Introducing Ethnomusicology in Ethiopia and the Need for Establishing a Research and Documentation Center

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Based in the field of Ethnomusicology, its emergence, historical evolution, role, methodology, and contribution to the scientific world, this paper discusses the significance of establishing a Cultural and Development Research Center in the Amhara Region (ARCDRC) to be based in the city of Bahir Dar, mainly aimed at collecting, documenting, preserving, and disseminating tangible and intangible cultural heritages. An institution of this nature, equipped with facilities such as a library, museum and archive center, each unit with its respective task of rendering wide ranging services to concerned institutions and individuals and the communities referred, through their various collections. This move, therefore, will enhance and encourage music traditions practiced in this geographic region, in addition to creating an atmosphere conducive to the study of customs and values in everyday life, community structures, gender roles, historical, political, religious, economic and cultural institutions and their functions, languages and dialects, proverbs, myths, and poetry. Prior to proceeding to the main points of this paper, it is worth giving a brief definition of the term Ethnomusicology.

Definition: As one branch of musicology, Ethnomusicology – also known as the Anthropology of Music - studies every type of music, i.e., the music of all nations, all cultures, at all times. The term musicology, that originates from the German word Musikwissenschaft, means “musical science,” a science that examines all imaginable features of music in the widest sense, among others, music history, musical styles, form, composition, instruments, harmony, counterpoint, notation, music aesthetics, music psychology, and acoustics (sound)” (Halpern 1976). The
major aim of Ethnomusicology is the researching, portraying, and documenting of music by considering its role, significance, and purpose in community life along with social, cultural, cognitive, physical, psychological, and therapeutic aspects that are closely linked with musical pleasure.

Ethnomusicology, furthermore, studies music cross-culturally. Predominantly focusing on orally transmitted cultures, scholars have, in the past, assessed the musical anthropology in numerous traditions. The focal point of ethnomusicological studies thus is based in a holistic approach. This refers to understanding the entire process whereby music is imagined, discussed, produced, and performed. These being the fact, ethnomusicologists principally study the relationship of certain musical sounds, behaviors, and ideas within a broader socio-cultural context. Comparisons of all kinds of musical behaviors and concepts practiced either within a given culture also belong to the major subject matter of ethnomusicological studies. In other words, the complete coherence of musically relevant communication structures is essential. This refers to interrelation and interaction of psychological, social, and cultural features rooted in the process of musical production and reception created and used in a certain time and space.

**History and Evolution of Ethnomusicology:** Ethnomusicology emerged as an independent scholarly discipline around the end of the nineteenth century, at first under the name “comparative musicology,” initiated by a group of German researchers among them Curt Sachs and Erich von Hornbostel, who are both viewed as pioneers of this field of study. Apart from historical and systematic musicology, which are also branches of musicology, the major aim of “comparative musicology” in the initial time tended to focus only on the study of non-Western, mainly orally transmitted, cultures that were also classified as “non-literate,” “primitive,” and “exotic” cultures, a result of a purely eurocentric
conceptualization. This Western dominated approach of non-Western music remained unchanged for more than half a century until after World War II. Thus, literature deriving from this period describes non-Western music as a lower state of music which Western societies had already gone through. For that matter, special attention was given to such music cultures with the aim of gathering essential information about the origins of music by undertaking explicit comparisons. In this regard Sangiorgio (2007: 2) states the following:

“The goal of the comparison between the different musical styles was to identify their distinctive traits and ultimately to grasp the universalia that are the foundation of the plurality of musical expressions in the world. ... 'Comparative musicology' represented a strongly innovative approach that contributed to give dignity to 'primitive music,' to sustain the existence of universal structures in music, to propose new methodological procedures of description and analysis and to provide a first systematic classification of music instruments.”

Continuous and thorough studies undertaken by quite a number of ethnomusicologists have positively contributed to significant changes in the approach to this discipline. In the 1950s this scholarly field was given a new designation, “ethnomusicology,” by Jaap Kunst, who stressed that this new term is more precise in describing the field of study compared to the previously used term "comparative musicology".

This paved the way for researchers to give more attention and take a deeper approach to the ethnological field and focus on fieldwork and intensive investigations of yet unknown music cultures. So, gradually the objects of study were no longer limited to non-Western music, but also included European folk, popular, and all other types of contemporary music and its expansion in the non-European world, and last, but not least, Western classical music (Sangiorgio 2007: 2).

International recognition and usage of the new word “ethnomusicology” was made possible after the establishment of the first academic organization, the Society for Ethnomusicology, in the United States of
America in 1955. Thus scholars not only initiated and introduced the new designation through their scientific publications, but they also worked out a more precise definition, preferring the viewpoint that this field of study should in no way be limited to the hitherto assumed “primitive” and/or “exotic” music cultures. On the contrary, it should be defined by the orientation of the scholar more than by any rigid boundaries of discourse.

**Recorded Sound and Ethnomusicology:** Ethnomusicology wouldn’t have existed long without the availability of audiovisual source materials with reproducible sound and images embodied in a carrier. Sound recording was made possible thanks to the revolutionary invention of the cylinder phonograph by Thomas Edison that was commercially offered around 1888. This technological device and its playback system not only helped to transmit and/or mediate recorded sound for scientific analysis, but also to introduce and represent music cultures as a whole. The invention of the cylinder phonograph has paved a way for the development of recording technology per se.

Among other disciplines, ethnomusicology was instrumental in managing and utilizing recorded sound. This great opportunity also encouraged and enabled scholars to undertake more fieldworks in many parts of the world and to increase the stock of sound materials. The existence of recorded music made thorough investigations and analysis of melody, rhythm, style, structure and repertoire possible. Apart from these aspects of study, this practice gradually led towards the expansion of ethnomusicologists’ scientific approaches, with the special emphasis of closely linking musical practices with culture. Although this anthropological approach already existed to a certain extent, scholars such as John Blacking and Alan P. Merriam played a significant role in promoting the understanding of music in culture through their targeted research and publications (Blacking 1973; Merriam 1964). This conceptualization, among others, deals with the function, meaning, and role of music in culture, gender, class, and
race, the interrelation of the music producer and the recipient (music made by man for man), musical instruments, their position and function, playing techniques, manufacturing methods and materials used, special characteristics, etc.

Ethnomusicology would not have had the chance to grow into the independent field of study it has become today, if sound recording, playback machines, and ongoing technological innovations hadn’t been available. Furthermore, methodological approaches wouldn’t have gone through continuous revision and rethinking. These situations led to substantial modifications and new conceptions of ethnomusicology (Simon 2008).

**Ethnomusicology for Ethiopia:** Like aural or oral history, Ethnomusicology applies to the same aims and goals that primarily focus on the collection and preservation of past and present music traditions. In Ethiopia orally transmitted cultures are still today practiced in the everyday life of the multi-nominal and multi-lingual ethnic communities. In terms of musical traditions, Ethiopia offers a mosaic of colorful customs, of which the majority is still unknown. Therefore, besides related scholarly fields like anthropology, ethnology, linguistics and history, ethnomusicological studies and their outcomes will inevitably contribute a lot to the introduction of known and yet unknown Ethiopian cultures both nationally and internationally. Through this process the long-lasting preservation of these musical cultures by means of material collection, investigation, documentation, publication, dissemination, and last but not least, their archival protection can be guaranteed, despite predictable or unpredictable changes that may, in one way or another, take place due to internal and external political, cultural, and economic transformations that may occur both regionally or nationally.
Research and Documentation Centre

**General:** The existence of museums, libraries, and archives dates back to the early history of mankind. Among others, the earliest libraries with abundant holdings existed in Greek temples and the Greek School of Philosophy about 300 B.C., and later on during the era of the Roman Empire (27 B.C. – 395 A.D.). Museums and archives along with their administrations emerged around the end of the eighteenth century. Among others, the French National Archives (*Archives de France*) established in 1794 (under the law of Messidor 7, Year II) during the time of the French Revolution belongs to the earliest institutions of this kind. At the beginning of the twentieth century similar institutions followed in other parts of Europe, such as *The Austrian Audiovisual Research Archive* in Vienna (1899) and the *Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv* (1900), the oldest audiovisual archives in the world. Today these two public archives hold rich published and unpublished audiovisual collections featuring every aspect of culture regarding the material and spiritual life of numerous communities and nations of the world. A large part of the recordings (music, films, video materials, both on analog and digital carriers) is today of incredible value. The growing interest of ethnomusicologists to record music since the beginning of the twentieth century and the gradual accumulation of sound recordings initiated the idea of collecting and preserving them. This condition was an impetus for the establishment of such Phonogram Archives with the main aim of professionally preserving materials for posterity.

**Ethiopia:** It must be noted that such institutions emerged at first in the form of cultural establishments owned by wealthy individuals, families and instructions of art (Asgedom 2007: 66). In the case of Ethiopia, predominantly religious institutions (e.g., churches) have since centuries been keeping books, manuscripts and many other historical objects, although in a very traditional manner. The origin of modern libraries in
Ethiopia may however, be traced back to the time after the Italian invasion (1941). The “Public Library” Wemezekir, founded by Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1936; 1941-1974) was for instance inaugurated in 1944. Since then this institution has been collecting historical and other materials through purchase, donation, and proclamation. Today it belongs to one of the country’s prominent public establishments, housing numerous valuable collections and preserving a good part of the cultural heritage of Ethiopia. It started providing its service at first with a collection of books that was granted by the Emperor. But it also included a museum and many other documents that gave the establishment the name “National Library, Museum and Archeology Office.”

It is obvious today, more than ever, that research and documentation centers, regardless of whether they are publicly or privately owned, are repositories of folk culture representing the identity of a community or a nation. They serve as platforms for the debate of theoretical and methodological issues. They reflect the social authenticity and, above all, the academic identity of disciplines (history, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, folklore, etc.).

A Research and Documentation Center that is planned to be established in the Amhara Region may consist of different sections/archives with various collections, accomplishing the tasks of collecting, acquiring, documenting, and disseminating the collections, according to existing national and international rules and regulations. Such a research and documentation center may include the following units:

a) A music section (audiovisual section): e.g., analog and digital recordings in various formats, musical instruments, as well as related data which serve to complement the basic information. These may, for instance, be gathered in the form of notes, sketches, and protocols during fieldwork.
b) A photographic section with photographic prints, negatives, as well as digital photographs in special picture files, with various contents reflecting the folk culture of the community. These materials may be gathered both by the research staff of the research center as well as by scholars on fieldtrips and donors representing different disciplines.

c) A multimedia section providing users with various services (internet portal with informative websites on history, geography, tradition and folklore, and ethnology) and also featuring the work of the Research and Documentation Center along with the entire infrastructure of the different sections and their relevant collections and holdings, their major tasks, aims, and goals and their offers to interested users. An internet portal will be one of the basic means of connection with similar institutions, both within Ethiopia and abroad. This will enable the Research Center to share and exchange experience and know-how, and promote its aim of preserving and employing the cultural heritage of various peoples as a natural and substantial background towards the creation of truly globalized values relevant to all humans.

d) An ethnological museum with folklore objects reflecting the Amhara culture and that of neighboring ethnic groups. It could include a section holding objects, for instance traditional utensils, clothes, and agricultural tools representing the Amhara and adjacent communities.

e) A library whose acquisitions should generally be dictated by the research interests and needs of both the research staff of the Center
as well as scholars, postgraduate students, and other researchers. The library should uninterruptedly acquire new useful materials, such as books, journals, offprints, and other local and foreign publications that are to be kept up-to-date according to an effective systematic cataloging system in manual or electronic form in order to enhance efficient accessibility.

All the so far explained sections of a research and documentation center need an effective collaborative network in order to accomplish their tasks and address demands and requests from users and beneficiaries. The Center should have duty-conscious and responsible staff members, who will not only take over the task of preserving the collected materials, but also the acquisition of new materials to suit the already existing collections. Scholars of various disciplines as well as interested individuals may be considered as volunteers readily available to donate their collections to the research and documentation center, thereby making a constructive contribution at the initial stage as well as during the entire process.

Regarding the music collection, special emphasis must be given to songs, dances, and musical instruments of the Amhara region, while the music cultures of neighboring ethnic communities should also be welcomed. Whereas these data constitute primary information, it is undeniable that additional information referring to social, cultural, religious, political, and economic circumstances should also be acquired for the sake of understanding the collected materials as precisely as possible.

**Conclusion:** There is no doubt that the establishment of a Research and Documentation Center in the Amhara Administrative Region is a big leap in this area for many reasons. The existence of such a research center will develop the musical landscape and the cultural assets of the region that will, among other things, be based on professional and extensive
fieldwork. This opportunity will initiate the collection of relevant source materials of the region’s culture on the spot. The availability of professionally collected and documented authentic audiovisual materials will not only enable scholars to carry out research on ethnomusicology, but also to offer courses of ethnomusicology, folklore, and related fields to students, as well as to encourage young scholars to trace and appreciate the musical cultures to which they belong by utilizing targeted field research and extensive scientific examination. In so doing, the need of collecting, preserving and safeguarding the rich cultural heritage will be understood, thus prompting us to protect against partial or complete disappearance of our country’s cultures and traditions.

I am prepared to contribute my part to the practical implementation of the proposed project for the establishment of an Amhara Region Culture and Development Research Center (ARCDRC) by sharing my academic background and my accumulated experience for the collection, documentation, preservation, digitization, and last but not least, dissemination of Ethiopian cultural music. In fact, it will be my greatest honor and pleasure to introduce my profession “Ethnomusicology” to my fellow citizens in my country of birth and to share my expertise with young students and scholars, who we can rely on for future developments in this and other related fields mentioned earlier in this short paper. I will support the International Advisory Board as well as the planning and coordination team in every way I can, hoping that my long-awaited dream/vision will soon turn into reality.
References


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