

## The One-Stringed Fiddle *Masinqo*: Its Function and Role in Contemporary Ethiopia and its Future

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Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

**Organology:** The *Masinqo* (also written as *Mesenqo* or *Masenqo*; figure 1) is a one-stringed spike fiddle classified to the group of the bowed-lute family<sup>2</sup>. The diamond-shaped resonator is usually constructed of four rectangular wooden boards that are glued together. The top of the opening is covered with parchment or rawhide, but also with goat or sheep skin whereas the bottom opening is closed with a wooden clog. The wooden neck or the spike of the *Masinqo* passes vertically through the resonator protruding it at its lower end. The string made of horse hair is tied at the overhanging end of the spike and it is then tied on the wooden peg called *Meqaña* that serves to tune the instrument by means of tightening or loosening. The bridge, *Birkuma*, is positioned in the centre of the sound box on the stretched membrane. The string runs through a guide hole in the bridge fixed for this purpose. Thus, the bridge serves to lift the string up to avoid vibrating sounds when the instrument is played.

The bow called *Degan* is made of a bent wooden bar. On both ends of the bow horse hair is tied. The string of the *Masinqo* can be bowed either with right or left hand hand, while the fingers of the other hand are usually positioned in the upper part of the string. The finger positioning may vary according to the desired tuning (traditional pitch sequence *Qīñit*) the musician choses (figure 2a-c). The voice range of the singer (usually the *Masinqo* player himself) is adjusted by tightening or loosening the tuning peg.

The *Masinqo* is one of the intensively used traditional music instruments in central and northern Ethiopia and thus, it is historically embodied in the music cultures of a number of ethnic communities residing here. Among them the *Oromo*, *Amara* and the *Tigray* are known for their *Masinqo* music. For that matter the instrument has a great symbolic value.

Even though the exact origin of the Ethiopian *Masinqo* is unknown, it could historically be indirectly linked with the bowed-lute *Rebab* (also *Rebap*, *Rabab*, *Rebeb*, *Rababah*, or *Al-rababa*) that was introduced to a large part of the North African region as far as the Middle East, parts of Europe and the Far East by means of the Arabic-Islamic trade routes from about the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Unlike the *Rebab*, the *Masinqo* reveals a different shape and construction and it also consists only of one string made of horse hair. This difference could be the result of a historical process of the spread of the fiddle likewise the *Rebab* as observed in many cultures of the world today. Its construction stretch from the simplest to the most sophisticated methods. So it is assumable that in the course of time variations in instrumental construction may have occurred accordingly in different regions, localities, cultures and traditions. According to Guelke (1980: 130) for instance, the fiddle was an important music instrument in the European Middle Ages being played to accompany the

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<sup>1</sup> *Masinqo*; Collection: Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES); Photo: T. Teffera, May 1997.

<sup>2</sup> However, it may sometimes also be plucked, a playing technique that is just used for creating a special sound effect and for the purpose of entertaining and attracting listeners.

songs of the 'Spielmann'. It is a very practical instrument since the musician is also able to move his body (dance) at will in order to entertain his audience. According to oral tradition the *Masingō* is closely related with the name *Izra* (*Ezra*) likewise the box-lyre *Bägänā* that is associated with the name *David*. It is commonly said: "Izra be *Masingō*; Dawit bā *Bägänā*" meaning "Izra [plai]ng] the *Masingo* and David the *Begena*". There are also epic songs in the music culture of the *Amara* and *Tigray* narrating this story (Kebede 1982: 66).

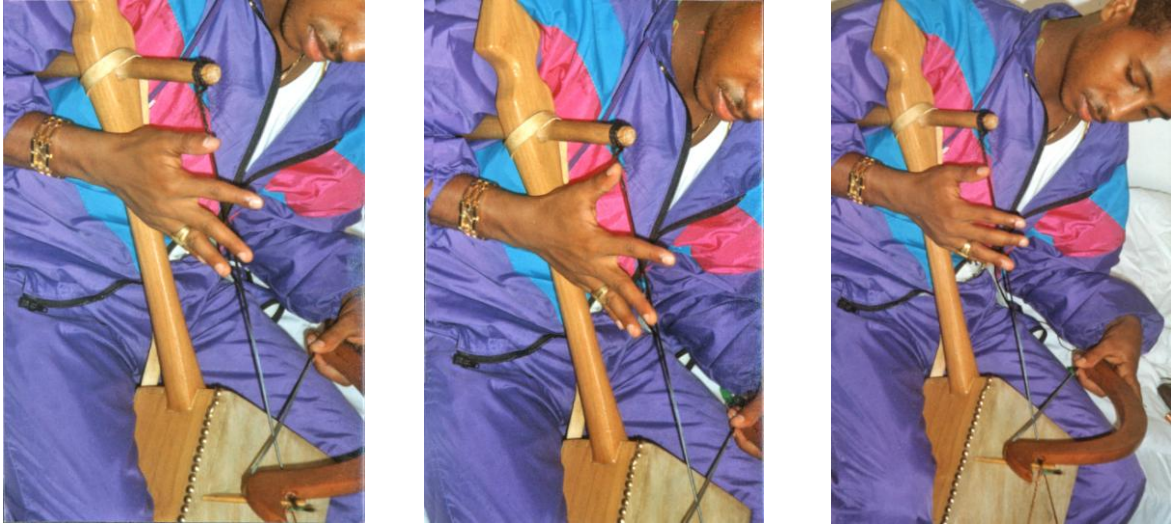


Figure 2 a-c<sup>3</sup>

The musical function of the *Masingo* is usually the accompaniment of songs. It is closely related with the traditional minstrel, poet and entertainer, the *Azmari*, also called the wandering musician.



Figure 3a



Figure 3b<sup>4</sup>



Figure 4<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Three of four widely used fingering positions on the *Masingo* based on the traditional 5- pitch sequences, *Qañat*, Musician: Abebe Fekade; Photos: T. Teffera, Ethiopian Music Festival in Berlin, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Figures 3a-b male *Azmari* accompanying himself on the *Masingo*, performing songs on a wedding ceremony in *Meqelle*, *Tigray*, Photo: T. Teffera, August 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *Azmari* couple performing songs in a traditional pub in *Gonder*, Photo: T. Teffera, May 1997.

According to my observations and fieldworks conducted in central and northern Ethiopia in the towns of *Gojjam*, *Gondär* and *Meqelle*, it is a very usual scene that *Azmari* musicians perform songs on various social and cultural occasions like for instance a wedding ceremony (fig. 3a-b). The traditional bars called *Azmari-Bet* [*Azmari* house] furthermore belong to the places where *Azmari* music is enjoyed in the evenings. The *Azmari* performs his songs as a solo musician, but he may also be escorted by a female musician who is also called *Azmari* (fig. 4).

Both musicians usually play predetermined roles and thus complement one another. The male *Azmari* who almost always plays the *Masingo* sings and accompanies himself and his female partner on the instrument, whereas the female *Azmari* is predominantly responsible for dancing, hand clapping and for the overall entertainment of the audience. In certain gaps she also overtakes the singing. These performance styles are usually very successful and attractive as well, if especially both musicians possess adequate know-how of the traditional music repertoire and a good experience in performing music as a couple. Apart from that, a naturally gifted voice is of course the best prerequisite to entertain listeners. The song repertoire of the *Azmari* primarily consists of entertainment and love songs that are mainly performed solo. Figure 5 for instance shows a musical notation of the love song (solo) in titled "*Yematibela Wef*" [ineadible bird]. The *Azmari* accompanies himself on the *Masingo*. At first a long instrumental prelude of the main melody is played by the *Masingo* (see bars 1–48; Music example 4). The vocal part - accompanied by the *Masingo* - begins in bar 49. At the end of the stanza the *Masingo* plays a short interlude from bar 81 onwards. One of the characteristic features of the *Azmari* songs accompanied by the *Masingo* is that both vocal and instrumental parts mainly comprise analogous melodic and metro-rhythmic structures. All the breaks and/or gaps in the vocal part are filled with appropriate *Masingo* parts as can be observed in the musical notation.

Apart from adult *Azmari* who usually perform their music in the traditional *Azmari* houses, one may also observe quite a number of child musicians during the day time on the streets of the cities of *Bahir Dar* and *Gonder* who are about 9 - 14 years of age. Holding the *Masingo* in their hands and offering short and spontaneous music performance on the streets, they try to be centre of attention attracting passers-by. In this way many of them make some money for their daily survival<sup>6</sup>. This fact reveals how the *Masingo* playing tradition, the music repertoire as well as the status and role of the *Azmari* are orally transmitted from the older to the younger generation.

Although the *Masingo* playing tradition and its role is still practised in rural Ethiopia reflecting the daily life of the communities concerned, its use in cosmopolitan cities such as *Addis Ababa*, *Bahir Dar*, *Meqelle* or *Gonder* is gradually diminishing due to contemporary ("modern") worldly music trends that are increasingly influencing the traditional music since decades. The profession of the *Azmari* who preserved the *Masingo* playing culture until today, is not being adequately replaced by young musicians. Furthermore, since the skill of singing and playing the *Masingo* remains for a great number of musicians (especially city dwellers) a supplementary occupation, it is seldom taken seriously. In other words *Masingo* playing mainly serves the own entertainment and it is rather considered as an alternative means of income, if there is a possibility.

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<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork in *Gojjam* and *Gonder* 1997; for detailed information about child musicians see Teffera 1999.

As a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country, Ethiopia is also a place where the migration of people from rural to urban centres is very high. This condition refers to the whole social strata of the rural community and so it includes the *Azmari* musicians as well. One of the main migratory centres is the Ethiopian capital, *Addis Ababa*, that has today become the residence of a large number of *Azmariwoc* (plural of *Azmari*). Approximately 40% of them finance their living with their music, whereas 60% practices music as a derivative job likewise their counterparts (primarily farmers) living in rural Ethiopia.

Figure 5: Love Song (solo): *Yematibela Wef* ["Inedible Bird"]; *Masingo* accompaniment

♩. = 105

**Masingo - introduction**

The musical score consists of two staves: the upper staff for the vocal line and the lower staff for the *Masingo* accompaniment. The tempo is marked as ♩. = 105. The score is divided into measures numbered 1 through 55. The vocal line includes the following lyrics:

awrāg  
masinqō

yā--- ma-ti bā- ---la wā--- ---fi tā-- yi- za bā--ci-

---ra yā- ma--fi --bā-- --la wā----- --fi (i)-tā- yi--- --za bā--ci--

56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63

---ra (ā)-li- ben a-dā- ma-- --ciwu al-ma --ze bo--- caci--ra bo--- ca-----ci

64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71

---ra (ā)-li--- ben a-dā-- ma-- --ciwu al-ma --ze bo--- caci--ra bo---

72 73 74 75 76 77 78

**Masingo interlude**

ca-----ci ---ra

79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86

ca-----ci ---ra

87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94

ca-----ci ---ra

95 96

Since the early 1990s changes have taken place in the musical life as well as in the social status of the *Azmari* permanently with regard to his evening performances in traditional music houses and pubs in *Addis Ababa*. As a result the *Masingo* is gradually being replaced by keyboards. Instead of the purely traditional music modern “popular” songs with some touch of traditional music styles have dominated in the past decades. The *Azmariwoc* who once performed their traditional music accompanying themselves on the *Masingo* are nowadays also becoming singers being accompanied by a one-band keyboard. Nevertheless,



their singing style has to a great part remained within the traditional pattern that requires virtuoso arrangements of the *Qīñitoc*, i.e. the traditional modes widely used in these music cultures of the Central Highland of Ethiopia.

The songs performed can still be identified in their overall musical construction and their lyric as well, but they are arranged with new instrumental preludes, interludes and the latest rhythmic versions like for instance reggae, samba, rock & roll and rap on the keyboard. Hence this situation may prove that the songs are subjected to the European chordal harmonization. Therefore, they differ from the traditional music style substantially and not only in their insufficient intervallic relationships. The keyboard players are usually young musicians between 20 and 35 years of age performing "pop" songs and also fuse "modern" and traditional music; that means for instance traditional songs either accompanied only by modern musical instruments or by modern and traditional music instruments simultaneously. On the one hand they try to gain a new originality which "pays off", but on the other hand, they lose the individuality, they are exchangeable and arbitrarily applicable. The intensified destructive competitions in the area of music production has rather caused a standardization in the arrangement and thus the musicians or the music producers are less involved and interested in the artistic and aesthetic presentation and selection of music according to the principle of the traditional creativity of the *Azmariwoc* in singing **and** playing the instruments.

Therefore, the *Azmariwoc* are just "exotic" entertainers who are accompanied by the young city musicians (with an untrained know-how of the *Masingo* playing technique) on a more expensive looking and simultaneously unsuitable substitute. The number of traditional pubs in *Addis Ababa* has diminished to a large extent. Musical performances and/or events have become more uniform these days. The traditional *Azmari* who used to be a culturally indispensable specialist, has nowadays changed his attitude/outlook towards music making. With very few exceptions, the *Azmari* has become a kind of a "doesn't matter" service man. Along with the modern/new trends of music and all accompanying changes, the local music business begun to flourish starting from around 1970. At the same time an increasing number of *Azmariwoc* left the traditional pubs and joined "modern" music bands. "Pop singers" of today like for instance *Elias Tebabal* and *Shambel Belayneh* were at first very well-known and recognized as traditional singers accompanying themselves on the *Masingo*. They moved from their rural birth places to *Addis Ababa*, gained great success as musicians and had enjoyed a high reputation. Today, however, they are no longer active in the traditional music sector. They rather have put down their *Masingos* aside and live abroad as all-in-one singers accompanied by modern music ensembles or bands.

The continuously growing consumption of commercial music cassettes particularly in urbanized areas leads the musicians to a comparatively high income as well as a better life standard so that they predominantly focus on the commercial side of music making. As a result they ignore the importance of maintaining their traditional music, i.e. singing and instrument playing.

Compared to the rural community, the urban population is divided into different social classes. Therefore it has to be observed in a more differentiated way than the farmers residing in rural Ethiopia who are to a large extent put on an equal status. In the city we may for example observe people belonging to various ethnic communities who migrated from the different rural areas and settled scattered and are socially always treated separately.



"new comer" migrates into the city. In such cases, they will only have chance to make a career as "pop singers", or they totally give up and stop their musical pursuit.

The population of rural Ethiopia on the other hand, has a limited offer namely only the music that is represented in accompaniment with the *Masingo*. Thus, as far as there are no further offers the tradition continues living without any interruption. For the rural inhabitants tradition is something that is accompanying and reflecting the everyday life. For that matter they are not aware of the fact that the reason of the continuity of their tradition above all lies in the fact that there are no alternatives possible. Only few young people who had the opportunity to learn or work in a big city for a period of time are conscious about the existing differences and urge (at first still as outsiders) for "modernization" in their music. The use of radios and tape recorders is however, mostly dependent on battery operation and the quality is so poor that it seems ridiculous compared to live performances on the *Masingo*. Here the valuation of modern technical devices like e.g. radio, tape recorder and television as status symbols rather plays an essential role and therefore, the acceptance of the music consumed by using such devices is smaller. The population also belongs to the same social strata (i.e. that of the farmers) so that also in this regard very few differences might be made.

The musical perception particularly of the today's Ethiopian youth differs much from earlier times and generations. Very rapid socio-cultural changes along with the notion of modern civilization (industrialization), economic and scientific development simultaneously create nonspecific necessities and consequently a cultural shock, that would shift those very respected and eminent traditions that were intensively practised some decades ago. Within short periods of time, such changes have completely influenced sectors of existing traditional institutions, including music as discussed in this paper. In this regard medias (radio and television) have also played their part, since they must also be intent on making their profit, because the majority of their consumers, who insatiably look for new entertainment, are city dwellers. Media programs that are arranged under these circumstances affect the people to the extent, that they would no longer be able to understand their historically embodied traditional values as such. Instead they are influenced and motivated to listen to trendy songs with new melodic and rhythmic styles performed by modern music bands. Particularly regrettable is in addition the bad cassettes recording quality (today CDs and DVDs) that unfortunately belongs to the modern trends like the "modernized and acculturated" songs of the *Azmari*.

One can neither stop historical developments nor change them substantially, but it is the task of each ethnomusicologist to contribute his part to thorough studies of music along with its historical, social and cultural background by means of field researches, documentations and preservations of source materials. It is also important to introduce the examined music not only nationally but also internationally.



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