters, i.e. several pitches fall on one syllable like in measures 1 and 15 and
- melodic lines in which a pitch serves as a central pitch; e.g. in measures 7 and 8.

The melodic lines that are arranged according to the given structures of the song text vary in their length. The text consists of meaningless syllables that play a vital role in the shaping of the melodic lines. The basic characteristics of such song styles are performed by the *Azmari* in the same way today even though they are in continuous change. The music tradition of the *Azmari* is not only practised in the music cultures of the *Amara* or the *Tigray*, but also in many other ethnic communities of Ethiopia. One of the common features of the *Azmariwoc* lies in their performance styles.

Conclusion

Every historical collection possesses a high value both for future generations of the corresponding community and for the development of academic researches and their systematic documentation. Historical materials give us insight into the past and simultaneously open a possibility for academic researches to

⁹ Most of the *Azmariwoc* (plural of *Azmari*) are usually *Masinqo* players who accompany themselves while singing; see also Timkehet Teffera: Musik zu Hochzeiten bei den *Amara* im Zentralen Hochland Äthiopiens. Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. etc. 2001: 163–167 and 177–178.

¹⁰ See for example measures 5 and 14.

¹¹ For instance most probably Kaschke is mentioned in measure 24 with the term “the German“.

¹² See for example song lines 1, 2 and 3.

compare them with the present time, i.e. to discover and justify all arising changes in years, decades or centuries.

The so far discussed sound collection is to be examined in exactly the same way. Since we have no written materials about this collection at our disposal, which would have given us detail information regarding their emergence, many questions will remain unanswered like, for instance, which motivation Kaschke had to record this collection and which musical know-how he possessed before starting with the recording work. Besides, it is important to know whether Kaschke - apart from Enno Littmann – also took the assistance and/or support of others.

Did he make pressure in order to record these materials, or were the participants cooperative?

Did they show their readiness, in order to present their music out of respect and hospitality for their guest (Kaschke) corresponding his wish?

- Were the performers simply proud of the fact that their voices were recorded with technical equipments that are completely unknown to them?
- Could it also have been that all participants showed their co-operation due to instructions of the ruler of that time?

There are very limited possibilities to get a relatively exact picture about the whole collection and thus to be able to make proper statements.

Due to the repeated listening of each recording which was made possible through the transcription work, it may be assumed, that Kaschke not only had a limited possibility for the recording work, but also a limited research area which - on the other hand - means that the number of participants (i.e. singers, groups who accompanied the songs and instrument players) who made their contributions to this collection were very limited as well. This phenomenon obviously contributes to the fact that the collected repertoire is not varied enough. This may among other things be recognized that one and the same singer performs different types of songs e.g. entertainment song as well as a war song and/or he performs the same song either on the same day successively, or he performs one and the same song at different times, e.g. cylinders 19 recorded on the 19th February, 1906 and cylinder 30 recorded on the 15th of March, 1906.

- Why are the texts limited?
- Were the songs at that time only equipped with such limited texts, or does this depend on the respective singer who probably might have had little know-how about the respective song?

Despite the fact that on already existing melodies always new texts are added in the course of time taht are for example to be observed in the repertoire of the *Azmari*, I have the opinion that at that time the songs were performed in exactly the same way like today. Therefore, it may be supposed that the performers did not necessarily know all texts belonging to certain songs. Because, knowing the songs wont necessarily mean to be able to perform them properly as well.

- Were all these performers, amateurs or professionals?
- May it be possible that a singer may be good enough in singing, for example, some few entertainment songs, while he has no idea about war songs, because of his little experience of performing this song style?

In the course of the analysis work of this collection it was discovered that a number of songs are performed today in almost the same way, despite changes in melody, rhythm and text.

In this regard a renewed and calculated study on the spot, a so-called re-study, is of substantial importance. This study should give us insight about the musical forms, the melodic, metric, rhythmic and textual structures, as well as about the instrumental practices of each recording at the time of its emergence and today. A further analysis should focus on the following questions:

- To what extend are these songs used in the everyday life of today?
- Which roles do they play?
- Are there fundamental changes which occurred in the course of time?
- If so, how is this phenomenon to be justified? and last but not least
- Which value do these songs possess today in the music cultures of the ethnic communities represented here, i.e. the *Amara* and the *Tigray*?

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