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THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC AMONG EAST AFRICAN SOCIETIES¹: THE CASE OF SELECTED AEROPHONES

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S u b j e c t: Social status, significance, function, role and historical evolution of traditional music instruments among East African communities in general and selected aerophones (solo and ensemble).

Purpose of study: To study the abundant types of traditional music instruments, especially aerophones occuring in the music cultures of East Africa and to suggest a few methods of research approach and musical analysis.

Methods: Historical, descriptive, analysis of musical transcriptions.

Keywords: East African kingdoms, court music, traditional music instruments, aerophones, ensemble music, hoquet style, polyphonic, polyrhythmic.

Among traditional East African communities music making is closely related with and recognized as a social activity that fosters and reinforces communal unity². Besides songs and dances, music instruments certainly play a vital role in many events as well.

First of all, mention must be made, that traditional East African musical instruments are not only limited to the abundant types of drums or xylophones as it is widely believed and with which even the entire African continent is often identified (Károlyi 1998: 3; Kubik 1983: 27). Instead, all four major groups of instruments (chordophones, membranophones, aerophones and idiophones) with diverse construction methods, materials, shapes, playing and tuning techniques, scales, musical styles and repertoires are represented in this geographic region³.

The traditional music of East Africa has gone through many changes caused by historical, political, economic and socio-cultural evolutions that have been taking place since early periods up to the present day without interruption. Thus, its musical landscape has become what it si today (see Kubik 1988: 16). The external and internal migrations⁴, the Islamic expansion in the 7th century A.D.⁵ and the European colonisation in the 19th centrury are some of the major factors that should be taken into closer consideration when tracing back East Africa's music history.

With regard to the development of indegineous music and musical instruments and their longlasting preservation, East African traditional kingdoms which existed in Sudan⁶, Ethiopia⁷, Uganda⁸, Rwanda⁹, Burundi, Tanzania and in the East African coast¹⁰, have inevitably played a vital role. In such kingdoms traditional musical instruments among others served as symbols of status and authority. Though, apart from their symbolic significance, the traditional rulers themselves have fostered their intensive use. Through the patronage of such leaders, musicians got the opportunity to develop their artistic skills to perfection not only by practising musical instruments, but also by performing court music on every occasion¹¹. Therefore, for most of them, music making was their major occupation.

Predominantly drums sets have intensively been used in many East African courts. Apart from their use as typical signal instruments for transmitting messages to the masses (for example in the kingdom of *Buganda* in Uganda), their presence in almost all musical events has always been very common. For instance, accompanying songs and dances, processions, state proclamations, and royal coronations has been a very common practise.



Fig. 1. Kettle-drum negarit.12

Some of the former Ethiopian Emperors for instance possessed large numbers of kettledrums called *negarit* (fig. 1). These drums were among others used on various state occasions as well as on very special festivities related with the kingdoms and the royal regalia.

The very famous royal drums of the *kabaka*¹³ (king) of *Buganda* in Central Uganda belonged to the most honourable music instruments as well. Drums usually played in sets thus accompanied almost every step of the *kabaka*;

i.e. nearly all his private and official activities throughout the day. Drums were played on departure and arrival of the *kabaka* from and to the palace, when he woke up in the morning, when he welcomed his guests, when he demanded private entertainments et cetera (Kubik 1982: 16; Cooke 1988: 601–602).

Aerophones played and still play a significant role in the music traditions of the East African communities. As court instruments, aerophones also served the royal regalia within the respective kingdoms for centuries. This refers to nearly all types of aerophones, namely end-blown, stopped, transverse and oblique flutes, trumpets and horns with and without finger holes made of bamboo, wood, calabash, animal horns, plastic and metal tubes of various sizes and shapes et cetra. They were played both as solo and in sets on various both private and offical occasions. Some of the instruments played in the courts included:

— end-blown notched flutes *endere* of the *Baganda* in Central Uganda which are made of bamboo with four finger holes (fig. 2);

- end-blown flutes *embilta* made of bamboo or metal tubes without finger holes (fig. 3) as well as the end-blown flute *meleket* made of wood and used by the *Amara* and *Tigray* of Central Ethiopia;
- the conical oboe *nzumari* or *zumari* made of horn, wood and metal consisting of 4–6 finger holes (fig.4) and the side-blown metal trumpet *siwa* used in *Swahili*-speaking regions of the East African coast of Kenya and Tanzania (fig. 5);
- stopped bamboo flutes *bol* of the *Berta* from West Ethiopia and South Sudan (fig. 6a-c);
- side blown horns such as *amagwara* and *amakondere* from Uganda and Rwanda and
- end-blown trumpets of the *Berta* (Ethiopia, Sudan) called *waza* that are constructed of conical segments of calabash and fit in one another like a telescope in combination with the side blown goat horn *angari* and the wooden ideophone *bulu-pale* (fig. 7a-c).

Even though East African kingdoms do no longer exist today, they have left us a large portion of musical and instrumental traditions.







Fig. 3. Flutes *embilta*.¹⁵



Fig. 4. Oboe zumari.¹⁶



Fig. 5. Side-blown metal trumpet *Siwa /* East African Coast.



Fig. 6a. Stopped bol flutes partially.



Fig. 6b. *Bol negero* group partially (see also trumpets).



Fig. 6c. Kettle-drum *negero* played with two wooden sticks.

My ethnomusicological fieldwork conducted in five East African countries, namely Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in 2005 showed that – apart from those musical instruments which served in the above mentioned kingdoms uncountable types of aerophones are used in the various musical cultures and / or communities of this region. In this article, attention has been given to some typical aerophones that are played in sets.

Aerophone ensembles in East Africa often refer to flutes, trumpets and horns. Flute ensembles predominantly use stopped bamboo flutes without finger holes. They are of different sizes¹⁷ and usually produce a single pitch. In trumpet ensembles, on the other hand, open-ended tubes made of segments of gourd and calabash are used. Similar to the flutes, the trumpets are also of various sizes, but their tubes have no finger holes. Depending on their various lengths, they may produce the technical keynote as well as the overtones through overblowing. Compared to flutes and trumpet ensembles, horn ensembles are very rare. It is very doubtful that horn ensembles like that of the amakondere played in sets of eight, twelve, even up to sixteen instruments from the former kingdoms of Uganda and Rwanda are still practised in these regions.

The number of instruments used in the various aerophne ensembles differs both locally and regionally. Such ensembles

may additionally perform in combination with drums, rattles, wooden concussion ideophones, ancle bells et cetera.

The use of the hoquet technique is very important in constructing a complete melodic line. The hoquet style in combination with the creation of polyphonic and polyrhythmic patterns is widely spread and applied in East African aerophone ensemble performances, as well as in other instrumental and vocal music practises of East African traditional music. One of the famous communities using abundant types of aerophone ensembles in East Africa are the *Berta* who reside along the boarders of West Ethiopia and South Sudan as already mentioned. As an example the *bol negero* ensemble (also called *balu naggaru, bol naggara, bul nagaro*) of the *Berta* from Ethiopia will be examined.

The term *bol negero* refers to a "flute-drum" ensemble. Nevertheless, occasionally end-blown trumpets are added to this ensemble for the purpose of tone quality. Therefore, the *bol negero* ensemble discussed here consists of nineteen stopped flutes, *bol*, one kettle-drum, *negero*, and two end-blown calabash trumpets which makes a total amount of twenty-two instruments.

The number of instruments used in such ensembles varies from one *Berta* village to the other, but at least five to eight instruments representing the respective scale are unquestionably required. Every other instrument added to the ensemble is – as already mentioned – only related with the ambition of creating tonal quality and thus reinforcing specific pitches.

The construction of flutes belonging to one ensemble is usually carried out by one professional maker who – in the process of construction – fixes the required pitch for each instrument simultaneously. In most cases the flutes are constructed from the shortest to the longest flute successively, i.e. from the highest to the lowest pitch in descending order. Followingly, the pitches are tested by playing the instruments in sets in order to make final corrections. Likewise the flutes, similar construction methods and procedures are applied to sets of trumpets and horns as well.



Fig. 7a. Waza trumpets.18



Fig. 7b. Horn angari.



Fig. 7c. Ideophone bulu-pale.

In the traditional music of the *Berta* usually five to six pitches play a dominant role in a given musical piece. The same scales are also applied to their widely practised flute and trumpet ensembles. Intervalls between the respective pitches are mostly limited to major seconds and thirds as well as to approximate minor thirds, although at times major seconds may also appear. Nevertheless, it is important to note, that "pitches" discussed in relation to traditional African music in general, should never be perceived from a Western musical point of view. Above all, they should never be compared with the Western tempered notation system or with equal temperament. Micro tonal deviations that do not correspond to the equal temperament may certainly occur quite often in African traditional music, although these micro tonal deviations are not recognized as such by the culture bearers.

The usage of large ensembles with, for example, 8, 10, 12, 15, 22 aerophones that create a wide tonal range of two, three or more octaves, also belongs to a very common feature among the *Berta*. This can, for instance, be observed in the case of the *bol negero* scale shown (fig. 8). For the purpose of finding out the precise frequency of every pitch, it was inevitable to apply acoustical measurements by means of the spectrum analysis.



Fig. 8. Bol negero ensemble scale represented in descending order.

Each vertical line of the graphic representation shows the basic frequency domain and the related pitches (overtones) of every instrument used in the *bol negero* ensemble. The maximum frequency is 3 kHz. The pitches given in the staff correspond to those demonstrated on the flutes and trumpets according to their traditional sequence. The frequency lies between 1.480,4 Hz for the highest and 159.75 Hz for the lowest pitch. Though, clearly visible frequencies show only the flutes 1 to 15 as well as the two end-blown trumpets. The longer the tube, the more difficult it becomes to produce the technical keynote easily. This problem was observed in the flutes 17 to 19 which mainly produce the partial tones rather than the keynote¹⁹.

The roughly estimated intervals are m3-M2 M2-m3... et cetera (m = minor; M Major). On the other hand, the two end-blown trumpets show an interval of a major third (g- e^b).

Short, repeated polyrhythmic and polyphonic patterns characterize the aerophone ensembles of the *Berta*. This very typical phenomenon is also applied in various ensemble music of East Africa.

Every music tradition possesses its own rules and concepts that will enable musicians to perform music accordingly. In such aerophone ensembles, the contribution of all instrument players – who are expected to insert their melodic-rhythmic note(s) and / or fragment(s) at appropriate time is very essential. For that matter the musician should orient themselves to specific points of reference (Kubik 1988: 91). A fragment of the music piece performed by the *bol negero* ensemble proves this observation (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Extract from a *bol negero* musical piece. Date / place of recording: Timkehet Teffera, 13.02.2005; Inzi Shederia / Assosa / West Ethiopia.

The musical notation in figure 9 shows the melodic patterns and their variation played by all flutes and trumpets of the *bol negero* ensemble (the kettle-drum *negero* is not used in this piece). Each melodic phrase (= passage, course et cetera) is devided into 18 elementary pulses of which the smallest note value is a sixteenth beat.

The concept and use of elementary pulses in African music is the most practical method to analyse and followingly understand the rules and structures of melodic and metro-rhythmic courses.

Every aerophone ensemble in East Africa possesses its own characteristic features, which distinguishes it from others both from the musical and socio-cultural contexts. However, we may observe characteristic similarities in a great number of ensembles. These are among other things:

- the use of specific types of music instruments like for instance stopped flutes;
- the typical playing methods and playing techniques of instruments;
- dance styles and synchronized body movements which are often concentrated on rhythmic foot steps;
- spontaneous formations of dancing lines and circles as well as;
- gender specific issues; i.e. the clearly defined division of roles of female and male musicians during a performance.

Aerophone ensembles are performed on various occasions such as for entertainment, public holidays, funerals, weddings, rituals, initiations as well as before and after harvest seasons accordingly. Therefore, such occasions mostly possess a functional character that is closely linked with the community's everyday life. Aerophone ensembles perform purely instrumental music combined with traditional dances, but they also accompany songs and dances in which both male and female community members often participate actively.

Aerophones are principally or even exclusively played by men. In some regions it is even taboo for women to touch certain types of music instruments. Therefore, they usually take part in singing, dancing combined with hand clapping and ululating. Occasionally though, they may additionally accompany flute or trumpet ensembles by keeping time with concussion idiophones like for instance in the case of the *pile* flute ensemble of the South Ethiopian *Maale*. Here some three, four or five female musician play the wooden ideophones called *gaylo*, which additionally accentuates the rhythmic structure of the respective music when played in groups. Similarly in the *waza* trumpet ensemble of the *Berta*, about four to six female participants usually shake gourd rattles while they simultaneously sing and dance.

In very exceptional cases though, we may observe women musicians playing flutes in ensembles along with their male counterparts. This was observed among the *Maale* people of South Ethiopia. Female flute players actively participated in the *pile* flute ensemble, in which eight to nine stopped flutes are played in sets accompanied by dancing.

The above descriptions of East African music instruments, particularly aerophone ensembles, is a very small portion of my recent research project on this region. This article has so far shown that East Africa, specifically in terms of its various types of aerophones performed both in solo and ensembles and related musical styles is a completely untouched area of study. However, it would be impossible to discuss all available aerophones in East Africa within the scope of this article. Therefore, an attempt has been made to provide the reader with efficient information as far as possible especially on aerophone ensembles which might stimulate scholars to conduct fieldworks and research studies not only in ethnomusicology, but also in related desciplines in the future.

The appendix offers a relatively rough list of data based on so far collected first and second hand information; i.e. fieldwork in East Africa (2005), authentic audiovisual recordings made on the field as well as references of accessible materials (e.g. literatures; very few academic works and music instrument collections in national museums both in Europe and Africa). Organological details of the aerophones, their specific classifications in groups and sub-groups; their analogous music repertoires, playing techniques, the usage of their musical and / or instrumental styles (both locally and regionally); their musical and non-musical functions, gender related issues and the role of society in culture will be focal points of my future studies on this region.

Conclusion

East Africa is known for the use of its abundant types of music instruments that are played on different occasions. Traditional music instruments among other things served in the various kingdoms as court music instruments predominantly for the entertainment of the royal regalia. Based on a six month lasting ethnomusicological fieldwork in five East African countries, namely Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (February–July 2005), this paper deals with selected types of aerophones used in East Africa. Although the main objective of this research focussed on all blowing instruments regardless of their types, here only selected aerophones have been discussed in terms of their historical and cultural origins, methods of construction, usage of materials and scales, their musical and / or non-musical functions and last but not least their gender specific roles.

Therefore, special attention has been given to aerophones played in ensembles. This refers predominantly to closed bamboo flutes and open-ended calabash trumpets without finger holes. Each of these instruments usually produces a single tone so that a full melodic line will be created while playing together. For that matter, the typical hoquet style is used. The melodic phrases are mostly repeated in a cyclic form. Additionally other music instruments such as gourd or calabash rattles, drums and wooden concussion idiophones also play an important role in accompanying the flute or trumpet ensembles.

NOTES

¹ The East African region geographically refers to the countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Southeast Sudan, Tanzania, North Zambia and Malawi as well as Rwanda und Burundi.

² Therefore, music events mirroring the everyday life events like birth, death, marriage, initiation ceremonies, communal acitivities, weddings, funerals, sacred rituals, healing rites are carried out throughout the year. It would not be an exaggeration to state, that almost every musical event is predominantly marked by functional music fitting to the given situation. Most important however, is the active participation of the community expressed in many different ways. Thus musical professionalism is not a necessity for participating in musical performances (see also Nketia 2000: 33).

³ Musical instruments may at times differ considerably according to locality and region as well as their social, psychological, therapeutic and pedagogic roles within a given society. On the other hand though, there are also instruments distributed in a certain geographic area for historical reasons (for example harps and lyres).

⁴ Migrations were not limited within the East African territory, but they also took place in neighbouring African regions towards East Africa (e.g. the great Bantu migration about 1000–1500 years ago). Main reasons of migration were, among others, the search for fertile land, inter-ethnic conflicts, natural catastrophes, overpopulations and epidemics.

⁵ East African regions which came into contact with Islam are, for instance, the Kenyan and Tanzanian boarders along the Indian Ocean including the islands Zansibar and Pemba. The Islamic expansion mainly came into being due to the great interest in the Muslim world (also India) and in the strategic importance of this area for commercial traffic. As a result the so-called Swahili culture, a mixture of indigenous African Bantu and Arabic, emerged.

⁶ As an example, the kingdom of Sennar from the early 16th century could be mentioned.

 7 For example the periods of the Emperors Menelik II (1889–1913) and Haile Silassie I (1930–1974).

⁸ The four famous kingdoms of Central and South Uganda were *Buganda*, *Bunyoro*, *Toro* and *Ankole*. All of them are of *Bantu* origins.

⁹ The *Tutsi* kingdom of the l6th century, the royal courts of the kings and their chieftains were centres of cultural life. Extraordinary musical performances took place very often in these coutrs. It was also customary that several musical genres as well as musical instruments were associated.

¹⁰ Omani – Arab kingdom starting from the 9th century.

¹¹ Cooke 1988: 601.

¹² The use of the *negarit* was predominantly limited to the Central Ethiopia region. The photo shows one of the music instrument collection of the IES-Museum at the Addis Abeba University; Photo: Timkehet Teffera: Addis Abeba, March 1993

¹³ The term *kabaka* refers to the titles of the Bugandan kings who successively ruled from the late 14th century until 1969. The first *kabaka* was called *Kintu*, whereas the last was the *Kabaka Mutesa* II.

¹⁴ Photo: Timkehet Teffera: Kampala, May 2005

¹⁵ Music Instrument Collection of the Yared School of Music; Photo: Timkehet Teffera: Addis Abeba, February 2005.

¹⁶ Made and used in the 19th century in Pate Island; Collection of the Mombassa Museum in Kenya; Photo: Timkehet Teffera: Mombassa, June 2005.

 17 Average length of tubes are 20 to 75 cm, whereas the diameters of the blowing openings span from 2–5 cm.

¹⁸ Photos figures 7 a-c: Timkehet Teffera: Gambella Village / Assosa district, West Ethiopia, February 2005.

¹⁹ For technical reasons the basic frequency of flute number 19 could not be found out at all, because while blowing the player's breath was heard rather than an obviously identifiable pitch. Nevertheless, it could possibly be the note G or its partials.

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TRADICINĖS MUZIKOS VAIDMUO RYTŲ AFRIKOS ŠALIŲ VISUOMENĖJE: KAI KURIE PUČIAMIEJI INSTRUMENTAI

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Santrauka

Rytų Afrika neturėtų būti laikoma vien tik visokiausių tipų būgnais garsėjančiu regionu, nors šiuos instrumentus dažnai galime išgirsti daugelyje čionykščių bendruomenių. Žinoma, būgnų muzika labai svarbi muzikiniame Rytų Afrikos šalių gyvenime, tačiau pažymėtina, jog įvairiomis progomis grojama visoms keturioms pagrindinėms muzikos instrumentų grupėms priskiriamais instrumentais. Dėl to straipsnyje aptarsime kai kurių pučiamųjų, Rytų Afrikos bendruomenių liaudies arba tradicinėse muzikinėse kultūrose laikomų klasikiniais instrumentais, naudojimą.

Ankstesniais laikais nemaža tradicinių muzikos instrumentų vaidino svarbų vaidmenį daugelyje Rytų Afrikos valdovų dvarų: jie būdavo pasitelkiami tiek privatiems pasilinksminimams, tiek oficialiomis bei valstybinėmis progomis. Kai kurie muzikos instrumentai taip pat pabrėždavo ypatingą garbę ir valdžią. Šiuo požiūriu ryškiausi pavyzdžiai galėtų būti senoviniai Bugandos ir Bunjoro dvarai centrinėje Ugandoje. Šie dvarai tebegyvuoja ir šiandien, nors ankstesnę politinę valdžią jau yra praradę ir tenkinasi vien kultūrine įtaka.

Remdamasi per šešių mėnesių kelionę po penkias istoriškai giminingas Rytų Afrikos šalis (jos metu buvo stengiamasi fiksuoti, aprašyti ir ištirti visus pasitaikančius pučiamųjų instrumentų tipus) surinkta medžiaga, straipsnio autorė mėgina aptarti tik tam tikro tipo pučiamuosius, kuriais paprastai grojama grupėmis. Trumpai apžvelgiamos ir istorinės bei kultūrinės šių instrumentų ištakos, jų gamybos būdai ir medžiagos, garsaeiliai ir muzikinės bei nemuzikinės jų funkcijos.

APPENDIX

LIST OF AEROPHONE ENSEMBLES IN EAST AFRICA

FLUTES / PANPIPES

		classification			tube	shapes			
No.	ensemble	end-blown	stopped	finger holes	conical	cylindrical	material	community	country
1	abbi		x	none		x	bamboo	Berta	Ethiopia
2	andinga		x	none		x	bamboo	Gumuz	Sudan
3	afyanza		x	none		x	bamboo	Komo	Ethiopia
4	akalere	x		4		x	bamboo	Busoga	Uganda
5	bal		x	none		x	bamboo	Ingasana	Sudan
6	bol negero		x	none		x	bamboo, calabash	Berta	Ethiopia
7	fila		X	none		х	bamboo	Gidole	Ethiopia
8	embilta	x		none		x	metal, wood	Tigray, Amara	Ethiopia
9	endere	x		4		х	bamboo	Baganda	Uganda
10	eruma		X	none		х	bamboo	Amba	Uganda
11	mbasi		X	none		x	reed	Wasangu	Tanzania
12	kome mdinga	x		none	x		wood	Gumuz	Sudan
13	kumia urma	x		none	x		wood	Gumuz	Ethiopia
14	kumurere	x		2		x	bamboo	Gishu	Uganda
15	meleket	x		none		x	wood, metal	Amara	Ethiopia
16	osegu		X	none		X	bamboo	Madi	Uganda
17	pilea		X	none		X	bamboo	Malē	Ethiopia
18	woissa		X	none		X	bamboo	Ari	Ethiopia

PANPIPES

1	enkwanzi	X	none	x	bamboo, elephant grass	Busoga	Uganda
2	eruma	X	none	x	bamboo	Amba, Konjo	Uganda
3	oseke	х	none	x	?	Alur	Uganda

TRUMPETS / HORNS

		classif	ication		t	ube shape	es			
No.	ensemble	end-blown	trans-verse	finger holes	conical	globular	cylindrical	material	community	country
1	abu	X		none	x			gourd segments	Luo	Kenia
2	adolo		X	none				wood and calabash	?	Sudan
3	agwara at zeu		X	none	X			wood	Alur	Uganda
4	agwara at payda		x	none	x			wood	Alur	Uganda
5	amakondere, makondere		x	none	X			wood, animal horn	Baganda, Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, Busoga	Uganda, Rwanda Burundi
6	aporo	X		none			X	wood	Karamoja	Uganda
7	arupepe		x	none				wood	Karamoja, Teso	Uganda
8	asukusuk	X		none			X	wood and gourd	Teso	Uganda
9	dinke		X	none	X		x	bamboo and animal horn	Welayitta, Hadiya	Ethiopia
10	dussul	X		none	X		x	plastic tube and gourd	Nymang	Sudan
11	eggwara, akawunde or kawunde	X			X			gourd segments	Ganda	Uganda
12	gwara me akuta		X	none			X	wood	Lango	Uganda
13	hura		X	none			X	wood	Keffa	Ethiopia
14	icombi	X		none		X	x	wood and gourd	Gishu	Uganda
15	kanga or akanga			none	X			gourd	Dajo, Lotuko & Bur	Sudan
16	kanga		X	none			X	wood	Alur	Uganda
17	kurumbe		X	none	X			wood	Komo	Ethiopia
18	likhaanga		X	none	X			wood and animal horn	Luluhya	Uganda
19	limba	X		none	X			wood	Madi	Uganda

		classifi	ication		tube shapes					
No.	ensemble	end-blown	trans-verse	finger holes	conical	globular	cylindrical	material	community	country
21	poreresa	X		none	x			wood	Welayitta	Ethiopia
22	tum		х	none	X			wood	Acholi	Uganda
23	turi or ture turungule		X	none	x			wood	Madi	Uganda
24	uluru or luru	X		none		X	x	bamboo and gourd	Madi, Lugbara	Uganda
25	vipenga		X	none		X+s- shaped		gourd	Wanyakyusa	Tansania
26	waza	X		none	x			calabash segments	Berta	Ethiopia, Sudan

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