Digitising at the International Library of African Music: The Role of Technology in South African Ethnomusicology Archives

Introduction

The International Library for African Music (ILAM) was officially founded in 1954 by Hugh Tracey. Located in Makhanda, South Africa, it is a research institution devoted to studying music and oral arts in Southern Africa. Foremost, the library preserves thousands of historical recordings and aims to archive, teach, publish and promote the music of sub-Saharan Africa (ILAM). The agenda of this paper is to interrogate the role of technology in the formation of ILAM, with the intent of emphasising how technologies shape the archive, and are embedded in the colonial epistemological project of extraction and control that subjugates African knowledge systems (Hamilton et al., 2012 & Ridener and Cook, 2009).

In response to Derrida's notion of domiciliation, I suggest that ILAM, in the production and preservation of objects, enacts a dislocation which is both topographic and temporal (1995). Because the technologies are embedded in broader systems of power such as colonialism, their object-centred authentication of knowledge often invalidates tacit knowledge systems (Hamilton et al., 2012). This is exacerbated by Hugh Tracey describing recording as an act of discovery (Tracey, FFG, 1965*:7). The primary issue in the production of the archive is the exclusion of those recorded from the act of

recording. In depriving them of the agency of self-representation, the archive figures an ‘uncivilised other’ with a static culture. Traditional cultures are positioned as ‘living history’ and thus at risk and in need of an ‘outsider’ custodian (Coetzee, 2014).

Hugh Tracey describes the history of the collection as “a personal one” and in naming claims authorship of the archive, an act of patriarchal consignation. Audio recording technologies were understood as a continuation of the Western-centric logic of writing devices that prioritised fidelity. The first recorded object is, by default, considered authentic and at risk of obsoletion. This necessitates constant updating. In alignment with a linear narrative of progress, new technologies are seen as imperatives, and the ‘original sound’ is understood as a transferrable information object that ought not to be changed, or renamed.

Fetishising new technologies risks entrenching this archival logic, reducing objects to a locus for the extraction of information. Through object-making, the archive enables the extraction of cultural value. Digitising, in what Coleman terms the internet’s neo-extractive colonialism (2019, p.5), may further cultural extraction through an asymmetry in access mirroring colonial development (Coetzee, 2014. p.15). Indeed, megacorporations have created sprawling open-access digital archives under the guise of 'global culture' which, functionally, provide uneven access to exploitable cultural repositories. If integrated into this framework, the cultural heritage invested in ILAM’s archives will become alienated. If the archive is to be decolonised, it needs to deprioritise novelty and fidelity in favour of intentional and localised education and dissemination (Manoff, 2001).

Dislocating Music

ILAM was founded on the Eurocentric logic that prioritised object-oriented acts of history-making. The act of archiving, or attempting to archive, immaterial cultural heritage inferred a fragility of music and oral traditions. Traditional fields of knowledge production were turned into dislocated objects from which Western practitioners began 'objective' formations of history. Generally, this negated the fact that 'other cultures' produced their own histories. And, technological gatekeeping estranged the objects from the very cultures they were derived (Hamilton, 2012, p. 226).

The technology employed for making the archive has an intimate relationship with what is made and who has access to it. Initially, transcription was the primary technology used to materialise music. However in 1931, as Tracey was beginning his attempt to document African music, he was encouraged by two English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, not to develop a method for the notation of African music but to focus on field recordings instead. The agenda was, in his words: "discovering and recording the range and extent of African music" of which there was "little reliable information". This would allow for "a broader, sounder foundation, based upon the evidence collected on discs and not upon hearsay or romantic imagination" (Tracey, 1973). This was emphasised by the notion of "discovery" requiring expeditions into "the country" to record representative "authentic" samples (Tracey, FFG, 1965*:7). This sentiment was rooted in the primitivising view that the written record was un-African as well as the view that oral forms of knowledge-making and dissemination were not yet actualised knowledge (Hamilton, 2012).

At the time of Tracey's first recordings, in 1929, audio recording technology was relatively new. The equipment he had access to was immobile and it was necessary to arrange transport for, and to host, fourteen "young Karanga men" in Johannesburg, to

record what Tracey described as the first recorded and published “items of indigenous Rhodesian music” (Tracey, 1973). From the outset, the production of the recording required a dislocation, as the performers were obliged to leave their homes and be housed in undignified conditions, already proving Tracey’s notion of an ‘authentic’ recording impossible (Coetzee, 2014).

Symptomatic of the archive is the desire for, and the impossibility of, a complete collection (Harris, 2002). In 1931 Tracey obtained a Carnegie Fellowship grant to study the music of ‘Southern Rhodesia’. This gave him access to a very early model of a portable recording machine, allowing recordings to be done in the ‘field’. He recorded over 600 items on plain aluminium discs. Tracey mentioned the scope of this work might be taken as a random sampling of the indigenous music as it appeared, much of it by chance, along the route of his recording tour, suggesting a “different but equally haphazard route would no doubt have revealed equally interesting data” (Tracey, FFG, 1969*, p.1). This randomness may be read as an archival failure. However, completeness was an impossibility. As Tracey notes, a systematic approach entails an “inside knowledge” to which he was not privy and would also require “thousands of recordings if all the major styles of African music are to be included, let alone the minor ones” (FFG, 1965*, p.7).

Sound reproduction is a social process and the efficacy of sound reproduction as a technology or as a cultural practice always implied social relations among people, machines, practices, and sounds (Sterne, 2003, p.219). The early discs used by Tracey were 78 r.p.m and their recording times were limited to, at most, a 5-minute duration. Later forms of electric recording were more durable, accurate, reproducible, and had increased recording time. These innovations made recording easier and allowed for the bulk of Tracey’s field recording (Sterne, 2003, p.273, 293). However, the discs themselves were still at risk of physical deformation as well as technological

obsoletion. The limit to duration meant the performed compositions had to be shortened for the recording. Additionally, his recording process, which was supported by Gallilo Records, showed little economic success, “as they would appeal only to a limited audience which was familiar with the dialect in question, few, if any, of whom would have the necessary apparatus on which to play them” (Tracey, 1973, p. 2). Far from objective, the recordings were a product of technological and economic limitations.

The performance of music was seen as separate from the recording of it, this in aid of a truer record of the musical culture unsullied by Western intervention. In this skewed dynamic, the producers of the music were not given agency over recording payback and storage. The music was not allowed to be synthesised through engagement with the technology as it would then become ‘inauthentic’. African music was something fixed and the recordings functioned as a time capsule. In this way, the music was made into an object. Or, the information of the music was held in the object. It is in the ‘objectification’ of music that it entered the archival realm. The music became a disembodied document; playable not by a person but by a machine. Material limitations induced through this process meant only those with the machines, the resources, and the know-how were able to play the recordings. It may be taken for granted that taping, transcription, translation, cataloguing, and ultimately archiving is a 'good thing', but the ‘fixing’ of oral traditions also undermined their resilience and disempowered the people who produced them as colonial institutions become custodians of ‘other’ cultures’ heritage (Hamilton, 2012, p. 219).

Consignation: Fetishising the Written

Tracey had near total control over the archive and most acts of appraisal were his own. He produced 218 commercially available LPs for the “Sound of Africa Series” with the agenda of presenting “African music to a general audience”. In the early 1960s, he then produced “The Music of Africa Series”. Once the objects were produced, they were at risk of technical obsoletion. Preservation required the updating of format and medium, in a way that reasserted the stasis of the object, while remaking it in perpetuity. ILAM later re-issued, “without modifications”, the original LP series in CD format retaining the numbering, cover images, and liner notes of the original LPs (South East Academic Library).

As custodian and expert, Tracey claimed authorship of the collection. While individual artists were generally named, the collections were contingent on Tracey, labelled as being “by Hugh Tracey”. Because of his self-assertion, tradition, music, and culture become both secondary to the collection and that of the generalised other ▮ the native African. Tracey presented himself as an expert on African culture, possessing knowledge in a fashion only permissible to the outsider (Coetzee, 2015, p. 2). In this there is an inability to see the self, how his person and institutive functions were formulated, embedding themselves in his paternalism. Derrida describes the signature as a statement, an assertion of the role as archon or father of the archive (1996, p. 48). This paternalism is reinforced by the inheritance of his legacy by his son, along with some of the material effects of the archive. The attempt to venerate while studying, as well as the ambivalent desire to assimilate and be assimilated, alongside the contradiction of being African and coloniser, permeated the archive (Coetzee, 2015, p.

15). In the process of updating the recording of the paternalised object, the substance of Tracey's appraisal is retained in the name of authenticity.

Within ILAM, the audio recording is organised and validated through visually oriented technologies such as writing, photography, and metadata. While the concept of notation was initially spurned, from the outset, the conception of recording technology made reference to writing. Audio recording technologies were seen as methods of transcription or "mnemonic machines" which produced defendable objects. Technologies such as the phonograph and the gramophone were understood as continuations of the Western-centric logic of writing devices. Because of the mnemonic aspect of recording devices, their products were seen as 'more objective' than writing. Prioritised by recording were characteristics of "primacy, inscriptibility and linear technical perfectibility". These parameters were then reiterated as the reason for recording technologies becoming obsolete (Roy, 2022, p.1,2). The notion of fidelity and usability (and in turn potential for distribution) was contingent on cultural norms and expectations regarding the technology. The idea of lossless recording quality embedded in the notion of fidelity followed a data-centric notion of the essential, in which even the 'original sound' was an information object. In the discourses of fidelity, each consecutive technology serves as a usurper. To break this continuity, it is necessary to acknowledge the social contingency of technologies so they might be culturally located. In this way, fidelity can be demystified and recording technologies understood as 'social artefacts all the way down'" (Sterne, 2003, p.221, 218).

Photography, as the verifiable object of vision, adhered readily to this logic. For a sound-oriented field of ethnomusicology, the photograph served a two-pronged purpose. Primarily, it was a tool for information gathering; a representation of the subject and context which could illustrate and authenticate audio recordings. Secondly, it served as a means of self-representation for the archivist, to show them

entering authentic spaces and documenting their exchanges (Shepherd, 2015). There are many images of Hugh Tracey in the field. Dressed formally, bearing his whiteness and its concurrent civilising mark of technology. Often his boom microphone protrudes into a semicircle of performers as a literal investigative probe. Coetzee notes that while “no white man with recording gear and an expedition entourage touring colonial Africa could attain the fictional ideal of invisibility” in Tracey’s text he makes reference to an ability to “blend in” by adapting to customs, (paradoxically) participating in performances, and erasing signs (within the recording) of his intervention and selection involved in the sound recordings (2014, p. 56). Far from blending in, images of him in the field represented the novelty of the technology, evidencing the ‘native’ peoples’ first encounter with the technology of audio recording. Tracey, while embarking on excursions, made a spectacle of himself which he proceeded to document. In the re-representation of this moment his image was normalised, the alien technologies commonplace, and, in turn, the native's experience of the spectacle became the spectacle.

This kind of representation exemplifies how African cultures, when not framed as backward and regressive, were seen as primitive and primordial, as if a window into early human history. In McClintock’s words, “the world's multitudinous cultures are marked, not positively by what distinguishes them, but by a subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time” (1992, p. 86). For Tracey, this meant representing African cultures as ‘living history’. Evident in the prospect of discovery that motivated his field recordings, the intent to go out, find and save cultural ‘relics’, is how his field recordings were inseparable from the larger colonial project to which they contributed in their search for knowledge. As late as 1960, Tracey presented himself as an expert on African culture and figured himself as the ‘explorer’. His self-identification exposes the colonial ideals which continued to underpin his project of knowledge production (Coetzee, 2014, p. 15). Contemporary cultures were seen as historical sites to be mined

for information. In the act of ‘finding’ and recording, the culture was relegated to a historical site, caught up in a gesture of protection in the wake of progress. While this does not encapsulate ILAM’s archive or undermine its content, it is worth noting that Tracey’s investigations were concerned with symbolic capital and, by extension, colonial power.

Technological Imperatives: For Future Generations

Futurity underpins archiving and memory. ILAM’s travelling exhibition was titled “For Future Generations”, a phrase quoted from Hugh Tracey when conveying a significant aspect of ILAM’s ethos. Preservation methods are qualified based on imagined futures, hoping the objects constituting the archive will be relevant and accessible to people in the future. However, the novelty of innovation is often conflated with futurity. While digitisation might appear to be *of* and *for* the future, this supposition is informed by the Eurocentric paradigm wherein history is a matter of progress. The linear trajectory of history, converging on culture, economy, and technology, presents the arrow of progress as both inevitable and regressible, necessitating the expansionist project. Innovative technologies were bestowed upon the undeveloped colonies, functioning as a guise for subjugation and resource extraction (McClintock, 1992, p. 84-85, 96). The reach of technology is uneven and mapping the density of internet infrastructure reflects a colonial asymmetry in ‘development’ (Sterne, 2003, p.337). The risk is to envision the newest technology as an imperative, outside of the politics of history, and in so doing continue past biases.

The cultural value generated by ILAM was, and still is, exploitable. Tracey acted as a placating agent for mining companies and colonial governments, which relied upon

routine coercion and force for their daily maintenance. However, the colonial project was not limited to the extraction of natural resources and labour, but also extracted and appropriated cultural value. Through knowledge-claims about indigenous people and their cultural products Tracey amassed, and laid claim to, cultural capital (Coetzee, 2014. P.9, 15).

Coleman argues the contemporary production of internet infrastructure and media platforms in Africa functions as a new extractive colonialism. He describes how colonial infrastructure such as railways were designed to extract raw materials from the African countries, denying them involvement in the processing of the materials which would lead to economic profit and internal growth (Coleman, 2019, p.5). As sound recordings, images, and objects are transposed to the digital realm they become forms of data. Sterne suggests they ought to be considered part of “larger social and technological complexes, rather than as separate media” (2003, p.338). The communication infrastructure is built “for the express purpose of harvesting data, churning a profit, and/or storing the data as raw material for predictive analytics”. Coleman describes African citizens’ data as a treasure trove of ‘natural resources’ for tech companies to exploit, suggesting that tech companies like Meta and Alphabet are building network connectivity infrastructure for the benefit of data extraction “rather than building local infrastructure for sustained economic development in African countries” (2014, p. 7,8).

Projects such as Google Arts & Culture, a not-for-profit segment of Google, aim to digitise cultural heritage. While shying away from making knowledge claims, or defining culture and its value, they make it explicit that their agenda is not to archive contemporary culture. They do make statements regarding the future, with the tagline “the future of our past”, which entrenches the stasis of represented objects while leaning into generalised narratives of inclusivity, appealing to a communal past and shared access, ignoring means of acquisition, current issues of accessibility, and

historical inequality. The Google art project refers to digital cultural artefacts as “information” that they claim to make accessible by organising efficiently. They celebrate the resolution of their imaging technology, describing it as being “the closest one can get to the “hands-on” experience of a work of art without actually touching it” (Google Arts & Culture). This plays into the data-driven ideal of technological progress, the ultimate goal being a data-dense representation of the culture. The cultural objects are situated outside of contemporary culture, dislocated, organised, and readily accessible to a privileged public.

Subscribing, uncritically, to the imperative of progress and innovation will lead to the further disenfranchisement of cultural producers in Southern Africa who have already been estranged from the archival process. The agenda of ground-up archiving is not to capture everything, rather it invests in people as keepers and creators of their own culture. Small archival institutions, despite being under-resourced, need to adhere to localised objectives rather than uncritically chasing technological innovation.

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