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## Kettledrums: The Case of the Ethiopian Nägarit, Insignia of Ancient Royal Power

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## **Kettledrums: The Case of the Ethiopian Nägarit, Insignia of Ancient Royal Power**

Timkehet Teffera

**Abstract:** Like numerous kettledrums found in many parts of the world, the nägarit, a kettledrum of ancient Ethiopia, was predominantly considered as an emblem of power and authority. Nowadays its use has become practically non-existent. This study attempts to make a comprehensive representation of this drum. Subsequently, the ergology of the nägarit will be elucidated in terms of instrument making, size, material preference and lacing/tensioning designs. This is followed by the discussion on its history in use by past Ethiopian royal courts, its significance, function and role. Some questions related to history, geographic diffusion, detailed musical role and meaning, playing technics, and beating patterns might remain unanswered, because the nägarit is obsolete today in relation with its function as a court music instrument, even if it is still used in remote and ancient Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

**Keyword:** Nägarit. Kettledrum. Ethiopia. Haile Silassie. Ethiopian Orthodox church.

### **Tímpanos: O caso do etíope Nägarit, símbolo do antigo poder real**

**Resumo:** Como vários tambores encontrados em muitas partes do mundo, o nägarit, um tímpano da antiga Etiópia, era considerado como um símbolo de poder e autoridade. Hoje em dia seu uso tornou-se praticamente inexistente. Este estudo tenta fazer um retrato abrangente desse tambor. Posteriormente, a ergologia do nägarit será elucidada em termos de sua fabricação, tamanho, preferência de material e desenhos de laços e tensionamento. Em seguida é feita uma discussão sobre a história de seu uso pelas cortes reais da Etiópia anteriores, seu significado, função e papel. Algumas questões relacionadas à história, difusão geográfica, papel e significado musical detalhado, técnicas de execução e padrões de execução podem permanecer sem resposta, porque o nägarit está obsoleto hoje em relação à sua função como um instrumento musical de corte, mesmo que ainda seja usado em antigas igrejas ortodoxas etíopes remotas.

**Palavras-chave:** Nägarit. Kettledrum. Etiópia. Haile Silassie. Igreja Ortodoxa da Etiópia.

### **Tímbales: El caso del Nägarit etíope, símbolo del antiguo poder real**

**Resumen:** Al igual que varios tambores que se encuentran en muchas partes del mundo, el nägarit, un tímbal de la antigua Etiópia, se consideraba un símbolo de poder y autoridad. Hoy en día su uso se ha vuelto prácticamente inexistente. Este estudio intenta hacer un retrato completo de ese tambor. Posteriormente, se dilucida la ergonomía del nägarit en términos de su fabricación, tamaño, preferencia de material y diseños de lazos y tensado. Luego se hace una discusión sobre la historia de su uso por las cortes reales de la Etiópia anterior, su significado, función y papel. Algunas cuestiones relacionadas con la historia, difusión geográfica, papel y significado musical detallado, técnicas y patrones de ejecución pueden permanecer sin respuesta, porque el nägarit es obsoleto hoy en día en relación con su función como instrumento musical de corte, a pesar de que todavía se utiliza en antiguas iglesias ortodoxas etíopes remotas.

**Palabras-clave:** Nägarit. Kettledrum. Etiópia. Haile Silassie. Iglesia Ortodoxa da Etiópia.

## Introduction

Like numerous kettledrums found in many parts of the world, the *nägarit*<sup>1</sup> (ነጋሪት), a kettledrum of ancient Ethiopia was predominantly considered as an emblem of power and authority. Nowadays its use has become non-existent. The study attempts to make a comprehensive representation of this drum. At the outset, the term *nägarit* and similar designations used inside and outside of Ethiopia, are aimed to be discussed and the worldwide geographic diffusion of this drum type will be thoroughly deliberated. Subsequently, the ergology of the *nägarit* will be elucidated in terms of instrument making, size, material preference and lacing/tensioning designs. This is followed by the discussion on its history in use by past Ethiopian royal courts, its significance, function and role. In a bid to provide interested readers with a complete picture, comparing the *nägarit* with other types of kettledrums found in neighbouring African countries (figures 29-39) and other parts of the world, attempt has been made to include as many accessible data as possible in the course of this discussion.

Regarding music analysis, there are unfortunately neither sound nor film recordings that depict particular playing techniques and rhythmic pattern/s of the *nägarit* (solo or in chimes) at our disposal. Therefore, it is difficult to trace the musical function and role of *nägarit* as an instrument of early Ethiopian royal courts as well as ancient churches and monasteries.

Interviews and personal communication conducted with various individuals at

1 Different spellings are applied for this drum. However, the present study used the term *nägarit*.

different times and places were of course, given special emphasis. Interviewees are mainly elderly citizens (70 - 85 years of age) who have lived during the years of the last Ethiopian empire of *Haile Silassie I* (1930-1974)<sup>2</sup>. Even though informants acquainted me with general information about the *nägarit*, they were unable to provide us with the music and sound-related aspect. Narrations circulating about the *nägarit* from a historical perspective were not quite satisfactory and reliable. Therefore, it is, in my opinion, hardly possible to find clear information about *nägarit* playing methods, beating patterns and their possible connotations related with their use in past royal courts due to the absence of 'analytical' sound and/or film recordings by observers who lived during that particular period. So given the research state, only hypothetic assumptions and evaluations are possible that may lead to the following questions:

What is the origin of the *nägarit*? How was it introduced in Ethiopia? When did the *nägarit* start being used in former royal courts of Ethiopia?

Were there specific patterns applied for solo and/or ensemble drumming? Did any patterns exist that were played during specific events, such as, for proclamations of war, crowning ceremonies or public holidays, to call the congregations for a liturgy (in ancient churches/ monasteries)? Did any musical rules apply to play the *nägarit* both as solo and in groups 10, 20 or more drums? Was there a 'give and take' of rhythmic

2 As the personal communication with Alemtsehay Worke, whose interview took place in Addis Ababa, September 2015. She is a 75 year old woman and the interview focused the period of the last Ethiopian kingdom of Emperor Haile Silassie I and about the royal drum *nägarit*.

patterns (phrases) in an ‘interlocking’ or hocket (hoquet) style during ensemble performances? Written and oral accounts indicate that several *nägarit* drums were played with sets of flutes and trumpets. How were music performances organized for such ensembles, which involved different groups of musicians? Was each ensemble to performing its own part? If so how: simultaneously or separately?

The *nägarit* is beaten either with pairs of drumsticks or with hands (figs. 20 – 24). Did these playing techniques or drumming methods vary from one occasion to the other or depended on the type of drum? Had drummers special ranks based on their respective years of service, experience and special drum-beating talent? Did musicians make any rehearsals prior to a performance? Did any *nägarit* beating repertoire exist for instance related with song and dance accompaniment? How did drummers pass down their skill from one generation to another?

## Definition

The term *nägarit* indicates a kettledrum classified to the membranophone family. Montagu (2002: 192) writes that kettledrums are distinguished by their bowl- or cauldron-shaped bodies as well as “... *any shape of closed vessel with a skin across the open end, from gourds sliced across the equator to the great Uganda drums, which have parallel sides above a conical base...*”. Kettledrums are found all over the world. In Ethiopian highlands, the generic term *nägarit* is used to designate variously sized kettledrums. In many African regions, kettledrums exist with a huge assortment of size and material such

as calabash, clay, wood and metal with a variety of lacing and tensioning techniques and analogous names not only throughout the African continent, but also in The Near and Middle East, South and Central Asia as far as Europe. Among them designations such as *nägäro*, *naggaro*, *nagaru*, *nagariitaa*, *nägaritto*, *nägäreet*, *nuqäriya*, *naggara/nagärä*, *naghara/naghärä*, *naqqära/naqqärat*, *nağarät*, *naqqareh*, *nakkare*, *naqqäre/nakkare*, *neggara*, *naqr*, *nâgrâ*, *nagora*, *naker*, *nacaire*, *naquaires*, *nagada* and *nūqara* may be mentioned<sup>3</sup>. These terms indicate both single and paired drums played in courts. For instance, this was the case in North Africa among the Saharan *Tuaregs* (Kebede 1982: 63). In East Africa we find information about such a practice, during seventeenth century Sudan as well as in former kingdoms of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda (Gansemans 1986: 44-47; van Thiel 1986: 42-43). West Africa’s example is represented by the *Hausa* people of Nigeria (here called *tambari* or *tambura* plural). The *tambari* are often used to accompany Islamic festivities, to honour kings and chieftains and as war drums (Meyer 1997: 112). In the Middle East, kettledrums are found, e.g. in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan as well as in India. In Europe, the British kettledrum *naker* may be cited. The *naker* is a paired drum with differently sized membranes producing relatively high- and low-frequency sounds (Blades & Bowles 2001: 596).

The Arabic name *naqqāra* is comparable with the Amharic word *nägarit* that derives from the ancient Gə’əz language and from the

3 See among others the written accounts of Gottlieb 1996; Kebede 1971: 161 and 1982: 63; Blades & Bowles 2001: 596; Connor & Howell 2001: 635; Baily & Dick 2001: 636; Dick 2001: 591; Kimberlin 2001: 1104 and Sachs 1979: 267-268; 1971: 83-85.



words *mängär* መንገር ‘to announce’ or *nägärä* / *assäma* ነገረ/አሰማ ‘he spoke, announced, proclaimed, broadcasted or heralded’ (Baumann 1978: 25; Kebede 1982: 63; Kimberlin 2007: 1104; Powne 1968: 12/15).

Based on various accounts, it is believed that the worldwide spread of kettledrums might have been triggered by the spread of Islam and Islamic cultures including music. In his work, Blench (1984: 161-162) mentions the spread of kettledrums and other musical instruments from North African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries to Sub-Saharan African. So, according to Blench (*ibid*), except for a few countries of black Africa, kettledrums have been encountered almost in the whole continent. Blench specifically discusses a drum found in western Sudan that might have originated from North Africa. The instruments referred to have bronze or wooden bodies that are of approximately 1-meter in height. They are “...played in pairs with heavy wooden beaters, mounted on camel or horseback, and used in the music of Islamic courts” (*ibid*). Baily & Dick (2001: 591) as well make note of kettledrums that

*...probably reached India after the Arab conquest of Sind, in 712 ce, together with the other Arab military instruments, the oboe and trumpet. With the establishment of Muslim Turko-Afghan rule under the Delhi Sultanate from 1192, the name naqqāra was adopted in India, often in an Indo-Aryan form as nagārā .....*”

The precursor of the today’s European timpani is the Arabian kettledrum that found its way to Europe through crusaders probably starting from the thirteenth century. An evidence for the Arabic connection and root of the *naqqāra* is that the French identify their kettledrums with

the analogous term *nacaires*, the Italian identify it as *nacchera* or *naccherone/naccheroni*, whereas *nácar* or *nacara* represent Spain (Blades 2005: 223-4; Sachs 1971: 85). Kettledrums furthermore found their way through Spain to Great Britain around the eighth century, but they remained unused until the era of the Crusades (1096–1291).

*Nakers represent one manifestation of the cultural exchange between the Muslim states and the West, a phenomenon that began before the Crusades with Frankish mercenaries serving in Byzantium and under Muslim potentates, and Saracen troops serving the Normans in Sicily (Blades & Bowles 2001: 596; see also Sachs 1971: 85; Montagu 2002: 26-27).*

Baily & Dick (2001: 591) argue that the South Asian *nagārā* (derived from the Arabic *naqqāra*) was often played in pairs. Its musical function was to lead “... instruments of military ...and of the ceremonial band *naubat*, *naubatkhāna* or *naqqārakhāna* of courts, shrines and temples since the Middle Ages”. Moreover, these drums are prevalent in South Asia and they were and still are played today in courts and as folk music instruments. As observed in many world cultures, in South Asian music traditions the *nagārā* are played together with aerophones, such as horns and oboes. In the case of British *nakers* there are also evidences that they used to be played with aerophones starting from the twelfth century, the first aerophone being the long straight trumpet/*buisine* (Sachs 1971: 84-85; Montagu 2002: 107-108). In fourteenth century France, royalties or high ranking officials were welcomed with the sound of *nacaires* and trumpets, small drums (*tabor/tabour*) and shawms (Blades & Bowles 2001: 596). There

are certainly various instrumental settings encountered over the centuries not only in Europe, but also throughout the world.

In past Ethiopian kingdoms, several numbers of *nägarits* (large and/or small; single and/or paired) were played together with sets of *əmbilta* flutes<sup>4</sup> and straight trumpets, *mäläkät*. Kebede (1971: 161) writes "... *nägarits* would sound, and the *mäläkät* and *əmbilta* .... herald the news: *nəgus sinägəs, awaj sitawäg, nägarit yədäläqal, mäläkät, əmbilta yənäfal ንጉሥ ሲነግስ፣ አዋጅ ሲታወጅ፣ ነጋራት ይደለቃል፣ መለከት እና እምቢልታም ይነፋል።* [= when a king is crowned, *nägarit* is beaten, *mäläkät* and *əmbilta* are blown]". It is unfortunately impossible to imagine how these instruments were played and how they sounded together.

### The Anatomy of the *Nägarit*

*Nägarits* are traditionally made of hollowed out wood, sometimes of calabash and clay, and in exceptional cases of brass, bronze, copper, ceramic, gold and silver (Powne 1968: 13-14; Günther 1972: 55). Their size may considerably vary from small to extra-large bodies. Gorfu (1997), who collected oral traditions about the *nägarit* and its role, during the heydays of the Ethiopian royal monarchy, explains about the measures of a monstrous *nägarits*.

4 *Əmbiltas* belonged to court music instruments in *Amhara* and *Təgray* regions. Traditionally these flutes were made of bamboo, but metal or plastic tubes are applied for *əmbilta* making as well. Today, these instruments are presumably not used in the *Amhara* culture (most probably in rural areas). Contrary to this, the *Təgray* of north Ethiopia use them on various communal entertainment events. They are exclusively played in sets of three musicians. The straight trumpet *mäläkäts* have a cup-shaped mouthpiece and semi-spherical or conical cavity similar to the European trumpet. Today *mäläkäts* are obsolete.

*A cubit (≈ 50 cm) being the length of a man's arm from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow, approximately two feet in length [≈ 61 cm], the drum on its front, or its major mouth, where the skin was stretched, was about four cubits [≈ 183 cm] in diameter. .... the smaller end, measured about 2.5 cubits (≈ 114 cm), five feet across (≈ 152 cm). Then the length from the front end of the drum to the back end measured seven cubits (≈ 3.2 m), or 14 feet (≈ 4.26 m)."*

The drumhead of the *nägarit* is covered with rawhide of cow, bull or elephant along with various types of lacing. Gorfu (ibid) tells the story of a king who assigned a group of instrument makers to construct the largest *nägarit* the kingdom has ever witnessed. He describes the challenging process of drum making. The work starts with the search for the biggest and best tree in the whole empire. Given the meagre infrastructural and technological advancement Ethiopia was in back then, one may imagine the search for the best tree would require months, even years of travel from place to place on horseback, mule, or even foot. Preparing the wooden body by cutting the tree into the required size yet another task that consumed quite a long time followed by transporting it to a specific destination, hammering, chiselling and hollowing out the wooden trunk appropriately, and finally polishing and smoking of both interior and exterior of the cut piece. Apart from the fifty selected instrument makers who enjoyed a temporary dwelling camp, community members were assigned to prepare fresh meals for the instrument makers, while soldiers guaranteed the safety of the entire crew in the camp. The size of the more than two year-manufactured body was according to Gorfu (ibid) "...eight feet [≈ 243cm] on the major

mouth, fourteen feet in length [ $\approx$  426cm], and five feet wide on the smaller end". Then the drumhead was covered with the hide of the biggest bull elephant, which as well took a long time to find the appropriate animal, hunt and prepare its skin for the *nägarit* professionally.

In terms of dimensions, two *nägarit* types may be distinguished. The large cauldron-shaped *nägarit* which is made of copper or other metal bowls has a diameter of 92 cm, while a smaller bowl-shaped *nägarit* made of wood, clay or metal may approximately be between 15 and 25 cm in diameter (Kimberlin 2007: 1104-5). There are varieties pertaining to the preference of the skin for the drumhead and patterns of lacing and tensioning.

Large *nägarits* used to be beaten with one or two drumsticks with the drum positioned across the backs of mules (today obsolete). Smaller *nägarits* were beaten either with drumstick/s or with hands, whereby the drum was commonly suspended on the front of the player's belt. He positions himself on horseback<sup>5</sup>. "During the emperor's progress on some ceremony of state, the *nägarits* would be borne on mules before him. Each rider, seated almost on the animal's haunches, would have a pair of drums slung from the saddle..." (Powne 1968: 13).

In the past playing *nägarits* was limited to royal courts or in churches. In the everyday life of ordinary people, the use of the *nägarit*

is not documented. Nowadays specimens of *nägarits* are found in historical churches and monasteries. For instance, in the town of *Bahir Dar* and its outskirts, few *nägarits* are preserved on the historical islands where, among other things, the *Kəbran Gäbrə'el* Monastery of Lake *Tana* [ክብራን ኅብርኤል ገዳም በጣና ሐይቅ] are found. *Nägarits* are as well preserved in *Lalibäla*, e.g. in the *Yämrähana Kəṛəstos* Church [ያምርሃና ከርስቶስ ቤተክርስቲያን ላሊበላ] and in the *Nä'akuto Lä'ab* Monastery ነዕኩቶ ለአብ ገዳም ላሊበላ]; in the *Fasilädäs* Monastery [የፋሲለደስ ገዳም ጎንደር] in *Gondär* and in numerous other churches and monasteries of *Təgray* and other localities. Ethiopian and foreign cultural centers, and institutes a few ethnographic museums also have *nägarits* in their holdings. We may, for example, mention the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES), and the Yared School of Music (YMS; see fig. 1, 2, 3, 4)<sup>6</sup>; the *Däbre Bərhan Selassie* Church in *Gondär* (fig. 5); the Palace of Emperor Yohannes' IV (1831-1889; fig. 6) in *Mäqälle*<sup>7</sup>; the *Yämrähana Kəṛəstos* church in the town of *Lalibäla* (fig. 7) and last but not least the Weltmuseum Wien (World Museum<sup>8</sup>; fig. 8-9) in Vienna.

5 See film footage uploaded on YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C84\\_WzjWk0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C84_WzjWk0) about the mobilization of the Ethiopian army to the war front during the second Italo-Ethiopian invasion in October of 1935; the film among others shows a mass of people (primarily consisting of warriors) flocking on foot and many war drums put on mules and horses and drummers on horseback beating these drums (see also Montagu 2002: 43-44).

6 Both IES and YMS are branches of the Addis Ababa University and are most probably the only state owned establishment in Ethiopia of their kind.  
7 At this town, in August 2016, I recorded an interview with an 85 year old woman named Zenebech Desta.  
8 This museum used to be called Museum of Ethnology, Vienna (Völkerkundemuseum, Wien). I had the opportunity to examine the two kettledrums of this historical museum back in 2005. They were then preserved in the 'Africa Department'.



Figure 1: *Nägarit* made of wood covered with hide; 65 cm/ø; 45cm/H; irregular lacing Collection IES; Photo: T. Teffera 1993, Addis Ababa



Figure 2: *Nägarit* made of bronze; skin removed due to damage; 76 cm/ø; 60cm/H; Collection IES; Photo: T. Teffera 1993, Addis Ababa



Figure 3 Wooden *nägarits* covered with hide; lacing: (left): crisscross and irregular lacing, (right) zigzag-lacing; IES Collection; Photo: T. Teffera 1993, Addis Ababa



Figure 4: Wooden *nägarit* covered with animal hide; small drum: 35 cm/ø; 20 cm/H; large drum: 40 cm/ø, 50 cm/ H; W-lacing pattern; YMS; Photo: T. Teffera 1993



Figure 5: *Nägarit*; *Däbre Birhan Selassie Church, Gondär*; small drum: 40 cm/ø and 30 cm/H; large drum: 50 cm/ø and 35 cm/H; lacing: crisscross/irregular and w-lacing; Photo: T. Teffera July, 1997



Figure 6 Wooden *nägarit* covered with raw hide; ca. 50 cm/ø; 35 cm/H; Emperor Yohannes' IV Palace; *Mäqälle*; Photo: T. Teffera August, 2016





Figure 7: Wooden *nāgarit* covered with rawhide; Y-lacing; ca. 125 cm/ø; 1 m/H; Instrument preserved in the *Yämrahana Kərəstos Church, Lalibäla, Wollo*<sup>9</sup>



Figure 8: *Nāgarit* drums from the collection of the World Museum Vienna; wooden resonator with leather cover; 8) catalogue no. 139586; 10 cm/H; 30cm/ø; 9) catalogue no. 139587; 15 cm/H; 33 cm/ø; Collected by Max Lersch in Addis Ababa in 1959; Photo: T. Teffera 2005



Figure 9: *Nāgarit* drums from the collection of the World Museum Vienna; wooden resonator with leather cover; 8) catalogue no. 139586; 10 cm/H; 30cm/ø; 9) catalogue no. 139587; 15 cm/H; 33 cm/ø; Collected by Max Lersch in Addis Ababa in 1959; Photo: T. Teffera 2005

9 With the kind permission of Daan Vreugdenhil (via E-Mail 30.11.2016); see also the following link: <http://www.nationalparks-worldwide.info/eaf/ethiopia/lalibela/yemrehanna-kristos-church.html>

Robert Gottlieb (1996) who studied the musical culture of the Sudanese *Gumuz* of *Sheneisha*<sup>10</sup>, points out that kettledrums (called *nagara* or *naqqāra*) are beaten in accompaniment of antiphonal (group) songs. In Gottlieb's audio recordings<sup>11</sup>, a number of songs are accompanied by the *nagara*<sup>12</sup> played by women with hands, while the use of drumsticks is exclusively left to men.

Ruibal-González (2014: 236) makes not of traditional body scarification symbols practiced among the *Gumuz* of western Ethiopia) that is associated with kettledrums, namely "...the cross inscribed in a circle .... on cheeks, arms, breasts and material culture..... the cross and the circles were the design with which the Funj Lords of Sudan branded their slaves and livestock. The Funj icon was composed of two elements: a circle which represented a kettledrum (*nuqqara*) – the symbol of kingly power in Sinnar – and a cross, which stood for the sticks (*asaya*) used to play the royal kettledrum....."

Gottlieb assumes that the *naqqara* might have a close relation or a common background with the Ethiopian *nāgarit*. Note must be made that the *Gumuz* also inhabit the border region of Ethiopia and share common material and music cultures with their Sudanese brothers and sisters.

The same applies for the neighbouring *Berta*<sup>13</sup> people who inhabit the border

10 Village ca. 25 km from the Blue Nile provincial capital of *Ed Damazin*, South Sudan

11 As a series of the *UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music*, Gottlieb's Sudan recordings were released in 1985 on LP and later on CD (1996).

12 See for example, track 7 *Andus Gafa*, a funeral song; track 8 entitled *Dokagaza*, song performed during the time of pestilence and track 10 *Sowa* in which the *nagara* drum and waist and anklet bells *walwala* and *sisā* made of brass and from small gourds filled with pebbles are played in accompaniment of the song (Gottlieb 1996)

regions of Ethiopia and Sudan<sup>14</sup>. The *Berta* are well-known for their plentiful aerophones, namely closed bamboo flutes called, *bol/bal*, end-blown calabash trumpets, *waza*, and side-blown horns, *angari*, found in nearly every *Berta* village. The flutes and trumpets are played in sets of 5 to more than 20 musicians. Gourd rattles, wooden concussion idiophones and/or the *nāgāro/naggāro* may additionally accompany the aerophone ensembles<sup>15</sup> (fig. 10).



Figure 10: *Nāgāro* drum of the *Berta*; drumhead covered with rawhide; a pair of wooden beaters with ca. 40 cm in length, 50 cm/ø; 30 cm/H; *Inzi Shederia*, *Benishangul-Gumuz* Region; Photo: T. Teffera 13.02.2005

13 Also *Bertha*, *Bartha*, *Burta*, *Berta*, *Beni Shangul*, *Bela Shangul* and *Wātawit*.

14 The home of the both *Berta* and *Gumuz* in Ethiopia is the *Benishangul-Gumuz* Administrative Region in north-west Ethiopia. Along with the *Shinasha*, *Mao* and *Komo*, the *Bertha* and *Gumuz* represent the five indigenous people's groups of this region. With their Sudanese counterparts, they share mutual cultural, traditional, social and religious values as well as music traditions considering themselves as one entity (see details in Simon 2003: 49).

15 During my fieldwork among the *Berta* communities (2005), I had the opportunity to observe a *bol-nāgāro* (flute-drum) ensemble.

## Tensioning and Lacing

Tensioning and lacing techniques of the *nägarit* vary accordingly. This may as well depend on the experience of the instrument maker and materials selected for the drum body and the skin used for covering. A *nägarit* drumhead is covered with leather or rawhide. Besides the membrane that is applied to cover the opening, there are also *nägarits* covered on both the top and the base (figures 8, 9, 35). Holes are punched around the periphery of the skin in close gaps to pull the two pieces together and tension them with leather thongs in W, V, Y, II and crisscross and other patterns (figures 11, 12). Other *nägarits* may have a belt or a ring opposite to the membrane covering the

drumhead. The lacing of the two sides may be of different designs. Figure 13, for instance, is laced in crisscross; Y- or W-lacing patterns (see also images 14, 15, 16, 17 with various lacing patterns).

*Nägarits*, particularly the extra-large drums, were often played with one or two sticks. Smaller *nägarits* are played with stick/s or hands depending on the occasion. In the case of the *Berta*, during the *bol nägäro* ensemble performance, the drum is mostly positioned in the centre arena and the drummer is surrounded with the flutists who make synchronized movements in circles (clockwise or counter-clockwise; see fig. 18) or in rows. The drummer beats the *nägäro* with wooden sticks positioned at one spot as shown in fig. 19.



Figures 11-12: Hide covering the drumhead and the bottom and laced with leather thongs (W-lacing and tensioning ligatures); Collection: World Museum Vienna (see detailed description in figures 8 and 9)





Figure 13: Rear of the *Berta nãgãro*; Y- and crisscross-lacing and belt tensioning; the four legs that are carved out of the same piece of wood are ca. 3-4 cm in height; Photo: *Inzi Shederia*, *Benishangul-Gumuz* Region; Photo: T. Teffera 13.02.2005



Figure 14<sup>16</sup>



Figure 15<sup>17</sup>



Figure 16<sup>18</sup>

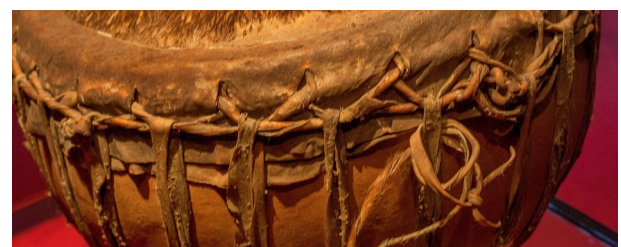


Figure 17<sup>19</sup>

16 <http://www.africaandbeyond.com/deba-drum-ethiopia.html>

17 <http://www.africadirect.com/artifacts/drums/ethiopian-drum-with-seeds-inside-great-sound-african-81340.html>

18 <http://www.bilder.ethiopianculture.de/eBay/ethiopian-drums-14-1394-3.jpg>

19 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagara,\\_MDMB\\_945.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagara,_MDMB_945.jpg)





Figure 18: *Bol năgăro ensemble music performance, Benishangul-Gumuz Region; Photo: T. Teffera 13.02.2005*



Figure 19: *Playing the năgăro with a pair of wooden sticks, Benishangul-Gumuz Region; Photo: T. Teffera 13.02.2005*

## Historical Background of the *Năgarit*

A worldwide common feature encountered in the use of kettledrums, is that they were largely used as court music instruments and regarded as emblems of state power, authority and royalty<sup>20</sup>. This was at least the case regarding the century old Ethiopian royal monarchy. Kane (1990: 1063) briefly describes the role of the *năgarit* in Ethiopia that was “... formerly used as an insignia of authority and beaten to herald the approach of the monarch or person of rank or the announcement of decrees; gossip...”. Kane distinguishes between two *năgarit* types called *săntăl* (ሰንተል ነጋረት) and *dăb anbăssa* (ድብ አንበሳ ነጋረት = bear and lion). The former is an exceptionally large drum made of a metal body producing a reverberating sound when beaten. It is, for example, sounded

20 See Powne 1968: 13-14; Günther 1972: 55; Blench 1984: 161; Gansemans 1986: 32-33 & 44-45; van Thiel 1986: 42-43; D’Avray 1996: 97; Ruibal-González 2014: 236.

when the king appoints officials and representatives of different provinces. The *dăb anbăssa* is a very large drum played in court and for special religious festivities (Isenberg 1841: 107; Kimberlin 2007: 1105 and d’Avray & Pankhurst 2000: 19). In an 1845 travelogue<sup>21</sup> that narrates about the kingdom of *Shoa* in former Abyssinia, the author named Harris, confirms this notion. Harris spent more than two years in Ethiopia observing the kingdom’s daily activities accompanied by a variety of protocols. Similarly, in many early African countries, the respected royal courts possessed an assortment of traditional music instruments such as a variety of drums including kettledrums, trumpets, flutes, animal horns, chordophones, e.g. lyres, zithers and others. These instruments represented the royal court and were played in ensembles or in

21 *Harris' Gesandtschaftsreise nach Shoa und Aufenthalt in Südabyssinien: 1841 – 1843* [Harris' Delegation Trip to *Shoa* and stay in Southern Abyssinia: 1841-1843].

solo at the kingdom's official and informal occasions.

During the past Ethiopian monarchies, subjects gave attention to signals and/or information coming from the palace through the sounds of the *nägarit* sonorously clanging from afar. *Nägarits* were beaten to welcome high-ranking foreign officials, for various court ceremonies, to announce the dawn of a New Year, during the release of new decrees<sup>22</sup>, to pronounce harvesting season, the collection of tributes. They were used as war drums and to accompany warlords, to exhort an army consisting of infantry with spears, shields and swords to battlefields. Once the king announces ክተት ሰራዊት ምታ ነጋሪት [*kətat sarawit mətä nägarit* = *assemble the army beating the nägarit*] his order is practically implemented and the mobilization of warriors/troops would begin instantly.

Finally yet importantly, *nägarit* drums were and still are used today in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido churches and monasteries. Besides bells made of stone (lithophones) and wooden blocks, *nägarits* were struck to call the congregation for worship, for the liturgy and to attend meetings<sup>23</sup>, on major religious, national, and patriotic holidays as well as on official or unofficial events of the court (Widenmann & Kauf 1845: 117, Baily & Dick 2001: 591).

Royal courts of central and northern Ethiopia owned certain numbers of *nägarits*. The playing of these drums, along with other court musical instruments (particularly

*mäläkät* and *əmbilta*), were left to people with a darker skin complexion, who were often brought from southern and western regions of the country. These musicians were dubbed as 'slaves', since music performing, particularly instrument playing, was considered as a profession of the lower class. Consequently, it was taboo for ethnic communities, for instance, the *Amhara*, to be a musician or even using a musical instrument<sup>24</sup>. The 'slave' musicians often belonged to the court and hence, lived near the royal enclave in order to be able availing themselves to perform music, whenever the king orders (Kebede 1971: 161).

Prior to the first Italo-Ethiopian war instigated by Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini at the end of the nineteenth century, Emperor *Menelik* of Ethiopia declared imminent war through the resonant sounds of *nägarit* drums. This was a period before the advent of mass media, radio or television, where sounds of *nägarits* were unquestionably imperative in broadcasting important messages to the public (Gorfu 1997). "*Once Menelik's nägarit.....drummed, the message spread and was heard by the people throughout the country. Menelik's proclamation [awaጃ = አዋጅ] was positively responded to .....able-bodied men and women reported to duties in their respective districts and provinces.....*" (Bekerie 2015). Similarly, Tibebe (1995: 51) discusses the importance of the *nägarit* as a signal instrument to transmit the delicate message of Emperor *Menelik* II requesting his people to get prepared for the war. "*The emperor's nägarit sounded the war cry ርስትሁን የሚቀማ፣*

22 With reference to proclamation, it is interesting to note that the word *nägarit* is nowadays used to denote the official law gazette of Ethiopia known as *nägarit gazette* ነጋሪት ጋዜጣ.

23 See details in Montagu 2002: 193; d'Avray & Pankhurst 2000: 14; Kebede 1982: 63; Gorfu 1997, Sachs 1979: 267; Meyer 1997: 112-113

24 In the years of 2006 and 2016 I recorded an interview about about the traditional music of the Amhara and Təgray past royal court in Təgray with Berhanu Tedla, a 78-year-old traditional azmari (minstrel), vocalist and masinqo player.

ሃይማኖትህን የሚያረክስ፣ ሚስትህን የሚደፍር ጠላት ከሩቅ መጥቶብሃልና ተነሳ! ጉልበት ያለህ በክንህድህ፣ የሌላህ በጸሎትህ ተከተለኝ (*rəstəhən yämiqäma, haymanotəhən yämiyaräkəs, mistəhən yämidäfər t’älat kəruq mät’obəhaləna tänässa!! Gulbät yalähə bägulbätəh, yälelähə bäts’älotəh təkätäläñə*) meaning “An enemy has come from a distant land to take away your land, destroy your religion, defy the honor of your wife, Rise up! If you are string, follow me and render me your arm. If you are weak, follow me with your prayer for my victory.) Such was Ethiopian emperors’ call for war mobilization. Land, Religion, Wife - these are the sacred trinity of Ethiopian war nationalism, tabot-Christian [Arc of the Covenant] denominationalism, a ‘nationalism’ as ephemeral as the length of the battle itself, after which it broke down into its parish and shire components. For the hundreds of thousands of volunteer fighters, the three principles worth dying for had been the rallying ground for saving Christian Ethiopia from “Granñə Muhammad” in the sixteenth Century all the way up to Mussolini in the mid twentieth.”

Depending on their position including military ranks such as *Gərazmatšə*<sup>25</sup>, *Fitawrari*<sup>26</sup> and *Qäñazmačə*<sup>27</sup> [ግራዝማች፣ ፊታውራሪ፣ ቀኛዝማች], Ethiopian dignitaries were entitled to own a number of *nägarits* in their courts. During the ancient monarchy of the Funj Sultanate of the Sudan in which kettledrums also represented power and authority, Riubal-González (2014: 236) comments that in ancient Abyssinia, where a close connection between kingship and

drum existed, it was customarily the Ethiopian Emperor Susenyos (1606-1632) who gave “...the royal kettledrum, as a sign of vassalage,..... a fact that explains the prevalence of the Amharic term for drum among Bertha and other lowland groups. The Ethiopian monarchs marched to war under the sounds of the drum..... Meaningfully a group of Mayu from Assosa said that the *nägära* were played to announce the arrival of the king (Amharic term ‘negus’), and some elders from the village of Malo, in Menge, said that it was used to announce a sheikh. This proves that the memory of their original use and their association with power is still very present among the Berta. This is probably one of the reasons people rarely play drums along with *zumbara* and *waza*” [end-blown calabash trumpets].”

Parkyns (1853: 48) elucidates that former *Təgray* chieftains were entitled to own *nägarits*. “... certain provinces give a right to the use of the *nägarit* to the chief who governs them. *Qubi* uses 44; each of his sons 32; other chieftains .... use 16 or 20. Minor governments use *əmbilta* and *mäläkät* ....”. Emperor *Tewodros II* (1855-1868) kept 44 *nägarits* in his palace each representing the 44 provinces (localities), which were under his jurisdiction at the time. During the reign of Emperor *Haile Selassie I* (1930-1974), provincial army commanders were entitled to 24 *nägarits*, also an indication of the number of the localities they were entitled to govern. Isenberg (1841: 107) elucidates that “...only a governor of a province .....called *Däzazmačə*, is allowed to have the *nägarits* [here spelled as *nägāreets*] playing in front of him; and if he has more than one province under his jurisdiction, he has an additional *nägarit* for each province. Thus the Abyssinians

25 Old Ethiopian military title meaning commander of the left wing of a traditional armed force  
 26 Old Ethiopian military title meaning commander of the vanguard of the traditional armed force  
 27 Old Ethiopian military title meaning commander of the right wing of a traditional armed force

have their *Däzazmačoč* [plural to *Däzazmačə*] of two, three or four *nägarits*<sup>28</sup>.

Similarly, D'Avray (1996: 46 and 50) makes notes of the head of the *Habab* of Eritrea (formerly Ethiopia) during the early eighteenth century who was given the title of *Käntiba* (lit. meaning major) by the then Ethiopian Emperor *Iyasu*. Consequently, the *käntiba's* newly achieved rank was made official through, "... a robe, a gold bracelet and a *nägarit*, .....a ceremonial drum which .....to call to arms all those entitled to, and thus bound to, use them when summoned by the *Negus* or his representatives."

The *bol-nägäro* (flute-drum) ensemble of the *Berta* is not a recent phenomenon, but an old tradition that used to be practiced in former royal *Berta* courts of the nineteenth century. The flute sets including the drum were habitually stored in the enclosure of the palace and used only on special occasions<sup>29</sup> (Simon 2003: 12; Teffera 2008).

28 The use of the *nägarit* in the abovementioned settings was practiced in Ethiopian royal courts until the abolition of the royal monarchy in 1974.

29 Personal communication with *Almahadi Hojele* who was head of the Culture & Sports Bureau of the *Benishangul-Gumuz* Regional State in *Assosa* and *Hussein Alfadir* staff of the local administrative office of *Assosa* Zone in 2005. The interviews took place during my ethnomusicological fieldwork in *Assosa* and adjacent localities in February 2005. Apart from the interviews I conducted, I also made audiovisual recordings of different aerophone ensembles (see private collection Teffera/2005; video 001-006, altogether 6 hours of film material. By the time of my fieldwork the interview *Hussein Alfadir* was a ca. 40 years old man, and our personal communication on 13th February 2005 referred to traditional music and musical instruments of the *Berta* community from cultural and religious aspect. On the other hand, *Almahadi Hojele* was a 60 year old man, and our communication on 15th February 2005 referred to traditional music instruments, performance styles and music repertoires of the *Berta* and *Gumuz* peoples.

Parkyns (1853: 227) illustrates different episodes of the studies he carried out in the north Ethiopian region of *Təgray*. Regarding the use of *nägarit* drums he makes the following comment:

*Formerly, in the times of the empire, there was greater regularity in the partition of this kingdom, which then consisted of 44 counties or provinces, called .....addy nägarit or drum countries, as they conferred on their chief the right of having a band of drums beating before him when he went in procession, on a march, or to battle. The rank of (the) balä nägarit or the owner of drums, confers the same privileges and the same station as that of Däzazmačə, the title only being wanting. Most of the drum countries were or are held by chiefs of this latter rank; a few only are not so...*

After observing the kingdom of Emperor *Tewodros II*, a British officer noted that the lighter drums were fastened in pairs to a mule saddle, one on either side, making it easy for the drummer who rode the mule to strike them. The larger ones were carried by mules, the drummer riding alongside and beating the drums at stated intervals in a peculiar manner. However, there is no evidence whether this 'peculiar manner' denotes certain beating patterns, which might help to communicate specific information, for instance, the activities of the king in his palace such as during the early kingdoms of the *Baganda* of central Uganda.<sup>30</sup> Meyer (1997: 123) describes the

30 This ancient kingdom, which lasted for more than 200 years, among other things, possessed uncountable 'royal drums' of various sizes and shapes which were played on different occasions. Through the sounds and beating patterns of the royal drums echoed important messages from the royal enclosure to ordinary people. Most Bantu languages are tonal languages. The central and southwestern Bantu people customarily communicated through music that developed over centuries. This communication is, above all,

use of *tambura* kettledrums by the *Hausa* at the Kingdom of Emir of *Zaria* (formerly *Zazzau*) in the State of *Kaduna* of northern Nigeria. Subsequently, Meyer remarks that during the 1960s two drummers played four *tamburas*. Nevertheless, when it comes to ensemble performances the drums had different functions. Two *tamburas* called *ya'd'aid'ai* (lit. = 'one after the other') were beaten alternately with one or two mallets that are covered with hippopotamus skin. The drum patterns comprised a constant rhythm with moderate tempo and metrical function, whereas on the other two *tamburas* (called *sal-salo* = of different kinds) steadily changing rhythmic patterns were played with two drumsticks (ibid.). How about the Ethiopian *nägarit*? Were there any specific rhythmic and metric patterns used for solo or ensemble performances? Any patterns used

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expressed through distinctive rhythmic drum patterns consisting of syllables, words, and word combinations that bear different meanings through their different accentuations. This interpersonal transformation of information included the entire population and it still, is considered as an effective method of communication. In this conjunction, Mbabi-Katana (1984: 342) argues about *Bantu* languages, in general and the Ugandan *Bantu* communities *Baganda* and *Banyoro*, in particular as follows: "*Rhythm and dynamic accents are the most important basis of surrogate language, and the instruments used are drums, logs and trumpets, depending upon the type of message and social status of the sender. Messages transmitted by using logs or trumpet sounds are associated with common people. They normally convey messages relative to communal activities such as hunting. Common people, on the other hand, do not send drum messages, for the drum is regarded as a symbol of authority. In the past, whenever a king appointed a chief, the action was symbolized by the presentation of a drum and a spear by the king or his representative to the new chief. The appointee would then coin a definite slogan or motto, which could be communicated regularly to his people as a drum message. He would thus be gradually associated with and identified by his drum beats, functioning as a symbol of office to people near and far from his region.*"

when played in combination with other musical instruments such as sets of *əmbilta* and/or *mäläkäts*?

In his travelogue "*Im Reiche Kaiser Meneliks: Tagebuch einer Abessinischen Reise*" [The Empire of Emperor Menelik II: Diary of an Abyssinian Journey], the German traveller Friedrich von Kulmer (1907: 55-57) portrays a traditional music performance he was able to observe in *Däzazmačə* Wolde Michael's house, then governor of the *Harar* (eastern Ethiopia). As guest of honour, Kulmer had the opportunity to attend the wedding feast of the *Däzazmačə's* daughter in 1907. He narrates about a group consisting of more than 15 male musicians who played aerophones and kettledrums. Accordingly, Von Kulmer identifies flutes and 'trombones' represented in figure 20. The flutes are *əmbiltas*, whereas the trombones are mistakenly confused with the straight trumpets *mäläkat*. About four of the musicians on the left, at least two of them are standing and two are sitting right beneath these, each of them holding a *mäläkät* that are differentiated through their funnel-shaped mouth pieces attached to the long cylindrical tube. According to the picture, the drums are *nägarits*. The largest one is a single and the other two are different-sized pair drums. In a seated position, one drummer apparently seems to operate two *nägarits* with his hands leaving the smallest drum untouched. However, in his description, Kulmer talks about many more musicians not depicted in the photo. Hence, I assume that the mass of musicians does not belong to one ensemble unlike Kulmer's account. They might rather have simply posed for a photo and do not as a coordinated ensemble.

With reference to *əmbilta* and *mäläkat* players, Kulmer describes to have

encountered 10 persons who played together in their own trio groups (mainly referring to the *əmbilta* group/s) in accompaniment with several pairs of drums (small and large) that hanged on the drummer's necks. Kulmer does not give details as to how the drums (perhaps only *nägarits*) were beaten. Surrounding the musicians a group of men holding guns and revolvers continuously shot in the air (perhaps in celebration of the wedding) and recited verses that are traditionally related with warrior's or patriotic songs<sup>31</sup>. Kulmer witnessed this particular scene upon his arrival at the wedding venue, where the governor warmly welcomed him right at the entrance (ibid). I can imagine that the musicians might have continued performing in their specific groups. Therefore, according to my so far made observations and collected oral information, an *əmbilta* ensemble consists of a group of three musicians only. Of course, such a flute set can be accompanied by *käbäro* drum/s<sup>32</sup> and *mäläkät*.

My colleague, David Evans informed me that he encountered and recorded a *mäläkät* in Aksum played with *əmbilta* during one of his several fieldworks in Ethiopia. Therefore, even though I did not get the opportunity to observe the use of the *mäläkät* during my past more than decade-long fieldworks in central and northern Ethiopia, David Evans argues the opposite based on his observations in Aksum. Hence, he notes that this instrument is not at all extinct or

"retired."<sup>33</sup> Having stated this, both the *mäläkät* and the *nägarit* had (still today have as the recent observations of David Evans in Aksum have shown) a similar function from musical perspective. Hence, both produce a loud and impressive single sound at variable intervals of time. *"Both are very large instruments (here exclusively referring to the huge nägarit drums) and visually impressive. All of this would reinforce and represent the power and prestige of their patrons, i.e. kings, nobles, wealthy people, the church, wealthy parents of a bride, etc., perhaps also while entertaining visiting and foreign dignitaries..."* (David Evans<sup>34</sup>).

When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, the government of Emperor *Haile Selassie I* was forced to go into a predictable war, despite diplomatic efforts to avoid it. Hence, when the Emperor called out for war, the sound of *nägarits* was heard all over the country in mobilizing warriors to the battlefield. Wilfred Barber (2012: 14-15) explains this situation with the following words:

33 David Evans furthermore argues the following about the socio-cultural status of the *əmbilta* in former times and today: *"I think in the imperial era the important people such as the Governor of Harar liked to have as many musicians and musical groups as possible as a display of their status and importance. Thus, a very powerful person might have several əmbilta trios at a court. These musicians could also be "imported" from other regions. I think it is highly likely that the əmbilta has always been an instrument predominantly or perhaps entirely from north-central Tigray but known over a larger area (Amhara) through patronage by nobles and other powerful people. When I asked my students at Bahir Dar University (BDU Ethiopia) if they had ever seen or heard əmbilta, only a few from Tigray responded positively. Of course, it could have been more widespread in the old days. The problem is that almost all historical accounts come from descriptions at the courts of the wealthy and powerful, and we do not know much about the status of əmbilta at the village level in the past"* (Email correspondence 07 June 2017).

34 Email correspondence 10 June 2017.

31 On wedding ceremonies of the Amhara, traditional warrior's songs symbolize the groom as a hero.

32 Ethnomusicological field research in Aksum, Təgray; Timkehet Teffera/private collection, Təgray 2006.



*"The emperor's war drum, nägarit, will be banged with the open hands of a warrior servant at the southern entrance of the old palace. Its thump will be answered by a thump from forty smaller hide kettledrums from the palace until the whole capital echoes with the sound, which will carry six mule or more. Every one of the six Rases [equivalent to duke] in his own province will have his drums banged and every local chieftain will smack his own drum to warn the people to rally to their leader. Throughout the country every man, capable of bearing arms - a rifle, sword, or spear - is expected to drop anything he is doing and rush to the local leaders with his arms and the local leaders will march to their chieftains, who, in turn, rally around the bases, just as series, villains, and vassals used to in feudal Europe. Ethiopia's army then will be ready to repel - not to fight - the invader. The general mobilization is a new idea in Ethiopia, as heretofore when the war drums sounded the war was on. The emperor educed to take the measure because a call for volunteer, which usually is preliminary to a war might have brought up only 60 per cent of the fighting men - not that they are unwilling to battle, but because they might not realize the gravity of the situation after his yearlong effort to keep them calm".*

As an outcome of a time consuming survey, Jeff Pearce (2014) uncovers the truth about the Ethio-Italian war in a remarkable manner in his book *"Prevail: The Inspiring Story of Ethiopia's Victory over Mussolini's Invasions 1935-1941"*. Among other things, Pearce tells about the reactions of the Ethiopian people after the attack on the towns of *Adigrat* and *Adwa* (north Ethiopia) by the Italian army. His information is based on the British journalist, author and war correspondent, George Steer, who witnessed the public's reaction on the spot that particular day in the

country's capital Addis Ababa. Pearce (pp. 56) writes about the journalist:

*"Steer headed into the streets where the locals were streaming towards the courtyard of the Little Gibbi [the small palace]. He saw five thousand soldiers squat down in front of the Great War drum of the empire, made of lion skin and carried by four servants, with a fifth to beat it with a crooked club. By eleven o'clock, various nobles and chiefs were on hand, and the Court Chamberlain, Ligaba Tosso, stepped on an old kitchen chair, holding the Emperor's mobilization order. The drummer with the club yelled out, 'Listen! Listen! Open your ears! The symbol of our liberty wishes words to be said to you. Long may he live, and the enemy with our gates may God destroy! There was a respectful silence, at least from the center of the crowd and then the Court Chamberlain read the words of Haile Selassie..."*

After reporters, diplomats and a huge crowd gathered in front of the palace and people were informed about the capture of *Adwa* and *Adigrat*, there was outrage. The crowd declared its readiness by promising the emperor that they will defend Ethiopia's territory and sovereignty waving their rifles or spears, swords, shields or simple sticks, shouting words of anger, singing war songs and reciting patriotic verses called *shiläla*, *fukära* and *qärarto* ሽለላ፣ ቀረር፣ ቀረር፣<sup>35</sup> (ibid.).

<sup>35</sup> In the film *Second Italo-Ethiopian War Documentary*, uploaded on YouTube, a war scene is shown with lots of patriots gathered in front of the king; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lLueKshJEO>; (last retrieved 28.11.2016).



Figure 20: Music performance on the wedding of *Däḗazmačə Wolde Michael's* [Governor of *Harar*] daughter; Photo: F. von Kulmer 1907: Plate VIII

The images in figures 21, 22 and 23, show scenery, which resembles the above described historic moment in the Italo-Abyssinian war. The pictures were taken in front of the royal palace of Addis Ababa in October 1935. The photo caption in French reads: "*Sur le perron du palais impérial, le ministre de la Plume lit la proclamation du négous dont chaque phrase était scandée sur le tambour de guerre*" meaning "On the steps of the imperial palace, the minister of Pen reads the negus' [emperor/king] proclamation of which every sentence was chanted and

*expressed through the sounds of the war drum.*" (French Magazine, *L'illustration*)<sup>36</sup>.

It might be interesting to mention a very short footage of a documentary film entitled "*Haile Selassie of Etiopia: Second Italo-*

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to my colleague Francis Falceto for having provided me with this photo, translating the caption's content from French into English. Unfortunately, there is no photographer's name stated for credit, except indicating the name of the French magazine *L'illustration*.



*Abyssinian War 1935*<sup>37</sup>, which reflects the same scenes, demonstrated in figures 21–23.

Among other things, it figures depict the same drummer beating an extraordinarily huge *nägarit* (perhaps the *dəb anbässa ደብ እንብሳ* with a wooden mallet followed by the proclamation for the imminent war and later on masses of outraged warriors are seen flocking to the imperial palace, others standing in front of the emperor shouting, singing or reciting war songs accompanied by war-related lyrics (ፉኩራ and ቀረርቶ). Each warrior expresses his readiness to fight and destroy the Italian invaders. They move back and forth holding a spear, a sword or a rifle with angered and fierce look on their face (last retrieved 05.02.2016).

The photos represented in figures 24, 25, and 26 were made by the German photographer, Joseph Steinlehner, who travelled to Ethiopia on behalf of the Africa-Photo Archive in Munich, Germany. During his stay in the country from 1927 to 1929, Steinlehner captured uncountable photos, which are of great historical value today. The photos were taken in Addis Ababa in 1928 and 1929 and later on printed as postcards<sup>38</sup>.

In the first two images, a huge number of people are gathered probably in front of the main palace of Addis Ababa. Various sized *nägarit* drums are positioned on the ground. Drummers are seated behind the respective *nägarit* drum. Most of them seem to hold a

single drumstick in their hands, which might probably be a common practice in such a drum chime. The bystanders gathered around the drummers may probably be warriors, priests and ordinary folks who flocked to this spot (maybe the Imperial Palace) following the call for war. Few people are holding the imperial flag featuring the crowned Lion of Judah holding a cross, which is the emblem of the empire.

The third image in figure 26 displays a similar scene with a group of *nägarits* and players. The picture might have been made at the entrance of a big banquet hall probably in the enclosure of the Imperial Palace in Addis Ababa.

The next image (fig. 27) is accessible in the online archive of the Italian Geographic Society called *Onlus (Società Geografica Italiana Onlus)*, the 'Ostini' collection. According to the description, the photo depicts war drums (*tamburi di guerra*) with four large and three small drums. The picture might probably have been taken within the enclosure of the palace of *Gondär* in 1914. The photographer's name is not mentioned here, but the Commercial Agency of Italy to *Gondär (Cartolina della R. Agenzia Commerciale d'Italia a Gondar)*. I assume it might also have been printed as a postcard. Figure 28 depicts a group of boys with several *nägarits* and the double-headed *käbäro* in the background.

37 See <http://footage.framepool.com/it/shot/916870166-abissinia-haile-selassie-d'etiopia-seconda-guerra-italo-etiopica-farewell-to-yesterday> and <http://footage.framepool.com/en/shot/691371686-haile-selassie-i-of-ethopia-second-italo-abyssinian-war-topee-throne> (last retrieved 05.12.2016).

38 It is interesting to take a closer look at the postage stamps depicting empress *Zewditu* and Emperor *Haile Selassie I* as Prince Regent and as emperor.



Figure 21: On the steps of the imperial palace, the minister of Pen reading the emperor's proclamation accompanied by loud chants and the sound of the *nāgarit*; Photos: see *L'illustration* (1935). No. 4833 – 93 October (French Magazine); see cover page and pp. 214



Figure 22: On the steps of the imperial palace, the minister of Pen reading the emperor's proclamation accompanied by loud chants and the sound of the *nāgarit*; Photos: see *L'illustration* (1935). No. 4833 – 93 October (French Magazine); see cover page and pp. 214



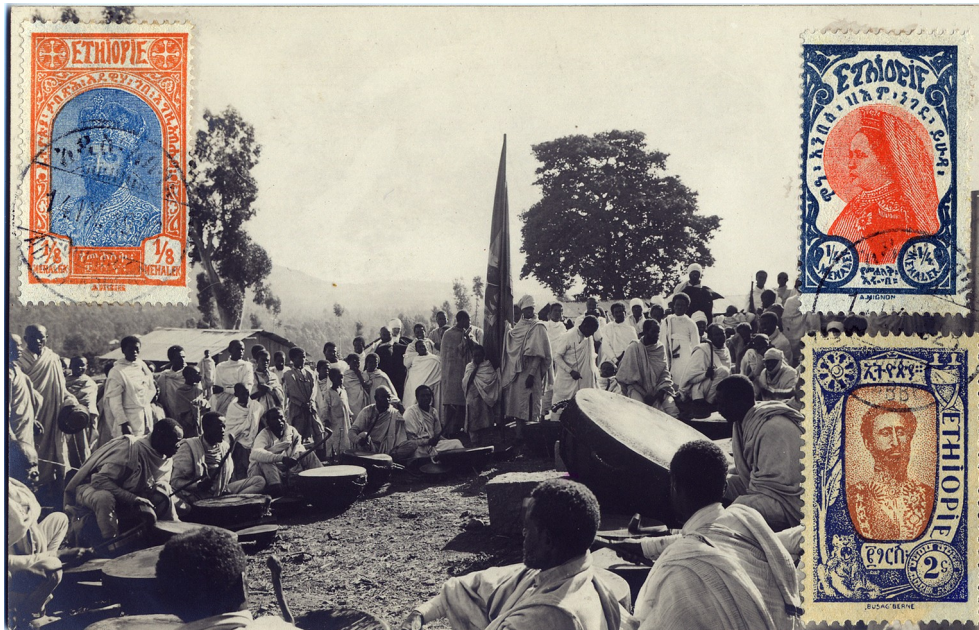


Figure 23: A large number of warriors armed with sabres and revolvers listening to the proclamation prior to the second Italo-Ethiopian war, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1935; Photo: *L'illustration* (1935). o. 4833 – 93 October (French Magazine), pp. 215; see similar photos in Harlan 1925: 617 and 627 and Barblan 1941: 115-118



Figures 24: People gathered around a group of *nāgarit* players (probably at the Imperial Palace, Addis Ababa?); Photo: Joseph Steinlehner, Addis Ababa 1928 (see also Harlan 1925: 617)





Figures 25: People gathered around a group of *nāgarit* players (probably at the Imperial Palace, Addis Ababa?); Photo: Joseph Steinlehner, Addis Ababa 1928 (see also Harlan 1925: 617)



Figure 26: *Nāgarit* players most probably in the Imperial Palace seated in two rows facing one another; Photo: Joseph Steinlehner, Addis Ababa 1929





Figure 27: Tamburi di guerra, 1914

[http://www.archiviofotografico.societageografica.it/index.php?it/152/archiviofotografie/sgi\\_master\\_dbase\\_8563/4003](http://www.archiviofotografico.societageografica.it/index.php?it/152/archiviofotografie/sgi_master_dbase_8563/4003) (last retrieved 07.12.2016)



Figure 28: A group of boys with *nāgarits* and 1 *kābāro* drum in the background;  
Photo: Ferdinando, Martini (1925: 28)

## Display of African Kettledrums for the Purpose of Comparison

In the following, various kettledrums are presented from different African countries (i.e. Togo, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Egypt). Except the drums represented in figures 29-39, all drums are museum specimen preserved in the Worldmuseum in Vienna. I took all photos during my research carried out in this state-owned famous museum. The examinations of these and many other musical instruments took place in two phases, namely during the months of January and August 2005. The museum has dedicated a huge department to African collection, for which responsible staff members deserve a great appreciation for their kind collaboration. The kettledrums referred to here were collected between the end of the nineteenth until the mid of the twentieth century by different scholars and travellers (almost all Europeans) who visited different African countries and their communities starting from about the end of the nineteenth century.

The purpose of displaying these instruments aims at demonstrating the varieties of this drum type in terms of size, material, lacing designs, tensioning techniques and other peculiarities. Based on his studies Jeremy Montagu (2002: 192), notes that there are, among other things, kettledrums constructed "...in the shape of a human body, feet, legs, and the lower half of the torso, sliced across the waist; others are the whole figure with the drum poised on the head, as loads of all sorts are commonly carried in Africa. Both are often instruments of ritual and may be hung about with human bones and other accoutrements. Note that drums are classified by the shape of the drum itself. The fact that many of these anthropomorphic drums have legs does not make them footed drums. Because they have a closed shell, they remain kettledrums irrespective of how the kettle is supported or decorated". The following drums do not include anthropomorphic kettledrums that are perhaps encountered in Central, West and South Africa than in East and North African regions. Nevertheless, the drums displayed below hopefully provide the reader with the existing variety of kettledrums.



Figures 29 a-b Wooden kettledrum with irregular X and Y leather cords + belt tensioning; 29-32 cm/ø; 18 cm/H; Collected by Oskar Baumann in 1893 among the *Kara* of Tanzania; catalogue no. 049814





Figures 30 a-b: Wooden kettledrum with a stand hollowed out of one piece of wood; skin on drumhead is nailed on the rim of the opening; 29cm/H; 25.5 cm/ø; Collected by Oskar Baumann among the *Sukuma* of *Ututwea* region, Tanzania, in 1893; catalogue no. 049252



Figures 31 a-b: Wooden kettledrums with handles; skin cover is nailed on the rim of the drum; 31,5 cm/H; ca. 17/ø; Collected by Oskar Baumann among the *Pare*, north Tanzania 1991



Figures 32 a-b: Metal drum; nails are used for tensioning the skin; 13,9 cm/ø; ca. 16 cm/H; Collected by Jutta Schienerl, Kairo 2004; catalogue no. 181901 (see also Teffera 2018)



Figures 33a-b: Calabash drum; skin laced with twisted leather thongs in II-pattern; belt fixed on the bottom of the resonator and tensioned with the skin covering the drumhead; 31,5 cm/H and 25.8 cm/ø; Collected by Clara Frassen, Ghana 1955; catalogue no. 35283



Figures 34a-b: Bowl-shaped wooden drum with handle carved out of the same wooden piece; skin is affixed with glue; wooden nails are additionally inserted through holes punched in the skin and into the wooden body; 21.5 cm/H; 23 – 27 cm/ø; Collected by Eugen Ruff, Zimbabwe 1993; catalogue no. 174626





Figures 35 a-b: Deep wooden kettledrum with an implied foot; membrane = cow hide (?); Skin cover on both ends of the drum and tensioned with plant fibers and leather cords running from top to bottom in Y- and II-patterns; 1 0/H; 75 cm/ø; Collected by H. Köther among the Sukuma of Tanzania in 1902; catalogue no. 070037



Figures 36a-b: Hemispherical calabash drum; body decorated with engraved geometrical patterns (black ink?); drumhead covered with skin glued at the rim of the resonator; 10 cm/H; 21 cm/ø; Collected by Becker von Hans among the Beja, Egypt; collection date unknown; catalogue no. 097803



Figures 37a-b: Paired kettledrum carved out of one piece of wood; leather covers glued to the edge of the drums; rear of the body decorated with engraved flower motives and holes encircling these; on the center part connecting the two drums a small wooden piece carved in the shape of a crocodile is glued; the crocodile's eyes are made of two red fruit seeds; 4.5 cm/H; 11–12 cm/ø; Collected by Carl Drächler, 1939; catalogue no. 125520. Such pair drums are called naqqarat, naqqārāt, nāgarāt, probably the plural form of naqqara, a term commonly used for variously

sized kettledrums in many Arabic and Muslim cultures. Similar terms are nagaru, naggaro, nggara, negero, negarit. Their resonators are not only made of wood, but also of clay or copper. They are played in both worldly and religious music events. In Tunisia, Elsner (1983: 94-95) observed the use of the naqqārāt in classical music ensembles. While playing, the drummer sits cross-legged on the floor and beats each drum with a wooden stick (Touma 1975: 123; Conner et. al 2000: 12-13 and 625.637; see details under Teffera 2018).



Figures 38a-b: Calabash drum; drumhead covered with skin punched at the edges in regular gap to be tensioned by means of twisted leather thongs and tensioned against a ring/belt on the rare of the body (belt-tensioning), lacing pattern is II (however irregular probably due to aging); 24.5/H; 19/; collected by Grunitzky in 1918 among the Ewe (also Ebwe, Eibe, Eve, Efe, Eue, Vhe etc.), Togo; catalogue no. 101651



Figures 39a-b: Kettledrums tabshi and tambari of the Hausa, Sokoto Region, Nigeria, Collection of the Völkerkundemuseum Berlin, catalogue nos. 132 and 135; Source: Meyer 1997: 114-115

## Conclusion

Based on the study of available and accessible source materials, this paper has attempted to throw light on kettledrums, in general and on the Ethiopian *nägarit*, in particular by considering all aspects currently under discussion.

Some questions related to history, geographic diffusion, detailed musical role and meaning, playing technics, and beating patterns might remain unanswered, because the *nägarit* is obsolete today in relation with its function as a court music instrument that has become non-existent. But the fact that the *nägarit* is still used in remote and ancient Ethiopian Orthodox churches shows the continuing existence of this graceful musical instrument.

I am very much convinced that future in-depth investigations will bring light to some of the questions raised at the outset of this discussion, especially with reference to the music-related aspects of this historical drum type.

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