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## "Unite Yourselves in the Name of Anywaa": Music and Anywaa Ethnic Identity in Gambella, Ethiopia

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Bowling Green State University: Africana Studies Student Research Conference  
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**“United Yourselves in the Name of Anywaa”: Music and Ethnic Identity amongst the Anywaa People of Gambella, Western Ethiopia**

Ethnicity has become increasingly politicized in northeast Africa in recent decades, a phenomenon that has been implicated in various conflicts and protests. Many complex factors play a role in this, and much scholarly attention is given to the political and economic circumstances under which ethnicity becomes salient. I would add to these circumstances also the role of expressive culture. Today, I aim to expand our understanding of ethnic phenomena by exploring the mutually constitutive relationship between music and ethnicity among members of the Anywaa ethnic group in Gambella region in western Ethiopia.

This is built on the premise that ethnicity is socially constructed. Ethnic claims often rest on belief in shared genetic origins, language, and cultural practice. However, these factors are not static. Social anthropologist Frederik Barth (1969) writes, “We can assume no simple one-to-one relationships between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant” (14). Ethnicity arises when a group comes in contact with perceived others. As such, it is contingent and relational. This is not to imply that ethnicity is illusory but to recognize that it requires belief and practice to exist.

Expressive culture such as music is intertwined with ethnic processes. Music can reify ethnic groups through emphasizing musical difference and through activities such as listening to, thinking about, and talking about music (Stokes 1994). In the case of the Anywaa, music is one means by which they defined themselves during my fieldwork. They link certain music characteristics and genres with their Anywaa identity, and there is an abundance of songs that appeal to Anywaa ethnicity. As we will see, however, a distinct Anywaa music is not always fixed or understood homogeneously. This is consistent with an ethnic constructionist approach,

in that ethnically-marked musical styles and ethnicity itself are neither self-evident nor static. Rather, are actively created and negotiated by different social actors.

### **The Anywaa and the Other: The Encounter**

The Anywaa speak a Nilotic language and consider themselves the indigenous people of Gambella. However, migrations of ethnic Nuer from Sudan (now South Sudan) and so-called “highlanders” from other parts of Ethiopia have made the Anywaa a demographic minority in recent decades. This term, “highlander,” encompasses multiple ethnic groups that are distinguished from the Nilotic peoples of Western Ethiopia partly by physical appearance. Nilotic Anywaa are dark-skinned, and highlanders are lighter-skinned.

The often-tense relationship the Anywaa have with the highlanders and Nuer should be considered in the context of the Ethiopian state. Over various regimes, Gambella has been on Ethiopia’s political and cultural peripheries, a marginalization that has helped produce ethnic cohesion (Reid 2011, 14). Furthermore, Ethiopia’s current government is based on an ethnic federalist system. This divides the nation into different regions based on majority ethnic groups that reside in these areas. This structure has further politicized ethnic identity in Ethiopia (Feyissa 2011).

Although Ethiopia officially mandates equality of all ethnic groups (Cultural Policy 2005), this is poorly realized in practice. Highlanders occupy the center of national culture. In many of my conversations with highlanders, they refer to physical appearance, language, or culture as aspects that differentiate Gambellans from what they call the “true” Ethiopians.

Given these circumstances, many Anywaa possess a strong ethnic consciousness (Feyissa 2011; Kurimoto 2005, 350-351). Additionally, periodic ethnic violence in Gambella has further heightened the need to unify and protect themselves from ethnic Others.

### **Identifying and Interpreting an Ethnically Anywaa Music**

Turning now to ethnicity and expressive culture, scholarship on the links between music and national, regional, and ethnic identities is abundant (Askew 2002; Turino 2000; Meintjes 2003; McDonald 2012; Stokes 1994; Waterman 1990). Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino

(2000), for example, in his work on music in Zimbabwe, describes how rural dances and musical styles were reframed to represent the Zimbabwean nation. He calls this process “modernist reform,” which, “objectifies, recontextualizes and alters indigenous forms for emblematic purposes...” (16).

We can observe a similar process for ethnicity in Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians associate certain rhythms, instruments, dance styles, and costuming with certain ethnic groups. State media frames various what my interlocutors call “traditional” or “cultural” songs and dances as belonging to a certain ethnic group. Like Hobsbawm and Ranger’s “invented tradition,” these are symbolic practices that “seek to inculcate certain values” (1983, 1). In this case, they legitimize a state rhetoric that encourages a plurality of politically-defined ethnic groups within the Ethiopian nation.

The Anywaa with whom I spoke pointed me to some musical characteristics that they consider part of their traditional music. One of these is the instrument, the *thoom*, colloquially known as the thumb piano.<sup>1</sup> Several Anywaa and highlanders to whom I spoke associate the *thoom* with Gambella. Ethiopian state media has helped propagate this. State theatre and television programs have featured the *thoom*, framed by an educational narrative about the region and ethnic group that plays it (Gebeyehu 2008; “Gambela Tomtom Musical Instrument” 2011).

Another musical practice that Anywaa identify as part of their tradition is the use of certain drum rhythms, such as *okaama* and *agwaa-ga*. These rhythms are now produced in studios and accompany cultural songs. If we listen to artist Omaan’s track, “Okaama,” we can hear its namesake rhythm, along with a *thoom* sample. At present, these specific rhythms are identified on the local level amongst the Anywaa themselves. On a national level, the extensive use of drums in general is associated with, if not the Anywaa, at least Gambella region. Several

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<sup>1</sup> The *thoom* is ethnomusicologically classified as a lamellophone. Many variants of this instrument exist throughout eastern and southern Africa, but the *thoom* appears to be its main iteration in Ethiopia. Some variants of this instrument are also reportedly in southern Ethiopia. However, it was an Anywaa musician, Kut Ojullu, who first brought this instrument to the national stage in the 1970s (Gebeyehu 2008).

highlanders in Addis Ababa have told me that Gambellans use a lot of drums and contrast this with their own music, which does not emphasize rhythmic complexity.

Through studio production, state media, and general discourse, we see how attempts are made to link certain musical characteristics with the Anywaa as an ethnic group. This is not to imply that interpretation of this music is homogeneous, however, as meaning depends on individual backgrounds and experiences.

In national broadcasts, the linkage between the *thoom* and Anywaa is made didactically for Ethiopians who would not normally encounter them. Outside Gambella, such representations are potentially reductive: the Anywaa appear as a homogeneous group, perhaps exoticized by their difference from the majority highlander population. We can observe hints of this when highlander musician Habtamu described Gambellan music to me during an interview, “The rhythm is so hot...that’s why it makes me very passionate for [the] Gambella song...I’m not from Gambella, I’m Ethiopian, but the Gambellan song pleases me.” As mentioned, rhythm and drumming are aspects by which highlanders distinguish Gambellan music from theirs. When Habtamu says he is not from Gambella but is *Ethiopian* he differentiates between Self and Other and indicates Gambella’s cultural marginalization in the national imaginary. The mention of Gambella without mention of specific ethnic groups is reflective of Gambella’s homogenization by those residing outside it.

The way highlanders perceive Anywaa music can be contrasted with the more personalized interpretations by my Anywaa interviewees. John said, “[Traditional music] is important for Anywaa, because it is their identity.” Ojho, when listening to Anywaa music said, “[I] get a deep feeling of connection to Anywaa culture” (personal communication 2017). Unlike the highlanders, who reference musical elements, many Anywaa reference the lyrics. Lyrics that address Anywaa history, cultural practice, and ethnic unity are praised. For young singer, Wenraya, lyrics also serve a didactic purpose about cultural history. She cited singer Omaan’s songs as amongst her favorites because, “He talks about culture, about things that people forget about. He renews all the things, and then people remember it” (personal communication 2017).

Though the Anywaa identify the *thoom* and particular drum rhythms as theirs, these styles in Gambella are not necessarily exclusive to the Anywaa but are complicated by cross-cultural borrowings. The Nuer in Gambella also play the *thoom* and use some of the same rhythms. Wenraya told me the Nuer's use of the *thoom* is copying Anywaa culture and expressed disapproval. Her displeasure suggests that it is important for her that certain musical practices be the exclusive domain of the Anywaa. Such exclusivity helps delineate the boundary between ethnic Self and Other.

These debates are consistent with how ethnomusicologist Louise Meintjes considers musical style as “a site of contestation” according to the interests of various groups. She suggests that, “the making of style must be captured on the move” (2003, 11). This calls attention to the processual nature of making an ethnically-distinct music. The ambiguities and debates surrounding distinct Anywaa musical characteristics indicates that Anywaa ethnicity and boundaries are not fixed but are subject to manipulation by various agents: the state, music producers, performers, and so forth.

### **Reifying Anywaa Ethnicity through Lyrics**

In addition to musical characteristics, song lyrics also promote intra-ethnic cohesion and differentiation from Others. Our first example, “Wabang,” by singer Lorson, was released in 2004. Lorson composed it in response to mass ethnic killings in 2003, when over four hundred Anywaa were murdered in mob violence by highlanders (Human Rights Watch 2005). My Anywaa interlocutors sometimes refer to this as “the genocide,” and it looms large in popular memory.

As we listen, note that the sonic aspects marked as “Anywaa” discussed earlier are not present here. Furthermore, Lorson does not conform to global popular music aesthetics, perhaps indicating that his intended audience is ethnic insiders rather than a national or international audience:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Transcriptions and translations were accomplished with the assistance of Anywaa research associates, Apay Ojullu Aballa, Meher Omot Obang, Ojho Othow Ojullu, and Wenraya Aballa.

...Anywaa, Anywaa (2x)...  
 No cāādhe di paac, di cōōbō cakiin, yaak ööy,  
 yaak ööy  
 No laange di pogi di gøø ki maac yaak ööy  
 yaak ööy (2x)

...  
 U na en America dēēt u joot ee  
 U na en Canada dēēt u joot ee  
 U na en Australia dēēt u joot ee  
 U na en Kenya Nairobi dēēt u joot ee  
 U na en Sudan ööy winynyu luumi dwallu  
 dēētū na ciel ki nyenga Anywaa ki nyeng  
 Nyeya ma Adöōngö aa ki cuumi marwa

...Anywaa, Anywaa (2x)...  
 If they find him walking in the town, they will  
 stab him with a knife, for no reason, no reason  
 If they find him taking a stroll in his town, he  
 will be shot, for no reason, no reason (2x)

...  
 You, in America, how are you?<sup>3</sup>  
 You, in Canada, how are you?  
 You, in Australia, how are you?  
 You, in Kenya Nairobi, how are you?  
 You in Sudan, listen carefully, and unite  
 yourselves in the name of Anywaa  
 In the name of Adöōngö, our king

The affective impact of this song is significant once situated after the 2003 incident. It evokes traumatic memories of when the Anywaa were killed because of their ethnicity, encouraging them to unify on the basis of collective grievances. Lorson calls upon Anywaa in other countries, creating connections between ethnic members across national boundaries, emphasizing the importance of ethnic affiliations over national affiliations or geographic residence. The invocation of the Anywaa king, Adöōngö, also implies political separatism, the possibility of ethnic self-governance.

The second example is by young artist Pachaka, released in 2016. It is a reggae song, called “Köōngö,” which translates as, “culture.” Like Lorson’s song, it is also addressed to Anywaa listeners and lacks distinctive sonic markers of Anywaa ethnicity. The following excerpts highlight some notable lyrics:

Jaay angø? Ni raanyø köōngö marø,  
 köōngö marø ø di pwönyö  
 Nyii angø? Ni raanyu köōngö marø,  
 köōngö marø ø diwiilø  
 Köōngö marø ni cāādihø ki køøre

...  
 Ni pāā ‘A’ ki juurē mōga acwølla ri-  
 juna Anywaa.

...  
 Dhaa ba wiila na cāāna ki dhi-jur mør.

Brothers, why are you destroying our culture? Our  
 culture can teach us  
 Sisters, why are you destroying our culture? Our  
 culture can change us [for the better]  
 Let us follow our culture

...  
 Differentiate me from other tribes, call me as a member  
 of the Anywaa tribe

...  
 I will not change my language to speak in other tribes’

Dëera ba pwødha na nëena ki mar jur mør.	languages
Noo wiila köönga meenga Agwaa-ga omieli nga... Okaama?... Obeerø?...	I will not bleach myself to look like another tribe If I change my culture, who is going to dance the Agwaa-ga?...the Okaama?...the Obeerø?...

Here, Pachaka encourages the Anywaa to maintain themselves as distinct from other ethnic groups. The word he uses, *juurë*, refers to people groups who are not Anywaa. The line, “Differentiate me from other tribes” quite directly states the desire not to become like ethnic Others. In the last verse, Pachaka sings about specific aspects of Anywaa culture that must be maintained: language, skin color, and Anywaa song genres such as *agwaa-ga* and *okaama*. Naming Anywaa song genres also invokes insider ethnic knowledge, prompting listeners to recognize the ethnic Self.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen how music is implicated in attempts to define Anywaa ethnicity. Anywaa music reflects ethnic consciousness and is intertwined in producing Self and Other. We have seen attempts at linking distinctive musical characteristics with the Anywaa as a people group and use of musical difference to constitute ethnic boundaries. For ethnic insiders, the lyrics also play a prominent role by invoking insider knowledge and collective memory, as well as openly calling for ethnic unity and distinction. Interpretations of participants and listeners vary according to different social positions and encounters, yet comments still often contain ideas about ethnic difference. Such difference, however, is not always clearly defined and subject to contestation and negotiation by various actors. This indicates that ethnicity is not fixed but in flux. “Anywaa music” is not a preexisting category but is dynamically created and defined.



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