

How do Musical Instruments Relate to Social Structure and Organization? Analysis of Musical Instruments Mirroring Social Organization and Social Structure in the Gamo Zone, South Ethiopia

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Abstract

Studies in ethnomusicology of traditional musical instruments typically explain the basic features of instruments. They explain how instruments are made, from what they are constructed, and how they function within musical repertoires. However, studies explaining the mechanisms through which traditional musical instruments mirror or reflect the social organization and structure of a society are few in number. This research aims to describe how traditional musical instruments reflect the social organization and structure of a society, focusing on the Gamo people of southern Ethiopia. The study adopted an ethnographic research design, data were collected using key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, and audiovisual recordings, and it was analyzed qualitatively. The study identified multiple musical instruments including Diitha, Baqqaa, Lule, Darebe, Dinkyee, and Gondale that reflect the social organization and structure of the Gamo community. These instruments reflect social hierarchy, leadership positions, family structure, and societal organization in two main ways: through symbolic representation of the nature of the instruments (such as the ordering of strings or body parts), and the context in which the instruments are performed.

Keywords: Social organization; social structure, musical instruments, traditional musical instruments

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on traditional musical instruments often focus on describing their nature, form, function, taxonomy, and how they are used in musical repertoires. Some have indicated their relevance in marking ethnic identity (Cottrell, 2024; Elias, 2023). For instance, studies in ethnomusicology identify five types of musical instruments according to the mechanisms by which they produce

musical sound (Bakan, 2012; Shelemay, 2006): idophones or self-sounding instruments, chordophones or string instruments, membranophones or drum varieties, aerophone or wind instruments, and electrophones, instruments, instruments that produce sound using electricity (Bakan, 2012; Firew, 2019; Tesfa, 2013). Others have illustrated how they are used in different circumstances, such as war fronts (Shelemay, 2006), courts, nomination of new leaders, special events, inauguration of proclamation, praising leaders, accompanying communal activities, and expression of grievances (Andrew, 1997; Timkehet, 2006).

The social relevance of musical instruments goes beyond that. They are not simply instruments made to produce musical sound only; sometimes they serve as a mirror reflecting the social structure and organization of a society (Clayton et al., 2012). The way instruments are made and used, their shape, order of arrangement, and their names illustrate social relations and hierarchies in society. Social organizations are systems of obligation relations among and between groups constituting a given society, including kinship, family, marriage, and descent. Social structure, in turn, embraces the differential positions assumed by individuals and groups within those systems of obligation relations; it may comprise the status and roles individuals undertake in their obligation relations (Itao & Kaneko, 2022; Kumar & Soren, 2025; Sidhu, 2024)

Ethiopia is one of the countries in Africa comprising diverse ethnic groups adhering to varied cultural practices; music and musical instruments are one part of this diversity. Ezera (2009), in his analysis of the formation and structure of Ethiopian traditional music scales, highlighted the rich diversity of musical instruments in the country. In his work, Ezera (2009) classified Ethiopia into three hypothetical zones based on the type and diversity of musical instruments dominantly found in specific areas. The first region comprises north and north-central Ethiopia. In this area, we find commonly known and widely used musical instruments such as Kirar, Kebero, Washint, Imbilta, and Begena. The second zone covers Eastern Ethiopia, where there are unique musical instruments in Harari, Afar, and Somali cultures. According to Ezera (2009), the richest region endowed with the diversity of musical instruments along with multiple repertoires is the West and Southwest Ethiopia. This region comprises areas such as Gambela, Benishangul Gumuz, the recent Sidama, South Central, Southwest, and South Ethiopia regional states. South Ethiopia, similar to its ethnic diversity, holds a wide variety of musical instruments belonging to

windblown, string, self-sounding, and drum varieties. An outline of musical instruments such as *Dinky*, *Zye*, *Pilea*, *Woisa*, *Lolata*, *Hanata*, *Gayilo*, and *Fila* by Timkehet (2006) illustrates how Ezera's (2009) analysis and taxonomy correctly show the varieties of musical instruments in those areas.

Despite Ezera's (2009) analysis and Timkehet's (2006) description of the diversity of musical instruments, studies on traditional musical instruments in Ethiopia are dominated by descriptions of instruments as part of musical repertoires and cultural heritage. Few studies have tried to show the social role of traditional musical instruments. For instance, Shelemay (2006), in her book entitled "Soundscape: Exploring Music in a Changing World," indicated the relationship between the *Begna*, social status, and religious thought. Yet, while most research is dominated by ethnomusicological analysis, Timkehet (2006, 2020) tried to indicate how the *Pilea* of the *Maale* is arranged in a form that illustrates the family structure of the society. Firew (2019), in his study of *Fila* and other musical instruments, tried to show how musical instruments and their names are related to the social organization of the society among the *D'irasha* and *Mosiye* people of South Ethiopia. However, we lack studies illustrating how traditional musical instruments reflect the social organization and structure of a society. In recent years, the pressure of globalization has been mounting on cultural heritage, and its relevance in society is fading away. Documenting musical instruments and their relationship with the social structure and organization of society contributes to the safeguarding and preservation of cultural heritage. Thus, this research aims to describe how musical instruments, their nature, order of arrangement, and use in a social context mirror social organization and structure in *Gamo* culture.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

We preferred an ethnographic research design because it helps to observe, record, describe, and interpret musical events as they are used in real-life settings. This is done by attending events such as parades, festivals, rituals, and ceremonies. It helps to capture a comprehensive picture of how musical instruments are used to mirror the social structure and organization of society. The design allowed to explore one or more people's insights in a real-life setting and record what happens, or to actively elicit descriptions of real life from people through observation, interviews, or other

techniques. The design helps to collect qualitative data from participants by using ethnographic data-gathering methods. This requires more of an insider's perspective, achieved through the physical observation of everyday life and venues of musical performance (Creswell, 2013a). In this regard, the ethnographic research design has supported the qualitative data collection methods, focusing on the close observation of social occasions and interactions. This approach helps produce rich descriptions of daily engagement with music through people's experiences.

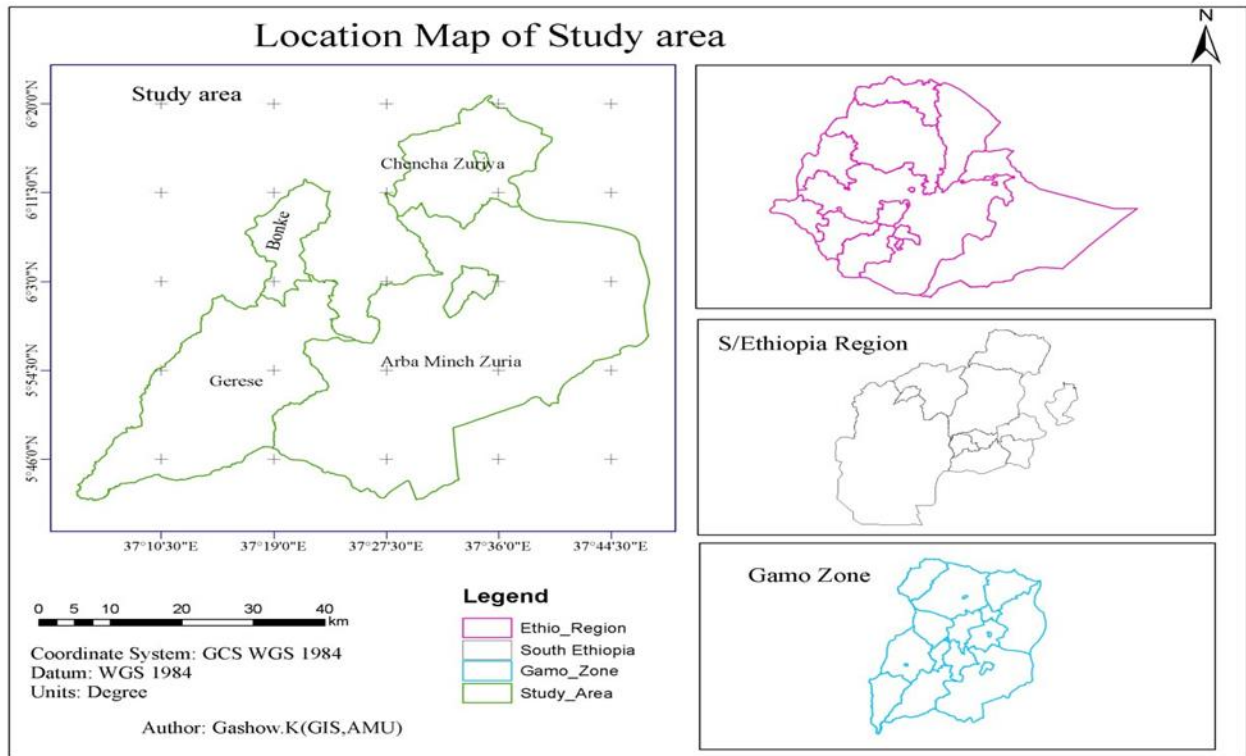
2.2. Description of the study area

This paper, which aims to show how traditional musical instruments reflect social organization and structure, was conducted in the Gamo zone. The people of *Gamo* are one of the ethnic groups that reside in the South Ethiopia Region (SER). Administratively, they belong to the *Gomo* zone, which is dominantly inhabited by three ethnic groups, namely, *Gamo*, *Zeise*, and *Giddicho* (Yosief, 2020). The zonal administration shares a boundary with the Wolayita Zone in the north, Garedula Zone in the south, Kore Zone in the east, and Gofa and the South Omo Zone to the west. Its administrative center, Arba Minch, is located 120 km and 505 km from the regional center, Wolayita, and the national capital, Addis Abeba respectively.

Gamo zone has a total of 8,222.42 sq.km land area coverage. In 2019, the estimated population of the zone was 1,613,513, with 802,557 males and 810,956 females. Out of the mentioned population, 1,265,084 (78.41%) lead their lives in rural areas of the zone while urban dwellers account for only 21.6 % (Yosief, 2020) .

The *Gamo* people are known for their rich cultural practices. They have a distinct musical culture signifying their identity. They are also known for their rich conflict resolution, traditions, and complex indigenous political system organized around 42 self-administering districts or *Ders* (Temechehn, 2020). Dominantly, the agrarian community practices mixed agriculture. Most people in the *Gamo* highlands live with *enset* production. They also support their livelihood with the production of wheat, barley, peas, and beans. People living in arid and semi-arid areas produce maize and bananas to support their livelihood. In the *Gomo* culture, there is a group of people who lead their lives with pottery, tannery, weaving, and other non-farm activities. People who led their lives with the above-mentioned nonfarm activities belong to a lower society

(Freeman, 2006). Currently, the Zone has sixteen Woredas and four reform towns. This study was conducted in Grese, Bonkey, Chench Zuriya, and Arba Minch Zuriay Woredas.



Picture 1: Map of Ethiopia, South Ethiopia Regional and the study area

2.3. Procedures for selecting the study area and research participants

We purposively selected rural *Kebeles* from *Grese*, *Boneky*, *Arba Minch Zuriya* and *Chencha Zuriya woreda*. We used purposive sampling to identify and select the study sites for two important reasons. First, people who are found in the selected study *kebeles* and *woredas* are known for their distinct and well-developed musical traditions. They have diverse forms of musical instruments reflecting the social and cultural life of the community. Second, they are selected for cultural relevance to the research topic; among the *Gamo* musical instruments, they play a key role in expressing social relations, status, and hierarchy. Because of this, we identified study sites from these *woredas* and communities in order to understand how musical instruments are used to reflect the social organization and structures of a society. To do so, we are expected to get access to experts and knowledge holders; because of this, we took purposive sampling to

elicit the knowledge that is typically found in the experience and wisdom of musicians, craftsmen, and musical instrument players.

Therefore, we relied on purposive sampling to select study setting. The sampling technique is designed to achieve an in-depth understanding of musical instruments and their role in mirroring the social organization and structure among the *Gamo* people of southern Ethiopia. Based on this, rural *kebeles* with rich musical instruments mirroring the social organization and structure of the society were selected. We selected 4 rural *kebeles* from each *woreda* in consultation with specialists from the *woreda* Culture and Tourism Office. Similarly, the selection of study participants was done purposively; musicians who play instruments, artisans who craft musical instruments and experts from the culture and tourism office participated in the study.

Although music is part of culture, not all individuals in society are equally capable of playing music and musical instruments. For instance, among the *Gamo*, *Dawura*, *Maale*, and *Wolayita*, musical instruments such as *Dinky*, *Diitha*, and *Pile* are made by artisans. In other societies, such as the *D'irasha* and *Maale*, most musical instruments are made and played by a specific group of people who are known for making music, crafting musical instruments, and playing music. Skills and knowledge of making music and musical instruments are found in the minds and experiences of a few individuals. Because of this, we used purposive sampling to identify informants who could give rich data on *Gamo* traditional music and musical instruments. Hence, 8 musical instrument players, 6 craft workers, 12 elders, and 4 members of the *woreda* music band, totaling 30 informants, are purposively selected from the community and participated in the research.

2.4. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

We adopted a combination of various data collection instruments, including key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, observation, and audio-visual recording. Instruments of data collection, including guiding questions for interviews and focus group discussions, were prepared in English and later translated and administered using Amharic and Gamotho of the *Gamo* language. Key informant interviews are used to elicit insider's knowledge (Creswell, 2013b) of music and musical instruments; in-depth interview to examine detailed individual experiences and meanings (Rtchie & Lewis, 2003); observation to capture the use of musical

instruments in social life (Lebaka, 2018); and audiovisual recordings are used to capture visual and audio records (De Hek & Ladio, 2019) of musical instruments within performance contexts.

The data for this research were collected using ethnographic fieldwork, and we conducted it in two phases. The first phase was conducted in Gerse, Arba Minch Zuriya, and Chench Zuriya Woreda from January 2021 to March 2021. During this field work, we collected data on traditional musical instruments such as *Diitha*, *Dinky*, *Lule*, and *Baqqa*. The second field work was conducted from April 2021 to July 2021 in Gamo Zone, Chench Zuriya, and Bonke Woreda. In this field work, we gathered additional data on the social significance of *Diitha*, *Baqqa*, *Lule*, *Darebe*, *Dinky*, and *Gondale*. In the process, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were tape-recorded, and pictures of informants and musical instruments were taken for future analysis. The data obtained from two independent field works were used to write this research article. Thick description, member checking, prolonged field stay, data and method triangulation, peer debriefing, conformability, and ethical rigor (Creswell, 2013b) were employed to ensure credibility and dependability of our findings.

2.5. Methods of Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyze the data. First, we transcribed all the recorded interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis started with the familiarization of the transcribed data. After reading the transcripts, we generated codes and then tried to search for basic themes. Then we reviewed emerging themes and later defined them and gave them names. Finlay, the report was written by referring to codes, categories, and themes.

2.6. Ethical Consideration of the Study

The process of data gathering strictly followed the ethical guidelines of ethnographic research. We protected informant rights and dignity; we worked hard to protect them from potential and immediate harm that could harm their safety. The data obtained from them is kept confidential. In the process, we communicated with our informants honestly and transparently; we took pictures of musical instruments along with their players after gaining informed consent. We anonymized the names of informants who did not permit us to use their names in our research report. Informants who participated in this research shared their ideas voluntarily after clearly

understanding the objectives of the research. The names mentioned in this research are names of informants who permitted us to use them in the research.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Musical Instruments, their feature and use in Gamo culture

Dinkye

Dinkye is one of the windblown musical instruments in *Gamo* culture. It is an elongated pipe-like instrument that has a narrow air inlet on one side and a wide air outlet at the other end of the instrument. *Dinkye* is made from a combination of bamboo, wood, animal horn, cattle fly whisk, swatter, and animal tail. People use a wood which has a pipe-like opening named *Ira Isho* to make the internal part of the *Dinkye*. According to Wonbocha Ashicho,

Dinkye is made by artisans or craft workers. It constitutes three to nine ensembles, sometimes accompanied by one drum. The ensemble is grouped into three. The first group holds the longest *Dinkye* with a low, thick sound, and it is named *Kawo*. The second group, which has medium length and medium sound, is called *Dayina*, and the shortest, loudest, and highest sound-producing group is named *Indo* and makes the third category.

The type of *Dinkye* documented in the *Gamo* highlands has a resemblance to the *Dinkye* known among the *Dawuro* and the *Wolayita*. The length of the tallest instrument is about 2 meters and 50 centimeters, while the smallest one has a length of 1 meter and 50 centimeters.



Picture 1- Picture of *Dinkye* (left and right) taken by researchers in Bonkey Woreda in 2021

Gondale

In *Gamo* culture, *Gondale* stands for shield. Though its size and nature vary from place to place, the shield is known for its use on war fronts. In this research, we focus on how it is used in the *Gamo* traditional music. There are two types of *Gondale*/shields in *Gamo* culture. The first one is small in size and is made from a metal plate; it is named *Gasha*. It is a type of shield that is often held by ordinary individuals and is made by artisans from iron or any other metal. It is used by ordinary individual in the performance of mourning and burial songs. The second one, which is made from hippopotamus skin, is called *Geba*. It is a highly prestigious instrument in *Gamo* culture and is often used by heroes and respected leaders only.



Picture 2: Picture of Geba taken from Grese Woreda by researchers in 2021

The *Gamo* people uniquely employ *Gondale* to produce sound in mourning songs. They produce sound from *Gondale* by striking it with the ground or *Thambaro*, a ritual spear made from bronze. The sound of *Gondale* cannot be heard unless there is an important social occasion in the community. Holding and using *Geba* on social occasions such as mourning rites, funerary ceremonies, weddings, and *Maskala* ceremonies is only allowed for respected leaders and heroes; holding and using *Geba* is disallowed for women and individuals from the lowest social hierarchy.

Baqqqa

Baqqqa is another musical instrument that has an intricate relationship with *Gamo* social organization and structure. It is not typically an instrument in its natural sense. Rather, it holds a mechanism of producing sound using a local scarf made from cotton during mourning rites and on festive occasions. Married women in *Gamo* culture use their cotton-made scarves to make musical sounds during mourning rites or on festive occasions. Married women who have given

birth to a child will repeatedly fold their scarf until it becomes thick and hard enough to sound when hit with the hand. After properly folding the scarf, they put it between their thighs. Then, they hit the folded scarf using their hands while singing vocal songs during mourning rites. It is played to accompany the mourning rites of respected elders and leaders. Making *Baqqa* and producing sound using *Baqqa* is disallowed for unmarried young women.

Lule

Lule is a small bell that is made from a metal plate. We found it in *Gerse worda*, *Garbansa Karche*, and *Koshale Kebele*. It is made by blacksmith artisans who belong to the lower social hierarchy. *Lule* produces sound when the player collides with the curved metal plate with its wall. According to Aweke Machee, *Gamo* people living in the *Gerse* highlands tie *Lule* on the neck of their cows or sheep when their herd size reaches ten for cows and one hundred for sheep, following a ritual performed to ward off death from their stock.

Diitha

Diitha is the other well-known musical instrument that is used in the daily life of the *Gamo* people. The shape, size, and material from which *Diitha* is made have a significant resemblance to the *Kerar* of the *Amhara*. *Diitha* is made from wood, leather, string, and a bowl-shaped box. It is made by artisans who belong to the lowest social position in *Gamo* culture. They attach the string on the top bar with a bowl-shaped box using a tie made from the peel of false banana or *enset*, and they use the *enset* peel to tune the quality of the sound. The Wooden bowl can be made from any wood, and it is covered with animal leather to make the box. The remaining parts of *Diitha* are made from wood. It has five strings, which are made from fiber; a small piece of skin, which is tied with rope on *Diitha*, is used to play it.



Picture 3: Picture of Diitha taken by researchers in Gerse Woreda Culture and Tourism Office in 2021

Darbe/ Karabe/ Tambure

Darbe is a kind of drum that serves as a musical instrument in *Gamo* culture. It is also called *Karabe* in some areas and *Tambure* in other areas. It is a type of drum that has two sides covered with stretched cow leather on a wooden vessel. In its shape and nature, *Darbe* has similar features to the *Kebero*, which is common in most parts of Ethiopia. When making *Darbe*, leather obtained from a cow is used to cover the heads and to fringe the frame. It is made and played by tanners who belong to the occupational group in the community.

There are two types of drums, or *Darbe*, in *Gamo* culture. The first one is called *Darbe*; it has a medium size and is used during cultural rites such as mourning and declaring public sanctions. It is often played by male tanners from the occupational group in the community using their hands, while playing *Darbe* is forbidden for women. The second type of drum is called *Karabe*; it is used for wedding ceremonies and, recently, there are trends of using it for religious ceremonies. The drum commonly accompanies mourning songs and occasionally accompanies wedding rites in *Gamo* culture.



Picture 4- Picture of *Darbe* taken by researchers in *Garbansa Karche Kebele, Grese, Woreda* in 2021

3.2. Reflecting in Social Organization and Social Structure

Analysis of the data revealed two mechanisms by which musical instruments reflect the social organization and structure of society. First, by using symbolic representation of sound and physical parts of the musical instruments, and secondly, by referring to the social context in which they are used.

3.2.1. Reflecting Social Organization and Structure through Symbolic Representation

In *Gamo* culture, traditional musical instruments such as *Diitha* and *Dinky* are known for mirroring the social organization and structure of the society through symbolic representation. *Diitha* is part of the string instruments, and it typically looks like the *Kirar* of Ethiopian music. *Diitha* has five strings on it; each string has its own name, symbolically representing a social position in *Gamo* culture. Awoke Machhe described this as:

In our culture, *Diitha* is used to accompany wedding and mourning songs. As an instrument, it has five strings on it; each string has its own name depending on the sound that it produces and the position that it has on the instrument. The name of the string may vary from *Dere* to *Dere*, but the representation that they have on the instrument is common throughout *Gamo* culture. In the *Grese* area, a string that produces a soft, thick sound, taking the first place at the top of the instrument, is named *Kawo*. It's sound symbolically represents *Kawo*, who is the leader of the *Gamo Dere*. While the second string from top to bottom is named *Kawo Machee*, which means the wife of the *Kawo*, the third stands for *Malla*, representing the second social hierarchy in the *Gamo Dere*; the fourth is *Manna*, and the fifth one is *Manna Machee*, representing the artisan group and artisan's wife respectively (January 20, 2021, *Grese*).

The above quote illustrates how parts of a traditional musical instrument, i.e., the order in which the lyre's strings are placed from top to bottom, have come to represent combinations of leadership positions, social ties, and social hierarchies of the society. Strings named with *Machee* and *Kawo Machee* represents the social ties formed with marriage. Similarly, strings named with *Kawo*, *Manna*, or *Kawo Machee* and *Manna Machee* imply the social structure, stratification, leadership position, and hierarchies in *Gamo* society. The important point we derive from the description is that sound and parts of the instruments have become representative of social positions. The thick graceful sound which is produced with the first string stands for *Kawo*, who is the leader of the community, while the second represents the wife of the *Kawo* named *Kawo Machee*; the third stood for *Malla*, the second social hierarchy; the fourth named *Manna* refers to

the artisan group; and the fifth and final named *Manna Machee* implies wives of the artisan group in the society.

Similarly, alternative approaches are used for mirroring social position and structure using parts of musical instruments and their sound. Informants from *Gerse Woreda*, *Garebansa Kareche Kebele*, named the strings of the *Diitha* as *Kawo*, *Maga*, *Dayina*, *Sole*, and *Manna*, in the same manner as informants explained the phenomenon in *Dega Ocholo* and *Chencha Zuria Woreda*. According to them, the string that produces a soft, thick, graceful sound stands for *Kawo*; next to *Kawo* is *Maga*; the string that is in the middle, producing a medium sound, was labeled as *Dayina*, and the last two strings that produce a thin and loud sound are named *Sole* and *Manna*. This shows that the way sound and *Diitha*'s strings are interpreted to demonstrate social position in *Gamo* culture has its own version, with slight differences in naming among people who reside in *Dega Ocholo*. In *Dega Ocholo*, the five strings of the *Diitha* are named *Baletho*, *Domebe*, *Kaletho*, *Dogala Bale*, and *Mala Bayira*. From this, it seems that parts of the instrument and sound have reflected social organization and structure through symbolic representation.

In *Gamo* culture, *Dinkyee* is the second traditional musical instrument reflecting the social structure and social organization of the society using symbolic representation. Instruments that make up a *Dinkyee* ensemble have their own distinct names; the name given to each instrument has a symbolic representation and meaning. Wonbocha Ashicho, a key informant from *Grese Woreda*, *Garebansa Kareche Kebele*, described the name and symbolic representation in one *Dinkyee* ensemble as follows:

Dinkyee holds a set of musical instruments extending to nine in number. Recently, we played a set of instruments comprising five instruments. Based on the sound that each instrument produces, the set of musical instruments in it are classified into three groups. The longest one, which produces a soft, thick sound, is called *Kawo*. The next instrument, which produces the second sound and its followers, is called *Dayina*, and the last group, producing the loudest sound in the ensemble, is called *Indo*. As an ensemble, we consider our *Dinkyee* as a family and community. As you can see, *Kawo* and its thick, graceful sound symbolically stands for leaders. The second group of instruments and their name in the ensemble

represent the social hierarchy that is found next to the *Kawo*. They are instruments that connect the sound of *Kawo* with *Indo* and the drum. In the same manner, the *Dayina* in the ensemble are represented as a group of leaders who connect the *Kawo* with the people. In the same way, while playing *Dinky*, the *Dayina* connects two sounds that are found at the extremes. *Indo*, in its part, indicates escorting and enhancing the agility of our music (January 22, 2021, Grese).

Such an explanation analytically illustrates symbolic representation as one mechanism through which sound gets meaning for mirroring social organization and structure in *Gamo* culture. Second, it shows how instruments and their sound becomes representative of social hierarchy. For instance, parts of the instrument, both in *Diitha* and *Dinky*, served as a symbol to represent something in the culture, i.e., social hierarchy. This means parts of the instruments and their sound give clues or signify something both for the player and listener in the community.

3.2.2. Reflecting Social Organization and Structure in Social Contexts in Which They are Used

Traditional musical instruments in *Gamo* culture have multiple roles; they signify political position in the contexts in which they are used. Often, installation events are hosted with songs, dances, and the sharing of food and drink. Musical instruments are used to accompany songs and festive events. At the same time, they are used to signal the expression of consent and approval. In *Gamo* culture, the installation of new leaders, such as *Kawo*, *Maga*, and *Alaqa* are decorated with the sounds of *Zaye*, *Dinky*, and *Darbe*. Informant named Yegnasew from *Gerse Woreda* stated that *Zaye* is used during the installation of a new *Kawo*. Its sound, supported by the sound of the *Darbe*, accompanies the power transition in the *Gamo* traditional political system. The sound of *Zaye* is heard while installing a new *Kawo* to indicate his legitimacy and acceptance (March 2, 2021, Grese). After the installation of the new *Kawo*, all members of the *Dere* express their joy and consent by playing *Diitha*, *Zaye*, and *Dinky*. Hence, the sound of *Zaye* declares acceptance of the mass attending the coronation event.

Despite declaring social acceptance of leaders, the sound produced by *Darbe* also serves to declare social sanction and rejection. Among the *Gamo* people, there is an age-old tradition of justice that works on the principles of *Gome*. According to Maresha Mekuriay, every member of the community is socialized to respect and adhere to the principles of *Gome*, which prohibits

individuals from breaching values, norms, and cultural laws of the community. If someone breaches such cultural norms of the society, he has an obligation to confess it first to leaders and later to the community. Hiding and discarding evidence of misconduct is *Gome* (taboo). If someone hides what he has done and discards the evidence, elders and leaders of the *Dere* will call for a public assembly and declare a sanction on the offender's family. After the sanction, no one in the *Dere* (administrative area) will engage in social activities with the offender's family. They will be ostracized from social interactions. The final sanction and rejection of the offender's family is declared with the sound of *Darbe* and *Gondale* (Jun 2, 2021, *Chencha Zuria Woreda*).

Our informant from *Dega Ocholo Kebele*, named Daniel, asserted that, in *Gamo* culture, we use *Gondale* and *Darbe* to declare a sanction on those who breach community values and refuse to accept their misconduct. The process of declaring sanctions starts with identifying the offenders. If the suspected offenders deny telling the truth and when members of the village fail to bring evidence that testifies to it, they request that the leaders declare sanction on the suspected offenders and their family. Then, all members of the community are called to gather on *Dubusha* (a public gathering space). Then, they declare sanctions and curse the suspected offenders and their family by pounding the ground with *Gondale* and beating *Darbe* with hands (May 10, 2021, *Arba Minch zuriya woreda*). In this case, the sound of *Gondale* and *Darbe* is used to indicate rejection of certain acts of its members that violate the norms of the community through cursing and declaring social sanctions.

Despite this, there are also musical instruments that display an individual's wealth in *Gamo* culture. Among the *Gamo*, *Lule*, and its sound are used to indicate the wealth of a house, as one can read the number of sheep or cows a person has from it. *Lule* is a metal plate that is hung on the neck of a head-leading sheep or cow when the herd size reaches 10 for cows and 100 for sheep. Though *Lule* serves as an indicator of herds on grazing land, households that have a limited number of sheep and cows are not allowed to use it. This is because they do not fulfill the required number of sheep or cows to use *Lule*. The sound of *Lule*, apart from serving as a locator of herds on grazing fields, indicates the wealth individuals have accumulated in *Gamo* culture.

The use of distinct musical instruments such as *Dinkye* and *Darbe* in *Gamo* culture illustrates

wealth and social status. As it was stated by Fiqeru:

In our culture, wealthy individuals adorn their family's wedding and mourning rites using *Dinkye* and *Darbe*. In mourning rites, an individual who lost a relative from his family will go to the *Maga* and ask to use *Darbe*. Before taking the *Darbe* to the mourning rite, he gives payment to the *Maga* for its service. The payment that is given for *Darbe*'s service is called payment for its tear. Then he will bring the *Darbe* to be used on the mourning rite. Similarly, families who have lost their relatives will bring *Dinkye* with its players to decorate mourning rites as well as wedding ceremonies of their relatives by providing payment for artisans who play the instrument. Those who cannot afford the payment cannot use either *Darbe* or *Dinkye* for mourning or wedding rites (May 10, 2021, *Chencha Zuriya Woreda*).

As we can see from the above quote, wealthy people use *Dinkye* and *Darbe* to adorn wedding and mourning rites. Both cases show that wealthy individuals decorate and set apart their mourning and wedding rites from those of common people, using *Dinkye* and *Darbe*.

The use of musical instruments such as *Gondale*, *Darbe*, and *Dinkye* in mourning rites is another context that reflects social organization and structure in *Gamo* culture. Mourning rites of leaders, heroes, and respected elders are commemorated distinctly. Starting from the telling of the death to the funeral ceremony, they are uniquely decorated with instruments such as *Gondale*, *Darbe*, and *Dinkye*. The *Gamo* use these instruments in the mourning rites of leaders to indicate the social status and authority of the deceased person. Describing this, Mesefin states:

In *Gamo* culture, we use the sound of *Gondale* to indicate the death of leaders, respected elders, and heroes. *Gondale*, *Zaye*, *Dinkye*, and *Darbe* are not used in the mourning rites of ordinary individuals. Their sound is used to accompany the mourning rites of respected leaders. Despite giving a signal to indicate the death of leaders, heroes, and elders, *Gondale*, *Darbe*, *Zaye*, and *Dinkye* decorate mourning rites. Using *Gondale* on mourning rites accompanied by *Zaye* and *Xambaro* (ritual spear) indicates the level of condolence and losses that the community experienced (March 16, 2021, Grese).

This shows how musical instruments and their sound are used in mourning rites and the installation of new *Kawos*. It indicates their specific attachment to social status and authority. Thus, the sound of *Gondale*, *Darbe*, and *Dinky* on mourning rites clearly demonstrates the death of a respected leader, hero, or elder in the village or *Dere*.

4. DISCUSSION

Studies on traditional musical instruments focus on describing their nature and role in musical repertoires and taxonomy. Few anthropological and ethnomusicological studies have attempted to show how these instruments are used to reflect social position, organizations, and hierarchy in society (Cottrell, 2024). In her book *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World*, Shelemay (2006) identified three ways in which musical instruments convey meaning and acquire cultural interpretation. How instruments generate meaning in a culture reveals their intricate relationship with social systems, including social organization and societal structure. Musical instruments and their sound acquire meaning through three different mechanisms. First, they create meaning by referring to something else in the environment and symbolically becoming it. Second, they acquire meaning through symbolic representation. Third, they drive meaning by using text in musical repertoires (Shelemay, 2006). Thus, understanding how musical instruments and their sound are conceived and defined in a society helps to clearly illustrate how they reflect social organizations and structure.

In this research, we identified two ways in which meaning-making through musical instruments reflected social position, hierarchy, or organization. First, in *Gamo* culture, traditional musical instruments used symbolic representation to mirror social structure and organization. Second, they illustrated the social structure and organization of the society through the social context in which they are utilized. From the findings, we assert that musical instruments are not merely tools for making music. Rather, the way in which these instruments are crafted and used, the place where they are kept, and the way they are arranged during musical performances convey specific meanings that signify a society's social system. Their nature, shape, and sound often mark social status and hierarchy. Instruments linked with specific group personalities dictate how they are used in diverse settings. According to Shelemay (2006), meaning-making is used to indicate the connection of instruments with social organization and system. Hence, our

findings align with Mans (2006), who stated that musical meaning maintains social structures and values, such as gender, age, and class level; religious, moral, and interpersonal values; affect and intellectual content; political significance and ideology; and the transmission of language and culture.

Specifically, the findings illustrated symbolic representation as the primary mechanism through which traditional musical instruments in *Gamo* culture are used to mirror social organization and structure. Parts of musical instruments and the patterns of string arrangements on the *Diitha*, as well as the sound each string produces, illustrated social positions and organizations. Strings on the *Diitha* and ensembles of *Dinky*e symbolically signified leadership positions and social status. Similarly, early studies on African traditional music demonstrated that African musical instruments symbolically encoded social relations, status, and hierarchies (Bates, 2012; Kubik, 2010; Merriam, 1964; Nketia, 1974, and Zemp, 1978). For instance, Zemp (1978) illustrated how structural features of instruments such as strings, parts, and tuning systems mapped social distinctions among various communities in Africa. Kubik (2010) showed that string order, pitch hierarchy, and sound intensity symbolically encoded seniority, authority, and ritual knowledge. Agawu (2014) indicated that the use of sound prominence and musical control as metaphors for social authority and power. In Africa, certain musical instruments are restricted to the use of elites; they are owned and played only by respected individuals. Ownership and performances of these distinct musical instruments index social rank and legitimacy (Nketia, 1974).

The findings of this research correspond with those of Agawu (2014), Bates (2012), Kubik (2010), Merriam (1964), and Zemp (1978). They also agree with the findings of Pankhurst (1955) and Powen (1968), which showed that *Negarit* (kettle drum), *Imbilta*, *Meleket*, and *Begena* served as emblems of status, political power, and prestige in north central Ethiopia. Timkehet (2006) highlighted how musical instruments mark social status and leadership position among East African communities, including Ethiopia. Similarly, Shelemay (2006) showed how *Begna* served as an emblem of prestige and sanctity in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, in her studies of the *Maale* music, Timkehet (2020) demonstrated how the *Pilea* marked the social organization of the *Maale* people. Unlike the

findings of the above-mentioned studies, this research revealed two important additional roles of musical instruments mirroring social structure and organization. It showed the role of musical instruments and their sounds, declaring social sanctions in the context of finding criminals in society. It also illustrated how instruments and their sounds are used to declare the popular acceptance of newly appointed leaders in society. Furthermore, it demonstrated how ensembles of *Dinkye* and strings of *Diitha* are used to mirror family and social organization within a society. This adds new insights to the study of music by showing that specific components of musical instruments, such as string arrangements, pitch hierarchy, and ensemble structure, operated as micro-level symbols mirroring social structure and organization.

The social context in which musical instruments are used significantly indicates wealth, status, and authority among the study communities. In *Gamo* culture, *Darbe* and *Dinkye* are used in the mourning and wedding rites of respected leaders, heroes, and wealthy farmers. This selective ritual use demonstrates how musical instruments function as markers of wealth, status, and leadership position in *Gamo* society. According to Pankhurst (1955) and Powen (1968), in Ethiopia, the use of musical instruments in specific social contexts serves to mark the status and prestige of leaders and individuals within the society. For instance, in northern central Ethiopia, the number of *Negarite* used in a leader's military campaign clearly indicates the leader's place in the political hierarchy. In Buganda (the recent Uganda) culture, leaders use kettle drums during judicial procedures to signal the arrival of the king and other leaders (Timkehet, 2006).

The use of musical instruments and their sounds in Roman funerary practices often marked wealth, political authority, and high social identity. They symbolically reinforced prestige and public reputation (Alexandrescu, 2019). According to Yuen (2014), musical instruments function as symbolic goods, signifying elite status, cultural and social distinction, and social differentiation. Despite producing musical sound, they serve as markers of prestige and upward mobility. They act as social actors with agency; the characteristics of the sound they produce, particular sound quality, are linked with status, ritual authority, and prestige (Bates, 2012). Findings of this research go with those of Alexandrescu (2019); Bates (2012); Pankhurst (1955); Powne (1968), and Yuen (2014). They show that the contexts in which *Zaye*, *Dinkye*, and *Darebe* are used clearly mark social status, position, and political

authority in the society. However, the payment given to custodians of *Darebe* before using it in mourning rites and the payment given to *Dinkye* players after serving at weddings and mourning rites of wealthy families constitute new insights. These two insights distinguish this research from the studies of Alexandrescu (2019); Bates (2012), Pankhurst (1955), and Powne (1968).

5. CONCLUSION

From the various types of musical instruments found in Gamo culture, we selected *Dinkye*, *Diitha*, *Lule*, *Gondale*, and *Darebe* to show how they reflect social organization and structure. These musical instruments are part of the material and musical culture of the *Gamo* people. They are used to produce both musical and non-musical sounds in *Gamo* culture. For instance, *Zaye* and *Dinkye* produce sound using air; *Diitha* is a chordophone and produces sound through the vibration of strings. *Lule* and *Gondale* are self-sounding instruments, while *Darebe* produces sound through the vibration of stretched membranes.

In *Gamo* culture, these musical instruments are used in different social and cultural activities. They accompany both joyful and sad moments. For instance, they are played during mourning rites, wedding ceremonies, the installation of new leaders, and communal ceremonies. In daily social activities, they are used to send signals for communication. However, the role of musical instruments in *Gamo* culture is not limited only to the production of musical and non-musical sounds. The Instruments themselves, their nature, the way they are used, their sound, and the context in which they are played all serve important social functions. They mark social status and positions within the society.

The results of this research show that musical instruments perform their social functions only after they convey meaning and receive cultural interpretation. How musical instruments generate meaning in culture reveals their intricate attachment to social systems, including social organization and structure. In this research, we identified two mechanisms through which *Gamo* musical instruments and their sound acquire meaning. First, they create meaning through symbolic representation. Second, they acquire meaning by referring to something else in the environment and symbolically by becoming it.

We also identified two ways in which meaning-making through musical instruments reflects social position, hierarchy, and social organization. First, a musical instrument reflects the social structure and organization through symbolic representation. The strings of the *Diitha*, the names given to each string, the way ensembles of *Dinkye* are organized, and the sound they produce all mark social status and the organization of *Gamo* society. These sounds, instruments, and their arrangement highlight the upper, middle, and lower social positions. Similarly, they reflect the family and social organization of the *Gamo* community.

The second mechanism is the context in which musical instruments are used, which also reflects the social organization and structure of the society. In *Gamo* culture, the use of musical instruments in weddings, mourning rites, and the installation of new leaders indicates the social position and hierarchies that individuals hold in the society. For instance, *Gondale*, *Darebe*, and *Dinkye* are used to decorate the mourning and wedding rites of leaders and wealthy individuals. *Dinkye* and *Darebe* are played during the installation of new leaders. Similarly, the sounds of *Darebe* and *Gondale* are used to declare social sanction or acceptance.

Finlay, this research concludes that musical instruments have multiple cultural features signifying the material culture of a society. They also serve as a source of musical and non-musical sound. Despite this, their use in society goes far beyond musical and non-musical sound production. Their sound, nature, and use play a key role in marking and reflecting social hierarchies and organization within the society. In this research we tried to investigate the link between musical instruments, social organization, and structure. However the sound and melodies produced by musical instruments have rich social interpretation. Despite this, due to the focus of our research on sound sources and the absence of musical experts who could analyze musical structure and melody, we have not touched it. Therefore, we recommend that researchers conduct further studies on the link between musical instruments and material culture, including musical instruments in *Gamo* and in other societies.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study followed the ethical principles of ethnographic research, and the informants involved were adults. They have been informed about the purpose of this study and the uses of the data collected from them. They have given their informed consent to participate in the research process.

Consent for publication: We have informed participants of the research and authorities from *Gamo zone Gerse*, *Chencha Zuriya*, and *Bonke woreda* about this research and its publication process, and they have given us their verbal consent for publication.

Competing interests: The data are collected through field work by the authors, and there are no competing interests.

Author’s contributions: GKK collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the results, drafted and revised the manuscript. EDB participated in reviewing and providing comments on different versions of the research manuscript and collected data.

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