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## Article

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# *Ityopyawinnät* and Addis Abäba's Popular Music Scene

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## Introduction

Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country,<sup>1</sup> has seen a dramatic increase in the production of secular music in recent years. With a majority of its population under the age of 30,<sup>2</sup> Ethiopia's youth dominate the popular culture scene.<sup>3</sup> However, there are very few studies relating Ethiopian politics, history, and society to popular culture.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on the urban pop music of Addis Abäba, this article investigates the concept of 'ኢትዮጵያዊ ቋንቋ' (*ityopyawinnät*), 'being Ethiopian', as defined by urban youth. The central argument being that the 'non-elite, unofficial and urban'<sup>5</sup> part of Addis Abäba is redefining and asserting *ityopyawinnät* as a response to ethnic federalism,<sup>6</sup> through a quasi-resistant music industry that lies in the space between 'quiescence and revolt'.<sup>7</sup>

Addis Abäba's popular music scene rigorously addresses and interacts with the State's ideology of ethnic federalism. Two opposing points of view can be found in the scholarly literature dealing with ethnic federalism in

<sup>1</sup> BBC Monitoring 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Central Statistical Agency 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In general, scholarly explanations depict popular culture, including popular music, as part of the youth scene. See Hall and Jefferson 1975, 9; Newell 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Woube Kassaye states that 'as compared with the rich musical heritage that Ethiopia has, the attempt to study/research music is little [*sic*]' (Woube Kassaye 2009, 1200). Shelemay also calls for further studies in contemporary Ethiopia pointing out the gap in scholarship (Shelemay 2009). In addition, Simeneh Betreyohannes 2010 makes an important contribution, by addressing the gaps in literature on Ethiopian music while acknowledging the strides made in this scholarly endeavour.

<sup>5</sup> Honwana and De Boeck 2005, 1.

<sup>6</sup> The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia introduced a system of administration known as 'ethnic federalism'. This constitution establishes nine semi-autonomous regional states based roughly on linguistic and ethnic composition. Thus, the 'Afar State ostensibly embraces mostly the 'Afar people; the Təgray State mostly the Təgrəñña speakers; the Amhara State the Amharic speakers; Oromiyya the Oromo speakers; and so on. For an introduction to this concept, see Aalen 2006 and Kidane Mengisteab 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Moorman 2008, 6.

Ethiopia: its supporters hail the state structure for its having ended centuries of Amhara cultural and linguistic dominance in the country;<sup>8</sup> ethnonationalists, on the other hand, argue that *ityopyawinnät* was postulated by a totalitarian elite who wanted unity at the expense of cultural and linguistic difference. Opponents of ethnic federalism maintain that it misrepresents realities and experience, and that it imposes a form of government inimical to Ethiopian nationalism.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of these debates, there is a sharp contrast between state ideology and any methodologically reflective expression of ordinary experience; thus, there are few points of contact between the self-representation of power and the social complexities created by that power. If popular music is one of the few spaces in which youth share, narrate, express, and present their ideas, any analysis of popular music should give a nuanced understanding of the difference between history as narrated by the political elite and history as lived and experienced by the population.<sup>10</sup>

James C. Scott, in his seminal work *Weapons of the Weak*, discusses how 'coercive force at the disposal of the elite and/or the state makes any open expression of discontent virtually impossible'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, those subject to the authority of the elite either become passive and accept their situation, or their acts of resistance are muted and remain unacknowledged. Ethiopia's political landscape is one whereby, after the contested May 2005 elections, the political elite successfully introduced such a system, negatively affecting popular support in the capital.<sup>12</sup> While the State attempted to establish authoritarian control over society,<sup>13</sup> implementing controversial policies such as ethnic federalism, Addis Abäba's youth refrained from openly demonstrating. This hesitancy is, at least in part, a consequence of the aftermath of the May 2005 elections where the reaction of the Ethiopian government was severe.<sup>14</sup> However, though acts of resistance on the part of youth may not be clearly identifiable, popular music seems to have emerged as the most

<sup>8</sup> Asafa Jalata 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the scholars who argue along this line are Ottaway 1994; Solomon Gashaw 1993; Asfa-Wossen Asserate 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Girma 2012, 122–146.

<sup>11</sup> Scott 1985, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Steinman 2017; Clapham 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Given the fact that Ethiopia has faced dramatic changes since the rise to power of the new prime minister Abiy Ahmed, the past tense is used in this sentence to acknowledge that there has been a general shift in the political approach of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

<sup>14</sup> This was also recently seen in the response to various protests across the country in the past two years, especially towards the Oromo protests. See Awol K Allo 2016.

pervasive means for youth to challenge the state ideology of ethnic federalism.

The nationalism espoused by youth in popular music, henceforth referred to as *'ityopyawinnät'*, appeals to a home-grown and historically developed nationalist sentiment in Ethiopia. While the dominant view of scholars such as Benedict Anderson sees nationalism as a European invention, and acknowledges that a distinctive form of nationalism developed in twentieth-century Europe with the fall of empires and the rise of nation states,<sup>15</sup> Ethiopian nationalism is of a very different kind. *Ityopyawinnät* describes the sense of belonging in a 3000-year-old state-building project,<sup>16</sup> of membership in a bastion of independence secured at the Battle of Adwa,<sup>17</sup> of civilizational continuity (briefly interrupted by the Italian attempt of 1935) underpinned by rich literary and deep religious traditions and infused with Islamic-Christian harmony. At present, Ethiopia is a case in which a conscious romanticization of a socially constructed identity can be useful—for a variety of reasons, allowing for a healthy growth of what people mean by 'identity', dialogue, and mutual responsibility. In this article, it will be shown that, in every song, discussion, and music video, the terms 'nationalism' and 'identity' are used separately and independently, allowing them to be working categories that bind people and allow for open discussion.

The article offers data showing that the popular music scene in Addis Abäba is a call for social responsibility, based on ideals of *ityopyawinnät*, and that the State entertains sentiments opposed to this ideal. The multiple actors involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of music, and the nature of the songs produced are all analysed to help strengthen this argument. The social and civic responsibility of artists, musicians, or song writers goes a long way in imagining an Ethiopia beyond ethnic politics, while addressing the key issues that may have allowed the establishment of ethnic federalism, namely questions of historical injustice, restrictions on freedom, and the non-recognition of certain ethnicities in the past. Popular music in contemporary Addis Abäba is quite literally the space where key

<sup>15</sup> Anderson 1991.

<sup>16</sup> According to this view, Ethiopia's millennia-long history has enabled it to expand and incorporate various ethnic groups and religions. Solomon Gashaw 1993; Asfa-Wossen Asserate 2015; Zewde Gabre Sellassie 1975, 1. This view has also been discussed by Hama Tuma 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Jonas 2011.

dialogues about belonging, and the politics of identity and nationhood are tackled by non-political actors.

## 1 Methodology

The research was conducted in March and April 2016, and involved various members of the music scene in Addis Abäba, including musicians, arrangers, producers, journalists, broadcasting stations, and ordinary Ethiopians. As a first means of data collection, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with forty individuals: fourteen musicians; five workers at the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC); four Sheger 102.1 FM radio hosts; the president and vice president of the Ethiopian Musicians Association (EMA); two representatives of the Culture and Tourism Bureau; one representative from Yared Music School; and twelve Ethiopians who worked in music stores, who owned traditional restaurants, or who were professional dancers, and/or sold music as street vendors. Those whose viewpoints added direct value to the argument of the article have been cited, and those who agreed have been named. The selection of those interviewed was based primarily on their proximity to the popular music industry; musicians, producers, arrangers, and distributors were of the utmost importance. Others were approached after being identified for their scholarly and institutional contributions regarding music. Furthermore, a few were approached simply because they were associated with those already interviewed.

I then conducted participant observation in two neighbourhoods, namely Haya Hulätt and Stadium. Haya Hulätt was selected because of its bars and nightclubs and for being the hot spot of musicians, music producers, film actors, and, in general, people involved in the entertainment and media sector at the time. Stadium, the neighbourhood that takes its name from the national stadium, was selected for being the place to watch football. Mostly dominated by youth, it is one of the few places where music and lyrics were adopted as chants by football fans. From these two neighbourhoods, first-hand solid data was gathered concerning the consumption and experience of music, helping to identify the role that music plays in these spaces. At the same time, a total of approximately five hundred questionnaires (questions are listed in Appendix E) in Amharic were distributed across the city. These were distributed in cafes, restaurants, pharmacies, clothing stores, and in small shops. They were also handed out to students I encountered on the streets, as well as to shoe-shine boys who spend most of their day listening to the radio and music. Some three hundred of these questionnaires were returned with useful feedback and these responses are important

primary data. In addition, search engines such as YouTube were used to collect and study the content and meaning of songs that were identified during research.

Data gathered through these non-linear methods was then used to draw up a list of major themes for a critical analysis crucial to the argument of the article; moreover, only songs repeatedly identified by respondents were selected for textual analysis. Although this limits the analysis to the time during which the research was conducted, it allows for an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of Addis Abäba in 2016. The themes identified from the data are then discussed in their relation to the political dynamics of contemporary Ethiopia, its historical foundations, and how the culture of secular music relates to the wider system of power.

Following this introduction, the article is divided into three sections. The first part presents major themes that characterize popular music, as well as textual explanations of songs whose lyrics were most often identified from the answers to Questions 7, 9, and 10 of the questionnaire and from interview answers. This part also presents ways in which music is consumed and distributed in Addis Abäba, characterizing the interaction between the State, the consumers, and the producers of popular music. This approach allows for thematic analysis. The second section offers a synthesis of the data as well as discussions about the implications of popular music's influence on the historical development of Addis Abäba. It brings together certain theories about resistance, and theories of art as a tool of creating a democratic society as well as the role of entertainment as a subtle form of resistance within Ethiopia's popular music scene. The third section will provide brief concluding remarks.

## 2 Characteristics of the Popular Music Industry

### 2.1 Multilingualism

YouTube searches under the label 'new Ethiopian music' lead viewers to hundreds of music videos produced over the last few years and up to the current week. The lists of music videos show clearly that the secular music industry is dominated by songs representing a variety of Ethiopian cultures, languages, and dances. Songs are closely related to dances such as the እስክሱታ (*askästa*),<sup>18</sup> the rhythmic movement of the upper body, shoulders, and neck, performed by young skilled dancers, who perform both tradi-

<sup>18</sup> For more on *askästa* see Martin 1967.

tional dances and, sometimes, foreign dances; the songs are increasingly becoming multilingual. The mixing of languages has emerged both as a positive quality and as its own aesthetic category: 45 per cent of all interviewees and 68 per cent of questionnaire responses identified this theme as a key characteristic of contemporary popular music. People also held a generally positive outlook about this phenomenon. 'It is good that languages are being mixed, they are all our languages anyway', one interlocutor responded.<sup>19</sup>

Languages carry the cultures of people. Thus, musicians singing in different languages automatically promote multiculturalism as well. And in contemporary Addis Abäba, singing in multiple languages and different cultural styles has almost become a prerequisite of becoming a successful artist. Older musicians, such as Ṭalahun Gässäsa and Mahmud Ahmäd, have multilingual and multicultural songs. But Gośsaye Täsfaye's 'ኢቫንጋዲ', 'Ivangadi' (which is the name of a tradition from the Lower Omo Valley) was one of the first multicultural popular songs in contemporary Addis Abäba. His song is about a woman from the Lower Omo Valley, whose culture Gośsaye Täsfaye comes to admire. The song tells of a man who leaves Addis Abäba and of a woman from a small and marginal community in southern Ethiopia with whom he shares neither culture nor languages. The only thing they have in common is that they are both Ethiopians. Gośsaye sings,

በሰማይ ከዋክብት ታጅባና ደምቃ	'Surrounded by the stars
ድቅድቁን ጨለማ ስትገፈው ጨረቃ	As the moon chases away the darkness
የወግ የልማዱ ጭፈራው ሲደራ	When the <i>wäg</i> and <i>ləmad</i> , the dancing ensues
ለፍቅር ታዘዝኩኝ እኔስ ለ ሀመር ።	I became captive to her love, the Hamär <sup>wa</sup> .

The first two lines paint an image of the scene within which *ivangadi* takes place in the Lower Omo Valley. It introduces images of this famous culture to the urban listener. The third line is particularly interesting for this research as Gośsaye applies the terms **ወግ** (*wäg*)<sup>20</sup> and **ልማድ** (*ləmad*),<sup>21</sup> to

<sup>19</sup> Informant A 2016 (personal interview). All interviews were conducted in Amharic and translated into English by the present author.

<sup>20</sup> Kidanä Wäld Käfle draws on its Gəʿəz origin as **ወግዕ**, 'wägʿə' as 'ወግ ታሪክ አንቲካ ወራ ከሽማግሌዎች አፍ የሚገኝ [...] ልማድ ደንብ', 'wäg tarik antika wäre käšəmagallewočč af yämmiggäññ ləmad dānb' ('history, received from the elders', 'tradition', 'custom') (Kidana Wäld Käfle 1955/1956, 377).

<sup>21</sup> Kidanä Wäld Käfle defines 'ልማድ ሀመር የተለመደ ግብር', 'ləmd ʿamäl yätälämmädä gəbər' ('something that has been practised and is custom') (Kidana Wäld Käfle 1955/1956, 568).

the Hamär, a society considered peripheral and marginal, whose cultures have had little connection to the city. The words are synonyms for ‘culture’, ‘custom’, ‘tradition’, which, typically, only refer to the dominant cultures within Addis Abäba. In a single line, Goššaye embraces the Hamär culture and traditions as Ethiopian. As such, and by continuing to explain his unexpected act of falling in love with her, Goššaye reduces the importance of the linguistic and cultural differences between two people who represent vastly different cultures and languages.

Besides singing about other cultures, however, what is most striking is that musicians increasingly use two or three languages in single songs. They also include languages in songs that do not necessarily represent the specific culture being performed, which means they code-switch. A musician might sing in Gurage to an Oromo dance, or might sing in Amarəñña (Amharic) to an Agäw musical beat. Historically, by listening to the languages musicians sing in, one gets a good idea of which linguistic group they originate from. For example, if an artist always performs in Təgrəñña, it probably means the artist is from the Təgray region.<sup>22</sup> However, the popular music scene now allows for musicians to venture out of their specific linguistic and ethnic identities, making it difficult to tell who is from where. This new development means that musicians are not singing in only one language, and allows creativity in the juxtaposition of different languages and in code-switching between languages and traditions.

Through the questionnaires, four musicians were identified for such code-switching multilingualism. They are Mammilla Luqas, Bähaylu Agg<sup>w</sup>änäfər, Taddälä Gämmäčču, and Tämäsgän Gäbrä Əgzi‘abəher. Mammilla Luqas is known for his song ‘ዛጎ’, ‘Zago’; his lyrics are simple to memorize and the music is a mix of Ägäw and Wälaytta. He uses Amharic while discussing two vastly different cultures. In ‘Zago’, Mammilla sings,

<b>ባልናገር አገውኛ</b>	‘Even if I don’t speak Agäwəñña
<b>ባትመልሺ በወላይተኛ</b>	Even if you don’t respond in Wälaytäñña
<b>አንድ ያደረገን እኛን ከእኛ</b>	Something has made us one
<b>ወላይተኛ በ አገውኛ</b>	Wälaytäñña with Agäwəñña.’

Mammilla’s song presents two people who do not share the same language. He links two regions in Ethiopia, Agäw, found to the north of Addis Abäba, and Wälaytta, to the south. However, ‘Zago’ is, except for four phrases, sung entirely in Amharic. Three languages are used, with Mammilla

<sup>22</sup> However, this does not mean that all those who speak Təgrəñña are Təgaru, or all who speak Oromo are Oromo.



relativizing the importance of language difference and promoting another dimension of this discussion. Mammilla, consciously or not, minimizes the attention given to language and easily code-switches from one to the other, offering an alternative. He sings that it is precisely the ability to mix, unite, and mould the different cultures and languages that has allowed people to live together. Furthermore, the people on screen wear one another's clothes and dance one another's dances. 'Zago', much like 'Ivangadi', gives centre stage to cultural difference in Ethiopia, while downplaying the linguistic differences, and recommending a union of different cultures and languages.

The two examples discussed above pinpoint the centrality of multilingualism for various popular musicians who see music as a means of helping people to learn about one another's cultures, customs, and languages. However, some argue that it is precisely ethnic federalism that allowed this to happen. A lecturer in theatre studies at Addis Ababa University stated that the Ethiopian government has, unlike previous regimes, invested a lot in the recognition of different ethnic groups and languages in the country. He also argues that 'the music industry is reflective of that, as musicians use different languages and cultures previously non-dominant to the popular scene'.<sup>23</sup> According to his view, musicians are using the state apparatus to bring out the voices of different ethnic groups in an entertainment industry that celebrates unity in diversity. Regardless, youth are clearly undertaking a process of depoliticizing the various languages and identities they live with. In fact, expressing oneself in different languages is an important symbolic gesture, by which artists accept the different languages and further the idea of an Ethiopia that is all-inclusive. Just as important is the fact that artists show that languages can be learnt by almost anyone. While ethnic federalism highlights these differences, thereby accentuating linguistic identities, musicians actively try to bridge the gaps and downplay any interpretation that promotes these differences.

## 2.2 Adoption of Foreign Genres

The other theme identified through the questionnaire is the adoption of foreign genres, such as reggae, rock, and hip hop, into contemporary Ethiopian music. Many in Ethiopia consider the Western world to be incapable of contributing meaningfully to Ethiopian music.<sup>24</sup> Some respondents viewed incorporations of foreign style as signs of cultural decay and the

<sup>23</sup> Informant F 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>24</sup> Furioli 2011, 125.

‘loss of *ityopyawinnät*’. However, incorporating global themes into cultural songs is not a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. The 1950s–1970s saw an American cultural influence on the country’s pop culture. In the documentary film *Under African Skies: Ethiopia*, a film released in 1985 about Ethiopian secular music, there are scenes in which music consumers during the Därg era discuss the influence of Western cultures on Ethiopian musical traditions. During a videorecorded group discussion, an unnamed interlocutor stated that ‘the most comforting thing about Ethiopian culture is its ability to incorporate and make Ethiopian all forms of external cultures that it meets’. Some respondents used this same idea to show the adaptability of *ityopyawinnät* in 2016.

Further, musicians deliberately mould and refashion these foreign genres for local listeners. By singing in Ethiopian languages when using a foreign genre, musicians facilitate the process of domesticating these genres. They also use common Western musical tunings for traditional instruments like the *kərar*. Some also incorporate West African moves with Ethiopian dances in very traditional songs. The most important element of domestication, however, is the incorporation of Ethiopian history, realities, and facts in the lyrics of these songs.<sup>25</sup>

Ləḡ Mika<sup>3</sup>el was identified by respondents under the age of 24 as an inspiring artist. He released his debut album in December 2015, in the rap and hip hop genres. Ləḡ Mika<sup>3</sup>el’s name is itself a play on the historical title (*ləḡ*) given to sons and grandsons of the Ethiopian nobility. His songs are rooted in Ethiopian history and make allusions to religion and culture alike. Here is a verse from his famous rap song ‘ዛሬ ይሁን ነገ’ (*Zare yəhun nägä*, ‘It could be today or tomorrow’):

አዩኝ አዩኝ እና ከ-ነኔ ነው አሉ	‘They see me and they condemn
የኔ ዜማ ማዜም ግርም ያለው ሁሉ	When they hear me singing
ባያውቁት ነው እንጂ ባይገባቸው	They do not understand the foundation
ወሉ	
ዜማዬ ያሬድ ነው ማህሌቱ ሁሉ	My songs are Yared’s <i>mahlet</i> and <i>zema</i> .’

<sup>25</sup> One musician who usually sings in the reggae genre and who is known for his patriotic music albums is Teddy Afro. He is mentioned by *every* interviewee and in *every single* questionnaire and interview throughout the research. However, the scope of this research is too limited to discuss Teddy Afro because he is also considered a symbol of political resistance in today’s Ethiopia.

In the text he mentions St Yared of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>26</sup> The fact that Ləḡ Mika'el highlights this in his song and continues to rap, incorporating famous lines, such as 'ጅ በለው' ('*če bäläw*', 'tell your horse to gallop') and 'ና ና ዘመዱ' ('*na na zämäde*', 'come, come my kin'), shows his ability to integrate a foreign style with traditional Ethiopian chants in a modern music genre. In general, his lyrics and compositions make a case for acknowledging a deeper kind of national feeling. Though a modern and highly unappreciated genre, Ləḡ Mika'el's rap music is rooted in old popular songs, reflecting folklore, culture, and respect for historical and religious figures. Moreover, in his music video, old Ethiopian women can be seen pouring coffee from a ጃበና (*ḡäbäna*), a traditional coffee pot, and fixing their ነጠላ (*nätäla*), white Ethiopian shawls, with old men playing checkers with young rappers. The use of these symbols of the past, and the way the old and new generations come together on screen creates a public space for a fresh interpretation of Ethiopia's history. His music video brings together two generations who lead vastly different lifestyles and, by attaching sentimental value to the symbols of the past, he allows for people to imagine a reconciled future where the past and present can come together.

The hit song 'ኢትዮጵያዬ', 'Ityopyaye' ('My Ethiopia') by an upcoming artist called Dan Admasu, who sings in an experimental reggae style, was also popular during the time of my research. Some musicians try to present solutions to claimed ethnic grievances in their accounts of Amhara dominance in the past. However, Dan Admasu's lyrics, below, from his song 'Ityopyaye' reveal a change of direction:

በጽድቅ አባቱ ስም አጥፊ ልጅ አይ  
ጸድቅም  
በወላጁ ክፋት ዘር አይከሰስም

'A sinful child cannot be cleaned by his father's holiness  
For his father's sins, a son cannot be prosecuted.'

This song is an example of redefining what is important: even if there is criticism of the past, the child cannot be blamed for his father's actions and neither can the father redeem his unholy son. This is one musician's critique of the political situation in Ethiopia, in which ethnic grievances were emphasized instead of looking for a means of reconciliation. Even though he uses metaphors, he states his message unambiguously: Dan invites people to move away from criticizing one another's past and to forgive one another.

In conclusion to this section, although Ethiopia's popular music scene gives some prominence to foreign genres, as youth venture to different

<sup>26</sup> Mogäs Śəyyum 1999/2000.

global cultures, these foreign genres are *made Ethiopian* via a process of syncretizing Ethiopian history and symbols, and through the use of Ethiopian languages with foreign musical styles. The statement, quoted above, from *Under African Skies: Ethiopia* seems to apply equally to the modern Ethiopian popular music scene. Furthermore, in the cases identified above, youth are not simply adopting foreign genres and adapting them for Ethiopian listeners, but are using these same genres to sing and perform patriotically about Ethiopia.

### 2.3 Nationalism: Producers, Distributors, and Consumers

The question of national identity and its centrality in the lives of Ethiopians is best demonstrated in the many seminars, discussions, workshops, and meetings held across Addis Abäba to analyse what *'ityopyawinnät'* means. At the time of this research in Addis Abäba, average Ethiopians were constantly renegotiating its definition. Venues such as book launches, poetry nights, and theatres engage the ordinary Ethiopian with how to proceed as a nation, against a background in which ethnic nationalism is seen to have taken root across the country and might lead to fragmentation. Coincidentally, while conducting this fieldwork, the Culture and Tourism Bureau in 6 Kilo, a district of Addis Abäba, held half-day workshops and seminars to discuss *ityopyawinnät* and youth. Discussion leaders were men in their fifties and above, the listeners were mostly in their twenties. The fact that government spokesmen organized the meeting, and that youth attended in large numbers hints at the centrality of 'identity' and 'nationalism' in the lives of urban Ethiopians of all generations. The music industry is an integral part of this growing interest in nationalism. Take, for example, Ğossi Gäbre's song 'ሀገራ', 'Hagäre' ('My country').

የብዙ አመት ታሪክ ያላት	'She has years of history
እግዚር በቃሉ ፈርዶ ያጸናት	God made her in his word
እንዳይኔ ብሌን የምሳሳላት	I watch out for her like I do my eyes
ሀገራ ለኔ እናቴም ናት	My country is also my mother.'

Ğossi's song was a sensation in the streets of Addis Abäba during the time of this research. The title of his song, 'My country', refers directly to Ethiopia. He starts off with explaining that 'his country' is historically rich. He then alludes to religion, placing his country on a pedestal above others

as it is the beneficiary of supernatural protection and guidance.<sup>27</sup> He then says he cares as much for his country as he does for his eyes. And he ends the four-line poem by comparing his country to his mother. Despite the patriotism in the song, the lyrics are quite simple.

### 2.3.1 Producers

The romanticization of Ethiopia is not a recent phenomenon; from the conception of Ḥaylā Šállase's brass bands to the earliest *mäsinqo* and *kərar* players, Ethiopia has been a central theme in the country's musical history. The independence of the country, its religious and cultural attributes, and even the landscapes from the Nile to the mountains and plateaus have all had their place in Ethiopian music. Mängəstu Ḥaylā Maryam's Därg regime forced musicians to dedicate one song in each of their albums to Ethiopia,<sup>28</sup> and, although the State no longer enforces such a law, all established musicians have at least one song about Ethiopia. Ethiopia is either a theme in their songs or thrown into songs as part of a verse, without any intervention from the government.

My own observations and interviews also demonstrate the centrality of national identity and nationhood in contemporary Ethiopian social, economic, and political life. Unprompted, interviewees would discuss the importance of *bagär* ('country') and *ityopyawinnät*. Respondents were enthusiastic about musicians using their art to glorify Ethiopia, but, at the same time, they were concerned that this was happening without any overt socio-political critique. While some interviewees mentioned the importance of religion and myths for many Ethiopians, others shared their reservations about excessive nationalism in music.

Notable musicians such as Alämayyāhu Fanta call the popular music industry 'ጭንቅታ ብቻ' (*čukät bəčča*, 'just noise'), primarily because, as a dance-specific industry, it only appeals to youth. But also because, while Ethiopia is constantly alluded to in songs, the musicians seldom contribute meaningfully to improving the socio-economic and political conditions Ethiopians find themselves in. Similarly, Francis Falceto commented that 'nationalism is neither a one directional "thing" nor necessarily positive for Ethiopia's

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed Girma argues that the historical development of Ethiopia implies a kind of religious covenant that inspires the people's deep attachment to Ethiopia and justifies the important place given to religion in the views they share about their country (Mohammed Girma 2012, 27).

<sup>28</sup> Mahtämä 2016 (personal conversation).

popular music scene'.<sup>29</sup> For these critics, singing about Ethiopia is of little service to the nation, to Ethiopians, or the music industry. Almost 60 per cent of the respondents, both young and old, used the same phrase as Alāmayyāhu Fanta, 'čukät bəčča' ('just noise'), to describe contemporary music in Addis Abāba. However, for others such as Mulatu Astatqe,<sup>30</sup> even though the music industry lacks quality, the ideas embedded in the songs offer hope. The term 'čukät' refers to being characteristically loud. The popular music industry is identified as focusing heavily on dancing as entertainment, instead of having a deeper poetic quality and better structured arrangements.

What is clear here is that, for older musicians, the contemporary music industry appears undisciplined: musicians lack the knowledge, creativity, or any critical insight into the art. For example, Teddy Mac explicitly states his concern that, 'while Ethiopia has a rich tradition of *qane* poetry, most musicians do not use this in their productions'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Alāmayyāhu Fanta and Mulatu Astatqe both mentioned the fact that popular musicians rarely use the four traditional Ethiopian ቅኝታ (*qəññət*, 'scale').<sup>32</sup> The difficulty of these genres, the simplicity of adopting foreign genres and playing upbeat music, as well as the fact that musicians do not use the four *qəññət* more often are, in their opinion, an indication that young musicians lack both musical talent and respect for the art.

It is not simply older musicians who recognize certain problems in the music industry. The majority of urban listeners in the city are aware of the lack of good quality popular music in the industry. According to interviews with street vendors, people purchased the CDs of musicians who produce sophisticated music, with pleasing arrangements and deep poetry. Approximately 70 per cent of questionnaire respondents also said they prefer music from the older generation,<sup>33</sup> because of the slow tempo and refined linguistic presentation. Mahtämä from EMA ascribes this phenomenon to the success of Ethiopian music from the 1950s–1970s.<sup>34</sup> Mulatu Astatqe, however, believes that youth are not entirely to blame for this situation and comments, 'who is studying Ethiopian musical cultures in depth? No one, so we

<sup>29</sup> Falceto 2018 (personal conversation).

<sup>30</sup> Mulatu Astatqe 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>31</sup> Teddy Mac 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>32</sup> Refer to Weisser and Falceto's in-depth discussion of Ethiopian *qəññət*, Weisser and Falceto 2013, 28, 299–322. Also refer to Timkehet Teffera 2013.

<sup>33</sup> See Question 5 of the questionnaire, Appendix E.

<sup>34</sup> Mahtämä 2016 (personal conversation).

cannot blame youth for assimilating everything they hear across the globe and resinging old songs'.<sup>35</sup> But the question persists, that if there is a general awareness of these problems in the music industry, among musicians and consumers alike, how can the industry be so successful, and why do people tend towards this particular art in the capital city?

Consider Bərhanu Tāzzära. Many interviewees mentioned Bərhanu as a musician who is not talented musically. Yet, he is also identified as a prominent artist who appeals to a strong Ethiopian unity; he has multiple songs stating the need for Ethiopia's ethnicities to work together to strengthen *ityopyawinnät*. But, as one interviewee put it, 'musicians like him are not creative anymore—all we get now are one-hit wonders and only a few of the musicians pour their hearts into the music they produce'.<sup>36</sup> Bərhanu is representative of those musicians in Addis Abäba who have joined the popular music scene as a result of technological competence.<sup>37</sup> With only a computer, a *mäsinqo* player, and some poetry, people can easily produce and release songs on social media, thus perpetuating the production of similar trendy songs, reducing musical creativity, and making the nationalist sentiment appear greater, though perhaps less genuine than it might actually be. This apparent contradiction reveals the industry's complex nature as it hints at structural influences that allow the production of trendy, unsophisticated, and patriotic music in the capital.

Over and above Bərhanu's competence in producing music, several interviewees noted his painstaking promotion of Ethiopian unity. To them, his songs have value because they are his way of resisting the government. As opposed to previous regimes, in which musicians were legally bound to sing about Ethiopia and espouse a unified Ethiopian sentiment, contemporary musicians are taking up the same theme as a form of covert resistance to the government, struggling to bring together Ethiopians—in direct opposition to what they assume the government is doing. This is, in turn, recognized and well received by consumers, who continue to listen to such songs even at the risk of promoting music with inferior musical and lyrical qualities. Thus, the music industry enjoys the double advantage of producing simple trendy music, and of seeing musicians and artists become sensations overnight—as long as the songs contain lyrics that appeal even remotely to Ethiopian unity.

<sup>35</sup> Mulatu Astatqe 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>36</sup> Informant C 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>37</sup> Englert 2008, 6.

### 2.3.2 Distribution and Consumption: Formal and Informal Spaces

The distributors are another factor to consider. In contemporary Addis Abāba, many media outlets broadcast a wide range of popular as well as traditional music. In my research, Sheger 102.1 FM radio and EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation) were taken as key formal, private and state-owned distributors of music respectively. Restaurants and the stadium were considered as informal distribution sites of popular music.

Sheger 102.1 FM radio repeats the phrase ‘ኢትዮጵያ ለዘለዓለም ትኑር’ (*‘Ityopya lāzälä’ alām tənur*, ‘may Ethiopia live forever’) throughout its broadcasting hours, daily. Such a display of patriotism in formal media is a recent development. This phrase is heard in both Sheger 102.1 FM, a privately-owned radio station, and in media corporations, such as the EBC, over which the Ethiopian government has a monopoly. It is heard at the end of talk shows and television programmes. Sheger 102.1 FM has a professionally trained journalist, Bālen Yosef, who works as a music broadcaster, and who selects and promotes the music. Bālen Yosef says that no surveys are done to assess what the public likes before music is broadcast, either at Sheger 102.1 FM or at EBC.<sup>38</sup>

EBC is Ethiopia’s state-controlled television and radio broadcasting centre; it is the State’s media outlet. On the questionnaire, most respondents answered humorously to the question ‘Do you watch EBC?’. One respondent wrote, ‘I have high blood pressure’, suggesting that watching EBC would only contribute to a deterioration of his health. The idea that the state media is biased and untrustworthy is shared by several other respondents. Music is broadcast throughout the day by the EBC, in its various radio and television programmes, in between news programmes, as advertisements, as an introduction or conclusion to various programmes as well as the key element of programmes specifically intended as music programmes.

At the EBC, the broadcasting of music basically reflects the government’s ethnic federalism policies. EBC sees the media’s duty as ‘a site for positive image building’;<sup>39</sup> it constantly broadcasts shows that highlight the government’s achievements in Ethiopia. Thus, Teddy Afro is rarely played on state media as he openly criticizes the government in some of his songs. However, reasons were not provided for Teddy Afro’s censorship on the state media. It follows that, precisely because state media outlaws him, Teddy Afro’s value and power has increased considerably: although Teddy Afro only has

<sup>38</sup> However, for religious or historical holidays, then the station selects songs appropriate to the celebrations.

<sup>39</sup> Skjerdal 2011, 67.



a few songs that contain political critique, his reputation as the only musician to confront politicians has made him the most popular artist of contemporary Ethiopia. The support he has in Addis Abäba also reflects the value given to musicians who oppose EPRDF, appeal to unity, and do so in aesthetically pleasing compositions and in good poetry. Ultimately, EBC's censorship of Teddy Afro reveals a regime afraid of criticism. In a recent interview in *The Guardian*, Teddy Afro publicly claimed that '[b]ecause of our government, our country is divided', making him the first artist to state this directly.<sup>40</sup>

Yäshaq, a worker at EBC, is in a committee of five who monitor TV and radio broadcasts. He stated that music censorship is primarily cultural. Thus, videos that expose too much naked skin and have sexual content, as well as those which are foreign to Ethiopian culture are not broadcast. Importantly, Yäshaq explained that all songs that represent ethnic identities have to be broadcast regardless of their quality. Particularly for this reason, EBC allocates ample time to broadcasting cultural songs, to see that the constitution, in its efforts to give ethnic minorities a voice, is respected. For the EBC, it is of the utmost importance that songs from various ethnic groups are broadcast throughout the day.

Yännägär, the programme head of ትብታን በዜማ (*Tazzatan bāzema*, 'Memories through music') on FM 97.1 radio station (a part of the EBC), uses the expression 'EBC effect' to describe this phenomenon. When political festivals are organized, such as the one celebrating the building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile river, large numbers of musicians are broadcast to serve the political agenda. Musicians then follow government trends to produce music that EBC will broadcast.

The formal media sector, especially the state-controlled EBC, has allowed musicians to build a reputation by singing of different cultures and in different languages. One informant commented that this particular policy has pressured musicians to sing about unity in diversity 'for fear of being too local if they sang repeatedly about a single region in Ethiopia'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, any musician who is working on building a career would learn different languages, cultures, and dance styles to produce music that can be broadcast by the EBC. According to this explanation, musicians refuse to be associated with a single ethnicity and make conscious decisions to produce music from various parts of the country. The irony here is that it is precisely ethnic federalism that has allowed for this to happen.

<sup>40</sup> See Gardner 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Informant B 2016 (personal interview).

Beyond the formal media, there is a growing number of restaurants in Addis Abäba which serve Ethiopian cuisine, accompanied by popular music and dance. Primarily intended for tourists, these restaurants have flourished since 2008 but serve mainly Ethiopian customers. Mälaku Bälay, owner of **ፈንዲቃ የባህል ምሽት ቤት** (Fändiqa yäbahäl mäṣət bet, ‘A traditional nightclub’)<sup>42</sup> and a traditional Ethiopian dancer, said, ‘we do not perform to broadcast our cultures to foreigners; they come and go. We are more interested in reminding Ethiopians of who they are, despite the harsh conditions they face within their country today’.<sup>43</sup> He is afraid that Ethiopians will leave their country and flee to foreign countries. Much deeper is the awareness of the living conditions in contemporary Ethiopia, that threaten people’s faith in *ityopyawinnät*. As a result, these restaurants have taken it upon themselves to present dances of various ethnic groups in Ethiopia and they all have time dedicated to **ፉክራ** (*fukkära*), a war cry chant, every evening. The following is taken from a performance in the restaurant Yod Abyssinia,

<b>ለዳር ድንበሩ እምቢ ማለቱ</b>	‘For his land and border, he says, “No”
<b>በእውነት ልዩ ነን ጥቁር እንቁዎች</b>	We are different black diamonds
<b>የራስዋን ፊደል ቀርፃ የፃፊች</b>	She designed her own alphabets
<b>እንደገና ሙቼ ልሙት እንደገና</b>	Let me die and die again
<b>ለሃገር አንድነት አይበቃትም እና</b>	It is not enough for the unity of a country
<b>ኢትዮጵያ ማለት የጀግና ሀገር የውበት ሀገር</b>	Ethiopia means the land of the brave and beauty
<b>ማን እንደነበረች ታሪክ ይናገር</b>	Let history speak of who she once was.’

<sup>42</sup> There are other types of traditional nightclubs, called ‘**አዝማራ ቤቶች**’ (*azmari betočč*, ‘*azmari* houses’), which do not serve food. The *azmari* are musicians who play the *mäsinqo*, and whose lyrics were, traditionally, very critical of social and political conditions. Through *qəne*, historically, they addressed and voiced discontent. See Ashenafi Kebede 1975. In these nightclubs, *azmari* now play the *mäsinqo* while presenting poems to tease customers and generally make vulgar and sexual jokes.

<sup>43</sup> Mälaku Bälay 2016 (personal interview). Mälaku’s concern is duly noted in Teddy Afro’s song ‘**አልሂድ አለ**’ (‘Alhed alä’, ‘It refuses to go’):

<b>ልሂድ ወይ ጨክኜ ልንዝ በቃ ስንቁን ቋጥሬ</b>	‘Should I be brave and leave, let me pack my things
<b>ደሞ እንደ አመሉ አልሂድ አለኝ እምቢ አለኝ እግሬ</b>	But as usual, my legs refuse.’

The symbolism of his legs refusing to move is a metaphor of the rooting of Ethiopians in their country faced with economic burdens that uproots them, forcing them to migrate.

The historical note about bravery, the romanticizing of a female figure symbolizing Ethiopia and consistent with people's representation of the country as a mother, the reference to the Ethiopian alphabet, the *fidäl*, as well as the courage shown in the man's declaration that he is ready to sacrifice his life repeatedly for the unity of his country, all encapsulate the concerns Addis Abäba people have for the future of Ethiopia as a united entity. This is a sincere declaration of their disinterest in ethnic or linguistic differences. Regardless of how the State defines Ethiopia, such a text shows that people are prepared to leave the State to one side in the nation-building process and to take up social responsibility for one another based on nostalgia for a country in which fragmentation was largely unknown.

The public's reaction to this text was always overwhelming: people would abandon their food and their conversations and give a standing ovation while chanting the famous war-cries with the performers. Further, these chants disregard current Ethiopian politics and only glorify past rulers. There was never any mention of the Därg or EPRDF. It was as if the two were systematically erased from people's conception of a glorious Ethiopia.

At the Checheho traditional restaurant, the young dancers defined *ityopyawinnät* as 'belonging to the land of Christianity and Islam'. The identity shared by these young Ethiopians is one based on religions. This is an unconscious, yet overt expression of a self-construction based on religious symbolism. There is a movement aimed at protecting both Orthodox Christianity and Islam.<sup>44</sup> This has also been noted by the older generation, as my informant Säm<sup>3</sup>on Maräye Yäfru, a local in Addis Abäba, observed that '[t]here is a large section of youth who is growingly focusing on religion, unlike our generation when we tried to form a clean break between religion and nation'.<sup>45</sup>

At the time of this research, music from all over Ethiopia was played in the nightclubs of the Haya Hulätt neighbourhood. From Thursday evenings until Saturday late nights, Ethiopian popular music, primarily heard on EBC, in various languages, cultures, and dance styles, was constantly played in all the bars. The only exception was the Freedom Bar, where only Təgräñña music was played. Interview respondents commented on the

<sup>44</sup> There is a noticeable growth in youth acting as vanguards and protectors of the Orthodox Church, Meron Zeleke 2015. There was no mention of Ethiopian Pentecostal, Catholic, or Protestant religious associations with Ethiopia. It seemed that patriotism was linked only to Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>45</sup> Säm<sup>3</sup>on Maräye Yäfru 2016 (personal interview).

Freedom Bar saying that it was the bar of the ruling party, uninviting to other Ethiopians and alienating.<sup>46</sup> At that time, people claimed that they did not go to this particular bar, because it was assumed to be ‘tribal and backward’.<sup>47</sup> In most bars, popular songs from the West were also played, but people were generally more enthusiastic about Ethiopian music. When an English song was played, the dance floors would empty, but any Ethiopian music quickly saw them fill up again.

The Addis Abāba football stadium is a fundamentally contradictory location, conspicuous for the way music is lived and experienced. It is where Ethiopia’s contemporary ‘battles’ take place and so, during games against foreign countries and teams, people wear the flag and surround the stadium.<sup>48</sup> Algeria played Ethiopia two weeks into this research in Addis Abāba. Alongside young urban dwellers decorated in the Ethiopian flag, there were children as young as 7 singing ‘ኢትዮጵያ ሃገራ’ (‘Ityopya hagäre’, ‘Ethiopia my country’), a historically patriotic song. Some of their chants are adopted from war-chants, such as ‘Çe bäläw’ and ‘Fano fano’, and others are taken from Ġah Lud, Teddy Afro, Ġakki, and other popular musicians. During the game, the following lines from Zälaläm Kassaye’s hit song ‘የድል ዜማ’ (‘Yädäl zema’, ‘The sound of victory’) were among those chanted in and around the stadium.

**ከእንግዲህ ይበቃል ትውልዱ ተንስ ቷል** ‘It’s enough now, the generation has risen  
**ታሪክ ሰሪ ሊሆን ጉዞውን ጀምሯል** It has started its journey to make history  
**ኢትዮጵያ አለን አይዞሽ ቁመናል ል** Ethiopia, don’t worry. We are here.  
**ጀችሽ**

When there are football games at the stadium, people take to the streets, and dance and sing for hours.<sup>49</sup> Songs like the above, give the youth hope;

<sup>46</sup> When the Gondär and Oromo protests broke out simultaneously in 2016, the Freedom Bar was closed for fear of public attacks. However, there were no reports of attacks on the bar.

<sup>47</sup> Informant C 2016 (personal interview).

<sup>48</sup> Direct confrontation with federal police, fighting, and telling political jokes are other common occurrences at the stadium. This, however, needs separate and detailed research.

<sup>49</sup> In addition to this, people were also seen losing control, dancing, drinking, celebrating excessively, while singing and chanting war-cries around the stadium. One interviewee commented on the phenomenon around the stadium and on the popular songs that are broadcast through EBC and other media outlets as follows: ‘people will dance to news these days’ (Ġnnani Ġšäte 2016 (personal interview)). Ġnnani was

lines such as 'the generation has risen' show how youth sees its potential. It is as if the artist and the football fans are consoling their mother that they do care about her and are there for her. Through such lines, Ethiopia becomes a social reality, constructed by the people.

### 3 Synthesis

Mohammed Girma theorizes that the role individual Ethiopians play as protectors of one another, in a culture in which people feel answerable to their fellow Ethiopians regardless of linguistic and religious backgrounds is a result of what he calls 'covenant-thinking'.<sup>50</sup> This covenant-thinking, which assumes Ethiopia has a historic and religiously unique position in the world, is manifest in the *ityopyawinnät* espoused, performed, and consumed by the music industry. Despite the State's implementation of ethnic federalism and regardless of the debate among Ethiopian policy makers and scholars, the nature of popular music reflects a reimagined Ethiopia.

While the conventional understanding of art is that it is for entertainment, the fact that artists are human beings, living in societies that face a variety of concrete challenges, militates against them limiting their art to the sphere of entertainment. The way in which the popular music industry has flourished raises several issues. The financial possibilities that allow musicians to produce nationalist music, and the political conditions that motivate youth to produce trendy music have impacted on the quality of the music industry. Furthermore, Addis Abäba's youth lack an in-depth awareness of Ethiopia's traditions, religions, culture, and history, even though they imagine a country with grand traditions. Ləḡ Mika'el may sing of St Yared's *mablet* in order to present a case for the uniqueness of Ethiopia, but, not having been educated in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church schools, he lacks a deeper understanding of this way of life. Nevertheless, the music industry has flourished, and sees itself as having a fundamental task. There is a general consensus that Ethiopia's government is unable to see the effect

explaining the ludicrous nature of the popular music scene and hinting that people are simply looking for an excuse to dance and, hence, may even consider dancing to news. Respondents also commented that, while Zäläläm's song lifted their spirits whenever there was a football game, it did only that. 'We are here, but we cannot really do anything for Ethiopia. It is an empty song' (ፎንታይ 2016 (personal interview)).

<sup>50</sup> Mohammed Girma argues in his book that the non-elite population of Ethiopia lives through an assumed covenant that transcends ethnicity, religion, or other identities and that creates a national consciousness. See Mohammed Girma 2012.

of the crisis of ethnic federalism on the country's future. This lack of trust in the government's ability to safeguard the country is visible on many fronts, one of which can be seen in people's reaction to the existence of the Freedom Bar. As Scott observes about subtle acts of resistance, '[h]owever partial or imperfect their understanding of the situation, they are gifted with intentions and values and purposefulness that condition their acts.'<sup>51</sup> The idea that the government is responsible for opening up places such as the Freedom Bar is a harsh criticism but highlights the intent behind the growing nationalism in music. The assumption that emphasizing difference based on ethnicity is deliberately undertaken by the government increases the appreciation of popular music, no matter how unaesthetically pleasing or lyrically inadequate. Attachment to past history, removal of the current government from the glorification of Ethiopia in music, references to Islamic and Orthodox Christian definitions of Ethiopian exceptionalism (covenant-thinking), are a tangible, if subtle, appeal to social responsibility.

Art as a tool for the creation of a democratic society also surfaces in a closer examination of the popular music industry. In African countries where opposition parties exist, political pluralism is in its infancy, and parties draw their support on a regional and/or ethnic basis rather than on the basis of political and economic ideologies.<sup>52</sup> However, in Ethiopia's popular music scene the use of code-switching diminishes the need to emphasize linguistic identities, and, looking beyond the government to appropriate symbols from the past, attempts to reconcile the past with the present. These are all processes of navigating multiple identities. Nor are these processes only directed towards Ethiopian cultures and languages; the adoption and incorporation of foreign genres demonstrates the adaptable nature of *ityopyawinnät*. The Ethiopian nation is imagined through musical space, in which various cultures serve as a unifying factor,<sup>53</sup> and Ethiopia is imagined as a melting pot par excellence. While statements broadcast through the radio, such as '*Ityopya läzälä'äläm tənur*', are a means by which the government installs a general **ሃገር ፍቅር** (*bagär fəqər*, 'love of Ethiopia'), a feeling of patriotism, the music industry has an identity that is based on this feeling but which is more elastic. Thus, the music industry draws on certain histories and casts them into a wider mould of heroes and heroines who

<sup>51</sup> Scott 1985, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Clapham 1997, 32, 556.

<sup>53</sup> Moorman discusses a similar observation in Angola and writes 'music was not simply resistance or cultural distraction from economic and political oppression. Above all, culture inflamed political imagination' (Moorman 2008, 6–7).

defended a concept of independence and a sense of nationhood built around other symbols long before the specific merging of ethnic entities as part of a new nation state. As such, though youth may not demand democracy directly, they entertain the idea of pluralism and call for dialogue in their lyrics. The value of pluralism is key to the development of any democracy. Having a youth base that is not attached to ethnic identity is fertile ground for political democracy to prosper as it allows parties, individuals, and groups to base their ideas for dialogue on political and economic ideologies rather than on narrow nationalisms.

The performance of the music itself, at the stadium and at the traditional bars and restaurants, is highlighted by symbolism rather than by concrete achievements. The stadium presents an option for disengagement from reality, whereas the traditional restaurants act as cultural reminders and venues to relive and reimagine the nation. Mälaku's response about how the existence of his traditional bar reminds Ethiopians of what they leave behind when they go into exile is itself an act of social responsibility. And, much like the stadium, the *fukkära* (war cry chant) is an example of how music can aesthetically enable people to forget their problems, lighten their spirits, and boost the collective morale of people who may be feeling inadequate, by reminding them of where their country once was, and of what their country has achieved over time. This is patriotism in its most humble form. And, even if its consumers are aware that popular music over-romanticizes the past, the fact that people join in the performance of these songs seems to indicate that it consoles them as much as it unites them and gives them hope. It presents a simple means of escape, a space to de-stress. Most importantly, it contributes to an imagination of a community in which members are aware of each other's situations and in which they engage in temporary but comforting exhilaration.

The popular music scene reflects the State's attempt to control ideology, and to espouse ethnic federalism; but this attempt has been countered by a less confrontational and more subtle means of resistance in which music calls for social responsibility. Both the public and the musicians circulate, accept, produce, and allow for new symbols—such as the mixing of languages and traditions, in an attempt to construct a present-day national identity in stark contrast to what proponents of ethnic federalism attempted to instil.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This article highlights identity politics in contemporary Addis Abäba. The field of popular music gives individuals more power to define who they are,

and diminishes the influence of any group, individual, or state apparatus. Thus, popular music is a form of mild subversion and rebellion. The glorification of Ethiopia through state media, the flourishing of nightclubs and restaurants that play traditional Ethiopian music, historical and religious lyrics that present Ethiopia as the land of Islam and Christianity, draw attention to the relationship between the State and urban youth as the latter attempt to redefine their identity. This appeal to a greater Ethiopia is an orchestration of the popular fantasies and national aspirations of young urban dwellers.

Some musicians also manage a reconciliatory tone in their songs. Through music that praises, sings, and admires the past, and also attests to the basic loyalty of the young people, these musicians allow for intergenerational and interethnic understanding, and offer a lively platform for an exchange of views. Although this music is not a direct challenge to political conditions, it resists any idea of secession and is a means of dialogue for the people of Ethiopia.

In its own way, the industry makes a subtle appeal for social responsibility to maintain the unity of Ethiopia. And, while politicians and the elite have argued about the costs and benefits of ethnic federalism, popular music has invigorated Ethiopian nationhood by focussing on the very diversity that ethnic federalism has allowed to flourish. Youth are remodelling their identity by showing their commitment to the cultures and languages of their fellow Ethiopians, regardless of ethnicity or religion. This demonstration of unity is consistent with a hope for change. Above all else, the social responsibility that urban dwellers show towards the rest of the country is testimony to the unique imagination of nationhood that the multi-ethnic metropole, Addis Abäba, encapsulates, and to its role as the centre of Ethiopian nationalism.

Considering the rapidly changing socio-political and economic conditions in contemporary Ethiopia, this article recommends further research to be conducted on popular songs and artists, not just within Addis Abäba, but in other areas of Ethiopia as well. The role of the diaspora in shaping and guiding Ethiopian politics has been given minimal attention in this research article; this is also another venue for more exploration. Further research could also be done on the problems youth attempt to tackle in a general way, as well as on other venues of the arts in creating room for youth to negotiate questions regarding citizenship and identity in contemporary Ethiopia. Questions also remain as to whether these urban dwellers foster people's ideas of identity, and create new thresholds and/or new limitations.

Since the research for this article was undertaken, some defiant and extremely political songs and albums have been released in Addis Abäba, and



it seems that those mentioned in this article merely prepared the way for today's music scene. Since the rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian government has also undergone dramatic shifts regarding questions of identity. Considering this ideological reorientation, a further investigation into how the popular music scene has changed—if at all—takes on a new importance. Finally, a historical description of the value of music in relation to grave political and economic problems would offer a deeper understanding of the role of music in Ethiopia in general.

### Appendix A: Seminars and Lectures

Book launch of 'Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015)', Fellows Dining Room, St Antony's College, University of Oxford (9 March 2016).

Seminar 'Globalization and *Ityopyawinnät* in Contemporary Ethiopia', Culture and Tourism Bureau, Addis Abäba (15 April 2016).

### Appendix B: Videos

Mälläs Zänawi [= Meles Zenawi], *On Record: When Meles vilified the Flag* (Addis Abäba, 1991), available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px4JQkUvX\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px4JQkUvX_Y), accessed on 27 March 2019.

Taylor, R., *Under African Skies: Ethiopia*, BBC Active Video for Learning (1985), available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZST3I4ZAaY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZST3I4ZAaY), accessed on 27 March 2019.

### Appendix C: List of Songs

Dan Admasu, 'Ityopyaye', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpWkQe2Sz1A>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Gośśave Täsfaye, 'Ivangadi', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXOMw3spKi4>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Ĝakki Gosse, 'Bandiraw', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp34o0SjF8o>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Ĝah Lud, 'Yärgəb amora', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toemsrYmGng>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Ĝossi Gäbre, 'Hagäre', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BQZ008kGok>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Ləğ Mika'el, 'Zare yəhun nägä', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99bK65R830w>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Mammilla Luqas, 'Zago', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3atvkbutes>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Teddy Afro, 'Alhed alä', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ac2MII8oNk>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

Zälaläm Kassaye, ‘Yädöl zema’, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FivbFJt2oCw>, accessed on 27 March 2019.

## Appendix D: Personal Interviews (All Conducted in Addis Abäba)

Alämayyähü Fanta, musician and traditional music instruments teacher at Yared Music School, personal interview (25 March 2016).

Alämitu Amarä, researcher at the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Addis Abäba, personal interview (7 April 2016).

Bälen Yosef, journalist at Sheger 102.1 FM radio, personal interview (30 March 2016).

Ennani Ešäte, woman interviewed in 22 Mazoria, personal interview (26 March 2016).

Falceto, F., founder of *Éthiopiennes* series, personal conversation (2018).

Informant A, personal interview (19 April 2016).

Informant B, personal interview (5 April 2016).

Informant C, personal interview (7 April 2016).

Informant D, personal interview (28 March 2016).

Informant E, personal interview (7 April 2016).

Informant F, personal interview (12 April 2016).

Mahdär Asrat, musician based in Addis Abäba, personal interview (28 March 2016).

Mahtämä, vice president of EMA (14 April 2016).

Mälaku Bälay, renowned traditional dance performer, personal interview (28 March 2016).

Mulatu Astaṭqe, musician known for creating Ethio-jazz, personal interview (14 April 2016).

Səm’on Marəye Yəfru, resident in 22 Mazoria, personal conversation (26 March 2016).

Sofy, musical arranger by profession, personal interview (6 April 2016).

Teddy Mac, renowned music arranger, personal interview (14 April 2016).

Yännägär, head worker at FM 97.1 radio station, personal conversation (13 April 2016).

Yəshaq, worker at EBC in charge of music censorship, personal interview (13 April 2016).

## Appendix E: Questionnaire

- 1) ጾታ (‘gender’)
- 2) ዕድሜ (‘age’)
- 3) የትውልድ ቦታ (‘birthplace’)
- 4) ሙዚቃ ያዳምጣሉ? (‘Do you listen to music?’)
- 5) ካዳመጡ ምን አይነት ሙዚቃ ነው የሚወዱት? (‘What kinds of music do you listen to?’)

- 6) ከኢትዮጵያ ሙዚቀኞች (ከጥንቶቹ 1940–1970) የትኞቹን ያደንቃሉ? ('Which musicians from the older generation (1940–1970 EC) do you admire?')
- 7) ከዘመናዊ ሙዚቀኞቻችንስ የቶቹን ያደንቃሉ? በብዛትስ የቶቹን ያዳምጣሉ? ('Which musicians from the current generation do you admire? Which ones do you listen to the most?')
- 8) የኢትዮጵያ ቴሌቪዥን እና ሬድዮ ይከታተላሉ? የቶቹን ጣቢያዎች ያዘወትራሉ? ለምን? ('Do you watch EBC? Which programmes do you follow?')
- 9) በቅርቡ የሰሙት እና በጣም የወደዱት ሙዚቃ አለ? ('Which song did you hear recently that you really enjoyed and admired?')
- 10) ሙዚቃን ልእርስዎ ምን ሚና አለው? ('What is the role of music for you?')
- 11) ጥንት ሙዚቃዎቻችን ውስጥ የሌሉ አሁን የምናግኛቸው ምን ነገሮች አሉ ብለው ያምናሉ? ('What makes our music today different from that of the older generation?')
- 12) ለሙዚቀኞቻችን ማድረስ የሚፈልጉት መልዕክት አለ? ('What comments do you have for our current popular musicians?')

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### Summary

The production, consumption, and distribution of contemporary Ethiopian music has thus far remained largely unexplored, although it is an important part of the urban Ethiopian public sphere. This study explores themes dominant in the music scene of Ethiopia in 2016, in which musicians explore ideas central to Ethiopian socio-political and economic life. The subversive nature of Ethiopian music, its presentation of characteristic topics of urban life, its aesthetic power, and the prominence it gives to important themes such as citizenship, nationalism, and identity are all investigated in this article. The study examines the influence music has had on bringing Ethiopians together in the face of a divisive political landscape, and as ultimately having played a critical role in the political changes the country witnessed in 2018.