Private Matters: Song, Thought, and Autobiographical Memory in the Ethiopian Highlands

[Draft version]

> *Before Swann had had time to understand what was happening, to think: "it's the little phrase from Vinteuil's sonata. I mustn't listen", all his memories of the days when Odette had fallen in love with him [...] had awakened from their slumber, had taken wing and risen to sing maddeningly in his ears, without pity for his present desolation, the forgotten strains of happiness* (Proust 1922)

"I can see him", Chalo said. "Whenever I sing this song, I can see my father standing right here in from of me. His voice is bright and he holds his rifle just like a hunter". This was not his first time mentioning how music would bring back memories of the days before his father, now in prison for murder, left their home as a fugitive. The then seventeen-year old would often go to the river just before dark, sit on the bank, and stare into the forest on the other side, softly whistling or singing in his unstable voice. That's when the memories would come to him, sometimes in extended series: "that night we were together at the camp, he sang all these poems. Now it's like he is here with me again, and it makes me feel happy"[1]. Struck by the sudden changes of mood, the frequent tears, and the seeming accuracy of his recollections, I started wondering how and why music exercised such a power on his memory.

What's on their minds? Music and the inner life

Perhaps it is a general predisposition of some sort that lends that power to music (any music). Proust gave us one of the most beautiful (though fictional) accounts of a musical reminiscence; but he was hardly the first. Rousseau, in his *Encyclopédie de musique* (1768), tells of a certain "ranz des vaches", an air dear to the Swiss that would stir their memories of the homeland and bring them to tears. It might very well be that music act as a "can opener" for our memories (Sacks 2007). A few psychological studies (Baumgartner 1992, Schulkind *et al* 1999) have investigated the phenomenon – coining it as the "they're playing our song" effect – in an attempt to define the extent of this power. Their rather scant results, which point to the influence of emotions, are supported by clinical accounts of preserved memories,

[1] November 2006. All names were changed for privacy reasons.

among Alzheimer's patients, in the context of emotional tunes (Samson *et al* 2009). A recent study in neuroscience (Janata 2009) went a bit further and suggested that this power of music originated not only in the emotions evoked but by the role it might play in autobiographical memory, as evidenced by the activation of the Medial Prefrontal Cortex, an area of the brain specialized in self-referential processes. In other words, musical recollections could belong to that "complex tapestry" (Schacter 1996: 89) of traces and instants echoing each other that is our personal memory, and that we know intuitively as the foundation of our self-definition – our history, our relationships with others, and what with have become. Music might very well participate in shaping it.

In truth, psychologists may be better-equipped then ethnomusicologists to address this phenomenon. But in the case of Chalo and others living in that part of the Ethiopian Highlands, musical remembrances are a cultural practice. Called *təzəta*, they are recognized by everyone and, apparently, experienced by everyone. What makes them particularly interesting is that they occur outside of commemorative contexts and that, most of the time, the poems themselves bear no obvious connection to the event remembered[2]. These recollections happen in the solitude, away from sociability, when they sing "for themselves" (*läbəčča*). We are talking about a cultural experience that is yet individual, private, deeply felt and personally relevant. The problem is that, even though ethnomusicologists and anthropologists alike greatly emphasize individuals in their monographs (Ruskin and Rice 2012), there have been very few studies convincingly dealing with the issue of inner thoughts and personal memories in a cultural context. Only Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1998) embarked in such a journey in her book about song and remembrance among Syrian Jews – where she noticed the "rich banks of associations" that *pizmon* songs evoked in the context of migration and entangled their networks of commemorative and personal memories. This is not due to a lack of interest: anthropology has long been concerned with the concept of "self" and cultural shaping of thoughts. But as Maurice Bloch (2012) recently noted, they approached it through other concepts such as the "person", which, when not utterly vague, were disconnected from any biological or cognitive base. Relying on meta-discourse (how people talk about memory), they assume the equivalence of discourse (especially ritual discourse) with the operations of the mind[3].

[2] Making them quite different from the remembrances of the Kaluli of New Guinea, for example (Feld 1982).

[3] This approach is exemplified in « Person, Time and conduct in Bali » (Geertz 1973).

If we want to understand how, and to what extent, music might shape autobiographical memory in a culture such as the Ethiopian Highlands, we need to ask the three following questions:

1. How can recall be triggered by a piece of music? How do musical memory and autobiographical memory intersect?
2. How do we reconcile individual, personal experiences that involve inner states with collective, culturally shaped representations and practices?
3. And finally, why is it so prevalent in this particular society? Why do they cultivate?

Ethnography alone will provide answers. Judith Becker (2004) and others after her have convincingly argued for an interdisciplinary focus in ethnomusicology. I will not repeat these arguments here but simply note that, even without engaging ourselves in empirical methods, we can gain considerable insights from looking at the hypotheses emerging from the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, especially given their recent peak of interest in culture (Demorest *et al* 2008). By discussing the dynamic relationships between cognitive constraints and cultural representations, we will see how a particular practice of musical remembrance, caught between wandering thoughts and imagination, can dramatically fashions one's intimate perception of self – and thrive in times of violence.

Təzəta: beyond the "Ethiopian Blues"

We are in the Gojjam region of Ethiopia, in the remote and relatively marginal lands formed by the deep slopes, gentle hills and patches of forest that link the High Plateau to the floor of the Abbay (or Blue Nile) valley. Like most of their rural countrymen in the nearby region of Begemder, the people established here define themselves as Amhara and are followers of the Ethiopian *Tewahedo* Orthodox church, whose parish boundaries are still more effective in defining territories than the more recent administrative entities. From their hilltops, the churches overlook a landscape of scattered homesteads and small fields. Gojjame peasants make their living out of mix-farming, cultivating their land with the ox-plow and raising herds of cattle that they take for days, nights and sometimes whole weeks in the forests. And there it is, I was told, away from the villages and far along the riverbanks, that they most commonly experience *təzəta*[4].

[4] For an ethnographic account of the music in the forest, see Morand 2013. I have lived a total of 21 months in Gojjam villages between 2003 and 2013. Most of the observations and conversations reported here occurred between 2006 and 2008.

So what does this word mean? Asking this question is to step into confusion. Modern dictionaries of Amharic translate the word *təzəta* as "memory", "recollection", or "reminiscence" (as in Kane 1991); older ones prefer "sudden thought", "regret" (Guidi 1901), or "nostalgia" (Baeteman 1929)[5]. Their obvious difficulty in finding a precise equivalent for this word in European languages makes it complex enough; but the real confusion stems from its history and fame among the general urban population, the diaspora and scholars of Ethiopia. For them, *təzəta* is a song, or a style of song, associated with the feeling of longing. Many claim that it is rooted in the Highlands' tradition – and so old as to have given its name to one of the most common pentatonic scales of Amhara secular music (Kimberlin 1987). Professional itinerant musicians (known as azmaris) supposedly made it famous (Ashenafi Kedede 1971: 218); but it only acquired national prominence in the 1960s with the development of urban popular music and the many renditions of the song by singers such as Tilahun Gessesse, Mahmoud Ahmed and Muluqan Mellesse, to cite a few. In their lyrics, the "feeling of *təzəta*" (*yätəzəta səmet*) represents the complex set of emotions evoked by the persistent memory of an impossible love or, since the first waves of emigration, the home country. This nostalgic ethos took such a considerable importance in the musical production that it stepped outside the frame of this song and became a literary device, an entire musical aesthetics, and even a national sentiment. *Təzəta* is now "a feature of the Ethiopian culture", a "collective sentiment where sadness and jubilation inevitably mingle" (Delombera Negga 2004: 41), and the "bluesy, supreme hymn of Ethiopia" (Falceto 2004: 43).

But in the Gojjam countryside, where azmaris seldom come and radios are few, the word *təzəta* seems to bear none of these meanings – neither a song, nor a scale, nor even a specific emotion. The word itself is not mentioned in poems. This alone would cast some doubt on the claims of old rural roots. But Weisser and Falceto (2013) also recently pointed out that there are no traces of the song before the 1960s and that the four "traditional" scales owe less to the oral tradition than to the rationalization of 1950s and 1960s professors at the Yared Music School in Addis Ababa. Musicians and theorists were engaged in the construction of a standard national music that was mirroring the state's efforts at political unification and centralization. To understand what happens to the Gojjame peasants when they "experience *təzəta*", we have to step away from the aesthetics of the "Ethiopian blues" and approach it at the local level, and with their own terms.

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[5] The verb *təz allä(w)* (literally, to have or experience *təzəta)* is translated as "to recall", "to remember" (Kane 1991).

Absence and recall

Such an approach is not as easy as it may sound. In trying to understand the representations associated with music, I was confronted with several challenges that all derive from the same reason: the apparent lack of an organized discourse. This is not limited to *təzəta*. Unlike their priests with the church liturgy, peasants in Gojjam do not have an explicit theory of sounds. In the course of my fieldwork, I encountered very little abstract talk about music, and it was difficult to even initiate one since the Amharic language interestingly does not have words for "music" or "singing" that can be used generally. What they have are specific words for different kinds of musical performances, mostly genres of song such as the three major ones – the *qärärto* (with its verb *aqrara*, to "do the *qärärto*"), *əngurguro* (*ang*^{w}*ärag*^{w}*ärä*), and *zäfän* (*zäffänä*). This doesn't mean that they don't talk about music; but that comments are always grounded in very particular circumstances and revolve around judging people and their performances: was the poem (*gətəm*) new, personal and deep? The "melodic contour" (*zema*) nicely done? And the voice (*dəms*) brilliant? Any conversation about music is thus depends on a willingness to pass judgments on others or speculate about them, which means putting oneself in a potentially delicate situation.

These difficulties are exacerbated with *təzəta*. I had heard the word several times shortly after my arrival – always in association with music and solitude – and had been told that it "comes" in private moments, usually outside the house. This had aroused my interest but, despite my best efforts, I could not gather much more information, for no anecdote, no story about it ever surfaces in conversation. When asked about it, people resort to laconic comments. And the bigger the assembly, the more incongruous the questions: "in the forest, they sing the *qärärto* or the *əngurguro*", my interlocutors would say, before dismissing the matter with a laugh: "Really, I don't know that many things". I quickly learned that *təzəta* is not a topic for conversation: it is a private experience and, as such, not meant to be communicated.

But there are moments when it surface. These are sparse and can only occur in private settings, when people are not really alone but consider themselves almost as such: moments that I call "shared solitude" (Morand 2012). They happen between people living or having lived in the same household, such as brothers, sisters, or parent and child, and usually (but not exclusively) of the same gender. A mother and her daughter, for example, are not guests in each other's houses. They might talk and entertain each other but don't have the obligation to do so, and they feel just as comfortable working silently next to each other while absorbed in thought. One of them might start humming, and then singing, seemingly ignored by her

companion. Only if she becomes visibly overwhelmed by her emotions is she gently stopped and a few words are then uttered. The same thing happens at the night camps where most men stay with their cattle in small groups of two or three: once the fire dies down comes the hour of soft muffled melodies and the occasional hushed conversation. This is how *təzəta* ever comes to be mentioned. As an ethnographer, I only started learning about the experiences and the feelings associated with this word when my hosts and several of their neighbors (men and women alike) began including me in their circles of intimate relationships. This meant accepting the appropriate corresponding role - as a sister or daughter substitute – and learning, little by little, how to play the expected part: when to ignore the singer, when to mirror his or her emotions, and when I could ask questions[6].

What did I learn? First, that *Təzəta* is what pushes people to sing in the privacy of their solitude (or shared solitude). It is a state of mind, sometimes intrusive and sometimes actively sought out, that stems from an acute sense of absence – of someone of something. I mentioned earlier how 17 year-old Chalo would evoke the memory of his father, and how singing, would often bring him happiness and temporary relief. His mother Abbaynäš also had many such moments. She told once me as she came home from fetching water: "Today, the *təzəta* came to me of the times before the troubles, when we were rich. We had white *teff* [a staple cereal], meat and eggs for all our guests; so I sat there, near the river, and cried[7]". *Təzəta* is the sense of what used to be but slipped away. But it also appears the image – the memory – resulting from a piece of music performed "with *təzəta*". As Chalo said, in what is the most precise statement I was ever given, "you hear someone sing the *qärärto*, your brother for example. When he disappears, when he is dead or gone, you get his *təzəta* by singing the same *qärärto*". Thus causality is quite unclear, for no one cares to entangle what, of the state of mind, the music, or the memory might precede the other. *Təzəta* designates the entirety of an experience in which music briefly revives the past.

But not any past, as it became increasingly clear. One of my first encounters with *təzəta* singing, and one of the most striking, was with our neighbor Təgəst, Chalo's first-degree cousin and a young woman in her early twenties. The two houses opened on different yards but were otherwise quite close from each other and I often heard Təgəst's voice. One day, attracted by loud noises and cries, I found her at the door. She was sitting there churning the butter, talking, weeping and singing at the same time, seemingly confused and waving

[6] For more details and a discussion of methodological problems, see Morand 2010a.

[7] She uses the verb *alläqqäsä*, which can mean both "to cry" and "to cry by singing" (while performing the *əngurguro* genre).

uncontrollably. “I’m crying on my life”, she said when she saw me, before resuming singing: “Alas, my father, my world (*away abbat aläm*)”. “Really, you don’t know what happened”, she finally told me when calming down[8].

By that time, I already had an idea of what she meant. I had decided, a few weeks before, to settle down in that specific hamlet because of a generous invitation by Abbaynäš, whom I had met at a wedding; her husband was in prison and she lived with her four children while awaiting his return. Almost her neighbors, including people further on the other side of the hill, belonged to her husband’s extended family, and were all linked by an intricate network of personal ties[9]. They also shared one thing: a traumatic history of division, reaching back at least a decade, and which had culminated five years before when Chalo’s father had first killed his brother’s son, Kassahun, and then his brother himself, Mälaqu, over a land dispute. The murderer had fled to the forest and lived there as an outlaw for a couple of years, before accepting a reconciliation process that had brought him to prison with the promise of timely return[10]. Not surprisingly, this reconciliation was extremely difficult for all involved, and especially so for the small group of siblings that suffered the most. The murders and their aftermath were never mentioned publicly but hints surfaced regularly in private discussions and, as I slowly discovered, featured prominently, and almost obsessively, in their singing. Təgəst was Mälaqu’s daughter and the painful memories overwhelmed her. But she was not the only one to experience, in one way or another, the *təzəta* of her father and brother, the murders and the happier times before. For most of them, music was all about that past and, sometimes, a few additional similar stories.

As we have seen with Təgəst, this experience of recall is intense. It is often accompanied by sudden changes of mood and emotional expressions denoting feelings of joy, sadness or even anger. I witnessed it regularly with Abbaynäš, who spent a lot of time singing softly to herself when working in her yard. Sometimes, her voice would suddenly rise higher and the words became clearer, as in that time when she evoked another of her personal tragedies:

Hamsa hunäw wärdäw and hono qoyäčäw	They were fifty coming down the mountain, he was alone waiting for them

[8] Təgəst, November 2006.

[9] Amhara kinship (*zämäd*) is bilateral, with an equal importance for the mother’s and father’s sides. (Hoben 1973)

[10] This reconciliation took place with traditional mediators (*šəmagəle*, “elders”). In exchange for a large sum of money and other provisions, the victims’ side agreed to withdraw their witness statements from the court, thus ensuring that his acquittal at trial.

Ağəre bäkəlaš astänagädačaw	With the Kalashnikov the Proud received them
Anči [Abbaynäš] atəbäy gälta gälta	You [Abbaynäš], don't be foolish
Yəzägäyal ənği mäče yəqäral fänta	It is a long time coming! But your turn is bound to follow[11]

"What is the meaning of these poems?" I asked her.

"- These are my own poems", she said. She had composed them three years ago, when her nephew (her sister's son) had died. He had been killed in his home village downstream, at her parent's place. Five thieves had come, shot him, and taken two oxen. He himself had a rifle, but he was outnumbered.

"Do you know his killers?" Of course she knew them; they were from the same area. They killed because they didn't want to be recognized but she knew who they were. And her nephew was such a young man, a newly ordained priest.

Restless, she started waving her hands and spoke faster. "It happened at the night camp, near the forest". That day, there were no other men with him, just a few children. The moon was full and bright, but around 10 pm darkness fell. The thieves arrived. There was a brief exchange: "who is here?" the nephew asked before shouting, then "watch out!" and a bullet was fired. They ran and disappeared. At the sound of gunshot, locals came rushing; they followed footpaths and found the oxen tied up in the forest. But the nephew was dead.

"So when did you sing the *qärärto*?"

"- At the funeral. It is the *təzəta* of the funeral, when I burned with anger".

"But you didn't seem so upset before you started!" That's how it was, she answered, while rising and leaving the room. *Qärärto* could at times be happiness, and at others, like today, it could become anguish and anger[12].

Abbaynäš's song is anchored in a specific past moment, giving it meaning and framing an experience that is clearly impossible to understand if "you don't know what happened" – hence her need to linger on the details of the context. What she said, and how she said it, was also representative of how these memories were usually verbalized to me. It always highlights a social event (here, a funeral), and seems to be remembered with a vivid precision. People often say that they recall the entire sound and "image" (*məsəl*) of the memory, as if it were

[11] *Tära* or "turn" should be understood as "revenge". It is a customary practice in Gojjam for the relatives of a murder victim to pressure one of their own into killing the murderer or, if not possible, one of his closest family member.

[12] Conversation with Abbaynäš, November 2006.

reenacted in front of them. Surprisingly though, the musical moment itself – the actual *təzəta* – is only mentioned with a few evasive words. "Can you describe me your *təzəta*?" I regularly asked. "Well, you know what I mean, you know how it is", a lot of them answered, as if such a common experience required no further explanation. Sometimes, they would point to the circumstance (a wedding, a harvest, a holiday feast) and at other times to the poem as a key to my understanding. Verbalization thus seemed difficult and was never spontaneous. But if I asked specific questions, such as who was there and how was singing, they suddenly found easier. Many of them, like Gännätu (Chalo's and Təgəst's uncle) or Adamu (another related neighbor), for example, claimed to have such precise mental images that they could describe the setting and approximate time of day; the number and identities of other participants, where they stood in the scene, and who was dancing, for example in the case of a wedding; they would also unexpected details such as the light of a full moon, a calabash hanging in a corner, or their fatigue and the heat of the sun on their body at a harvest. Sensory aspects – at once visual, auditory, and kinesthetic – are central. As are, of course, the emotions and the intensity they bring to the experience. As Abbaynäš said, these are in large part defined by the musical genre. Day after day, I heard how *qärärto* was happiness, though it could veer into anger; *əngurguro* a deep sadness; and *zäfän* the most elated of joys - for "there are three kinds (*aynät*) of *təzəta*: by *qärärto*, by *əngurguro,* by *zäfän*".

An emotional connection?

Is the presence of these intense emotions the force behind these musical recollections? As I mentioned earlier, this has been the favorite explanation of psychologists. Oliver Sacks, a neurologist famous for his books of clinical tales, saw in many of his patients how familiar pieces could bring back to consciousness seemingly long lost memories with a surprising intensity. In his mind, these reminiscences are the result of happy conjunctions strengthened by a certain quality of persistence inherent in music. Like associations of ideas and musical epilepsies and "brainworms" (melodies that keep playing in the heard), musical reminiscences are automatic and merely the fruit of chance, personal inclinations, and emotions. His observations are consistent with the small handful of psychological research on music and autobiographical memory (Baumgartner 1992, Schulkind *et al* 1999), which has emphasized the role of emotions, "free" associations and other idiosyncrasies, as well as the challenges associated with working on personal memories.

I said before that autobiographical memory has not received the attention it deserves from anthropologists. Surprisingly, this was also the case in psychology where, until quite recently, it had the status of long-forgotten poor relative. The reason is quite simple: it is extremely difficult to study it with empirical methods. Memories are accessible only through the declarations of participants and their personal nature makes rigorous control and replication almost impossible. Behaviorists in the first half of the 20th century rejected introspective descriptions in their wish to uphold the scientific nature of the field, effectively pushing autobiographical memory out of their enquiries (Bower 2000: 4-14). It is only in the late 1970s that the interest resurfaced with the first "ecological" studies, involving tasks closer to everyday recollection and tools such as diaries, questionnaires and free recollections. Together with recent advances in neuroscience and clinical research with patients suffering from amnesia or brain lesions, these studies have led to a whole new theoretical field, an a radically new conception of structure of autobiographical memory and the processes of remembering and forgetting.

First of all, autobiographical memory is not a single system; it lies at the intersection of the two differentiated and specialized systems famously described by Tulving in 1983: 1) semantic memory, which stores concepts and knowledge independently of the context in which they were acquired; and 2) episodic memory (or mental time travel), for events anchored in their contexts and recollected with a specific imagery. The differences between these two systems have less to do with their contents (auditory versus visual information, for example) and more with how they are processed. Let's take music, for example: one could think that musical memory should stand firmly on the semantic. But Platel *et al* (2003) have shown in an fMRI study that a piece of song can be recalled through either a semantic or episodic process and that the neural networks involved are different in each case. The fact is, both systems are not mutually exclusive are often activated at the same time. And this is what happens with autobiographical memories, where semantic components, such as general knowledge of a period of time are embedded in each recollection (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000).

What happens then with musical reminiscences? Don't they involve a complex interaction between semantic and episodic memories? This is precisely what a study by Janata (2009) suggests: the activation of the median pre-frontal cortex, a region of the brain involved autoreferencial processes (i.e. self-knowledge, including sensory aspects), seems to indicate that "multiple memory retrieval processes are summoned in order to assemble different bits of semantic and episodic content into a multifaceted recollective experience […] that also has an

affective component to it ». The latter is important because it calls back to one of the most important debate in the history of episodic and autobiographical memory research: reliability. We know since Bower (1981) that emotions have a critical influence on memory. Current mood, because it affects imagination, perception and judgment, favors recollections with a congruent emotional tonality. Emotional memories are also better remembered and with more details than non-emotional ones: they are reliable not despite their emotional content but because of it. A case in point is the "flashbulb" memory, with its vivid imagery and feelings of veracity, as if it were a quasi-recording. These have mostly been studied in association with striking public events ("where were you on 9/11 that can evoke them in almost all Americans), but also with personal trauma and trial cases (Christianson 1995). Could it be that music crystallizes an event as a flashbulb-like memory?

Gojjame music, whether in private or various public (and semi-public) settings, is all about emotions. So much so that emotional reactions, and the near-impossibility to control them, are the greatest concern surrounding all performances – the source of much caution, and the reason why music is considered as potentially disruptive and dangerous. The emotions I'm talking about are very far from the "basic" and purely aesthetic emotions (though aesthetic pleasure is certainly present). As I have argued and illustrated before (Morand 2010b, 2011) these emotions are linked to more values and social behaviors – and so powerful that they linger long after the music has stopped. Let's take "sadness" (*azen*), for example. Associated mostly with the *əngurguro* genre, *azen* is a deep feeling of loss, despair, and abandonment and pushes singers and listeners alike to either burst in tears and wave uncontrollably, or withdraw into themselves, gaze averted and mouth covered. It also represents requests and offers of empathy and the promise of material help by kin in times of suffering, as best exemplified in funerals. The unit for an *əngurguro* song is a two-line poem, to which a number of words and non-semantic syllables are added. The non-measured melodic contour on which *əngurguro* is built (figure 1) indexes sadness as a "wept" phrase, with small-range, downward movements closely following natural prosody, a trembling quality and frequent glottal stops (or stylized sobs) indicated by arrows and asterisks on the transcription below[13]:

(*ə) (ə) (ə) ənä Fətfətə ənä Əmäyte Alga* (ə) (ə) (ə) those [relatives] of Fətfətə, those of Lady Alga

[13] Given the features of this music (impossible to render on a traditional score), I have devised a system a transcription that uses sonogram and/or melodic contour abstraction (obtained with the linguistics software Praat); the pentatonic scale is indicated with horizontal lines.

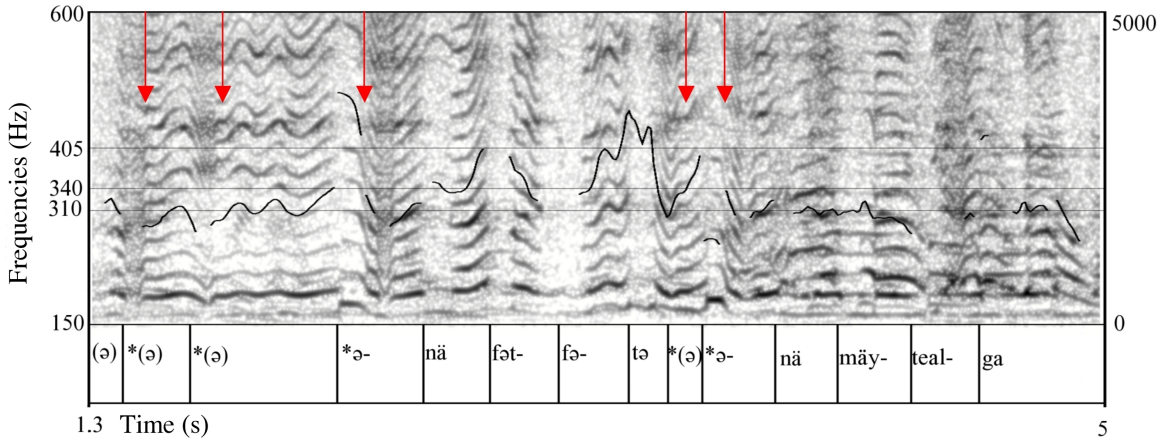


Figure 1. An ənguruguro "wept" phrase.

"Joy" (*dästa*) is of two types: the first, in the *zäfän* genre, is a high-energy collective elation, usually accompanied by handclapping and dance. The second, evoked by the *qärärto* genre, is also high-energy but quite different: stiff bodies, abrupt gestures and occasional gun swinging are the outward manifestations of the "feeling of heat" (*yägalä səmet*) that overcomes singers and other participants as they boast, count their "followers" (*wägän*), and assert their individual autonomy by drawing on the popular figure of the bandit, both hero and murderer. The *qärärto* melodic contour is based on principles similar to the *əngurguro*'s (figure 2): its patterns are an imitation and amplification of Amharic emotional intonation: fast phrases, constant tone instability, large interval jumps and ascendant profiles are general characteristics of happy or excited deliveries[14], while sudden glottal stops following ascending patterns are widespread in Amharic exclamations, especially so in Gojjam.

ərä (mə) (ə) (nə) (ə) ərä gudew (nə) (nə) gudew Ah *(mə) (ə) (nə) (ə)* ah my surprise *(nə) (nə)* my surprise

[14] For a summary on emotional cues in music and language, see Patel (2008: 344-351).

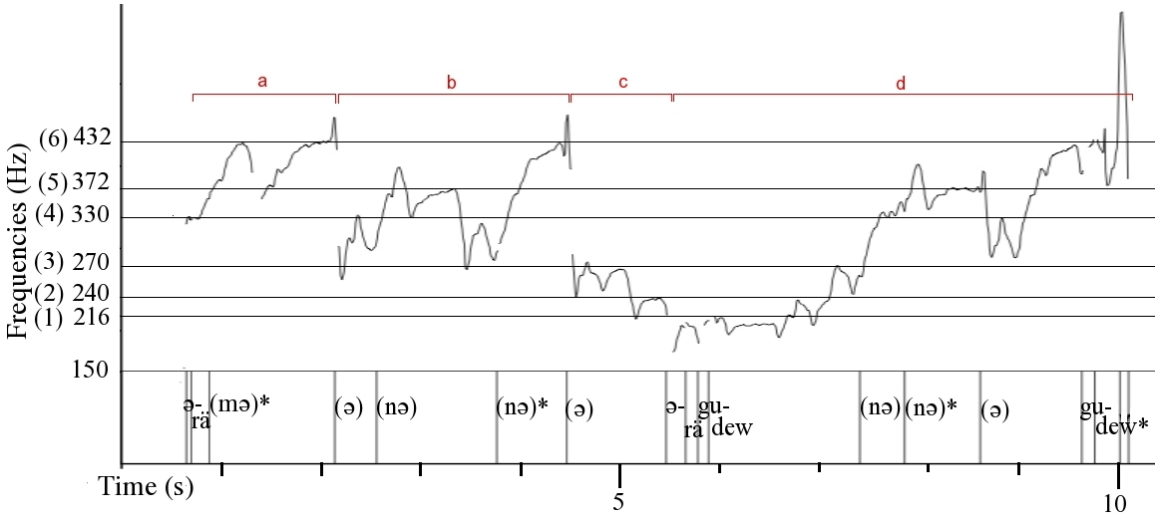


Figure 2. A *qärärto* "heated" phrase

This "feeling of heat" is not far from "anger" (*nəddet*), equally evoked by the *qärärto* genre – for example, as an appeal to revenge during a funeral, as in Abbaynäš's song above. But in other, seemingly peaceful gatherings, an insult, or a simple reference in the poems to an underlying issue among the audience is all it takes to slip into anger. In the worst cases, it leads to fighting, gunfire and even killings, with long-lasting consequences for the local community[15].

Music is central first because of its involvement in all aspects of social life, from major events (weddings, funerals, memorials and other life-cycle ceremonies) to lesser ones (work parties, holidays and small family gatherings). Unless purposefully avoided for fear of consequences, singing is an integral part of all social interactions. These interactions are almost always delicate to handle, for the absence of lineages and other stable kin groups in the Amhara culture is linked to an emphasis on individual ties and the cultivation of personal networks, leading to a great instability in friendships and alliances, even among close relatives. And conflicts abound: whatever particular form they take, and how long they last (from a few days' quarrel to a lifelong enmity), they all have to do with land dispute or cattle theft, with a few minor variations and aggravating circumstances (purposeful negligence, spouse cheating, etc.). Social events are the moment where the states of kin and neighbor relationships become explicit - by the simple virtue of who comes to express their solidarity. Music goes a step further, for the poetry sung tells the "truth" about these relationships (according to the

[15] These are rare instances, of course, but they do happen. I was once told that in 2008, a few weeks before my return to the village, a man at a housewarming party, heated by his own *qärärto*, reached for his rifle and a killed a woman he detested.

singers' own point of view, of course), and is evaluated in this light, as audience exclamations of "that's true!" or "say this again!" make clear. These truths are usually not straightforward, and many of them remain obscure to uninformed listeners, but people involved unmistakably understand what point is being made behind the metaphors, puns, and hidden meanings characteristic of Amhara poetry[16]. Sometimes, it is a joyful celebration of cohesion with a few jokes at the expense of absent people and known enemies; other times, it is a direct fight; most commonly, it strikes as a delicate balance between veiled aggression and expression of friendship. It seems also quite usual to insult neighbors when they are at hearing range. This was the case a *təzəta*, recalled by Adamu, involving a collective harvest with his young brother and a few relatives and a *qärärto* he sang at close proximity from his personal enemy – Təgəst's husband:

Mən təğa natə mən kəfu kəbtə nat	What kind of calf is it, what mean cattle is it,
[č'ärqen yäbälačäw	[that ate my clothes!
Yähwalaw nägär azura bayäčäw	Without thinking of the consequences

The choice of genre and rhetorical devices plays a great role. I showed in a previous paper (Morand 2011) how, during the dramatic funeral of a young man killed by his older brother, singers avoided the *qärärto* genre and strategically emphasized the imbrication of personal ties and solidarity obligations to reject feelings of anger in the audience and reject a properly unthinkable option: a murderous revenge against one's own kin. Music thus both highlights and transforms relationships. As they play their part in local dynamics, in conflicts and reconciliation, performances almost inevitably become memorable moments, representative either of a whole period of time (how things were with a specific person) or a crucial event that changed everything. That would explain why singing the same *qärärto* or *əngurguro* would provoke vivid and emotional recollections comparable to flashbulb memories. *Təzəta* memories do not seem to emerge from the random juxtaposition (by mere chance as it were) between an event and a piece of music, as postulated by Schulkind, Baumgartner or Sacks: the memory and its meaning are somehow built, or indexed, into the sound. Maybe we should not be so surprised: all three authors mention, at one point or another, the prevalence not only of emotion but also of close, meaningful relationships in these recollections.

[16] See Levine 1965, Getie Gelaye 2000.

In the case of *təzəta* the indexation of the event in the music itself makes its recollection almost a necessity, and might explain why, in the Gojjame peasant society, musical remembering is so compelling, pervasive, and systematic.

Imagination, culture and meaning: from trace to memory

This theory faces one problem, though: the obvious unreliability of these memories. While there was of course no way for me to assess such unreliability directly, it struck very early on in my fieldwork for two reasons. The first lies with the substantive transformations undergone by musical and verbal materials between their public (and original) performance and the private setting – a fact that was openly, though quite paradoxically, recognized by all my interlocutors. On the one hand, they always claim that they perform the *qärärto* or the *əngurguro* exactly as they heard or sung it before, because they are able hear the *zema* (melodic contour) play inside their heads in all its details and the voice in its precise quality. But on the other hand, they readily admit that singing "with *təzəta*" entails a series of changes or differences (*ləyunnät*), starting with the poem, which is shortened (less added words and syllables). In general (but not always), this is accompanied with a certain shrinking of the patterns, a smaller (and lower) melodic range and a reduced ornamentation. Figures 3 and 4 provide an example of such transformations:

Təmb amora (nə) siyaräğ yəhonal gwotətə The vulture *(nə),* when it ages, becomes an owl

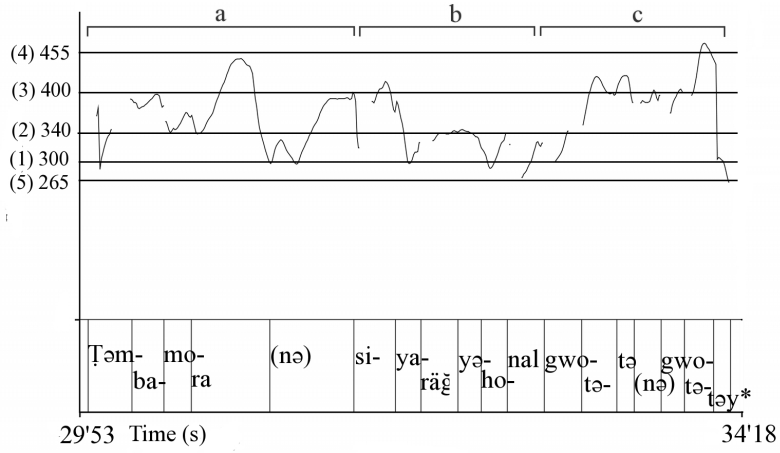


Figure 3. Third phrase of a *qärärto* by Adamu, sung at a harvest

Təmb amora (nə) (yə) siyaräğ (nə) yəhonal (yə) gwotətə (nə) gwotətə

The vulture *(nə) (yə)* when it ages *(nə)* becomes an owl *(nə)* an owl

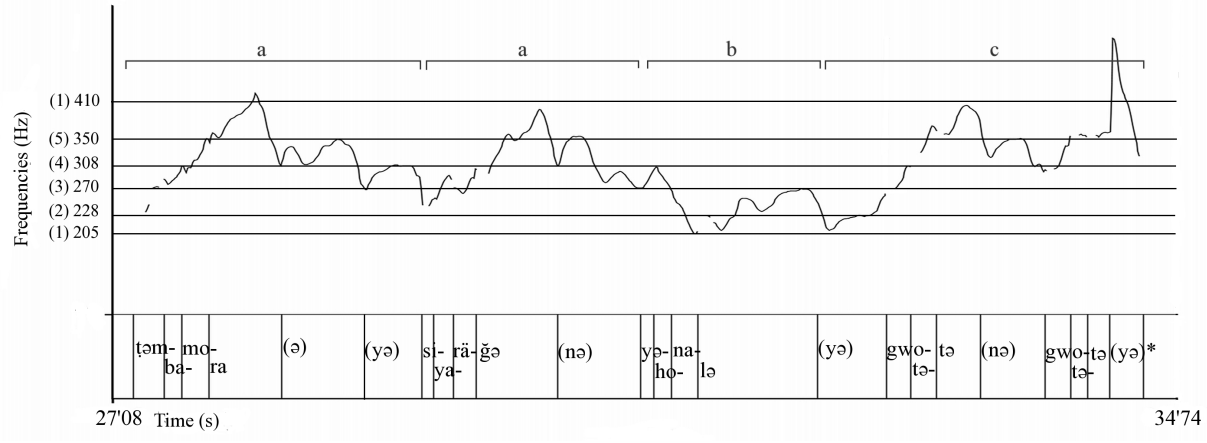


Figure 4 The same *qärärto* by Adamu, in private and "with *təzəta*"

Even if the singers tried extremely hard, it would still be nearly impossible for them to perform the songs identically because of the non-measured, instable nature of the *qärärto* and *əngurguro* in particular. Simpler features, such as what words to add and where, are not better reproduced. It appears that, despite the general claims, close reproduction of the song is not a real concern. This seems to set *təzəta* recollections quite apart from the musical reminiscences mentioned by Proust (where a composition is involved) and studied by psychologists, who only consider responses from recording played to passive listeners.

The second reason is the considerable level of stereotypicality in memory verbalizations. Musical events in public settings are rich, complex, and often ambiguous, because of the juxtaposition of many underlying issues and points of view. None of that complexity is represented in the (sparse) descriptions, though, which all seem to draw from a common, short list of words and all memories can be categorized in a few types (a day at a harvest, a night at camp with a father, etc.). Even if we assume that stereotypes arise mostly from the verbalization process, we are still left with a few puzzling statements: why would one only remember and sing again, out of a whole *qärärto* joust in which several relatives participated, only the "turns" (*tära*) of one them, for example?

Təzəta recollections contain so many patent distortions and contradictions that they leave us wondering whether we should stop calling them "memories" at all. Maybe these are nothing more than illusions or embroidered tales that Gojjame peasants keep repeating in an elaborate discourse intended primarily for themselves. But maybe not. The imagination we see at work here, distorting and transforming, probably heavily influenced by the dynamics of "shared

solitude", doesn't seem to differ much from the same propensity highlighted by ecological studies.

As I mentioned earlier, ecological methods attempt to account for subjective experience with tasks as close as possible to everyday uses and contents. Launched in 1981 by Ulric Neisser's *Memory Observed*, these studies have profoundly modified the conception of memory by questioning the very idea of a bank of immutable memories preserved as archives of our past. Of course, we have all doubted at least once the veracity of a particular recollection; but we have great difficulties imagining the extent of the deformation our mental images cast back on the events we lived as actors and witnesses. We trust our memories, especially when they are vivid. The certainty of their reliability is only heightened by the similarity in brain areas that mental imagery and visual perception activate (Schacter 1996: 22). But conditions of recall and retrospective biases both commonly affect a remembering. A famous experience by Nigro and Neisser (1983), for example, showed that manipulating conditions (with different wordings for a same task) results in shifting image perspectives. Even flashbulb memories can be affected.

So what are memories, if not quasi-photographic records of the past? There are the result of a process analogous the work of a paleontologist who strives to reconstitute a dinosaur's skeleton from the few bones she found[17]. "An important part of your recollective experience", Schacter tells us (1996: 21-22), "is, to a large extent, constructed or invented at the time of attempted recall". Modern neurobiology shares this view (Damasio 2010): recollections are each and every time constructed and memories are, quite literally "prejudiced" (Damasio 2010:133). If this were not the case, we would live like Funes, the character from Borges' short story "Funes the memorious" (Borges 2007). Affected by an infallible hypermnesia, Funes perceives everything and remembers everything, never forgetting a single detail. But this ability submerges him, as he cannot see, for example, how a dog seen through two different angles could still be the same animal. In other words, he misses the automatic and largely unconscious filters that enable us to understand our environment. Free of "prejudices", he is incapable of categorizing.

These filters act as inferential processes and constrain perception and remembering by imposing sets of suppositions and interpretations upon them. Psychologists have identified several kinds of these filters, but the most interesting for us here is the concept of schema. Initially proposed by Frederic Bartlett (1932) and rediscovered at the end of the 1970s,

[17] This analogy was first formulated by Neisser (Schacter 1996: 40)

schemas are considered good candidates for the structuration of memory (Bower 2000). Schemas stem from a predisposition of the brain to recognize regularities in the environment and exist in all domains and at all levels of abstraction. Some are common to all humans and appear very early (such as the face recognition schema); but many are cultural, such as the major mode in western music (Huron 2006). As they sit at the intersection of culture and cognition, schemas have generated a lot of interest among cognitive anthropologists (D'Andrade 1995, Boyer and Wertsch 2009, Bloch 2012). It is quite significant that Bartlett's concept arose from a "psycho-anthropological" project (Rosa 2000): for him, psychology could not be understood outside of society. In *Remembering*, he describes his experiences on the repeated reproduction, after a simple exposition, of complex materials such as drawings and stories. He noticed that distortions were not random and tended towards a known form. They were, he concluded, a rationalization – the result of an unconscious but yet powerful "effort after meaning".

Later experiments have shown that schemas can also explain distortions in episodic memories (Brewer 1995). As "clusters of organized expectations" (Bower 2000:24), they help discriminating reality as well as acting upon it. Some schemas, named scripts, are specialized in social activities and time organization: a visit to relatives, a wedding, or a funeral – all familiar, seemingly normal activities. For those who share them, schemas are "what goes without saying", to quote Maurice Bloch (2012) – an echo of the incredulous "you know what I mean" that I heard so many times when enquiring about *təzəta*.

Many aspects of *təzəta* recollections are no doubt associated with social scripts: common expectations should guide (and distort) the remembering of action sequences and details such as the occupation of space (people usually sit according to their status, for example), the identity of other singers (if a brother chose to sing, the others might have followed), or the number of workers at a collective harvest. Scripts provide the structure and reinforce certain details at the expense of others. They would explain the stereotypes.

Something more could also be at work: the fundamentally musical nature of the event and the remembering, the parallels between the distortions in the music and in the visual/kinesthetic image – all these point to a co-construction rather than an association between a musical piece and a memory. My hypothesis is that 1) the same schemas constrain the perception and remembering of both the music and the event, by triggering inferences that are at once musical, visual, and social; 2) these schemas correspond to the three main musical genres: *qärärto*, *əngurguro*, and *zäfän*. Only a controlled experiment could validate this hypothesis. But ethnographic observations can sometimes go a long way in unveiling implicit

assumptions. Limit cases are fascinating precisely for that reason. One such case, which I witnessed in March 2007, would be difficult to explain without the schema hypothesis.

Since I devoted an article (Morand 2010b) to the analysis of this limit case, I will only summarize it here. It involved a small house gathering on a holiday and singers (mostly men) taking "turns" in a *qärärto* joust. The atmosphere, filled with exclamations and shouts, was exuberant. When one of the women took her turn, however, the audience split into two contrasted groups: in the first joyful exclamations continued, while in the other listeners started to wail, warned of imminent tears, and exhibited many of the behaviors usually associated with the *qärärto* genre. Musical analyses showed that she had sung something extremely ambiguous, which combined elements from both genres. What is interesting is that none of the participant I talked to the next day seemed to have perceived it as ambiguous – as if they had not heard the contradictory cues. The tumult was attributed to the woman's emotions and intentions, which were also interpreted according to the genre they had perceived (for some, she was crying on her life situation, for others she was resentful and angry). Even visual details greatly differed in the recollections: someone mentioned tears rolling down her face, tears that I, who had heard *qärärto*, had not personally seen. An early recognition of the genre seemed to have guided the understanding of the entire scene.

To better describe the content of these genre-schemas and the extent of their automatic associations, I decided to create a questionnaire. I first selected a list of words that came regularly during *təzəta* recalls. They belonged to three categories: emotions, behaviors, and values. I presented the list to Abbaynäš and two of her relatives (who did not take part in the following step) and asked for their suggestions; I added a couple more words at that point, and removed three others. The final list had 25 words. I submitted it as a questionnaire to 26 persons, all adults (22 men and 4 women), asking them to respond "without thinking", as fast as they could, and tell me of each word if it was associated with the *qärärto*, then with the *əngurguro* and finally with the *zäfän*[18]. Once the responses were coded, I performed a Principal Component Analysis to correlate the three variables: individuals/words/genres.

[18] Participants could answer "yes", "no", or "I don't know".

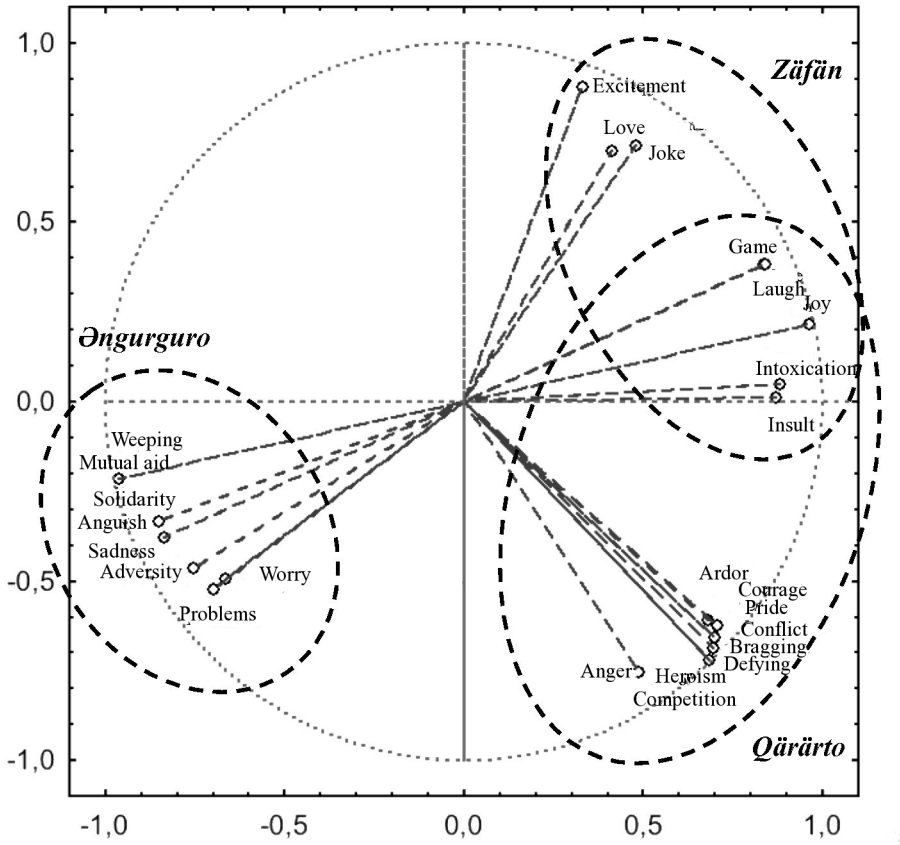


Figure 5. Principal Component Analysis. Projection on the two first axes represents 82% of response variability

As figure 5 shows, responses were extremely consistent across individuals[19]. They reveal three clusters of words (two of them overlapping) corresponding to the three musical genres. They confirm that *qärärto*, *əngurguro* and *zäfän* represent three different modes of interacting, each of them the result of a combination of emotions, moral values, and social behaviors. As they elicit according sets of inferences and expectancies, the musical genres seem to act as a main constraint on the perception and remembrance of complex social events.

Reflecting on the past

The schema hypothesis helps explain distortions as well as the construction of memories. It does not explain, however, why specific memory traces emerges at all, why a particular *qärärto* or *əngurguro*, from a few weeks or several decades ago, is brought to consciousness at particular moment.

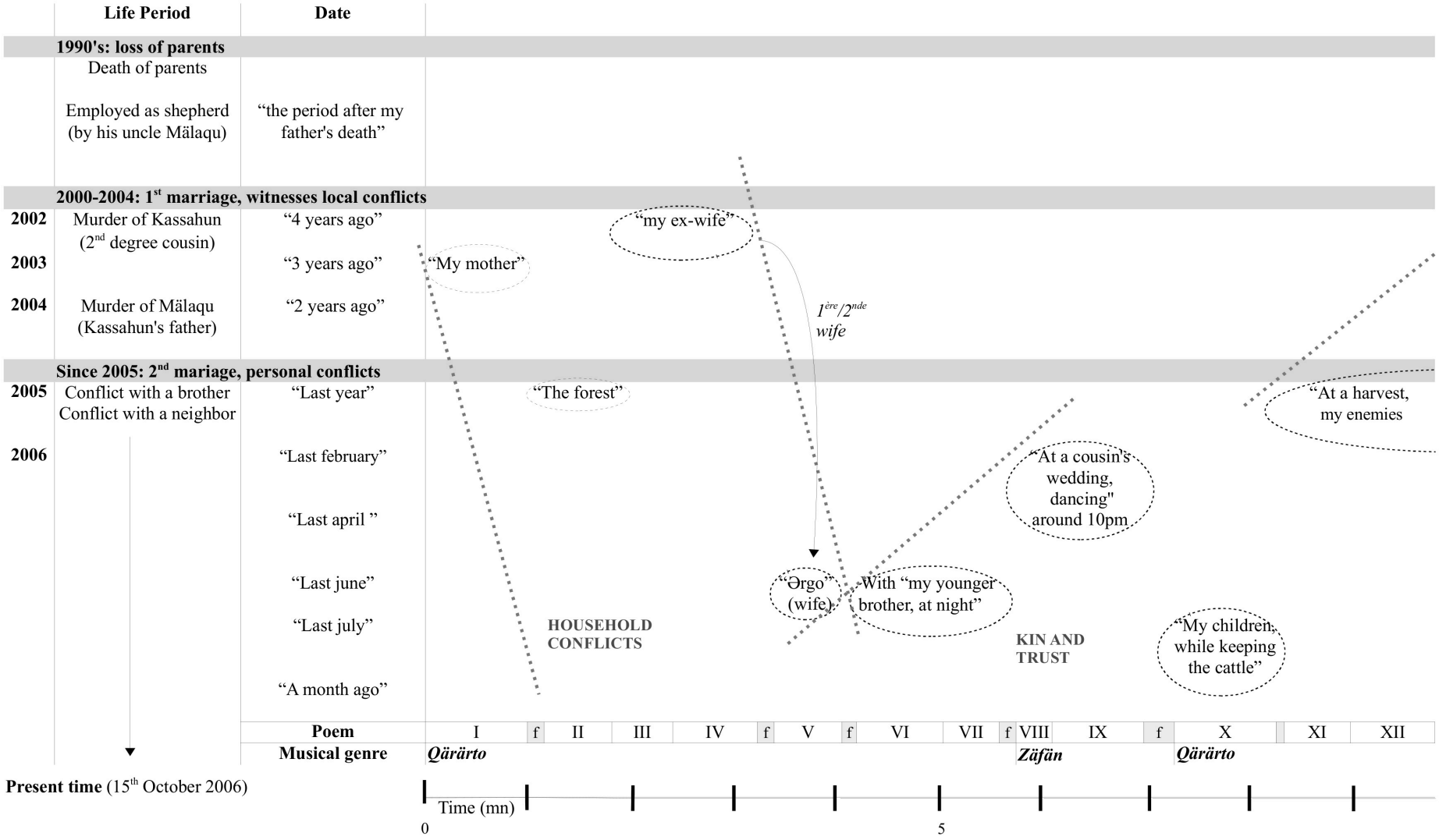
[19] The graph shows responses as point clouds projected on two axes. The closer the words are to the edge of the circle, the better they are explained by the axes, and the more consensus they generated.

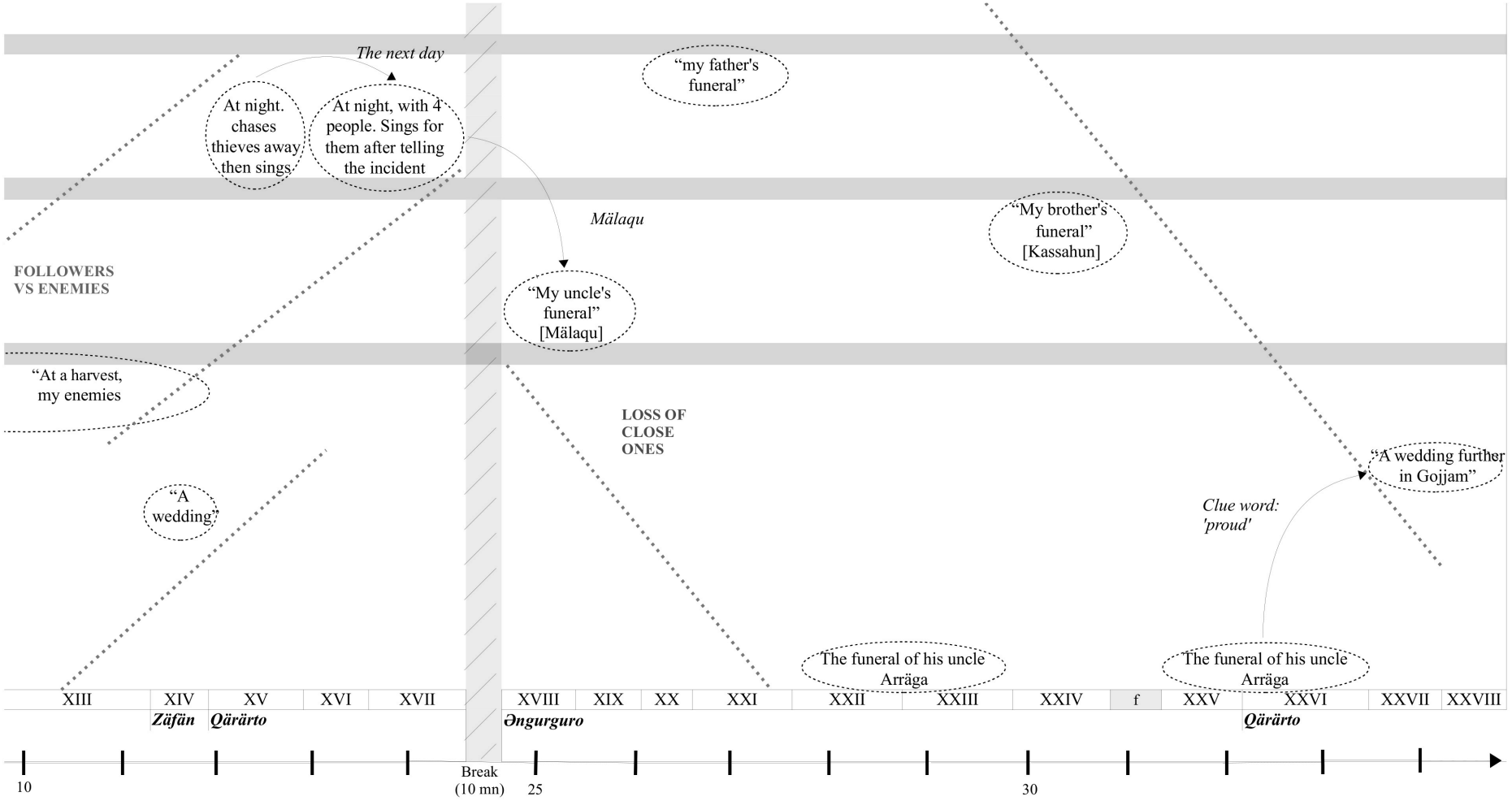
Almost all the people I worked with liked to embark in long private performances lasting up to an hour. I always thought that they held a key to understanding of *təzəta*, partly because of their length, and partly because of the weariness that seemed to suddenly fall upon the singers when they stopped, leaving them silent – as if all thoughts had been exhausted. But it was even more difficult to talk about these performances: the singers had no interest in discussing them, and didn't even wish to play the record. They just wanted to move on. It is in that light that we must appreciate the effort Adamu made, as we were staying in the forest with his brother in November 2006, when he accepted to listen back to the twenty-five performance he just finished and comment it for me[20].

The table in figures 6 and 7 is a summary of these comments. It reads as a double timeline and shows how temporalities intersect in the course of the musical performance:

- in abscissa, the chronological flow of time (in minutes). On one line is the succession and duration of poems; below them are the genres. "f" stands for *fučät*, or short intervals of whistling.
- in ordinate, the depth of time past, as evoked in memory: on the right and in quotation marks are the dates Adamu gives for each of his memories; and on the left, their relation with few facts from his life.

[20] The performance contains two blocks of fifteen minutes each, with small break in the middle. He didn't comment on the last five minutes.


Life Period
Date
1990's: loss of parents
Death of parents
Employed as shepherd (by his uncle Mälaqu)
"the period after my father's death"
2000-2004: 1st marriage, witnesses local conflicts
2002
Murder of Kassahun (2nd degree cousin)
"4 years ago"
2003
"3 years ago"
2004
Murder of Mälaqu (Kassahun's father)
"2 years ago"
Since 2005: 2nd mariage, personal conflicts
2005
Conflict with a brother
Conflict with a neighbor
"Last year"
2006
"Last february"
"Last april "
"Last june"
"Last july"
"A month ago"
"my ex-wife"
"My mother"
1ère/2nde wife
"The forest"
"At a harvest, my enemies
"At a cousin's wedding, dancing" around 10pm
"Ərgo" (wife)
With "my younger brother, at night"
HOUSEHOLD CONFLICTS
KIN AND TRUST
"My children, while keeping the cattle"
Poem
I f II III IV f V f VI VII f VIII IX f X XI XII
Musical genre
Qärärto
Zäfän
Qärärto
Present time (15th October 2006)
Time (mn)
0
5


The next day
At night. chases thieves away then sings
At night, with 4 people. Sings for them after telling the incident
"my father's funeral"
Mälaqu
"My brother's funeral" [Kassahun]
FOLLOWERS VS ENEMIES
"My uncle's funeral" [Mälaqu]
"At a harvest, my enemies
LOSS OF CLOSE ONES
"A wedding"
"A wedding further in Gojjam"
Clue word: 'proud'
The funeral of his uncle Arräga
The funeral of his uncle Arräga
XIII
XIV
XV
XVI
XVII
XVIII
XIX
XX
XXI
XXII
XXIII
XXIV
f
XXV
XXVI
XXVII
XXVIII
Zäfän
Qärärto
Əngurguro
Qärärto
10
Break (10 mn)
25
30

Throughout the performance, Adamu's recollections wander and leap in a wide exploration that takes him back as far as the deaths of his parents, when he was still a teenage boy, to his first and now divorced wife or the more recent passing of his uncle Arräga. A closer analysis shows that the memories are guided by associations of idea that everything but random. Let's take a look, for example, at the sequence from poems XI to XXIV:

- Adamu starts with the *təzəta* of "his enemy" (Təgəst's husband) or rather, of the harvest with his relatives when he sang his anger against him. This conflict, which is still ongoing, is causing him quite a lot of trouble at the time of this performance;
- which is probably why the next series of *təzəta* (after the memory of a first marriage I know very little about) brings him back to an earlier period: the time when, as a young orphan, he worked as a shepherd for Mälaqu, Təgəst's father (and his second degree uncle), in the very same house he is now prohibited to enter. The memory evoked the very first conflict he personally experienced: thieves trying to raid the night camp and how he frightened them away. The next *təzəta* features the boasting *qärärto* of the next day, when he retold the event to camp companions and possibly Mälaqu (the owner of the herd).
- This detail is important, for the small break doesn't seem to have interrupted his thoughts. When he resumes, he shifts to *əngurguro* and a very different emotional tonality. "These are the funerals of an uncle", he says, without further details. But the date and poem are very transparent: only Mälaqu's home has twice been broken by murders:

Away, away, alkuñ ənen bawäläläñ	Alas, Alas, I cry, as I falter
Yəh ləmadəñ betə säw gälwal mäsälä	It became a habit in this house, that a man kills another

It is conceivable that Mälaqu's image, aroused by the night camp *təzəta*, lingered in his mind and turned his thoughts towards him and the tragic circumstances of his death, prompting after him a series of other funeral recollections (including Kassahun, the other victim)

Interestingly, this framework looks very similar to the structure Conway and Pleydell (2001) proposed for autobiographical memory. They belong to clearly defined "periods of time" and reactivate general semantic knowledge about them ("this was the time after the deaths of my parents"). They also clearly belong to "themes", which I have indicated on the graph by dotted lines. Common themes, according to Conway & Pleydell, include interests such as "family" or "work", but are the elements most susceptible to cultural variation. Here, they reflect the Gojjame society's main concerns: household relationships, allies and enemies and

loss, among others. Besides periods and themes, a few clues, such as the detail of an image or even a common word ("pride", in poem XXXVI) can also prime a new *təzəta*.

The succession of *təzəta* recollections thus tells a story – his story, as he sees it at this point of time, in November 2006: the struggles in his current marriage, the harsh conflict with his neighbor, the recent loss of a beloved uncle (Arräga), all calling back to the series of events and causalities that shaped his life. In other words, it contains a strong narrative component, determined by what Conway and Pleydell call the "working self": the sum of goals, motivations and self-perceptions at a given time. The "working self", as disposition that effectively prevents contradictions with the current self-perception (or cognitive dissonance), regulates the emergence of autobiographical memories in consciousness. For the same reason, past events that do not appear are also noteworthy. In Adamu's case, it was his middle brother Wärqu (the younger one is mentioned several times): in 2006, the two were in the middle of a disruptive dispute, very similar to the one that affected Chalo's father and Mälaqu a few years before, over the sharing of their parents' lands; and no happy memory made its way into Adamu's *təzəta*. But what struck me most was how changing *təzəta* recollections were. What changed was not the meaning of any specific memory trace – these were quite inflexible, for the genre-schemas define it almost entirely. It was the emergence and disappearance, year after year, and visit after visit, of specific remembrances as stories unfolded, conflicts arose, rankled or came to an end, and friendships and alliances were redefined. Acquaintances once deemed untrustworthy would become "good relatives", or vice versa, and get featured very differently (in terms of episodes, times, and emotional tonalities) in these recollections. As the Gojjame redefine themselves, their relationships, and the paths that they led them there, *təzəta* casts back a look consistent with the present lights.

Conclusion: a private matter?

Gojjame peasants thus engage in an elaborate play with time when singing "for themselves": with the time of performances, with its succession of patterns, phrases and poems, retrieved and re-constructed; and the time of mental travel, with its leaps between distant periods and themes. They offer us an example of how culture can shape the wandering of thoughts and create practices of recall. Its most puzzling aspect is how self-directed the dialogue is, and how little of it is communicated: *təzəta* is not learned in any straightforward or explicit manner; it takes an entire childhood witnessing loved ones singing and sharing their solitudes to make it into a self-evident experience. So why does music have this power? There are at

least three layers to consider. The first one might be a general, perhaps even universal, predisposition in the brain (which still lacks comprehensive evidence). The second one is social and historical and includes: the reliance on orality in a society where written records are still almost exclusively associated with the church and state elites; the structural dynamics (the kinship and agrarian systems) that drive relationship instability; and the importance for it of social gatherings. The fact that music is always (at least potentially) performed during these events, and has the ability to confirm or transform them (by telling the "truth"), constitutes our third level, the musical one, which has to do with sounds and the properties culturally ascribed to them: the emotions, moral values, and social behaviors associated with the three genres. The schemas that seem to guide and unconsciously constrain each recollection are the final level, the one where the psychological workings of memory intersect with culture, and help explain why *təzəta* is so prevalent and systematic.

Of utmost importance is the rhetorical power of this music in social events, where it persuades by stirring irrepressible emotions – and what remains of it in private rehashing. How does it influence other memories and thoughts, or interpretations of how people around behave? *Təzəta*, after all, is still about issues at stakes. Throughout my fieldwork there were indications that it was, indeed, more than a strictly private matter. When the word came out of my endeavors and the conversations I was having, subtle but repeated enquiries appeared about neighbors and what they sang. There was also that mistake I made early on when I told Abbaynäš and her small group of guests that Təgəst's 12 year-old brother had a *təzəta* of Kassahun, the murdered brother; their sudden worry and rushed questions ("was he heated, was it anger"?) showed me that *təzəta*, even though experienced as a private experience, is of a very public concern: for the boy, rehashing his pain and anger for years, could very well decide to act on it upon his coming of age, and kill his own uncle, or one of his cousin, in revenge.

His uncle Gännätu, one of elders in charge of the reconciliation process, could very well dismiss his own tears with a light "Don't worry, it's nothing. It's just the past". But the reactions that day to a child's *təzəta* were enough to convey that anguish and anger, however private, were not only echoing the struggles past, but also foretelling all the ones to come.

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