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## Challenges in the Repatriation of Historic Recordings to Papua New Guinea

Don Niles and Vincent Palie

*Two musical examples were played as part of this paper. Due to technical difficulties, it is not possible to include them here, however, references are given to published versions of them.*

*Although a joint paper, at the conference each author presented different sections. The first section is by Vincent Palie.*

### Introduction

Papua New Guinea is an independent nation of about four and a half million people, located north of Australia. Papua New Guinea has more than 800 diverse languages and cultures, some of which are dying out or changing at a very alarming rate.

The Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies (IPNGS) was established in 1974 in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Its main mission is to undertake research into music, dance, and folklore. The IPNGS is entirely government-funded. Presently there are sixteen staff, half of whom focus on research—music/dance and ethnography. Undoubtedly, establishment of the IPNGS was greatly influenced by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Music materials are housed in our archive, located on-site. In addition to materials collected by Music Department staff, the archive also contains recordings of music from Papua New Guinea made by overseas researchers, commercial recordings, and copies of materials from other archives. At present there are approximately 9200 hours of such recordings. The majority are of traditional music, but the collection includes large collections of popular and religious music as well.

Since its establishment, the Music Department has been doing research work to document the musical traditions of the country. In many cases, we undertake surveys of traditions of a particular province not well represented in our archive. Many of our traditions are in danger of dying out because of many people migrating and resettling in urban centres where they do not learn them. However, over the last decade it has become increasingly difficult for us to do such research because the budget contains

virtually no money for this purpose. This is something which Don will discuss later.

We have also made great efforts to locate the early recordings of Papua New Guinea music and languages located in archives throughout the world. I would like to talk a bit more in detail about this work.

### **Early Recordings**

Our ancestors orally passed on their knowledge and skills of music and dance. In this way they kept alive our cultural values. In many parts of the country this is still the way our traditions are maintained.

Beginning in 1884, Papua New Guinea was administered in the north by the Germans and in the south by the British. It was during this early colonial period that the first recordings were made in Papua New Guinea. In 1898, some members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait briefly visited parts of present-day Central and Western provinces and made the first sound recordings.

Up until World War I, the main work in recording was done by Germans, often as part of expeditions. Many of these recordings were made on wax cylinders, some on wax discs, each lasting only two or three minutes. Most of these recordings survive today in Berlin, with some other collections located in other European archives (Niles 2002). Over the past two decades we have worked closely with such archives to repatriate these materials to Papua New Guinea. Early recordings from the archive in Vienna have been released on CD (Niles 2000) and it is hoped that there will be collaboration with the archive in Berlin to issue some of the wealth of materials located there as well.

As a result of this German activity most of these early recordings concern the northern part of Papua New Guinea, that is, the area formerly German New Guinea. After World War I, when administration for the whole country became the responsibility of Australia, however, recording activity was reduced.

Apart from a few exceptions, Australians were not much interested in recording in Papua New Guinea during their colonial administration. Instead, those who did record were a much more international group. Recordings were made by German, British, Swiss,

American, French, Hungarian, and Australian researchers.

The years following World War II were another turning point in the history of recorded music in Papua New Guinea. International interest in the country increased further and, more importantly, the availability of tape recorders enabled many more researchers to make recordings.

In 1947 Ray Sheridan was appointed Education Officer for Music by the colonial government—the first real interest shown by the government in traditional music. In 1953 Sheridan made some of the first tape recordings in the country. After the workshop, we were able to interview him briefly. Sadly, he died a few weeks afterwards.

### **Repatriation of Early Recordings**

In large part, we have been very successful in locating early recordings of Papua New Guinea music and arranging for their repatriation. At present, we have copies of all the major historical collections, although we hope to receive better copies of some collections in the future.

Early recordings benefit the descendants of those who sang the songs or played the musical instruments. These recordings give them the chance to hear their ancestors' voices and the performance skills they had. People today may hear versions of songs still performed today or types of music or instruments which have been totally lost. Here, for example, is a 1913 recording of a nose-flute from Manus province, an instrument which apparently no longer exists there:

**Manus nose-flute, musical example, recorded by Richard Thurnwald, 1913;  
(Niles & Webb 1987: Manus cassette, no. 2)**

In contrast, early recordings also contain such treasures as the first recording of Tok Pisin or New Guinea Pidgin, the most widely-spoken language in the country today.

**Tok Pisin (example of speech, recorded by Rudolf Pöch; Niles 2000: Ph  
381, CD1:31)**

I'd like to add a bit of my experiences as a member of Tambaran Culture, a contemporary band. It was formed while I was studying music at the National Arts School, now part of the University of Papua New Guinea. We travelled both domestically and overseas promoting Papua New Guinea traditional music and dance, including a trip to Sydney in 1985. At that time Don Niles was teaching part-time. He recognised the importance of traditional music and dance, and encouraged us to promote our traditions. Eighteen years later we are back in Sydney again, continuing to promote these traditions in a different way.

In regard to utilising and promoting PNG music today, many young musicians are coming back to the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies archive to listen to traditional recordings. The preservation of such traditional musics and songs in libraries and archives is very important to the young generation of the country.

With the current trends at Papua New Guinea's musical front, many young Papua New Guineans are now featuring overseas music, with less interest in their own traditional music. However, this has had little impact on Papua New Guinean traditional music. Some people are still interested in utilising traditional music in their contemporary music compositions.

Such interests also highlight the tremendous and timeless efforts made by the researchers who made these recordings. I have great respect for their contributions.

Don will now discuss some of the difficulties we have faced in our work.

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*The concluding section is by Don Niles.*

### **Difficulties Faced by the IPNGS**

As Vincent has outlined, from the early days of the Music Department, our goals have been fourfold: 1) to record and document the musical traditions of the country; 2) to develop and maintain an archive of such recordings; 3) to disseminate the results of research on music; and 4) to liaise with others concerned with such research.

It is now almost thirty years since the Institute was established. And while I am happy and even proud to say that we have strived hard to achieve all of these goals and have had a number of successes, that is only part of the story, the part which it is nice to include in annual reports and to highlight at international conferences and workshops, such as this.

Yet there is also another, not so pleasant side to things, which has often made the achievement of our goals next to impossible. As you can probably guess, this negative side has a lot to do with lack of financial support for our work. Twenty years ago, the Music Department received funding to undertake three to four research trips a year from our recurrent budget, and we actually did them. Today, we are lucky if we receive funding *on paper* for one greatly reduced fieldtrip, but even if we do get the numbers on paper, we will not get the actual money to do the work. We also never receive money for overseas travel, as the organisers of this workshop will be aware.

Instead, most of the little money my Institute now receives from the government goes to pay for utilities. We consider ourselves very lucky if we do not have the power cut, or the telephones or fax or email disconnected, or the water cut off every couple of months. Not only do such things affect our ability to do basic work, they also endanger the archival materials we have worked so hard to collect. And, as the rainy season gradually approaches, we must once again worry about where the holes in the roof will be this time. Will the strategically-placed buckets catch all the rain, or will new holes develop, perhaps above a computer or our only printer? So we can forget about any field research; we'll have to be satisfied if we have a dry office with functioning utilities.

But not all our problems are money related. There are also considerable problems in the management of cultural institutions and their general neglect and decline.

Yes, the present situation in Papua New Guinea as regards government concern and support for traditional cultural expression is often dismal indeed. But a small group of people at a few institutions attempt to overcome these obstacles and produce the best work possible under such conditions. I think one of the main reasons why these people continue to work under such adverse conditions is their deep pride in the multitude of traditions in the country, coupled with the knowledge that the true benefactors of this

research and of archiving will be the people in the village.

### **Complications in the Repatriation of Recordings**

As Vincent has explained, we have been quite successful in getting historical recordings repatriated to Papua New Guinea. This is a nice public relations exercise for all concerned, and it truly benefits everyone. Yet, while the recordings are now back in the country, they still should be returned to the areas in which they were recorded, to the people for whom they have the most meaning. In many cases, this is an expensive undertaking, and even if it is possible, the materials have to be returned in an appropriate format. For example, there is no point returning the materials on DAT tape with documentation written in German—the format in which we have received many recordings. For Papua New Guinea, analogue cassette tapes are still the most accessible format and in most villages it is likely that someone will have a battery-operated tape recorder, but electricity is absent except in villages very near urban areas. Documentation must be English, Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, local vernaculars, or a combination of all or some of these, as necessary.

But even if the format and language are appropriate, who should receive the materials? Where should they be housed so they can be accessible to everyone interested? There are few cultural centres in the country, and those that do exist are in urban areas, not villages. Few people would want to travel to an urban cultural centre to hear their own music anyway. Schools might be a possibility as they are government institutions found throughout the country, but the security of equipment and the recordings themselves would need to be considered and protected, and teachers may neither have the interest nor the time to spend on such issues, particularly if they are not from the area recorded.

If the recordings are particularly well documented, it might be possible to find descendants of the people concerned, in which case there is a greatly heightened added interest in the materials. But even here, decisions have to be made as to which relatives should be given copies, how should they control access to them, etc.

Wherever possible, we have attempted to return historical recordings to the appropriate villages. Often this involves giving copies of these materials to a researcher (from IPNGS or outside) going to the area concerned. There they will have to determine the

appropriate people to receive such recordings, as well as supplying background information to what they are returning. While this is not entirely satisfactory, it is one approach. Closer contacts need to be developed between researchers and the IPNGS to enable such efforts to continue.

I mention all of these miscellaneous points to demonstrate some of the difficulties in the fundamental idea of returning historical recordings to the communities concerned. What might be applicable in one country or one part of the country might be totally inappropriate in another. But the rewards are considerable. The voices of long dead ancestors certainly have the power to talk about the past, the present, and the future in ways yet to be fully understood.

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