

# A RETROSPECTIVE LISTENING THROUGH ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

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## Abstract

This article interrogates the use of ethnomusicological archives on the field. How can the perception and the interpretation of archives by contemporary musicians provide us with ethnographic, musicological, and socio-cultural information about both historical and contemporary musical practice? This preliminary work intends to implicate Gabonese musicians in the interpretation of the archives and the future use of archives in musical practice. It is based on two examples of retrospective listening: the first is about Yannick's perception of his own playing recorded 10 years ago, and the second is about three Fang musicians' perception of the playing of other Fang musicians recorded 50 years ago by Pierre Sallée. Ethnomusicological archives carry micro-history, traces of performances, and periods of time that could be long forgotten. Revisiting and returning recordings in a scientific context allows the researcher to introduce new perspectives and research topics about the historicity of oral tradition musical practices, as well as the perceptions and interpretations of musicians regarding musical performances. Conducting retrospective listening on the field with musicians allows us to enrich the archival material with ethnographic data, to study the transformation of musical practices through time and better define the criteria that musicians use to listen and characterize the performance of a musician.

**Keywords:** ethnomusicology, archives in the field, retrospective listening, Gabon.

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## Resumo

Este artigo questiona o uso de arquivos etnomusicológicos no campo. Como a percepção e a interpretação de arquivos por músicos contemporâneos nos fornecem informações etnográficas, musicológicas e socioculturais sobre ambas as práticas musicais histórica e contemporânea? Este trabalho preliminar pretende envolver músicos gaboneses na interpretação dos arquivos e no uso futuro de arquivos na prática musical. Baseia-se em dois exemplos de audição retrospectiva: a primeira é sobre a percepção de Yannick a respeito de sua própria execução gravada há dez anos, e a segunda é sobre a percepção de três músicos *Fang* sobre a execução de outros músicos *Fang* gravados há 50 anos por Pierre Sallée. Os arquivos etnomusicológicos carregam micro-história, traços de execuções e períodos de tempo que podem ter sido esquecidos há tempos. Revisitar e retornar gravações em um contexto científico permite ao pesquisador introduzir novas perspectivas e tópicos de pesquisa sobre a historicidade das práticas musicais de tradição oral, bem como as percepções e interpretações dos músicos sobre execuções musicais. A realização de uma audição retrospectiva no campo com músicos nos permite enriquecer o material arquivístico com dados etnográficos, estudar a transformação das práticas musicais ao longo do tempo e definir melhor os critérios que os músicos usam para ouvir e caracterizar o desempenho de um músico.

**Palavras-chave:** etnomusicologia, arquivos no campo, escuta retrospectiva, Gabão.

## Ethnomusicology and Archives

Under the paradigm “comparative musicology”, the first studies in the discipline of Ethnomusicology focused on the historicity of oral tradition music by comparing rhythms, melodies and musical instruments from all over the world in order to study the origin and the evolution of music (Schaeffner 1936, Sachs 1943). Through the multiplication of recording collections, sound archives were created

and rapidly significantly increased. However, ethnomusicologists quickly dismissed sound archives as their objects of study and focused instead on ethnographic studies from a monographic perspective in order to better understand music in its cultural context.

In the 1970's, some ethnomusicologists worked on the historicity of oral tradition music by using written and iconographic sources and by studying oral tradition as a media for social and collective memories<sup>2</sup>. By the end of the 1990's, studies explored ethnographical and ethnomusicological archives. Ethnologists today are more self-aware about the protection of their own fieldwork material for future research, and also about the communities where data has been collected. According to Moulinié and Mouton (2008), the use of the ethnologists' archives is, for the most part, for punctual research from a documentary perspective to illustrate a publication or to look for information about objects collected and preserved in ethnographic collections.

Epistemological and historical studies on archives collections aim to better understand the work of the ethnologist and the evolution of the discipline (Fürniss 2015). Other studies concern the influence of the scientific and political context in the constitution of archives. Some ethnologists "revisit" previous fieldwork material collected by ethnologists and colonial administrators or missionaries. Other researchers also use ethnographical archives to examine the continuity and the transformation of cultural practices. Several French ethnomusicologists specialized in African music have developed studies from this perspective (Le Bomin 2004, Leclair 2004 and 2014, Fürniss 2014, Lacombe 2014, Lechaux 2015). Through a diachronic comparison between the ethnomusicological archives and contemporary recordings collected in the field, they use musical analyses to study the permanency and transformations of musical

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2 See *Cahiers d'ethnomusicologie* 22, 2009.

practices in order to reconstruct the history of a population's musical heritage.

## Archives In the Field

This article intends to continue studies on ethnomusicological archives and, specifically, of what use are archives in the field? This question comprises two main issues: First, what is an ethnomusicological archive? Second, how can we use archives in the field and for what purpose?

If archives<sup>3</sup> are usually defined as documents that are preserved in archival institutes, we should define ethnomusicological archives as all the ethnographic and scientific material that ethnomusicologists produce, such as audio and video recordings, ethnographic notes, books, articles, etc.

Recently, Fűrniiss took sound archives back to the field where they had been collected almost 100 years earlier in 1908 in Cameroon. The aim of her work was to identify the contents and the ethnic origin of the recordings<sup>4</sup>. She explains the difficulty linking the archival sounds with their cultural meanings over the gap of tremendous changes of culture and social behaviors during the last century in this region, particularly where musical practices have disappeared (Fűrniiss, Forthcoming).

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- 3 According to Oxford Dictionaries, archive is: 1) A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people; which is divided into two subtopics, 1.1) The place where historical documents or records are kept; 1.2) A complete record of the data in part or all of a computer system, stored on an infrequently used medium. Accessed in November 20, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/archive>.
  - 4 The recordings come from three different collections: Zenker, Archiv Kamerun and Waldow.

Continuing this approach, my preliminary work intends to implicate musicians in the interpretation of the archives and the future use of archives in musical practice. I aim to study how the perception and interpretation of archives by contemporary musicians can provide us with ethnographic, musicological, and socio-cultural information about both historical and contemporary musical practice.

My first use of archives in the field occurred in February 2016 during a one-month field trip in the capital-city of Gabon, Libreville, where I conducted a comparative study of the instrumental gestures of several musicians playing the harp as part of the program of the Chair GeAcMus “Gesture-Acoustic-Music”<sup>5</sup>. This fieldwork was intended to conduct motion-captures of several musicians to compare their instrumental gestures across several populations such as the Tsogho, the Apindji, the Massango, the Myene and the Fang. The 8-string harp is a fundamental element in the practice of the *bwiti* cult that is shared among these populations. The origin of the *bwiti* cult is attributed to the Tsogho or Apindji population. Myene and Fang borrowed this cult at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and transformed it. Among the Fang, the harp is also practiced in the *ombwiri* cult, closely linked to the *bwiti* cult.

Among these populations we observe variations in the naming of the harp, its manufacturing, decoration, meaning, and also in the associated musical repertoire. What about the musical gesture? The aim of my study was to understand how each musician interacted with his instrument to produce music according to given aesthetics and cultural contexts. To do so, I compared the manufacturing of the instrument, its acoustic, the gesture of the musician, the musical language, and the associated socio-cultural meaning among several populations.

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5 This program is directed by Susanne Fürniss and François Picard, and funded by IDEX “Sorbonne Universités” (ANR-11-IDEX-004-02).

In the Chair project, my research focused on the instrumental gesture from a synchronic perspective, but an event led me to also embrace the diachronic perspective of this musical practice.

During my Ph.D fieldwork in 2006, I studied the music of the *bwiti* cult among the Fang population in northern Gabon (Mifune 2012). I met a Fang musician, Yannick Essono Ndong, at Libreville, and we recorded several pieces of the harp repertoire with him. In 2015, as he had moved to France for his studies, we met in Paris to work on the instrumental gesture project. I gave him the recordings I made with him in 2006, nearly 10 years earlier. He told me that he was very surprised to listen to himself “playing like that”. I thought several times about the words: “playing like that”. I finally asked him: what do you mean by the fact that you were surprised to be “playing like that”? He said that he didn’t recognize himself in the first listening of the recordings and that he didn’t like “his playing at the time”.

At that moment, I realized there was a historical perspective to the recordings I made during my Ph.D.

After only 10 years, the recordings I made in 2006 carried a micro-history, a trace of a style of playing and a period of time that could be long gone. This event made me aware of three main issues:

- How would the musicians perceive harp performances recorded 50 years ago? What relevant ethnographic information does the point of view and reactions of the musicians to these archives provide to my research, and to the enrichment of sound archives?
- How does retrospective listening contribute to a musician’s playing style and memories?
- How can musicians make use of sound archives today?

## Retrospective Listening

This preliminary study is based on two examples of retrospective listening: the first is about Yannick's perception of his own playing recorded 10 years ago, and the second is about three Fang musicians' perception of the playing of other Fang musicians recorded 50 years ago by Pierre Sallée.

The survey protocol I elaborated is the following:

- I asked the musician about his learning and playing experience and together we defined the corpus of repertoire to record.
- I then recorded the musician playing live with motion capture techniques involving five synchronized cameras and several reference points marked by tiny stickers placed on the body of the musician.
- I measured the harp played by the musicians for further acoustic study.
- Finally, I showed the videos to the musician to discuss their perception of their own playing and that of other musicians.

For the last part, I showed them videos I made with other musicians during several motion capture sessions, as well as audio and video archives recorded in 1965 by the ethnomusicologist Pierre Sallée. I used these archives as discussion material to talk with the musicians about musical gesture and playing styles. This unique collection of recordings of harp performances was the only possible point of comparison I had with my own recordings. Sallée's archives represent the first historical trace of the *bwiti* and *ombwiri* cult and are

now digitized and accessible on the audio archives of the CNRS-Musée de l'Homme website Telemeta<sup>6</sup>.

During the survey, I asked the musicians to listen to Sallée's archives without telling them they were historical recordings. The three expert musicians who practiced the *ombwiri* cult immediately recognized the songs from *ombwiri* repertoire. All of them said listening to the recordings made them nostalgic. They told me that it was the older musicians, the former generation who performed like that, but today nobody plays in that way because it would be inappropriate.

From discussions with the musicians I observed two dynamics in harp performance from 1965 to 2016 among the Fang:

- 1) Throughout 50 years, there is a continuity of the identity of the musical pieces. All of the musicians identified the songs and immediately sang along when they listened to the recordings.
- 2) There is a transformation in the performance: the musicians recognized that it was a performance from past times. The two main criteria they gave me to describe the transformations concern the harp playing and the way to sing the song:
  - Today, musicians play faster.
  - The way the musician sings and formulates the lyrics are different today. In the past, the lyrics were well-pronounced and "simple". Today, musicians sing faster and add words to explain the meaning of the lyrics that are in a specific ritual language to other initiates.

Thus, historicity is incorporated in the performance and the musical material. The playing and the way of singing is characteristic

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6 [http://archives.crem-nrs.fr/archives/fonds/CNRSMH\\_Sallee/](http://archives.crem-nrs.fr/archives/fonds/CNRSMH_Sallee/)



of a period of time. The performance itself is a relevant source to study the historicity of musical practices, but also the evolution of the performances of musicians. Indeed, Yannick's perception of his own performance ten years ago showed the evolution of his playing from beginner to expert musician. Thus, the interpretations of the musicians of the sound archives allow me to point out the transformation of harp performance over the years. Nevertheless, for both cases of retrospective listening, I must compare and put into perspective, the musicians' interpretations of the sound archives with a musical analysis to investigate if the discourse of the musicians and the performance itself tell the same story. In future research, I aim to compare different performances (ancient and contemporary) of the same musical piece that could confirm or disconfirm a musician's interpretation and also to better identify the features on which musicians base their interpretation of ancient and contemporary harp performances.

During the discussion about the harp performance from Sallée's audio archives with the musicians, I also gathered new ethnographic information. Because of the continuity of the ritual practice of the *ombwiri* cult and the fundamental role of the harp performance in the ritual, musicians could identify ritual elements linked to it simply by listening to the harp performance.

During their listening, they could identify if it was the same musician who was playing in the different recordings, the moment of the ceremony where the musical piece was performed, as well as the meaning of the lyrics. All of this ethnographic information is very precious for ethnomusicologists to better contextualize, retrospectively, musical practice and archival material collected by previous researchers.

Apart from the ethnographic elements of the context of where and when the musical piece is collected, retrospective listening by a

musician to his own performance can also resurrect memories from his personal history. By listening to his recording from 2006, Yannick told me that it reminded him of some elements of his life at that time of his life, such as the temple where he used to play, the people with whom he played, the place where he lived, among other information. By listening to sound archives, musicians could look back into their past lives. Through music, they could remember things that they no longer thought they remembered. Bringing and using sound archives in the field allows us to study individual memories from past times through music.

I conducted the same experiment with a Tsogho musician, Jean-Claude Madouma. Before listening to the recordings, I didn't tell him what kind of recordings they were. After one minute of listening, he was able to tell me the name of the musician, who was his own father Jean-Claude Ndjodi, and that he was still alive. I had not expected to meet a musician whose harp playing was recorded 50 years ago. The last day of my fieldwork we went to see his father and to show him the recordings and movie that Pierre Sallée made 50 years ago. Jean-Claude Ndjodi was interested to see the videos and to listen to himself playing the harp. He didn't remember Pierre Sallée who collected the video and audio recordings, only another ethnologist he worked with, Otto Gollnhoffer. Unfortunately, he did not speak extensively about the videos or audio recordings, and 15 days after I left Gabon, I was saddened to learn about the death of Jean-Claude Ndjodi. I hope that I could bring to him and his son some memories that they could share before his death.



Fig. 1: Jean-Claude Ndjodi in 1965 (photo credit, Pierre Sallée. CNRS-Musée de l'Homme Archives) and Jean-Claude Ndjodi in 2016 (photo credit, Marie-France Mifune)

## **The Use of Archives by Musicians**

While they were listening to archival recordings and viewing motion captures, I asked the musicians if they had already heard or seen themselves playing the harp, and if they had already used recordings and for what purpose. For most of the musicians, it was the first time they saw themselves playing, but not the first time they heard themselves. They like to record themselves or other musicians playing in order to “improve” their own playing. Since the 1990’s, some musicians use radio-tape players and CD’s. Due to difficult conditions for the preservation of tapes and CD’s, as well as for the devices to play them, it is difficult to keep a trace of their playing or that of other harpists from 20 years ago. Today they use their cell-phones and USB or flash memory sticks to record themselves, not only to improve their own playing but also simply to listen to music recreationally.

Thus, having these recordings from 1965 is very precious to them. It represents a cultural wealth. They can remember a period of time and a way of playing that they no longer practice. By listening to these recordings they can incorporate in their playing, new elements that belong to the past and were left aside since. I took the initiative to offer to each musician I worked with a CD that I burned with several pieces from Sallée's audio archive to return a part of their cultural heritage that they could keep and use for themselves. Future research will study how the musicians have made use of these audio archives and the potential impact on the evolution of contemporary repertoire. In particular, we can compare the respective influence of archives and of their own recent recordings with the evolution of their performances.

As Seeger said, the role of archives is not to keep old stuff but to keep material, until those particular moments in the lives of individuals or the histories of communities might rediscover them to create a new future for themselves. Archival collections are potentially the tools for people's self-determination (Seeger 1986; 1996).

Archives must be returned to the populations. I think it is part of our duty as academic scientists. How can we do that? Only in an institutional form through museums or universities? In Gabon, at the Omar Bongo University, attempts to host archives have been made, but nobody has access to them, nor is even aware that these archives are stored there. Bringing copies of audio archives back to the field can be a way for the ethnomusicologists to further involve the communities in the enrichment of the archives as well as to give back a part of their own cultural heritage. Web platforms open to the public, such as Telemeta, also provide relevant tools to begin the process of the systematic return of musical heritage to a population; however, electricity and internet do not yet function everywhere in

Gabon and numerous ethics and legal issues have yet to be resolved to make it so, even on small scales. It is the responsibility of ethnomusicologists to seriously consider these issues<sup>7</sup>.

## Conclusion

Revisiting and returning recordings in a scientific context allows the researcher to introduce new perspectives and research topics about the historicity of oral tradition musical practices, as well as the perceptions and interpretations of musicians regarding musical performances.

Doing retrospective listening in the field with musicians allows us to enrich the archival material with ethnographic data, to study the transformation of musical practices through time and to better define the criteria that musicians use to listen and characterize the performance of a musician. Ethnomusicological archives carry micro-history, traces of performances, and periods of time that could be long gone. Historicity is incorporated in the performance itself but not only there. As music of the oral tradition is integral to socio-cultural events, ethnomusicological archives can return the socio-cultural and individual memories of ancient times to musicians today.

We, ethnomusicologists, have the responsibility to make the cultural heritage accessible to populations and make their heritage and history available to them, which can be successfully achieved by bringing archives back to the field.

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7 See Seeger Anthony and Shubha Chaudhuri (Eds.), 2004.

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