

RESEARCH | PEER REVIEWED

# "He Has Rescued Me from Danger": Religious Music-Making, Trauma, and Resilience on the Ethio-South Sudanese Border

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## Abstract

The Ethio-South Sudanese border is characterized by instability and conflict. Most populations in this area have experienced violence and displacement and face ongoing insecurity and political inequality. During my fieldwork in the region, several composers gave accounts of how composing and singing Christian songs provided them with comfort and hope in times of hardship, particularly following episodes of violence. Using ethnographic research and interviews as primary methodologies, this article explores how these individuals use religious music-making as a means of coping and resilience in the wake of trauma. The primary goal of this article is to provide a platform for their stories. The secondary goal is to explore resonances between their accounts and scholarly observations about potential roles of music-making in trauma resilience across disciplines. I focus particularly on themes of embodied music-making, community connection, and spirituality. All point to the same phenomenon: that music can play a role in human resilience and meaning-making. Finally, I make suggestions on how to enhance mental health care in culturally-relevant ways in a religious society such as in Ethiopia, as well as draw out cross-cultural implications for mental health care in the western system.

**Keywords:** music and trauma; songwriting; resilience; religious music; cross-cultural music therapy

“When your heart is breaking, you can put it into a song.”

— Gatwech Kewer Kong (2016)

Gambella People’s Region lies on Ethiopia’s western periphery, bordering South Sudan. It is one of the most underdeveloped and unstable regions in Ethiopia. Colonial and post-colonial geopolitics, exclusionary and exploitative state-building dynamics, resource conflicts, and increasingly politicized ethnic identities have made life in the area precarious at best and prone to outbreaks of violence at worst. Many populations residing in Gambella have been directly impacted by war, displacement, and ethnically-targeted violence at some point in their lifespan (Feyissa 2011; Hagos 2021).

In this unstable context, Gambellans continue to create music. Song topics range from romantic love to social and political issues to dance to religious songs. With a predominantly Protestant Christian demographic, religious songs in particular comprise a significant portion of music-making in the region. In this article, I explore how composers and singers from Ethiopia’s western Gambella region use religious song for coping and resilience in the wake of violence and displacement on the Ethio-South Sudanese border. I mainly focus on the accounts given by composers in the aftermath of the ethnically-targeted massacre in Gambella in December 2003 (Human Rights Watch 2005).

The primary aim of this article is to provide a platform for these individuals to share their experiences. People in this region “fall through the cracks” of global consciousness, under multiple scales of marginalization and oppression as Black Africans in an even further marginalized peripheral border region of the Ethiopian state. While catastrophes in white nations receive abundant coverage in international outlets, similar events in places such as Ethiopia and South Sudan receive comparatively little attention (“Viewpoint on Ukraine” 2022). If this article offers anything new to the conversation, it is a testimony to these individuals as human beings whose lives and experiences are worthy of being heard. The secondary aim is to explore common themes about how music-making has played a role in their coping and resilience in the wake of trauma and during times of hardship. Resilience refers to the process of utilizing one’s internal and external resources to make positive adaptations in difficult circumstances (Ungar 2013). While there seems to be a consensus that creative and embodied acts such as music are helpful for recovering from trauma, these continue to occupy a peripheral status in treating trauma when compared to medication or talk therapy (van der Kolk 2014, 209–210). Music-making in Gambella, furthermore, is closely interrelated with spirituality and social connection, two additional factors that may play a role in mitigating the effects of traumatic experiences (e.g., Hiller et al. 2017). Downplaying the arts, spirituality, and the individual’s relationship with their wider community is particularly unhelpful in sociocultural contexts outside of white Euro-America (Gopalkrishnan 2018). In places such as Ethiopia, mental health more broadly is closely bound with conceptions of religion, spirituality, and community (Zelege et al. 2019).

## Approach and Methodology

This article draws from ethnomusicological research I conducted during my graduate work from 2016–2019. Methodologies include open-ended interviews in English, Anywaa, Amharic, and Nuer languages (depending on the language the interviewees were most comfortable with); translation and analysis of songs; participant-observation in daily life in Ethiopia; and “deep hanging out”: long hours spent at roadside cafes, hotel lobbies, on

buses, walking about town, and participating in daily life with Gambellan colleagues and friends.

By the time I began my research in Gambella, I had already been traveling to Ethiopia for several years to volunteer and visit friends in the country. As a music student and pianist, I naturally connected with Ethiopian musicians during my travels, which eventually led me to graduate school and writing my master's thesis on traditional music groups in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital). During my master's, I noticed that Gambellan music was curiously absent from traditional performances, even though traditional performing groups claimed to present songs from all around the country. Many Ethiopians seemed to know little about Gambella in general, considering it a part of South Sudan rather than Ethiopia. This lacuna of knowledge piqued my curiosity in the region. In 2016, a friend in Addis Ababa introduced me to a few Gambellan students from the Anywaa ethnic group, including Apay Ojullu Aballa, a composer in the Anywaa church. We became fast friends, perhaps in part due to our shared status as students and our shared backgrounds as church musicians. They invited me to visit them in Gambella during their school break and assisted me in establishing research feasibility. During my PhD, I traveled to Ethiopia annually for two to six months at a time when not serving as a graduate assistant at my university. I conducted research in both Gambella and with Gambellans and South Sudanese in Addis Ababa (where many reside for school and work). Though my research was a multi-ethnic study, I did form several close friendships with Anywaa individuals outside of my research, which resulted in my research being skewed towards Anywaa perspectives. Hence, the majority of this particular article does focus on the experiences of Anywaa composers, particularly their accounts of the 2003 ethnic massacre that had a pervasive effect on their community and came up frequently in our conversations.

The approach in this article draws from my training in both ethnomusicology and music therapy. In addition to my years doing fieldwork and in academia, I have practiced music therapy in community settings, hospice, and psychiatric facilities in the United States. As I have moved back and forth between music therapy and ethnomusicology, tension between these fields has become apparent. Music therapy and mental health treatment more broadly in Euro-America tend to split the individual from the community and the biomedical from the social, cultural, and the spiritual (Gopalkrishnan 2018). Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, is predicated on music within its sociocultural milieu. Music therapy often occurs in a clinical space, isolated from the individual's everyday context, while the subject of ethnomusicological study is the use of music by communities in everyday life, including rituals pertaining to health and healing. Music therapy also tends to draw more frequently from quantitative methods—likely influenced by the necessity of receiving funding in a capitalist, quantitatively-based healthcare system—while ethnomusicology is qualitative, ethnographic, and rooted in the humanities. Recent years have seen increased dialogue between the two disciplines, particularly in the fields of medical ethnomusicology (e.g., Edwards et al. 2015) and disability studies (Bakan 2014). The development of the community music therapy model, a paradigm that works with and within the broader community and particular sociocultural contexts, also begins to bridge the disciplinary gap (Pavlicevic & Ansdell 2004). I would place this article somewhere in between music therapy and ethnomusicology, though leaning more towards ethnomusicology in terms of research approach. Ultimately, however, I am less concerned with the debate between different disciplines in this particular article than I am in how they all point to the same phenomenon: that music-making, for many, somehow plays a role in human healing, resilience, and meaning-making. Music therapy and ethnomusicology are, in this sense, merely different lenses through which we can view these dynamics.

I start from the comments of the people to whom I have spoken as they shared their

experiences and how music helped them in times of great difficulty. The narratives are given priority, as these individuals are the experts on their own experiences. My contribution is to explore resonances between these accounts and scholarly observations from various disciplines, including psychology, music therapy, trauma research, and cultural anthropology. Additionally, by listening to accounts of violence and displacement through the lens of religious song, it is my hope that we can expand our understanding of these individuals' experiences beyond the standardized "life stories" narrative that aid agencies have utilized with displaced peoples. I suggest that religious song and experience, not typically given attention by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists, can provide an alternative to the tropes that restrict or flatten the nuances of individual's sentiments, opinions, and experiences in the process of trying to make wartime narratives comprehensible for international audiences (Kindersley 2015). This is not to elide my own role in compiling these narratives as a researcher (not to mention how individuals present themselves and their stories according to the internalized expectations they have of what an American researcher wants to hear). Nonetheless, song can provide an additional avenue through which individuals can express their experiences and emotional lives in the wake of conflict, displacement, and ongoing instability.

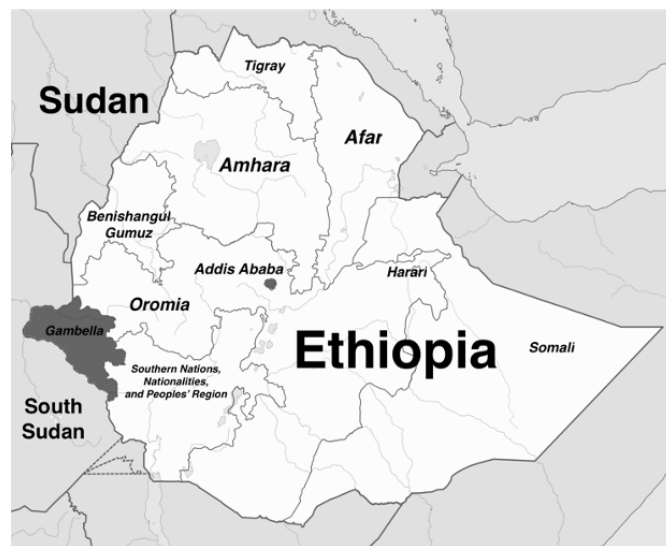
This article is socially and culturally specific to the Anywaa ethnic group with some additional insights from the Nuer ethnic group, the majority demographic on the Ethio-South Sudanese border. Some of these individuals are from Ethiopia and others are from South Sudan, as the border in this area is fluid and sees frequent movement of peoples on either side. With this specific focus, we do not need to consider these individuals under homogeneous labels such as "refugees," "displaced peoples," or "trauma survivors" as is often fraught in the clinical literature (Comte 2016), and their experiences can be nuanced according to their sociocultural beliefs and norms and unique experiences of ethnopolitical violence and displacement.

Lastly, I make suggestions as to practical application in supporting individuals who have been through traumatic experiences, particularly in contexts such as the Ethio-South Sudanese border, as well as cross-cultural implications.

### **Sociopolitical Context in Gambell**

Gambella People's Region is in western Ethiopia on the border of South Sudan. There are five politically-recognized indigenous ethnic groups in the region: the Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Opwo, and Komo. There are also many other ethnic groups who have migrated to Gambella from other parts of Ethiopia, known collectively in the area as *highlanders* or *habesha* (terms which Gambellans used interchangeably), who are distinguished from indigenous Nilotic and Koman populations by their lighter skin color. There are also many refugees from South Sudan residing in Gambella, mostly from the Nuer ethnic group. Most of the ethnic groups in Gambella also live on the South Sudanese side, and there is fluid movement of peoples and popular sentiments across the border (Feyissa 2011, 1–4, 7–8).

**Figure 1.** Map of Ethiopia's regions, including the nation's capital, Addis Ababa. Gambella People's National Regional State highlighted (map base obtained from Wikimedia Commons, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons. Country and region labels added by author).



Historically, Ethiopian empires utilized Gambella as a resource for trade in ivory, gold, and slaves for the Imperial elites, as well as trading with the Arab world in the nineteenth century (Johnson 1986). The local, dark-skinned population in Gambella and South Sudan are still referred to by lighter-skinned Ethiopians as *bariya*, “slave,” a legacy of the slave trade in the region (Feyissa 2011, 125). Today, Gambella is one of the most neglected and impoverished regions of Ethiopia, with little infrastructure, lack of educational and vocational opportunities, and poor access to medical care and social services (Feyissa 2011, 1; Kurimoto 2005, 339). Gambella is on the periphery of Ethiopia not only geographically but also culturally. Many highlanders—who have dominated Ethiopian politics and nation-building—do not even consider Gambellans as Ethiopians but rather as South Sudanese, express fear of the region, and cast primitivist notions upon Gambellans, such as assuming Gambellans do not wear clothes. I have witnessed multiple times how my Gambellan associates have been called out by highlanders as *bariya* (slave), *t'ik'ur* (black), or even *Sayt'an* (“Satan”) as we walked together in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital.

Such discriminatory attitudes, along with Gambella’s neglect from the highlander-dominated Ethiopian state, has bred tensions between indigenous Gambellans and highlanders (Feyissa 2015; Kurimoto 2005, 339). Tensions are also high between Anywaa and Nuer ethnic groups, especially since many Nuer have come more recently as refugees or Sudan People’s Liberation Army soldiers from Sudan and South Sudan. Historically, the Anywaa were the majority demographic in the region but have gradually been outnumbered by predominantly Nuer refugees since the 1980s. According to the 1984 census, Anywaa still held the majority at 30,499 people while Nuer numbered 27,827 people. By the time of the most recent national census in 2007, Anywaa are only the third largest demographic in Gambella at 21.16%, with Nuer at 46.66% and highlanders at 27% (Hagos 2021, 17).

Many Anywaa to whom I spoke perceive that the Nuer are stealing their ancestral lands and resources, since Gambella is a resource-rich area (see also Kurimoto 2005, 341–342, 350–351). These tensions periodically spiral into cycles of retaliatory ethnic violence between groups. The largest instance of ethnic violence against the Anywaa occurred in December 2003. Many Anywaa refer to this as “the incident” or “the genocide,” when Ethiopian federal government troops and highlander civilians targeted and killed 424 ethnic Anywaa between December 13–15 in the capital town alone (Human Rights Watch

2005), not counting those killed in surrounding villages. The effect of this slaughter on the Anywaa has been pervasive: everyone to whom I spoke who is old enough recounts memories of this event, running for their lives, witnessing their friends and family shot or cut down by machetes, and spending months to years stranded in the bush or in refugee camps.

Circumstances following the massacre came up frequently in our conversations, mainly among Anywaa men who were teenagers or young adults in 2003, as Ethiopian forces targeted young Anywaa men for killing and imprisonment during this time period. Many Anywaa youths fled to Pochalla, a town on the border of Ethiopia and then-Sudan, and stayed there for upwards of a year before being able to return home to Gambella or ultimately fleeing to other countries as refugees. Individuals who spent time at Pochalla told me accounts of how, besides facing the trauma of seeing their community members killed and facing uncertainty over their future, they frequently suffered from shortages of necessities such as food and shelter at the border.

The trauma in Gambella is broader than this one event in 2003, however: repeated cycles of violence, poverty and neglect from the Ethiopian state, and racist and discriminatory attitudes from dominant ethnic groups in the nation are all forms of trauma faced by many in this region (Feyissa 2011; Hagos 2021). In Gambella, there is a precarity of life, where material resources are scarce, safety is fragile, and violence is a continual, looming possibility even in times of relative stability. The potential for trauma to impact Gambellans is not one event but pervades everyday life through ongoing insecurity and structural violence.

### **Christianity on the Ethio-South Sudanese Border**

Protestant Christianity is the main religion among the indigenous peoples on the Ethio-South Sudanese border. Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Islam are also common throughout Ethiopia, and these religions were brought to Gambella region by migrants from other areas of Ethiopia. However, few indigenous Gambellans and South Sudanese have converted to these, and every indigenous Gambellan to whom I spoke identified as a Protestant Christian. Many are active participants in religious practice through numerous church gatherings throughout the week and music composition and listening.

Protestantism arrived in Gambella in the 1950s when American missionaries in Sudan crossed the border into Ethiopia (Osterlund 1978, 156–158). With Gambellans' conversion to Protestantism, Christian music began to comprise part of their compositional and listening worlds. Euro-American hymns, such as the Golden Bell Hymnal, were translated into local languages, and these are still popular among some groups in the region, especially the Nuer (Gatwetch Kewer Kong 2016; Lim Chuol 2019). Euro-American hymns did not become popular among Anywaa, however, since Anywaa singers began composing their own Christian songs in local styles quickly after the missionaries' arrival (Apay Ojullu Aballa 2016–2019; Ojho Othow Ojulu 2016–2019; Osterlund 1978, 195–196). Today, Anywaa Christian composers have a prolific musical output. Composer Othow Obang said he believes this is evidence that spiritual songs are inspired by God. "That means that [composing spiritual songs] is a gift," he said (2017).

There is a sharp division between church music and secular music in Gambella and in Ethiopia broadly. This is, in part, influenced by the national language, Amharic, having two different terms for song: *mezmur*, which means sacred song, and *zefen*, which means secular song. Many Ethiopian Protestants do not even listen to secular songs. The Amharic Bible includes the term *zefen* in lists of sins in Romans 13:13 and 1 Peter 4:3, so many believe that listening to secular music is forbidden. This ideology is less pervasive among South Sudanese refugees and immigrants, who are less influenced by the Amharic

language and the Ethiopian brand of Protestantism.

For many Gambellans to whom I spoke, Christianity is thoroughly integrated into their daily lives, worldviews, and identities, despite Christianity's complicated legacy in Africa. European and American missionaries were often complicit with colonial endeavors, and critical scholarship has highlighted Christianity's intertwinement with efforts to colonize African consciousness and justify takeovers by European powers (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Elbourne 2003). From a musical perspective, western Christianity has historically been opposed to traditional African music practices, partly driven by foreign missionaries and partly by converted African Christians who consider traditional songs pagan (see, for example, James 2007, 230–231). This is not to say that the link between Christian missionaries and colonial powers were uniform across Africa: some missionaries were more strongly allied with colonialists than others (Elbourne 2003, 455). In Gambella, Protestant missionaries did not work as a direct arm of European colonizers, as Gambella was governed by the Orthodox Christian Ethiopian empire (Osterlund 1978, 151). By establishing schools and clinics, the Protestant mission provided social services to Gambella that were not offered by the Ethiopian state, and missionaries tended to work alongside existing beliefs and practices in their proselytizing (Apay Ojullu Aballa 2016–2019; Ojho Othow Ojulu 2016–2019; Osterlund 1978, 151–152). For Gambellans, often discriminated against by dominating Orthodox highlander culture, Protestant Christianity provides an attractive alternative for social affiliation and upward mobility.

Outside of direct European colonial governance, however, Protestant Christianity is still linked with Euro-American cultural and ideological hegemony, currently proliferating under a variety of NGO initiatives that provide financial donations, health and educational services, and opportunities for upward mobility for Africans while many of these institutions are based in the Global North. Indeed, there is an element of practicality to some comments. Samson Ojullu Ameer, an NGO worker and religious singer, cited that the church saved his life from being on the streets and addicted to drugs in part by providing him the material and social supports he needed to recover. Nyachan Gatkuoth, a South Sudanese refugee living in Ethiopia, said, “The more you love God, the more you get what you want. If you love Jesus, there will be a reward” (2016).

Nonetheless, none of this mitigates the genuine, deeply-felt aspects of Christianity for these individuals, as will become increasingly apparent throughout this article. Indeed, Africans themselves are some of Christianity's most fervent adherents and proponents (Elbourne 2003). I have personally encountered this fervor myself in Ethiopia and other African countries throughout my travels and among African diasporic Christians in the United States. Christianity is increasingly centered in the Global South, and even early agents of Christianization in Africa included Africans themselves (Maxwell 2015).

According to my Anywaa research associates, composers were among the first evangelists (Ojho Othow Ojullu 2016; Okwori Ojullu 2016; Samson Ojullu Ameer 2016). Okwori Ojullu, an early Anywaa convert in the 1960s, described how he began composing religious songs to convert his community during an interview in 2016: I remember the first song that I composed was addressing the nation, saying, “You, whole nation, you come and accept Jesus Christ. Accept the good news that is Jesus Christ.” That is the first song that came to me. I was thinking like, something new is here among us, so we have to accept it. So, the first song started by calling the people to accept Jesus Christ as their God and savior.

I agree with Kenyan ethnomusicologist Jean Kidula (2013) when she asserts that we need to consider Christianity as something not inauthentic to Africa but thoroughly integrated and made contextually relevant by African social actors themselves. Even Euro-American hymns are an integral part of culture and society in this region. During my conversation with Nyachan, she sang Nuer songs from her childhood that I recognized as Nuer lyrics set

to Euro-American hymn melodies.<sup>1</sup> A Nuer research colleague, Lim Chuol, showed me a recording from a 92-year-old instrumentalist and singer from South Sudan, Thomas, playing an indigenous lyre and singing a Nuer version of a Euro-American hymn: Christianity (and its music) have been here for generations.<sup>2</sup> The roles of Christianity and the church, furthermore, are not singular but multiple (Elbourne 2003, 455): yes, the church is a source of material support and potential upward social and financial mobility. It is also a practical spirituality in the sense that Gambellans, in a precarious environment of the present reality, can imagine a better future beyond this one. However, if we take Gambellans at their own words, their faith is deeply connected to their emotional states and is a source of hope and comfort even outside of the promise for material reward.

Ojho Othow Ojullu, one of my research colleagues, explained,

When I listen to [Christian music], it's connected to my spirit. The message is connected to my spirit. The reason why I say this, because, sometimes I weep when I listen to those songs, the church music. But, when it comes to secular music, I just listen to them as normal. But church music is different from that. Sometimes I weep. (2017)

Singer/composer Othow Obang listens to both spiritual and secular songs and said, "Both inspire me, but the church is better for me" (2017). A South Sudanese listener in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, said that his favorite song is the Nuer version of "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," saying, "If I don't follow Jesus, I have nothing. This world will go away" (2017). In contexts of the Ethio-South Sudanese border, where instability, displacement, and cycles of violence are the norm, "this world going away" is an imminent concern.

To consider Christianity solely as colonial or neocolonial legacy or to pass it off as a strategic move for upwards mobility in a world of limited options would be not only to simplify the religion in Africa but also to ignore what Gambellans are actually saying in favor of a scholarly analysis. I consider this a dangerous move, in which I would posit myself as master over this knowledge (see also Steingo 2016, 6, 19–20). As much as is possible given my privilege as an American-born, white scholar, I try to avoid this approach by taking Gambellans' comments seriously and deferring to them as experts on their own experiences on the role of religion and spirituality in their lives.

### ***In Any Problem, God Will Help Me Through the Song: Experiences of Christian Song Among Gambellan Composers***

Of the 57 Gambellans whom I formally interviewed during my fieldwork from 2016–2019, 28 spoke at length about Christian songs as a source of comfort and encouragement in times of hardship. Samson, a well-known composer in the Anywaa church, recounted a traumatic childhood, orphaned and living on the streets with a drug addiction by the time he was a teenager. He began attending a church and, upon converting, volunteered to sing in the choir. Over the next few years, he began composing his own Christian songs and now teaches them to his congregation and records them in local studios. He described the role of songs in his personal life, saying:

Sometimes, [the songs] are my way of communicating with God...it is not an easy thing I can [explain]. When I am out of sense, sometimes, when I try to sing these songs, they bring me back...so whenever there's a time when I am in stress or depression, when I sing one of my songs, I just feel more comfortable and more refreshed. And I feel like I'm with God himself. That means it is like a connector between me and God. When I sing, I feel like God is here now.... (2016)

Young composer Achan Oboya described her inspiration for one of her songs, "Aani ëë alwäyya ki ngø këët ni yöö?" ("What shall I fear?"), saying,



[It] was suffering that pushed me...that inspired me to write this song. Because, I had been in a tough time, so I was struggling with some challenges. But, [over] the course of time, I understood that God is on my side. I have to tell those problems that, "I have God, who can overcome all these things. He has the power. He already won the victory for me." (2016)<sup>3</sup>

What shall I fear?	<i>Aani ëë alwäyya ki ngø këët ni yöö?</i>
When everything I should fear has been overcome by God	<i>Ni jappa da lwäyyö ki geni bee ni bööt Jwøki yöö</i>
Is there anything that I should fear?	<i>Aa gina ngø këët ni lwäära yöö?</i>
When everything I should fear has been overcome by God	<i>Ni jappa da lwäyyö ki geni bee ni bööt Jwøki yöö</i>

Philippi Omaan, one of the most popular Christian composers at the time of my research, described how one of her songs helped prevent her from committing suicide:

Music is so important for me. Most of my songs, when I sing them, God would provide and help me. And whenever I'm emotional or in any problem, God will help me through the song. I will calm down. So, God inspires me through music, in my heart, gives me some peace...I do remember one time, I had a problem, and I was about to commit suicide. So, I went somewhere alone, and I sang my song. The title of the song is "Bëëtö buut Jwøk," that means, "There is nothing like living in the presence of God." And this song, at that moment, reminded me about me, someone who is in the presence of God, and God helped me out from that condition. (2017)

Living in the presence of God, there is nothing like it	<i>Bëëtö buut Jwøk øøy bung gin pääri gø,</i>
He is an awesome God; he has rescued me from danger	<i>Kee gin mo beer öö a aka gin mo beer öö ka piemi öö gü moo leth mo do cööpa ri thøø dëära cooth agëëngi</i>
Yes, of course, he has rescued me	<i>Møn öö agëëngi møn öö</i>

Achan and Philippi preferred to be non-specific about the difficulties they were facing at the time during our conversations. Other individuals to whom I spoke disclosed more details about their personal experiences. Anywaa church composer William Cham recounted how he began to compose songs in response to specific traumatic events during an interview in 2019:

When I started to [compose] songs, it was related with my life, because my father was killed by someone when I was still a child, around 5 years old. When I grew up to 10 [years old], my mother also was killed by someone. And then I feel I'm not comfortable in my heart. But when I came to the church, when I started to read, I got comfort from the Scripture, from David's Psalms. And then I started from there, I started to make music [on] my own, to comfort myself...

And [in addition] to that, not only my own life but when I think about my nation, the Anywaa, and their life. The government of Ethiopia killed so many, many people. And I feel sorry in my life, when I see that...[and from that incident] I pick out something from that to be a song. So when I started to sing, just many people [started] to feel it also. [I composed the song] not only [using] my own words but also from the Scripture, joined together [in] a song.

William is referring to the December 2003 ethnic massacre of Anywaa when he mentions the Ethiopian government killing people. Achan connected her ability to compose songs

with this incident, as well. She described receiving her songs in dreams, saying,

Sometimes, I stay for a long time during the night without sleeping. And, when I begin to think about God's mighty work in my life, when I get sleep, those songs come in my dream. And then I will begin to sing them...When the incident came, you know, the genocide in Gambella...It was 2003 when [I] began to dream about the songs. It affects me, generally, as my people. I felt [sad] about the many lives that were taken. (2016)

### **Music, Trauma, and Emotional Well-Being: Resonances Across the Literature**

These accounts are hardly out of the ordinary, as music as a source of comfort and healing in the wake of traumatic events has been addressed across cultures and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Kate Bingley (2011), in her ethnographic research about women's music-making in post-war Sierra Leone, cites similar comments from her interviewees about how music positively impacts their emotional well-being. Bingley emphasizes the embodied aspect of music-making and the ways in which it resonates physically in the process of singing and dancing. Embodied music-making is relevant in regards to trauma, as traumatic experiences are stored in the body as sensations and images, outside of verbal processing (Bensimon et al. 2008, 36; Krantz & Pennebaker 2007, 202; van der Kolk 2014, 43). Making music is potentially one means of experiencing and reclaiming control over one's body after the body has been subjected to harm or the threat of harm.

On the other hand, putting one's trauma into words allows one to cognize and assimilate traumatic experiences into their life narrative (Krantz & Pennebaker 2007). In the context of Gambellan societies, actually, music and words are inextricable from one another: there is no such thing as purely instrumental music, and even instrumental performances are renditions of songs that were originally composed with words. There is no word for "music" in the local languages. Local terms such as *duut* (in Anywaa), *diit* (Nuer), and *zefen* or *mezmur* in Amharic translate as "song," which have both melody and lyrics. Composing new songs integrates both embodied singing as well as the narrative aspects of the lyrics, even if composers do not always directly describe their trauma in the song.

There is scarce research on lyrical song composition and trauma. Harrison et al. (2019) wrote an ethnographic account of a trauma-informed, collaborative songwriting workshop with refugees and asylum-seekers in Finland, in which participants in the workshop cited improved mood and social connection. In a quantitative study, Hirschberg et al. (2020), observed improved symptoms in a small sample size of veterans with PTSD in the United States after participating in a collaborative songwriting intervention with a professional songwriter. Outside of therapeutically-bound settings, ethnomusicologist Joshua Pilzer (2012) explores some aspects of musical creativity among Korean women who underwent sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation. These women personalized preexisting songs through creating new lyrics and melodies, and, in doing so, were able to express and cope with trauma in a non-overwhelming, socially-acceptable way (44–45).

In general, however, there is little written on the lived experiences of those who compose new songs outside of therapeutic settings in the wake of trauma or while undergoing a difficult life experience. Perhaps the lack of exploration into this phenomenon is due to the paucity of organic songwriting among the general population in the Global North, where trauma scholarship is disproportionately based. Singing precomposed music allows one to connect with their emotions and experiences but also allows them some distance and anonymity, as they are not singing their own words but rather the words of another (Pilzer 2012, 9). While singing precomposed songs is certainly a creative act—through song selection, vocal inflection, gesture, and cultural references—Anywaa composers take

ownership over their experiences in a direct and public way when they compose original songs.

Many to whom I spoke in Gambella cited spiritual songs as the most impactful to their lives. Clinical psychologists Katie Sherwood and Helen Liebling-Kalifani (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with women refugees from Zimbabwe and Somalia, who cited the importance of their spirituality generally (Christianity and Islam, respectively) in coping and moving forward after traumatic experiences (88–89, 99–100). However, little is addressed in the scholarship regarding Christian music and healing cross-culturally. Bernard M. Kigunda (2004) looks at the role of music in ritual healing and trance in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Church in Kenya, relating its similarities to pre-Christian music and healing practices among this population. He highlights the fact that less attention is given by western scholars to healing practices within the church, with most scholars choosing to look at indigenous healing rituals. Based on my experiences in Ethiopia and several other African countries, it is the Protestant Christian church that dominates over pre-Christian traditions: hence, I, too, find it notable that Protestant Christian music and healing is not addressed more substantially in scholarship, given that it comprises such a significant part of life to many Ethiopians and South Sudanese to whom I spoke. I suggest that this may be a combination of factors including bias in the predominantly secular contemporary western academia; a tendency to reduce African Christianity as a colonial legacy; and a tendency to Other peoples of Africa by focusing on pre-Christian rituals. Ethnomusicologist Jean Kidula (2013) points out that there was little study of African Christian musics since they fit into neither traditional African nor European genres (1), and scholarship more broadly has had a tendency to consider Christianity as an imperialist imposition and a colonization of African thought rather than something to be taken seriously as a genuine African belief system (ibid., 1–2; see also Maxwell 2015, 908–911). Though scholarly attention to African Christianity and Christian music has increased in recent decades (Kidula, 2013, 2), it has yet to grow to encompass African Christian music and healing. Whatever the root causes may be, scholars and practitioners need to reflect on this lacuna in the literature and potential biases, especially when religion and spirituality seem to play a prominent role in overcoming traumatic experiences and improving mental and emotional health among religious practitioners.

### **“So That I Can Share with People”: Music, Trauma, and Social Connection**

All of the singers to whom I spoke in Gambella teach their songs to their fellow congregants in the church. Several have also recorded their songs in the studio, which they then share through memory cards, Bluetooth, and flash drives on mobile phones and laptops. Communal singing is common in Gambella, especially during religious gatherings. Music listening is also typically a social activity, as people spend time with one another throughout the day at cafes, bars, and backyards while playing music on their mobile phones or from PAs.

Several composers indicated the importance of sharing their songs with others. Achan said, “I believe that it was God who inspired me to receive those songs through dreams, so that I can share with people... God works in those songs. Not [just] in the present time, but also in the future” (2016). She also connected the songs she composed out of her personal suffering to how it could help others, saying, “Different people have the same problem that I had...so I hope that this song will help them so that they can proclaim God’s victory [over] those problems that they are facing right now” (2016).

Philippi expressed a similar sentiment, saying,

My vision for the future, since I’m in this ministry, this kind of gift...I want God to keep me on the right track so I can continue composing my songs. Because...I know that God helped

a lot of people and the church in general [through those songs], and I want those songs to reach somewhere up there, where they keep inspiring people. (2017)

Samson (2016) described a specific instance after the 2003 genocide when he composed a song to encourage his companions who had fled to the Sudanese border:

You know, during the incident, many people just escaped. They went to the border. Many people, all they did is just waste their time with worldly things. And some of them already believed, and they went back to the world because of the incident, [thinking] that there is no hope or right. Some of them, they are not believers, they do not know about Jesus. What I was thinking was, if those people could come and believe God, what would happen? I came to the conclusion that, when they believe God, their future will be bright. So, even the song itself, when you sing it, it starts with the sound you are calling someone and you want him to come into something you like. “Ööu, ööu” means ‘Come!’ I was thinking of them, because their life was desperate at the border.<sup>4</sup>

William Cham also recounted composing songs to comfort both himself and his community at the border following the incident.

[My songs are] not for me alone. I start to hear my own [songs] in my heart, but now also it helps others in the church. [The music] will be a comfort [to] our tribe<sup>5</sup> when they face some challenges...When I try to sing that one, people will get hope that God will help us in this situation. (2019)

Ojho, one of my research colleagues who was at the border with William and Samson following the genocide, said regarding William’s songs, that, “It turned out helping the entire church, and the entire Anywaa...[his music] affects the life of many individuals...Even, I am one of them, I can say” (2019). Singer/composer Othow Obang was also at the border and recounted similarly how songs by William Cham and others were a source of support. “We composed songs of comforting, and we loved to be together, sing, and pray together,” he said. “And things got better, actually, due to that” (2019).

Singing together and composing songs to encourage each other allude to elements of community and social connection, which are important factors in coping with traumatic events and ongoing instability (Ungar 2013, 256–257; van der Kolk 2014, 212). Schweitzer et al. (2006) did a study among Sudanese refugees from Australia that showed correlations between social support from fellow Sudanese in the community and better mental and emotional well-being. Hiller et al. (2017) found recurrent themes of community and social support as coping strategies for various forms of trauma among South African youth, including religious communities (5). Trauma researcher and specialist Bessel van der Kolk (2014) goes so far to assert that, “A good support network constitutes the single most powerful protection against becoming traumatized...much of the wiring of our brain circuits is devoted to being in tune with others. Recovery from trauma involves (re)connecting with our fellow human beings” (212).

Music is a powerful social connector: both through singing/moving in time together and through performing a shared cultural and social identity. At the broadest level, ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1974) suggests that music-making connects us all as common humans, insofar as music is experienced in the body which all humans possess (108). Music is also necessarily intended for other ears, per Blacking, and this is especially true in the context of the Anywaa societies with whom I spoke, where many singers compose songs to help not only themselves but also other members of their community. Furthermore, at the body level, playing and singing in time with one another facilitates social bonding through synchronicity and collective action (Bensimon et al. 2008, 43–44; van der Kolk 2014, 215–217). From the anthropological perspective, creativity and

embodied music and dance with one another helps constitute a “shared world,” producing and reproducing shared sentiments and collective memory. Creating this world is especially pertinent for displaced peoples who are no longer physically present in a shared geographic homeland (James 2007, 222). Even quantitative studies have corroborated the correlations between communal music-making and even music listening with neurobiological mechanisms of social bonding (Tarr et al. 2014). Participating in music, then, whether through composition, singing together, or even listening may help enhance the human connections that are so critical for mitigating the effects of trauma.

Making music together also bonds individuals together through strengthening group identity, particularly as songs acquire meanings linked with ethnocultural identities according to the context of the participants. The strengthening of cultural identity, particularly in the wake of others’ efforts to wipe out that particular group, is an element of social resilience (Robertson 2019). For the Anywaa with whom I spoke, there was a strong ethnic element to this group identity, performed through the very language of the song itself as well as the context of their situation following the 2003 massacre, in which they were specifically targeted for violence due to their ethnicity. William Cham described his inspiration for composing one of his songs after the 2003 incident, saying,

There is one song I composed, it is comparing [our situation to] the life of Israelites when they faced insecurity from other nations, and the way God helped them with that problem...I [sang] that one, [and] people would get hope that God will help us in this situation. (2019)

As the Israelites are God’s chosen people in the Bible, the idea that Anywaa have “God on their side,” as it were, is a potential implication. Herein, perhaps, lies the darker side of music-making in contexts of violence and instability, in that music serves to strengthen group boundaries in an environment already wrought with ethnic tension, further defining the in-group and the out-group, Self and Other (Robertson 2019, 117–118; Stokes 1994; Baker 2013, 413). Another complicating factor in trauma resilience in this situation is that this traumatic instance is linked not to a personal wrong but to broader patterns of social injustice in which the Anywaa have been marginalized in their ancestral lands by ethnic Others and the Ethiopian state itself (see also Zarowsky 2004).

At the same time, elements of religious song transcend ethnic boundaries in other contexts by connecting participants to a global Christian community. Anywaa and Nuer, between whom ethnic tension is most sharp, sing one another’s Christian songs (Ojho Othow Ojullu 2019; William Cham 2019). Strangely enough, though the 2003 massacre was perpetrated by Amharic-speaking highlanders, my research colleagues talked about an Amharic song by a highlander artist, Tekeste, called “Alresawm” (“አልረሳውም,” “I will not forget”) that had a positive impact on them while stranded at the border after fleeing the violence. Ojho explained,

I love his song so much. When I started listening to the Amharic song [at Pochalla], I [remembered] that moment when I first listened to the song [in my village]...in Amharic the title is “Alresawm”...That means, I will never forget you God...I will never forget your mighty work that you did for me. Something like that. So we would gather together and listen to this song.... (2017)

This is not to ignore a broader pattern of ethnoracial marginalization, as Anywaa know the songs of other ethnolinguistic groups—the highlanders as well as songs of the dominating western Christianity that is so closely linked with neocolonialism and white saviorism in Ethiopia—while few, if any, highlanders and Euro-American Christians are singing Anywaa songs. The Gambellans to whom I spoke are certainly aware of the discrimination that exists against them within multiethnic churches. However, again, to take my interviewees seriously, they still consider Christian songs from other

ethnolinguistic groups as a part of themselves, since it connects to their spirituality. Othow explained his attraction to Amharic and English songs, saying,

[The] Holy Spirit is one. In your tribe, in my tribe, in other tribes, is one. Even if you will not understand the meaning of the song, sometimes you can desire the song, [even if] you didn't understand what the song means. That...feeling is the Holy Spirit. (2019)

In essence, Christian song cannot be distilled into one meaning or purpose for composers, singers, and hearers. Kidula (2013) points out in her study on Avagooli Christian song in Kenya that religious music registers multiple scales of identity, including ethnic, religious, and national (9-12). Anywaa Christian song also intersects with multiple identities that are produced and reproduced in communal music-making, enhancing a sense of social connection and belonging both ethnic and religious.

### **“How Can I Comfort Myself?”: Empowerment and Purpose**

When Samson told me about how he composed “Ööu” (“Come”) while stranded at the Ethio-South Sudanese border, I was struck by the way he had taken initiative in an environment in which he and his companions otherwise had little control over their lives and futures. He used one of the few resources he had available to him—his capacity to create music—to provide some sense of hope for his community. Othow, who also fled to the border after the 2003 massacre, described further how they sang and composed religious songs to relieve their distress:

Actually, according to the Bible, in every situation, there is something for it. When you are mourning, there can be something for comforting. There were many songs that helped at that time that related to comforting: How can I be comforted, how can I comfort myself?...It is a big thing, because how can that one tribe be targeted and killed in the daylight?...So it became so difficult. So, in such a situation, when you get into distress...the one who will be the solution for that distress will be you by yourself. So, we started to do that, and it got better...and when things calmed down, we came to this side [back to Ethiopia] to resume the education. (2019)

One of the characteristics of post-traumatic stress is the feeling of helplessness and disempowerment in the face of life-threatening events (van der Kolk 2014, 206). Composing and singing songs for members of their communities to encourage and teach them is one way in which these individuals empowered themselves in that moment and as well as invested their lives and experiences with purpose to comfort their companions. Furthermore, singing and bodily movement such as clapping and dance themselves are an act of empowerment through establishing control over one's own body after facing near destruction of the body by perpetrators of the massacre, as well as the looming threat of bodily destruction through lack of food and exposure to the elements. Othow alludes to this sense of empowerment when he says, “The one who will be the solution for that distress, it will be you by yourself.” As conflict resolution scholar Marie Smyth (2002) argues, “In order to heal, the victim must overcome helplessness, to become an active participant in his or her own healing. Creativity is resistance to oppression...creating something new is an act of defiance in the face of destruction” (76). Indeed, the individuals with whom I spoke can hardly be reduced to “victims” or “survivors,” with many individuals going on to obtain graduate degrees, become professors, travel internationally, establish families, start businesses, and become vibrant contributors to their communities over the next twenty years.

The spiritual element enhances a sense of purpose in their music-making. Samson said,

God gave [the gift of song] to me because he has a reason for that. Because, being an orphan is difficult sometimes....if you are an orphan, then no one cares...[but] God himself has been with me through all these things...[I want] to be someone, whether in the church or in the community...Because that is where my life started. (2016)

Samson's statement resonates with how Achan and Philippi said they believe God gave them the ability to compose songs so that they can help others who experience similar problems to their own. These singers have made their life difficulties meaningful through linking them with their musical gifts and identifying them as part of God's higher purpose, a positive coping strategy in the wake of trauma (Harris et al. 2008, 18–20).

Ojho and Othow went so far as to correlate religious songs with inspiring them to return to the Ethiopian side of the border so that they could resume their education and move forward with their lives. Ojho, who now has his master's degree and acceptance into a program at Oxford University, described at length:

I do believe that one of the driving forces behind my coming back to Gambella [was] because I kept listening to those songs, because they are so powerful for my life. And the fact that I do remember about my home here helped me a lot to think about coming back and continuing my education...So, the first song that I listened to from Anywaa was the song of this guy William, William Cham. The song was about, even though we have hardship and problems, you know, God is still in control [of] our lives. No matter what, we still have the chance to overcome all those problems, and we have to keep pressing on God, we have to lean on God. And those songs, they encouraged me to stay focused on my life and to think about my future and also staying committed to God. And they inspired me. (2017)

For these individuals, song—especially religious song—was a factor in both relieving their immediate emotional pain as well as inspiring them to move forward with their lives after large-scale violence and displacement.

## Conclusion and Implications

As stated in the introduction, the primary aim of this article is to provide a platform for these individuals to share their experiences. As a secondary aim, I have explored resonances between how these individuals perceive religious song as a significant factor in surviving and thriving in the wake of traumatic experiences and what the research literature has observed about the correlations between music-making and trauma resilience. My concern is less about a particular disciplinary approach to this phenomenon and more about how, despite methodological and epistemological differences, all these scholarly fields nonetheless seem to agree that music and embodied expressivity can support post-trauma healing and resilience across cultures.

So, we are left with the question of, what now? There is a dearth of mental health services available in areas such as Gambella that already lack basic resources and where individuals are, in many cases, traumatized by recurring violence, poverty, and pervasive insecurity. As I write this conclusion, I just ended a phone call with a young singer from Gambella, Wenraya Aballa, who informed me of a recent suicide of a Gambellan youth who had expressed feelings of despair over the constant insecurity and lack of opportunities in Gambella. "People are losing hope," she said (2022). This loss of hope has worsened with the recent civil conflict in Ethiopia that broke out in 2020 between ethnic rebel groups and the Ethiopian government. Unfortunately, suicides are not uncommon in Gambella, yet another unaddressed issue in the region.

I do not necessarily suggest that new mental health clinics or music therapy be introduced in areas wrought by violence and insecurity, particularly in societies that do not compartmentalize mental health as separate from spiritual, physical, and social health.

I *do* suggest that we can support and expand on programming that is already happening and what singers/songwriters are already doing in the area. In an unequal global landscape, we should radically listen to what individuals and communities really need and resist the urge to impress a western concept of mental health treatment and trauma healing.

In Gambella, as we have seen, Christianity is a significant part of life, and Christian songs have provided consolation and healing for many individuals after ethnic massacres and fleeing for their lives. The church is one of the most respected institutions in the area, as many to whom I have spoken are suspicious or disillusioned with the government and NGOs, whom they view as having consistently failed them and being rife with nepotism and corruption.

To acknowledge this is not to mitigate the damages of Euro-American Christianity's cultural and ideological hegemony. Yet, to ignore the centrality of Christianity to Gambellans' own identities and cultural backgrounds is to exert yet another version of white Euro-American ideological hegemony based on whatever philosophical or intellectual movement is trending at the moment. It is possible to hold in mind both the problematic aspects of how this religion spread in sub-Saharan Africa as well as the way in which it is genuinely felt and owned by Gambellans. We need to follow Gambellans' lead in their best path to healing and well-being. I suggest that scholars, policymakers, and practitioners should not distance themselves from local religious institutions but be willing to work together productively if it may benefit a given community.

Several religiously-based trauma healings have been conducted in this region through the church and religious organizations using a book that Gambellans introduced to me called *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help* (Hill et al. 2016), written in consultation with church leaders in Africa and the West, Bible translators, and mental health professionals (Hill et al. 2016, 6). So far, from what I have seen in Gambella, these religious initiatives have done more for this particular population than anyone else has in attempting to educate and support people in understanding their trauma and how to help others who have experienced trauma. The training has been adopted by some Anywaa who are now running the training independently for their fellow community members. Several cited this training as improving their insight into how to think about the lingering effects of their traumatic experiences and relate it to their own cultural and religious beliefs. Further research into how these trainings have impacted participants and future possibilities for expanding education about trauma-informed care in a way that makes sense in a heavily religious society is one possibility for this particular community.

We can also lean into what these communities are already doing musically. As Samson, Philippi, and Achan indicated, they compose their songs not only to relieve themselves of stress but also to help others. Partnering with composers to provide funding for producing their songs in the studio to reach more individuals and overall supporting artists for their work is another need. Both religious and secular composers consistently told me that it is nearly impossible for them to support themselves through their music. This phenomenon is certainly not exclusive to Gambella, though it is worse in this region due to pervasive insecurity of daily life and lack of support from organizations.

From another perspective, I also suggest that western scholars and practitioners might reflect on the possibility that practitioners from other contexts—such as the Anywaa singers/composers above—could provide some application for our own populations. The United States has its own mental health crises, and medication and talk therapy alone have their limitations. As van der Kolk (2014) astutely notes, “Mainstream Western psychiatric and psychological healing traditions have paid scant attention to self-management. In contrast to the western reliance on drugs and verbal therapies, other traditions from around the world would rely on mindfulness, movement, rhythms, and action...” (209). In this sense, western therapies can learn something from the embodied music-making and sense of community and social connection that my interviewees cited as part of their own



healing. In the United States, music-making is too often reserved for the “experts” and seen as inaccessible or inappropriate for the general population. The amount of times I have heard, “I can’t sing,” in the United States is saddening. Yet, musicality is something innate within humans until we are told otherwise. Nyahok, a Nuer choir singer I interviewed in Gambella, said, “If you become sad and you remember one song and you sing it, it seems like it’s removing [the sadness that] is there in your heart” (2019). Strangely enough, this has been my own experience, as well, through my participation in music throughout my lifespan. In Gambellan societies, nearly everyone sings as a natural part of their everyday life. While expertise and specialization are certainly recognized in composers, even composers do not receive formalized training and say that their abilities are a gift: a gift that could be bestowed upon anyone. The ways in which I have seen my own culture exclude people from participating in music—which has such profound emotional effects on my interlocutors and myself—is unfortunate. In regards to trauma care, in particular, if trauma’s effects are stored in the body, embodied modalities such as music and dance have cross-cultural treatment potential, insofar the physical human body is something shared by all of us across cultures.

### About the Author

**Sarah Bishop** received her MM in Clinical Music Therapy from Arizona State University and her PhD in Musicology from Ohio State University. Her graduate research focused on music, ethnic politics, and violence in western Ethiopia, as well as cultural heritage preservation of Anywaa song and instrumental traditions. She currently provides music therapy and directs the activities program at a mental health rehabilitation center in the United States and continues to offer workshops on music therapy for musicians and psychology students in Ethiopia. Her research interests include music and violence, Protestant Christian music and movements across Africa, music and authoritarianism, and music and trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to Nyachan sing “I have decided” in Nuer at <https://youtu.be/TtuhCJsVhj8> (recorded in 2016 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, by author).

<sup>2</sup> Listen to Thomas playing the lyre and singing at <https://youtu.be/cORhZDaOYZU> (recorded in 2019 in Lare, Ethiopia, by Lim Chuol).

<sup>3</sup> Listen to “Aani ëë alwäyya ki ngø këët ni yöö?” by Achan Oboya and read the rest of the translation at <http://sbmusicology.com/aani.html>. Recorded in 2016 by author in Gambella, Ethiopia. Translation by Ojho Othow Ojullu.

<sup>4</sup> Listen to Samson singing “Ööu” at <https://youtu.be/-KmhW7Op9W0>. Recorded in 2016 by author, translated by Samson Ojullu Ameer.

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge the problematic colonial nature of the term “tribe.” This is the literal word that many Ethiopians and South Sudanese use when talking about different ethnic groups in English, so I have preserved William’s original words here.