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Museum collections of musical instruments and the reproduction of colonizing approaches with digital tools

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Museum collections of musical instruments and the reproduction of colonizing approaches with digital tools

Gisa Jähnichen

Abstract: Ethnomusicology has a reputation of being an engaged discipline that deals with ethical issues. This engagement is subject to dynamic changes embedded in and expressed through discourses on the quality of its knowledge contribution. This paper is dedicated to the many issues coming with internet archives introducing or explaining musical instruments, which contribute widely to simplifications and degeneration of actually available knowledge. One of the problems resulting from that is the re-introduction of colonizing patterns into the ethnomusicological discourse on musical instruments. This paper aims at showing alternatives to this self-infecting practice of re-colonizing academic writing.

Keywords: Museums. Musical instruments. Decolonizing. Digital representation.

Coleções de instrumentos musicais e a reprodução de abordagens colonizantes com ferramentas digitais

Resumo: A etnomusicologia tem a reputação de ser uma disciplina engajada que lida com questões éticas. Esse engajamento está sujeito a mudanças dinâmicas incorporadas e expressas através de discursos sobre a qualidade de sua contribuição ao saber. Este artigo é dedicado às muitas questões que surgem com os arquivos de Internet voltados à introdução ou explicação de instrumentos musicais, que contribuem amplamente para simplificações e degeneração do conhecimento realmente disponível. Um dos problemas resultantes disso é a reintrodução de padrões colonizadores no discurso etnomusicológico a respeito de instrumentos musicais. Este trabalho também visa mostrar alternativas para essa prática autocontagante de uma escrita acadêmica recolonizadora.

Palavras-chave: Museus. Instrumentos musicais. Descolonização. Representação digital.

Colecciones de museos de instrumentos musicales y la reproducción de enfoques colonizadores con herramientas digitales

Resumen: La etnomusicología tiene la reputación de ser una disciplina comprometida que se ocupa de cuestiones éticas. Este compromiso está sujeto a cambios dinámicos incorporados y expresados a través de discursos sobre la calidad de su contribución al saber. Este artículo está dedicado a las muchas cuestiones que surgen con los archivos de Internet orientados a la introducción o explicación de instrumentos musicales, que contribuyen ampliamente a simplificaciones y degeneración del conocimiento realmente disponible. Uno de los problemas resultantes de ello es la reintroducción de patrones colonizadores en el discurso etnomusicológico acerca de instrumentos musicales. Este trabajo también pretende mostrar alternativas para esa práctica autocontagante de una escritura académica recolonizadora.

Palabras-clave: Museos. Instrumentos musicales. Descolonización. Representación digital.

Introduction

Ethnomusicology is a discipline being categorized under social sciences and/or humanities. Beyond this, it has a reputation of being an engaged discipline that deals with ethical issues, equality among peoples' cultures, their rights, and their participation in the distribution of wealth in the human world. This engagement is subject to dynamic changes embedded in and expressed through discourses on the quality of its knowledge contribution.

This paper is dedicated to the many issues coming with internet archives introducing or explaining musical instruments and instrument collections. Additionally, there are countless sources about musical instruments in texts other than about musical instruments which contribute widely to simplifications and degeneration of actually available knowledge. One of the problems resulting from that is the re-introduction of colonizing patterns into the ethnomusicological discourse on musical instruments, especially in academic writings that are becoming part of new digital knowledge resources. Decolonizing academic writing in ethnomusicology is not only an urgent demand. It is a necessity in order to sustain as a meaningful way of knowing about music in and as culture.

This paper also aims at showing alternatives to this self-infecting practice of re-colonizing academic writing, particularly in terms of methodology, without limiting the use of internet sources, on the contrary, through making progressively use of it.

Approach and Methods

Shortly before I started to work on this topic, an amazing collection of sharp ideas and provocative texts was published, edited by Francesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati, called "Perspectives on a 21st Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology?" (2017). Not all texts contributed to my enthusiasm, especially those old makeups of already known and rigidly judged approaches to the topic under investigation, narrating the story of the early Berlin School. As if there is nothing new to say about it. The core texts of this collection will be used as a discursive framework of this paper. The central point of it is the re-production of colonizing ideas using internet platforms, which might have been the result of projects dedicated to the de-colonization of ethnomusicology. I want to investigate 3 examples:

1. The Musical Instruments Museum Online (MIMO) platform¹, which inspired the overall topic of this panel;
2. The webpages of the Musical Instrument Museum (MIM²) in Phoenix and the Musical Instruments Museum (MiM³) in Brussels, in a comparative approach, which are both webpages of museums of musical instruments claiming their uniqueness;
3. The Facebook page of the SEM subsection on "De-colonizing

1 Available at <<http://www.mimo-international.com>>, accessed December 01, 2018.

2 Available at <<https://mim.org>>, accessed December 01, 2018..

3 Available at <<http://www.mim.be/en>>, accessed December 01, 2018.

ethnomusicology', especially the posts and comments about the use of musical instruments.

Example 1

The MIMO platform, which inspired the overall topic of this panel starts with:

Welcome to the world's largest freely accessible database for information on musical instruments held in public collections. Our database now contains the records of 63631 instruments.⁴

4 This is the promise made by the website MIMO. Musical Instruments Museum Online and realized through an exhaustive project at the Philharmonie de Paris in France. The website provides a centralized point of access to information about select instrument collections housed in Europe. Through a series of submenu headlines, the user can access details of the collections in the language(s) of the originating museums. The website invites us to explore some world collections of musical instruments that include large European collections dating back to colonial times. These collections have grown through private enthusiasts working in or about a larger region such as the Royal Museum for Central Africa Tervuren and the Musical Instruments Museum Brussels in Belgium; the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Ethnological Museum Berlin) and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Germany; the Royal College of Music Museum London and the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom; the Museu de la Musica Barcelona in Spain; and the Galleria dell'accademia (Department of Musical Instruments Florence) in Italy. Two co-operative museums in Sweden take part in the project as well: the Scenkonstmuseet Stockholm and The Nydhal Collection Stockholm. In these latter two cases, the focus is more strongly local. Another Scandinavian participant is the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, Oslo. The largest concentration of collections, however, is contributed by French institutions including the Philharmonie de Paris—Musée De La Musique, Musée du Palais Lascaris (Nice), Musée de L'hospice Comtesse (Lille), Musée Auguste Grasset Varzy, Pôle Accordéons Tulle, Musée des Instruments À Vent La Couture-Boussey, Museon Arlaten (Arles), Musée de la Musique Mécanique

Though the geographical distribution of collections does not necessarily prove a regional focus regarding the collected items, it implies certain philosophies. One is the adoption of historical inconsistencies in the categorization of musical instruments and the overlapping of incompatible classification systems that vary from institution to institution.

There are also distinctions in the amount of descriptive information for each collection, from helpfully detailed to nearly nothing. In the collection of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Ethnological Museum Berlin), information is often reduced to the pure physical object. The search function is also limited to the nomenclature used in the collections, which can lead to contradictions and a revealing lack of cultural knowledge regarding musical instruments. These inconsistencies are, seen from another perspective, also a source of information about institutional collection history and actual management.

Each institution is briefly introduced through some statistically relevant information (Jähnichen, 2016) such as the number of instruments in the collection, the number of instruments per category, the place they were collected (with inconsistencies such as mixing continents with countries or regions), the date of production, and the names of instrument makers as far as is known. The search function and categories reflect the idiosyncrasies of the cataloguing systems used by the various institutions compiled on MIMO.

Les Gets, Musée des Instruments De Musique L'aigle, Musée de la Lutherie et de L'archèterie (Mirecourt), Musée de la Castre (Cannes), and Musée des Musiques Populaires (Montluçon).

Finally, one might get the impression that little thought was given to the variety of possible users. The website seems more about the state of world collections of musical instruments and about what is considered “world” rather than about musical instruments.

Example 2

The submenu “Geographic Galleries” on the Phoenix’s Musical Instrument Museum website, invites the audience with following claim:

Enter the Musical Instrument Museum and embark on a musical journey around the globe. MIM’s collection is presented in Geographic Galleries that focus on five major world regions. These are:

- *The Africa and Middle East Gallery, which displays instruments and artifacts from sub-Saharan, North African, and Middle Eastern nations.*
- *The Asia and Oceania Gallery, which features instruments from countries and island groups in five sub-galleries devoted to regions of East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Central Asia and the Caucasus.*
- *The Europe Gallery, where guests encounter instruments ranging from an antique charter horn and a foot-operated drum kit to a child’s vessel flute.*
- *The Latin America Gallery, which features instruments and ensembles displayed in three sub-galleries: South America, Central America and Mexico, and the Caribbean.*
- *The United States / Canada Gallery, where guests can observe the diverse array of instruments that shaped the North American musical landscape, including the Appalachian dulcimer, sousaphone, ukulele, and electric guitar. Special exhibits focus on iconic American*

*musical-instrument manufacturers such as Martin and Steinway.*⁵

The inconsistencies and the flaws are well expressed in each of the named categories. Galleries deal very differently with knowledge and exclusiveness of regions and nations. While in large regions the pure name dropping seems sufficient, in others the mention of curiosities is necessary in order to appear attractive.

Welsch (2017: 32) summarizes his excursion on the three implications of Herder’s (1966) writings on culture as following:

The classical model of culture is not only descriptively unserviceable, but also normatively dangerous and untenable. What is called for today is a departure from this concept and to think of cultures beyond the contraposition of ownness and foreignness.

This thought, among others, is crucial in order to understand the many misconceptions spread through museum collections of musical instruments and other classified objects serving a specific purpose of humans.

Thinking further into this direction, Amselle (2017: 238) reasons that

fixing and purifying ethnic or cultural identities – thereby removing their mixed nature – specifically resulted from the imposition of a colonial knowledge/power or more broadly, a colonial state. Put differently, cultural identities resulted from the registration, often in the written form, of ethnic, cultural or identity affiliations, notably through the registry office, censuses, ..., of identities that until then were flexible.

It is this flexibility that could be re-established through digital means, yet the

⁵ Available at <<https://mim.org/galleries/geographic-galleries/>>, accessed December 01, 2018.

medial progress is not yet understood as a tool benefitting changes in knowledge processing. What we widely observe is the use of media in order to reinforce already known assumptions.

The official website of Musical Instrument Museum in Brussels makes this thought not less evident.

The Musical Instrument Museum in Belgium is being fully engaged with the visitors' ways of exploration. There is a so called "Instrument of the Months" – activity exhibited online. One instrument of the collection is then introduced in a more detailed way and additional information from early literature and other essential writings or depictions are compiled. This activity suggests that most of the musical instruments in the museum can become the "Instrument of the Months". It suggests further that becoming the "Instrument of the Months" is an achievement of the so called originating region or an ethnically framed community. Objects, in whatever function they appear and among them significantly musical instruments, are obviously often taken as proofs or emblematic tools in fights and defences among contesting groups. The "Instrument of the Months" – activity is amplifying competitive thinking and plays with simplifications though it might have been established as a positivist fact sheet being put up in a website. For June 2018, there was the following information and online exploration available:

"Wambee"
chordophone

This little stringed instrument from Gabon, located on the Atlantic coast above the Congo, joined the MIM's collection one hundred and forty years ago.

The wambee (also called ombi or ngwomi) is a typical Central African instrument, with a construction midway between a lute and a harp. The strings, made of fine vegetable fibres, do not run over a neck like the lute or the guitar, but are each attached to a separate bow. The strings are not shortened to change the pitch but each produce a single note like the harp ('open stringed'). In contrast to the harp, the strings run parallel to the soundboard. The bows of the wambee slide into small openings in the back of the wooden sound box. They are further held together by woven fibre threads (Fig. 1). The strings can be tuned by shifting small fibre rings that are tied around the string and the bow. Wambee inv. 0154 has five bows and thus originally had five strings. Today only a few remains of the strings and rings survive. The soundboard of this wambee is a thin wooden board, skilfully knotted to the sound box with fibre threads, an ancient technique subsequently replaced by joining with wooden dowels or metal nails.

Wambee players hold the instrument in a horizontal position, with the bottom of the sound box against the belly and strum the strings with both thumbs and index fingers. A similar playing position can be seen in Fig. 2. The wambee is played by men in the evenings, for a restricted audience, as an accompaniment to stories. The accompaniment on the wambee is usually simple, more rhythmic than melodic. The expertise lies not so much in the technique of playing the instrument, as in the recital by heart of texts full of references to historical names and events. Bow lutes are still played in Central Africa. In the Republic of Congo, for example, the ngomfi is used to accompany dances and songs.

Wambee inv. 0154 is part of one of the MIM's two earliest collections. The instrument comes from the old collection of the Belgian musicographer and then director of the Brussels Conservatoire royal de musique, François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871). After his death, the collection was sold by his sons Edouard and Adolphe to the Belgian State, who placed it in the Conservatoire, pending the opening of the new Musée instrumental (1877).

François-Joseph Fétis described his entire collection of non-European musical instruments in the first two volumes of his

Histoire de la musique, released in 1869, an ambitious project that - unusually for that time - also included music from outside Europe. In the 1860s and 1870s, African instruments were barely known in Europe. The first music from the African continent could only be heard at the World Exhibitions, which celebrated the latest developments and discoveries in the fields of industry and culture. In 1867 five Arab musicians gave a concert in the 'Tunisian Café' at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Gustave Chouquet, first curator of the Musée du

Conservatoire national de musique in Paris, refers, in his report on the musical instruments at the subsequent World Exhibition of Paris in 1878, to the role played by Fétis in the development of the wider interest in and scientific discovery of music from 'foreign' cultures: "Il serait injuste de ne point reconnaître que F.-J. Fétis, and publiant son *"Histoire générale de la musique"*, a donné de l'essor à cette nouvelle branch de notre littérature [ethnomusicology]" [...]

Illustrations:



Figure 1



Figure 2a



Figure 2b



Figure 3

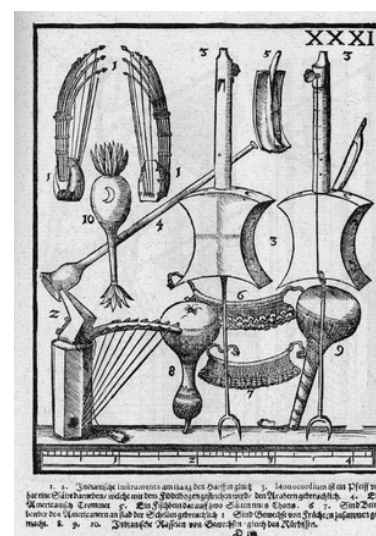


Figure 4

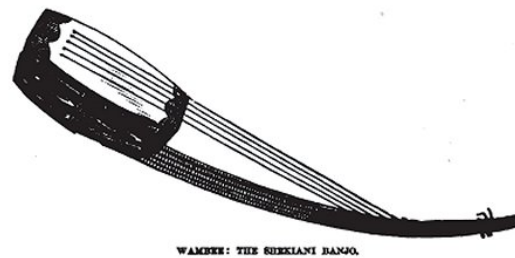


Figure 5



Figure 6a

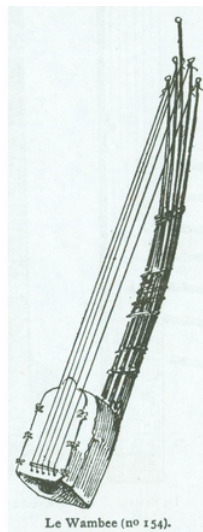


Figure 6b

Fig. 1: Wambee, Seki, Gabon, before 1872. MIM inv. 0154 © Simon Egan

Fig. 2a. Fig. 2b. Playing position wambee. R. Visser. Congo. nr. 41. Musiciens Indogènes [n.d.] (detail)

Fig. 3. F.-J. Fétis, *Histoire de la musique*, 1869, i, p. 39

Fig. 4. Michael Praetorius, *Theatrum Instrumentorum. Syntagma musicum*, Wolfenbuttel, 1619, plate XXXI

Fig. 5. Paul Belloni du Chaillu, (1831-1903), *Voyages et aventures dans l'Afrique équatoriale: mœurs et coutumes des habitants*, Paris, 1863, 163

Fig. 6. Fig 6b: "Le Wambee (n° 154)", in Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue descriptif & analytique du Musée instrumental du Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles*, Gent, 1880, p. 193.⁶

6 Available at <<http://www.mim.be/wambee>>, accessed June 21, 2018.

The online user was then able to click on a video example showing a black and white video clip of a black man playing the instrument without further information.

This very clear example of extremely obsolete knowledge surrounding tangible items in an intangible environment of recent culture is often defended with remarkable efforts on various internet platforms and webpages of organisations. This leads directly to the third example.

Example 3

A short excerpt out of a discussion on the SEM Facebook page "Decolonizing Ethnomusicology" gives a good insight into the problems already mentioned. One day, quite recently, the following question and a photo post popped up:

"Curious: what is this and where is it from?"



The following conversation⁷ started:

⁷ The dialogue repeated here is anonymized in order to protect the participants. However, the platform is publicly accessible by anyone who makes an effort to attend Facebook group pages.

GJ It is quite obvious what it is: A long necked fretless 3-string spike lute, which is possibly played with a wooden pick. Do you need to know who claims an originating culture? If you could get this picture, the instrument cannot be old enough to isolate it in this way. The skin used on the resonance box may give a hint that it is mainland Southeast Asia or East Asia (insular included).

RRR looks like Lahu or Lisu, Northern Thailand. a bit short though so might be a tourist version.

WB Nice. I have one too and always wondered. I lost the bridge, I might try a ukulele bridge or make one eventually.

RRR bridges were a small triangular block of bamboo with notches, nothing fancy. Handmade.

RRR here is the one I sold the MIM in Arizona.



BW almost certainly a chinese sanxian <https://collections.ed.ac.uk/stcecilias/record/96091>

"Sanxian ("Three strings") or...

DB This page gives the following names:

Lisu – tseubeu

Black Lahu – saemu

<https://goldentriangleinstruments.wordpress.com/strings/banjos/>

DB This says it has an iguana skin:

<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-elderly-lisu-man-shows-off-simple-stringed-banjo-like-musical-instrument-32302611.html>



RRR seen them with iguana skin, python skin, with open back and semi closed back. thanks for finding the names DB.

DB You are better at identifying really rare instruments than I am--I had never heard of this one before.

GJ Dear DB, they are only rare to those who do not know them ;) . Those who have them and play them occasionally do not think of them as rare. Also, Lisu and Lahu are not the only playing them, I have seen people who were labeled Lolo, Akha, Day, Thai-deng, Thai-dam and a number of others, using very similar instruments (all around the areas I mentioned). Those people travel and get in contact with others and they also instruct carpenters and instrument makers in tourist areas to make them in bigger numbers, using different material and good looking... So, the ethnic label does not really fit. Now, this is an instrument that people buy and sell everywhere in the world. Some of them believe in labels (they actually buy the label in a way, too). I enjoy that these instruments are still used in very

different contexts, that people are really creative with them. And it is not relevant from where these people are. It is only this "belonging-discussion" that makes it complicated.

Coming back to the framework of this paper taken from the article compilation made by Giannattasio & Giuriati (2017), the current discussion is the continuation of Herder's (1966) concept of culture with digital means. One may suspect that, already at the time, Herder wrote his "Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind" in the late 18th century, there were uttered critical remarks yet they were overrun by Herder's comfortable support of nation building and cultural racism. Welsch (2017: 34) notes that

It comes to light here just how fatal the outcome of recourse to the old concept of culture can be. The old cultural notion of inner homogeneity and outer delimitation engenders chauvinism and cultural fundamentalism.

Conclusion

The platforms offering knowledge on musical instruments vary broadly. However, they also exhibit a quite uniform set of methods:

- Regional classifications re-introducing simplifications such as "Kulturkreise" or even the concept of culture as defined by Herder.

Regionalism is not at all automatically ineffective. Ineffective and therefore objected is the methodical implication that regional features may be based on social similarities and need, therefore, reconstructed identities. This part of regionally rooted authenticity is

perpetuated through Study Groups, circles of scholars and friends, specific academic communities, and a number of preservation movements supporting regionalism or its preceding ethnicism. Many of the represented museums are only dedicated towards an exclusive geographic territory that is equalled with specific ethnic groups, the nation, or a specific region. This is nothing wrong yet the reasoning of collections exclusively based on the principle of its physical presence within a physical space in order to claim a type of ownership is questionable and socially dividing. Summarizing the observations discussed and the results, there can be stated that museum collections of musical instruments face the following problems:

- Fragmented object-related features such as the focus on measurements.
- This approach is the most wide spread way of rationalizing a musical instrument. Numbers, measurements, the amount of strings, frets, finger holes, keys, reeds or tongues, are object of contesting claims leading to a similar questionable result of explaining ethnic or regional achievements.
- Descriptive approaches to the unknown history of the musical instruments, musicians, and communities supposed to be the originators – using of outdated literature or facts that were not sufficiently confirmed and regardless of further historical changes in the peoples social reality.
- This point might be the worst since it is just one of many observations of historical blindness towards changes

among living beings, their relationships, their capabilities, their sensitivities and their willingness to transform.

Websites and discussions using social media show a new quality of communication among humans, about humans, about other beings, about any type of objects, and about human relationships towards these objects. The border between showing and explaining blurs, the way of thinking is rather associative and underlying. Nevertheless, the way of gaining knowledge is not really changed and the way how knowledge is generated and distributed is just amplifying patterns already known through earlier practices (Jähnichen, 2018). One pattern is a colonizing approach to anything unfamiliar, of which categorizing systems are only one small part. Taxonomies, descriptive tools, methodologies in general, are always coming with judgements and institutionalised morals. Fighting these judgements is part of the decolonizing movement among ethnomusicologists and anthropologists. Surprisingly, this fight re-introduces judgmental behaviour towards human communication. Some may think that the internet of information flows or things may open up to a more democratic or diverse use of knowledge. Surprisingly, it is also suggesting an average appearance and compromising distinctiveness. The main problem is not the radicalism in the ideas about indigeneity, feminism, decolonizing, or deconstruction. The problem is that the radicalism is not radical enough. When embracing all these ways of generating a kind of knowledge as part of the human history, one may come to the point to question basic methods far more consistently and less judgementally. I think that this could help find more appropriate solutions for an

individualized and at the same time holistically inclusive view on musical instruments and their temporary roles in human and non-human life.

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