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Beyond the Digital Return: New Heritage/s, Sustainability, and the Decolonisation of Music Archives in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana

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Summary

Beyond the Digital Return researches repatriation/restitution and re/appropriation of submerged but now digitally accessible musical and cultural material. The significance of the relatedness of "digital return" to processes of heritage and identity production as well as the decolonisation of institutional music archives/repositories are investigated in three African countries: South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, with affiliated research in Nigeria. The project contributes to Advocacy/Engaged/Applied Ethnomusicology, Archival Studies, Anthropology, African Heritage Studies, and Popular Music Studies. The project's concerns are about assessing the value of digital return to the development of sustainable cultures and in what digital return reveals about global demands for decolonising archives and museums. Key questions are: what happens after the "digitised musical object" has been returned to its community of origin? Is digital return the answer to developing sustainable music cultures or reviving an interest in them where it may be the case that they are on the brink of collapse or extinction? The main objective of the project is to enhance our understanding of how repatriation in the field of music yields new forms of cultural creation associated with heritage, and, more precisely, intangible cultural heritage. This objective is informed by identity re/construction/affirmation as a result of accessibility, current trends of decolonising archives and the opening up of music archives, collections, and digital repositories (where much digitization has been achieved). These processes have for decades been frustrated by notions of colonial and corporate authority and ownership. The project thus also aims to contribute to currently increasing debates on restitution and related rights issues such as ownership, copyright, and intellectual property rights.

Key Questions

Little scholarly attention has been paid to how archival materials are circulated, accessed, reappropriated, and used once they are 'home,' and become re/accessible. No empirical research has been conducted on the cultural effects of digital return and how it triggers new processes of musical and cultural production, is significant in remaking and sustaining group identities and heritage; and neither on its potential for decolonization of both society and archive. The subject has not been theorized, either, which our project seeks to do.

The project therefore investigates "digital return," the practice of repatriation and re-appropriation of submerged but now digitally accessible and mediated musical and cultural material/heritage (Lobley 2012, Coester 2012, Bell et al. 2013, Mojako 2016, Thram 2015/18, Gimenez 2018, Madiba 2019). It inquires on how these materials are circulated, accessed, and used once they have been returned and asks what new social and cultural relations and practices are produced when this music and its culturally-specific, re/mediated meanings, skills, memories, ideas, sounds, emotions, and performance styles it (used to) represent(s) become accessible. The project conceptualises the approach of "beyond repatriation" further and targets the significance of the relatedness of digital return to heritage and identity re/construction and the decolonisation of music archives/repositories in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana.

In view of the above, our concerns are about assessing the value of digital archival return for sustaining cultures and in what it reveals about global demands for decolonising archives/museums.

Methods and Concepts

The project follows a decolonising research methodology that takes archives as cross-sections of control and contested knowledge and requires engagement with archives as cultural agents of "fact" production, taxonomies, and of colonial and corporate authority. Thus we view archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production, as monuments of colonialism and sites of colonial ethnography. Decolonizing archives means to decolonize knowledge (Mbembe 2015). To reduce the colonial subject-object disparity in traditional forms of research our methodology involves "participatory action research" (Impey 2002, Kemmis/McTaggart 2005) and what we term "collaborative action research" (CAR), a strong emphasis of collaboration and action in research practices (Coester, Mboya, Mwonga, Watkins forthcoming). The reimagined archive offers new "approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions and to plan, act and monitor, evaluate and reflect" (Chambers 2006). We will develop this theoretically and practically for our project: what is a sustained participatory action research (PAR and CAR) effort at digital return? One aspect of this is to share archival research (written/visual/aural) as well as data from expert interviews, discourse analysis, and close participant observation/action, which delineate our research methods, to create "shared knowledge" in the communities where we find ourselves.

Aiming at a decolonial research methodology (Watkins 2021) that involves ethnography, our key approaches are participatory action and collaborative action research. Apart from this we draw on methods and techniques and employ a new mix of (applied) ethnomusicological, anthropological, heritage studies, and popular music/culture studies research methods as we combines archival and ethnographic research.

Vision

Decolonisation, open access, effective research management, and sustenance of music heritage repositories; the merger of creative communities and such repositories; and creative industries/music industries to create recognition of subaltern, alternative and unauthorised heritages:

■ Policies and frameworks for "replay activities" of popular and meaningful music of the past by governments, heritage industries and brokers

■ Merger of sustenance and improvement of frameworks within societies to change status of creative artists and improve living conditions of musicians and other creative artists

■ Digital return to benefit subaltern, creative communities to rewrite histories, reimagining past futures and re/create heritage; creation and sustenance of (digital) community archives

■ To fully tap and make useful the relationship of digital return/repatriation/restitution for decolonial indentities and heritage politics

■ Effective music and intangible heritage rights management (Copyright and IPR) on the African continent, effective Copyright for so-called traditional music and folk music

■ Decolonising learning and (participatory) research through open access digital cultural and musical learning

Contribution to the Cluster's Aims & Goals

The project contributes to the cluster and its research section Arts & Aesthetics as it is a reflection and scholarly investigation not only on the significant cultural role of music/digitisation/archive but also, as a consequence of it, the relatively new field of research on "alternative heritage-making" in Africa, in relation to the re-invigoration of heterogeneous identities. This idea has been increasingly significant. We explore how this is related to aesthetic processes, practices, and politics challenging (neo-)colonial and national constellations of power through digital return and the decolonisation of music archives. Moreover, the project is concerned with cultural and musical learning through digital open access. It thereby contributes to exploring the field of musical learning and heritage through decolonising practices such as participatory research and learning.

The project foregrounds an emerging, new multiplicity in Africa: that of heritage/s, related to subaltern heritage politics and re/affirmation of "ethnicities", and points to aspects of its dynamics. Our focus on new heritages in the plural reflects the increasing multiplicity of life worlds. Once considered an all-encompassing cultural formation/essence representing dominant narratives of the past, intangible heritage-making of subaltern groups points to "other pasts which count" (Hall 2005). Such "alternative heritage-making" and the related multi-"ethnicity" constitution of societies, a key variable in Africa, reveal group power asymmetries and claims of "ethnic" equality. Apart from class and gender inequality, these may by the main challenge for democratization and sustaining nation states. The project will thus contribute to the cluster's aspiration of understanding African multiplicities, their dynamics, and, as these new trends are constituted multi-lingually and multi-culturally, their relationality. The project seeks to contribute to the third important concept of the cluster in reconfiguring African Studies, that of re-flexivity, as the digital return is investigated as a processual relation between archives, scholars, artists, and communities, and evokes and emphasises the reflexive character of relations. Digital return feeds back into the context/the archive/its practices from which it evolved. By investigating this process and the new relations digital music returns and reappropriations produce, the project argues that African life worlds, cultural practices and identities have been relational, multi-layered, and heterogeneous, and are "under re/

construction" in the post-colonial and digital worlds.

We explore digital archival return, heritage and identity re/construction through relationality and re/mediation, produced through music-archive/music-making/"musicking" practices, in multi-local African spaces and at the "moment of agency," and how people relate to this remediated archive. We engage in this way with the four heuristic angles of the Cluster.

Ethnomusicology has been (colonially) structured by collecting/researching and archiving/exploiting for either fetish or scholarly use. The project is concerned with processes of decolonisation and learning through digital open access. Like the turn to repatriation, its methodology of PAR and CAR contributes to reconfiguring African Studies, as does its engagement with music, and popular music, the most enjoyed on the continent, and equally the most unvalued and understudied in African Studies and Ethnomusicology (Agawu 2016).

The project promotes doctoral researchers from/in Africa, and fosters interdisciplinary research across four ACCs and with academic partners at the University of Ghana, another key institution of higher learning in West Africa.

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